Factors influencing the intention of students at a selected TVET college in the Western Cape to complete their National Certificate (Vocational) Business Studies programme

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ABSTRACT

Student dropout, also called 'early departure', is a significant problem in South Africa's post-school education and training (PSET) landscape, specifically in the technical and vocational education and training (TVET) sector. The challenge of student retention and programme completion (the antithesis of dropping out) is equally significant and important to TVET institutions, the state department responsible (Department of Higher Education and Training) and the South African economy. Early departure negatively influences the success rates of educational institutions. It also influences the chances of personal employment and financial well-being of individual students, causing financial ripple effects on society and government. Students' decisions to remain or leave college or a programme are influenced by a variety of individual and social factors, both internal and external, including people close to the students and the policies, systems and structures within which students interact. These factors also encompass the quality and friendliness of teachers, social interaction with teachers and peers, and the role played by friends in academic achievement. This article reports on a study of student perspectives on the internal and external factors that influence their retention in, and completion of, a TVET college Business Studies National Certificate (Vocational) (NC(V)) programme in the Western Cape, South Africa. An improved understanding of student experiences, intentions, and decision-making processes leading to persistence provides a foundation for improving student retention and programme completion in a TVET environment.

KEYWORDS

NC(V); retention; persistence; South Africa; TVET; business studies; early departure; attrition

Introduction

TVET colleges aim to promote increased opportunities for, and access to, post-school education and training for students, and to develop in graduates the required labour market knowledge and skills (South Africa, 2013:13). In 2006, the NC(V) curriculum was introduced by the then Minister of Education (South Africa, 2006:4). The three-year, full-time NC(V) programme is aligned to Level 4 of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF)[1]. The implementation of NC(V) programmes was intended to be a major contribution to transforming South African education and training (South Africa, 2006; 2007). However, the NC(V) was initially characterised by low levels of programme completion as well as high failure and dropout rates (Papier, 2009:39).

Programme retention and completion are not insignificant challenges, for they potentially affect a country's financial stability, including both the employability and financial well-being of individual students (Adamson & McAleavy, 2000:535; Allen, 2012:8; Thomas, 2011:43). Up to 55% of young people actively searching for employment have education levels below NQF Level 4 (Grade 12), and this presents a challenge to actually finding employment (Statistics South Africa, 2015:1). Despite the intention of the TVET college sector as a whole and the NC(V) programme system in particular to overcome national skills shortages, such efforts have been described as 'inefficient' (Sheppard & Sheppard, 2012:63).

Social engagement and support are significant factors in retaining college students during their first year of study (Hodgson, May & Marks-Maran, 2008, in Allen, 2012:13). Both student retention and students' intention to complete their study programmes have been researched (Tinto, 2006:1). Existing studies of student-related issues – such as performance, attrition, integration and retention – in South African TVET colleges have mainly applied Tinto's theory of successfully integrating students into institutional environments. Such studies include those by Maharaj (2008), Papier (2009), Ngcobo (2009), Pather (2015), Moodley and Singh (2015), and Lawrence (2016).

Thomas (2014:225) argues that such studies tend to focus primarily on factors that influence dropout, poor performance or attrition, but that not much attention is given to the factors that influence students' intention to complete their studies.

The study that this article describes differs from existing South African studies because it:

- Investigated, as an alternative approach, the internal and external factors that influence NC(V) programme completion;
- Combined two student-retention constructs, namely those of Tinto (1975) and Bean (1981), in order to help understand student decision-making holistically; and
- Used both quantitative and qualitative data-collection instruments in order to provide a broader view and understanding of students' perspectives.

1 The NQF is a comprehensive system approved by the Minister for the classification, registration, publication and articulation of quality-assured national qualifications (South Africa, 2008b:6).

Research findings can be fruitful in helping TVET college policymakers to devise or amend policies and plan and implement programmes aimed at improving retention and programme completion – in this case, in the Business Studies NC(V) programme. The findings could also encourage future research to further explore the factors we have identified and over which TVET colleges have control.

TVET in South Africa and the introduction of the NC(V)

The advent of democracy in South Africa in 1994 resulted in education reform – in the areas of legislation, policy, access, curriculum development, and modes of delivery (South Africa, 2008a:1) – being prioritised. Educational structures are continuously being made more accessible to previously disadvantaged groups who had limited access to education or were denied access in the past (South Africa, 2008a:38). The South African education and training system underwent a significant change in 2002 after 152 technical colleges were merged to form 50 multicampus institutions. These institutions, previously called further education and training (FET) colleges, were later renamed TVET colleges (South Africa, 2013:12). It was argued that both the integration and the renaming were aimed at aligning the South African vocational education system with international developments and standards (Odendaal, 2014).

