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Evaluating postgraduate preparation in the South African context

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Little work is being undertaken in South Africa to systematically and intentionally prepare undergraduate students to pursue postgraduate studies. This is concerning given the shortage of postgraduate students and the small scale of postgraduate studies. The few programmes and endeavours that exist to prepare students for postgraduate studies are not necessarily evaluated to assess their achievements and shortcomings. This paper provides an evaluation of an academic year-long postgraduate preparation programme, and is specifically concerned with examining subsequent postgraduate enrolment and improvement of participants' marks. The study draws on both quantitative and qualitative data. The findings indicate that the majority of programme participants proceeded to subsequently enrol in postgraduate studies immediately after completing the programme and that the programme played a role in the pursuit of postgraduate studies. However, the findings also indicate that overall participants' marks did not improve after participating in the programme. The study brings to light that, while some achievements are possible, the limits of the programme must also be acknowledged.

Keywords: postgraduate preparation; university; South Africa; evaluation

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Introduction

The development and growth of postgraduate education have been identified as a national priority in South Africa. An explicit drive to increase the calibre and number of postgraduate students and graduates is apparent (National Research Foundation 2011). This is an endeavour relevant to the nation's drive to foster a new generation of Black researchers and intellectuals (Department of Education 2001), the development of the country's economic and educational profile (Lategan 2008) and the strategic plans of many research-focused universities. For the purposes of this paper, postgraduate studies refer to advanced studies that take place subsequent to the undergraduate degree. In North America, postgraduate studies would be simply referred to as 'graduate studies', and would take place after completion of the four-year undergraduate degree. However, in the South African context, the bachelor's degree is commonly three years in duration. Advanced studies that take place after the bachelor's degree are classified as postgraduate studies and include honours, masters and doctoral degrees (for a more in-depth review of degree levels at South African universities, see Mouton 2011, 16–17).

Despite the explicit drive to grow and develop postgraduate education, the shortage of postgraduate students poses a major challenge (Herman 2011a;

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Mouton 2011; Swanepoel and Moll 2004). This shortage of students is exacerbated by an unacceptably high level of attrition that is apparent for post-graduate programmes across the country (Herman 2011b). While attrition rates vary by discipline and level of study, the overall rate is calculated to be 46% (Mouton 2011). South African higher education institutions have some of the worst attrition rates in the world (Letseka and Maile 2008). Postgraduate programmes make up a small proportion of university studies when compared with undergraduate programmes. In 2008, undergraduate enrolment comprised 86% of total university enrolment, whereas postgraduate enrolment comprised only 14% (Bunting et al. 2010). Only about 10,000 students are currently enrolled in doctoral studies, which is a low figure given the substantially higher number of enrolments in other postgraduate programmes (approximately 43,000 are enrolled in masters studies and approximately 74,000 are enrolled in postgraduate programmes below the masters level, such as honours studies and post-bachelor diplomas) (Mouton 2011). In addition, the number of successful doctoral graduate students (those who graduated) declined from 1637 in 2011/2012 to 1576 in 2012/2013 (Department of Higher Education and Training 2013). This is a low figure when we take into consideration that a total of 43,067 postgraduate student graduates were produced in 2012/2013.

If the postgraduate system is to experience growth and development, and if the number of doctoral graduates is to increase, the number and calibre of students at the entry level of postgraduate studies (those pursing an honours degree) need to grow. However, little work is being undertaken to systematically and intentionally prepare undergraduate students to pursue postgraduate studies. When this work is undertaken, such programmes and endeavours are not necessarily evaluated with respect to subsequent postgraduate enrolment and improvement of participants' marks. Evaluating the performance of postgraduate preparation programmes is essential if we are concerned about the development and growth of postgraduate studies in the South African context.

