Reflections of Course, Peer and Technical Support in an Undergraduate Nursing Higher Education Institution, South Africa.

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Abstract
Background: The high failure rates in mainstream courses of the undergraduate Bachelor of Nursing degree qualification contributes to the nurse shortage in South Africa. Student Support Services assist students' integration academically into Higher Education Institutions, helping them cope and reduce the failure rates and premature course dropout. At current, there is insufficient research evaluating the Curse, Peer and Technical support which constitutes components of student support services and its role in academic and personal progression in Higher Education.
Materials and Methods: This study approach was a quantitative, non-experimental research design. Closed-ended questionnaire simple surveys were used with options of highly supportive, moderately supportive and lowly supportive. The simple survey questionnaire consisting of Course, Peer and Technical domains to the desired effect of academic and personal-psychological student support services to student nurses. The study sample was purposively selected. Altogether there were 187 undergraduate student nurses at the selected HEI. However, only 87 participants accessed the Academic Development Officer (ADO) support service. A total of 43 participants agreed to participate in this study. Ethical clearance was secured from the research ethics board, and ethics principles were observed through the study.
Results: Course, Peer and Technical Support was reported as Highly Supportive from 1st- 3rd year study participants. The 4th year study participants reported Technical Services as Lowly Supportive.
Conclusion: The study proved successful in obtaining study participants' reflections of Course, Peer and Technical support in an undergraduate Nursing Higher Education Institution (NHEI). Collectively, study participants from the 1st-3rd academic year rated Course, Peer Support and Technical support as Highly Supportive. The 4th year study participants found Course, Peer and Technical support services as Lowly Supportive. The findings suggest a need to explore further how academic support may be integrated into teaching practice and awareness of types of Student Support Services available. Furthermore, 1st year student nurses should not only be aware of the various types of Student Support Services and the structures of support, but needs to be consistently to all academic years alike including the 4th year student nurses.
Key Words: Access, Course Support, Peer Support, Technical Support, Student Support Services, at-risk and underperforming.

I.   Introduction

The Nursing Education Institutions (NEIs) have been integrated from provincial departments to Higher Education (HE) as part of National nursing education forms. To satisfy the requirements by the Council on Higher Education (CHE), the Nursing Higher Education Institutions (NHEI's) must meet the accreditation includes provision of Student Support Services [1]. Student support role is to improve student academic success [2]. However, despite increased access to HEIs, there are increased failure rates and low graduation rates of students. In the NHE context in South Africa, [3] state that graduation and completion rates for undergraduate and postgraduate nursing programmes are still low. This has serious repercussions in terms of a shortage of baccalaureate graduate nurses to provide care and treatment for patients.

The underlying problem is that students are academically underprepared for the transition from secondary school to HEIs [3]. Factors inhibiting academic preparedness are the teaching system, socio-economic disparities and emotional and personal factors that may cause psychological and academic stress [4]. Evidently, HEIs have a dropout rate up to 32.9% of undergraduates who do not complete their degree program. From this, the first-time undergraduate students have a 12-month dropout rate of 24.1%. From the first-time Bachelor's Degree aspiring students, 25.7% drop out. And among all undergraduate students, atleast 40% drop out [5].

To remedy the transitional issues from secondary school to HE, the University of KwaZulu-Natal established the implementation and monitoring of a comprehensive and holistic student support programme ([2]. This programme includes excellent teaching, mentoring and support by Academic Development Officer's (ADOs). The role of the ADO is to ensure retention and academic success of students. Additionally, the Academic Development Programme (ADP) (Boughey, 2010) explains, seeks to improve the quality of teaching and learning in HEIs and contributes to student transition to HEIs. ADP interventions were implemented within the economic sector at South African Higher Education Institutions with the hope of increasing the entry of previously disadvantaged populations into the workforce as a post-apartheid transformation strategy [7]. Since Student Support Services are now in place, it may be debated whether academic support services are effective in student retention and success. Support staff such as the ADOs are on contract and their employment in unstable which sees inconsistency with their presence due to the nature employment contract. Moreso, the graduation rate has witnessed a decline of 20% in 2006 to 17% in 2009. Some academic programmes have witnessed a higher dropout and exclusion rates than graduations [2].

