Academic development: Bridging the gap for student development and success

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Summary

The various sectors working in the higher education system in general and in institutions of higher education in particular are, ostensibly, all working towards the same outcome, namely student success. But often there is no deep insight into or informed appreciation of each others’ respective fields and of the efforts expended in pursuance of a common objective. The result is that the potential for structured collaboration and systematic cooperation for the benefit of the student is often not realised. This paper attempts to provide student affairs practitioners with a deeper insight into the raison d’être of ‘academic development’ (AD) as a field, viz. grappling with issues of teaching, learning and the curriculum. It sketches the development of AD as a field, its efforts to define and refine its mission, its struggle to re-invent itself, and other challenges it has had to contend with along the way. The paper highlights the critical carry-over issues and common student development and student success questions and argues for the exploration of a cross-cutting episteme.

Introduction

One of the fundamental challenges facing the higher education system in South Africa is the issue of access, retention and success of a large number of students from
educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. The problem is complex and multi-layered and the academic development\textsuperscript{1} movement has been grappling with it for at least the past 25 years. The problem has its origins in the apartheid policy in general and in its education policies in particular. These policies provided for separate, segregated and inferior education at both the pre-university and university levels for African, Coloured and Indian South Africans (collectively called Black), with Africans being the most deprived, not only materially but also epistemologically, that is, in terms of knowledge and skills equity. In contrast, the White education system was afforded the bulk of the financial resources, the best-qualified human capital and the best facilities and infrastructure, making it materially privileged and epistemologically advantaged.

Though a section of student affairs practitioners is directly involved in student development programmes, often, for many of the practitioners in the field, conceiving in a vivid, critical and theoretical manner of their own particular areas of work as related to the students’ academic performance and success is not an easy exercise. Of course, there is an implicit and common sense intuition that all personnel employed by higher education institutions, whatever their responsibility or rank, somehow contribute to the institution’s objectives and valued outcomes. This paper is intended to open wider the window into the academic sphere and shine a light on the academic challenges faced by educationally and socially disadvantaged students. It explores how higher education institutions have sought to deal with these challenges through interventions such as the AD programme in its various incarnations. The paper also discusses how the post-apartheid state has sought to both buttress and direct these interventions. Finally, the paper makes connections to student affairs, proposes an agenda for collaboration with academic development with a view to developing a common body of knowledge, and outlines critical issues and challenges that the student affairs movement in South Africa needs to attend to urgently for the sake of its own development and for the benefit of the students. Our primary interlocutors are therefore academic development and student affairs practitioners.

**Towards a dialogical relationship**

The *raison d’être* of student affairs and the primary role of its functionaries is to provide services and support and to develop and guide students towards success as they forge their way academically through the maze that is higher education (Mandew 2003: 61). It is hoped that through a better understanding of the academic challenges faced by students, and the ensuing AD initiatives and efforts,
student affairs practitioners will be in a better position to rethink their own philosophy, re-examine their practice and review their strategies with a view to adding theoretical, practical and developmental value to student experience, academic success and holistic development endeavours. Furthermore, it is hoped that this will facilitate the beginning of a constructive dialogue between the AD field and the field of student affairs in exploring a common epistemology as they grapple with the following complex and critical questions:

- Who is the student?
- What do student development and student success entail?
- How is the interface between ‘development’ and ‘success’ constituted?
- What do the answers to the preceding questions imply for academic development and student affairs practice?

These questions are not exhaustive nor are they meant to be an end in themselves. They are intended to initiate a constructive dialogue that will facilitate a critical reflection on how together we can develop a common body of knowledge and make a positive and lasting impact on the development of the student.

**What is ‘academic development’?**

As with many concepts, the term ‘academic development’ can mean different things depending on context and intent. For instance, in South Africa the term is also used in a more general sense to refer to all academic personnel ‘doing developmental work in higher education institutions’ (Volbrecht & Boughey 2004: 58). But this is not quite how we use the concept here. We employ it in a much more focused or specialised manner in two very closely related senses. In the first instance, we use it to denote the broad field or overarching discipline constituted of deliberate and structured interventions in the areas of learning, teaching and the curriculum initiated by higher education institutions to assist specifically students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds to enter, cope and succeed at university. Volbrecht and Boughey define academic development as ‘an open set of practices concerned with improving the quality of teaching and learning in higher education’ (2004: 58).

Put differently, we use the overarching concept of academic development to refer to a structured and integrated process of raising the standard and improving the levels of the interrelated and mutually influencing staff development, student development and curriculum development activities designed to facilitate student access and success in higher education. In the second instance, we use the term...
academic development in a much ‘narrower’ sense to refer to a specific trend, approach, or moment\textsuperscript{3} in the evolution of the overarching discipline of AD. We discuss this trend or approach below under the heading ‘Coming in from the cold?’

