



Research Article

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Access, Participation and Success: The Tri-Dimensional Conundrum of Academic Outcomes in a South African TVET College

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Doi: 10.2478/ajis-2018-0044

Abstract

This study sought to unravel academic factors which influence access, participation and success in a South African technical, vocational, education and training (TVET) college. The research questions which guided this research paper were as follows: What are students' experiences of access, participation and success in the context of one South African TVET college? How do students navigate the contextual dynamics that affect access, participation and success? A qualitative research design was used to investigate academic factors which impede or promote access, participation and success in the TVET College. An interview schedule was used to generate data which would highlight the participants' experiences of access, participation and success in the TVET College. An analysis of the reasons why students experience challenges in their academic performance in the college revealed that the under-preparedness of students for the TVET curriculum, the language of instruction, academic support programmes in the college, provision of educational resources assessment approaches had negative and/or positive influences on access, participation and success in the TVET college.

Keywords: access, education, participation, success, training

1. Introduction

Challenges pertaining to access, participation and success in education systems in both the developed and the developing countries have been areas of intense academic contestation for time immemorial (Nzembe, 2018). According to DHET (2012), TVET colleges are mandated to offer industry-related education and training programmes to students who dropped out of school before finishing Grade 12, those who completed Grade 12, but did not qualify to be enrolled in universities, as well as employed persons who want to upgrade their skills and knowledge, and at the same time improve their quality of life. Be that as it may, there is, however, a scarcity of existing research on the academic factors which contribute to low participation and success rates (DHET 2012) among students in TVET colleges in South Africa. It is, therefore, against this background that there is need to carry out a study on the reasons why there are challenges regarding access, participation and success rate at a South African TVET college.

1.1 Research Design and Methodology

In this study, a qualitative research design was applied in identifying and measuring the focus of the study. According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2003), qualitative research is conducted in a natural setting and involves a process of building a complex and holistic picture of the phenomenon of interest. Atieno (2009) also states that qualitative research design can either be critical or interpretive in nature because it captures the life experiences of participants and its goal is to understand the social or human problem from multiple perspectives.

In this study, a narrative of six students at a TVET college was used as a research methodology. According to Clandinin and Connolly (2000) a narrative inquiry is an umbrella term that captures personal and human dimensions of experience over time, and takes account of the relationship between individual experience and cultural context. Similarly, Creswell (2012) opines that a narrative is a mode of inquiry with a specific focus on the stories told by individuals. It is against this background that the researcher recorded narratives from six students with the intention of obtaining their academic experiences of access, participation and success in education and training programmes in a South African TVET college.

1.2 Research paradigm

According to Bertram and Christensen (2014 p. 22) a “research paradigm represents a particular worldview that defines, for the researcher who hold this view, what is acceptable to research and how this should be done”. In this study a critical research paradigm was used. This is important because the critical research paradigm focuses on the unequal and discriminatory ways in which the world is organised (Bertram and Christensen 2014). The researcher intended to draw up a list of interventions which the TVET college could use to improve the level of access, participation and success because according to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) the aim of using the critical paradigm in qualitative research is not just to describe but to change society to become more just.

1.3 The research sample

A research sample is a group on which information is obtained (Fraenkel and Wallen 2008). In this study a purposive research sample was used by the researcher, because the researcher did not intend to generalise the results beyond the group sampled. Patton (2006) is of the view that in purposive sampling subjects are selected because of some characteristics. In this study the researcher deliberately selected a purposive sample of six students, comprising three male students and three female from disadvantaged social backgrounds. For ethical reasons the actual names of the participants were not used and also the South African TVET College was not identified by its actual name.