The NC(V) Levels 2 to 4 programme was introduced at TVET colleges in 2006. Its purpose is to achieve the state's goal of making post-school education more accessible through vocational qualifications (South Africa, 2008a:243). According to Cloete (2009:11), the National Plan for TVET identified, as potential candidates, unemployed, out-of-school youths and individuals who had less than an NQF Level 4 qualification.

Since its inception in 2007, the NC(V) programme has experienced low levels of programme completion and high failure rates (Papier, 2009:39), as well as poor retention and throughput rates. Papier (2009:26) indicated that the following factors, among others, influenced the poor performance of students:

- A lack of social integration into, or adaptation to, the college environment;
- Failure to make new friends;
- Students' programme workload, based on the number of subjects and the duration of classes;
- The inability of lecturers to facilitate students' learning; and
- Lecturers who were unprepared.

Papier's 2009 report findings were intended to help prepare colleges for the new intake of Level 2 students in 2010 and to promote improved programme completion and student retention. However, performance, retention and completion continued to be low and, four years later, Fryer (2014:27) reported that the NC(V) throughput rate was still 39%.

Student perceptions of TVET

Many students who embark on a college qualification often do not complete their programmes when faced with the decision whether to remain in a college or a programme or to leave early. There are a variety of reasons for this (Roberts & Styron, 2010:2). Hillmert and Jacob (2003) and Billet (2014, cited in Harris 2014:50) indicate that individual decision-making, discretion and weighing up of options form part of every student's educational process. These influence their persistence in respect of completion and hastening entry into the labour market. The effect of individuals not completing their programme contributes to the lingering stigma attached to TVET and the perception that it is of a low quality when compared with mainstream education (Harris, 2014:37). Puckett, Davidson and Lee (2012:1) argue that TVET is perceived in many countries as being inferior when compared with a general academic education obtained through traditional universities or schools. This perception creates what Puckett et al. (2012:1) describe as a 'negative-feedback loop', despite TVETs having the potential to respond to both the skills shortage and unemployment. Lewis and Lewis (1985:167, cited in Harris, 2014:37) support this description, stating that the international perception of TVET is that it is a second-class option. A study by Needham and Papier (2011:36) in South Africa uncovered a difference in perception of vocational training between secondary-school learners and TVET college students: some learners were unaware of TVET, while others saw it as 'second-choice education … resulting in low-paying jobs with no career prospect' (Needham & Papier, 2011:36). TVET college students, however, had a positive attitude to TVET, to their actual exposure to the programme and to career-path progression (Needham & Papier, 2011). Such a positive attitude was attributed to the practical component of the NC(V) programmes, which helped students to understand the theoretical components.

Contrary to the view of secondary-school learners on TVET, as indicated above, South African TVET students seem to perceive their labour market entry and job prospects to be easier and of greater benefit as a result of the specific, practical workplace learning and experience they acquired (Needham & Papier, 2011:36). Jamaican participants in a study conducted by Aynsley and Crossouard (2010:138, cited in Harris, 2014:50) shared this positive view. They considered the benefit of gaining practical experience, as opposed to pursuing a purely academic education, to be a direct labour market advantage. The Jamaican participants also indicated that there was a greater economic gain to be had from practical training as opposed to that offered by a higher education qualification (Stockfelt, 2013, cited in Harris, 2014:45). Participants in Harris's (2014:45) study of TVET students in Barbados similarly understood that a university qualification does not guarantee employment or good employment.

Factors influencing student decision-making

Over the past two decades, studies conducted both internationally and in South Africa have found the factors that influence student decision-making to be similar. The findings set out

below emerged, more than two decades ago, from the largest sample-group study on persistence and dropping out undertaken in the United Kingdom. Such findings are comparable to those of Papier (2009). The '9 000 voices' study of Martinez and Munday (1998) indicated that the following factors had influenced students' decision-making processes with regard to early college departure:

- Not being placed in the most appropriate programme, and therefore being less satisfied;
- Applying too late;
- Not making friends easily;
- Being less satisfied with the teaching quality; and
- Being less satisfied with their programme timetable.