The research conducted contributes to the literature on programme evaluation at the university level. While programmes that aim to assist undergraduate students in coping with academic as well as non-academic demands have received considerable attention (see, e.g. Dogra 2001; Phaswana-Mafuya and Peltzer 2005; Pratt et al. 2000), matters pertaining to postgraduate preparation and transition have been generally overlooked (Spearing 2014). Accordingly, this paper provides an evaluation of an academic year-long postgraduate preparation programme. The programme was specifically evaluated with respect to subsequent postgraduate enrolment and improvement of participants' marks.

Programme evaluations at the university are valuable because they examine the success and shortcomings of programmes, and they provide academics and stakeholders with a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the goals, objectives, activities and results of programmes (Kemis and Walker 2000). It has been noted that 'evaluation of educational or social programmes is paramount for establishing success or impact in higher education' (Loots 2008, 1212). Programmes that are not part of the formal curriculum, but that supplement students' academic experience by aiming to prepare them for future studies should not be assumed to be beneficial, but should instead be scrutinised via formal evaluation (cf. Horn and Jansen 2008; Kay and Prosser 1989).

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Literature on postgraduate preparation programmes

Postgraduate preparation at the undergraduate level has been viewed as vital for producing high-quality researchers that are equipped with necessary academic skills (Karazsia, Stavnezer, and Reeves 2013; Maasdorp and Hotlzhausen 2009). Programmes that prepare students by equipping them with logistical information pertaining to postgraduate studies have also been viewed as important (Brucato and Neimeyer 2011). Participation in programmes that prepare undergraduate students for postgraduate studies can provide an introduction into, and guidance on, the academic culture of the academy (Grimmett et al. 1998), increase students' interest in pursuing postgraduate school (Lopatto 2004), result in reported improvement in research skills (Kremer and Bringle 1990), increase the likelihood of enrolling in a postgraduate programme (Narayanan 1999; Zydney et al. 2002) and result in better prepared and motivated postgraduate students (Hartmann 1990; Slovak, Joseph, and Broussard 2006).

While the merits of such postgraduate preparation programmes have been documented, cautionary views have also been expressed. These programmes should not be viewed as having the clout to drive change in the university, or being able to impart 'knowledge that will carry all students throughout their doctoral studies' (Neumann, Pallas, and Peterson 2008, 1477). Postgraduate preparation programmes can be seen to provide several benefits, but they should not be viewed as a panacea for the low number of postgraduate students and for the high levels of attrition that are characteristic of postgraduate programmes in South Africa.

Overview of the postgraduate preparation programme

The postgraduate preparation programme under study took place at a School of Education at a major South African university. The programme consisted of nine undergraduate students who were selected based on an interest to pursue a postgraduate degree, having earned average marks of approximately 65% (within a system where a distinction is 75% or above) and having experienced a schooling background that may not have prepared them for the demands of university. Programme participants were studying towards a Bachelor of Education and were preparing to specialise in different levels of teaching (e.g. foundation, senior primary and secondary) and in different subjects (mathematics, English, geography, history, etc.). As such, their courses of study differed significantly. Special consideration was given to students from groups that have been traditionally marginalised and underrepresented in the academy. The participant selection process was competitive and open to all qualifying students who were entering their final year of undergraduate studies. A selection committee made up of six academics reviewed student applications and chose the selected participants.

The programme participants were in their fourth and final year of undergraduate study. Unlike many bachelor degrees in South Africa that are three years in duration, the Bachelor of Education that participants were studying towards was four years in duration. The postgraduate preparation programme under study sought to prepare students for postgraduate studies who were not achieving distinctions, but who had a solid academic track record and displayed promise to further their studies beyond an undergraduate degree. It is noteworthy that programme participants did not comprise students who would likely enter postgraduate studies without additional

academic, administrative and financial assistance. Part of the programme's intention was to help students raise their marks and enrol in a postgraduate programme.

