

DEVELOPING AN EXTENDED CURRICULUM FOR HUMANITIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL: CONCEPTUAL SHIFTS, CHALLENGES AND CONSTRAINTS

J. CLARENCE-FINCHAM

ABSTRACT

This article traces the early development and implementation of an extended curriculum in the Faculty of Humanities, Development and Social Sciences at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Following Volbrecht and Boughey (2004) and Boughey (2007), it analyses the programme in the context of the development of Academic Development over two decades. The programme represents a conceptual shift from a foundation year model to a more holistic, integrated intervention which extends to the end of the second year. Prompted primarily by pedagogical and academic considerations, it is also a response to increasing emphasis on throughput and success and to the need to increase and enhance efficiency in Higher Education. The tension between the potential benefits of such a curriculum and challenges and constraints impacting on it is discussed in an attempt to develop a curriculum which is sustainable and which will result in higher success rates and the wider transformation of the curriculum.

Keywords: academic development, extended curriculum, equity, efficiency.

1. BROAD CONTEXT

The aim of this paper is to consider the early stages of the development of an extended curriculum in the Faculty of Humanities, Development and Social Sciences (HDSS) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), both in the context of the Faculty and the university, but also within the field of Academic Development as it is currently constituted and understood within Higher Education. In doing so, the conceptual shifts informing its development will be identified as well as the challenges and constraints that it faces.

Academic development at UKZN has existed in various forms for over two decades and, like other South African programmes, has reflected the ideological and conceptual shifts nationally and internationally that have shaped the field during this time. While the different discourses underpinning it continue to co-exist and should not be simplistically separated, chronologically or conceptually, it is nevertheless possible to identify three distinct developmental phases (Boughey, 2007b:25; Volbrecht and Boughey, 2004), each linked to a open-ended, different set of dominant discursive practices which are then reflected in different models of intervention.

The earliest “Academic Support” initiatives of the 1980s were largely non-credit bearing, often decontextualised, “add-on” offerings which focused on individual student “deficiencies”, the attainment of equality and redress from the injustices of the apartheid past. These interventions were gradually replaced by the socio-historical, systemic analyses of the 1990s which understood what were now called “Academic Development” initiatives in the context of institutional under-preparedness and shifted the emphasis to the interrogation of teaching methodologies, the transformation of the curriculum and the provision of credit-bearing intervention courses which were part of the mainstream curriculum and linked in varying degrees to disciplinary discourses (see also Morphet, 1995). Far more recently, with the emergence of the “Institutional Development” phase, there has been another shift, this time from access to efficiency, retention and throughput (Scott, 2001; Boughey, 2007a:20), where universities are challenged to meet the requirements of a skills-scarce labour market. Defining features of this phase are aptly captured in a recent editorial column in the Higher Learning Supplement in the *Mail and Guardian* in which the columnist speaks of the “additional mantle” recently placed on Higher Education and notes “some consternation within those universities which produce that ineffable entity called the “graduate” as the sector is increasingly viewed as “a producer of scarce and critical skills, as a research engine to achieve global competitiveness, and as a factory that creates work-ready labourers” (10 November, 2007:4).

Each of these phases has been underpinned and driven by modifications to national policy in Higher Education which have influenced the nature and degree of national support and have impacted directly on financial resources, while at the same time shaping the extent to which this work is recognised as a legitimate contribution to the work of the Academy. In addition, and integrally related to national trends, is individual institutional support. This in turn forms the framework in which contextually specific academic and pedagogical considerations need to be understood.

These phases, most particularly of “support” and “development” can be clearly identified in the context of UKZN. First, the non-credit bearing, short interventions that characterised early work, disappeared in favour of year-long generic interventions in Academic Literacy (for example *Learning, Language and Logic*, later *Academic Communication Studies*) which became part of accredited mainstream study as early as 1984. During the past decade, however, these have largely given way to consolidated year-long foundation, access or bridging programmes. More recently still, extended curricula (Scott, 2001) have also been introduced, in some instances in addition to a foundational year and in other cases, as an extension of it. Currently in the Faculty of Science and Agriculture, for example, the well respected year-long Science Foundation Programme is now run concurrently with the extended BSc4 with each being offered to a different cohort of students.

