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The impact of targeted educational programmes on academic outcomes for African students in Western Australia

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Abstract: Over the past two decades, people with African backgrounds have become part of Australian society. There have been extensive discussions of the various academic challenges African students experience at all educational levels in Australia. The academic challenges identified range from low academic achievement to unemployment and are particularly prevalent among African students who are refugees or those who have low socio-economic status. This paper argues that targeted educational programmes need to be implemented to support African students who are struggling in their academic pursuits. The positive outcomes and lessons learned from our implementation of the Top-Up Programme, a peer-mentoring educational initiative that supports domestic undergraduate sub-Saharan African students at Edith Cowan University, Western Australia, are discussed.

Keywords: peer-mentoring; African students; targeted educational approach.

Introduction

Formal education is key to the social mobility of individuals from low socio-economic backgrounds (Cunninghame, 2017). In the long term, higher education can improve an individual's income, health and employment opportunities, social stature and personal

274

dignity. As a type of social good, the acquisition of a university qualification has also been found to benefit the larger community immensely (Adams & Kirova, 2013; Affolter & Allaf, 2014; Clarke & Leigh, 2011; Dockery, Seymour, & Koshy, 2015; Sainsbury & Renzaho, 2011; Samani & Lozeva, 2016). It is within this context that African migrants in Australia (AMIA) strive to and are encouraged to obtain formal education and qualifications. However, AMIA represent a diverse group of individuals with varied needs, and mainstream academic support approaches have been unable to support academically challenged AMIA adequately. This failure has led to the adoption of victim-blaming attitudes toward academically struggling students with African backgrounds, some regarded as "problem students" (Gately, Ellis, Britton, & Fleming, 2017; Turner & Fozdar, 2010).

This paper argues that targeted educational programmes can effectively support students with complex academic needs. The following four sections substantiate this proposition. First, a brief overview of the trends in migration and a description of the different groups of AMIA are presented. Second, the literature on the various academic challenges facing African students at various educational levels in Australia is also reviewed. Third, theoretical discussions of targeted educational programmes and the outcomes achieved in contexts where they have been implemented are discussed. Finally, the description and outcomes of the Top-Up Programme (a peer-mentoring initiative funded by the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program [HEPPP] that supports domestic African undergraduate students [DAUS] at Edith Cowan University [ECU], Western Australia) are discussed.

African migrants in Australia

Over the past two decades, the number of individuals arriving in Australia from Africa has increased. According to Hugo (2009), there were only 1,590 African-born persons in Australia in 1861. Almost 57% of African-born migrants in Australia at that time were from South Africa and were mostly 'white'; the immigration of white African-born persons continued to be the case until the Federation in 1901. In 1890, the number of African-born persons in Australia increased to 2,923; only to decline to 2,840 at the founding of the Federation in 1901. Notably, this decline occurred in the aftermath of the economic depression (Hugo, 2009; Jakubowicz, 2010). The immigration policy of the Australian Government in the period limited migration to Australia based on race. Under the policy, 'whites' were accepted, and 'blacks' and other individuals of non-European origin were rejected (Hugo, 2009; Jakubowicz, 2010). Tellingly, "[black] Africans were specifically mentioned in the debates about immigration and [in the] restrictions and limitations" (Jakubowicz, 2010, pp. 4, 21; Jupp, 2007; Williams, 2009).

Hugo (2009) notes that as of 1947, there were only 75,506 African-born people in Australia. Of these, a little over 78% were 'white' South Africans or "the children of Anglo Saxons colonial functionaries" (p. 15). The so-called 'White Australia' policy was replaced by less restrictive immigration policies in the 1960s and early 1970s that paved the way for the migration of people of African and non-European descent into Australia, particularly in the late 1990s. However, the changes in Australia's immigration policies were largely driven by the government's desire to serve its own

interests by "recruit[ing] highly skilled immigrants, especially for the burgeoning mining industry" (Jakubowicz, 2010, p. 21).