Participants were required to attend, and actively participate in, a postgraduate-like seminar which took place once a week over the period of an academic year. Participation in the seminar took place during lunch time. The seminar required them to engage with readings, complete written assignments and participate in discussions, but participants did not receive credit for attendance nor a mark, as the programme was not part of the fixed compulsory curriculum. Seminar topics pertained to the discipline of education, but also exposed students to general knowledge in other fields and disciplines (such as African literature, geography and conservation studies). Additionally, participants were required to participate in three educational field trips which occurred over the weekend, an information session on applying for postgraduate studies, and an overnight writing retreat. The programme was designed to work closely with a limited group of students who would receive special attention and guidance with respect to developing their writing and reading skills.

While there are drawbacks to limiting programmes to small groups of students, it is noteworthy that small cohorts are conducive for providing postgraduate preparation and imparting self-motivation (Hartmann 1990). The participation of large numbers of students in such programmes is undesirable, as increasing the number of students can easily equate to each student receiving less specialised attention. It is therefore not surprising that postgraduate preparation programmes have limited their numbers to approximately 10 students per cohort (see, e.g. Hartmann 1990; Willis, Krueger, and Kendrick 2013). As a result of participating in the programme, participants received incentives. They were granted a personal netbook (small laptop computer). Those who pursued postgraduate studies were eligible to apply for selected postgraduate studies bursaries.

The evaluation

The programme was specifically evaluated with respect to subsequent postgraduate enrolment and improvement of participants' marks. Evaluating subsequent enrolment in postgraduate studies and improvement in marks is significant for two reasons. First, the postgraduate preparation programme was clearly concerned with preparing students for postgraduate studies, and it thus follows that examining subsequent enrolment in postgraduate studies would be one indicator of the programme's success. The academic and non-academic activities of the programme were intended to help students raise their marks, and enrol and succeed in a postgraduate programme. Second, the national priority to increase the calibre and number of postgraduate students must be taken into account. Students' marks can serve as an indicator of their calibre, and thus, an improvement in marks could be telling of improvement in the calibre of students. Subsequent enrolment into postgraduate studies, for students who may otherwise not have been academically, administratively and financially prepared to pursue postgraduate studies, makes a contribution towards increasing postgraduate numbers.

Methodology

In undertaking the postgraduate preparation programme evaluation several data sources were accessed. These include information pertaining to all nine programme

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participants. The use of both quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches served to derive tangible and measurable data, while simultaneously ensuring that participants' 'voices are included and adequately represented' (Barnes 2012, 472). It has been noted that methodological pluralism has the potential to be useful when conducting socially relevant and transformative research that is responsive to 'real world' problems faced in contemporary South African society (cf. Barnes 2012). It is noteworthy that the research at hand is responsive to the challenges faced by the South African postgraduate education system. Research focusing on evaluation of programmes in particular stands to benefit from both quantitative and qualitative approaches, as this dual approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of a programme (Loots 2008; Plewis and Mason 2005), and allows for the examination of both 'hard' outcomes which can be quantified and 'soft' outcomes which are discernible via participants' reports (cf. Morss and Murray 2001). Previous studies that have undertaken evaluations of university programmes that intend to provide students with academic assistance have employed a dual quantitative and qualitative approach to strengthen the research (see, e.g. Horn and Jansen 2008; Kay and Prosser 1989).

The sample comprised all students who participated in the postgraduate preparation programme. The small sample was suitable given that the purpose of the study was to evaluate a specific postgraduate preparation programme, and thus the findings are not intended to be generalisable.

Academic records

The undergraduate academic records of participants were accessed. These records allowed for the comparison of participants' marks. The marks participants earned prior to participating in the programme were compared with their post-programme participation marks to determine improvements, if any. Marks of 50% or above constitute a pass, while marks of 75% and above constitute a distinction.

Postgraduate enrolment data

Postgraduate enrolment data included figures reflecting how many participants proceeded to enrol in postgraduate studies. While enrolment does not automatically translate into successful completion of postgraduate studies, examining enrolment is important because it is a necessary first step to successfully earning a postgraduate degree.