In Humanities, on the other hand, the Humanities Access Programme has become the first year of a newly-introduced Humanities Extended Curriculum, while the Faculty of Education is implementing a different model and is in the early stages of integrating academic development into an already existing four-year, undergraduate Bachelor of Education.

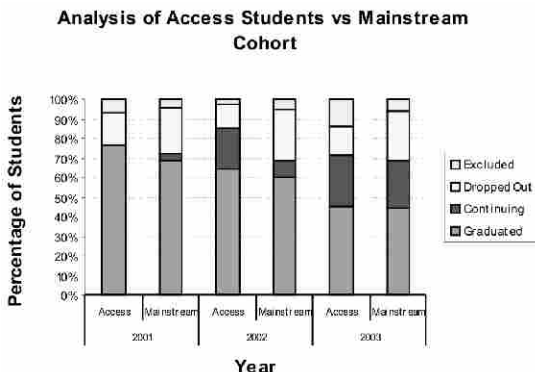
It is important to note here that even when interventions across faculties carry the same generic title and share certain central features (De Kadt, 2007), this does not necessarily imply identical pedagogical emphasis or structure. In the same way that various models of intervention continue to co-exist across the institution, and nationally for that matter, so too will internal differences between similar programmes signal faculty-specific challenges and constraints. These variations are to be recognised and accepted as a crucial part of a complex set of challenges facing the academic development practitioner - while there is no question that integrated academic development in the context of some form of extended curriculum (Scott, 2001) is the most beneficial model, this ideal goal needs to be held in tension with the different academic, pedagogical and pragmatic realities faced by faculties. For example, at an academic level, the scientific disciplines are underpinned by different discursive practices from those common in the Humanities and this will impact on the way in which the curriculum is developed, both in terms of its structure and its content. At a more pragmatic level, the Sciences are far more generously funded than the Humanities and this has obvious consequences in terms of what they are able to do.

2. THE HUMANITIES ACCESS YEAR

The Humanities Access Year was introduced on the Pietermaritzburg campus in 2001 and on the Howard College Campus in Durban in 2005. In terms of the phases and models discussed, it is best described as “hybrid”, combining what we consider to be the best of support discourse with the dominant development discourse, and needs to be understood both within this historical framework and within the broader institutional context sketched above. It has been designed specifically to give what Morrow called “epistemological access” (Morrow, 2007:22) to educationally disadvantaged students who do not meet the minimum points requirement of the university, and who would otherwise be denied access to university education (see Waetjen, 2006 for a critical analysis and suggested reformulation of the notion of “disadvantage”).

The selection process, which in 2007 was of 70 students in Pietermaritzburg and 130 in Durban, takes account of previous educational opportunity and performance on the Standardised Assessment Test for Access and Placement (SATAP) which is a diagnostic test recently introduced in several institutions to identify academic potential and predict possible academic success.

The programme consists of a combination of five non-credit-bearing foundational courses, (two in language and academic literacy, one in basic numeracy and two entitled *Africa in the World*) and three credit-bearing modules, one from the traditional mainstream curriculum and two in language and academic literacy, which are accepted as part of the mainstream curriculum accepted (see Diagram 1).



This means that the few non-exemption students who are accepted into the programme need to pass all four foundational modules by July in order to gain a Senate exemption, to register formally, to complete the Foundation year and begin mainstream study. For those who have passed all modules by the end of the year, the 48 credit points that are carried into mainstream study allow them to reduce their curriculum in the first and second year which contributes to the possibility of passing other mainstream modules.

3. STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE ACCESS PROGRAMME

There is little doubt that this Access Programme is benefiting the students. On the Pietermaritzburg campus particularly, student evaluation reveals that, in the main, they are satisfied with the programme and happy to be part of it (Waetjen, 2006) and that the benefits of the small classes and of constant interaction with lecturers and other students are recognised and highly valued. In addition, increased confidence in approaching academic tasks and the growing ability to participate in critical classroom debate is clearly evident. Of more significance, however, are some early, more formal indications that to some extent the access year is achieving the desired results. Research conducted by Tyson (2007) into the performance of the students entering the programme between 2001 and 2003 reveals that the graduation rate of the access students is marginally higher and the attrition rate lower than that of mainstream students. In addition, while the access students are taking longer to complete their degrees overall than those in the mainstream, over the three years, 78% of access students have graduated or are well on their way to graduating compared to 69.5% in the mainstream.

