Experiences and Perceptions of Extended Curriculum Programme Students Transitioning from High School to a University Offering Blended Learning Courses

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Abstract. The department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) introduced the Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) as one of the vehicles for addressing the access and success agenda. This study focused on the experiences and perceptions of ECP students who were transitioning from high school to a university offering blended learning courses. The sample comprised students who enrolled between 2021 and 2022 at a South African university based in the Eastern Cape province. A qualitative case study was used, with a sample of 60 students who were interviewed. The key research finding revealed that students lack knowledge on the use of technology, which hinders the success and transition process. Various themes emerged, such as the knowledge gap about ECP, challenges in accessing, and adapting to technological tools, inadequate academic and psychosocial support and understanding of disciplinary, academic concepts. To address the technology gap, the study recommends that the timing of the training provided to students be done in a systematic manner, taking into consideration that during the first few weeks, students experience a culture shock which may hinder their uptake of the technology training. There is also a need to provide outside the classroom student support to manage the culture shock. The study also recommends a staggered approach in the orientation process to ensure students have continuous support in their process of transition. Synergy among all stakeholders is also recommended to avoid duplication and competing initiatives by the different stakeholders, such as student affairs, student governance, academic departments and faculties.

Keywords: Blended learning, Extended Curriculum Programme, First-year students, Higher Education, Transitions

1   Introduction

The South Africa Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 provides for the provision of equity of access and makes emphasis on ensuring equitable access to higher education for all South African citizens who qualify. The Act promotes non-discrimination in student admission and encourages Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to actively lead in the promotion of diversity and inclusivity. The department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) has invested a lot of funding in the Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) across most South African universities. To have a high return on investment on these programs, it is important for universities to find ways of increasing the throughput rate of its students. In its conceptualisation, ECP courses are to be conducted in small-sized, secluded classrooms [1]. This enables students to learn how to work effectively with their classmates via group assignments and extracurricular activities, and forge lasting relationships within the academic community [2].

Transitioning from being a learner to being a student can be both fascinating and scary, thus bringing about a lot of anxiety and frustration to a student. Transitioning to university has long been studied [3,4] and widely recognized as influential in student success and well-being. Literature from national and international contexts show that student transition to higher education is a complex, non-linear, developmental experience [5–7]. This is because transition involves not just a move from one curriculum structure to another, but a move to a different academic environment with new social structure, new friends, and so on.

Covid-19 made the situation even worse; not only did the student have to adapt to the new environment, lecturers and friends, but they had to use technology for learning and assessments. Post-Covid, some universities opted for blended modes of provision. Blended learning scholars [8–10] argue that this mode of provision, which has gained significant traction in the field of education, involves a combination of traditional face-to-face instruction and online learning. It is evident that blended learning presents a diverse range of potential challenges for students, and serious impact for some student groups [11,12], prompting a need for research on how transition is experienced, including how it impacts first-year students in general, and particularly, ECP students. In South Africa, some researchers have investigated the perspectives and perceptions of ECP students without digging deeper into transitioning experiences of this group of students [1,13–15].

2   Theoretical Framework

To study students' transition experiences, Schlossberg's Transition theory was employed. Schlossberg's framework is frequently used to explain and understand the dif-

ficulties and problems encountered by students transitioning from high school to college [2,16–19]. Transition, according to Schlossberg (1981) is conceptualised as any occurrence or lack thereof that alters relationships, practices, presumptions, or roles.

Schlossberg identified the "4 S's" (situation, self, support, and solutions) as a significant collection of elements that affect a person's capacity to deal with a shift. According to Schlossberg's transition hypothesis, whenever a person experiences a new circumstance or a change in their way of life, they go through a transitional period. The idea stresses that the way people perceive and react to new circumstance, as well as the support and techniques they use affect the effectiveness of transition. Perception is key in determining whether a transition is an event or not, since a transition can only be characterized as such by the individual experiencing it [21].