In a study relating to engineering programmes (mechanical, electrical and civil), respondents concluded that certain students had left their college and programme early because of personal factors, that is, as a consequence of either their own actions or those of their parents (Ngcobo, 2009:66). Some students had become parents themselves, while others had failed a level and were kept out of college by their parents. A recent study by Lawrence (2016:93) of NC(V) Civil Engineering students in South Africa established the following reasons for their early departure from their programme:

- Delayed external examination results;
- Theoretical overload in the programme structure;
- College and programme expectations not being met; and
- Socio-economic conditions and influences.

Accumulatively, the factors influencing student performance, their intention to complete a programme, and their retention or early departure represent external–internal and student–institutional factors which, according to Jensen (2011:2), can be grouped in three categories: individual, institutional and external.

Theories and models of student retention

The study of attrition and concern about student retention changed in the 1970s from a purely psychological stance to a broader understanding of, and relationship between, individuals and their environment, particularly the learning environment and students' intention to complete their programme (Tinto, 2006:3). Adopting a proposition by Durkheim (1961), Spady (1971) concluded that individuals lacking the values of a social system and who were not supported, committed suicide (Bean & Eaton, 2001:74). Spady argued that the absence of an appropriate social system could be related to a feeling of hopelessness and a student dropping out of formal education altogether.

Based on Spady's use of Durkheim's proposition, Tinto (1975) introduced the concept of student academic and social integration as being related to students' decisions about dropping

out of, or continuing with, their studies. Later, Tinto (1993, 1997) revised this concept, suggesting that the extent of the relationship between student and institutional commitment might influence dropout intention and is a predictor of student persistence (Schreiber, Luescher-Mamashela & Moja, 2014:6). Tinto's (1987) retention theory advises against solely identifying individual factors as a measure of success: institutions should take equal responsibility for this and have to refrain from putting the onus solely on students to succeed (Laskey & Hetzel, 2011:34).

However, Tinto's theory and Student Integration Model (SIM) were criticised, mainly owing to the model not accommodating non-traditional[2] and part-time students such as community college students, who do not have the time or the opportunity for social integration (Tierney, 2000:1). Similarly, Karp, Hughes and O'Gara (2008:1) have criticised Tinto's theory in relation to students attending community colleges – for example, in the United States – as they are perceived as not having sufficient time or opportunity to participate or integrate. A view held by Bean and Metzner (1985) advocating that non-traditional students have less social interaction and integration as opposed to traditional full-time students pointed to the later criticism by Tierney (2000) and Karp et al. (2008). However, Tinto's SIM remains primarily in use for analysing student success, despite its noted shortcomings. Tinto's SIM has predominantly been applied to retention studies in South Africa on the maximal environment at educational institution in order to help better understand student success.

Acknowledging the criticism of Tinto's SIM has led to the analysis and use of Bean's (1981) Student Attrition Model (SAM), which focuses more on external support and influence and gives less prominence to social integration influences. The model recognises the influence of social interactions and of factors beyond the educational institution that play a vital role in influencing students' decision-making processes. External support includes, but is not limited to, family, friends and even finance, which were also used in Bean and Metzner's model (1985) for non-traditional students (Adamson & McAleavy, 2000:537). Bean (1981) equates student departure to labour turnover and attributes behavioural intention as a forecaster of persistence and retention.

Combined, the models of Tinto and Bean provide a basis for analysing the interaction of personal and institutional factors, because these factors influence a student's intention to persist. These models point to the importance of a successful fit between student and institution, the student's integration experiences, and how the internal and external support the student receives influences his or her motivation (Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora & Hengstler, 1992). Combining the Tinto and Bean models minimises the criticism levelled at singular-model relevance and increases understanding in respect of the internal and external factors that might influence student persistence and retention.

2 That is, part-time students not influenced by the college culture, environment or integration experienced by traditional full-time students (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Existing South African TVET studies (Papier, 2009; Maharaj, 2008; Pather, 2015; Lawrence, 2016) refer primarily to Tinto's model in order to assist in understanding student decision-making. However, by incorporating Tinto's SIM and Bean's SAM, the present study was able to analyse and present a broader array of factors that influence students' intention to complete a programme; this, in turn, led to greater understanding of, and insight into, the research problem.