**Unpacking ‘disadvantage’**

We have noted that AD is essentially an intervention designed to mitigate and overcome the adverse impact of a disadvantaged social and educational background so that the student can *enter* university *and* succeed. Let us take a closer look at the notion of ‘disadvantage’ before we consider responses to it. Student affairs practitioners are *au fait* with the affective, non-academic and socio-environmental factors impacting on students from educationally and socially disadvantaged backgrounds as they navigate their way through the morass that is the higher education system. The students have to overcome a myriad of barriers such as the problem of hunger that many of them have to contend with on a daily basis, the inadequacy and unavailability of suitable housing and the problems associated with this and the perennial problem of a lack of finances despite the existence of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme. The unending emotional stress resulting from this plethora of problems that takes its toll on students, impacting on their ability to succeed. Many students, through no fault of their own, become casualties of the higher education system, as can be evidenced from the inordinately high attrition and low throughput rates\textsuperscript{4}, with financial indebtedness the only evidence that they ‘have been’ to university. These adverse environmental factors manifest but one dimension of disadvantage.

Much is made of the Matric or National Senior Certificate results (at the end of twelve years of general education), but the brutal truth is that these results are generally not a true reflection of student ability in that they cannot be used as a completely reliable predictor of student potential to cope and succeed at university\textsuperscript{5}. This can generally be ascribed to the ‘mismatch between the outcomes of schooling and the demands of the entry level [and even beyond] of higher education programmes’ (Scott \textit{et al.} 2007: 43). It is especially the case with respect to former Department of Education and Training (historically black) schools results. What this means in essence is that a student with an ‘exemption’ or ‘bachelor’ pass, which theoretically qualifies them to enter university, might not necessarily cope with the demands of higher learning, while a student whose results reflect a ‘lower’ pass might, with the necessary support and guidance, be able to cope and succeed at university. For this reason, many higher education institutions have over the years developed their own entrance tests or adopted the
National Benchmark Tests (NBT) as additional and fundamentally much more reliable gate-keeping mechanisms.

The ‘educational disadvantage’ or ‘underpreparedness’ means that students ‘have generally not been exposed to key academic approaches and experiences taken for granted in traditional higher education programmes’ (Scott et al. 2007: 42), resulting in an educational ‘gap’ or ‘deficit’. This manifests in the lack of certain complex proficiencies that are required in order to succeed at university, viz. cognitive skills, communication and academic language skills, subject content, attitudes to learning and life skills (Grayson 1997; Scott et al. 2007; Kloot et al. 2008). An often cited expression of underpreparedness on the part of these students is said to be their proclivity for rote-learning. In essence, rote-learning is learning and memorising without deep comprehension and internalised understanding and it is totally unsuited and inadequate for successfully engaging the demands of higher education.

**Deficient Others**

The origins of AD can be traced back to the late 1970s and early 1980s when the four English-speaking, historically White, liberal universities (Rhodes, Natal, Cape Town and Witwatersrand) began to admit a small number of Black students from educationally disadvantaged schools (Volbrecht & Boughey 2004; Boughey 2007, 2010) as a result of a relaxation in apartheid policies (Pavlich & Orkin, cited in Boughey 2010). These early initiatives were known as academic support programmes (ASP) and represent the first trend or thrust in AD efforts. A key feature of the ASPs was their focus on overcoming factors of underpreparedness or disadvantage inherent to the individual student. From an ideological point of view, ASPs were primarily concerned with issues of equity (non-discrimination) and equality (Boughey 2007). As Boughey (2010: 5) puts it:

> Early initiatives were therefore inherently liberal in intent in that they focused on attempting to give Black students ‘equal opportunity’ by filling the gap between their poor socio-economic and educational backgrounds and university.

In truth and practice, though, when these students were admitted to the liberal universities they were viewed as ‘deficient Others’. They were different and were found wanting. They did not fit the dominant demographic profile of these institutions and lacked what it takes to succeed academically. As such, they
required a lot of remedial work in order for them to fit and be assimilated into a well-established, self-satisfied immutable system. It is safe to say that from the perspective of the liberal intent of these institutions, these ‘deficient Others’ would always be welcome but it was assumed they would continue to constitute a minority into the foreseeable future. ASP staff were primarily teachers and language specialists as opposed to ‘being academics’. They were appointed on short-term contract on the basis of their teaching expertise and experience, with no real prospects for permanent employment or tenure. The posts they occupied were often funded with soft money sourced externally rather than from within the universities’ own financial resources, indicating in no uncertain terms that the problem was really someone else’s.