Australia's 2016 population census showed that 317,182 people living in the country were born in sub-Saharan Africa, representing 5.1% of Australia's overseas-born population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). AMIA are often erroneously thought of as a homogenised group of individuals who are designated as "disadvantaged," "refugees" and/or as having low socio-economic status (LSES) (Naidoo et al., 2015; Silburn et al., 2010). There are three broad categories of AMIA: (i) Caucasian Africans, consisting of White Africans, mainly born in South Africa and Zimbabwe; (ii) North African Australian residents, comprised of people from the Maghreb (Algeria, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia) and Egypt; and (iii) Black Africans born in or with familial ties to sub-Saharan Africa. Each of the three collectives is further classified into five categories based on visa status, namely: (i) middle class professionals, (ii) humanitarian entrants, (iii) Australian-born Africans, (iv) family reunion entrants, and (v) international students (see Adusei-Asante, Awidi, & Doh, 2016).

The first category of AMIA comprises highly skilled and educated migrants. Many of these migrants are managers and professionals. Migrants in this category are often 'white' or the "children of European-origin parents from South Africa and Zimbabwe who subsequently moved to Australia" (Hugo, 2009, p. 15; Jakubowicz 2010). A significant number of the highly skilled and educated African migrants are also 'black' middle class individuals from Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Between 1999-2000 and 2008-2009, 80,252 Africans migrated to Australia as professional accountants, medical doctors (3,000 in 2006) and nurses (4,100 in 2006). Notably, 5.4% of medical doctors in Australia were born in Africa (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011; Jakubowicz, 2010).

Africans who arrived in Australia (either onshore or offshore) under the country's humanitarian programme represent the second largest proportion of African migrants in Australia. From 2000 to 2010, over 48,000 African refugees settled in Australia, mainly under the offshore programme (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011; Jakubowicz, 2010). Sudan was one of the countries that benefited the most from the Australian humanitarian programme. This programme led to an increase in the population of Sudanese migrants in Australia from less than 5,000 in 2001 to almost 20,000 in 2006. Notably, the majority of these migrants (54%) were male. Jakubowicz (2010) argued that the influx of Sudanese refugees, particularly the 6,000 refugees who arrived from 2004 to 2005, placed enormous pressure on the fragile government structures that had been previously established. Consequently, these newly arrived refugees and humanitarian entrants did not receive adequate support when settling in Australia.

Australia's humanitarian migration programme also led to the intake of refugees from sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), mainly from West Africa, the Congo (formerly Zaire) and the Horn of Africa (Hugo, 2009; Jakubowicz, 2010). The majority of these SSA refugees were young and had limited formal education and poor English language skills (Jakubowicz, 2010). The majority of Africans who arrived in Australia seeking refuge have been granted citizenship; for example, from 2008 to 2009, 11.3% (i.e., 9,841) of the applicants who were granted Australian citizenship were born in Africa

(Commonwealth of Australia, 2011). Of these, the largest proportion (i.e., 4,128) was born in South Africa followed by Sudan (i.e., 1,430) (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011). The increased migration of African refugees to Australia has given rise to a second generation of African Australians (i.e., children born in Australia to a parent or parents from Africa). This collective makes up the third category of Africans living in Australia; data on this cohort is limited.

The fourth category of AMIA comprises migrants who came to Australia under the family reunion programme (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011; Jakubowicz, 2010). The majority of individuals in this category migrated to join family members who were already resident in Australia and who held either skilled or humanitarian visas. Between 1999-2000 and 2008-2009, over 22,000 Africans migrated to Australia under the family reunion programme.

The last category of Africans living in Australia comprises international students. In 2014, it was estimated that there were nearly 9,000 African international students in Australia (Tyler, 2014). These migrants contribute significantly to the income stream of the education sector—the third largest export industry in Australia and the biggest export industry in the State of Victoria (Deloitte Access Economics, 2016; Wells, 2017). The majority of these international students come to Australia from Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana and Uganda to participate in student exchange programmes, engage in research partnerships and undertake leadership development courses at Australian universities (Tyler, 2014; Wells, 2017). A number of these international students remain in Australia (either temporarily or permanently) after they graduate; however, no data are available on the number of students that remain in Australia.

