

The Value of a Life Skills Programme at A Higher Education Institution in South Africa

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Abstract

The study on which this article is based, examined the value that a life skills programme gives to students at a higher education institution in South Africa. The life skills approach is an interactive educational style that focuses on more than just information. To have an impact on behaviour, information-based approaches need to be combined with attitudinal and interpersonal skills, known as 'life skills' that should aid to improve the changing of behaviour. The authors employed a quantitative approach as the research strategy. A Likert type questionnaire was based on a review of the literature. A principal factor analysis was utilised for data analysis. The results indicated that personal skills, academic skills, mentor relationships, facilitation skills and assessments are essential elements of a value-adding life skills programme at this institution. A number of findings led to recommendations being made for the improvement of the pass rate of students.

Keywords: Personal skills, academic skills, facilitation skills, assessments.

1. Introduction

In an increasingly competitive global and national economic environment, the competitive advantage of a company no longer lies in its products or technology but in its employees. The human resource function is fulfilling a central role in companies, making a direct contribution to the success of the company by creating a human resource capability that ensures that the company remains responsive to its environment and maintains its competitive edge (Schultz, 2009). The three foundations of individual behaviour in companies are ability, attitude and learning (George & Jones, 2008; Gibson, Ivancevich, Donnelly & Konopaske, 2008; Robbins & Judge, 2008). It is therefore the responsibility of schools and higher education institutions to effectively prepare students for entering the workplace. A life skills programme is of essence in assisting with this process.

The Directorate of Student Development and Support (SDS) at Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) in South Africa has developed a life skills programme as a strategy to bridge the gap between high school and tertiary education in an effort to improve the pass rate of the institution as well as to prepare students for the workplace. The purpose of the life skills programme is to help students to know and understand themselves better, live life more consciously and deliberately, attain personal satisfaction and fulfilment, and achieve their goals, personally and academically. The main objective of life skills is to assist and enhance the academic and personal wellbeing of each individual student. The life skills programme includes study skills development as well as personal skills development. The length of the programme depends on how many themes the academic department believes will make an impact on their students. The numbers of students that attend life skills programmes 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 therefore develop and appreciate study habits. According to SDS records, the study strategies seem to be the most popular topics in the 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 the SDS, students are administered to do academic skills assessment depending on what the lecturers' expectations are and, with regard to life skills, this will either be LASSI (Learning and Study Strategies Inventory) or the Neethling Brain Profile, which also assesses study profile and other career-related matters. The aim of the study being reported here, was to determine the value that the life skills programme adds to the experience of students at TUT. Value can ultimately be described in terms of what one does for the shareholders, and the customer (in this case the students) is the key to creating value (Hosking, 2002).

2. Life Skills Development

The purpose of the life skills programme is to help students to know and understand themselves better, live life more consciously and deliberately, attain personal satisfaction and fulfilment, and achieve their goals, personally and academically. There are more or less 800 students that attend the life skills programme of TUT each year. The programme manager submits a portfolio to first-year lecturers and the academics responsible to familiarise themselves with the themes/topics offered by the Directorate of Student Development and Support in the life skills programme. The lecturers then schedule sessions with the life skills coordinator to invite counsellors to mentor their first-year students. The sessions are mentored for one hour per session. A needs analysis is used to determine how long the programme should be. Some programmes include assessments while others do not. Since the programme is not credit bearing, it is voluntary and departments have the right to stop the Directorate from assessing their students in life skills. Figure 1 outlines the themes that are covered during the life skills programme at TUT.