Reasons for student dropout as stated by the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Teaching and Learning Office (UTLO) includes poor academic performance to problems in a student's life resulting in the student's distraction from his or her studies [8]. Researchers on first-year students' transitional challenges into HE finds that students are overwhelmed by the unfamiliar academic environment and this impacts negatively on their academic and personal lives [9]. Trying to rectify academic failure and enhance academic success by students, the 1997 South African White Paper developed transformational goals [10]. The goals focus on students' learning needs, academic development and development of intellectual abilities to pass each academic year and graduate and eventually to provide the labour market with high-level competencies and expertise, which are necessary for growth and prosperity of a modern economy [11]. However, evidence of high failure and drop-out rates shows that the transformational goals as declared in the 1997 South African White Paper have not been met [10].

Student Support Services which constitute Course, Peer and Technical support are avenues engaged by HEIs to help students transition into the HE and a course. With regards to the course support, course support helps support students with academic learning activities. This support largely benefited a student s they found the academic requirements easier to cope with and pass assessments from the helpfulness of the support. Course support is one f the largest factors leading to a student academic success. Course support in the form of peer support albeit in the classroom and practical setting helped a student nurse learn and acquaint themselves to the academic content and requirements [12].

[13] outline the various types of course support. This ADO support, lecturer support and peer mentor support, to name a few. However, as much as peer mentorship for instance has a positive outcome on student nurses' academic outcomes, there are inconsistencies which may affect the course support. This includes peer mentors lack of time to provide mentorship and inadequate formal evaluation of the support which may result in the peer mentor feeling unappreciated causing burnout and disinterest [14]. In their study, the findings on course or academic support found that student nurses being mentored, found the support uncoordinated and lacked proper implementation and no evaluation of the support being conducted. Furthermore, the peer mentors seemed unapproachable and not sincere in their roles. This caused the mentees not to want to attend the peer mentor services [15].

Considering that in South African Nursing Higher Education (NHE), most student nurses are from poor previously disadvantaged backgrounds. Their academic preparation from school is inadequate for Higher Education (HE) transitioning which leads to academic difficulty and failure soon to progress onto premature course dropout [16]. The lecturer support is also instrumental and primary in providing course support. In their study, student nurses revealed that lecturer support in a course helped them adjust to them academic content, understand the material and outcomes which led to course success. The lecturer's role extended into personal academic support, being approachable on academic and clinical content, academic advice givers and were all round caring and supportive. However, some of the comments on lecturer course support included the lecturer being more approachable to individual counselling or group counselling sessions for academic and personal support and the need for lecturers to praise students when they had done well [16].

Course support by the ADO includes excellent teaching, mentoring and support by the ADO. ADOs in an academic setting aim to ensure retention and academic success of students. Additionally, the Academic Development Programme (ADP) [6] seeks to improve the quality of teaching and learning in HEIs and contributes to student transition to HEIs [17]. Since Student Support Services are now in place, it may be debated whether ADOs are contributing to student retention, increasing pass rates and improving graduation rates as little research has so far been conducted [18]. Moreover, little research was done to test the efficacy of the academic support services and the impact on student success.

Technical support helps students integrate into a course and access digital or technological resources such as simulated technology and computer support. Students use technology for their course requirements to browse and prepare for class assessments and examinations. In nursing, the course requirements will be accessed digitally for theory or clinical skills. First year students do seek out support for technical support due to the course

demands. However, this soon wanes off as students feel that they know the technical requirements and just adapt to doing what they need to on the computer or using digital equipment, to get the work done. As student nurses progress into a course, they would find technical challenges [19. This could relate to connectivity problems, security and safety of the digital usage, lack of face to face interaction and the need to connect online when needed and to optimally use digitally enhanced and improved software [20].

Given the above accounts of Course, Peer and Technical support as components of Student Support Services, justifies the need for reflective studies on the impact of Student Support Services which needs to be done consistently. Inconsistencies in student support practices, processes and interventions may affect the student support programmes and their impact [21]. Furthermore, [22] no agreed-upon form of effective student support that will generate the desired results, therefore student support services need to ensue to assess the efficiency and outcomes of student support services. The ineffectiveness of Student Support Services if not evaluated periodically may affect the success of student nurses by premature course failure and dropout, timely course completions and graduations.

This paper therefore aims to underpin the reflection of Course, Peer and Technical Support in an Undergraduate Nursing Higher Education Institution, South Africa.