Methodological considerations

Acknowledging the effect of combining the Tinto and Bean models, the study on which this article is based aimed to determine the internal and external factors that influenced programme completion among the 2017 NC(V) Business Studies Level 4 students at a particular college. The study subscribed to an explanatory approach, as classified by Welman and Kruger (1999:19), applying a cross-sectional, mixed-methods design. An explanatory sequential contribution of the findings was used, a process that initially entailed prioritising quantitative data and which was followed and understood by related qualitative data.

Our analysis of Business Studies at Level 4 focused on two programmes, namely: (1) NC(V) Office Administration (OA) and (2) NC(V) Finance, Economics and Accounting (FEA). The research population comprised 63 final-year Level 4 students registered in 2017 for both NC(V) programmes. Quantitative data were collected during May 2017 and collated and analysed during June 2017.

The student sample was obtained through random sampling (Welman & Kruger, 1999:52; Kumar, 2014:236). To improve random sample reliability, a 99% confidence level was applied in order to derive a sample size of 63 students, of whom 46 consented to complete the quantitative rating-scale instrument. A sample of $n = 6$ participants was identified from the quantitative sample through non-probability purposive sampling, of which three consented to participate in the qualitative self-completion, computer-based questionnaire. The qualitative component sought to add a student perspective and understanding to the quantitative data. An attitude or rating scale, encompassing institutional or internal factors advocated by Tinto and external factors advocated by Bean, was used as the quantitative instrument completed by the 46 participants. A rating scale can test a wide variety of variables, objectively using a standardised procedure for questions or statements and answers or responses. The results can generally be applied to a wide range of people and settings, which improves their validity (Morgan, 2014:51).

After analysing the quantitative data in June 2017, the questions for the qualitative instrument investigating the influences that are directly in the control of a TVET institution were refined in July 2017. As indicated above, from the quantitative sample, six students were identified through non-probability purposive sampling and three consented to complete the qualitative self-completion, computer-based questionnaire during August 2017. The three consenting students were registered for the NC(V): OA programme. Selecting a self-completion

questionnaire for the qualitative component yielded the following advantages, which are in accord with those of Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007:158):

- Greater reliability;
- Greater objectivity;
- Freedom of thought;
- Absence of pressure or haste;
- A focus on content analysis;
- Allowance for additional thoughts relating to previous questions;
- A great likelihood of participant response;
- Cost-effectiveness;
- Completion over time; and
- Reduced researcher influence or bias.

The quantitative attitude- or rating-scale instrument preceded the use of the qualitative self-completion questionnaire. The quantitative instrument was administered during the first quarter of 2017, namely in May, and the qualitative instrument was administered during the third quarter of 2017, namely in August. The rationale for collecting the data during May and August was to ensure that the quantitative analysis was thorough, thereby ensuring the sound and refined development of the qualitative instrument. It also allowed participants in the qualitative study to reach their final academic quarter in preparation for their final national examinations and programme completion. Such allowance yielded the students' responses based on their experience, perception and understanding of their programme during a two-and-a-half-year period and their decision to persist towards completion.

The quantitative instrument was divided into three categories, namely individual, institutional and external, under which the internal and external factors advocated by Tinto and Bean were positioned. The factors that the study investigated were further guided by the findings of earlier studies, including those of Papier (2009) and Martinez and Munday (1998). Prior to administering the data-collection instruments, a pre-test was performed on the respondents similar to the population samples. Data from the quantitative rating scale were analysed manually – as suggested by Kumar (2014:316) – using Microsoft Excel. The responses to the rating-scale surveys were entered according to the number of responses per statement, per rated scale (1–4), namely: 'Strongly agree', 'Agree', 'Disagree' and 'Strongly disagree'.

The quantitative findings yielded numeric data gathered from the 46 participants. The collated responses were expressed as a percentage per statement, per rated scale. Kumar (2014:316) argues that data can be analysed manually (i.e. by way of paper-based or computer-aided analysis), based on a reasonably small number of respondents and on there being not many variables to analyse. Content analysis was used to analyse the responses emerging from the qualitative data collected. Qualitative data analysis essentially involves noting content patterns, consistencies and general themes by sifting participant data and

making sense of their understanding and expressions (Cohen et al., 2007:461). A common procedure used is content analysis, by which 'many words of texts are classified into much fewer categories' (Weber, 1990:15, cited in Cohen et al., 2007:475). According to Cohen et al. (2007:475), content analysis has the following advantages:

- It focuses on language and linguistics and therefore on the meaning of the data received;
- Data collection is systematic and the rules of analysis are 'explicit, transparent and public'; and
- Data are available in a 'permanent form' and, as a result, are verifiable and replicable.