The relevance of the individual's perception of the transition scenario is one of the main tenets of Schlossberg's theory [16]. Academic standards, the social milieu, and independence all underpin substantial adjustments for students making the journey from high school to college. The effect of these shifts on students' perceptions and the strategies for navigating them is highlighted by Schlossberg's hypothesis. Students' capacity to adjust to the increased academic and social demands of university life heavily depends on their self-efficacy, drive, and sense of self. Another important aspect of Schlossberg's idea is support. Townsend (2008) and Torres (2009) say that the social situations in which the transition takes place, and the kind of assistance made available to the student, affect how much significance the student attaches to the move and how easily they can get through it.

Finally, Schlossberg's approach stresses the significance of using successful tactics while in transition. Goal setting, time management, asking for assistance when necessary, and creating coping mechanisms are a few examples of these tactics [19]. According to these authors, students are better able to handle the responsibilities and changes that come with university life when they are given practical techniques. When universities create policies and practices aimed at enhancing students' coping strategies, administrators, staff, and policymakers can help high school students' transition smoothly into higher education [24]. Furthermore, Lazarowicz (2015) and Townsend (2008) highlight that although transferring-students typically have difficulties, they need to understand that they may succeed at their new institution if they have access to the necessary tools, support, and strategies for navigating their new systems. This starts with the institutions making ECP students a priority. Poisel & Joseph (2011) emphasized the need for institutions to review rules and procedures that have an influence on transitioning students' achievement – ensuring these students' overall success.

In a nutshell, Schlossberg's theory of transition is beneficial for studying students making the transition from high school. The theory also emphasizes how and why institutions, structures, units, and individual actors can create mechanisms and resources to help smoothen the transition, considering the nature and context of students at hand.

The students being researched in this study predominantly come from rural and township areas and are admitted into extended programmes, because they often need more academic support than the mainstream students.

3   Literature Review

Emerging literature shows that student transition to higher education is a complex, non-linear developmental experience [5, 6, 25, 26]. Literature reveals several factors, such as academic under-preparedness, adapting to living independently, subject selection, personal and social issues [3, 27] that make the transition process challenging. To respond to these factors, programmes such as the ECP, are implemented globally by universities to facilitate accessibility, integration, and success of underprepared students [28, 29].

ECP is regarded as useful in preparing and equipping students for a smooth transition into, and success in higher education [1, 15, 26, 28, 30–32]. Social integration is noted to be one of the factors that help with easing the transition for ECP students. The smaller sizes of the classes allow for close relationships amongst students and between students and lecturers, which is difficult to foster in mainstream studies as their classes are relatively larger in sizes and do not easily allow for lecturers to interact with students at an individual level [28]. Other opportunities – academic integration, reduced academic workload over an extended period, and support subjects offered on the programs such as computer literacy and academic writing skills, as well as the curriculum work done by staff of the ECP – significantly contribute to easing the transition [14, 15, 28, 30]. These benefits are consistent with the finding that successful support programs entail a confluence of academic, social, and other non-academic factors [33–35].

The impression of inferiority and stigmatization, however, seems to prevail in respect of ECP programs internationally – see the literature reviewed in United States by Potgieter et al. (2016) and in Zimbabwe [36]. South African literature (such as [1, 26, 37, 38] confirms the challenge noted above. Given that ECP students in South Africa tend to be predominantly black [1] from poor schooling conditions, stigmatization is even more problematic. These negative connotations have psychological consequences that negatively affect success [26].

Nevertheless, some studies [39, 40] contradict the negative connotation associated with ECPs. Makgobole & Onwubu (2021) explored the experiences of the Durban University of Technology students' experiences of the somatology ECP and found that the program assisted with the transition and equipped the students with some of the prerequisite skills. In the same vein, Matabane & Matabane (2021) carried out a study on Black students' experiences of academic support programs during first year at university, looking at the case of extended studies. The authors found that interventions offered in the ECP, including the extra support, smaller classrooms, support subjects such

as academic writing and computer literacy enabled students from disadvantaged educational and socio-economic backgrounds to smoothly transition while developing their literacies. Nala (2010) further reported that ECP helped some students integrate, outperform, and even assist their mainstream peers in academic writing. Another study of experiences of nursing students at one HEI in the Western Cape, reported that their ECP students found it easy to integrate into, and navigate mainstream studies, making it easy to adjust to the fast-paced work approach [41].