II. Methodology

This study approach was a quantitative, non-experimental research design. Closed-ended questionnaire simple surveys were used with options of highly supportive, moderately supportive and lowly supportive. The simple survey questionnaire consisting of Course, Peer and Technical domains to the desired effect of academic and personal-psychological student support services to student nurses. The reporting of data findings were set at three levels of significance in this study, namely:

- from 70%–100%, Highly supportive
- from 50%–69%, Moderately supportive
- from 1%–49%, Lowly supportive

Study Design: Quantitative Simple Survey design

Study Location: The study locations included the School of Nursing and Public Health (SNPH) situated centrally in the eThekwini district of KwaZulu-Natal [23]. University of KwaZulu-Natal). The SNPH consists of a four-year undergraduate nursing programme which offers the basic four-year nursing degree.

Study Duration: July 2011-April 2012

Sample size: 87 study informants.

Sample size calculation: The study sample was purposively selected. There was a total of 187 undergraduate student nurses at the selected HEI, SNPH. However, only 87 participants accessed the ADO support service from July 2011 to April 2012, of whom only 43 participants agreed to participate in this study.

Subjects and selection method: Informants were purposively selected. The criteria are included below:

Inclusion criteria:
1. Student nurses
2. Student from the 1st-4th academic year.
3. AMS staff from the College of Health Sciences.

Exclusion criteria:
1. Non- student nurses
2. Executive Leadership other than the College of Health Sciences
3. Nurse educators
4. Student support service staff

Procedure Methodology: Permission to conduct the study was granted by the Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The protocol reference number for the study was HSS/0229/012. The study was done in accordance with the ethical Declaration of Helsinki and that entailed obtaining written consent from participants prior to the study, non-disclosure of research participants' names and responses from the study and no harm of patients' mental and physical well-being [24].

After having obtained permission and ethics to conduct the study, the researcher began contacting student nurse whom attended the ADO support services. Study participants were contacted by the researcher telephonically and personally. The study information sheet and informed consent form was given student nurses and those whom consented to be apart of the study, had completed the informed consent.

The research tool was a simple survey questionnaire consisting of Course, Peer and Technical domains and was a conceptual framework of Student Support for Learning [25]. The simple survey as [26] states is a questionnaire allowing for participants to describe accurately the characteristics of a particular subject where data collection and information gathering can be elicited. There were twenty questions with options of "Yes" or "No".

Course support consisted of ten items, Peer Support consisted of five, and Technical Support consisted of five items on the checklist. Course support items referred to lecturers providing the students with instructional guidance to learning, lecturers answering students' questions, lecturers correcting students' misunderstandings, lecturers providing clear instruction to students, lecturers providing relevant resources, and constructive feedback on students' assignments and performance.

Peer support items included peer-to-peer learning, the extent to which students support each other on academic or non-academic issues and encourage social interaction.

Technical support included the extent to which assistance is provided to students in the online courses [25]. The technical assistance provided to students by the career and counselling centre sought to establish students' knowledge of where to access student support services when needed. Information technology and local area networks included students' knowledge of when and where to get assistance with IT-related and electronic queries whilst on the university premises.

Study participants completed the questionnaire at convenient times whilst on the university premises. Student nurses completed the surveys in a private and quiet space which was conducive to them. Once they completed the surveys, they handed it over to the researcher. All surveys were locked away in a safe cupboard only accessible to the researcher.

Statistical Analysis:

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 19 was with a significant *p value* $< .01$. Data was further analysed and reported by means of frequency distribution counts and descriptive statistics. Validity is the degree to which an instrument measures what it intends to measure [24]. Content validity was also ensured as the study instrument represented all the different components of the variables being measured [24]. The questionnaire of the study was guided by the framework of student support for learning [25]. The Cronbach's alpha for Course/Lecturer support was 0.957, for Peer support it was 0.669 and for Technical support it was 0.761. These scores were closely related to each other signifying internal consistency [27].

III. Results

Data analysis on students' reflections on student support services which included Course, Peer and Technical support from the 1st- 4th years and then separately for each academic year.