The qualitative data-collection instrument was a computer-based, self-completion questionnaire. The computer-based mode of delivery avoided what Cohen et al. (2007) describe as a laborious and time-consuming task of transcribing or processing text. The participants' responses were entered under each question. After collation, this study used content analysis to note the content patterns, consistencies and general themes emerging from participant responses.

Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the study used the strength of both quantitative and qualitative data. Presenting numeric data in percentage form objectively revealed the overarching experience of the 46 participants in the quantitative study. The descriptive data gleaned from the qualitative instrument helped the study gain a better picture of the students' experience, perspective and understanding of the factors identified in the quantitative data.[3]

The student-persistence models of Tinto and Bean

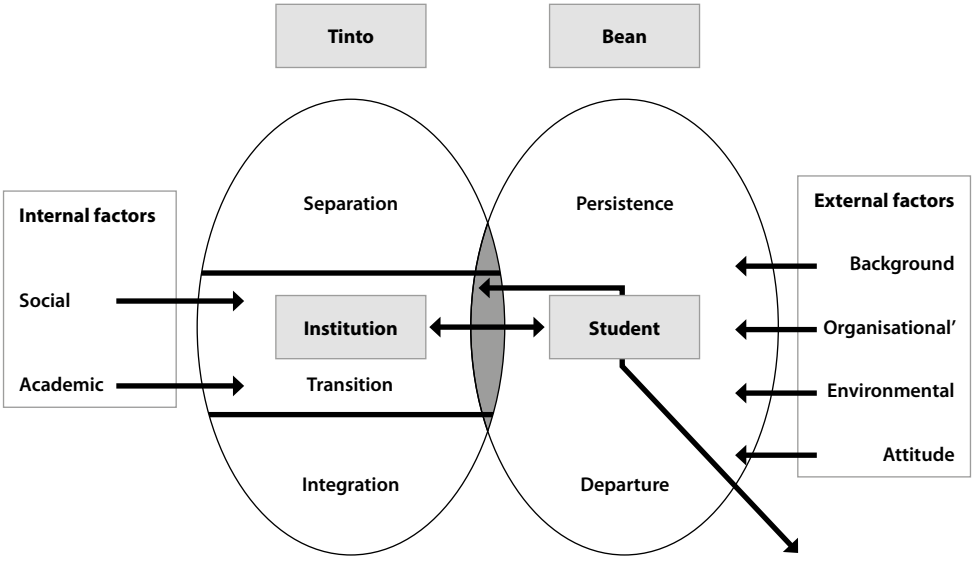
The combined theories of Tinto and Bean were adapted for the purpose of this study and are illustrated in Figure 1.

The internal (institutional) factors that influenced the student-persistence decisions broadly depicted in Figure 1 included:

- Friendships established at the educational institution;
- Student support services;
- Programme advice and orientation programmes;
- Academic staff, and teaching quality and style; and
- Financial and employment assistance.

3 Observing and complying with ethical standards and considerations, specifically in educational research, this study received research permission and ethical clearance from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology Ethics Committee, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), the selected TVET college and campus, and the participants in the study by way of informed consent. None of the participants' personal information was divulged and their anonymity was guaranteed.

Figure 1: Internal and external factors influencing student persistence and departure (Gaffoor, 2018:38)



Factors emanating from outside the educational institution which influenced students' decision-making about programme persistence, as broadly depicted in Figure 1, included:

- Intention – both initial-study and post-qualification intention;
- Employment prospects;
- Family influences, demands and facilitators;
- Community influences, demands and facilitators;
- Career guidance;
- Support structures; and
- The influences, demands and facilitators of friends outside the college.

Findings and results related to student retention and their intention to complete a programme

Business Studies is a broad, knowledge-based programme that provides general preparation for employment in a business environment. As a result, TVET college Business Studies attracts a broad array of students with a wide variety of backgrounds and reasons for study.

The factors of influence on and likelihood of NC(V) Business Studies programme completion are indicated in Table 1. The data gleaned from the self-administered questionnaire indicate all the investigated factors of influence. The factors are not listed in order of priority or importance; rather, they are expressed in the same manner as presented in the self-administered questionnaire.

