Mentoring life skills at a higher education institution: A case study

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Abstract
Higher education institutions are facing challenges with regard to improving the success and pass rate of students. Mentorship in the life skills programmes should contribute significantly in addressing these issues. A study was undertaken to determine students’ perceptions of the life skills programme at the Tshwane University of Technology. The sample for the survey included 146 students from departments that were available at the time of data collection. A factor analysis was employed to determine the most important issues regarding the life skills programme and its mentorship. A number of findings led to recommendations for the improvement of the success rate of students and the life skills programme. The implication of this study for higher education in general involves the adding of value to students through the mentoring in the life skills programmes offered by higher education institutions.

INTRODUCTION
Student throughput rate has become a serious concern in higher education institutions (HEIs) and academic departments are challenged to handle this issue. Tyobeka states in the Mail and Guardian (2009, 2) that ‘a student drop-out rate of 20 per cent implies that about R1,3-billion in government subsidies is spent each year on students who do not complete their study programmes’. In 2006, the total success rate of undergraduate students at the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) was 68.17 per cent, and it was recommended that the university should improve its success rate in relation to the national benchmark of 77 per cent (Pieterse 2008). According to Handy (2003), students fail because of inadequate preparedness, inappropriate study habits, and unproductive exam anxiety. Palmer and Chalmers (1990) contend that students fail because of ineffective study methods, because they do not know how to write examinations, and because they do not do enough work. Life skills training aims to get the students to think about the skills they need to cope as undergraduates. At
the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) life skills training includes academic support and personal support programmes which are presented as group facilitation.

HEIs need to become more conscious of the necessity of student development and support. It is envisaged that mentoring of life skills in Student Development and Support (SDS) in HEIs will improve the success rate of first-year students and increase the throughput rate of postgraduate students. This argument extends to the theories of mentorship. Mentorship provides the establishment of a learning relationship where a mentor becomes a role-model and advisor (Erasmus, Loedolff, Mda and Nel 2009). Directive and non-directive mentoring are two different types of mentoring interventions. Meyer (2007) elaborates by stating that directive mentoring focuses on providing advice and support while non-directive mentoring focuses on a facilitative style by listening and asking questions. Both can be utilised in the HEIs life skills programmes.

At the majority of HEIs life skills programmes are not compulsory. At TUT the life skills programme is voluntary but it would make a difference if life skills could be made a compulsory subject in HEIs.

This article reports on research conducted in SDS at TUT. The aim of the research on which this article reports was to determine the perception of students on mentorship in the life skills programme in SDS in order to improve the general impression of students’ satisfaction level with regard to life skills programmes.

The implication of this study for higher education in general relates to the fact that the support students receive from HEIs should contribute to the enhancement of their pass rates. Mentorship in the life skills programme should therefore add value to the student as well as the institution.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature review was based on definitions, roles and responsibilities of the mentor and mentee, the characteristics of an effective mentoring relationship and a mentor as a facilitator. According to Meyer and Fourie (2004), a mentor is a father/mother figure, a trainer and coach, an equipper and motivator. A mentor who is a life skills facilitator will help students to develop and enhance their potential through life skills. The mentoring process requires clarification of roles and responsibilities. Mentors are encouraged to consider the roles of a teacher, learning coach, guide, advisor, counsellor, motivator and sponsor (Meyer and Fourie 2004). The learning coach assists in developing a learning strategy that creates knowledge and success. As a coach the mentor helps to clarify performance goals and development needs, teaches managerial and technical skills and suggests specific behaviour in which the mentee needs to improve (Meyer and Mabaso 2006). The counsellor helps with more personal issues, such as balancing work and family or dealing with family issues. The counsellor needs to establish a trusting and open relationship with the mentees. In order to create a trusting relationship, the counsellor should stress confidentiality and show respect for the mentee. This means not disclosing personal information
that the mentee shares with the counsellor (Coast guards mentoring manual 2006). The sponsor promotes the mentee’s knowledge and skills, and the mentor may stand by the mentee in a critical situation. A sponsor creates opportunities for the mentee – opportunities that may not otherwise be made available. The opportunities can relate directly to the job or indirectly to the mentee’s overall professional development. The goal of the mentor is to provide as much exposure for the mentee as possible with a minimum of risks (Coast guards mentoring manual 2006). As motivators, at times mentors may need to motivate their mentees. Motivation is an inner drive that compels a person to succeed. Generally mentees are motivated and enthusiastic about their job (Coast guards mentoring manual 2006). A communicator helps the mentee understand effective internal and external communication, including the subtleties of when and how messages are best delivered how to handle potentially sensitive areas and how to communicate in difficult situations.