Both the literature and the federal government's 2011 report (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011) on the *Inquiry into Australia's Relationship with African Countries* (organised by the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade) acknowledged the contributions that AMIA make to Australia and their respective countries of birth. In addition to raising and donating several thousands of dollars directly to African governments for various development projects, AMIA contribute extensively to the economies of their birth countries by making financial remittances. While no specific data is available in relation to financial remittance AMIA make to their respective countries of origin, several studies have shown that members of the African diaspora remit US$40-51.8 billion to the African continent a year, a figure larger than the total Official Development Assistance the continent receives from donors (Doyle, 2013; International Foundation for Agricultural Development, 2009). Although African migrants have acknowledged that their migration has caused a 'brain drain' in their original birth countries, their financial remittances contribute significantly to the economic development of those countries. For example, such remittances have been used to improve living conditions and support the development of small businesses, especially in rural areas (Refugee Council of Australia, 2010).

Africans also contribute to Australia's human capital and multiculturalism. Despite representing less than 2% of the Australian population, African migrants constitute 5.4% of the medical doctors in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011; Jakubowicz, 2010). Examples of the acts of heroic African medical doctors in Australia abound. Notably, a Ghanaian-born surgeon, Dr Kwasi Yeboah, saved the life of a

person who had been involved in a near-death motor accident in Perth when he performed a roadside open-heart surgery (McNeill, 2016). People from African backgrounds have also played key roles in facilitating cultural, scientific and educational relationships and exchanges between their respective countries of origin and Australia. AMIA also have introduced diverse and beautiful traditions, rituals, cuisines, art forms and languages that have enhanced the richness and diversity of the Australian cultural landscape (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011; Jakubowicz, 2010; Refugee Council of Australia, 2010). Further, the participation of individuals from African backgrounds in Australian community life has enhanced the broader society's knowledge and understanding of African cultures.

African Australians have been commended for using their personal connections in their countries of origin to raise awareness about issues pertaining to human rights and vulnerable groups on the African continent. They have also raised refugee issues with government representatives and senior officials at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees that may have otherwise gone unreported in the media. For example, in 2009, members of African-Australia communities brought a number of issues to the attention of the Refugee Council of Australia, including revelations that amputation was being used as a tool for torture in Sierra Leone, that more resettlement places were needed for members of the Afar community in camps across the Horn of Africa and that acts of fraud were being committed in the Congolese community camps responsible for the offshore processing of visas (Refugee Council of Australia, 2010).

Academic challenges confronting African students in Australia

Academic challenges confronting AMIA in various educational programmes in Australia have been discussed in recent literature. In 2011, various submissions were made in relation to these issues to the Federal Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, which examined Australia's relationship with African countries (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011). In their submissions, the Refugee Council of Australia informed the committee that some African refugees in the country sacrifice or postpone their education, work two jobs, and forfeit their holidays and other social and recreational activities to send financial remittances to relatives (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011, p. 212). In her submission to the committee, Professor Ware also observed, "We need to take care that Africans who come to Australia with little or no formal education are able to catch up and do not become an underclass here" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011, p. 216).

A study by Burgoyne and Hull (2007) revealed that refugees from Sudan who became students were confronted with multifaceted, but interrelated, issues that affect their resettlement in Australia. Burgoyne and Hull argued that these students' "educational challenges and aspirations are inextricably bound up with [an] array of other resettlement issues" (p. 21). Turner and Fozdar (2010) drew similar conclusions when they conducted research with 40 adult Sudanese learners at three different educational settings in Australia. The authors framed their study theoretically in relation to the concepts of social capital, interdependent self-construal/conjoint agency and active versus passive settlement styles. These concepts were used to: (i) analyse Sudanese

learners' ideas about belonging; (ii) ascertain their ability to negotiate in a different environment; and (iii) determine how these viewpoints affected their learning experiences. The authors found that if teachers were to communicate with and support Sudanese students successfully, building trusted relationships was critical.

Harris and Marlowe (2011) researched the experiences of a group of young Africans from refugee backgrounds who were studying at a South Australian university. They found that many of these students were facing issues related to understanding the expectations of Australian educational institutions, living in residential environments that were not conducive to study, ascertaining culturally appropriate ways to seek academic assistance, accessing study materials and studying in another language.

