

Exploring Student Perspectives on the Expected Advantages of a Mentoring Program in the School of Accounting, Economics, and Finance at the University of Kwazulu-Natal

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Background & Context

- Majority of students in higher education enter from positions of adverse resource inequality.
- High drop out rates.
- White Paper on Higher Education (Department of Higher Education & Training, 2013): importance of increasing access & policies that support student success.
- In recent years, the University of Kwazulu-Natal (UKZN) has experienced a significant increase in the enrolment of students from schools that serve poorer communities (UKZN, 2024).
- The School of Accounting, Economics and Finance (SAEF) Mentoring Programme was introduced at the UKZN in 2020, with financial support from the Insurance Sector Education and Training Authority (INSETA)
- This study is the first within a broader research project on the UKZN SAEF Mentoring Programme.

Literature review

Reasons for implementing mentoring programme

- Students with **fewer resources** & those who **lack support** → less likely to **handle challenges & academic stress; less engaged** & may **leave university prematurely** compared to students with access to more support (Cornelius et al., 2016).
- **Identifying and addressing direct & indirect risk factors**, is essential to **managing potential effect** of these factors (Fourie, 2020).

Programme design

- **Variation in operational definition of mentoring** → **inconsistencies** in the **design** and **implementation** of successful mentoring → lack of clarity on how to **evaluate** programmes (Law et al., 2021).
- Problems of **unstructured mentoring programmes**.

Literature review

Mentor attributes

- **Reciprocity, mutual respect, clear expectations, personal connection, & shared values** (Yim & Waters, 2013).

Effect of mentoring programmes

- Evidence of an **indirect positive effect** on students' **transition** and **integration** into university, **retention**, hence **throughput rate**. Mentoring one of the most effective ways to **encourage student engagement and participation**, thus improving retention and encouraging **degree completion** (Cornelius et al. 2016; Livingstone & Naismith, 2018; Maharaj et al., 2021).
- Beyond improving students' **academic** performance, mentoring is also concerned with assisting mentees to cope with their **psychological and social challenges** (Cornelius et al. 2016) .

Motivation for study

- Students' perceptions of the mentoring programme → potentially reveal ***specific challenges*** they face.
- Allow programme designers ***tailor*** the mentorship programme better.
- SAEF can create an environment where students feel ***valued, supported and empowered*** to reach their ***full potential*** by addressing ***barriers to student success***.
- Aligning the programme with students' ***expectations and needs*** → better prepare students for future ***careers*** and ***leadership roles*** in their respective fields.
- Improve student ***retention rates*** and ***academic success***, and ***throughput rates***.
- ***Data-driven decision-making*** regarding its implementation and future direction are possible.
- Study can serve as a ***model for other programmes*** within the institution.

How does the SAEF Mentoring Programme work?

