

# **Challenges of academic literacy for in-service teachers**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The teaching and facilitation of academic literacy skills in English second language for in-service teachers presents a challenge in the light of the increased enrolment of un- and under-qualified teachers on the National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE). The course aimed to up-skill teachers to meet the minimum standards as required for the profession. Fundamental Literacy, a core module on the NPDE course, was designed to support and equip in-service teachers as students, with sufficient academic literacy skills to complete the teaching qualification successfully. This qualitative study explored the academic experiences of part-time in-service teachers in the fundamental literacy module. The collected data was analysed thematically to understand in-service teachers' experiences of the module and the support needed to ensure academic success. Findings suggest that adult learners experience anxiety upon entering the higher education environment. Factors outside the educational sphere (i.e. home and work) presented major obstacles to their success as students. In-service teachers are oriented to more social ways of learning as opposed to an individualised and autonomous method of studying. Teamwork and scaffolding techniques accommodated the unique linguistic and cultural needs of this mature learner cohort. It is recommended that a more innovative and collaborative approach to learning is considered with in-service teachers.

**Keywords:** academic literacy; higher education; teacher training; adult learners

## **INTRODUCTION**

In order to use knowledge and information effectively individuals must demonstrate the ability to identify their own knowledge gaps. In addition such learners should be able to locate, access and evaluate appropriate information sources to narrow the knowledge gap (Andrews and Patil, 2007; Rychen and Salganik, 2003). The ability to use these skills effectively is referred to as academic literacy and is a requirement for success in the higher education (HE) environment. In the academic context, emphasis is placed on the student's ability to extract information and reconstruct ideas into written text. A key success factor in the academic world is therefore the ability to access information effectively, and to use spoken and written language skills in multiple settings (Bransford, 2000). Students are thus required to demonstrate critical thinking, reflect on the nature of knowledge or information and its socio-cultural, economic and ideological context and impact on the world in which they live.

Competence in academic writing is also reflected in the ability to produce a clear coherent message or argument as a written piece through essays and thesis writing. Adult learners often enter higher education with limitations in academic literacy which severely impact on their ability to demonstrate the necessary stipulated exit outcomes of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Researchers suggest that students' confusion about the elements of thesis writing is understandable since seasoned academics frequently struggle to articulate their expectations of what a 'good' essay entails (Elander, Harrington, Norton, Hannah & Pete, 2006). A further complication may occur as mature students do not always understand the need for appropriate academic writing given that they perceive themselves as competent and successful in general life skills and teaching in the primary and high school context. They may not understand the difference between their teaching and academic environments or the need for competence in the academic language of the HEIs. Their main reason for enrolment on courses such as the National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE) often hinges on the improvement of their qualification for their current profession (Rose, Rose, Farrington & Page, 2008).

Adult learners enter the educational system with varied experiences, qualifications, deeply held views, assumptions and an intention to obtain knowledge specific to their individual personal and work-related needs. They further share characteristics such as a desire to enhance their employability, commitment to family and obligation to professional and social networks. It is especially their exposure to varied and previous life experiences that impact on their perceptions of reality and differentiate mature learners from senior certificate entrants in HEIs (Okezie, 2003).

An adult's perception of the ability to be successful in the current educational task is often shaped by experiences of their previous successes (Bandura, 1998). These self-efficacy beliefs forms the foundations for human motivation, well-being and personal accomplishment (Pajaras, 2002), widely considered as the main driving factors in decisions to persevere even in the face of difficulty. Students' motivation in continuing professional development activities are therefore profoundly impacted by their previous positive learning experiences (Lawler, 2003). Literacy for such in-service teachers as students, therefore seems to encapsulate the ability to manage challenges and problems within their daily world environment. Given that they seemingly manage most of their daily challenges with ease, these adult students therefore assume competence, also in literacy skills. An additional reason for students' reluctance to engage in literacy programmes may stem from the fact that the programme often competes with the limited time available to pursue their personal interests and activities which may include time for friends and family and/or events in their communities (Taylor, 2006).