With respect to the curriculum, Potgieter et al. (2016) reported that students felt that some ECP courses were irrelevant to their degrees and that the programme didn't develop their cognitive skills. This implies that a highly generalised ECP with no additional focus on cognitive development and disciplinary contextual flavour may not achieve the intended outcome.

This study sought to examine the experiences and challenges of ECP students transitioning from high school to university. The following were the research questions:

- What are the experiences and perceptions of UFH ECP students about transitioning from high school to university?
- How are their experiences and perceptions shaping the way they navigate their ECP?
- How do ECP students think their transition could be improved?

4   Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research study design to investigate the ECP students' perspectives and experiences during their transition. The chosen research design allowed the authors to elicit information that is offered by the participants so that the most important perception and experiences recalled from memory can be translated and documented [13]. Semi-structured interviews were used to generate data from a purposive sample of 3rd and final year ECP students in the faculty of management and commerce. Simple random sampling was further used to select participants. A blindfold selection was used to draw the individual participants. All selected participants were invited to the interview telephonically at their selected convenient date, time and venue. Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection which lasted 30 to 45 minutes. Interviews were recorded using a smartphone and notes were written as back-up for the recordings. To ensure confidentiality and the security of the data, all recordings were transferred to a USB immediately after the interviews and deleted from the phone. The recordings were transcribed and then participants were given an opportunity to validate the transcribed data. Thematic analysis was then used to identify emerging themes from the data.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Fort Hare Research Ethics Committee. An information sheet was provided to all participants highlighting the purpose of the study and written informed consent was obtained. To ensure confidentiality, all participants were coded in numbers.

5   Findings and Discussion

This section reports and discusses findings under four themes: knowledge about ECP; physical access and adaptation to digital technology for blended learning; academic and psychosocial support; and understanding disciplinary academic concepts. In the main, the findings show inadequacies in orientation about ECP, including challenges with accessing and adapting to university demands, while the benefits of slow-paced teaching, especially of concepts necessary for success in the faculty were also highlighted. The notion of orientation of ECP students, although initially saturated, proved to have important nuances about how students experience their transition. Four themes emerged from the analysis are discussed below.

5.1   Knowledge about ECP

While some participants knew about ECP from senior students and family, others did not, until they were on campus, while others came to the programme by chance rather than by design. The following are excerpts about their knowledge of ECP.

> *I didn't know about ECP. I knew about it from a cousin sister while I had just recently finished matric.*

> *I heard from a friend before coming to university.*

> *During the application process at [institution name redacted], I was told by student assistants about ECP.*

> *I did not know anything about the extended programme. I only knew the differences in the number of years between mainstream and extended programme.*

What they heard from senior students were two-fold: first, if a student does not have the required math mark, and, second, if s/he has not done commercial subjects (accounting in particular) at high school, then they cannot be admitted to the mainstream. While the first is true, the second is not. Evidently, students did not know the nature of ECP prior to enrolling in it. This lack of knowledge presupposes that they were not psychologically prepared for the expectations of the qualifications they were enrolled in. The following excerpt about the link between information and transitional challenges was shared by many participants:

> *I think when you are at this stage [entry to university] and are struggling to accept that you are here, information about Accounting and about the career paths you can take can be very helpful from the beginning, coz then you get to understand what you are studying, where you can go with it, and you … figure out whether you want to stay on or not. If that kind of support was available, things would be better.*

The above implies a question about the nature of the general orientation programme they received. A couple of students suggested that there was no orientation that was specifically tailored for ECP students. Instead, there was a general orientation programme which included all students in the first year of university. One student deemed it important but not sufficient:

> *The orientation was about the university [name redacted]. We were being told about how things are run. I only realized this year [2023] when they hosted an academic orientation that we were never given information about this particular course [qualification] that we are doing.*

The explanation for the difficulties associated with the orientation programme may lie in the fact that some of the students come to the university faculty as walk-ins and this happens for any number of reasons, including being rejected from other academic programmes. Besides, orientation programmes do not have all the time to go deeper into the purpose and benefits of the ECP.