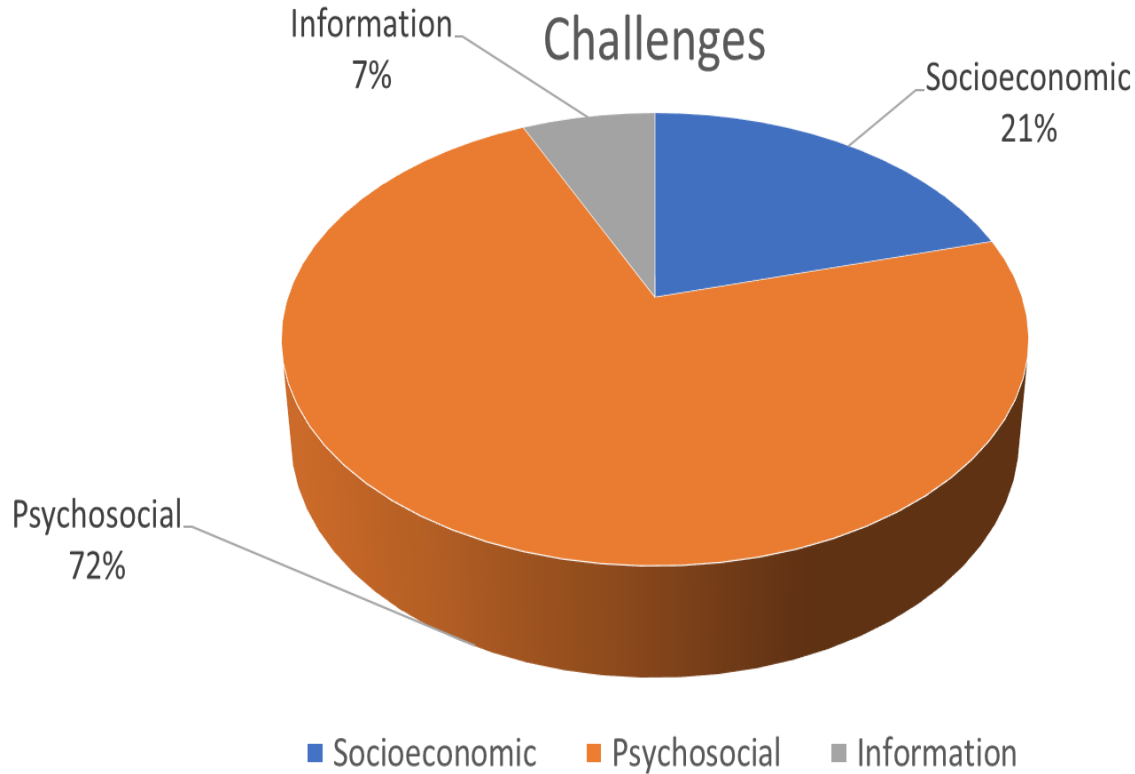
- Holistic support & proactively identifying student challenges.
- Approximately 300 actively engaging mentees.
- Compulsory \Rightarrow Voluntary (negative term decision students required to enroll)
- Students with negative term decision \Rightarrow all SAEF students, second year upwards with coursework component to qualification (exclude FYE).
- Semester \Rightarrow Annual.
- Programme Coordinator.
- Mentor/Project Assistant (PA) Training at the start of the Programme.
- At first mentor/mentee meeting - currently online (20-30 minutes):
 - Identify main challenges and complete Plan for Success
 - Complete Timetable
 - Mentee and mentor complete curriculum audit
- Every second week – 10 minute online meeting with Mentor (motivate, support, refer to Support Services)
- Every month – online group meeting on helpful Topics with PA and Mentor
- Mentors complete engagement report which PAs collate (reporting process has been streamlined)

Methodology

- 2023, newly enrolled mentees → **voluntary, anonymous Google form**: current challenges & expectations of programme.
- Respondents: **first-time or repeat participants**.
- **Qualitative survey research: less structured research methodology** - exploring individual perceptions & subjective logic (Wolff et al., 2019).
- Ability to **explore deeply into topics/issues/problems** from **perspectives of individuals**.
- **Inductive reasoning approach** → identification of emergent **data themes**.
- Subsequent inquiries will be **informed by the findings of this study**.
- **3 open-ended survey questions**, text box format, allowed for distinctive responses & clear expression. Text box could expand to the capacity that respondent required.
- Responses from **42 surveyed students** meticulously scrutinised - **each question underwent independent analysis** utilizing the inductive approach.
- **Percentage weighting was attributed to each identified theme**.
- **Ethical approval**: Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) at UKZN (protocol reference number HSSREC/00005210/2023).