1.4 Data generation methods

Data collection techniques were developed as part of a study’s total research design in order to systematise the collection of data and to ensure that all respondents were asked the same questions in the same order (Saunders et al., 2003). For this study, the researcher used an in-depth interview schedule as a data generation technique. The responses in the narrative reports were derived from questions in the in-depth interview questions and it was important to include in-depth interviews in this study because they would assist the researcher to come up with students’ narratives which would speak directly to the issues of access, participation and success in the TVET College. Wagner, Kawulich and Garner (2012) comment that in-depth interviews are a two-way conversation and a purposive interaction in which the interviewer asks the participant (the interviewee) questions in order to collect data about the ideas, experiences, beliefs, views, opinions and behaviours. According to Wagner, Kawulich and Garner (2012) much of the data that is collected and used in qualitative research is generated through in-depth interviewing.

2. Conceptual Framework

This study was conducted against the conceptual framework of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1973). To explain educational outcomes Bourdieu (1973) specifies four generic types of capital: cultural capital, social capital, economic capital and symbolic capital. Bourdieu (1973) coined the term cultural capital to describe the different tastes and habits of specific social classes, demonstrating how those characteristics reinforce power relationships between those who possess desirable cultural attributes and the institutions that reinforce them (Bourdieu, 1973; 1977; 1983). Bourdieu

(1973) defined cultural capital as instruments for the appropriation of symbolic wealth socially designated as worthy of being sought and possessed. Burke (2012) notes that although we have largely moved from bottle-neck system to mass post-school education systems in many countries, those benefitting the most from policies to expand tertiary education are those with relative social, economic and cultural capital.

2.1 Literature Review

According to Branson, Papier, Needam and Hofmeyr (2015) the majority of South African youth do not enrol in post-school education, with only 8% of youth between 18 and 24 attending university or college, with 4% of these youth attending vocational institutions. For the 20-24 year olds, 16% remain in school, 21% in employment, and 51% are not in employment, education or training (NEET).

2.2 Widening Participation: The Legislative Framework

Educational transformation in terms of legislation and policy had a huge impact on TVET Colleges (Department of Higher Education and Training 2012). Legislative and policy frameworks such as the Constitution of South Africa, 1998, Further Education and Training Act No. 98 of 1998, White Paper for Post-School Education and Training, and National Student Financial Aid Scheme Policy (Department of Education, 1998; Department of Labour, 1998; Department of Higher Education and Training, 2012; Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013b; Singh, 2015) had an colossal influence on determining the magnitude of access, participation and success among tertiary students in general and TVET College students in particular.

2.3 Academic factors which influence access, participation and success

High failure rates in TVET Colleges result in unacceptable levels of attrition reduced graduate throughput and an increased cost of training a nation's labour force (Mlambo, 2011). This implies that high failure rates are costly to all stakeholders since the certification and graduation rates for the TVET Colleges are reduced. Some of the factors that have been attributed to poor academic performance by TVET students relate to under-preparedness of the students for the TVET curriculum which facilitate articulation between the school and college, teaching methods practised in the college, the culture of the institution and class attendance (Mlambo, 2011).

2.3.1 The influence of pedagogical practices on access, participation and success

One criticism that has been levelled against the pedagogical practices in the TVET sector is that educators in the TVET system are ill-prepared for the ambitions expressed in the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET)'s White Paper on Post-School and Training (2013). Many of the ills besetting the sector are blamed for the weak initial preparation of TVET educators, particularly in respect of teaching expertise (Blom, 2016). Since the defining characteristic of TVET is the strong links with business which reflect the development of occupational identities through the socialisation of the individual into the culture of a particular occupation (McLean and Wilson, 2009), pedagogical practices should reflect a form of education and training with a close relationship with work, which is achieved by curricula which provides theoretical as well as occupational knowledge, through linkages with business and industry (Barnett, 2006; Blom, 2016). Taylor (2011) accentuate that TVET Colleges should successfully carry the burden of expectations in terms of the economic and social needs of the country, the recruitment of educators with right balance of both industry experience and pedagogical skills. Greenwood (2010) suggests that TVET College educators need a combination of technical qualifications, pedagogical knowledge and industry-related experience to provide quality teaching that will ensure success and create a vibrant and effective post-school education and training sector. A key characteristic of vocational pedagogy should, therefore, be two-sided, that is, learning and teaching should focus on bridging the gap between theoretical

knowledge and workplace-based skills (UNESCO, 2014).