A key priority of ASPs was the issue of access, that is, mechanisms of bringing the students into the system. It was crucial to identify students who, despite poor Matric results and a disadvantaged schooling system, had the potential to cope with the demands of university and ultimately succeed, that is, graduate. For this reason, a great deal of work was done to develop mechanisms to test and assess ‘potential’ which was later refined to assessing minimum proficiency, basic reasoning skills, synthesis and logical deduction ability, basic comprehension capability, grammar and syntax (Grussendorff et al. 2004). The use of these well-developed and refined entry tests still continues to this day (Boughey 2010: 5).

ASP initially dealt with the problem of ‘disadvantage’ in an intuitive fashion, drawing on popular rather than mainly academic sources. ASPs provided additional classes and tutorials and special courses in language and study skills (Volbrecht & Boughey 2004; Boughey 2007, 2010). The ASP solution was largely language-proficiency driven and what little academic theory was drawn upon was based largely on the discipline of applied linguistics and emanated from outside South Africa, with little consideration of the local socio-cultural and political context and educational complexities (Volbrecht & Boughey 2004). These early interventions were conceived and thought of as ‘bridging’ programmes designed to ‘fill the gaps’ existing in the knowledge of the students coming out of educationally disadvantaged backgrounds (Kloot et al. 2008).

In spite of their good intentions, the early ASP initiatives were not necessarily popular with the students for whom they were intended. This is understandable because they were offered in addition to the normal first year courses students were taking. This meant that the burden on students who were already struggling was enormous, if not unbearable. Moreover, the ASP tutorials and classes were not credit-bearing and as such students were not particularly motivated to participate in or commit themselves to attending the sessions on a regular basis. Some students cynically referred to them as ‘African Support Programmes’.
ASP work was located physically, financially, intellectually, ideologically and academically outside the academic mainstream of institutions, thus completing and institutionalising Othering\textsuperscript{10}. In true liberal form, this was not a purely racialised form of Othering aimed at educationally disadvantage Black students. It had an equally strong sexist component, targeting AD tutors and personnel, most of whom were White women, excluding them not only from the mainstream academic and intellectual sphere but also materially from the remuneration and reward system of the university. The message was clear and unambiguous: ‘You are not one of us. You are less than us. Therefore you deserve less than us’.

**Coming in from the cold**

With the sweeping and radical changes in the socio-political environment that began in the late 1980s, culminating in the negotiated political settlement in 1994, it was self-evident and inevitable that the higher education field would be in for major changes – structurally, systemically and ideologically, a process referred to as transformation. This period saw the emergence of a new trend or thrust that sought to be fundamentally different, philosophically more radical, conceptually more advanced, educationally more sound, practically more challenging and was inevitably financially more demanding than the ASP model.

In essence, the new thrust sought to de-ghettoise the earlier intervention strategy and the name was formally changed from ‘academic support’ to ‘academic/education development’. It was envisaged that this would be a complete departure from the ASP model. It sought to effect a fundamental and systemic change by mainstreaming AD, i.e. putting AD at the centre of faculties and departmental activities. Tinkering at the edges would no longer do\textsuperscript{11}. This new thrust would also be known as the ‘infusion’ model (Walker & Badsha 1993). Put differently, it sought to be a method of ‘adding in’ rather than ‘adding on’. But what would this new approach entail at a philosophical and practical level?

At the level of the institution one of the significant steps that were taken to institutionalise the new approach was to avail resources for the establishment of central hubs or units whose main task was to be the engine for driving, directing and coordinating campus-wide activities of planting, growing and nurturing AD inside faculties and departments. Some AD specialists were then placed in departments and faculties, at the coalface of academic activities as it were, to ‘play a role in curriculum and staff development’ (Volbrecht & Boughey 2004: 63).

The new approach sought to engender a shift from the individualised deficit model that located the problem in the individual student, to debunking dominant
assumptions about what it means to be an academic at a university. In the words of Moulder (1991):

> Academics are employed to teach *all* students who register for a course. They aren’t employed to teach only those students who have the knowledge and skills they would like them to have. [emphasis added]

There was a view that sought to move away from the deficit model to one that recognised that students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds drew from different forms of cultural capital to those of their mainstream white counterparts (Mandew 1993). At the level of the curriculum, there were renewed and novel approaches to addressing the issue of ‘language development’ to being something deeper and more critical than the earlier simplistic diagnosis of the problem as being one of ‘English’ as a second, third, or even fourth language. The new approach would be one of *language across the curriculum*, proposing the solution as (i) a broad one of *academic literacy*: and (ii) using language experts based in the AD Centre to work with staff in departments ‘so that language and literacy was developed in mainstream lectures and through mainstream assignments’ (Boughey 2005: 29).