Table 1: Internal and external factors of influence on and likelihood of Business Studies programme completion (Gaffoor, 2018:97)

Factors of influence on and likelihood of Business Studies programme completion as indicated by enrolled students	**Factors of influence on and likelihood of Business Studies programme non-completion as indicated by enrolled students**
1. Clear reason for enrolment	1. Unclear or no reason for enrolment/forced enrolment (parents)
2. TVET and NC(V) programme readiness	2. Unfriendly and unsupportive teachers
3. Friendly and supportive teachers	3. Poor teaching quality
4. High teaching quality	4. Absence of or underdeveloped soft skills, namely study technique
5. Developed soft skills, namely study technique	5. Absence of parent/guardian
6. Active parent/guardian engagement and involvement	6. Friends for social interaction only
7. Social interaction with friends with similar academic commitment and goals	7. Limited or no financial aid and transportation
8. Accountable financial aid and transportation or self-funded	8. Limited or no career guidance
9. Mature/older student	9. Younger and immature student
10. Female gender	10. Male gender
11. Student support service and teacher collaboration	11. Limited or no student support service
12. Programme- and career path-specific orientation	12. Limited or no TVET and NC(V) programme readiness
13. Clear intention after completion	13. Absence of or ineffective orientation
14. Assistance with labour market entry	14. Limited or no family and society support
15. Parent input on programme choice	15. Unclear or no intention after completion
	16. Limited or no labour market entry assistance

The computer-based, self-completion qualitative interview gleaned responses from seven open-ended questions and 11 detailed questions. A number of external factors contributing to programme completion, as indicated in Table 1, were identified from the quantitative data; these were explored further by using narrative interview data. The biographical data indicated a finding between age, gender and programme completion intention comparable to that in the literature, namely that there was a greater likelihood of programme completion by older students and females. The participants' responses regarding age showed that 65% fell into the age category 21 to 25 years, 29% fell into the age category 26 to 35 years, and only 6% fell into the age category 18 to 20 years. This indicated that older, more mature students were more likely to complete a programme than younger students. Across the two NC(V) programmes, 96% of participants were female. This showed that females were more likely to complete the NC(V) Business Studies programme than males: the enrolment and retention of females in the NC(V) Business Studies programme were more than double those of males. Historical secondary data from the TVET college investigated indicated that 56% of the students retained between 2015 and 2017 were female and 23% were male. This indicates a decrease in the progression of males since initial enrolment in 2015.

Internal factors influencing students' intention to complete a programme

Focusing on the literary factors both from a student-retention theorist, namely Tinto, and from existing student attrition and retention studies, this section discusses the internal and institutional factors that emerged from the study's quantitative and qualitative findings.

Of the participants in the quantitative study, 94% agreed that their intention to complete the programme was influenced by their teachers being supportive and assisting them in understanding the work. Of this group, 85% agreed that teachers had a good teaching style and 95% agreed that their lessons were enjoyable and understandable.

To arrive at students' perspective of, and experience related to, the matter of teachers being an influencing factor, participants in the qualitative study were first required to rank in order of importance eight factors that influenced their intention to complete their programme.

The eight factors were: available funding, teaching quality, friendly teachers, family support, friends, college support, job certainty and social interaction. This study expanded, in order of importance and participant experience, the two factors in support of the quantitative data regarding teachers, namely teaching quality and friendly teachers. Here, the quality of the teaching methods used and the personal characteristics and dispositions of teachers featured strongly. One interviewee noted:

Teaching-quality helps one understand the work better. The work is transferred in a way I can relate [to] and it's relevant to daily activities, as opposed to examples which are not relevant to us as youth.

Another noted:

> Teaching-quality, as each lesson comes with a positive message, making it memorable and easier to understand, and assist[s] you if you don't understand the first time.

The third interviewee noted:

> Friendly teachers, because[,] when someone is friendly[,] you feel accepted and welcomed, and you will return for that friendliness. Friendly people come across as knowing their job and [will] assist you at any time and not get frustrated, and that made me return and enjoy my programme completion.

Of the participants in the quantitative study, 94% agreed that they were satisfied with the NC(V) programme they had enrolled in. Practical work and the NC(V) programme structure featured as factors that contributed to their intention to complete the programme, as did constructive access to college resources (e.g. computers) and dedicated computer laboratory

space. However, these factors are not exclusively regarded as either positive or negative. One student experienced practical aspects of the programme, as well as access to computers and the library in order to complete the practical tasks, as both positive and negative:

> There are no dedicated computer labs[;] therefore[,] I needed to bunk (abscond from) certain classes to complete my assignments [at home] due to [the] lack of resources.