Adusei-Asante, Awidi and Doh (2016) undertook a community consultation exercise in Perth and found that students from sub-Saharan African backgrounds in Australia had varied and complex academic needs. They also showed that these students experienced difficulties related to: (i) their English language comprehension; (ii) conceptual learning; (iii) low levels of academic achievement; (iv) self-esteem issues; (v) managing their academic work, family and work commitments; (vi) career guidance issues; and (vii) adjusting to the Australian way of life. They also found that sub-Saharan African students tended to view 'help-seeking' as a sign of weakness.

More recently, Gately, Ellis, Britton and Fleming (2017) adopted a multi-method approach to explore the experiences of 22 Sudanese students at Western Australia's ECU. The study was partly informed by a preliminary analysis of the data that revealed interesting results about the performance of Sudanese students at ECU between 2010 and 2014. The researchers found that:

> Of all units undertaken in that period by Sudanese students the failure rate was 47.53% despite completion of assessments for 73% of the units of study involved … Further, Sudanese students discontinued their course[s] primarily for academic issues of which the precise nature is unknown. (p. 121)

To determine the factors causing low levels of academic achievement among Sudanese students at ECU, Gately, Ellis, Britton and Fleming (2017) used two quantitative scales to explore the students' motivations for learning and their English language skills. They found that the Sudanese students were extrinsically motivated to study and were confident in their English language skills, but needed additional support to improve their competence in written English. Other researchers have reached similar conclusions in their studies of African students in Australia (see, for example, Cassity & Gow, 2005; Hatoss, O'Neill, & Eacersall, 2012; Loshini, 2009; Matthews, 2008; Miller 2009; Woods, 2009).

The above review of the issues facing African students in Australia raises some critical points for discussion. First, commentaries on these issues could be described as the 'sudanisation' and 'refugeenisation' of the experiences of most African students in Australia. Refugees from Africa represent only a fraction of the total population of individuals from the African continent living in Australia (Jakubowicz, 2010). However, the literature tends to present the experience of African students in Australia in ways that ignores their differences and uniqueness. This is particularly concerning as

these narratives seek to portray Sudanese and other refugee students as "problem students" and also associate LSES with "stupidity" and "failure" (McKay & Devlin, 2015). For example, most researchers who have conducted studies on African students in Australia have argued that African students have limited language skills; however, this is inaccurate and an oversimplification (Burgoyne & Hull, 2007, p. 21).

Second, the broad-brush deficit characterisation that African students have low levels of academic achievement ignores the fact that educational differences have historically existed between advantaged and disadvantaged groups in Australia. For example, the 2016 Grattan Institute's report entitled *Widening Gaps: What NAPLAN Tells Us about Student Progress* revealed that:

> Low achievers in Year 3 are an extra year behind high achievers by Year 9. They are two years eight months behind in Year 3, and three years eight months behind by Year 9. The gap to students whose parents have a degree is ten months in Year 3 but two and a half years by Year 9. Even when capabilities are similar in Year 3, disadvantaged students fall between 12 months and 21 months behind more advantaged students by Year 9. (Goss & Sonnemann, 2016, p. 2)

Similarly, Perry (2017) argues that:

> Where one goes to school matters in Australia … Australia has one of the highest levels of school social segregation of all OECD countries … Advantaged students in Australia are much more likely to attend school with other advantaged students. And the same is true for disadvantaged students … While educational disadvantage is a problem in almost all education systems across the globe, it is especially large in Australia … For example, 47% of Indigenous [students] meet the minimum proficiency science standard in TIMSS compared to 77% of non-Indigenous students. (p. 3)

Thus, the low levels of academic achievement among Sudanese and refugee students cannot be framed only as an 'African problem'; rather, it is a systemic problem that policies should seek to address (see Naylor, Baik, & James, 2013). Ford (2013) attributes differences in educational outcomes among different cohorts of people in Australia to institutional racism. Further, several thinkers have argued that education needs to be rethought and redesigned in ways that targets and responds to cultural uniqueness and that education should not only be informed by models that appear to promote 'white' and Western hegemonic ideations (Ford 2013; Goss & Sonnemann, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Nakata, 2010).