Selected questionnaire data

A questionnaire that elicited participants' views of the programme was completed by participants at the end of the programme. The anonymous questionnaire was designed to allow students to express their views in written form. The questionnaire allowed for data to be generated that allowed students flexibility in terms of providing reports of their own choosing and explanations for their responses. This type of qualitative data allows for students' voices to be included and complements the quantitative data. While the questionnaire yielded data pertinent to marks, enrolment in postgraduate studies, academic skills development and what participants found useful and not useful, only the qualitative responses pertaining to participants' marks

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and enrolment into postgraduate studies are included, as the study at hand is principally concerned with evaluating enrolment and improvement in marks.

Findings

Enrolment in postgraduate studies

Of the nine students who participated in the postgraduate preparation programme, seven applied for entry into postgraduate programmes during their final year of undergraduate studies. Of these seven, six were accepted, and enrolled into, postgraduate studies. Of the two who did not apply for entry into postgraduate programmes, one accepted a teaching position and reported being interested in pursuing postgraduate studies in the future. The other participant was unable to graduate on time due to extenuating circumstances, and at the time of writing was completing the final year of undergraduate study.

These figures do not address the role the programme played with respect to them applying to postgraduate studies. Examining this role is important because applying for postgraduate studies is an indicator of a desire to pursue postgraduate studies. More importantly, applying is necessarily required to enrol and pursue postgraduate studies.

The following question was posed to the seven participants who applied for postgraduate studies:

> State whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: If I had not participated in [name of the postgraduate preparation programme], I would have still applied to an Honours programme. Provide an explanation for why you agree/disagree with the statement.

Of the seven, four disagreed with the statement and three agreed. In other words, for four of the participants, participation in the programme played a role when it came to applying for postgraduate studies. The participants' explanations for them disagreeing with the aforementioned statement were:

P1:	I disagree, I would probably have followed my friends and gone straight into teaching, I never saw myself doing honours.
P2:	Disagree – In [name of the programme] one was getting more motivation on persuing [*sic*] to do honours and even from our discussions one could see that she/he still lack knowledge from undergraduate degree, more reading still needs to be done.
P3:	Disagree – The main reason for joining was that it would extend my potential to do things other than set work. Also, the laptop as incentive motivated me to join. I would have still studied honours next year as it is my personal goal. However, [name of the programme] enabled me to take my goal more seriously and not to underestimate the demands that come with doing honours.
P4:	I disagree. – If it wasn't for [name of the programme] I wouldn't have had a netbook that helped me to easily apply online since I had not courage. – If it wasn't for [name of the programme] I wouldn't have known about [name of bursary] – [name of programme] helped me to get access to many things.

The programme helped participants view themselves as potential postgraduate students, gain sufficient 'motivation' and 'courage' to pursue postgraduate studies, take postgraduate goals more seriously and gain access to material resources that helped

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them apply for, and potentially fund, their postgraduate education. The participants' reported explanations thus indicate that the programme provided support, assistance and information that made a difference for them and encouraged them to apply for and pursue postgraduate studies.

Participants 1 and 4 focused on what the programme provided and the merits of the programme. Participant 1 suggests that the programme influenced their decision to not immediately seek employment in teaching and allowed for them to view themselves as a potential honours student. Participant 4 highlights the key resources and information that made the application process accessible. Participant 2 reports that the programme helped motivate them to pursue postgraduate studies, but also suggests that, despite programme participation, they still lack knowledge and skills. In reporting this, Participant 2 indicates that an undergraduate degree is not sufficient, and points out a need to pursue further studies if more knowledge is to be acquired. This participant's reference to 'from our discussions' suggests that the discussions that took place during seminars helped the participant realise that they still lacked knowledge and that there was still more to learn and read. In turn, the pursuit of an honours degree presents one way in which more knowledge can be acquired and more reading can be done.

With respect to Participant 3, their explanation for disagreeing with the statement provides evidence that they in effect agree with the statement, since they note, 'I would have still studied honours next year as it is my personal goal'. This seems to suggest that they would have pursued postgraduate studies irrespective of participation in the programme. Nonetheless, this participant acknowledges that the programme played a role with respect to them becoming more serious about pursuing postgraduate studies. The participant also suggests that the programme allowed for them to become familiar with what is required at the honours level in a manner that led them to not 'underestimate the demands'.