Table 1: Results from 1st-, 2nd-, 3rd-, 4th year study participants – Course support

Academic Year and Study participant rate	Highly Supportive	Moderately Supportive	Lowly Supportive
1st year **No. of student nurse study participants- 8 (100%)**	78.0 %		
2nd year **No. of student nurse study participants- 14 (82.4 %)**	78. 0 %		
3rd year **No. of student nurse study participants- 9 (100 %)**	78. 0 %		
4th year **No. of student nurse study participants- 8 (88.9 %)**			30.0 %

Data findings in Table 1 reveals that 8 (100%) 1st-year study participants, 14 (82.4%) 2nd-year study participants, 9 (100%) 3rd-year study participants found Course Support Highly Supportive at 78.0 % and 8 (88.9%) 4th year study participants found Course Support services Lowly Supportive at 30.0 %.

Table 2: Results from 1st, 2nd-, 3rd-, 4th year study participants – Peer support

Academic Year and Study participant rate	Highly Supportive	Moderately Supportive	Lowly Supportive
1st year **No. of student nurse study participants- 4 (50 %)**	78.0 %		
2nd year **No. of student nurse study participants- 4 (50 %)**	78. 0 %		

	Highly Supportive	Moderately Supportive	Lowly Supportive
3rd year **No. of student nurse study participants-** **8 (88.9 %)**	78. 0 %		
4th year **No. of student nurse study participants-** **5 (71.4 %)**			30.0 %

Data findings in Table 2 revealed that for Peer support services, 4 (50%) 1st year study participants, 4 (50%) 2nd-year study participants, 8 (88.9%) 3rd-year study participants found Peer Support Highly Supportive at 78.0 % and 5 (71.4%) 4th year study participants found Peer support services Lowly Supportive at 30.0 %.

Table 3: Results from 1st- , 2nd-, 3rd-, 4th year study participants – Technical support

Academic Year and Study participant rate	Highly Supportive	Moderately Supportive	Lowly Supportive
1st year **No. of student nurse study participants-** **3 (37.5 %)**	78.0 %		
2nd year **No. of student nurse study participants-** **4 (23.5 %)**	78. 0 %		
3rd year **No. of student nurse study participants-** **4 (44.4 %)**	78. 0 %		
4th year **No. of student nurse study participants-** **2 (22.2 %)**			30.0 %

Data findings in Table 3 revealed 3 (37.5 %) 1st-year study participants, 4 (23.5 %) 2nd-year study participants, 4 (44.4 %) 3rd-year study participants found Technical Support Highly Supportive at 78.0 % and 2 (22.2 %) 4th-year study participants found it Lowly Supportive at 30.0 %.

IV.   Discussion

Data findings revealed in Table 1 that Course Support was Highly Supportive at 78.0 % by the 1st- 3rd year study participants. The 4th year study participants found it Lowly Supportive at 30.0 %. The same was expressed by 1st-3rd year study participants who found Peer Mentor and Technical Support services as Highly Supportive at 78.0 % and 4th year study participants found it Lowly Supportive at 30.0 %. These study findings were consistent over the Course, Peer and Technical Support over the 1st -4th academic years.

The Course Support data analysis in Table 1, [28] lend support by stating that in order for student nurses to benefit from the course, they needed additional student support services. In their study, [28] defines student support as a group of activities used to enhance student academic performance. These services ensure increased student retention and success. This support is crucial during the first year of a student's academic journey. This is suggestive of the same highly supportive Course Support as study findings highlight. The first year is the stage when they just enter Higher Education (HE) and need guidance by student support services. In undergraduate Nursing Higher Education (NHE), evidently, the above-mentioned throughput and attrition issues are both academic and non-academic. For reasons as cited by [29], student nurses face challenges related to personal, academic and institutional factors. Socio-economic factors come into fray affecting academic progression as, if a student is unable to afford meals and having financial troubles this prevents him/her from focusing on academia. This corresponds with what [30] state, that the throughput rate among student nurses has not improved. This indicates a threat to the graduates' as higher education institutions are producing insufficiently qualified nurse professionals and this cripples the health workforce.

However, as data findings suggest, the Course Support being Highly Supportive to 1st- 3rd year study participants, conveyed a sense of appreciation of the Course Support services. It is delivered according to what student nurses needed and found beneficial to their academic integration. The sheer determination of student nurses to access these services and find them beneficial, is what [31] explains is a student's drive to complete and achieve academically. Given some students poor psycho-social backgrounds and despite parents' level of education, their lack of preparedness for HE, drove them to achieve academically.