2.3.2 The importance of language of instruction on access and participation

The problems in the South African education system have a long history such as the campaign by the African National Congress in 1954 when it challenged the Group Areas Act. The use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction was also a bone of contention between the African learners and the then apartheid government. The 1976 Soweto uprising heralded the climax of the conflict between the African students and the apartheid government, and also an end to the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in African schools. The current discourse in the South African education debates is that the mother tongue is the basis of all learning and children should be taught in their indigenous languages because bilingualism cannot be set as the aim of teaching (Themane, 1989 cited in Rammala, 2009). Be that as it may, the majority of TVET students struggle to communicate in English and that could be one of the factors that put them at a disadvantage, since it is the language of assessment in the examination. A study conducted in India and South Africa (Sayed et al 2007) found that similar exclusionary experiences are being felt in both countries where language is used as a critical means of exclusion. In South Africa, exclusion is experienced in the almost blanket denial of access to mother tongue learning while in India children are forced to learn Hindi instead of their mother tongue (Rammala, 2009).

2.3.3 Class attendance and academic performance

Class attendance remains a source of conflict between students in the TVET College under study and the teaching staff. Students do not attend lectures as prescribed by the college rules and policies as a result their academic performance plummets especially in the final semester of each year when they write summative assessment set by the Department of Higher Education and Training. Although the Department of Higher Education and Training has developed a Public Further Education and Training College Attendance and Punctuality Policy to enforce high levels of attendance and punctuality to improve students' chances of success and prepare them for the professional culture of the workplace (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013c) attendance and punctuality remain the twin challenges which are likely to pose a concrete obstacle to the successful implementation of the TVET concept. Because there are no consequences for non-compliance to this policy, students come to class when they feel like although the policy clearly states that students must attend at least 80% of the whole learning programme (DHET, 2013c). The major reasons given by students for non-attendance include, but not limited to assessment pressures, poor delivery of lectures, timing of lectures, and work commitments (Newman-Ford, Lloyd and Thomas, 2009).

Durden and Ellis (2005) researched on student differences in socio-economic background, ability, and motivation and reported a small positive relationship between attendance and academic achievement, that is, a few absences do not lead to poor grades but excessive absenteeism does. A study conducted by Ali, Jusoff, Mokhtar and Salamat (2009) also shows that attending lectures plays an important role in improving students' academic performance.

3. Presentation of Findings and Discussion

This section presented the findings from data generated through interviews with six students at a TVET college in Northern KwaZulu-Natal and a discussion thereof. The key research questions which guided this study were as follows:

- What are students' experiences of participation and success in the context of one TVET college in Northern KwaZulu-Natal?
- What are the factors which facilitate or impede student participation and success in this TVET College?
- How do students navigate the contextual dynamics that affect participation and success?

With the key research questions as the lenses through which the process of data presentation

and discussion it was envisioned that this section would take cognisance of the academic factors which promote or impede participation and success. An analysis of academic factors which influenced academic performance of especially NCV level 2 students at the South African TVET College were found to include language of instruction, the pedagogical approaches the relationship between the student and the lecturer, under-preparedness of students for the NCV curriculum, assessment approaches and academic support programmes. The above academic factors were found to have a significant influence on TVET students' participation and success rates in the various academic, technical, training and education programmes in the public college under study.