In order to buttress the language development efforts, ‘writing centres’ were established, aimed at both students and staff. For the student, the writing centres sought to develop their academic writing skills, while they provided support to staff as well so that a ‘common cause of writing development’ between staff and student could be promoted (Leibowitz & Parkerson in Boughey 2005). Other elements of the infusion model entailed language policy development, materials development, developing appropriate assessment methods, learning theory, research skills training, developing tutorials to be embedded in mainstream academic work, supplemental instruction programmes12, tutor training, learning resources such as transformed and transformative computer-supported learning, developing effective student selection methods, student residences-based peer-group learning projects, and student participation at AD association conferences (Walker & Badsha 1993). The infusion model was very ambitious in both its conceptualisation and objective but it has not been the only AD show in town. It has co-existed with an equally formidable and increasingly popular approach.

**Building firm foundations**

Another key AD intervention was the strategy of introducing foundation programmes, initially in the natural sciences stream, and later in the human
sciences. Essentially, foundation courses are conceptualised as *access and retention* programmes. They are designed to facilitate entry into and success at university. The historically white institutions were the first to go this route\(^{13}\). The foundation courses were initially largely externally funded\(^{14}\). Some historically black institutions followed suit because for them the problem was even bigger in that it was not a minority, but a majority of their student intake that was ‘underprepared’\(^{15}\). Of course, with the changes in the socio-political environment, the historically white institutions were also to be faced with the imperative of having to admit a large number of black students, many being ‘underprepared’ and coming from former DET schools. Over the years, some institutions have acquired good reputations for running and consistently improving what are considered to be flagship foundation programmes.

Conceptually, foundation programmes can be considered to be different from ‘bridging’ programmes. The latter ‘assume that the students are at a level close to what is needed for university work, and then attempt to provide an intermediate stepping stone between school and university’ (Grayson 1996: 993). Another way of distinguishing ‘bridging’ programmes is that they ‘attempt to look back to the Senior Certificate syllabus which is then retaught in an attempt to improve students’ readiness to engage with tertiary studies’ (Boughey 2005: 13). As the name suggests, foundation programmes have been designed to ‘lay the foundations’ for the ‘underprepared student’ on which to build the knowledge, capabilities, skills and self-confidence required for the acquisition of a university qualification. Rather than looking backwards to the Senior Certificate syllabus, foundation courses look forward to the university curriculum and endeavour to impart the capabilities and concepts that are required as a foundation for further learning (Boughey 2005). Satisfactory performance at foundation level is required for students to proceed into the mainstream or on to the next level.

Three key features common to most foundation-type programmes are that (i) there is a credit-bearing element embedded in them that count towards the qualification; (ii) there is an additional year built into the acquisition of the qualification (also referred to as ‘extended’ or ‘augmented’ programmes)\(^{16}\); and (iii) though there are differentials with regard to entry levels between foundation students and regular students, the exit standards and learning outcomes are said to be demonstrably on par for both foundational and direct-access cohorts.

Though it has had strong elements of trial-and-error, the design, construction and implementation of foundation programmes has not been a haphazard affair. To a large extent it has been a meticulous and carefully considered process that has been shaped by sound educational principles and rigorous pedagogical processes aimed at illuminating issues around subject matter and the structuring
of instructional activities. It has been informed by complex theories explicating the role of the learner, the role of the teacher, and how the learning process occurs (Grayson 1996). The theories employed in the development of foundational courses have variously drawn from the frameworks of cognitive psychology such as constructivism and from social theory. Constructivism focuses on the individualised aspects of learning, stressing that, fundamentally, learning is a process that occurs and is constructed within the individual (intrapsychologically), whereas social theories stress that learning is fundamentally and primarily a process that is socio-culturally mediated (interpsychologically)\(^\text{17}\) (Grayson 1996; Volbrecht & Boughey 2004; Downs 2005).

In general, foundation courses have been constituted of the following package of knowledge, capabilities and skills development designed to provide epistemological and vocational access: integrated degree-specific disciplines, i.e. knowledge of subject content; vocational skills, i.e. insight into the thinking and behaviour required in a specific profession\(^\text{18}\); integration and transfer skills, i.e. the use and relation of concepts and learnings between cognate disciplines and contexts; knowledge-construction skills, i.e. the ability to construct knowledge and meaning based (i) on experimentation and observation of natural phenomena and (ii) on reflecting on and analysis of cogent ideas and coherent views; academic literacy and communication skills, i.e. understanding and use of discipline-specific language and conventions; reasoning and problem-solving skills; metacognitive skills, i.e. learning-about-learning (the awareness of and control over one’s own process of learning and understanding in a reflective and conscious manner); practical skills, viz. laboratory-related and computer-related; group-learning skills; life skills, eg study skills, coping skills, time-management, conflict resolution, etc. Of course, not all foundation programmes necessarily lay claim to this comprehensive catalogue of knowledge and skills development. Also, the nomenclature between institutions, programmes and qualifications might not be uniform but the underlying skills-concepts and outcomes envisaged are broadly equivalent, viz. the development of higher-order thinking skills. But have these foundation programmes succeeded in achieving the desired outcomes, in terms of facilitating equity of access and enabling equity of success?

