

# Exploring the Psychological Impact of Access to Higher Education through the Extended Curriculum Programme: A Case Study of a Historically Disadvantaged University in South Africa



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## ABSTRACT

This paper explored the psychological impact of access to higher education through the Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) at a Historically Disadvantaged University (HDI) in South Africa. The researchers used the qualitative approach and adopted a case-study research design. Focus group interviews were used as a data collection tool/instrument with 40 students enrolled for ECP from level one to level four. Four focus groups were developed, and each focus group comprised ten members. On the other hand, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted individually among eight tutors teaching students enrolled on ECP and two HoDs from the two selected faculties. Purposive sampling was used to select participants, focusing on students enrolled on ECP from level one to level four. The results reveal a stigma associated with ECP. As a result, students assigned to ECP were being labelled as less capable by those who joined the university through mainstream. As a result, mainstream students did not include ECP students in their class groups after their integration into the mainstream. The results further showed that some lecturers viewed ECP students as less intelligent. The study recommends awareness campaigns both to support students in the ECP program and to educate others students about the ECP programme to eliminate stigmatization or discrimination against them. There is need for a cultural shift in the way both lecturers and mainstream students view the ECP programme.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Council on Higher Education has raised concerns about the quality of education in South African universities and the number of students who join tertiary institutions versus the few numbers of those who manage to graduate.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> South Africa, Task Team on Undergraduate Curriculum Structure, and Njabulo Simakahle Ndebele, "A Proposal for Undergraduate Curriculum Reform in South Africa: The Case for a Flexible Curriculum Structure: Report of the Task Team on Undergraduate Curriculum Structure," *Council on Higher Education*, 2013.

Statistics show a dropout rate of 50% across many universities in South Africa.<sup>2</sup> Students at Walter Sisulu University (WSU) and the University of Venda (UNIVEN), both rural, historically disadvantaged institutions, were among the most impacted.<sup>3</sup> However, the reasons behind student dropout in higher education are multifaceted. According to researchers such as Casanova et.al., the lack of appropriate selection criteria during the admission process from high school to tertiary education is one of the factors leading to such poor performance.<sup>4</sup> Some attribute student dropout to being enrolled in courses not related to their career aspirations. Others connect it to the use of invalid and unreliable admission criteria, resulting in students being admitted to programmes where they struggle. An example of this was the situation in OECD countries where the dropout rate rose from 35% in 2005 to 64.5% in 2018, and in countries such as Luxembourg, Hungary, Sweden, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, this rate was higher than 70%.<sup>5</sup>

Other studies have posited that many students dropped out of university during their first year of studies between 2016 and 2017.<sup>6</sup> The rate of dropouts was more prominent in 2021 among black students compared to white students in South Africa, with the problem believed to stem from the under-preparedness of the students, who matriculated from rural schools which lack resources.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the Department of Higher Education (DHET) introduced the Extended Curriculum Programme in order to correct these inequities inherited from apartheid.<sup>8</sup> The programme is based on the same curriculum as the mainstream programme, but has additional content intrinsic to the mainstream curriculum, meant to help support students toward success.<sup>9</sup> The additional curriculum material means these students take longer to complete their qualifications, usually by an additional year. Students admitted to the extended programme are provided with supplementary learning opportunities and student support to complete the requirements for the qualification.<sup>10</sup> However, these measures have not improved the throughput rate.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, although all the support is provided to these students, and the likely causes of increased dropout have been explored and

<sup>2</sup> Aradhana Tewari, "Exploring Volunteering Experiences of South Asian Indians and Their Intersections with Community Identity and Daily Life in Canada" (University of Waterloo, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Chrissie Boughy and Sioux McKenna, *Understanding Higher Education: Alternative Perspectives* (African Minds, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.47622/9781928502210>.

<sup>4</sup> Joana R Casanova et al., "Dimensionality and Reliability of a Screening Instrument for Students At-Risk of Dropping out from Higher Education," *Studies in Educational Evaluation* 68 (2021): 100957.

<sup>5</sup> Shahzaf Iqbal, Che Azlan Bin Taib, and Mohd Rizal Razalli, "The Nexus between Leadership Styles and Organizational Performance: The Mediating Role of Quality Culture," *Quality Assurance in Education* 31, no. 4 (2023): 600–615.

<sup>6</sup> Annet Caines Mitchell, "A Qualitative Multi-Case Study of African American Male Students Dropout Rate in Special Education in the Public School System" (Northcentral University, 2021); Chaunda L Scott and Eunice N Ivala, *Transformation of Higher Education Institutions in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Routledge New York, NY, 2019); Alfredo Guzmán, Sandra Barragán, and Favio Cala-Vitery, "Comparative Analysis of Dropout and Student Permanence in Rural Higher Education," *Sustainability* 14, no. 14 (2022): 8871.