Many mentors prefer to work with mentees who are self-motivated and are primary drivers of the relationship. Conversely, some mentors enjoy working with mentees who need encouragement on a regular basis (Lee, Anzai, Curltis and Langlotz 2006). The characteristics of an effective mentoring relationship need to be identified for any mentorship programme.

Effective mentoring relationship
Mentoring relationships need not necessarily be dyadic, because different forms of group mentoring have been proposed. Mentoring relationships are no longer considered to be relatively rare, and may occur sequentially or simultaneously (Baugh and Sullivan 2005). The essential factors for mentoring life skills are trust, self-esteem, partnership building, time and respect. Usually, mentorship is the special relationship that is cultivated between a mentor and a protégé, where the mentor counsels, guides, and helps the protégé to develop both personally and professionally (Gardiner, Enomoto and Grogan 2000). Hung (2003) explains that the mentoring relationship does not continue indefinitely. Once the relationship achieves its goals it comes to an end – the mentee is ready to move forward without the assistance of the mentor. Mah (2002) considers that relationships need to benefit both parties. Often it is expected that the partners in mentoring relationships will have similar backgrounds and goals. However, there can be great benefit to the mentee to choose a mentor of a different social or cultural background, since it will stretch the ability to deal with new ideas. The best mentorships are those that grow naturally from shared experiences. These naturally occurring mentorship relationships should focus on guiding the mentee (Mabry, Kumza and De Santis 2008). One of the roles of a mentor is to facilitate and that is also applicable in the life skills programme.
A mentor as a facilitator

A facilitator may be used for short-term task-orientated facilitation or long-term developmental facilitation. The purpose is to help the group accomplish its task, and to teach the group how to improve its process (Kolb 2004). A mentor is responsible for facilitating the mentorship process – hence a facilitator is still a mentor in this regard. The facilitator’s task is to facilitate the flow of comments and discussion of the participants and to lead them to significant learning.

McFadzean and McKenzie (2001) emphasise that communication should be changing from a one-way facilitator-to-student relationship to an all-round relationship where students communicate with one another and are also helped and supported by the facilitator. The facilitator is expected to encourage participants to plan and control their own learning process.

O’Hara, Bourner and Webber (2004) suggest a set of useful skills for members:

- **Questioning skills** – to help people to find their own solutions to their problems
- **Active listening skills** – to communicate to people that they are being understood; to help them work out their own solutions but not give solutions; to help them clarify their situation, the facts, their thoughts and their feelings; and to hear without judging or evaluating
- **The ability to give and receive feedback** – to help people learn and develop, to increase their self-esteem and to make them feel valued
- **An understanding of the group process** – to appreciate the difference between task and process and between helpful and sabotaging behaviours
- **Creative problem-solving skills** – to provide a range of tools to help the students when they are stuck
- **The skill of reflection** – to plan for future action and to help derive the learning from action
- **Understanding the process of learning** – to enable people to appreciate the variety of ways in which people can learn.

Van Dyk, Nel, Van Z. Loedolff and Haasbroek (2001) proposes the following guidelines in ensuring that a supportive atmosphere is maintained: giving everyone something to do at all times; trying to keep the experience focused and well paced; letting the group assist you; indicating time cues to the learners; utilising subgroups to encourage sharing; turning whatever happens into a learning experience; making the steps in the learning cycle clear and complete to the learners; and preparing the way for the next step. Retention of information can be greatly enhanced if learners can participate actively in the presentation. The rationale for including the various components of a life skills programme to improve study skills is discussed next.
Support programmes

Academic assessment is used to identify students’ study habits. Cottrell (2003) suggests that to obtain good marks, you do not necessarily have to work longer hours. Study schedule management is covered in the life skills programme to improve the time management skills of the mentees and to keep a balance between academic and social life. Organisational and time management skills are closely intertwined with the goals students wish to achieve.

Note-taking is one of the most important activities in students’ studies. According to Burns and Sinfield (2004), notes can be taken in nonlinear or linear form. Although the linear approach appears to be an extremely pragmatic, superficial approach to note-taking, it actually encourages reflective learning because students work to understand how the learning has been structured over a programme.

