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Academic Literacy, the pteep, and the prediction of academic success

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

1.1. Socio-political context of the study

South Africa is changing rapidly from a segregated to an integrated society. People with different languages, different cultures, different religions, different political beliefs, different histories, different socio-economic backgrounds, etc. are learning to live together in a unified South Africa in one geo-political dispensation. What is true for many other countries is also true for South Africa namely that *obtaining* democracy differs to a large extent from *developing* a civil society which involves exposing its people to development initiatives and incentives, developing the potential of people and their capacity to developing, maintaining and sustaining socio political, socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-educational progress (Louw & Bredenkamp, 1999). It is in this context that the researcher would like to introduce the importance and demand of access to higher education. Access, however, does not only imply the opportunity to enter a higher education institution. Human potential development and true capacity development can really take place if access is defined in terms of access to full administrative support, full learner support services, and full opportunity to access technology, lifelong learning and success. In other words, access has to be seen as full exposure to the opportunity for adding value to the learners' learning experience. If this could be achieved, the chances are optimized for capacity development in an environment like South Africa's where visionary leadership, critical thinking, innovative thinking, sound managerial thinking and managerial administrative and technological skills and qualities are dearly needed (Louw & Bredenkamp, 1999). This also highlights the importance of the present study in light of the importance of higher education graduates (knowledge workers) for the South African economy in the 21st century.

South Africa's current population is approximately 46 million. According to mid-year population estimates in 2005, it is comprised of 37.2 million Africans (79.4 percent), 4.4 million whites (9.3 percent), 4.1 million coloureds (8.9 percent) and 588 thousand Indians (1.2 percent). Statistics reveal that 37 percent of the population is unemployed, of whom 42.9 percent are African, 30.3 percent are Coloured, 22.5 percent are Indian, 10.1 percent are White (South African Institute of Race Relations, 2001/2). This imbalance is largely related to inequalities in educational access during the apartheid era. Therefore, at the centre of political discussions in South Africa, there has been a consistent demand for educational reform. The apartheid system legally separated South Africa's inhabitants into four racial groups: Africans, Whites, Coloureds and Indians. Political power and privilege were invested in the White minority, while Africans were socio-politically disadvantaged. The system of education strikingly reflected this division and class inequality (Nkabinde, 1993).

1.2. The need for equity and redress in South Africa

The process of democratisation in South Africa has impacted all spheres of society. In the process of change, the issue of facilitating equity against the background of historical unequal opportunities and disadvantaged conditions presented one of the greatest challenges. It is evident that the role of higher education in this process is of paramount importance, not only in establishing and sustaining the new democratic culture but also in developing the required human resources and in promoting equity. It is evident that providing unqualified access to higher education in itself is not sufficient to address these needs. The implication is rather a reconsideration of the position and role of higher education, towards access driven institutions and away from previously bureaucratic driven organizations (Louw & Bredenkamp, 1999).

It is therefore imperative that citizens should have access to the kind of education that will foster, enhance and develop values that will embrace rights that will promote freedom of movement, freedom of association, religious freedom, minority rights, freedom to vote, the right to participation in

government, the right to an unprejudiced judiciary, the right to equal participation and individual rights, (Schoeman, van Putten, De Waart, & Tims, 1990). Obviously where democracy is the chosen vehicle for the realization of a nation's political form of governance, then the values, norms, principles, theory and practice of democratic governance should be transmitted through and reflected on via the educational system.

There are many reasons why universities have to take the issue of fair access to higher education seriously. The future implementation of a National Senior Certificate (NSC) and the FETC Vocational, which will do away with the current Senior Certificate (SE) and the matriculation endorsement as an entry requirement to university has prompted the need for universities to look for new access practices (DoE, 1997; Strydom, 2002). The introduction of enrolment capping across the higher education sector in 2005 has put a new emphasis on throughput rates as part of public higher education funding (Badsha, 2004). In other words, access to higher education has become more restrictive, and while universities have quota's to fulfil for equal access they also have financial implications to consider, making retention and graduation rates of students of utmost importance. It is thus essential in light of enrolment capping amongst others for universities to develop their own access tests and to identify alternative methods of predicting academic performance that can be utilised as interim and future measures (Yeld, 2003).