3.1 *The under-preparedness of students for the NCV curriculum*

The poor academic performance by NCV level 2 students was interpreted as emanating from students' under-preparedness for the NCV curriculum. For example, one respondent was of the view that many students are under-prepared for the Information Technology curriculum. He had this to say,

Most of the students have a background in Mathematics Literacy and when they enrol for an Information Technology (IT) programme they are thrown into Pure Mathematics. That could be the reason why they fail NCV level 2, especially in IT. Besides, IT subjects such as Computer Programming and Systems Analysis are also challenging. (Ngosazana)

The above sentiments were also echoed by another IT student who said,

Maths is quite heavy and it drags me down. It is better if the IT curriculum focuses on computer subjects. I always ask myself why we should concentrate on Pure Maths when it does not contribute to the development of computer knowledge (Prumel).

Another female IT student concurred with the above view. She had this to say,

Information Technology students who have a good background in Pure Mathematics in high school and who also have access to computers at the college and at home have greater chances of doing well in their studies (Zuzi).

Bourdieu (1986) accentuates that disadvantaged students are less successful, not because they were of inferior intelligence, but because the curriculum was biased in favour of those things with which middle-class students were already familiar. Thomas et al (2012) also argue that the under-preparedness of first year students in TVET colleges should not be viewed as simply a deficit that students bring into the lecture rooms, TVET colleges are equally unprepared for the demands of their diversified student populations. It is, therefore, important for the TVET college leadership and management to come up with a cocktail of approaches which will mitigate the negative effects of students' under-preparedness for the TVET curriculum. One way of addressing this issue is to have bridging courses in fundamental subjects such as Mathematics, Mathematics Literacy and English First Additional Language.

3.2 *The language of instruction and academic outcomes*

The issue of language has been widely viewed by students who participated in this research as one of the most limiting factor in enhancing student participation and success. The majority of students who took part in this research conceded that language can be a barrier to learning if a student has poor reading and writing skills in the subject of tuition. For example, one of the participants in this research attributed her poor performance in other subjects of the curriculum as emanating from her poor reading and writing skills in English. She said,

I had a big challenge in Psychology of Education and English. English was a big challenge because it is not my mother language. I also had problems in understanding Psychology of Education concepts, theories and principles because of my poor English language skills. I could have done

better in Psychology of Education if I understood English very well (Ian).

Another participant, who indicated during the interview that he uses Afrikaans, English and IsiZulu at home emphasised that his reading and writing skills in English are not very good although he is fully conversant in Afrikaans, English and IsiZulu. He had this to say,

The barriers I experienced are in terms of understanding some concepts that are mainly explained in English. To overcome this barrier I asked my other classmates to explain some of the concepts in IsiZulu. Although I speak Afrikaans, English and IsiZulu, my English in the classroom has some gaps which I need to work on (Robert).

The other student who participated in this study also strongly believed that the English language can limit how students can understand, especially, if the student is a second-language speaker of English. She said,

The barriers I experienced are in terms of understanding some of the concepts which are mainly explained in English, maybe, because I speak English as a second language. To overcome this barrier I asked my friends to explain the concepts in IsiZulu so that I would have a better understanding of the ideas of the topic (Ngosazana).