While acknowledging the need for a bigger sample and qualitative data to complement his statistical evidence, Tyson tentatively concludes that “The Humanities Access Programme appears to be producing students who have a better chance of succeeding than students going into the mainstream” and cites a carefully planned curriculum, highly committed teachers and small group teaching as being amongst the factors contributing to this (see Appendix A).

Despite the evident strengths of the Access Programme, there were nevertheless some very serious limitations which emerged very early in its history, and here, problems associated with the lack of articulation between the access year and mainstream study presented the central and most pressing challenge. While evaluation of the modules offered was generally positive, the programme coordinator and the other staff were nevertheless cognisant of the academic disjuncture between the access year as a whole and the mainstream curriculum. This in combination with the complete absence of Academic Development in the first year of mainstream study resulted in students reporting a sense of academic dislocation as they moved from the highly structured environment of the access programme and entered the far less familiar domain of the large, less personal lecture theatre with all its attendant discursive challenges. At the same time, institutions were faced by the most recent shift in emphasis in National Higher Education policy the original focus on “access” was replaced by a greater concern about efficiency, retention, throughput and success (NPHE: DoE, 2001) and, in the light of this, greater numbers of students needed to benefit from academic development initiatives. Once again Academic Development practitioners were challenged to reconceptualise their interventions in response to changing educational and social priorities.

4. THE HUMANITIES EXTENDED CURRICULUM

The Extended Curriculum in Humanities, for which a pilot study was conducted in 2006 and which was introduced at the beginning of 2007 on the Pietermaritzburg campus, has been developed, first from a pedagogical point of view in response to internal weaknesses in the Access Programme and second as a consequence of changing national imperatives and educational policy shifts. In addition, in this specific context, the adoption of an institutional identity as “The Premier Institution of African Scholarship” must be an important consideration, which potentially shapes and supports the thinking which informs the development of the curriculum, particularly in relation to its potential to facilitate curriculum reform.

In the context of UKZN, it has become quite clear that for students entering the university through an alternative access route, the Access Programme should articulate more explicitly with the first year of mainstream study and, in addition, that academic development needs to be extended into at least the first and second year of the undergraduate degree.

Equally clear, however, and most especially in the light of the new emphasis on efficiency, is the need for some form of academic development intervention to be available to mainstream students. In addition, in the medium term, academic development interventions should have the potential to facilitate a critical reappraisal of the general curricula as appropriate responses to changing national and policy demands are identified, debated and developed. The Extended Curriculum, at the level of both aims and structure, has the potential to meet the first of these demands and, in the longer term, to play some role in curriculum reform (see Diagram 2).

ANALYSIS OF HUMANITIES STUDENTS			
YEAR	GRADUATION & RETENTION		
	ACCESS		MAINSTREAM
	No. of Students	%	
2001	23	76.6%	71.9%
2002	30	85.3%	68.5%
2003	35	71.4%	68.4%

The curriculum for this programme was developed in collaboration with the coordinators of the Access Programmes in Pietermaritzburg and Durban and a group of Academic Development practitioners who have a broad interest in curriculum and materials development. The result was a programme whose structure is now conceptualised more holistically as a four-year extended curriculum as opposed to the previous Access Programme plus three years of mainstream study. Importantly, the first of these four years, which is similar to the Access Programme, now offers 64 credit points by the end of the year which frees up sufficient time in the following years to allow for the augmented modules. In addition, students who perform particularly well are able to register for two modules from the mainstream curriculum rather than the original one. Students who register for three (instead of the usual four) modules per semester for the first two years of mainstream study are then required to choose at least one of their majors from a basket of disciplines which are central disciplines in the Social Sciences. After the 2006 pilot phase, which involved augmenting curricula from nine disciplines, four of the biggest and most popular, Sociology, Psychology, Media and Communication and Political Science, were included as possible choices of major.

In addition, Environmental Science and Legal Studies, two disciplines outside the Faculty but popular choices for a significant number of our students, have also been included.