Three of the seven students who applied for postgraduate studies agreed with the statement. In other words, their view was that they would have applied to postgraduate studies irrespective of their participation in the programme. Their explanations were:

P5: I could have applied to honours even though I did not attend the programme because it has been my wish to study to honours level even further as I am the only one in my family to have gone so far with my studies; I felt and I still feel like I want to achieve more.

P6: Yes I agree with the statement because I applied to [name of programme] because I was interested in doing honours.

P7: Agree: Basically my lecturers had encouraged me to do my honours next, so I would have applied. But, [name of programme] did play an important role to give me hope and courage for applying with confidence knowing that it helps me with finding the fundings [*sic*] as my lecturers did not have any fundings [*sic*].

Participants 5–7 indicate that they would have applied to pursue postgraduate studies irrespective of the programme. For Participants 5 and 6, their personal desires and interests are reported as having influenced their decision to pursue postgraduate studies. They also indicate that it was their intention to pursue honours studies previous to participating in the postgraduate preparation programme. In particular, Participant 6 points out that they applied to participate in the postgraduate

preparation programme 'because [they were] interested in doing honours'. Programme participation here can be viewed as attributed to the desire to pursue postgraduate studies, as opposed to programme participation playing a role in influencing the decision to pursue postgraduate studies. Participant 7 also agreed that she/he would have applied for postgraduate studies irrespective of the programme, but this participant reports that the programme played 'an important role' with respect to them acquiring 'courage,' 'hope' and 'help' in accessing funds. These reports are similar to those of Participant 4. It would appear that the programme was instrumental in helping these participants gain the confidence and bravery needed to apply, thus, suggesting that applying without support can be a daunting task. It is also evident that these participants benefitted from being provided with material resources and information pertaining to funding their postgraduate studies.

Participants' marks

Given that programme participants were studying towards a Bachelor of Education and were preparing to specialise at different levels of teaching and in different subjects, their courses of study differed significantly. As a result, there was only one stream of core course that all participants were required to take throughout their undergraduate studies. In total, this stream consisted of Education Studies 1–4 courses. An examination of the performance in this stream allows for comparison of marks for compulsory courses that all participants were required to take. These marks were specifically chosen for examination because they are pivotal for postgraduate selection committees at the university at which the research was conducted, since the courses require extensive essay writing. Table 1 presents the marks that participants earned for each of these courses and the average marks for Education 1–3, which were taken previous to participating in the postgraduate preparation programme.

For five of the participants (1, 3, 4, 6 and 8), their Education 4 mark improved when compared to their average mark for Education 1–3. However, for four participants (2, 5, 7 and 9), their Education 4 mark was lower than their average mark for Education 1–3. It is also noteworthy that for five participants (2, 3, 5, 7 and 9), their Education 4 mark dropped when compared to Education 3. Only three participants

Table 1. Marks for Education core courses (Educ 1–4).

	Education core courses				
Participants	Educ 1 marks	Educ 2 marks	Educ 3 marks	Average marks for Educ 1–3	Educ 4 marks
P1	61	61	61	61	62
P2	55	62	67	61.3	60
P3	66	64	71	67	70
P4	60	61	64	61.6	64
P5	57	62	66	61.6	59
P6	50	51	55	52	56
P7	70	70	70	70	67
P8	50	53	56	53	62
P9	62	54	64	60	52

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(1, 6 and 8) saw their Education 4 mark improve when compared to Education 3, with participant 8 experiencing the biggest improvement in marks. Based on these figures, there is no evidence that the collective Education 4 marks of participants improved after they completed the programme. However, these figures show that participants 6 and 8 saw the greatest improvement, earning higher marks in Education 4 than they had for Educations 1–3. Programme participants who earned considerably higher marks for Education 4 were those whose marks were relatively low to begin with (in the 50s), but those who were already performing in the 60 or 70 range did not see an improvement, with the exception of participant 1 who saw only a one point improvement.