This implies a need to rethink the orientation programme in ways that enrich students' experience. For example, in a different context, one institution orientates both mainstream and ECP students in one session (42). This approach is not helpful, as ECP is presented as a fallback position (ibid.), thus unintentionally contributing to the stigma somewhat attached to the programme, and shadowing the obvious academic, social, and psychological benefits embedded in the way the programme is offered.

The experience of first years could be enriched by a particular focus on the nature and purpose of the qualification students are enrolled for. It is important to clarify, during orientation, the possibilities of better academic performance under ECP touted by (13), that ECP students perform better in later years compared with students admitted in the mainstream programme (32), to the point of even sometimes taking the role of assisting students in the mainstream (*see* [42].

Since many students often lose out on the orientation experience for reasons already highlighted above, the task may land on the hands of lecturers. Findings, however, show that some lecturers did not close the gap arising from the failure of orientation programme. They would just introduce themselves and the course they teach. As one student said:

> *We never had any lecturer talking about this course [qualification] in particular.*

One participant said only two lecturers in her department took them through the nature of the modules they were doing during lecture time. It should be noted that the success of lecturers conducting some contextual orientation is contingent on all students attending these lectures, which is not often the case for various reasons, including students getting lost on their way to the correct venues. It stands to reason that a successful orientation requires a proper coordination of non-academic support – prior, effective

communication of the orientation dates, timely transportation of students from residences to orientation venues – and splitting the orientation programme into smaller topics and groups.

5.2   Physical access, and adaptation to digital technology for blended learning

Moving from high school to university was found to be difficult for students, even by the sheer fact of one having to now pass at 50% than the usual basic education 30% pass mark, which affects the amount of effort put at the two different levels. There are four elements of the experience students described during the interviews: (1) access to physical lectures; (2) access to technological infrastructure; (3) workload; and (4) taking personal responsibility for learning.

In terms of the first experience, some participants could not immediately physically access classes where lectures are held in their respective programme. They would get lost on their way to class or institutional offices. While getting lost may sound peripheral, it does shape the time and ways in which students adjust in a university environment. This was highlighted by a participant, who claimed that she had to figure out where different institutional support offices – Residence, Finance, etc. – are located. University buildings can, in their own right, be culturally complex and intimidating, thus impeding the immediate development of the psychological strength and confidence necessary for transition, leading to students missing lectures unintentionally and getting their non-academic concerns resolved late, even being shy to talk about or explain these experiences to people or peers they do not yet know.

The second experience involved the difficulty to adjust to the use of Blackboard (the university learning management system). Some students did not know the basic operations of Blackboard. One student spoke as follows about this experience:

> We were not taught on how Blackboard works. When the class started, we were lost. How are we going to log in on Blackboard? Where are you going to find the classes? Like it was hard for us even on our first Test. We also lost how [and] where we are going to find the test.

Keeping the first theme in mind, some students may miss the training provided by the Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC) at the start of the year because information is communicated via the very university platforms, e-mails, which they would not have yet accessed or become accustomed to. Moreover, given that most students coming to the university come from marginalized schools, predominantly in rural and township areas (42), some students come not knowing how to switch on a computer and/or work on Microsoft Office and login on Blackboard. But beyond these is the problem of access to computers and Wi-Fi. Another participant had this to say about these:

> I had no WIFI, computer at the beginning and I didn't know how to use Blackboard.