<sup>7</sup> Andres Gonzalez-Nucamendi et al., "Predictive Analytics Study to Determine Undergraduate Students at Risk of Dropout," in *Frontiers in Education*, vol. 8 (Frontiers Media SA, 2023), 1244686; Monica Otu and Zamambo Mkhize, "Understanding Black African Student Attrition in the Context of Transformation in South African Higher Education Institutions," *Journal of African Foreign Affairs* 5 (April 26, 2018): 149–71, <https://doi.org/10.31920/2056-5658/2018/v5n1a8>; K. Gernetzky, "Nzimande Anti Action on High Varsity Drop-out Rate," *Business Day* 6, 2012; O. Neves, "South African High University Dropout Rates: Why and What Can Be Done," Kezi Communications, 2008, <http://www.kezi.co.za>; K. MacGregor, "South Africa: Student Drop-out Rates Alarming," *University World News*, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Rubby Dhunpath and Renuka Vithal, *Alternative Access to Higher Education: Underprepared Students or Underprepared Institutions?* (Pearson Education, 2014); Lis Lange, "20 Years of Higher Education Curriculum Policy in South Africa," *Journal of Education (University of KwaZulu-Natal)*, no. 68 (2017): 31–57.

<sup>9</sup> Vuyo Mthethwa, "Students' Participation in University Governance in South Africa," *AOSIS*, 2022; Tennyson Mgutshini, "Extended Curriculum Programmes: Challenges and Opportunities," 2022; T M Leshoro and A Jacobs, "Challenges to Admissions in the Extended Curriculum Programme of the Faculty of Business and Management Sciences," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 33, no. 1 (2019): 173–83; Vincent Tinto, "Selected Publications of Vincent Tinto," *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 2, no. 2 (2014); Trish Gibbon, Johan Muller, and Heather Nel, "Higher Education and an Expanded Post-School Education System," *Shaping the Future of South Africa's Youth* 129 (2012).

<sup>10</sup> Jamil Salmi and Anna D'Addio, "Policies for Achieving Inclusion in Higher Education," *Policy Reviews in Higher Education* 5, no. 1 (2021): 47–72.

<sup>11</sup> Scott and Ivala, *Transformation of Higher Education Institutions in Post-Apartheid South Africa*; Vusi Gumede, "Higher Education in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Challenges and Prospects," *Tertiary Institutional Transformation in South Africa Revisited* (Africa Century Editions Press (ACE PRESS), 2020); Vivienne Bozalek, "Slow Scholarship: Propositions for the Extended Curriculum Programme," *Education as Change* 25 (2021): 21-pages.

documented, there is a dearth of documentation about the psychological impact of the extended programmes on students at the university under study.

Based on this background, the present study sought to explore the psychological impact of the ECP on students admitted to the programme to identify any shortcomings that may require redress, with a view to proposing recommendations that could make the programme more effective in achieving the desired purpose.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Student academic performance is currently the biggest challenge in higher education and is the focus of many researchers, including students in the ECP. The Extended Curriculum Programme was initially designed for previously disadvantaged students, with the perception that these students, because of poor educational backgrounds, need additional support to succeed in their studies. This perception is enhanced by the fact that the ECP student group is usually smaller compared to the mainstream student group.<sup>12</sup> These authors further reported that at some institutions, the variation in the availability of resources and the degree of seriousness with which the ECP is taken can negatively influence the success of the programme. While there is the understanding that ECP only benefits underprepared students, there are also many mainstream students who struggle with the transition from school to university.<sup>13</sup>

Originally, the ECP was intended to improve access to higher education institutions, but in the last decade, the emphasis of the extended programme has been shifted to also include equity of outcomes.<sup>14</sup> The ineffective placement mechanisms of students into extended programmes are a major drawback of the programme. Regardless of policies put in place to improve the throughput of students, some institutions have allowed access for students who do not meet the entry requirements for that institution. As a result, these students who are so severely underprepared for tertiary education have no prospect of succeeding, according to the Council on Higher Education.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the ECP curriculum structure, in some cases, is the same as the mainstream in structural design, without any additional foundational material intended to suit the intended extended curriculum.<sup>16</sup>

Academic performance is affected by either social, psychological, environmental or personal factors, and these factors vary from one society to another, and one individual to another. Stigmatisation towards students in the ECP programmes is one of the biggest limitations that psychologically prevents ECP students from functioning at optimal levels. Stigmatisation is a global social phenomenon that leads to the marginalization of a specific person or a group of people, like those in extended curriculum programmes.<sup>17</sup> According to Jenkins, stigma refers to the gap between what is perceived and reality, and the shame that comes with its discovery by others.<sup>18</sup>

Due to the preconceptions held by some members of society, stigma eventually leads to discrimination and loss of dignity. Furthermore, studies have indicated that ECP students may initially feel a sense of isolation, which exacerbates stigmatisation or perceptions of academic inferiority.<sup>19</sup> This has been

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<sup>12</sup> Chantal Julius, "Nursing Students' Perceptions of an Extended Undergraduate Curriculum Programme within a Higher Education Institution in the Western Cape Province" (Stellenbosch University, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> James Garraway, "Field Knowledge and Learning on Foundation Programmes," *Provision of Extended Curriculum Programmes in South Africa*, 2010, 31.

<sup>14</sup> Randhir Rawatlal and Rubby Dhunpath, "Stretching the Undergraduate Curriculum: A Compensatory Response to Curriculum Modelling," *Alternation* 12 (2014): 171–79.

<sup>15</sup> South African Council on Higher Education (CHE), "A Proposal for Undergraduate Curriculum Reform in South Africa: The Case for a Flexible Curriculum Structure.," 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Joana R Casanova et al., "The Dropout of First-Year STEM Students: Is It Worth Looking beyond Academic Achievement?," *Sustainability* 15, no. 2 (2023): 1253.