Additionally, while 'formal education' is being encouraged among AMIA, a recent study showed that acquiring an Australian qualification has not improved employment prospects for some African groups. El-Gack and Yak (2016) interviewed 72 members of the South Sudanese community living in the Australia Capital Territory who were attending workshops on the topic of finding employment. Of these workshop participants, 42% held tertiary qualifications in accounting, nursing, public health, medical science and law, but could not secure employment in their chosen fields. Notably, 95% of the participants were job seekers who already held casual or part-time jobs. The study also showed that while 24,000 South Sudanese currently live in

Australia, nearly 30% of the population is unemployed. Additionally, after conducting an examination of longitudinal studies around the world, Argy (2007) argued that education success rates at school and post-school are in large part determined by social class origin and noted that there is a correlation between education inequality and employment inequality (p. 1).

In its submission to Federal Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations noted that the following factors contribute to the high unemployment rates of Africans: "the period since [their] arrival in Australia, [and their] skill level, age, English language proficiency, and recent and relevant work experience" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011, p. 211). The Government of Western Australia also submitted to the committee that "African humanitarian entrants face a range of barriers to inclusion and integration, particularly in the areas of employment, education and training, social participation and political, civic and community participation" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011, p. 213).

There have been numerous calls to promote targeted educational programmes beyond those generally offered to migrants and humanitarian entrants to address the educational needs of African students in Australia. The Government of Western Australia captured the importance of offering such programmes in their submission to the Federal Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, when it stated that there is "a need for targeted programs to increase access to further education, [and to address the] issues associated with the high costs and complexity of recognition" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011, pp. 213-214; see also Argy, 2006, 2007). Peter Odhiambo, an influential AMIA, reiterated this point when he submitted to the committee that "African populations in Australia are critically under-served … there are no clear policies designed to integrate Africans into Australia …" (cited in Commonwealth of Australia, 2011, p. 216; see also Sidhu & Taylor, 2007).

The 2008 *Review of Australian Higher Education* (also known as the Bradley Review) set the following objective to increase the percentage of university students of LSES to 20% by 2020 (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008; Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). Since the publication of the Bradley Review, a broad range of equity programmes and strategies targeting various LSES students have been implemented to enhance these students' access to and participation in higher education (see Cardak, Bowden & Bahtsevanoglou, 2014; Somerville et al., 2013). Accordingly, the HEPPP was established to encourage all Australians to access higher education, regardless of their socio-economic background (Australian Government, Department of Education and Training, 2016; Samani & Lozeva, 2011). The HEPPP assists Australian universities to undertake projects and activities aimed at improving access to university education for people from various backgrounds. However, as learners with specific characteristics, sub-Saharan AMIA appear to have received little direct support or specific attention. Additionally, the in-group differences of sub-Saharan AMIA do not appear to have been addressed adequately other than in programmes that seek to target refugees more generally (see Arnot & Pinson, 2005, cited in Sidhu & Taylor, 2007; Jakubowicz, 2010).

Some Australian educational institutions have tended to address academic challenges confronting their students by using mainstream student support services; for example, by referring them to learning advisors for advice and support. However, a study by Karimshah, Wyder, Henman, Tay, Capelin and Short (2013) revealed that while academically challenged students may be aware of such support services, they tend not to access them, as they offer limited assistance. The authors argued that it was important for students to have access to opportunities for social integration within a university, a feeling of belonging and a good support network of family and friends. The authors also noted that educational institutions that wish to retain their academically challenged students need to focus on processes that encourage social inclusion and social networking (for example, by offering greater targeted support programmes and peer support programmes to student groups and by providing campus spaces for peer-to-peer social interaction) (see also Maher & Macallister, 2013; Thomas, 2012).

