The history of segregation in South African education means that the tertiary sector faces serious challenges in the post-apartheid era. Access and retention of students in higher education has become increasingly important, especially at the first year level where student attrition is greatest and the costs for the individual, the institution and society (Tinto, 1993) are substantial. This paper reports on the development of a student peer mentoring programme in the engineering faculty at the University of Cape Town which forms part of a larger academic development initiative aimed at improving graduate rates. An evaluation of the programme reveals its worth to both senior undergraduate mentors and first year students although there are areas where the programme is not functioning optimally. The findings provide a basis from which to develop the programme further and attempt to improve its capacity for maximizing student retention in South African higher education.

Equity and social redress are key for real development and transformation to occur in higher education systems in South Africa (Akoojee, 2002). Government policies have pressured institutions to increase the throughput of black graduates. Tension however exists between on the one hand, redress and equity, where institutions are required to ensure greater access and diversity in the student body, and on the other hand being committed to providing high quality education (Mabokela, 1997; Pavlich, Orkin, and Spinola, 1993; Zuma, 1996 as quoted in Akoojee, 2002; Scott, Yeld, McMillan, and Hall, 2005) to those very students who enter the system with a sub-optimal secondary education. Although the government has invested considerable funds in foundation or extended curriculum programmes (Department of Education, 2001, 2006), it is argued that these very programmes may inadvertently be acting as a ‘mask’ for the perpetuation of social privilege (Kloot, 2009). They typically provide intensive academic support to a small group of students in an effort to retain them. What is overlooked is the academic, social and emotional adjustment experienced by the majority of students entering mainstream curricula.

The demand for engineers in industry has placed pressure on engineering faculties to increase graduate rates. Scott, Yeld, and Hendry’s (2007) research shows that by the end of 2004 South African institutions graduated only 32% of engineering students within four years and 54% within 5 years for a four year engineering degree. Thus while access to higher education and the demographics of the student population may be improving, retention of engineering students is an area that requires attention. The Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment at the University of Cape Town has prioritised academic development as one of the means of improving graduate rates.
This has translated into the growth of the foundation programme for first year students as well as the appointment of a clinical psychologist and academic development lecturers within the faculty. Not unlike institutions elsewhere, the problem that South African higher education faces is retaining first year students where the greatest attrition rates are reported (Essack and Juwah, 2007; Scott, Yeld, and Hendry, 2007). Many first year students find themselves psychologically unprepared for the demands of tertiary education and the extent to which institutions manage students’ struggles has implications for their retention (Bailie, 1998; Swail, 2004). Tinto’s (1997, 2006) theory of student integration argues that the more students are able to be academically and socially integrated with the faculty, staff and their peers in the institution, the more likely they are to persist with their studies. Similarly, students feeling disconnected and alienated from the academic and social culture of institutions tend to feel marginalised and this impacts on their academic progress, making them susceptible to early withdrawal (Astin, 1993; Case, 2007; Mandew, 2003; Peel, 2000). Thus, higher education institutions have a responsibility to reflect on their position in the changing political climate and their ability to address aspects of students’ lives such as their relationship with the institution and life skills (Scott, Yeld, and Hendry, 2007).

The past three decades has shown the value of peer mentoring programmes in higher education settings, resulting in improved orientation, retention, and success of students (Campbell and Campbell, 2007; Jacobi, 1991; Johnson, 2002; Kahn and Nauta, 2001; Salinitri 2005; Terrion, Philion, and Leonard, 2007) and the benefits for the mentor, mentee and the institution are well documented (Johnson, 2007; Pope and Van Dyke, 1999; Treston, 1999).

This paper reports on the development of a student peer mentoring programme in the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment at the University of Cape Town which forms part of a larger academic development initiative aimed at improving graduate outputs. The programme is dependent on volunteering senior undergraduate students who are trained to mentor first year students studying towards an engineering degree. The evaluation of the programme took the form of first year students completing a self-report paper questionnaire at the onset of a lecture and mentors completing their questionnaire electronically. The evaluation yielded mixed findings. Peer mentoring clearly benefited some students in their adjustment to the institution. Specific mentors’ personal attributes enabled the establishment of successful mentoring relationships, where encouragement, advice and academic assistance was provided. Gains were reciprocal with 89% of mentors reporting that the programme contributed towards their personal development. Confidence in the programme was expressed in 93% of mentors feeling that it was an initiative worth continuing and 79% of first year students agreeing that it be recommended to future first year students. This was despite many unfavourable experiences of mentors where their professionalism and commitment to the programme was suspect. It is evident that while mentors began with noble intentions they appear either to lose interest or become overwhelmed with their own workload as the academic year progresses. On the other hand, some mentors reported feeling challenged by the apathy of first year students who failed to maximise the opportunity available to them.
The different attitudes towards mentoring that manifested as a mentoring culture in some departments was particularly pertinent to its successful implementation. In departments where a mentoring culture was not well established, mentors felt poorly supported by the academic staff and first year students themselves recommended closer monitoring of mentors. The findings point to the key role of academic staff in the mentoring programme who model the mentoring relationship in their interaction with student mentors. While their involvement in the programme may be perceived as a drain on resources in an already demanding academic teaching environment, it is imperative that structural changes be put in place for the programme to be both efficient and sustainable. A pervasive finding concerns the evolving institutional culture of student development in the faculty. Mentors and first year students alike alluded to the potential of the mentoring programme provided it is seriously endorsed at both the departmental and faculty level. The findings provide a foundation from which to develop the programme further and to begin improving its capacity for maximizing student retention in South African higher education.

References