Students need to memorise in order to retrieve for the examination and therefore they are equipped with the memorising techniques that involve reading, saving and retrieving information. Memory may be assisted by learning strategies (Cottrell 2003).

According to Dawson (2004), effective preparation for examinations helps students to control their nerves. The students will be able to manage their fear of examinations and also reduce stress levels. The students need to be guided regarding academic writing and the following hints should be provided: planning to write, when to write, developing individual writing habits and monitoring progress (Anderson 2004). It is important for the students to be aware of themselves regarding the type of learners they are. Burns and Sinfield (2004) suggest various learning style hints. Visual learners enjoy reading, watching film, TV and video and they also benefit from using pattern knot, systems supplemented by the use of colour, space, highlighting and cartoons or other visual images. Auditory learners remember sounds best and benefit from discussion or explaining things to other people. They may need to speak aloud when they are learning something, and supplement this by making key word tapes of topics that need to be remembered, possibly using jingles, tunes and funny voices to stimulate the memory. Kinaesthetic learners remember kinaesthetically and will need to love their subject, and possibly to build movement into their learning strategies. They will not learn by sitting in one place hour after hour. They may need to make charts and patterns of the key topics that they have to remember or act out or role play in some way.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Situational context

The main objective of the SDS is to assist and enhance the academic and personal wellbeing of the individual student. Mentors fulfil a vital role in the unit as well as in the university. Due to the merger, TUT have three learning sites. They are situated in Pretoria, Soshanguve and Ga-Rankuwa. Out of 14 programmes that SDS provides to
the academic departments, the life skills programme was used in this research. The research was conducted through departments which volunteered to have life skills training with SDS. The life skills programme offered by the SDS at TUT include study skills development and personal skills development (see Figure 1). The length of the programme depends on how many themes the academic departments believe to be appropriate in order to make an impact on their students. The numbers of students that attend the life skills programme also depend on how many first-year students there are per course.

Study skills activities are part of a wider process of personal development. Cottrell (2003) emphasises that personal planning is not something one does once and then forgets. Study skills development helps the students to prepare themselves for success in their studies (Landberger 2006). Students should develop and appreciate study habits. According to SDS records the study strategies seem to be the most popular topics in academic skills development in the life skills programme in the SDS. Through the study strategies, the Directorate assists students who need to develop study habits.

In SDS, facilitation is done on academic skills assessment, depending on what the lecturers’ expectations are. With regard to life skills the assessment will either be LASSI (Learning and Study Strategies Inventory) or the Neethling Brain Profile which also assesses study profile and other career-related matters.
Research method
A quantitative approach was utilised in this descriptive study. Quantitative research is described as research that addresses the issue of integrity by relying on an objective technology such as precise statements, standard techniques, numerical measures, statistics and replication (Neuman 2006). The quantitative method in this study involved the completing of questionnaires. A questionnaire on mentorship was designed based on relevant constructs identified in the literature. According to SDS records in the process, the constructs indicated below were identified and distributed to the participants. The broad themes that were covered in the questionnaire were:

- Mentorship skills
- Academic skills development
- Personal skills
- SDS assessments.

Participants
The majority of the respondents were between 19 and 22 years (71.2%), with 18.5 per cent aged 18 years, 7.5 per cent between 23 and 26 years, and 2.1 per cent 27 years or older. With regard to gender, 71.9 per cent of the participants were female and 27.4 per cent male.

Pertaining to home language, the majority of the respondents (23.3%) were Afrikaans speakers, 6.8 per cent English speakers, 4.1 per cent IsiNdebele speakers, 6.8 per cent IsiXhosa speakers, 12.3 per cent IsiZulu speakers, 20.5 per cent Northern Sotho speakers, 6.2 per cent Sesotho speakers, 10.3 per cent Setswana speakers, 1.4 per cent SiSwati speakers, 2.1 per cent Tshivenda speakers, 5.5 per cent Xitsonga speakers and 0.7 per cent spoke a language other than those mentioned above.

The majority (38.4%) of the respondents resided with their parents, 24 per cent resided with their friends, 11 per cent resided alone, 23.3 per cent respondents were TUT residents, and 2.7 per cent of respondents specified ‘other’ while 0.7 per cent did not specify the residence.

Sampling
Convenience sampling was chosen as a method of non-probability sampling, which was used in this study. Non-probability sampling means that not all elements have an equal chance, and conclusions are only made about those who have completed the questionnaires. A sampling element is the unit of analysis or case in a population. It can be a person, group, an organisation, a written document or symbolic message, or even a social action that is being measured (Neuman 2006).