Another student noted enjoying the practical work related to workplace exposure, but least enjoyed lecturer mood swings and student protests that disrupted class time and examinations. One interviewee claimed:

> I enjoy the friendly and motherly[,] caring nature of teachers, but least enjoy certain teachers' unpredictable mood swings and emotions[,] which dampened my college experience.

Social interaction with friends had an interesting limitation. Fifty-nine per cent of the participants disagreed with the statement about having many friends in class as well as on campus in other programmes. Respectively, 67% and 77% agreed with the statement about receiving support and motivation from their friends. Despite receiving motivation and support from friends, 72% of the participants stated that they preferred to study alone in order to achieve their academic goals, which indicates a preference for limited and selective social interaction in the classroom and during study or assessment periods. Sixty-three per cent of the respondents disagreed about the efficiency of studying with friends and 91% agreed that studying alone was better.

This indicates that a varied type of, or need for, social interaction with friends exists and that the interaction is dynamic, prioritising as it does academic achievement over social needs. Social integration and interaction seem to be a dynamic factor at different stages of a student's studies.

Friendship was also a double-edged factor: while one student noted, 'I can always approach them (i.e. friends) to show me how to complete a task or explain it to me', another noted that peers 'are a huge distraction in my life. Most times they are negative and not motivational [regarding] my academic goals.' One student indicated:

> They create distractions and not all of them contribute academically (in respect of group work), so it is frustrating to explain everything. They are of no benefit [during] class time either.

Social interaction or the need for friends is not academically driven; it exists only outside of classroom settings and in non-academic activities. Social interaction is dynamic and moves from a social need or requirement (classroom interaction) to an academically driven or motivated interaction.

Teaching-quality and supportive interaction with lecturers were seen as important factors contributing to a student's intention to complete the programme. Students' lecturers had a primary, more immediate influence than that of the campus Student Support Services (SSS). Sixty-seven per cent of the participants were aware of additional TVET college activities such as sport and extra lessons, facilitated by the SSS. But, although they were aware of the SSS and its offerings, 62% of them indicated that they did not make use of any SSS services. The students noted their appreciation for those lecturers who supported and guided them beyond the requirements of the curriculum. One student noted:

> Teachers told us they were glad to teach us and went the extra mile outside of curriculum and classroom requirements.

In contrast to using support services, the same student noted:

> I only use academic support and extra classes [in respect of] the subjects that offer them. I … generally seek assistance from one specific subject teacher who has always played an encouraging and supportive role since 2015 in Level 2 [in relation to both] my friends [and me].

Another respondent agreed:

> College open days are a great reminder for existing students. Access to existing students helps remind us of what is expected out there specifically in our field of study, and [of the] job … requirements after graduation. For academic and personal support, I generally have specific teachers who have assisted me since enrolment in 2015 and continue to assist me. If they do not know, they will [make sure] to refer [me to someone] or assist me obtain an answer or get the needed support.

None of the respondents made use of the campus SSS to support their programme completion, but relied instead on the additional services offered by certain lecturers.

The predominant response in the quantitative findings (based on student experiences gleaned from the qualitative findings) was that lecturers were influential internal factors as regards their disposition and content delivery and in helping students to align programme expectations to labour market realities. Teachers, as a factor influencing the students' academic achievement and intention to complete their programme, featured more prominently than social interaction and a need for friends. This study concurs with Tinto that social integration and interaction form part of the student experience, a process influenced by a number of interdependent factors. What emerged from this study was the importance and primary influence of teachers in contrast to the contribution of friends and SSS. The study also found that interaction with friends varied in purpose from the purely social to that related to academic achievement. It therefore concludes that, internally, teachers and their teaching-

quality and personal character were perceived by the students as the primary factor influencing their intention to complete their programme.

External factors influencing students' intention to complete a programme

The following section presents the external factors that influence students' intention to complete their studies, as suggested by Bean (1981), another student-retention theorist. It also considers the external factors that emerged from the present study.

Of the participants in this study, 78% agreed that they needed to complete their programme in order to further their studies in higher education. Despite these participants intending to further their studies at other higher education institutions after programme completion, 91% of the entire group agreed with Statement 4: 'My intention after completing my programme has been motivated by the idea of prospective employment in my vocation.' A further 83% agreed that the assistance offered by TVET colleges in finding employment after graduation had influenced their decision to complete their programme.