<sup>17</sup> Luca Pingani et al., "Stigma in the Context of Schools: Analysis of the Phenomenon of Stigma in a Population of University Students," *BMC Psychiatry* 16, no. 1 (2016): 29.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity* (Routledge, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> Palesa Makhetha-Kosi et al., "Experiences and Perceptions of Extended Curriculum Programme Students Transitioning from High School to a University Offering Blended Learning Courses," in *University of Fort Hare Teaching and Learning Conference (UFHTL 2023)* (Atlantis

supported by the studies of Sibiyi and Mahlanze, who mention that students studying nursing at the Durban University of Technology have expressed feelings of stigmatisation as a result of being on the ECP, and as a result, their confidence is hampered.<sup>20</sup> In the same vein, the report concluded that stigmatisation and lack of confidence among ECP students gravely affected their motivation and the quality of their success.<sup>21</sup> Worldwide research has been conducted about student access and success, but there is little focus on the psychosocial effect of some intervention programmes, for example, the students assigned to access programmes like ECP. Psychological factors have been shown to predict college retention and grade point average (GPA) even when controlling for traditional predictors of college success.<sup>22</sup> Yet, unfortunately, little is documented in the literature on the psychological impact of the programme on students enrolled in ECP programmes. Several studies have concluded that psychological factors are critical to success in the university setting.<sup>23</sup>

### Psychological Impact of the ECP Programme

Stigmatisation of students presents a significant impediment to the optimal functioning of an Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP). Research by Mabokela examined the academic development programmes at two historically white universities and revealed a predominant focus on addressing students' deficiencies even after five years in the program.<sup>24</sup> This approach not only stigmatises black students as inferior but also hinders the universities' capacity to critically evaluate the relevance of their academic programs for incoming student cohorts.

Furthermore, a study in South Africa highlighted the psychological impact of a bridging programme on admitted students. Those placed in the programme felt discriminated against compared to mainstream admissions.<sup>25</sup> Students expressed a sense of being viewed as academic failures and inferiors. The study also indicated that students in the bridging programme struggled with feelings of academic inadequacy and inferiority compared to their peers in mainstream programmes, often hesitating to disclose their program enrolment. Some students even prematurely discontinued their studies, citing negative treatment from lecturers who were perceived to discriminate against them and question their abilities.<sup>26</sup>

The discrimination experienced by students enrolled in the Extended Curriculum Programme in South African universities has led to feelings of inadequacy and alienation, particularly as the program is perceived to be intended exclusively for black students.<sup>27</sup> Aaron noted that students in foundation programs exhibit feelings of inadequacy and alienation, particularly when such programs are seemingly designated for black students, leading to disregard by mainstream staff and fellow students in other programmes.<sup>28</sup>

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Press, 2024), 33–52; Nthabiseng Audrey Ogude et al., “Can Extended Curriculum Programmes Be Improved through Engagement with Students Using Appreciative Inquiry?,” *South African Journal of Higher Education* 33, no. 4 (2019): 219–36.

<sup>20</sup> Maureen N Sibiyi and Hazel T Mahlanze, “Experiences of Facilitators Regarding the Extended Curriculum Programme Offered at a Higher Education Institution in the Province of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa,” *Curationis* 41, no. 1 (2018): 1–6.

<sup>21</sup> Irfan Mushtaq and Shabana Nawaz Khan, “Factors Affecting Students’ Academic Performance,” *Global Journal of Management and Business Research* 12, no. 9 (2012): 17–22.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Tindle et al., “Developing and Validating a University Needs Instrument to Measure the Psychosocial Needs of University Students,” *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 92, no. 4 (2022): 1550–70.

<sup>23</sup> Moin Syed et al., “The Role of Self-efficacy and Identity in Mediating the Effects of STEM Support Experiences,” *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 19, no. 1 (2019): 7–49; Simpiwe Sobuwa and Sioux McKenna, “The Obstinate Notion That Higher Education Is a Meritocracy,” *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning* 7, no. 2 (2019): 1–15; Tindle et al., “Developing and Validating a University Needs Instrument to Measure the Psychosocial Needs of University Students.”

<sup>24</sup> Reitumetse Obakeng Mabokela, “Unpacking the Impact of Inclusion and Equity Policies in South Africa and Ghana,” in *Handbook of Education Policy* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), 257–72.

<sup>25</sup> Chauraya Efiritha, Matope Nogget, and Maruzani Nyevero, “Voices of Conflict: Students’ and Lecturers’ Perceptions of the Utility of the Bridging Program at University.,” *Online Submission*, 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Zaynab Essack and Michael Quayle, “Students’ Perceptions of a University Access (Bridging) Programme for Social Science, Commerce and Humanities,” *Perspectives in Education* 25, no. 1 (2007): 71–84.

<sup>27</sup> Catherine Hutchings and James Garraway, “Provision of Extended Curriculum Programmes in South Africa,” 2010.

<sup>28</sup> Samantha Gale Aaron, *Safe When Centered: A Critical Race Critique of Campus Climate and Belonging for First-Generation Students of Color at Historically Black Colleges & Predominately White Institutions* (Eastern Michigan University, 2023).

Originally designed for previously disadvantaged students, the ECP is often associated with perceptions of being slower or having learning disabilities, leading to potential marginalisation due to the smaller size of the ECP student cohort compared to the general student population.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study applied the Attribution Theory to explore the psychological effects of the Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) on students. The Attribution Theory categorizes performance outcomes by examining internal and external factors that influence success or failure. Understanding this interplay helps organizations and individuals optimize performance and improve outcomes. In the context of ECP, situational factors like inadequate high school preparation and unstructured free time are identified as key challenges affecting student motivation and retention.