These disciplines, at first-year level at least, are augmented and now consist of six contact periods a week: the usual four and another two which provide substantial additional material linked to the mainstream curricula and designed to supplement it with a range of additional tasks and activities which have been developed to make the specific discursive practices of the disciplines explicit. This means that should a student opt to major in two disciplines from the specified list, the number of contact hours per week is the same as it is in the mainstream but with the time split among fewer disciplines. It is extremely important here to avoid a central pitfall of the early support initiatives which offered the students additional classes over and above the regular timetable and in so doing, represented an unintentional double disadvantage.

5. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAMME AND THE TRAINING OF MATERIALS DEVELOPERS

In order to implement this programme and having secured funding from SANTED, we appointed a highly skilled coordinator on a three-year contract, who is responsible for ongoing development of the curriculum, for liaison with first year academic coordinators from the mainstream disciplines and for the development of the materials developers responsible for the augmentation of the various disciplines. Materials developers are senior postgraduate students who are appointed to year-long contract positions and who then participate in ongoing training which, thus far, has included:

- monthly workshops, which included contributions from specialists within the institution who provided input and facilitated discussion and activities around a range of issues including the role and responsibility of materials developers, the nature of curriculum reform and the development of a more “responsive” curriculum in the South African context, which was linked to a workshop on “African Scholarship” and an exploration of the nature of “literacy”, “academic literacy” and “the language problem”;
- a short materials development programme which provided both theoretical perspectives and practical activities for collective discussion and critical evaluation;
- the building of a small resource library of relevant articles identified by the materials developers;
- report-back seminars on progress made within the various disciplines;

- ongoing individual interaction with the coordinator of the programme; and
- evaluation of materials.

This training programme in conjunction with individual interaction with the coordinator formed the framework for the materials developers' primary tasks which included

- attending classes in their respective disciplines;
- liaising with academic coordinators in the mainstream disciplines;
- interviewing students and identifying learner needs;
- developing a portfolio of materials.

It is hoped that in the longer term, critical analysis and discussion between the mainstream coordinators and the materials developers will result in the development of a more “responsive curriculum” (Dowling and Seepe, 2003; Moll, 2004.) which meets the diverse learning needs of all our students but here, it is salutary to recall Morrow's recollection of a job applicant who described changing a curriculum as being like “trying to move a cemetery” (2003:2) and it is certainly premature to make such a claim at this stage. In the medium term though, it is hoped that this curriculum will articulate with the mainstream curricula in such a way that it plays some role in both staff development and the transformation of the curriculum.

6. CHALLENGES AND CONSTRAINTS

Even in these very early stages of development, several constraints and challenges have emerged. The first of these is a lack of professionalism amongst our materials developers the group of students contracted to do this work, while committed, enthusiastic and often insightful, nevertheless lack the knowledge of the educational theory and practice which is needed to inform this programme. In any event, funding constraints and a scarcity of properly qualified practitioners also exacerbate the situation. Linked to this is the second constraint a lack of time for in-depth contextualised training for the developers. For example, while we were able to introduce such notions as the “responsive curriculum” there was insufficient time to consider the more complex nuances of the term and to consider how this might best apply to our current curricula.

A third concern is that during this early phase of development, because the primary focus was on the preparation of the developers, ongoing liaison and discussion with discipline specialists has been limited. This will be rectified in 2008 as the programme moves into its second year and the augmented modules come on line for the first time. A fourth concern is that the additional tutorials remain only partially integrated with the mainstream curriculum.

While the material is closely linked to the content of the mainstream modules, the tutorials remain additional to the four central lectures, and as such they can have minimal impact on possible curriculum reform. It may in the longer term be possible to integrate the material fully so that all students attend six classes per week in some disciplines but this is a complex issue which brings with it another set of challenges, most particularly with regard to pace of presentation and level of intervention and would need very careful planning and thought.

And finally there is the inevitable question of cost the model is relatively expensive and it is not adequately accommodated. Only the provision of sufficient resources can ensure that it will be implemented in optimum conditions.

7. EMERGING STRENGTHS AND FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

A key strength of Extended Curriculum is the professional expertise of the coordinator who can provide the materials developers with the necessary guidance and feedback from a theoretically informed position and can identify problems as they arise and respond accordingly. In addition to this, the programme has two significant potential strengths, most particularly in the light of recent national policy directives. Firstly, it has the potential to reach many more students than just the access group and so can go a small way towards meeting the challenge to improve retention and success across the board. Secondly, the curriculum, if properly developed, has the potential to facilitate curriculum reform, and to contribute to the development of curricula which are better suited to a more diverse group of learners.