**Hitting the sweet spot**

As can be expected, the adoption and implementation of foundation programmes has hardly been a walk in the park. An obviously central and critical question that has been raised is whether it is really possible to overcome twelve years of effective
under-preparation in one year of foundational courses. A formal assessment of student performance in one of the Science Foundation Programme (SFP) courses confirms that one year is definitely not sufficient. The investigation came to the conclusion ‘that the skills required for more theoretical tasks need ongoing practice and development over a sustained period [and that] this would need to be continued into the mainstream courses if students were to improve’ (Downs 2005: 667). The issue of the inadequacy of one year points to the need to embed AD in mainstream courses as espoused in the infusion model. It underscores the issue of ‘more time and more tuition’ (Kloot et al. 2008) as a sine qua non for all effective interventions.

These shortcomings and weaknesses notwithstanding, evidence indicates that there is an inherent educational benefit in the foundation programmes in enhancing and empowering students as active participants in the process of learning and in encouraging deep learning (Downs 2005: 679). Results of assessments undertaken so far indicate that, despite some challenges, the impact and efficacy of the foundation programmes is overwhelmingly positive and very encouraging. For example, in terms of the overall impact, the SFP at the University of KwaZulu-Natal ‘has made a significant contribution to increasing the number of Black African students at the tertiary level, particularly in the Faculty of Science and Agriculture’ (Downs 2010: 102). In terms of the time taken to complete the qualification, SFP students were ‘generally equivalent to or better than other mainstream science students and approached minimum time’ (Southway-Ajulu in Downs 2010: 103). A number of these SFP graduates have proceeded and succeeded at Masters level, with a few also completing doctoral degrees. Interestingly and worthy of noting, the ‘SFP has significantly increased black women participation in the [natural] sciences’ (Downs 2010: 106).

The SFP at the University of Limpopo indicates equally positive outcomes. Students who have gone through this foundation programme have consistently performed better than direct access students and also better than those direct students who have repeated a level at year one and marginally higher in subsequent years of the degree (Zaaiman 1998 and Letsoalo 2001 in Mabila et al. 2006).

A study conducted into a human sciences foundation programme, also makes significant and positive findings on the efficacy of the programme. The study concludes that students who went through the programme ‘had significantly higher graduation rates than mainstream students (African, Coloured and Indian students) and lower drop-out rates and exclusions’, were on par with White students, and there was no difference between these students and mainstream students in the time taken to complete the degree (Tyson 2010: 114–115).

A longitudinal study conducted into a foundation programme at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University makes equally encouraging findings. It concludes
that the foundation students ‘tend to perform better in later degree studies than
directly admitted students with similar academic profiles’ (Wood & Lithauer 2005:
1002). In addition, reflecting on their experience of the foundation programme,
these students attest to receiving benefits beyond the academic sphere, viz. the
development of self-knowledge, an improved sense of self-worth, development of
self-management skills, improvement in attitude, improved communication skills,
and the formation of support systems (Wood & Lithauer 2005).

Are we there yet?

At a systemic and structural level, what AD in general and foundation programmes
in particular have done is to directly or indirectly compel institutions to begin the
unsettling and inconvenient process of rethinking their assumptions about two
critical and related questions. The process is unsettling because it suggests that it
cannot be business as usual in thinking about the purpose of higher education. It
is inconvenient because it implies thinking in new ways about the process of the
business of higher education. The two critical and related questions are: (i) ‘Who
is the student?’ socially, economically, politically, culturally, educationally, etc.; and
(ii) ‘How prepared is the institution for who the student is in the way that it is
currently defining, structuring, configuring and offering its academic programmes?’
As a result, institutions have had to, mutatis mutandis, diversify and nuance their
entry level assumptions and rethink both the teaching and the configuration of
their qualifications, allowing for flexibility and for a diversity of valid and effective
approaches to the same qualification to co-exist.