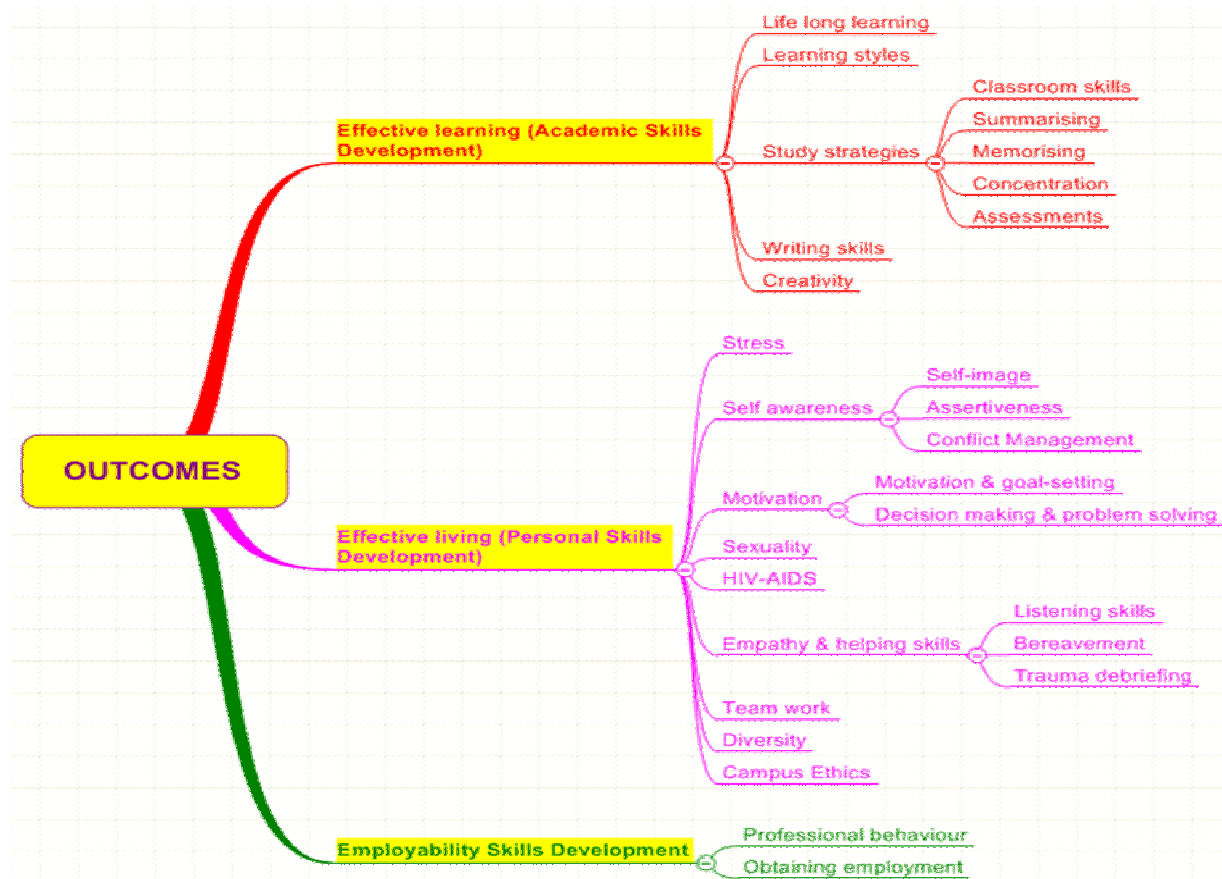


Fig. 1: Student Development and Support life skills programmes
(Source: Student Development and Support orientation file, 2007)

In life skills, facilitators are responsible for mentoring academic skills development, personal development and employment skills. Since the study focus is on first-year students, employment skills will not be discussed but only personal skills development and academic skills development.

Study skills activities are part of a wider process of personal development. Study skills involve the process that helps students to organise and direct the effort they invest in learning, and the way they use their results in becoming more effective and efficient learners who are more in charge of their own learning (Macronesia, 2008). Cottrell (2003) emphasises that personal planning is not something one does once and then forgets. It involves reflection, increasing self-awareness, being informed, taking personal responsibility, and developing a strategy to get where one wants to be. The ability to manage stress, handle conflict, assist people and respect others are essential personal skills that should be developed in students (Van Heerden, 2005). According to Landberger (2006), study skills development will help students to prepare themselves for success in their studies. Study strategies seem to be the most popular theme in academic skills development in the life skills programme of the Directorate of Student Development and Support. Through the study strategies, the Directorate assists students who need to develop study habits by offering study activities such as study habits, reading skills, comprehension and language proficiency, which are assessed by means of academic proficiency assessment at the Student Development and Support prior to intervention. Cottrell (2003) suggests that, to obtain good marks, one does not necessarily have to work longer hours. However, you do need to identify the task or problem correctly, discover the underlying issues and find out exactly what is expected.

Effective time management helps to keep a balance between one's studies and one's social life. There is enough time for studies and friendship. Organisational and time management skills are closely intertwined with the goals one wishes to achieve. Race (2000) lists the following to assess time management skills: distinguish between what is important and what is urgent, compile "to-do" lists, do not underestimate what you can do in a day and manage any distractions.

Learners should know that note-taking is one of the most important activities in their studies. According to Burns and Sinfield (2004), one can take notes in nonlinear or linear form. These authors then mention the following possible problems with nonlinear notes: all the information looks the same because it is difficult to focus on specific points and it is a passive form of note-taking. According to Moseki (2004), the main features of the column method of note-taking and summarising are a topic column, keywords column, column for examples and a column for points written in one's own words. According to the University of Victoria – Counselling Services (2006), concept-mapping is a tool for assisting and enhancing many of the types of thinking and learning one is required to do at university. Memorising is a process that involves reading, saving and retrieving information. According to McIlroy (2005), the following steps will help students to deal with memory interference: do not overestimate your memory and be aware that it can let you down, check out what you have learned by consulting several sources, attend small group sessions and discuss what you have learned with others, and once you discover that you have had a wrong impression, make a note of this and focus on the correct alternative.