Together with addressing 'equity of access', the Education White Paper 3 (1997) and National Plan for Higher Education (2001), also call for 'equity of outcome'. As such, universities are expected to ensure that, whilst they are addressing the matters of broader access and race and gender imbalances, they are avoiding situations characterised by high dropout and failure rates. Thus, emphasizing the need to predict academic success.

Riordan (2002) highlights the following reasons as to why the prediction of academic success is important:

- Inappropriate placement can lead to costly problems for universities and students

- Inadequate initial evaluation can result in failure to provide learners with support and appropriate curriculum design, enhancing the possibility of poor graduation rates.
- An understanding of the variables contributing to academic success will allow universities to understand which type of students are likely to be successful in graduating within the expected 3-4 years of studies.

Before predicting variables in academic success it is necessary to delineate the profile of students entering University. Yeld (2003) looked at what entering cohorts look like in terms of academic literacy and/or Mathematics knowledge and skills. She found that on the whole, entering cohorts reveal serious gaps and deficiencies in their knowledge and skill repertoires, and can be regarded as under-prepared for regular-admission tertiary-level study.
To date matriculation results remain the single best cognitive predictor of University success for White students, especially in the cases that fall in the top range of scores, but in lower range scores this relation breaks down (Entwistle & Wilson, 1977; Griesel, Bradbury & Craig, 1993; Strydom, 1996). As good performance in the senior certificate correlates well with university success the current need is for a useful indicator for those who do not do as well in the senior certificate but have a realistic potential to succeed at university (Yeld, 2003). The Alternative Admission Research Project from the University of Cape Town focuses on this group. More particularly, the measure used in the present study (PTEEP) aims to predict performance in a future setting in which language is one of many variables. According to Yeld (2003) on the whole, in terms of academic literacy and/or Mathematics knowledge and skills, entering cohorts reveal serious gaps and deficiencies in their knowledge and skill repertoires and can be regarded as underprepared for regular-admission tertiary-level study. These low levels of preparation of incoming students to South African higher education institutions have been widely recognised for some time. Despite this recognition, however, and with some striking exceptions, there has been relatively little systematic academic development work in respect of foundational and bridging programmes, and students continue to be admitted to courses and programmes for which they

are very clearly not adequately prepared (Yeld, 2003). This poses a problem in the challenges that South Africa faces with successful access to higher education. Gladieux and Swail (2000) asked the question, why do gaps in postsecondary opportunity remain so wide? For the better part of four decades, national policy in the USA has focused on access to the post secondary system and yet there remains a long way to go to equalise access. The question ultimately becomes, how do we provide greater access, thereby closing the widening gap between haves and have-nots? This is the context within which the current research is based. The greater challenge, however, in providing greater access internationally and nationally, is to increase the likelihood that students actually succeed in reaching their goals, which in most cases means completing a degree.

Before providing solutions, however, there is a need to understand what these gaps consist of. Thus the necessity of research like the present study. The present study hopes to highlight and demystify what some of these gaps are, by analysing the relationship between the PTEEP language test and students' academic literacy and academic success, and provide recommendations as to how to narrow or eliminate some of these gaps and deficiencies.

There are also gaps in research in understanding what entering cohorts into higher education institutions should ideally look like. This further emphasizes the need to look at cognitive development theory and to draw from this what these entering cohorts should look like, and more specifically how tests should be structured so that they are testing skills and abilities that are needed to be successful at a higher education institution.

The current study researches students from the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) and will create a profile of these students. The focus of this research however, will be to explore a cognitive variable, namely language constructs, as a predictor of academic success within the Humanity Faculty at Wits.

1.3. Aim

This research broadly aims to measure the validity of the PTEEP language proficiency test, as a predictor of academic literacy, on the University of Witwatersrand Humanity students' academic success. As well as the role that cognitive developmental theory may play in attributing to academic success, which could in turn affect access policy. Research proposes to improve access to institutions research should be done to shape access policy (Tinto, 1998). In addition, recommendations will also be made as to how the PTEEP language proficiency test can be used to improve the selection process based on the literature and findings of this research.

1.4. Overview of the study

The present study will follow the following format: the next three chapters aim to introduce and describe various key theoretical concepts and well as research done that is relevant to the present study. Chapter Five provides a description of the aims, research design and method employed for this study. The results and discussion thereof will be described in Chapter Five. The final chapter of the study presents a summary and a discussion of the limitations of the study as well as recommendations for future research.