The theory also considers dispositional factors, such as intrinsic motivation, to assess how being placed in the ECP impacts students' self-perception and decision-making. If students eligible for mainstream programs are assigned to the ECP due to logistical reasons, their motivation may decline. The stigma associated with the ECP, particularly from mainstream peers, can further diminish confidence. However, when students' experiences align with the expectations of their social group, confidence is bolstered. In line with Heider's Attribution Theory, students' interpretations of their ECP experiences reflect their self-perception, influencing future academic decisions, self-esteem, and belief in their capabilities. The Attribution Theory offers a valuable framework for understanding how ECP students interpret their academic experiences.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The qualitative approach was used in the study to gain in-depth information on the phenomena under investigation. By employing the qualitative method in this study, the researchers obtained data through focus group interviews with ECP student participants and individual interviews with ECP lecturers at the university under study.

### **Population and Sampling**

Two faculties at the university where the study was conducted, which offer the ECP, were the target population of the study. This constituted 200 students registered in ECP, 36 lecturers teaching in the ECP and 2 ECP Heads of Departments at the University. The sample was selected from that population. Purposive sampling, which consisted of 40 students enrolled in ECP from level 1 to level 4.9, academics teaching ECP students in these levels, and 2 HODs from both faculties were used in the study.

After consent was obtained from the participants, qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews with eleven staff members, which included 9 academics and 2 HODs from the two faculties. Focus group interviews were conducted with 4 focus groups, each consisting of 10, 8, 12 and 10 members respectively and captured on tape in addition to notes taken for cross-checking purposes. This method allowed for in-depth responses and flexibility in seeking elaboration.

### **Data Analysis**

The study utilised a combination of semantic and latent coding. Semantic coding utilised the following theme: "Applied to their programme of interest" which includes the following descriptive codes: a) qualified to be in the main programme, but there was delayed response, placed in ECP at registration: b) qualified to be in main, but was placed in relevant ECP programme instead: and c) did not qualify for main, placed in relevant ECP program. The latent code utilised a theme entitled "Demotivating aspects of ECP to students" as the interpretive initial code, which included the following aspects: a) disappointed and trying to change course, b) I consider ECP as a delayer of my progress, and c) confusion about the course code irritate. Therefore, in this study, both semantic and latent coding were utilised. No attempt was made to prioritise

semantic coding over latent coding or vice versa. Rather, semantic codes were produced when meaningful semantic information was interpreted, and latent codes were produced when meaningful latent information was interpreted.

Following the thematic analysis, the following steps were used to analyse and develop themes from student-focused interviews, lecturer and HOD interviews (qualitative data) as follows:

- 1) Initial open coding was performed by thorough reading of relevant texts or narratives, which were selected for each of the questions asked and placed in new subtexts or files for ESL students and academics, respectively.
- 2) A definition of the content coding with a short phrase based on the text was used.
- 3) Codes were sorted into clusters of categories.
- 4) Themes were then generated from a coherent representation of the content.

This study followed strict ethical guidelines to protect and respect all participants. Approval was granted by the University Ethics Committee. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks, and gave written consent. Participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time without any consequences. Efforts were made to minimize risk and ensure participants' comfort, including providing refreshments and a suitable interview environment. While complete anonymity was not possible due to the nature of interviews, confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms, and all data was used solely for academic purposes.

## PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

The results are presented according to the following themes: Students' disappointment and discomfort with the ECP, ECP as a delayer of progress, and the Effect of the Stigma attached to the ECP by lecturers and mainstream students.

### Student disappointment and discomfort with the ECP

As pointed out by the participants, three of the four group participants were so disappointed with the programme that they had made attempts to change the programme as shown in the following verbatim responses.

#### Focus Groups

*"I am not happy at all about this programme. I don't know what this programme is about. Why didn't they place me in the one I applied for?"*

*"My major frustration is that I don't know what I'm doing and where I am going to end up. What is the programme about, and why was I assigned to this programme? I know I passed my grade 12."*

*"I would not be in ECP if I had an idea of university programmes. Instead would be at home if not accepted by other institutions."*

*"I can never be comfortable being in ECP while my friends are in the mainstream, the worst part is that I passed my grade twelve with good levels."*

*"In fact, there is a lot of confusion as a result, though I am in level 3 by being at university, according to the programme I'm doing level 2."*

*"I didn't know much about ECP, and there was no information given about it."*

*"I have been trying to change to other programmes within WSU."*

*“When I heard about the programme from senior students, I was shocked since I knew my marks were too good to be in ECP.”*

*“I have been trying to change the programme, but thank God it's my final year.”*

*“I've not been comfortable being in this programme, and there were so many things that were causing the discomfort.”*

The respondents indicated that there were unclear goals of the programme, and they could not be assisted by their lecturers, who seemed equally confused. Furthermore, they felt that they qualified for mainstream, but were placed in ECP, which in the end increased their time of study at the University compared to the other parts, and yet they came equally prepared for the mainstream workload.

