

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUDING REMARKS

7.1. Conclusion

The aim of the present study was 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. More specifically, the aims were to describe what the academic literacy profile of students in the Wits Faculty of Humanities look like, as well as the role that cognitive developmental theory may play in attributing to academic success, which could in turn affect access policy, and future academic literacy tests.

It has become evident that policy and research to date has been preoccupied with the change process from a segregated to an open and integrated society in South Africa which inevitably presented the challenge of how higher education should be positioned to contribute to the establishment of an equitable social structure. This further brought about the challenges of fair access and ultimately academic success. It is evident that the traditional process of managing access as a process to get entrance into institutions only was not sufficient to address this issue due to the diverse backgrounds, cultural differences and competency differences based on experience and educational quality differences of learners. In actual fact the traditional approach largely perpetuates the traditional divisions. Thus the importance of the present study, which proposed to address some of these issues as mentioned above.

In order to address the aims of the present study a quantitative, descriptive-exploratory research framework was utilized in order to describe the academic literacy profile of students entering university and the role cognitive developmental theory may play in academic literacy as well as to explore the relationship between the PTEEP academic literacy test and academic success.

The results of the present indicated that students came in with an overall PTEEP average of 47.46% and obtained an average final first year score of 51.60%. This however did not indicate the relationship that existed between the two variables. Further analysis showed that no relationship existed between the overall PTEEP score or the individual PTEEP clusters and academic performance. Of significance was the Genre Cluster which seemed to have a positive relationship with academic success thus being postulated as a better measure of academic literacy. Overall the PTEEP was found to not be a good predictor of academic success. It was also found that Gender as a variable does not play a role in the overall PTEEP score, nor the prediction of academic success. Some ideas were also given as to how cognitive developmental theory (more specifically the ideas of Perry (1970), Piaget (1970), Riegel (1975, 1984) and Vygotsky (1978)) can help to better understand the level at which students are entering university, thus impacting on the way admission testing should be carried out in order to take these theoretical points into consideration.

In conclusion, it can be said that in light of the Department of Education's current focus on increasing access to higher education and the need for higher education institutions to concentrate on increasing their graduation rates (Badsha, 2004), this research has provided a valuable contribution in highlighting the importance of the study of access, admission testing, prediction of academic success, and the role of cognitive developmental theory for the future of higher education.

Having briefly summarised the results of the present study, the following sections consider the limitations of the present study and offer recommendations for future research.

7.2. Limitations

Various limitations to the present research have been noted and must be highlighted in order to critically evaluate the findings of the present study.

In terms of most of the literature available, not much is known about the role that cognitive developmental theory plays in the development of admission tests. A limitation with regards to the measure used, the PTEEP, was that little mention is made of cognitive developmental theory in young adulthood as a baseline in the construction of the PTEEP test. Furthermore, access to the test itself was not allowed. Even after talking to people at the University of the Witwatersrand who were involved in the construction of the test, not much was known about the set-up or layout of the test, and actual items of the test were not known to provide more meaningful investigation and richness in data.

In terms of the research approach; despite the advantages of the descriptive-exploratory research approach, there are also disadvantages to this research method and these needs to be highlighted as limitations of the present study. One of these limitations is the fact that there is no control for extraneous variables. For example, one cannot be sure of the environmental, social or institutional factors that may have played a role in the students' first year of study. Furthermore, because the present research was descriptive-exploratory in nature, there was limited external validity and the findings can thus not be generalised to other populations.

Another consideration that needs to be taken into account is the fact that, even though all the students were homogenous by the fact that they were all first year student in the Faculty of Humanities, not only do they come from different cultural backgrounds but schooling backgrounds as well which may have all had an effect on the cognitive abilities of the individual which is not always easy to measure.

One also needs to take cognisance of the fact that the sample was also small and definitely not representative of all first year students, especially in the Faculty of Humanities. The sample size was further reduced to include all inclusion factors for the present research and to exclude those where the quality of the raw data was not usable. Furthermore voluntary students who wrote the PTEEP test and thereafter registered in the Faculty of Humanities

were used rather than randomly selected participants, and the participants were also limited to a restricted university and geographical area of South Africa. As a result of small numbers used the study was further compromised in the following ways: A further analysis using a degree breakdown was not possible, and individual subjects in the relevant degrees could not be analysed to assess if any relationship exists between individual subjects and PTEEP clusters and/or overall PTEEP scores.

In the present study, the year of study was controlled for, which did not allow for comparisons across different years of study. Only one cohort was studied and not longitudinal data. On the same note, the researcher was unable to address an important aspect of home language as it was not known. This limits the measure of the influence of language on cognitive skills and abilities. It is important to highlight that the PTEEP test was administered, scored and analysed in its language of instruction, English, which may also have affected the results of students who does not have English as their first language.

7.3. Recommendations

In spite of the limitations discussed above, this study has highlighted some important issues regarding access, the prediction of success and the role of cognitive theory. With this in mind the following recommendations are suggested for future research:

Studies should include a larger sample size, thus increasing the richness of further analysis that could be carried out, using different variables, for example, home language, degree breakdowns, and individual subject analysis in comparison with specific PTEEP clusters and scores.

A review of current literature and the results of the present study indicate a need for further research related to the relationship between academic literacy tests and the prediction of academic success. More specifically, research is needed in a longitudinal capacity assessing the academic success of students across the different years, that is, from first year to the fruition of their studies.

This kind of study would provide more insight into the complex processes of retention, attrition and graduation. In addition a study on students placed on extended curriculum's or foundation programmes, and their relationship with academic success.

Furthermore, continued exploration is required of the contribution cognitive developmental theory in young adulthood can make to admissions testing and facilitating success in higher education programmes.

A triangulation study would prove to be useful in being able to look qualitatively at the individual students' personal, cultural and social experiences in the first year of study together, and quantitatively at the prediction of academic success. Thus including cognitive and non-cognitive factors that lead to academic success.

Further research is also needed of the link between PTEEP results and academic success including support programmes at university that helps to consolidate the skills that the PTEEP tests. This includes students' experiences of the teaching/learning environment. Thus answering the important question: Is PTEEP only a good predictor when it is supported by task-orientated seminars, mentorship programmes, etc.?

Other higher education testing approaches which also make use of dynamic testing principles and could be reviewed as another example of an admission test is that of the University of Port Elizabeth's Admissions and Placement Assessment Programme (APAP). According to Koch, Foxcroft, Watson, Seymour and Streicher (2002), the APAP appears to serve as a model to foster development and accountability through information sharing. It also seems to curb the barrier of administering the test in English only, as APAP is administered in English, Afrikaans and Xhosa. Thus allowing students to demonstrate their cognitive abilities in their mother tongue. Implementing the positive aspects or the aspects that work from various tests into one test would lead to the development of a superior test that further leads to more positive results, for example, the prediction of academic success.

The aim of the present study was to obtain much needed baseline information. The study does not attempt to provide answers to many questions with regard to what admissions tests should look like and how cognitive skills should be assessed. The study does, however, provide some understanding and awareness of the potential factors that could play a role in access testing and the prediction of academic success with a basic understanding of cognitive developmental theory as well. It also provides developers of tests, universities and researchers with important baseline information about the validity of the popular used PTEEP test and access testing in relation to academic success on the whole. The researcher hopes that the results obtained from the present study will prove useful and that they will provide meaningful information to those who wish to utilise it.