According to Dawson (2004), effective preparation for examinations will help students to control their nerves. McIlroy (2005) explains that examiners seek evidence of critical thinking to demonstrate that students have learned at a deeper level than rote reproduction. Understanding the assignment title and planning the structure of an assignment are two crucial elements in completing a successful assignment (Van Heerden, 2005).

Burns and Sinfield (2004) distinguish the following learning styles: *visual learners* enjoy reading, watching films, TV and videos 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 need to speak aloud when learning, and lastly *kinaesthetic learners* remember by building movement into their learning strategies.

3. Method

The method will be discussed below by referring to the research design, participants, sampling, measuring instrument, data collection and reliability of the study.

3.1 Research Design

In order to achieve the aim of determining the value that the life skills programme adds to the students at TUT, a quantitative research design using a survey was employed. 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 completing questionnaires. A questionnaire on the life skills programme was designed based on relevant constructs identified in the literature. The broad themes that were covered in the questionnaire were facilitation skills, academic skills development, personal skills and SDS assessments.

3.2 Participants

The majority of respondents were between 19 and 22 years (71.2%), with 18.5% aged 18 years and younger, 7.5% between 23 and 26 years, and 2.1%, 27 years or older. In relation to gender, 71.9% of the participants were female and 27.4% male while 7% did not specify whether they are male or female.

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

The majority (38.4%) of the respondents reside with their parents, 24% reside with friends, 11% live alone, 23.3 % respondents are TUT residents, 2.7% of respondents specified “other”, while 0.7% did not specify their residence.

3.3 Sampling

Convenience sampling was chosen as a method of non-probability sampling for this study. This means that not all elements had an equal chance, and conclusions will only be made about those who have completed the questionnaire. A sampling element is the unit of analysis in a population. It can be a person, a group, an organisation, a written document or symbolic message, or even a social action that is being measured (Neuman, 2006). The first-year students (156) who were available during life skills lectures at the time the data were 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 questionnaires and seven questionnaires were incomplete. This resulted in a sample size of 146 participants. Descriptive statistics were applied for analysis of the data using frequencies, means and medians.

3.4 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; Welman, Kruger & Mitchell, 2010). The questionnaire was pilot tested before the actual data gathering and the participants 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, in other words, factors that are somehow clearly marked by high loadings for some variables and low loadings for others, to make the output more understandable.

3.5 Data Collection

A questionnaire and letters of consent were given to students during their lectures. Because convenient sampling was used, 156 students were given the questionnaires and 146 completed them.

3.6 Reliability of the Study

The internal consistency of the items measuring the respondents' perception of the mentorship skills, of aspects of academic skills, personal skills programmes and items relating to the assessments was measured by calculating Cronbach's alpha for each subset of questions. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Reliability analysis results

Themes	Cronbach's alpha
Mentorship skills	$\alpha = 0.787$
Academic skills development programme	$\alpha = 0.882$
Personal skills development programme	$\alpha = 0.775$
Directorate of Student Development and Support assessments	$\alpha = 0.385$

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 the Directorate of Student Development and Support have a low alpha coefficient (0.385), reflecting the diverse nature of the questions in this subsection.

4. Analysis and Findings

The findings and discussions are discussed below.

4.1 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 participants' perception of mentorship. This was done to ascertain whether 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 2. Each number represents the partial correlation between the item and the rotated factor and 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 2 to aid with the interpretation. (Factor loadings of less than 0.3 signify association of less than 10%, i.e. 0.03-squared, of that item with the factor.) The complete factor solution is indicated in Table 2.

Table 2: Factor analysis pattern matrix

Pattern matrix				
No.	Statement	Component		
		1	2	3
C9	Memorising strategies adequately explained	.825		
C11	Creativity improved	.785		
C10	Writing skills improved	.781		
C8	Learning style adequately explained	.755		
C13	Importance of taking notes explained	.713		
C7	Lifelong learning skills were conveyed	.680		
D15	Taught to manage stress effectively	.572	.333	
C12	Language skills sharpened	.536		
D17	Knowledge about diversity improved		.838	
D19	Familiar with campus ethics		.783	
D16	Taught to manage conflict effectively		.752	
D18	Skills to assist people improved		.532	
B4	Facilitator fulfils his/her role			.885

B3	Facilitator knowledgeable			.754
B2	Facilitator has good communication skills			.695
B5	Facilitator guides me to make own decision			.569

Extraction method: principal component analysis

Rotation method: Oblimin with Kaiser normalisation

The first factor, which accounts for 38.1% of the total variance (see Table 2), 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.