### **ECP as a delayer of progress**

Participants expressed disappointment about being assigned to the ECP, as revealed in the four focus groups. They felt the programme lacked clear goals, which left both the students and their lecturers confused and unable to provide effective support. Furthermore, they believed they were qualified for mainstream education but were placed in ECP, which extended their study time at the University, even though they were equally prepared for the mainstream workload. This is evidenced in the following verbatim responses:

#### **Focus Groups**

*“Sometimes I feel that writing examinations at the end of the year is delaying our progress like any other university student.”*

*“I can never be comfortable being in ECP while my friends are in the mainstream, the worst part is I passed my grade twelve with good levels.”*

*“I heard from those who graduated from varsity before that there is too much pressure at university, so I came prepared, so I feel as if ECP disorganized me.”*

*“At first, I used to be active, but not anymore. What frustrates me more is the fact that we are being ignored by our lecturers because our lectures are being postponed now and again.”*

### **The Stigma Attached to the ECP by Mainstream Students**

#### **ECP students view themselves as despised by mainstream students**

The four focus group participants expressed that they felt looked down upon by their mainstream counterparts, which made them uncomfortable in their presence. The mainstream students considered the programme (ECP) to be useless, and as a result, they did not want the ECP students to be included in their discussion groups, as they viewed them as slow learners. This is pointed out by the four focus groups in the following verbatim responses.

#### **Focus Groups**

*“My roommate thinks that he is better than me when it comes to academic performance, which is not the case.”*

*“Mainstream students think we are less intelligent; that is why we are doing year-long modules.”*

*“Mainstreamers think that ECP is a useless programme, as a result, chances of getting employed if you are from this programme are slim.”*

*“I never felt good about joining the university through ECP. As a result, I stopped caring for books, and my performance dropped. For all these years, I would have still been trying to apply to other universities.”*

### **ECP students feel as if lecturers treat them as less Achievers**

The participants asserted that they were ignored as ECP students by their lecturers so much that their classes were postponed more than necessary without being duly informed with a proper explanation for the postponement. This result has led to laziness by some members of the focus groups since they do not have frequent classes. Moreover, the focus group members mentioned that in class, the lecturers would only engage those who joined through mainstream, and even some questions would be for the mainstream students. Lecturers would even refer to the mainstream students by their names to show that they were known students. This has created divisions because one group thinks they are better than the other. This type of treatment by their lecturers aggravated them more into an inferiority complex.

### **Feedback from the focus group discussion**

*“Lecturers focus more on the ones in the main programme with little time for us.”*

*“Some lecturers do not treat us like the main ones, even during discussion in class, they will assume that the ones who can come up with ideas are the mainstream students.”*

*“When trying to voice out your opinion, like any varsity lecturer, the mainstream students do not take me seriously.”*

*“Some lecturers do not treat us like the main ones; even during discussions in class, they will assume that the ones who can come up with ideas are the mainstream students.”*

*“The Lecturers focus more on those who join through mainstream, as a result, they even remember their names. In some instances, I will feel like not attending lectures since I feel as if no one noticed my presence as someone who joined through ECP.”*

### **Psychological Effect of the Stigma Attached to ECP by the Lecturers**

#### **Level 1 and 2 Lecturers' data on Inferior Treatment of ECP students by Mainstream Students**

#### **ECP students feel despised by lecturers**

The study conducted among academic staff participants found a shared sentiment regarding the discrimination experienced by students who join the university through the Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) compared to their mainstream counterparts. The study revealed that lecturers felt that mainstream students believed those who joined through ECP were less capable, resulting in a stereotype that they were slow learners. Shockingly, some academic staff members also hold this view, contributing to the labelling and stigmatisation of ECP students. The negative psychosocial impact of this stigmatization on some students admitted into the programme is evident, and it is disheartening to observe that some students internalize such demeaning social recognition, leading them to lose their sense of self and give up.

#### **Level 1 Lecturers**

*“...the ones in the main think that they are better than the ones in the ECP.”*

#### **Level 3 Lecturer**

*“... the only thing I noticed is that the students who are in the mainstream think that they are better than the students in ECP.”*

### **Level 1 & 2 Lecturer2**

*“...stereotype among my students, especially those who join through mainstream, they think they are better or more intelligent.”*

### **Level 2 Lecturer**

*“Since there is always that type of behaviour among our students, to think that they are better than those who join through ECP, I always tell them to change to their advantage, since the ones who join through ECP have experience of university life better than the mainstream students.”*

Level 1 and 2 Lecturer:

*“...the ones in the mainstream think that they are better than the ones in the ECP.”*  
*“I am a product of ECP myself with the same experience as the current ECP students. As I underwent discrimination by my lecturers then, I make sure that my ECP students feel welcomed in my class and also assure them that they are not less intelligent or should not reject other programmes...”*

*I believe that we all know that students who joined through the main program undermine the ones who joined through ECP.”*

### **Level 4 Lecturers**

*“...stereotype among my students, especially those who join through mainstream, they think they are better or more intelligent.”*

The study revealed that lecturers felt that mainstream students believed those who joined through ECP were less capable, resulting in a stereotype that they were slow learners. Shockingly, some academic staff members also hold this mentality, contributing to the labelling and stigmatisation of ECP students. The negative psychosocial impact of this stigmatization on some students admitted into the programme is evident, and it is disheartening to observe that some students internalize such demeaning social recognition, leading them to lose their sense of self and give up.