These are somewhat ambitious goals but they are not necessarily unrealisable. However, if they are to be attained then the focus needs to be not on individual programmes operating in small pockets of the academy, but on much broader systemic support, both nationally and institutionally. For Scott, this would entail “a marked shift in the extent to which educational expertise is valued and given recognition in the sector, in institutions and in departmental cultures” which in turn is dependent on “knowledge and recognition of the importance of substantial improvement in the output of higher education; the sector's acceptance of responsibility in this regard, particularly in relation to improving teaching and learning; consequent strengthening of the accountability of individual institutions... and, since accountability is not sufficient in itself, raising the profile of expertise in teaching and learning as an intellectually challenging area of work that can lead to career advancement” (2005;2). This does not mean that the achievement of equity in our institutions is a thing of the past and Scott warns against falsely dichotomising equity and development initiatives (2001). Boughey (2007b) also argues for a model which is inclusive enough to retain the positive dimensions of past models while at the same time responding to new national demands.

She has suggested a new “third generation” model for academic development which would result in “equity” and “efficiency” being held in a critical yet constructive balance and calls for the current practices, structures and processes of Academic Development to be re-imagined and freshly understood (2007b).

As institutions of higher learning explore ways in which to achieve this balance, several issues need to be held in tension. While there is no question that the higher education sector is required more than ever to be publicly accountable for what it does, this does not imply that they should be entirely driven by the needs of the market. As Morrow points out, “...the assumption that 'the market' satisfies the pre-existing desires of consumers completely ignores the obvious ways in which markets manufacture needs and desires as opposed to merely responding to them” (2003,7). Institutions of higher education need to hold skills-driven factors in a critical tension with broader educational concerns as they develop an appropriate curriculum framework this includes a consideration of political and epistemic pressures in addition to those of the market. For Morrow, “[t]he actual substance of the teaching and research programmes of higher education needs to change or be changed to reflect our new political reality. Teaching and research activities need to be demystified, and made transparent to all stakeholders... and we need to acknowledge that we are in Africa with its own alternative forms of knowledge”. Most importantly, “we need to accept that the state cannot afford to pay for irrelevant teaching programmes and research projects. Access, transparency, relevance and accountability will become the watchwords of higher education and its curricula will be forced to change to accommodate this political reality” (2003:7).

8. REFERENCES

Badat, S. 2003. *Transforming South African higher education, 1990-2003: Goals, policy initiatives and critical challenges and issues*. Pretoria: CHET Consortium B.

Boughey, C. 2007a. Educational development in South Africa: From social reproduction to capitalist expansion? *Higher Education Policy* 20: 5-18.

Boughey, C. 2007b. Marrying equity and efficiency: the need for 'third generation' academic development. *Perspectives in Education*, 25(3).

De Kadt, E. 2007. Alternative access at UKZN: a reflective report. Unpublished report prepared for the forthcoming institutional audit of the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

DoE (Department of Education, South Africa) 2001. *National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa*. Pretoria: Government Printer.

- Dowling, D. and Seepe, S. 2003. Towards a responsive curriculum. In *A tale of three countries*. P. Naude and N. Cloete (eds), 41-53. Cape Town: Juta.
- Gee, J. P. 1990. *Social linguistics and literacy: Ideology in discourse*. Basingstoke: Falmer.
- Mail and Guardian Higher Learning Supplement. November 10, 2007,4.
- Moll, I. 2004. Curriculum responsiveness: the anatomy of a concept. <http://www.epoor.org/updocs/S1>
- Morphet, A. 1995. *The Second Part of an Evaluation of SAAAD: Examining present perceptions, potential future pathways and the decisions which any particular choice would require*, SAAAD: Braamfontein.
- Morrow, W. 2003. Epistemic values in curriculum transformation. In *A Tale of Three Countries*. P. Naude and N. Cloete (eds), 2-12. Cape Town: Juta.
- Morrow, W. 2007. *Learning to teach in South Africa*. HSRC Press: Cape Town
- National Education Policy Initiative. 1992.
- Naude, P. and Cloete, N. (eds). 2003. *A tale of three countries*. Pretoria: Cape Town: Juta.
- Pretorius, D. 2003. Social engagement and the creation of knowledge. In *A tale of three countries*. P. Naude and N. Cloete (eds), 13-40. Cape Town: Juta.
- Scott, I., Yeld, N. and Hendry, J. 2007. *A case for improving teaching and learning in South African higher education*. HEQC/CHED Improving Teaching and Learning Project.
- Scott, I. 2005. *Improving teaching and learning through capacity development: a proposal to the Quality Promotion and Capacity Directorate of the HRQC*. University of Cape Town: CHED.
- Scott, I. 2001. Public funding for academic development: analysis and proposals. Individual submission to the Ministry of Education in response to the 2001 discussion document. Funding of Public Higher Education: A New Framework.
- Tyson, D. 2007. Measuring the success of the Humanities Access Programme, Pietermaritzburg Campus UKZN: 2001-2003. Poster presentation at Conversations about Foundation Conference, CAPUT, October 2007.