Several participants were of the view that the programme did not help them improve their marks. Participant 2's report is provided as an example of these views. This response was provided as a result of answering a question which asked participants to discuss what about the programme was not useful:

> P2: How to improve my course marks in other courses as there is no link with what we were doing in [name of the programme].

Participant 2 suggests that because seminar sessions were independent, and not directly related to participants' compulsory courses, the seminar sessions and the programme itself were not helpful in improving course marks. Participant 2 reports this despite participants being encouraged to apply the writing and reading skills that were developed during the programme to the courses they were taking and to future potential postgraduate courses. For example, participants participated in several exercises that addressed how to analyse an academic article and how to write for an academic audience, irrespective of the subject matter or course under study. Participant 2's report implies that the only way one's marks can improve is by receiving more support in tackling the specific material of the courses in question. Participant 2's views can thus serve to help explain why it was the case that for many participants their Education 4 mark did not improve.

However, one participant suggests that the programme helped them develop academic skills and abilities that in turn helped achieve improved marks.

> Participant 8: [Name of the programme] has helped me to achieve better marks in theoretical studies mostly Education …[name of the programme] has increased my ability to read theory and achieved [*sic*] good marks.

Participant 8 attributes their improved marks to the programme and not necessarily to them gradually becoming a better course taker for the Education stream. In particular, this participant links improvement in reading ability to achieving good marks. Participant 8's report thus provides evidence that the nine-point improvement between the average marks they achieved in Educations 1–3 and the mark achieved for Education 4 can in part be attributed to the postgraduate preparation programme.

Discussion

This study was concerned with evaluating a postgraduate preparation programme with respect to postgraduate enrolment and improvement of participants' marks. The study found that the majority of programme participants proceeded to subsequently enrol in postgraduate studies immediately after completing the postgraduate preparation

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programme. The findings indicate that for the majority of participants who applied for entry into postgraduate studies immediately after completing their undergraduate degree, the programme played a role in their pursuit of postgraduate studies. Only a minority of participants indicated that the programme did not play a role in this regard. While the ways in which participants were influenced or helped by the programme varied, of special note is that for several participants the programme was instrumental when it came to gaining motivation and courage to apply, and accessing resources and information.

The findings thus build on Lopatto's (2004) work, which found that postgraduate programmes increase students' interest in pursuing postgraduate school, and confirm Hartmann's (1990) findings that the efforts of postgraduate programmes result in participants being more motivated about postgraduate studies. Additionally, the findings suggest that applying for postgraduate studies might be daunting for some students, and that gaining the will, confidence, motivation and courage to apply is important.

Indeed it must be acknowledged that not all students come from university-educated families that treat the application process as a taken for granted exercise, and that students coming from such families reap considerable advantages (cf. McDonough 1997; McDonough et al. 1998). It is noteworthy that the programme granted special consideration to students from groups that have been traditionally marginalised and underrepresented in the academy. If students from these backgrounds are to stand a chance of participating in postgraduate education, then the provision of information and resources is essential to improve courage and motivation. Overall, the programme was successful in this respect.

When it comes to applying for, and enrolling in, postgraduate studies, gaining access to bursaries and acquiring funds to pursue further studies is important. The findings indicate that the postgraduate preparation programme provided information on funding opportunities and bursaries, and that this played a role in encouraging students to apply for and pursue postgraduate studies. This finding is relevant to previous research on the obstacles faced by postgraduate students in South Africa. It has been noted that postgraduate students face financial concerns, and that these concerns are viewed as having an adverse impact on their studies (Herman 2011b). It is also noteworthy that traditionally underrepresented students may be faced with financial pressures stemming from family obligations, as they report difficulties continuing their studies in the face of expectations to financially contribute to supporting the family (Portnoi 2009). This suggests that a narrow focus on academic matters may not sufficiently address the concerns of students who are being prepared to pursue postgraduate studies.