Targeted educational programmes

Research has shown the value of identifying, developing and targeting specific members of LSES groups rather than implementing 'one-size-fits-all' and mainstream educational programmes for all students (see Cardak, Bowden & Bahtsevanoglou, 2014; Gale et al., 2013; Gore et al., 2015). Targeted educational programmes seek to identify students' learning needs and to adapt the teaching and learning processes in response to students' needs (Goss, Hunter, Romanes, & Parsonage, 2015). Targeted educational approaches also refer to systematic efforts aimed at "lifting the performance of students who are many years behind and also finding ways to challenge students who are already well ahead of year level expectations" (Goss, Hunter, Romanes, & Parsonage, 2015, p. 6). The approach, while not new, has been found to be critical in closing the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged groups and in encouraging increased participation in higher education by people from low socio-economic backgrounds (Samani & Lozeva, 2016; see also Recommendation 2 in Goss & Sonnemann, 2016). Targeted educational interventions are person centred and have also been shown to benefit all learners, including struggling students and those doing well.

Designing and implementing targeted educational interventions involve gathering and using credible data to meet each student's needs at their respective starting points while remaining cognisant of students' cultural needs and personal characteristics (Adusei-Asante & Doh, 2016; Goss & Sonnemann, 2015). An example of the systematic collection and use of data has been reported in New Zealand, where the Ministry of Education is currently working towards identifying correlations that can be used to target interventions to improve the life outcomes of at-risk learners whose needs are identical to African students in Australia (Adusei-Asante & Doh, 2016; Goss & Sonnemann, 2016). Numerous examples of good-practice-targeted educational interventions have been reported. Loshini (2009) discussed an after-school homework tutoring programme (i.e., the Refugee Action Support Programme at the University of Western Sydney) in which students who were studying to become secondary education teachers tutored African refugee students in secondary schools to facilitate their inclusion in Australian society. The author found that the targeted intervention programme enabled the refugee students to learn formal English. In the process, the

students were also empowered "to move beyond their adversities to acquire some form of cultural and symbolic capital that could be converted to economic capital" (Loshini, 2009, p. 20).

Samani and Lozeva (2016) conducted a case study/pilot outreach project entitled "Ride AHEAD." The project sought to inspire young people who had become disengaged from mainstream schooling to access higher education. Ride AHEAD used bicycle restoration activities, campus visits, mentoring, career counselling and community engagement to motivate participants to view university as a post-school option. The researchers concluded that their outreach programme effectively targeted disengaged young people whose post-schooling options and exposure to improved life choices in higher education were broadened through the Ride AHEAD programme.

Burgoyne and Hull (2007) also researched and reported on a number of successful initiatives that had been adopted by registered training organisations and were aimed at Sudanese and other African refugee student populations. The researcher found that initiatives that linked English language tuition to immediate settlement concerns related to the students' local employment opportunities or practical skills had a greater success rate of retention and academic progress. A key recommendation of the authors was that the outcomes and methods of delivery of any programme "adequately respond to the needs of … learners presenting with very limited spoken English, very little experience of literacy in any language, and very little experience of formal education" (p. 10).

The ensuing discussion clearly shows that peer-mentoring is an effective vehicle for implementing targeted educational programs for students experiencing academic difficulties or those with low socio-economic status backgrounds. As a concept, peer-mentoring in higher education involves an experienced or knowledgeable student providing support to a less experienced student to improve academically (Collings, Swanson & Watkins, 2014) and engage in life at university (Hall & Jaugietis, 2011). The literature outlines several positive outcomes of peer-mentoring programmes for mentees and mentors. Research has found that mentees display higher levels of integration into university, are less likely to consider discontinuing their studies and better prepared to enter second year compared to non-mentored students (see Collings, Swanson, & Watkins, 2014; Fox & Stevenson, 2006). Peer-mentoring programmes have also been found to provide mentees with guidance to career planning, competence awareness, establishing networks and navigating new environment (Adusei-Asante & Doh, 2017; Schmidt & Faber, 2016). Positive outcomes for mentors include improved leadership, communication and organisational skills (Adusei-Asante & Doh, 2017; Hall & Jaugietis, 2011), professional development, institutional recognition and personal satisfaction (Schmidt & Faber, 2016).