In Table 2 indicating Peer Support Services, shows that 1st-3rd year study participants found Peer Support services Highly Supportive at 78.0 % and 4th year study participants found it Lowly Supportive at 30.0 %. In a study on medical students on Course support, revealed that students transition into university and into their course. Course support by extra-curricular advice and peers helped them cope with the course support. They were able to understand the content and requirements better. [32] conducted a study on the impact of Peer support provided to the first-year students nurses on the clinical stress and psychomotor nursing skills. Their study revealed that in the first academic year, a student is anxious and stressed and makes many errors due to the uncertainty of the skill.

The Peer Assisted Learning which was peer to peer support, albeit in groups of student or individually helped reinforce positive thinking, calming the student, allowing focus and freedom of speech as students felt more comfortable and safer.

Further supporting the benefit of Course and Peer Support which majority of the study participants in the 1st – 3rd year found Highly Supportive, [33] reveals that poor academic outcomes can be attributed to lack of additional support on a lecturer's part. As such, slower students, need more time spent on being taught a particular section again or to go over academic content again. Not offering this to students, affects their understanding leading to academic failure ([33]. [34] state that students who learn a lot slower need time with a peer or tutor to over additional tutorial materials. The supplemental course support by the extra sessions with a lecturer or peer mentor ensures that the subject matter is at a cognitive level, deeply learnt and understood. Cementing the effects of peer support and the influence on positive course outcomes, as literature reveals, allows for a positive influence on a student's confidence, self-esteem, empowerment and helped students cope better [32]

Table 1 and 2 of the Course and Peer Support reveals that 4th year study participants find these support services Lowly Supportive at 30.0%. In this instance literature reviews reveals that students do not attend the student support services as they feel they have been in the system long enough and do not need the support. Some students also feel ashamed and stigma of attending student support services as being seen as not being able to cope. [33] state the same that older academic year students feel they can handle the academic pressures and do not seek support services. [35] revealed in their study, student nurses did not attend support services due to their non-awareness of the service and also a stigma attached to attending services for counselling or mental support. This accounted for 75% who did not utilise this service. [36] further add that cultural differences and social stigma of a student attending a support services is an obstacle for reaching out to support services.

Also, [37] states that possibly 4th year students find student support services lowly supportive as these services are not impressed upon them. They are not reminded and informed on why they need to attend the services. Therefore, their lack of awareness of student support services. For the same reasons, [37] states that Student Support Services need to be made aware for all the academic years as academic and personal support for retention is paramount.

On the support by Technical Services, Table 3 reveals Technical Support was found Highly Supportive by 1st -3rd year study participants. The 4th study participants, however, found it Lowly Supportive. Literature reveals that 4th year students even though at their senior academic year may not be aware of the various types of support services. In their study of support services by undergraduate student nurses in Nurse Education Institutions (NEIs), [35] found that students lack awareness of certain services led to student nurses not understanding the role and support offered.

[19] explain further on first and senior academic year student attendance and students' attention to IT related support. In their first year at university, students experience shift in technology from school and into HE. Once they acquaint themselves to the technology, course expectations and what digital skills they need to acquire and use, is what their focus is on. The senior academic year students soon lose interest and disconnect to digital transformations at HE simply because they know what they too digitally to get their coursework done. Therefore, they do not find the need to seek out IT and digital support.

V.   Conclusion

The Course, Peer and Technical support services as part of Student Support Services need to be periodically assessed to ascertain if it is benefiting student nurses. Student nurses who access NHEIs come from poor socio-economic backgrounds with limited preparation for HE integration. The purpose of the Course, Peer and Technical support services is to increase access with access. If these services are not benefiting a student nurse, this may lead to course failure and premature dropout. This ultimately affects the purpose of transformation of HEIs and a failure to support the healthcare institutions with qualified graduate professional nurses. Course, Peer and Technical support services as this study found are well received by the 1st-3rd year student nurses. Upon 4th year access into a program, student nurses do not find these services supportive. This is suggestive of the lack of awareness of the support services, discontentment with the services, a stigma to attend the services and lack of interest in the services provided. There needs to be further research on the specific reasons why 4th year student nurses find these support services lowly supportive and how to improve uptake of these services till the end of a 4th academic year of a student nurse.

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