### **A synthesis of the lecturers' data on the inferior treatment of ECP students by mainstream students**

The study conducted among academic staff participants found a shared sentiment regarding the discrimination experienced by students who join the university through the Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) compared to their mainstream counterparts. The study revealed that lecturers felt that mainstream students believed those who joined through ECP were less capable, resulting in a stereotype that they were slow learners. Shockingly, some academic staff members also hold this mentality, contributing to the labelling and stigmatisation of ECP students.

### **ECP Students' Negative Perspective on Recommending Potential Applicants to the ECP**

#### **Focus Groups**

*“I won't recommend this ECP to someone I'm related to because I wouldn't feel fine if someone I know is suffering like the way I did when I was still in level one, and I'm still suffering with workloads, though I'm doing level 4.”*

*“I won't recommend the program to someone related to me because I will feel bad if someone I know suffers the way I have suffered.”*

*“I have already mentioned ECP to those in my neighbourhood that if they get a chance to be at university, they should have a clear understanding of ECP. Also, they should know that it is for students who have not met the requirement, so that they do not end up being labelled as less intelligent.”*

*“I would not recommend ECP to other learners I know. I will explain it to them as a wake-up call, as I'm already a victim, so that those who are still in high school should understand what the programme is about and who is supposed to be assigned to it. Unlike myself, I never had that explanation.”*

### ***A synthesis of Focus group data regarding recommending the ECP to others***

The study responses among the participants of Focus Groups 3 and 4 shared negative sentiments regarding their experiences with ECP. For instance, participants in Focus Group 3 indicated that they would probably provide other students with information related to ECP as a way of deterring or warning them about the programme, since they felt that others might not survive the discrimination associated with being in ECP. On the other hand, the majority of participants in Focus Group 4 emphasised the fact that they would not like their relatives, friends, or acquaintances to be discriminated against by mainstream students. In addition, they believed that the lecturers themselves did not understand the ECP programme. Moreover, the participants of Focus Group 4 stressed the fact that they would not allow new students to pass through what they experienced and therefore would never recommend ECP as an alternative. Such ECP student experiences undermine the proper purpose for which the programme was designed by CHE.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Psychological demotivating effect of ECP on students**

Psychological factors which affect student motivation include the locus of control, a sense of value and purpose, self-esteem, feelings of success, and it is shown that the problems are related to the teaching profession, curriculum, working conditions, students and their parents, colleagues and school administrators, and physical conditions.<sup>29</sup> From respondents' interviews (by both academic staff and student focus group participants), several issues were raised, which could demoralise students in ECP. Students felt that there was no justification for their admission to ECP since their matric performances were equally good and had qualified them to be in the mainstream. There was no explanation whatsoever why they ended up in the ECP program while their counterparts with equal or lesser matric qualifications were in the mainstream. They even postulated that had they known, they would have rather remained home than been in ECP. These findings are similar to those of Uduak, who also stressed the issue of transparency in the assignment of students to the ECP of a few students from one of the universities in KwaZulu-Natal.<sup>30</sup> They seemed not to have a clue about how they ended up in ECP, and these factors affected students' motivation and thus affected their interest in settling into engaging with the programme and their approaches to learning. Furthermore, studies of Uleanya and Yasmin noticed poor social integration, stigmatization, inability to work independently, lack of critical thinking skills, and lack of self-confidence among students assigned to the programme.<sup>31</sup> The study also supports other researchers, who noticed a lack of confidence among students studying towards a nursing degree and were placed in ECP because of the stigma associated with being placed in ECP.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Turgay Han, Aysegül Takkaç-Tulgar, and Nilüfer Aybirdi, “Factors Causing Demotivation in EFL Learning Process and the Strategies Used by Turkish EFL Learners to Overcome Their Demotivation.,” *Advances in Language and Literary Studies* 10, no. 2 (2019): 56–65.

<sup>30</sup> Uduak Johnson, “Success or Failure? Student Experiences of the Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) in the College of Humanities” (University of Kwa Zulu-Natal, 2017).

<sup>31</sup> Chinaza Uleanya and Yasmin Rugbeer, “Investigation of First-year Learning Experiences in a Rural University in South Africa,” *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 8, no. 1 (2020): 29–46.

<sup>32</sup> Sibiya and Mahlanze, “Experiences of Facilitators Regarding the Extended Curriculum Programme Offered at a Higher Education Institution in the Province of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa.”

### **ECP as a Delayer of Progress**

The students in the ECP spend more years at university than their counterparts in the mainstream for no justification, and yet they are all from the same backgrounds. The extra time gained by ECP was not properly utilised; in most cases, it was free time, which had nothing to prepare them for the workload in later years of their study. They considered ECP a delay in their progress. Furthermore, the participants were so uncomfortable in the programme that they were always trying to change the course or the University if possible. According to Attribution Theory (situational factors), these factors can harm someone's self-esteem as a result of being tormented by their peers. This is probably due to the fact that they spent more time with no additional benefit in the programme, and in addition, they were perceived as if they were offered a favour to be at University by their peers.

These findings can be attributed to one of the factors of either Dispositional or Situational Attribution called the Locus of Control. In the field of psychology, the term locus is used to describe a specific place, situation, or location where a particular event or occurrence takes place. This location is where the causal category of attribution is located, meaning it is the source of the particular event or occurrence. The locus is a critical concept in psychology, as it is used to determine whether individuals attribute their successes or failures to internal or external factors. The students who were assigned to the ECP expressed a sense of being undervalued by their peers who were in the mainstream programme. They felt that the other students looked down on them because they were placed in ECP, which created a feeling of inferiority. This caused them to doubt their own abilities and resulted in a lack of confidence. Additionally, they felt that their reputation was being tarnished by being placed in ECP as if it were a reflection of their academic inability. This has resulted in a sense of frustration and disappointment among these students. Moreover, they felt that their self-confidence was depleted since they were viewed by others as students who failed to meet the university requirements.