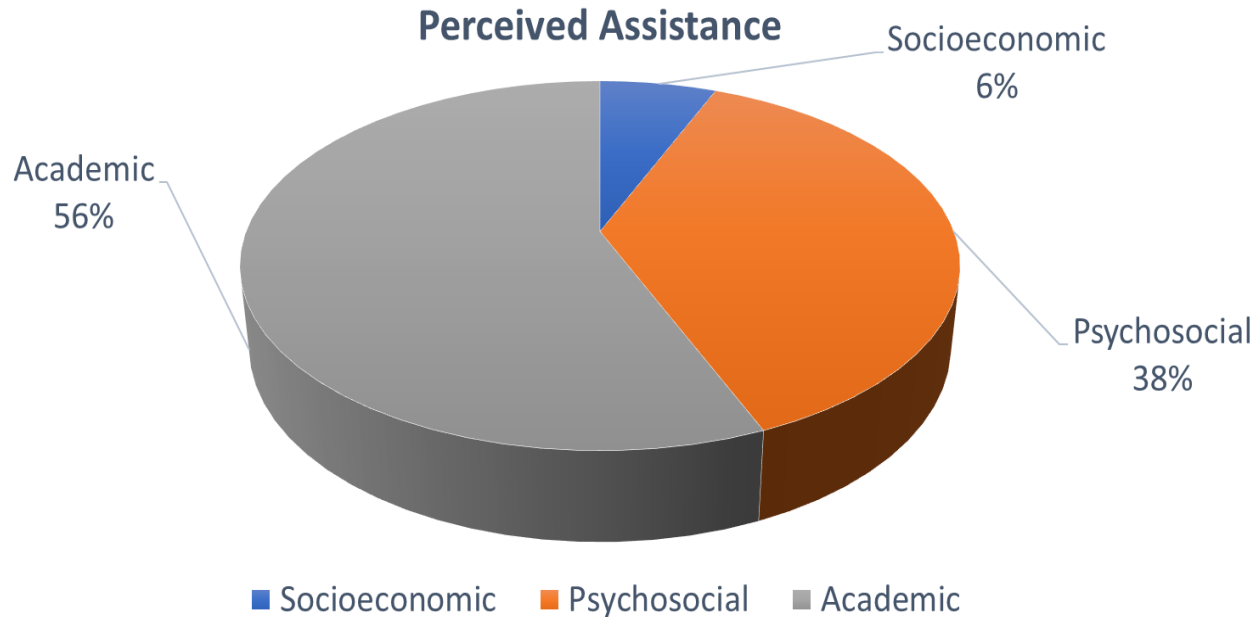
Discussion of findings:

First question analysed asked about **the challenges the student is currently facing that could potentially hinder their academic success in the institution.**



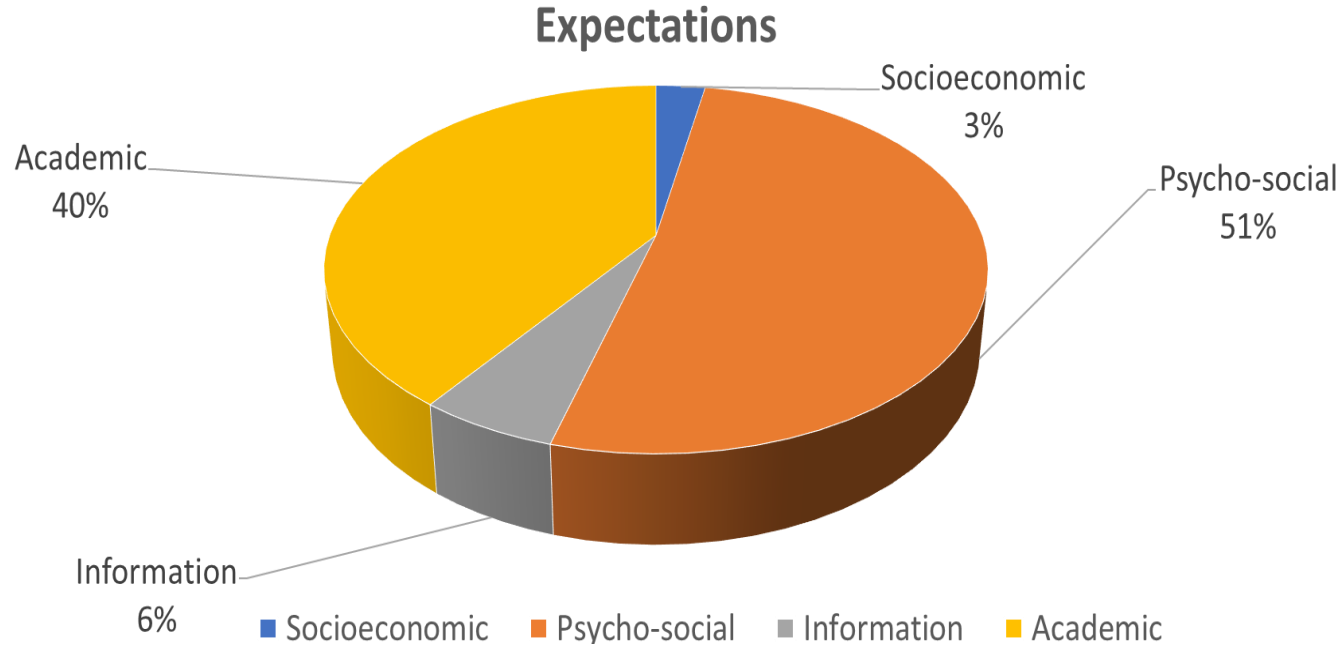
- *“Personal issues, lack of motivation, procrastinations, and the constant uncertainty whether I chose the right degree for myself”*
- *“Low self-esteem”*
- *“Lack of motivation, time management and stress”*
- *“...health or personal issues...”*
- *“Procrastination, lack of motivation, lack of discipline”*
- *“Anxiety”*