But are these responses adequate and sufficiently deep? Are the answers to
the first critical question revealing anything new or is the student still viewed as
‘deficient’ or as ‘the Other’, or still as both: ‘the deficient Other’? If not, then who is the
student? In terms of the second critical question, philosophically and practically,
how have mainstream curricular conceptualisations, programme constructions,
pedagogical approaches, programme management structures and research agenda
been impacted upon? Has a new consciousness and practice emerged in respect
of what it means to be an academic vis-à-vis Moulder’s earlier assertion? How
is the relationship between the academic (discipline-specialist) and the AD
expert constituted? How is engagement between them structured and facilitated?
What is the nature and manifestation of power in this relationship between the
discipline expert and the AD expert? What role does power play in the structuring
and facilitation of the engagement? Where and how does the student feature in
the scheme of things? Is the student at the centre or at the margins? At the policy,
management and strategic level the question that has been raised by Volbrecht and Boughey (2004: 57) is how are the previously fragmented communities and fields of knowledge/practice to be integrated?

A criticism of foundation programmes is that, generally, the class sizes have tended to be relatively small in numbers with the result that systemically, the impact has been rather limited, the critical mass in terms of throughput rates has not been achieved and, systemically, the ripple effect has largely not happened. Put differently, the argument is that the foundational programmes have managed to level only a relatively small patch of the playing field.

Put your money where your mouth is

A key issue that has acted as a constraint in AD has been the issue of funding. We saw that for a considerable period many of the programmes were funded largely through soft money, sourced from outside government and outside higher education institutions. This constraint has had far-reaching consequences in several respects. Key among these has been the issue of the professionalisation of AD staff in terms of academic qualifications, and the generation of knowledge in the field. We noted that AD staff were ‘low-level’ staff in terms of academic qualifications, and were appointed on short-term contract basis. As a result, they were denied easy access to institutional resources to improve their qualifications as AD practitioners. Also, they did not have the wherewithal to conduct much-needed research into AD practice and issues, thus constraining development of capacity in the field (Boughey 2010). Many of the AD practitioners were graduate students who were pursuing ‘pure’ qualifications in mainstream fields rather than AD-related qualifications. These constraints notwithstanding, some practitioners in the field have soldiered on admirably, overcoming structural, systemic and other constraints, generating phenomenal knowledge in the AD discipline while also developing formidable expertise in the field.

Over the years, the government has taken note of the success, though limited, of AD interventions and of pockets of excellence and relative success, especially foundation-type programmes, and has recognised their potential systemic impact. The 1997 White Paper entitled A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education and the 2001 National Plan for Higher Education specifically recognised the role of foundational courses and extended programmes and the impact they could make. The new higher education funding framework of 2003 made provision to fund extended curriculum programmes. These earmarked funds were given in three tranches covering the years 2007/2008, 2008/2009 and 2009/2010. This
has led to more institutions introducing foundation programmes. In 2010 there were 45 foundation-type access programmes in South Africa (Downs 2010: 98). What does the proliferation of these types of programmes suggest for the higher education system in South Africa? Are they to be considered a stop-gap measure to mitigate against a weak general education system, or are they the future?

Critical questions for the student affairs movement

As student affairs practitioners, what lessons can we learn from the struggles, setbacks and victories AD movement? As the recent Physics Education Review indicates, under-preparation in the General Education system is continuing unabated (SAIP 2013)22. The problem of articulation between the general/further education system and the higher education system is going to be with us for a while yet. In short, challenges relating to access and success are not about to disappear any time soon. There is, however, much that can be done to improve the preparedness of the higher education system to develop students and engender student success. For the student affairs movement, the obvious place to begin is with our own preparedness in terms of our capacity and capabilities as producers of critical student affairs knowledge for the South African context. The recurring refrain one hears from student affairs practitioners is that very little has been written about the field in South Africa. This may be true. But what are the reasons for this? Many practitioners feel inadequate in terms of the skills required to be knowledge producers in respect of student affairs issues. As with other skills, knowledge production skills are learnt, developed and honed with practice – over time. There is no better place than the university to acquire, develop and perfect these skills. An obvious strategic objective would be to partner with the AD movement to equip student affairs practitioners with knowledge production skills specific for their field.

Linked to the academic development of student affairs practitioners is the need to map out student affairs issues to be explored and questions to be investigated for purposes of the proposed knowledge production endeavour. As student affairs practitioners, we must intensify the difficult task of grappling with the key issues and critical questions pertaining to the imperatives of the preparedness of the higher education system in general and our own preparedness in particular. Of course, it is much easier to go abroad to do benchmarking and to import externally developed solutions with a view to adapting them for our situation and context. Without detracting from the inherent value of benchmarking, the question needs to be asked, however: to what extent are these 'adapted solutions’
derived from ‘developed’ countries appropriate for our context? Is student affairs practice in South African in a state of inertia or are we on top of our game? Only South African student affairs practitioners can produce the critical knowledge required for their field and context. The ideal moment to do this will never arrive. It is up to us to create conditions for this ideal moment. It is incumbent on the disparate student affairs organisations therefore to come together to draw up and implement a long term strategic plan for the development of the student affairs field as a knowledge-production field for our context. Student affairs practitioners need to develop a kindred spirit with their AD counterparts for the benefit of the student. Apart from human and financial resources this task requires vision, commitment and leadership.