However, as postulated by some researchers, in view of the above challenges or demotivation issues, for transition programs like ECP, there is a consensus that social connectedness and supportive environments play critical roles in how students in transition programs adjust to university transition.<sup>33</sup> Such transitional programmes had no effect on students' sense of belonging and acculturation, regardless of support from staff and fellow students. Contextual factors matter when trying to understand students' experiences in transition programmes.<sup>34</sup> Although the ECPs are created to mitigate some of the challenges that limit access and success for underrepresented students in South Africa, the programme's structure creates new challenges for the students. First, the additional year is financially burdensome for students who already come from impoverished backgrounds.<sup>35</sup> Second, the program is poorly understood in the wider university environment, leading to perceptions that the ECP is an inferior programme.<sup>36</sup>

### **The psychological effect of stigma attached to ECP students by mainstream students.**

This study looked at the psychological effect of stigma on students in ECP compared to those in the mainstream. As defined by Verma et.al., stigma is "the gap between the virtual and the actual, and the shame

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<sup>33</sup> Courtney Karmelita, "Advising Adult Learners during the Transition to College," *NACADA Journal* 40, no. 1 (2020): 64–79; Sanne G A Van Herpen et al., "A Head Start in Higher Education: The Effect of a Transition Intervention on Interaction, Sense of Belonging, and Academic Performance," *Studies in Higher Education* 45, no. 4 (2020): 862–77.

<sup>34</sup> Leshoro and Jacobs, "Challenges to Admissions in the Extended Curriculum Programme of the Faculty of Business and Management Sciences."

<sup>35</sup> Tosin Popoola, Nonhlanhla Khumalo, and Molebi Popoola, "Extended Complicated Punishment: Nursing Students' Experiences of a Transition Program," *Journal of Nursing Education* 61, no. 8 (2022): 477–82.

<sup>36</sup> Julius, "Nursing Students' Perceptions of an Extended Undergraduate Curriculum Programme within a Higher Education Institution in the Western Cape Province"; Popoola, Khumalo, and Popoola, "Extended Complicated Punishment: Nursing Students' Experiences of a Transition Program."

that attaches – or would attach – to its discovery by others.”<sup>37</sup> Maringe and Jenkins contended that one way stigma is sometimes generated is when those with more power stigmatize others who are less powerful in an effort to uphold inequalities between the groups.<sup>38</sup> The stigma, in this case, is predicated on the thought that ECP is for the less able and for students looking to earn a higher education through less rigorous study to complete only the minimum requirements to qualify for work, which informed what is referred to as psychosocial stigmatization aspects.

In this study, several aspects were raised by students with respect to the above. The findings of the study showed that ECP student participants were considered slow learners who did not pass the matriculation examination, and that they were just given a chance to join the University through a bridging course. They were considered less intelligent and did not stand a chance of employment after the completion of their studies. They were segregated when it came to group work as they were considered low performers.

Furthermore, the study findings noted that these ECP students had no relationship with their counterparts in the mainstream and avoided being identified as ECP students. ECP students further indicated that because of their treatment by both fellow mainstream students and their lecturers, they would not recommend anyone to join university through ECP unless it is adequately explained, so that one can make their own choice. These psychosocial stigmatising aspects are supported by other studies, which reported on community college programs in the United States of America that remain stigmatized as these programs were perceived to be for the less able and that the programmes themselves contribute to the demoralization.<sup>39</sup> Two characteristics that are critical to student success are self-concept and self-efficacy.<sup>40</sup> Self-concept refers to a person’s belief about himself or herself, in comparison with his or her peers.<sup>41</sup> Academic self-concept refers specifically to beliefs students hold about their own academic abilities in comparison to their peers, and Self-efficacy, a related construct, refers to a person’s confidence in their own ability to be successful in higher education.<sup>42</sup> It is therefore possible that the revelations as identified by this research finding, of psychosocial stigmatization aspects, can affect these ECP student with their academic progress. In order to counteract ECP students’ experience of stigma and to contribute to systemic transformation, a study by Ogude and Rollnick contends that a process of curricular redesign was started to embed the faculty’s ECPs more seamlessly in its regular curricula.<sup>43</sup> The main objective was to remove the stigmatising effects of the access model while ensuring that the equity and redress-based access granted to black students from challenging socioeconomic and educational environments would translate into academic success.<sup>44</sup> However, this is yet to be achieved in the present study site.

### **The Psychological effect of stigma attached to ECP by lecturers on ECP students.**

This study further looked at the psychological effect of stigma on students in ECP by lecturers referring to them as less achievers. The findings of the study revealed that some lecturers' behaviour towards ECP

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<sup>37</sup> Sunil K Verma, Pankaj Bharti, and Tushar Singh, “Does Stigma Always Have Negative Consequences?,” *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 28, no. 6 (2018): 495–507.