The absence of these basics can create different emotions, including a feeling of cultural exclusion from the cultural goods necessary for participation in a university setup. However, through acts of social learning from their peers, they would learn to use Blackboard to access the platform and study material provided therein, as the following participant confirms:

> *Navigating Blackboard was a challenge, but we help each other as students on how to navigate and access study materials on our own.*

These acts of social learning appear to have happened spontaneously. However, they foreground the importance of making friends as part of building networks in order to overcome personal challenges related to adjusting to university life. Meanwhile, making friends and building networks is not an easy process, it is dictated by the rigidity or flexibility of persons, including the institutional environment created to enable and sustain the networks. Hence the need for orientations to create building blocks for creating social networks for students.

There were mixed experiences about workload by some students. While some said that the pace of teaching was appropriate (see the sub-section, understanding disciplinary concepts later), helping them grasp useful concepts, others felt that the workload was heavy on them. For one participant the workload came in the form of too much content for ECP. This is not necessarily supported by literature. For example, ECP has, *inter alia*, academic workload, which eases transition (14,15,28,30). That is why some students talked about how concepts were broken down slowly over a considerable length of time. Yet workload came out strong from a few participants, with one of them suggesting that with so much workload, one would just study enough to just pass. It is important to note that the participants who complained about workload were students who had no prior knowledge of commercial subjects. The workload was also considered to be a product of congested or clashing assessments. This arises from, amongst other things, a lack of coordination between lecturers in the ECP:

> *The difference in varsity is that they [lecturers] expect you to submit your work, regardless of how many other assignments you still have to do in a particular week.*

Another participant elaborated:

> *Each lecturer would just treat or teach their module as it's the only module you are taking. One had to find the time to make it work for each module. That is very difficult, and that is very shocking.*

Although unrelated to the claims of workload, there was a sense from one particular participant that some of the things taught in ECP were not relevant or necessary in her opinion. This is consistent with the finding by Potgieter et al. (2016) which further said

that some courses were irrelevant to their degrees and that the programme did not develop their [student] cognitive skills. The participant suggested a stricter focus on modules and content that aligns with what they would need later in varsity or life beyond it.

Finally, it was evident that the participants had not adjusted properly to the need to take personal responsibility in the new environment. Basically, taking personal responsibility means being able to set up a personal study schedule, managing time and regulating one's learning accordingly. In this regard, one participant called the change to university a "drastic change" and "a shock" to her.

> *For example, you come here, and all of a sudden, it's your responsibility to get things done on your own. No one pushes you to do things. It was a bit overwhelming.*

There was no evidence that ECP students were deliberately assisted to learn and adapt new ways of engaging learning on their own. Support should come in the form of imparting and modelling techniques for coping in the university, something the results do not show had been happening. Schlossberg's theory suggests techniques like setting a goal, managing time, asking for assistance and developing mechanisms for coping with the transition [19]. Students are better able to handle the responsibilities and changes that come with university life when they are given these practical techniques. It does appear that some of the participants who felt anxious and sometimes depressed were not imparted these – many either at high school or all at varsity.

Another participant was "a bit used" to, because she "got a glimpse" of, working independently in high school. This difference reveals differences in ways in which basic education contributes to instilling a culture of self-discipline or personal management necessary for adaptation to university demands. The nuance in the finding is that adaptation for some non-commercial students was not easy. A participant said that being a non-commercial student from high school "made things worse" for her, leading her to what she called "a bit of depression, somewhere, somehow." These findings are linked to the theme of institutional support, which is discussed below.

5.3   Inadequate academic and psychosocial support

Findings show that students had expectations that there would be institutional support at the level of systems, structures, and individual lecturers, to help them transition smoothly. Institutional support is crucial for successful transition of students to university. The support should consider social, personal, cultural, and psychological circumstances of the transitioning students. However, some students found the transition difficult for various reasons: they had come to the institution already desperate because they had been rejected elsewhere; and the faculty was a fallback because they were just willing to study any programme that was not yet fully subscribed. This on its own can be consequential for how they adjust.