The first-year students who were available during life skills lectures (156) at the time the data was collected in the Directorate of Student Development and Support were used as the sample for the study. Three of these students did not complete the
seven questionnaires were incomplete. This resulted in a sample size of 146 mentees. Descriptive statistics were applied for analysis of the data using frequencies, means and medians.

**Measuring instrument**

The questionnaire included six Likert-type rate scales with closed-ended questions. The Likert-type rating scale was first developed by Rensis Likert for measuring attitudes and can be applied to numerous different response anchors such as ‘disagree’ to ‘agree’, ‘unsatisfied’ to ‘satisfied’ and ‘frequency’ (Swanson 2005). The questionnaire was pilot tested before the actual data gathering and the mentees were satisfied with the design of the questionnaire, finding it easy to answer and not too lengthy to complete.

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was used in this analysis. It is a statistic that indicates the proportion of variance in the variables, namely common variance (i.e. which might be caused by underlying factors). Factor analysis is widely applied as a data-reduction or structure-detection method. Various methods are available to extract the underlying factors in a set of data, the most common being principal components analysis and principal axis factoring. The former is generally preferred for the purposes of data reduction (translating variable space into optimal factor space), while the latter is normally used when the research purpose is causal modelling.

An assortment of rotational strategies is available after the initial factors have been extracted. The goal of all of these strategies is to obtain a clear pattern of loadings, that is, factors that are somehow clearly marked by high loadings for some variables and low loadings for others, to make the output more understandable.

**Data collection**

A questionnaire and letters of consent were given to students during their lectures. Due to the method of convenience sampling that was used, only 156 students were given the questionnaires and 146 completed them.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

**Mentorship regarding life skills**

In this study the measuring instrument and sample were discussed. The main purpose of the study was to investigate mentorship in the Directorate of Student Development and Support at TUT. In particular, the study attempted to determine the students’ perception of mentorship in the life skills programme in the Directorate. The objectives of the study were to determine:

- the students’ perception of mentorship in the Directorate;
- the role of the mentor in the life skills programme; and
which aspects of the assessments in the Directorate were most significant for the students.

**Factor analysis of the study**

A factor analysis using the method of principal components was performed to further investigate the structure of the 19 items measuring the students’ perception of mentorship. This was done to ascertain that the questions actually measured the dimension (mentoring skills, academic skills and personal skills) as intended. The pattern matrix, which reports the factor loadings for each item on the components or factors after the rotation, is displayed in Table 1. Each number represents the partial correlation between the item and the rotated factor and indicates the extent to which the item is represented by the factor. Items with high factor loadings characterise a factor. The items were sorted by size, and factor loadings of less than 0.3 were reduced in Table 1 to aid with the interpretation. (Factor loadings of less than 0.3 signify association of less than 10 per cent, i.e. 0.03-squared, of that item with the factor). The complete factor solution is indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Factor analysis pattern matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Component 1</th>
<th>Component 2</th>
<th>Component 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C9</td>
<td>Memorising strategies adequately explained</td>
<td>.825</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C11</td>
<td>Creativity improved</td>
<td>.785</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C10</td>
<td>Writing skills improved</td>
<td>.781</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C8</td>
<td>Learning style adequately explained</td>
<td>.755</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C13</td>
<td>Importance of taking notes explained</td>
<td>.713</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C7</td>
<td>Lifelong learning skills were conveyed</td>
<td>.680</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D15</td>
<td>Taught to manage stress effectively</td>
<td>.572</td>
<td>.333</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C12</td>
<td>Language skills sharpened</td>
<td>.536</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D17</td>
<td>Knowledge about diversity improved</td>
<td></td>
<td>.838</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D19</td>
<td>Familiar with campus ethics</td>
<td></td>
<td>.783</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D16</td>
<td>Taught to manage conflict effectively</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.752</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D18</td>
<td>Skills to assist people improved</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.532</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B4</td>
<td>Mentor fulfils role as facilitator</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.885</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B3</td>
<td>Mentor knowledgeable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.754</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>Mentor has good communication skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.695</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B5</td>
<td>Mentor guides me to make own decision</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.569</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Extraction method: principal component analysis
Rotation method: Oblimin with Kaiser normalisation
The first factor, which accounts for 38.1 per cent of the total variance (see Table 1), has high loadings on all the items relating to the academic skills development programme, as well as on item D15, which is spread between factor 1 and factor 2. This item, ‘I have been taught to manage stress effectively’ which was assessed under the personal skills development theme, therefore relates to both academic and personal skills. It shows that most of the respondents who are stressed need to be further assessed whether they are academically stressed or personally stressed. This does not necessarily mean that students are only personally stressed. The majority of respondents seemed to appreciate the support given in academic skills development because they were aware of the impact of the support and had experienced what it could have on their studies.