With respect to improvement of participants' marks, the findings indicate that overall these did not improve. Additionally, participants' reports provide evidence that the programme was not useful in this respect. Nonetheless, a minority of participants, whose marks were relatively low to begin with, did see an improvement. This improvement in marks was attributed to the programme by only one participant. This points to some of the shortcomings of the postgraduate preparation programme. The various limits of such programmes have been noted by Neumann, Pallas, and Peterson (2008). It is noteworthy that the programme did not aim to address the material that was covered in the courses they took for credit. Previous work suggests that programmes that are instrumental in raising the marks of participants focus on

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the subject material of the course(s) in question (Smuts 2003) and not on general academic skills development.

One must also take into consideration the demands of the postgraduate preparation programme. The programme was labour and time intensive since it took place over an entire academic year and required participants to attend weekly seminars. The possibility exists that the demands of the programme and the time that participants devoted to the programme translated into participants being left with less time to devote to their formal curriculum. Thus, participation in the programme could have detracted from their academic performance. Previous research has found that an increase in time spent on paid or unpaid work is associated with lower average marks (Trockel, Barnes, and Egger 2000). Thus, spending more time engaging in other activities, such as working or participating in an academic preparation programme, could mean that students are left with less-time available to devote to their formal courses, and in turn, this could result in lower marks. The hardships associated with juggling various commitments, and the potential consequences that this has for academic performance, could be particularly relevant for the programme participants since they came from groups that have been traditionally marginalised and underrepresented in the academy, and these students commonly already have increased demands on their time as a result of fulfilling family obligations and taking up part-time employment to cover their expenses.

Overall, evidence exists that the majority of programme participants go on to pursue postgraduate studies and that, for the majority of those who go on to immediately pursue postgraduate studies, the programme is viewed as playing a helpful role. As such, there is indication that this postgraduate preparation programme helps further the national priority of increasing the number of postgraduate students. On the other hand, if we view marks as a proxy for the calibre of students, then the programme did not serve the purpose of increasing the calibre of students. The programme is also restricted to working with only a few students who participate in an intimate postgraduate-like seminar.

Limitations of the study

The evaluation of the programme only accounts for programme participants who enrolled in postgraduates studies immediately after completing their undergraduate degree. Postgraduate enrolment which may take place a year or several years down the line was not accounted for as this information was not available at the time of writing. The study is also limited in that it considers enrolment in postgraduate studies, but does not address participants' subsequent performance in postgraduate studies nor successful completion of postgraduate degrees. Again, this information was not available at the time of writing. Nevertheless, an increase in enrolment at the postgraduate level is one of the first necessary steps for the growth of postgraduate studies, and for students who enrol; this signals the promise and potential to earn a postgraduate degree.

Conclusion

The small scale of postgraduate studies in South Africa and the drive to promote its growth necessitate an increase in the number and calibre of postgraduate students. Despite this, little work is being undertaken to systematically and intentionally

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prepare undergraduate students to pursue postgraduate studies. The work that is being undertaken in this regard should thus be evaluated to assess its outcomes. This study set out to fill this gap and engage with research that is responsive to transformation efforts in South Africa by undertaking an evaluation of a postgraduate preparation programme. The findings indicate that the majority of programme participants go on to pursue postgraduate studies, and that the programme played a role in this pursuit. However, overall, participants' marks did not improve after participating in the programme.

While the programme was unique and the findings are not generalisable, the study nonetheless reveals that such programmes have the potential to contribute to growing the number of postgraduate students and that they have the potential to motivate students, help them gain courage to apply for postgraduate studies, and help them access funding opportunities. It also indicates the limits of what such programmes can achieve. Further research is necessary on postgraduate preparation programmes that extend beyond viewing marks as an indicator of calibre. For example, the growth and development of students via the examination of writing samples, discussion skills and their own perspectives of academic growth and development could provide further insights on the shortcomings and merits of postgraduate preparation programmes.

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