I did not know anything about the course I was put into. When I was doing my late application, they were like, 'oh ok, you qualify for Accounting; we gonna put you there.' And because I was desperate for school and studying at that time, I was like, 'ok its fine. As long as I'm in. As long as I will studying.'

In such instances, institutional support is vital to ease anxiety. However, some students reported that this institutional support was not forthcoming. One participant said that she "cannot recall any support that was given to ECP." Another student added that no one was there to say, "Accounting is about this and that". The student elaborated:

We were promised that we would get support, but when we came in, there was literally no support. It was every man for themselves. When we were attending the orientation, they never gave us academic orientation where they would let us know about the course [qualification]. And they were not accommodative of people who did not do certain [commercial] modules in high school. Like for example, I did business; I never did economics. But now I am overwhelmed by the fact that I have to study a full textbook the whole year, on economics that I know nothing about. It was never broken down for me. They just put us together and assumed that all of us know about it. There were no extra classes or at least some form of help from the department. They assume that because they put us in the extended programme, it is a bit easier, whereas it was not easy at all.

There were also problems with coping with the move to university. One participant said the following:

I did not cope, I just survived. For a short period of time, I fell into depression. I was given anti-depressants. Like it was a very huge thing. It was a lot.

When sked why this was the case, her reply, shared by others, revealed that students don't come to varsity just as matriculates but as human beings with personal problems that, when entering the new environment, augment the effects of the situation they find themselves in.

Besides the fact that I came here with my own problems, I am not familiar with anything or anyone – like the courses, the lecturers, and the students. Nothing. Now I am here, and I have to deal with this on my own. I can't call anyone for help and say, 'hey I need help with this and that.'

Another participant was not even attending classes for some time, until late in her first semester:

I don't recall much about the first semester because I was not there. I was still trying to process the fact that I was here. For some time, I think, I felt a bit depressed about things. I wasn't accepting the fact that I am really here. Later on in the semester, I started attending my classes.

A third participant also said that she had "never thought that [she] would end up" at her current university. All the responses above indicate that how transition is experienced also depends on whether students are in a university of their choice, in an academic programme of choice, and whether there exist favourable personal circumstances. This behoves institutions to create a welcoming, empathetic environment that recognises and helps students overcome these nuances and circumstances. This position is shared by [43].

Another dimension was academic and non-academic support. There was a feeling that some lecturers were distant, difficult, and dismissive. When a certain student had approached a lecturer for remarking on the strength that she thought she had done well, her attempts to get clarity on why she got the mark neither yielded a change nor was a clear feedback and justification given. Making a comparison with how things used to be at her previous high school in this regard, she said:

> *In high school, a teacher use to break things down for you and tell you, 'you have lost your marks here, because you did not do A, B, and C. But here, if you've lost the marks, no one explains anything to you. You just have to figure it out yourself that you went wrong here, and there, and there. I got a lot discouraged in the first year of foundation.*

She shared that she got discouraged from trying to do well the next time. It is worth pointing out that the participant in question had the confidence of engaging lecturers. Her situation reveals the importance not only of empathy but the potential failure of horizontal dialoguing between students and lecturers about assessments in ways that make the transition a good, psychological experience. She perceived some lecturers to be distant.

> *Not all lecturers are approachable. Some ... don't respond to e-mails. And sometimes they don't even provide you with memos after the assessment. They also don't open the space for you to consult and ask them about these marks.*

In addition to distance, data shows that some students sometimes did not feel like they were "part of something", as one participant said. When experiencing challenges with certain modules, a participant did not go to lecturers because she felt she "was not really understanding anything in class" anyway, and thus thought consulting "would not help". Another participant commented about the absence of safe space to engage some lecturers, in comparison to high school teachers:

> *I had a safe community in high school. I had teachers I knew had my back. Whenever I would feel that everything is a lot, I knew who to go to and get the comfort.*

At university, she got a different, unpleasant treatment not only from lecturers but from support services. The treatment appears to have broken her spirit and zeal to study. She

said some offices would "give me a treatment that would make me cry …, that will make me not want to come to the office again. My family members started to intervene." The support service offices are vital to student transition. She also talked about having lecturers to talk to about the difficulties being experienced during transition as a crucial form of support she felt she needed. The experience of the participant foregrounds Worsley et al. (2021) view that creating a friendly environment is critical for student transition. It is understood as being considerate of the context of students who recently join a university.