Factor 2 explains a further 12.4 per cent of the variance, representing the items relating to the personal skills development programme. It shows that respondents were grateful for the personal skills development themes presented because they were aware of the impact of the skills in their personal and academic life and understood, the impact this would have on their future.

Factor 3 is characterised by items B2 to B5, which assessed mentoring skills, explaining a further 9.5 per cent of the variance. The majority of respondents indicated their satisfaction with the role of the mentor as measured by the items relating to mentorship skills.

This shows that the majority of respondents were benefiting from the mentorship in life skills in the SDS. The respondents seemed to be satisfied with the relationship they had with their mentors and also with the skills of their mentors. Table 2 shows the perception of mentees regarding the necessary skills needed by mentors when facilitating life skills programmes.

Table 2: Perception of mentorship – mentoring skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mentoring skills</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5</td>
<td>Median  Mode</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Mentor has good communication skills</td>
<td>26 97 15 5</td>
<td>2.0 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Mentor guides me to make own decision</td>
<td>43 77 21 5</td>
<td>2.0 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Mentor fulfils role as facilitator</td>
<td>35 82 22 6</td>
<td>2.0 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Mentor knowledgeable</td>
<td>42 76 21 7</td>
<td>2.0 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Communication skills were perceived to be the best attribute (obtained by combining the two agreement categories), followed by guidance to take own decisions. Very few respondents disagreed with any of the statements on mentoring skills. The study revealed that with regard to mentoring skills, communication skills were perceived
to be the best attribute, followed by guidance in making one’s own decisions. This shows that there was good communication between the mentor and the mentees (in other words, good communication skills), and that the students were satisfied with the guidance and advice the mentors provided in the sense that they encouraged students to make their own decisions. The students believed that the mentors had sufficient knowledge and effective facilitation skills.

**Academic skills development**

Table 3 demonstrates the perception of mentees concerning the academic skills development. The ranking of the skills, derived by combining the two agreement categories, is reflected in the table.

Table 3: Perception of mentorship — academic skills development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>...</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>Mode</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Importance of taking notes explained</td>
<td>46  63 12  1  1</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Learning style adequately explained</td>
<td>32  67 15 10  1</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Memorising strategies adequately explained</td>
<td>34  65 22  0  2</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Lifelong learning skills have been conveyed</td>
<td>17  75 30  3  0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Language skills sharpened</td>
<td>27  64 19 10  0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Creativity improved</td>
<td>22  61 27 11  0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Writing skills improved</td>
<td>25  53 32 10  2</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The respondents agreed that their academic skills had improved, again illustrated by the mode and median of 2. The majority of the students/mentees indicated that academic skills themes/topics were being facilitated effectively to them.

**Personal skills development**

Table 4 displays the perceptions of mentees with special reference to personal skills development. The ranking is also indicated in the table.
Table 4: Perception of mentorship – personal skills development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal skills</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>...</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>Mode</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Taught to manage stress effectively</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Taught to manage conflict effectively</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Memorising strategies adequately explained</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Lifelong learning skills have been conveyed</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Familiar with campus ethics</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As in the academic skills, the majority of the respondents agreed that they had benefited from the personal skills development programme. The mode and median are again 2 for all the items. The majority of the students/mentees indicated that personal skills themes/topics were facilitated effectively to them.

Assessments

Table 5 illustrates the perception of mentees regarding aspects of assessments relating to the life skills programme. Assessments are used to determine what topics are to be facilitated in the life skills programme. Findings regarding perceptions of assessments are indicated in the table.