In support of these views, the participants also indicated that the predominant reason for enrolment was to obtain an NQF Level 4 (school-leaving) qualification that provided practical, work-related exposure. While the intention to further their studies at higher education institutions featured, the prospect of labour market entry with vocational experience was a key motivator for enrolment. Job-placement assistance was a further attraction. One student noted:

> The practical experience I gain [gives me] a competitive edge over students attending [a] traditional public secondary school.

Another noted:

> I did not cope academically at [a] traditional public secondary school and gave up after failing two subjects in Grade 12 (Level 4, final year). Enrolling at [a] TVET [college has] provided me with an alternative route to progress to higher education without the judgement of age in relation to qualification.

All three interviewees indicated that their experience of initial failure at a public school had motivated their enrolment at a TVET college. Their motivation for completing their programme was a perceived higher prospect of employment and improved labour market entry with an alternative NQF Level 4 qualification that would afford them practical experience. This indicates that a clear, direct reason for enrolling and completing their programme existed prior to their enrolment.

Respectively, 94% and 85% of the participants agreed to being motivated and influenced by parents and family support structures; 59% disagreed that they received support from their

immediate community; and 85% agreed that their parents had influenced and supported their programme completion, despite 83% stating that their parents had not completed any post-school education themselves.

One interviewee noted:

> I do not make use of any support structures available on campus. My support comes from my parish priest (religious community leader), who gives me … encouragement and [sound] advice, reminding me to keep the faith through challenging times.

Another noted:

> I only use academic support and extra classes [in respect of] the subjects that offer them. My motivation off-campus comes from my parents and [through] healthy academic … competition with my sister studying a different course at a different TVET college.

When compared with the internal factors, the external factors, as advocated by Bean (1981), were largely aligned to the literature and the findings of existing studies. An analysis of the current interdependent external factors influencing students' intention to complete their TVET programme revealed that a clearly defined reason for enrolment at a TVET college was the greater prospect of employment; and family and community influences were also prevalent external factors of influence.

Conclusion

In a country reforming its education system in order to permit greater equality of opportunity, the South African PSET (TVET) structure is of great economic importance. The TVET sector is widely accepted and entered mostly by previously and currently disadvantaged groups, and, in this way, it promotes greater access to post-school education. Many students, both in South Africa and internationally, regard TVET colleges as unfavourable institutions for opening up career prospects. This has a negative influence on perceptions of the education and opportunities these colleges offer, and also tarnishes the TVET sector and its stated objectives.

Existing South African and international studies have investigated the factors that influence poor performance, attrition and early departure. However, this study approached the research problem by focusing on the factors that influenced students' intention to complete a programme in NC(V) Business Studies. Internal factors that influenced the intention of the participants in the study to complete their programme included primarily the quality of the teaching, but, more importantly, the disposition, personal character and caring attitude and behaviour of the teachers towards their students. Findings regarding their interaction with

friends indicated a progressive and selective interaction that varied between a social need and a need to achieve academically, the latter being preferred by the group. The internal factors indicated that the participants perceived and experienced their teachers, rather than their friends and the college SSS, as the primary factor influencing their programme completion. To gain a broader perspective of interdependent factors, the external factors of influence in this study were considered and these were seen to include the participants' initial reason for enrolment and the support they received from their community, family and friends outside of the college. These factors indicated that some participants enrolled at an alternative PSET institution to achieve their NQF4 and so further their studies at higher education institutions. More importantly, they were influenced by the perception of easier labour market entry thanks to the NC(V) practical component. Support from parents and friends outside of the college environment was perceived as being a vital influencing factor; however, this factor was not held in higher regard than the influence of their teachers.

Bean (1981) posits behavioural intention as a forecaster of persistence and retention. Although the study was conducted with participants who had not yet completed their NC(V) programme, the findings in respect of factors that influenced their intention to complete it provide a broader and more current behavioural forecast from which TVET college policymakers can address, redress or create policies which take account of such factors. The TVET colleges should build on the internal and external factors that are within their direct control.

The study recommends that future research be undertaken to explore the research topic; and the aim of this research should be to provide a more complete and accurate understanding of the reasons for student attrition, retention and completion of studies in a South African TVET NC(V) Business Studies context. The replication and expansion of the research findings is also to be encouraged at other TVET colleges.

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