The participants were then asked how they navigated their transition. Data shows that they relied on self-motivation, family support and motivation, classroom environment, and the student counselling unit. Only one participant talked about how she became aware of the Student Counselling Unit late during the year. She confessed that she was able to find that safe space that eased her personal situation. This is consistent with Worsley et al. (2021) who believe in the positive effects of what they call "well-being adviser".

One student suggested that she "got her strength" from "that voice at the back of your mind that says, 'you have to do this.'" and the sense of belonging in one of the modules taught in the extended programme. Moreover, in the module in question, there was a sense of community, which embraced difference, thus facilitating a sense of being. One lecturer had created an environment in which other students were supportive of each other, recognizing their differences, and thus boosting their morale and confidence. This demonstrates that the process of transition requires lecturers at individual levels to make the transition bearable if not enjoyable by building classrooms that affirm and promote a culture of diversity, cognitive and socio-economic difference without inferiority. Importantly, lecturers have a fundamental role in facilitating learning.

Furthermore, some students relied on family and peer support. For example, one participant pointed out that it was her parents who motivated her to keep going, suggesting that "you are going to rise above circumstances". Another suggested that when she had issues related to accommodation and financial aid, the intervention of her uncle eased the negative experience. Another still pointed out that her peers helped her a lot when she had problems with various modules like Economics and Accounting.

Asked how appropriate institutional support would have to look like, one participant, who had experienced academic support from a FASSET programme offered in the department of Accounting, saw this programme as a model of good academic support. FASSET offers extra classes in which food vouchers are given to students attending them. Students are not taught by their lecturers but by invited guests and persons not in the department, thus establishing connections beyond the academic programme. However, this support is not offered to students at ECP level; it is offered in the Department of Accounting only and for a few selected students. Moreover, it is a programme that is funded externally, implying that if the extended programme were to model it, it would require a lot of funds neither the government nor the unit has.

5.4   Understanding disciplinary and academic concepts

At the centre of the extended programme is the preparation of the underprepared students for a smooth transition to university academic disciplines [42]. One nuanced finding pertains to the experiences of students who have non-commercial subjects from basic education. This is born from the fact that the admission requirements to the Faculty of Management and Commerce include English and Mathematics, thus opening up for students who had not done commercial subjects in high school. Describing this experience, one student had this to say:

> [It's] not easy to navigate the program and adjust, especially with Accounting and Business Management as I have never done commercial subjects in High School and as a result, I need to work more harder than others".

The perception that one has to work harder if they have no prior commercial subjects may have some merit. The reason is that it is not just a transition from matric to university, but from one knowledge structure or field and disciplinary knowledge – physical science, life sciences done at basic education – to another, such as commercial knowledge structures with their disciplinary jargon. Thus, the additional time created in ECP does not only deal with the fact that matric results are not adequate for admission to the mainstream programme of Management and Commerce, but it also takes into account further challenges which would obtain in adjusting to new concepts applicable to disciplines in the faculty.

It is not clear, however, that the dimension under discussion occupies a central place in the purpose of the design of the programme. It may be added that academic concepts peculiar to knowledge structures under the programme are also concepts through which discourses in those disciplines are later understood and navigated. In so many ways, this may be linked to the positive experience students had concerning teaching pace in relation to the additional time offered by ECP as shown below.

Participants felt that ECP offered them an opportunity to learn, at a reasonably slow pace, the concepts with which they were not familiar from basic education. This finding is represented in the following views of some of the participants:

> The time allows lecturer to take their time to make us understand the concepts.

> We do very few chapters in a long time which makes us to follow the concepts easily.

> The time makes it easy for us to get used to university teaching because lecturers are not too fast.