Second question: designed to capture the **type of support and assistance students need from the SAEF mentoring programme in order to succeed in their modules.**



- *“...extra tutorials on some modules that I find challenging than others”.*
- *“The transition from online to face to face is harder than it seems, so learning techniques we can adopt and physical assistance would be helpful”.*
- *“I need a personal tutor because my honours degree doesn’t provide one”.*
- *“Extra classes and some encouragement spirit to do it”*
- *“Past Papers, one on one session, tutorial sessions”*
- *“Having a mentor for certain modules that are giving me problems. Some modules are not that easy and the workload is too much, it helps having someone who will help you understand the work.”*

Third question: designed to capture the **expectation of students on the programme, regarding how they hoped the SAEF mentoring programme would aid students and support them to pass their modules.**



- *“Motivations and more experienced people who would assist in managing the pressure.”*
- *“Yes, it can only provide emotional support”*
- *“That I will be encouraged more”*
- *“What things they would implement if they were to fail in life; How do they cope with pressure; What study approaches do they implement”*
- *“Encouragement”*
- *“Emotional support”*
- *“Just knowing I'm not alone that helps”*

Conclusions & Recommendations

- Key finding: **academic assistance** is crucial; however, without adequate **emotional & motivational support**, the mentoring programme will not foster **resilient students**, who can achieve **academic success**.
- **Holistic approach** to student support is needed.
- A **systematic approach to psychosocial challenges** requires the **integration of psychological interventions, social support systems** in the mentoring programme.
- Must continue to **enhance communication** with the appropriate **support structures** in the institution.

How has the Mentoring Programme helped SAEF?

- Getting to know our students
- Improves holistic wellbeing of students hence improves their ability to perform academically
- Closer relationship with Support Services e.g. Student counselling. We know where to guide our students.
- Connects students with support services. Many are unaware the support exists.
- Prevents personal tragedies e.g. suicide, hunger, addiction
- Alerts us to potential problems e.g. tutor not available.
- Direct and immediate contact with students e.g. Food hampers after floods

Challenges

- **Participation.** Under-utilization of university resources.
- **Students do not read emails/notices** therefore 'unaware' of programme.
- Some students believe they are signing up for a '**personal tutor**'. They sign up but then do not participate.
- For Accounting mentees - **Matching mentees with mentors** who have completed similar qualification.
- Adverse socioeconomic contexts.
- Delays in registration.
- Scaling up the programme – resource constraints?

Feedback from students

I felt supported throughout the semester, it gave me a support system that I needed

I saw a lot of improvement in my academics from last semester

My mentor was hands on from the beginning until the end. She was very supportive and she assisted me in every way possible, academically and emotionally.

My mentor helped me in various other ways like providing me with bursary information to apply for funding, residence applications, applications campus jobs for students and he provided me information to apply for a free analysis short course.

It did indeed help in many ways. Just talking to someone who is neutral was very comforting as she was never bias just honest and gave very useful advise. It felt good to be checked up on.

I have attained new skills from the mentorship such as being organized, CV writing, time management and being well spoken.

It gave me someone I could I freely confide in with my struggles without expecting anything in return or any condemnation

There were workshop unrelated to our academics. There was a workshop on how to set up your Linked-in profile to attract recruiters, our options when we finish our undergraduate degrees besides honors/PGDA.

It has helped me overcome my depression.

This engagements made me to feel like the university really cares

I created a LinkedIn account because of it, and I got offered vac work through it.

Thank you