Lareau and Weininger (2003) note that the theory of cultural capital has enabled researchers to view language as a resource, that is, one that provides access to scarce resources, is subject to monopolisation, and under certain conditions, may be transmitted from one generation to the next. Jones et al (2008) also highlight the importance of English as a language of instruction by asserting that disadvantaged students who struggle to express themselves in English find it more difficult to be assertive, such as in the face of institutional bureaucracy around registration or programme selection. Language competence not only makes it easier for students to understand abstract concepts, but also increases a student's confidence to engage in more complex conceptual theorising (Wickham 1999 cited in Jones et al 2008). This implies that a substantial number of students may be under-achieving because they are struggling with language issues. A female academic development staff member who participated in the Jones et al (2008) report noted that English is not a first language for most students and so they are "automatically disadvantaged because their first language is not recognised in the classroom interaction, so it is not being used as a resource in classroom discussion or group activities". The academic development staff member also observed that "different languages can be used as strengths". She concluded by saying, "That is one example of how students are disadvantaged, not only because of what they are perceived not to have, but what they do have is not seen as valued". Thomas et al (2012) have consistently argued that this sort of institutional hegemony should be addressed by adapting post-school education and training curricula to meet the emerging needs of new kind of students. This means that a starting point would be to align the post-school education and training curricula with the students' needs and review successful foundation programmes and incorporate the key elements into the mainstream curricula. Thus, in this study students who possessed a competitive level of language proficiency may have found it easier to make sense of what was learnt in the technical education and training system, whereas those with poor linguistic competencies may have struggled to adapt to the rigors of academic and technical gymnastics. The emerging cross-cutting theme from participants seems to suggest that the issue of English as a language of instruction poses the greatest challenge to students who speak it as a second language. All the three participants who participated in the in-depth interviews indicated that they find it very difficult to fully understand what is taught in the lecture room mainly because most of the concepts are explained in English, a language which is foreign to the majority of them in the TVET sector. The issue of mother-tongue instruction seem to be a central issue since the participants indicated that they navigated the problem of English as a language of instruction by asking their peers to explain some of the difficult concepts in the vernacular language.

3.3 Academic support programmes in the TVET College

The other theme which emerged during the interview sessions is that of academic support. The majority of students acknowledged the existence of academic support programmes in the college. These are tutorial programmes which are facilitated by fellow students to ameliorate barriers experienced by students during conventional face-to-face instruction by lecturers. In the TVET College under study the institution has set up extra-classes in Maths, Information Technology, Maths Literacy and English after realising that students struggle with these fundamental subjects. The purpose for including these extra-classes was to iron out any learning difficulties experienced by NCV students in Maths, Maths Literacy and English. For example, one of the participants in this research explained,

We have Saturday and winter classes which help us to achieve success because we are taught by Peer Tutors who in some cases explain concepts in the mother-tongue. This helps us to understand concepts better than when lecturers use English, a language which most of us are unfamiliar with (Ian).

This view was corroborated by another participant who said,

Yes, the college provides weekend classes and these are good because you are taught by other students, so you are free to ask questions, however not many students attend these weekend classes (Robert).

One of the participants in this research also weighed in and said,

We have Saturday classes where we attend for at least two hours and they are quite helpful because we are teaching each other as students. The lecturer will be acting as a facilitator and most of the teaching will be done by students who are referred to as Peer Tutors (Ngosazana).

Another participant had an almost similar view but differed in that he bemoaned the absence of academic support in other areas of the curriculum. He had this to say,

Yes, the college provides Peer Tutors to help students who face challenges in English, IT, Accounting, Maths and maths Literacy. It would be better if this support is given in all subjects, because I have a problem with understanding Education and Development topics such as The Hormonal System, The Nervous System and Special Needs Education. It would be better if we are given extra-academic support in these areas (Ian).

Bourdieu (1984) argues that education plays an important role in aiding the reproduction of social inequality and social exclusion. According to Tzanakis (2011) cultural capital assumes a central importance in the above process of social reproduction because inequalities in cultural capital reflect inequalities in social class. This cultural capital plays itself out in the classroom and gives students of middle and higher classes an advantage over their lower-class counterparts (Redford, 2007). Maimane (2016) has consistently highlighted the view that academic support and development should be provided by tertiary institutions to address issues around student retention, progression and success. This implies that any academic support programme in the TVET College should carefully unpack issues which negatively impact on the disadvantaged sections of the student population and set in motion processes which will mitigate the impact of the present conditions.

3.4 The influence of educational resources on participation and success

On the question which required participants to outline the nature of resources provided by the college, the majority of the responses were in the affirmative, that is, participants were happy with the level of support they received from the college leadership and management.

One of the participants in this study was of the opinion that,

We are provided with textbooks, calculators, dictionaries and computers. Access to the internet should be improved since at the moment we do not have full access to the internet to do research in subjects such as Economics, New Venture Creation and Financial Management (Ian).