The above factor shows that most of the respondents who are stressed need to be further assessed to ascertain whether they are academically stressed or personally stressed. The majority of respondents seemed to appreciate the support given in academic skills development because they were aware of the impact this could have on their studies and had experience of it.

Factor 2 explains a further 12.4% of the variance, representing the items relating to the personal skills development programme. It shows that respondents are grateful for the personal skills development themes presented because they were aware of and had experienced the impact of the skills in their personal lives and academic life and they were also aware of the impact this will have on their future.

Factor 3 is characterised by items B2 to B5, which assessed facilitation skills, explaining a further 9.5% 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 life skills programme in the Directorate of Student Development and Support. The respondents seemed satisfied with the relationship they have with their mentors and also with the skills their mentors have.

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

Table 3: Academic skills development

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

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

Table 4 displays the perceptions of participants with special reference to personal skills development. In addition, the ranking is being indicated in the table.

Table 4: Personal skills development

	Strongly agree	...			Strongly disagree		
Personal skills	1	2	3	4	5	Median	Mode
1.Taught to manage stress effectively	38	63	21	6	1	2.0	2
2.Taught to manage conflict effectively	32	64	23	5	2	2.0	2
3.Skills to assist people improved	35	59	24	8	0	2.0	2
4.Knowledge about diversity improved	11	77	27	4	2	2.0	2
5.Familiar with campus ethics	21	62	31	9	2	2.0	2

As with the academic skills, the majority of 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 respondents indicated that personal skills themes/topics were facilitated effectively to them.

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

Table 5: Aspects of assessments

	Strongly agree	...			Strongly disagree		
Aspects of assessments	1	2	3	4	5	Median	Mode
1.Immediate verbal feedback important	33	75	13	3	0	2.0	2
2.Will follow up on recommendations	20	69	30	1	1	2.0	2
3.Questions/statements in assessments clear	38	65	18	0	0	2.0	2
4.Learnt more about myself	46	58	13	3	1	2.0	2
5.Questions/statements intimidating	9	29	36	37	10	3.0	4

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 the Directorate of Student Development and Support. The mere fact that respondents felt that the questions in the assessments were intimidating might have influenced their responses therefore their assessment reports might not have been valid. This could have discouraged them from having confidence to follow up on the recommendations. The issue of whether respondents will follow up on recommendations should be investigated to identify further possible problem areas. There was general consensus that immediate verbal feedback is crucial and that respondents had learnt more about themselves. 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 (22%) were uncertain about this aspect, while almost a third indicated that they found the 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. This matter should be addressed to ensure that the reason is not that students do not know where to find assistance.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The aim of the research reported here was to obtain information to examine the value that a life skills programme adds to the experience of students at a higher education institution in South Africa. The outcome of this study that was conducted at TUT clearly indicates that the life skills programme indeed does add value to the learning experience of students. The literature study also indicated that students benefit from life skills programmes at tertiary level. The study further signified that a life skills programme supports students in the areas of effective learning (study skills) and effective living (personal skills) which indicated that personal and academic skills were enhanced. A number of findings led to recommendations being made for the improvement of the pass rate of students. Further research could be conducted on the impact of life skills on students' academic success, programme evaluation on life skills and life skills training programme for life skills practitioners. Students should be encouraged to complete life skills sessions in order to improve their personal and academic skills. A forum on the facilitation of a life skills programme should be implemented in the Directorate of Student Development and Support in an effort to improve the student throughput rate at TUT.

Students should be afforded the opportunity to evaluate the programme after completion in order to improve the programme. The programme should be constantly improved to meet the needs of students. Students should be encouraged to follow up on the recommendations indicated in the assessments they have done with the Directorate of Student Development and Support. Students should then be afforded the opportunity to evaluate the facilitators to enable the latter to improve their mentoring skills with regard to life kills programme, if necessary.

During evaluation sessions, students should be given the opportunity to verbally express their views about their experiences in the life skills sessions in order to obtain a general impression of the student satisfaction level. The support given to students in acquiring life skills requires exercises to be planned to afford them the opportunity to practise and develop the relevant skills. Small groups of students should be encouraged to perform tasks and reflect on their learning. Attending the life skills programme should be encouraged because it is useful for active learning in higher education to promote different methods of learning and personal development. Group discussions should be encouraged to promote independence among students.

These recommendations are made to assist with enhancing the pass rate of students at this higher education institution. Finally, it is recommended that life skills programmes be implemented and monitored at school level as part of the preparation process to enter a tertiary institution or the workplace.

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