Table 5: Perception of mentorship – aspects of the assessments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal skills</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>...</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>Mode</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Immediate verbal feedback important</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Will follow up on recommendations</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Questions/statements in assessments clear</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Learnt more about myself</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Questions/statements intimidating</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Regarding the assessments that relate to life skills, immediate feedback was perceived to be the best attribute, followed by the fact that students learnt more about themselves. The respondents expressed their satisfaction with the assessments in SDS. However, the students felt that the questions in the assessments were intimidating and this might have influenced their responses. Since they felt that their assessment reports might not be valid, they did not have the confidence to follow up on the recommendations. The issue of whether students will follow up the recommendations should be investigated to identify further possible problem areas. There was general consensus that immediate verbal feedback is crucial and that the respondents learnt more about themselves as a result. They also agreed that the questions and statements in the assessment were clear. Most respondents did not find the questions and statements in the assessment intimidating, as indicated by the mode of 4. However, a fair proportion of the respondents were uncertain about this aspect (22%), while almost a third indicated that they did find these questions and statements intimidating. Although the majority agreed that they would follow up on recommendations, it is disconcerting to note that almost a quarter indicated that they were uncertain about this aspect. This matter should be addressed to ensure that the reason is not that students do not know where to find assistance.

Reliability of the study

The internal consistency of the items measuring the respondents’ perception of the mentorship skills, of the aspects of the academic skills and of the personal skills programmes and of the items relating to the assessments was measured by calculating Cronbach’s alpha for each subset of questions. The results are shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Reliability analysis results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Cronbach's alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mentorship skills</td>
<td>α = 0.787</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic skills development programme</td>
<td>α = 0.882</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal skills development programme</td>
<td>α = 0.775</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directorate of Student Development and Support assessments</td>
<td>α = 0.385</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The alpha coefficients of the items assessing mentoring skills, the items relating to the academic skills programme and the items relating to the personal skills programme are all higher than 0.7, indicating a satisfactory level of internal consistency for each of these themes. Only the items relating to the assessments in SDS have a low alpha coefficient (0.385), reflecting the diverse nature of the questions in this subsection.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of the research was to obtain information on the relationships between students and counsellors and on the counsellors’ skills, and to determine what
topics/themes are important to the students. The aim of the research on which this article is based was to improve the life skills programme at TUT, identify the general impression of student satisfaction levels with regard to the life skills programme, identify students’ perceptions of experiences in the mentors’ facilitation of the life skills programme and determine the value of mentorship in the life skills programme.

In conclusion, it must be said that, based on the results of this survey, it was found that the students had a positive perception of mentorship in the life skills programme. The findings of the study indicate that mentees benefitted from the life skills programme. They also show that mentoring life skills supports students in the following areas: guidance, motivation, counselling, teaching and communication. The study revealed that mentees benefited both personally and academically. Based on the mentorship survey in the Directorate of Student Development and Support at TUT, various recommendations were made. It was recommended that mentees be encouraged to take part in life skills sessions to improve their personal and academic skills. Mentees should be afforded the opportunity to evaluate the programme when they have completed it in order to improve it. They should be encouraged to follow up on the recommendations indicated on the assessments they had done with the Directorate of Student Development and Support. Mentees should also be afforded the opportunity to evaluate the facilitators to enable the latter to improve their mentoring skills if necessary. During evaluation sessions, mentees should be given the opportunity to verbally express their views about their experiences in the life skills sessions in order to obtain the general impression of the student satisfaction level. Group discussions should be encouraged to allow mentees to perform tasks and reflect on their learning and to promote independence among mentees.

The human resources development of mentors is important in order to improve the mentors’ skills. Round table discussions for mentors will assist in information sharing. Mentors should offer enough time to reflect and acquire relevant skills. A life skills forum should be implemented in the Directorate of Student Development and Support in higher education in order to improve the student throughput rate at TUT. The programme should be constantly improved to meet the needs of the mentees. The support given to mentees in acquiring life skills requires exercises to be planned to afford them the opportunity to practise and develop the relevant skills. Mentoring life skills should be encouraged because it is useful for active learning in higher education, and to promote the academic and personal well-being of the students.

Finally, it must be emphasised that Student Development and Support Units in HEIs should implement life skills programmes to improve on the success and throughput rate of the higher education institutions in South Africa. Life skills programme could undoubtedly contribute to improving the success rate of students as well as the throughput rate students. The implication for higher education in South Africa will focus on creating a broad framework for building an awareness of the importance of mentorship in life skills in the tertiary environment, with specific focus
Mentoring life skills at a higher education institution: A case study

on building the awareness among the student population. Mentorship programmes should be refined to build on existing programmes with the objective to enhance awareness of the importance of life skills. The students should therefore benefit from the student services and support they receive at higher education institutions.

REFERENCES