Top-Up Programme

The Top-Up Programme (Top-Up) was introduced in 2015 to address academic challenges of DAUS at ECU (see Adusei-Asante, Awidi & Doh, 2016; Gately, Ellis, Britton & Fleming, 2017). Top-Up is HEPPP-funded and designed as a targeted peer-mentoring initiative. Students self-select to participate in the programme or are referred

by academic staff (see Adusei-Asante, Awidi & Doh, 2016). While the programme is open to all DAUS, it targets African students who need an intensive, culturally-sensitive and person-centred academic support that are generally not provided by the conventional student support services at the university. However, the Top-Up team collaborates with academic support officers across the university, some providing guidance and learning materials to Top-Up mentors; others facilitate selected plenary sessions as explained below.

Top-Up comprises three components: (i) one-on-one peer-mentoring, (ii) a compulsory plenary session and (iii) a walk-in option. Students participating in the programme are matched to a paid mentor. The mentors provide academic support to the mentees and or direct them to appropriate services within the university. Mentors meet their mentees on a weekly basis (preferably face to face and on an ECU campus) to discuss any assignments that the student might have and the student's academic progress. Mentors and mentees may also discuss the content of lectures, develop plans for assignments, discuss draft essays and feedback, rehearse presentations and prepare for mid- and end-of-semester examinations. The support provided by mentors is largely driven by the needs of mentees, but mentors may also suggest topics for discussion. Mentors report on each of the mentees they work with each semester, highlighting their mentees' achievements and the areas in which the mentees could improve. Students who show a mastery of academic skills through their assignment and end-of-semester examination results are encouraged to leave the programme and assume an autonomous learner stance.

In the second component of the programme, mentees participate in a one-hour plenary session each week. The session provides students with insights into the use of academic language and conceptual learning competences, and covers areas such as plagiarism, semester planning, academic reading and writing skills (for example, subject-verb agreement and the parts of a paragraph), drafting essays and preparing for examinations. Towards the end of the semester, a session is dedicated to job employment applications, interview skills and careers. Academic support officers at the university and Top-Up mentors facilitate the plenary sessions. The plenary meetings are delivered in a hands-on fashion providing students with immediate opportunities to practise what they are taught. Light refreshments are served at the sessions as an incentive, and students are encouraged to socialise to increase their social capital. Funds are also available to support students who need financial help to purchase textbooks and bus or train tickets to attend lectures.

A third component was added to Top-Up in 2017. Referred to as the 'walk-in option,' this component of Top-Up assists students who are not participating in the programme as mentees, but who have immediate academic needs. The flexibility of this component allows students with work or other commitments who do not require intensive support to seek help as and when required.

All mentors are paid employees of ECU and receive casual rates and other ancillary benefits. Mentors are expected to have obtained or be enrolled in a master's degree or hold a master's degree or a higher degree. Currently, nearly 90% of the mentors in Top-Up are ECU doctoral candidates of African descent. Mentors wishing to work in the programme apply to the Programme Manager and are recruited based on student

availability, funding and their suitability to the programme in terms of their background and skill set. On average, each mentor is assigned two to five students. As of November 2017, thirty students were participating in the programme.

Top-Up has had a positive effect on student retention and improved the academic achievements of DAUS at ECU. Over 90% of the students who participated in the programme in 2015 remained enrolled in their courses:

> Except for one student, whose personal circumstances did not permit him to be present all the time, most of the participants attended the plenary sessions regularly. Attendance averaging 70% was recorded. The sense of community created in the sessions played a role in the sustained patronage of the plenary discussions. The atmosphere enhanced [the] sharing of ideas, [the] sense of belonging and networking among the students. Through the project, the students … formed study partnerships, which are improving their academic skills. (Adusei-Asante, Awidi & Doh, 2016, p. 4)

In 2016, 20 of the 22 students who participated in the programme were retained. The mentors reported a significant improvement in the academic outcomes of their mentees, some of whom were awarded high distinctions (80+) and distinctions (70+) for the first time in their academic studies. As of June 2017, 10 students had taken advantage of the 'walk-in' component of the programme. These students came from various schools at the university and mostly sought assistance with essay assignments, proofreading and the statistical analysis of quantitative data. There are currently 30 students in the programme, all of whom have been retained. The HEPPP programme is now a reference point for ECU academic staff who have African students that require additional academic support. The model and outcomes of Top-Up have also been shared at various national educational conferences including the 2016 and 2017 Students' Transition, Achievement Retention and Success conference held in Perth and Adelaide respectively, and the 2017 Association for Academic Language and Learning Conference in Geelong, Australia.