Another participant, Robert, also corroborated the above observations by saying,

In Accounting and Financial Management lecturers were given Overhead Projectors (OHPs) so that it will be easy for them to explain accounting principles clearly to students (Robert).

A participant in the research sample for this study also weighed in by saying,

The resources provided by the college are calculators, computers and books. Of late the college also installed free WIFI which helps us to access information from the internet without buying data bundles. These resources are important because most of us come from poor families so we do not have the financial resources to buy the resources (Ngosazana).

To explain educational outcomes Bourdieu (1973) specifies four generic types of capital: cultural capital, social capital, economic capital and symbolic capital. Bourdieu (1973) coined the term cultural capital to describe the different tastes and habits of specific social classes, demonstrating how those characteristics reinforce power relationships between those who possess desirable cultural attributes and the institutions that reinforce them (Bourdieu, 1973; 1977; 1983). Bourdieu (1973) defined cultural capital as instruments for the appropriation of symbolic wealth socially designated as worthy of being sought and possessed. This wealth appears to belong to the whole society, accessible to all on the basis of individual ability and effort, but social origins determine its appropriation. Thus, in this study participants who took part in this research might find it very challenging to access the different forms of capital due their socio-cultural and economic circumstances. Jones et al (2008) has consistently argued that viewing disadvantaged students as being under-prepared for tertiary education in certain respects is elitist and unhelpful, and that preparedness for tertiary education institutions should also be considered. A study by Freeth and Ngidi (2006) found that although the institution had certain mechanisms and programmes in place to assist disadvantaged students, the more fundamental institutional transformation was necessary in order to truly meet the needs of these students. This implies that the college should transform itself, move away from a traditional way of doing things and move towards a model which help students to learn as well as developing critical thinking in students. The probable reason why students complain that textbooks do not sufficient information could be that these students have not been equipped with critical thinking skills and problem-solving approaches which are capable of going beyond the textbook knowledge. The college leadership should wake up to this reality, if graduates from the TVET college system can contribute meaningfully to the socio-economic development of South Africa.

3.5 *The interaction between assessment approaches and academic achievement*

On the question which required students to identify the different assessment methods which college used to evaluate the students' work the majority agreed that the college uses class tests, assignments, examinations, practical projects such as Integrated Summative Assessment Tasks (ISAT). Integrated Summative Assessment Tasks are student-centred research projects where students are required to carry out research with the guidance of the lecturer. While the lecturer plays a facilitating role, most of the work, including the process and the product of the ISAT project is entirely the responsibility of the students. One the participants in this project was of the perception that,

Most of the assessments in my subjects are through written tests, assignments, examinations, ISAT as well as oral presentations (Robert).

Another participant, commented of the assessment methods as follows:

We are assessed on a term by term basis through tests, and assignments, and over and above that we have a summative assessment in the form of a research project called an ISAT, which tests on what we know and apply what we have learnt in a research-based project (Dinesh).

Another participant responded in more or less the same way as the above participants. The only slight difference is that she added work-place experience as part of assessment. She said,

We are assessed in through tests, assignments, examinations and volunteer programmes. (Zuzi).

One issue which is of great concern to academic staff at the TVET College under study is that the majority of students struggle to secure openings to practice the skills due to a lack of social capital (Burke, 2012). One component of the assessment regime highlighted in the three responses above is the volunteer programme, which is commonly referred to as in-service training. In-service training is an important component of all the assessment methods outlined because it enables students to marry theory learnt in the lecture-room and the application of the theory in the real work situation. Blom (2016) emphasise the fact that many qualifications require students to complete a period of in-service training before they can graduate. This in-service training found to be most successful when the programme was structured, where there were formal institutional structures to assist students find suitable placement and where there were clear agreements between the institution, the organisation hosting the student and the student (Blom, 2016). The researcher is of the opinion that the leadership and management of the TVET College should market its programmes to private and public organisations in the province with a view to develop win-win relationships with business organisations which will assist the students in securing the much-needed work experience.