<sup>38</sup> Felix Maringe and Jennifer Jenkins, “Stigma, Tensions, and Apprehension: The Academic Writing Experience of International Students,” *International Journal of Educational Management* 29, no. 5 (2015): 609–26.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Gauthier, “A Renewed Examination of the Stigma Associated with Community College Career and Technical Education,” *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* 44, no. 10–12 (2020): 870–84.

<sup>40</sup> Matthew J Mayhew et al., *How College Affects Students: 21st Century Evidence That Higher Education Works*, vol. 1 (John Wiley & Sons, 2016).

<sup>41</sup> Marjorie Seaton et al., “The Reciprocal Relations between Self-Concept, Motivation and Achievement: Juxtaposing Academic Self-Concept and Achievement Goal Orientations for Mathematics Success,” in *Noncognitive Psychological Processes and Academic Achievement* (Routledge, 2017), 59–82.

<sup>42</sup> Mikyong Minsun Kim and Elisabeth Louise Kutscher, “College Students with Disabilities: Factors Influencing Growth in Academic Ability and Confidence,” *Research in Higher Education* 62, no. 3 (2021): 309–31.

<sup>43</sup> Nthabiseng Audrey Ogude and M Rollnick, “Ideological Positioning of Extended Curriculum Programmes—a Case Study of a Large South African Research University,” *South African Journal of Higher Education* 36, no. 2 (2022): 222–38.

<sup>44</sup> Ogude and Rollnick, “Ideological Positioning of Extended Curriculum Programmes—a Case Study of a Large South African Research University.”

students was indicative of this aspect. For instance, the ECP students were treated differently by their lecturers from their mainstream counterparts; for example, lecturers asked simpler questions while addressing ECP students compared to their mainstream counterparts, lecturers recognised their counterparts by their name but not those in ECP, and during group discussion, lecturers presumed that only those in the mainstream were the main contributors of ideas.

The study's findings revealed that students enrolled in the Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) often hesitate to ask questions to their lecturers, even when they struggle to grasp the material being taught. Consequently, they find it easier to connect with their fellow ECP students. Many of these students feel undervalued by their peers who are not part of the programme and perceive a sense of condescension directed toward them due to their ECP status, which has led to feelings of inferiority. This perception contributed to self-doubt and a lack of confidence among ECP students. Furthermore, they believed that their reputation suffered as a result of their association with the ECP, as if it reflected poorly on their academic abilities. This has led to significant frustration and disappointment, as they felt their self-confidence was undermined by being viewed as individuals who had not met the university's entry requirements.

Moreover, as a result, some of the ECP students felt that they should not be mixed with the mainstream until graduation. These findings confirm those of Makgobole et.al., who indicated that stigmatisation and a lack of confidence among the ECP students gravely affected their motivation and their chances of success and that such students who enrolled for extended curriculum degree programmes were stigmatized.<sup>45</sup> Yet one of the motives of the programme is to give access to inadequately prepared and previously disadvantaged students who may not be competent and decide to drop out before they finish their programmes.<sup>46</sup>

### **ECP Student Negative Views Regarding Recommending Potential Applicants to the ECP**

The findings of the study revealed that ECP students' views regarding recommending potential applicants to the ECP were that they were unwilling to recommend them to their fellow students. This was because they believed that the treatment they received from their counterparts in the mainstream, who believed that ECP was for slow learner students, was demeaning and uncalled for. Moreover, the findings revealed that mainstream students even assumed that ECP students were at university by chance since they had not passed their grade twelve in an acceptable manner, yet it was not the case. Furthermore, there was a lack of transparency related to the placement of students into ECP, such that they were placed into programme not related to their dream careers. It is therefore evident that with such revelations, these ECP students are unlikely to recommend potential applicants, well knowing these applicants were likely to undergo the endurance they went through.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The study's findings recommend that the University strictly adhere to the admission criteria policy for the extended curriculum program (ECP). Additionally, students assigned to the ECP should be properly informed about the program to ensure they understand its purpose. This is important to help students who may not be familiar with the differences between the ECP and the mainstream curriculum to make informed choices. It is also recommended that a special information desk be set up at the registration venue to provide specific guidance to potential ECP applicants, reducing the number of students who join the ECP without understanding its requirements and end up dropping out. Furthermore, the study recommends conducting awareness campaigns to highlight the value of the ECP, helping prospective ECP students make informed decisions and raising awareness among mainstream students to avoid stigmatizing or discriminating against ECP students. There is a need for a shift in the university's culture to better understand and support the ECP

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<sup>45</sup> Mokgadi Ursula Makgobole and Stanley Chibuzor Onwubu, "Exploring Students' Experience and Perceptions of the Somatology Extended Curriculum Programme at the Durban University of Technology," *Journal of Education (University of KwaZulu-Natal)*,no.82(2021): 60-77.

<sup>46</sup> Dhunpath and Vithal, *Alternative Access to Higher Education: Underprepared Students or Underprepared Institutions?*

and its students. It is recommended that university staff be educated about the challenges ECP students face and be prepared to adjust and accommodate these students to minimize their difficulties

## CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the psychological impact of access to higher education through the Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) at a Historically Disadvantaged University (HDI) in South Africa. The findings of the study have shown that the extended curriculum programme has a psychological impact on students assigned to the programme. This has been evidenced by the ECP students' lecturers teaching in the programme. It is recommended that school administrations conduct awareness campaigns to highlight the value of the ECP, to help prospective ECP students make informed decisions and raise awareness among mainstream students to avoid stigmatizing or discriminating against ECP students.

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