The success of the Top-Up partly stems from its uniqueness, differentiating it from conventional peer-mentoring initiatives in several respects. First, mentors participating in the programme are paid wages, unlike conventional peer-mentoring programmes, which function on unpaid volunteerism. Top-Up mentors receive several ancillary benefits including access to subsidised parking fees, professional development and contributing to publications on the programme. These incentives, which are not provided in most conventional peer-mentoring initiatives, underscore the high-level commitment of the mentors to the programme (see Adusei-Asante & Doh, 2017).

Second, the level accountability required of mentors and mentees is relatively higher in Top-Up than conventional peer-mentoring programme. Mentors are accountable to the Top-Up manager who monitors their performance regularly. Mentors provide reports on their mentees every semester, outlining the extent to which the students' objectives for the term or academic year had been achieved, and if not, steps to address relevant issues identified. Mentees are compulsorily required to meet their mentors every week and also attend the plenary sessions. Mentees who are absent from both sessions on three consecutive without legitimate excuses are queried and sometimes warned about being

expelled from the programme. While there has not been the need to expel any student so far, the policy of compulsory attendance has successfully provided positive deterrence to the students, compared to the rather laissez faire approaches that characterise conventional peer-mentoring programmes.

Another key feature of Top-Up is the style of teaching. Mentors apply one-on-one teaching approaches and support their mentees on an individual needs basis. Additionally, mentors provide pastoral support to their mentees or refer them to relevant services on issues they have less competence in. Students experiencing financial hardships receive financial assistance to purchase textbooks for the semester books, if they are able to demonstrate the genuineness of their requests.

Finally, because Top-Up is designed to target DAUS, most of the mentors are of African backgrounds. For example, of the ten mentors currently in the programme, the majority (i.e., seven) are African postgraduate students. The other three mentors are non-African higher degree students. There are five female and five male mentors. The decision to involve Africans in the programme was informed by the need to inspire students to realise that if people who resemble them physically have been able to achieve laurels in education they could too, if they remained committed to their studies (Ortiz-Walters & Gilson, 2005; Santos & Reigadas, 2002).

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the effectiveness of targeted educational programmes in supporting African students who are struggling in their academic pursuits drawing on findings related to the Top-Up Programme at ECU, Western Australia. The paper has also highlighted the point that Africans living in Australia are not a homogeneous group, but comprise a diverse collection of five different cohorts. The majority of Africans living in Australia hold skilled visas. This is important given that issues relating to Sudanese refugees often take centre stage in the Australian media as an 'African problem.' More importantly, the study has outlined the various academic challenges African students experience and the theoretical debates among researchers and practitioners on the subject.

Based on our successful implementation of the on-going Top-Up Programme at ECU and the lessons that have been drawn from other good practice frameworks, we argue that 'one-size fits all' approaches do not provide academically challenged students with sufficient support to succeed at school or in higher education. This paper has shown that targeted educational interventions offer better opportunities for understanding students' educational needs. Targeted educational interventions place students at the centre of all learning and teaching processes. They also offer avenues for students (who through no fault of their own may be lagging behind) to catch up. The strategy is personalised and culturally appropriate. Further, the paper has also demonstrated that, if designed appropriately, targeted interventions provide a non-intrusive way of supporting struggling students in a manner that does not make them feel that they are being 'treated' as 'academic patients or special needs learners.'

However, targeted educational interventions are time consuming. As such, they require patience, tactfulness and resources. In the present case, the paper has demonstrated the effectiveness of a monetary incentive in the mentorship project. The community atmosphere created through the programme has meant a great deal to student participants. The paper has also highlighted how critical institutional support is if any targeted educational interventions are to succeed. The success of the HEPPP project is partly attributable to the immense support that has been provided by ECU leaders and staff in participating schools in the past two years.

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