Another area that merits attention is the field of student development programmes. Currently, each institution designs its own student development programme with little if any collaboration with other institutions. As student affairs, do we have a common and shared vision for student development and student success? Have any of the current student development programmes offered by student affairs been rigorously evaluated? Are these programmes coherently structured? Are they effective? How can they be improved? Do the programmes reach all the students? Can these programmes be sufficiently developed to be credit-bearing and/or be registered on the qualifications framework? Can we as the student affairs movement agree on an inter-disciplinary research agenda with our AD colleagues to jointly seek answers to some of the complex questions relating to student development and student success? Some of the questions that need to be explored are: What does student development and student success mean and entail? Who is the student who enters our higher education system? Is the ‘first-year-experience’ the best it can be for students? How is it currently constituted? How can it be improved? Who is the student who exits the system prematurely? Who is the student who exits the system through graduation? What are his/her attributes? Are these attributes suitable and appropriate for the world of work? Are these attributes appropriate for democracy and responsible citizenship?

It is critical that student affairs practitioners think consciously, purposefully and systematically about their contribution to student development and student success. There is a need to pose probing questions about what it means to be a student affairs practitioner. It is incumbent on us to put the assumptions of our practice under the microscope and to subject them to a much closer examination and a more intense scrutiny. Are we as student affairs practitioners mere functionaries performing mechanical tasks and carrying out non-reflective actions, or are we able to define a much deeper and more fundamental purpose for our existence? In the South African context of higher education what is the
philosophical glue that holds us together as the student affairs field? Who is defining and setting our agenda? What is the place and agenda of student affairs in the overall scheme of higher education? Are we focused on the task at hand? To what extent do power games such as institutional politics, divisional wranglings, personal ambitions, personality issues and inter-organisational suspicions detract us from the critical thoughts we should be thinking, the probing questions we should be asking, the vital answers we should be seeking and the important things we should be doing?

How do student affairs contribute to institutional preparedness in respect of our programmes, the various services we offer and the policies we formulate and implement? Have we rigorously evaluated the appropriateness of our services and the effectiveness of our support structures? To what extent are we engaged in Othering practices and policies? Are we employing existing resources effectively and efficiently? Again, how and where does the student feature? Is the voice of the student audible? Is this voice intelligible? Where do our weaknesses and strengths lie? What does student affairs preparedness mean in terms of intra-student affairs cooperation and inter-institutional collaboration? In short, as the student affairs movement, what do we need to do philosophically, strategically, developmentally, programmatically and practically to up the ante and take student development and student success to new and greater heights?

Conclusion

Fact is, the AD movement in South Africa has made great strides since its humble beginnings more than 25 years ago. It has had a huge and positive impact on higher education. This progress has not been accidental. It can be ascribed to a relentless struggle to grapple with the critical challenge of access and success. A key feature of this struggle has been the discipline and intellectual rigour that practitioners, despite marginalisation, have applied in reflecting on their practice and mission. The body of knowledge and expertise that the movement has generated is phenomenal. In its turn, student affairs in South Africa is arguably as old as the university and has largely played a supportive role that has not always demanded critical, rigorous and intellectual reflection on practice and mission. Needless to say, these days are long gone and the student affairs movement also has to contend with issues of access, student development and success and reflect these in its practice, programmes, services and policy choices. We have proposed the questions to be explored in this regard and suggested synergistic collaboration with the academic development movement as a possible way forward.
Notes