3.6 Students' perception of assessment approaches used in the TVET college

Having gone through participants' responses regarding the different assessment approaches used in the TVET College under study, the researcher tried to glean through responses which indicated the impact of these approaches on students' academic achievement. The responses showed that, on the whole participants were happy in the way they were assessed. For example, one of the participants was of the view that,

I felt happy in the way I was assessed because projects gave me a sense of the workplace, experience of what the workplace is like. Tests and assignments helped me to see where I was lacking as a student. The ISAT helped me because it gave me an opportunity to interview a bank official at a local bank. The interview included things like how to make a credit card. I was also shown how to upload names of clients on a database. As a financial management student I benefitted a lot (Robert).

The other participant, also expressed satisfaction on the way students at the TVET college are assessed. To show her gratification on the assessment methods used at the college she said,

I am happy in the way they our lecturers have been testing us. We are tested on a continuous basis through practical and theoretical assignments. This helps us to be able to see the relationship between theoretical knowledge and practical skills which are important in our curriculum. Continuous assessment also helped me to prepare for our year-end examinations (Ngosazana).

However, the other participants were sceptical in the way they were assessed because according to one of the participants his main problem was,

The ISAT requires individual effort and creativity. The other challenge with ISAT was that as a student I needed more time not only to research about my college but other organisations too (Dinesh).

The other participant, also weighed in and said,

Some question papers are difficult to understand which made me battle to answer the questions on

my own. Some question papers come with mistakes and it is difficult to get the correct answer when the question itself is not correctly written. (Ian).

Bourdieu (1977) suggests that the education system should do away with giving explicitly to everyone what it implicitly demands of everyone alike. This consists of academic, linguistic and cultural competence and that relationship with culture which can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture. Tinto (2008) is also of the view that students need to have a clear idea of what is expected of them academically, especially in terms of being able to understand examination questions and how to answer them as well as understanding the requirements of assignments. As reported by Mlambo (2011) students themselves frequently raised the issue of struggling to understand examination questions and of obtaining poor marks as a result. This point also speaks to the necessity for lecturers to provide adequate explanations and guidelines, as well as for students to acquire an academic discourse, which is often more difficult for those who are not English or Afrikaans first language speakers.

4. Limitations of the Study

One key limitation of this narrative inquiry was the smaller number of participants in the study. Only six students participated in the research and the results from such a small number of participants cannot be generalised in all TVET colleges because the socio-economic conditions of students attending other TVET colleges may be the same and dynamics very dissimilar. For example, students in the TVET College under study may be disadvantaged as much as other students in other TVET colleges, but the fact that students from other TVET colleges are provided with accommodation and food made the level of challenges in the two scenarios dissimilar. However, the long and short of it all, was that to oversimplify from this small-scale study would not be tenable and also generalizable to all TVET colleges in KwaZulu-Natal province and South Africa in general.

5. Recommendations

Based on the research findings from this study it is recommended that the college leadership should:

- Expand the academic support programme to include other subjects that are not currently being catered for in the present academic support system.
- Look at the issue of language of instruction to come up with a formula which strikes a balance between students' linguistic challenges and policy requirements as articulated by the DHET.
- Conduct professional development programmes with a view to equip lecturers with knowledge and skills in such areas as teaching methods, assessment approaches, management of teaching and learning as well as the integration of theory and practice in the respective TVET programmes.

6. Conclusion

This study intended to find out students' academic experiences of access, participation and success in a South African technical, vocational, education and training college. The research found that academic factors such as the under-preparedness of students for the TVET curriculum, the language of instruction, academic support programmes, educational resources and assessment approaches have the potential to make or break students' chances of accessing, participating and succeeding in their academic programmes. It is, therefore, important for the TVET College leadership and management to analyse these academic factors with a different set of lenses so as to increase the students' chances of access, participation and success.

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