Volbrecht, T. and C. Boughey. 2004. Curriculum responsiveness from the margins? A reappraisal of African Development in South Africa. In *Curriculum responsiveness: case studies in higher education*. H. Griesel (ed). Pretoria: South African Universities Vice-Chancellors Association.

Waetjen, T. 2006. Measures of redress: defining disadvantage in a university access programme. *South African Review of Sociology*. 37(2): 200-217.

APPENDIX A

Measuring the Success of the Humanities Access Programme, Pietermaritzburg Campus UKZN: 2001-2003

The History

2000. A working group was established to respond to high failure rate among students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. Other initiatives investigated and a programme and curriculum were established.

2001. Second Language students with less than 32 Matric points were invited for an interview. 30 students were selected on basis of interview and biographical profile questionnaire.

2002. Potential students applied directly for the Access Programme. Over 400 applications received which made interviewing impossible. A Placement Test was developed as a selection tool together with a biographical profile questionnaire. 34 students were selected.

2003. 49 students were selected.

The Curriculum

1st Semester

- Academic Communication Studies 101.
- English 110: Intro. to Writing.
- Africa in the World 110.
- Basic Numeracy.
- Basic Computer Skills.

2nd Semester

- Academic Communication Studies 102.
- English 111 : Intro. to Writing (Part 2).
- Africa in the World 120.
- Information Literacy (Mainstream module).

Student Profile

Students selected for the programme :

- achieved less than 32 Matric points and therefore not eligible for mainstream
- from educationally disadvantaged background
- showed potential for success. Evident through selection tests and biographical profile.

Research Method: Quantitative data was collected from the UKZN Students Management System as a measure of the number of students that have *graduated*, were *continuing* with their studies, had *dropped out* or *excluded* from the University. This data was compared with data obtained from UKZN Division of Management Information website for mainstream students of the same cohort as Access students, 2001 - 2003.

The Findings

- There is little difference between the graduation rate of Access students (57,5%) and mainstream students (57,1%) for this period, but there is a higher percentage of continuing students for Access (19,5%) compared to mainstream (12,4%).
- On average there are 77,9% of Access students who have graduated or are well on their way to graduate compared with 69.5% for mainstream students.
- It would appear that although the graduation rates are higher than mainstream, a higher percentage of Access students are taking longer than 3 years to complete their degree.
- Access students have a higher rate of academic exclusions (8.8%) than their mainstream counterparts (5.2%) for the period 2001 to 2003.
- There is a lower drop-out rate among Access students (14,2%) compared to mainstream students (25,2%).

Conclusions

The Humanities Access Programme appears to be producing students with a greater chance of succeeding at University than students going directly into the mainstream. There are a number of possible reasons for this:

- The Programme has a carefully planned curriculum.
- Small group teaching.
- Attention given to developing good study habits.
- A highly committed staff.
- A sound understanding of the background and developmental needs of the students.
- A dedicated counsellor to assist with social, personal and learning problems.
- Students are trained to access support systems.

Areas for Further Research

The conclusions above are tentative. Further data will be added at the end of 2007 for the 2004 cohort. A qualitative exploration of this data is necessary to establish why there are these trends. This would need to be conducted via interviews with students in all categories of the research.

Compiled by:

Dean Tyson
Humanities Access Programme
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Pietermaritzburg
Phone: 033 260 5977
Email: tysond@ukzn.ac.za