1. In other contexts, ‘academic development’ (AD) is known as ‘educational development’.
2. This refers specifically to student academic development as opposed to ‘general’ or ‘holistic’ student development as generally employed and understood in the field of student affairs/services.
3. In her writings Boughey uses the term ‘phases’ as an analytical tool to denote distinction rather than to imply strictly sequential and discrete stages.
4. The issue of high attrition and low throughput rates is not a new phenomenon in South Africa. Studies conducted in the 1930s, 1950s and 1960s into White students’ performance indicate very low throughput rates (Akojee & Nkomo 2007 in Kioko 2010). A 1963 study indicates a throughput rate of 55%, of which 49% were constituted of White males (Malherbe 1977 in Kioko 2010). Currently, the attrition rate at first year level is 40% of all students admitted at our universities with a cohort throughput rate of a mere 30% for a three year qualification over a five year period, with the graduation rate for Black students being less than that for White students in all fields of study (Scott et al. 2007).
5. The unpredictability of the NSC results is most pronounced in results from the former deprived apartheid Department of Education and Training schools (Hofmeyr & Spence 1989, Yeld & Haeck 1997 cited in Van der Flier et al. 2003).
6. National Benchmark Tests are designed to achieve three things: (i) to assess entry-level academic literacy and mathematics skills, (ii) to assess the relationship between entry-level skills and school-level exit results, and (iii) to provide institutions requiring additional information in the admission and placement of entry-level students.
7. There is a twist though to this ‘under-prepared’ discourse. In the view of Miller ‘students from disadvantaged backgrounds may be over-prepared in the sense what impedes their progress at university is not new learning …but learning to unlearn’ (cited in Mphahlele 1994: 50).
8. This was well before the momentous political changes which began with the release of political prisoners and the unbanning of anti-apartheid political movements in the early 1990s.
9. Strictly speaking, these were not the first attempts to admit Black students into White institutions. For example, the University of Natal had since the 1960s accepted Black students into its exclusively Black medical school and the University of the Witwatersrand had established a ‘slow stream’ programme in the 1970s (Mphahlele 1994: 49).
10. Though it has earlier origins, the notion of ‘Othering’ was first systematically employed and popularized by Gayatri Spivak in her groundbreaking essay ‘The Rani of Sirmur’ as an analytical tool to demonstrate how colonizers in India justified and institutionalised their power, moral superiority and monopoly of superior knowledge over the colonised, who they defined into existences as Others who were different from and, more importantly, inferior to them.
11. The University of the Western Cape came to epitomise this new approach. For a crisp and vivid exposition of this new vision of academic development see Walker & Badsha (1993).
12. Supplemental instruction was defined as being ‘voluntary, non-remedial, student driven, cost effective and [focusing] on high-risk courses rather than high-risk students, and, most importantly, SI leaders [receiving] intensive training in the principles of non-directive facilitation of small groups’ (Davies & Vorster 1994: 166 cited in Boughey 2005: 30).
13. The University of Cape Town introduced its Science Foundation Programme (SFP) in 1986 and the University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg) introduced its SFP in 1991, and its Humanities Access Programme in 2001, with the latter being internally funded. The Durban campus of the University of Natal had a four year BSc programme (referred to as the ‘Augmented Programme’) which admitted students directly into first-year course as early as 1991 (Kirby undated).
14. For instance, students participating in the SFP at the University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg) received bursaries from the United States Agency for International Development (Downs 2010: 105).
15. The University of the North’s Science Foundation Year (UNIFY) was introduced in 1992 (Mabila et al. 2006: 295). The University has now been renamed the University of Limpopo. The University of Durban-Westville introduced its Science Foundation Programme in 1999 (Kirby undated).

16. There have been exceptions, though, such as at the School of Theology at the University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg) where there was no additional year (due to a combination of financial constraints and pedagogical considerations). The introduction of foundation courses brought about a complete reconceptualisation and reorganisation of the School’s bachelor degree curriculum, with two foundation courses being introduced, one at first year level and the other at the second year level.

17. The foremost and frequently cited exponent of the social aspect theory of teaching and learning among AD practitioners has been Lev S Vygotsky (1896–1934), a Russian cognitive psychologist, who wrote the seminal book *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes.* Two key ideas in the theory of Vygotsky are the notions of the ‘zone of proximal development’ (ZPD) and ‘scaffolding’. The ZPD is the gap or interval between what the learner (adult or child) can learn on their own, and what they can learn with the assistance of a more experienced and knowledgeable person. In order for the learner to learn new concepts and skills, the knowledgeable person (teacher) must provide scaffolds to support the learning experience. These scaffolds are then removed when the required learning has occurred. (www.social.jrank.org)

18. Garraway (2010) argues that in the case of universities of technology which are essentially more vocation oriented, foundations courses have to begin the process of inducting the student into the vocation or profession of their field of study.

19. Undertaken at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, this study by CT Downs (2005) is aptly entitled: ‘Is a year-long access course into university helping previously disadvantaged Black students in biology?’

20. For a detailed breakdown of the statistics see Mabila et al. (2006) and Downs (2010).

21. The study was undertaken as a master’s degree investigation at the University of Natal. (Tyson 2010)

22. As the SAIP Review indicates, the issue of under-preparedness is not unique to South Africa but is a global phenomenon. However, ‘the level of under-preparedness is substantially worse in South Africa than in almost all other countries’ (original emphasis). (2013: 14)