Important concepts are taught at ECP and beneficial, prerequisite modules like AMB, AEB and different concepts are taught and by the time you reach TFN you know and understands those concepts from previous years.

The above utterances further highlighted the importance of time given to the students to understand and comprehend their workload and environment. This is supported by [28] who emphasized on allowing students and lecturers to create a close relationship within their lectures. However, it was also found that there were students who lacked the confidence to speak in class, and who felt that they could benefit from tutors in assisting them beyond lectures. One student said, in acknowledgment of this challenge:

Academic support from lecturers is provided but follow-up should be done with tutors as they don't conduct them. Some of us have background of science and also during lectures, it is difficult, or I have no courage to ask lecturers questions which is a challenge.

The student highlighted that there is no follow-up done to whether tutorials are done. In the main, the lack of confidence is informed by a range of issues such as lack of linguistic capital (English) to engage in class, not necessarily by cognitive inferiority. It may also be informed by their personality types arising from the cultural contexts from which they come. These dynamics require ECP lecturers who are aware of these peculiarities and who create a space to minimize or eliminate the barriers arising from them, especially given the extra time and smaller classes in which they operate.

These participants think that there is valuable experience in getting assistance from their peers. This finding invokes the concept of power relations as responsible for the lack of courage to engage lecturers, presupposing comfort in engaging peers. The value of face-to-face tutorial sessions is confirmed by a study in the context of distance education (44). The study shows that tutorial sessions, collaboration, and assessment have a positive effect on student performance. It stands to reason that the absence of adequate, deliberate, and more focused face-to-face tutorials undercuts the additional benefits of ECP.

6   Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis of results shows that ECP makes transition easy for many students. However, students with no prior commercial subjects' knowledge appear to experience peculiar challenges during transition. These challenges relate to workload, and lecturer-student relations. The study implies a need for studies that focus on the exploration of student transitional experience in particular academic disciplines within the faculty to shed light on the differences and reasons of such differences for how transition is experienced.

In terms of access and adaptation the study revealed challenges related to student-lecturer relationships, evolving personal responsibility, and the importance of social and peer learning during the transitioning stage. It turns out that power-differentials between ECP students and lecturers may prevent the necessary interaction in lectures. Thus, for a richer experience, lecturers have to be aware of the power dynamics at play, create conditions that minimize or eliminate these. Moreover, tutors and tutorials appear to be crucial in overcoming the challenges experienced between lecturer and student, making it important to closely monitor them in a more structured way. This could be done by ensuring that tutors are well trained and prepared and that their pedagogic strategies enhance discussion and dialogue between and amongst students, and between tutors and students.

The findings also expose how experiences of students with no prior knowledge of commercial subjects differ, and how the additional time can even be more vital in their transitioning process. Apart from that, this suggests a need for further research into the experiences of students with no commercial subjects, a distinction and nuances this study had not fully explored. In the final analysis, the experience of students depends on institutions putting deliberate structural mechanisms at the institutional and lecturer level.

To address the technology and blended learning gap, this study recommends a review on the timing of the training provided to student over the academic year. There should be a systematic way on the provision of training to ensure that students benefit from the training. It is also important to acknowledge that student experience a cultural shock which needs to be addressed through the provision of outside the classroom student support tailor made to the specific students' needs. The study further recommends that the student orientation approach be reviewed and be done in staggered approach to allow the provision of continuous support to student in their process of transition. There is also a need to have synergy among all stakeholders this helps the university to avoid duplication and competing initiatives stakeholders (student affairs, student governance, departments and faculties) need to work together and integrate events that benefit all students. It also involves creating conditions for dissemination of accurate ECP information, and more focused orientation to dispel stereotypes attached to the ECP. Importantly, lecturers must engage the stereotypes about the programme to boost student confidence in relation to their counterparts in the mainstream programme. These recommendations could be useful for HEIs offering ECPs in general, and more particularly those that have a pool of predominantly Black students from rural communities and poor socio-economic backgrounds.

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