This study was conducted to ascertain whether the Fundamental Literacy Module (FML) course impacted on the individual students' literacy level and whether the course equipped students in organising their learning. In the rest of this paper, we provide the background and context, aims and structure of the course.

## **CONTEXT AND PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH**

The issue of under-qualified educators is a problem throughout South Africa (SA) with the Eastern Cape having been identified as one of the most affected regions (Department of Education, 2006). The NPDE was introduced in this region to 'up skill' the number of un- and under-qualified teachers (Wildeman, 2000) in Segoe (2012). The main rationale for the qualification, as introduced in 2001, was to improve the quality of teaching and learning at schools and Further Education and Training (FET) colleges (Department of Education, 2006).

In January 2010, an institution of higher learning in the Eastern Cape accepted a total of 82 students into the 360-credit NPDE programme. This was a higher intake for the institution which generally accepts an average of 50 students per year. The increased 2010 intake related to the Department of Basic Education's (DBE) re-assessment plans for the course and the possible replacement thereof (Department of Education, 2006).

The training of un- and under-qualified educators is the focus of the 360-NPDE programme. Educators who enrol in this programme are usually employed in public and private schools, Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) centres and Further Education and Training

colleges throughout the province. Many teachers who enrol on the programme have been teaching by virtue of having completed only a National Senior Certificate (NSC) qualification. The NPDE course offered at the HEI in the Eastern Cape, is equivalent to Relative Education Qualification Value 10 (REQV) status and the successful completion of the National Professional Diploma in Education provides educators with the required REQV 13 status; i.e. fully qualified educator status (University of Fort Hare Learning Guide, 2010). The successful completion of the qualification also translates into a salary increase and the possibility of permanent employment with added benefits for those who enrolled on the course.

### **OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL PROFESSIONAL DIPLOMA IN EDUCATION (NPDE)**

The NPDE with its strong classroom focus aims to equip educators with the foundational, practical and reflexive competences to qualify for entry in advanced study, i.e. Level 6 of the National Qualification Framework (NQF). The qualification was originally designed as an alternative access route into further study as it offered entry and the possibility to pursue a degree course in education. The qualification focuses on the up-skilling of teachers in the general education and training sector. These teachers typically teach in the foundation, intermediate, senior and further education and training phases. The exit level outcomes of the qualification are organised around four categories, i.e. fundamental learning; subject and content of teaching; teaching and learning; and school and the profession. Table 1 below provides an overview of the course structure of the NPDE qualification.

**Table 1:**

#### **Course Structure of the NPDE**

<b>Year 1</b>	<b>Year 2</b>	<b>Year 3</b>
School and the Profession [1;24]	Life Skills/Life Orientation [y;20]	Life Skills/Life Orientation [y;24]
School and Community [1;36]	Languages and Literacy [y;20]	Languages and Literacy [y;24]
Recognition of Prior Learning [1;120]	Mathematics/Numeracy [y;20]	Mathematics/Numeracy [y;20]
Teaching and Learning Processes [2;36]	Teaching and Learning Processes [y;36]	Teaching and Learning Processes [y;24]
Fundamental Literacy [y;24]	Fundamental Literacy [1;12]	
Fundamental Numeracy [y;24]	Fundamental Numeracy [1;12]	
<b>Total Credit Value: 264</b>	<b>Total Credit Value: 120</b>	<b>Total Credit Value: 96</b>

*The first number in the bracket indicate an offering in either 1st, 2nd semester or year (y) long module. The number following the semi-colon in the [ ] indicate credit value (University of Fort Hare, 2011: 38-49).*

## **The Fundamental Literacy Module (FLM)**

The overarching exit level outcome of the literacy module requires the candidate to 'demonstrate competence in reading, writing and speaking the language/s of instruction to facilitate their own academic learning and to facilitate learning in their classrooms' (South African Qualifications Authority, 2009). The module is a fundamental and core component of the qualification, which promotes competence (i.e. reading, writing and speaking) in English as the language of instruction. Included in the learning outcome is the understanding that interaction in the module will enhance academic learning and enable learners to transfer their own experiences when designing learning experiences in their own classrooms. The module thus uses a four-focused approach which includes the ability to communicate effectively in the language of instruction, use appropriate methods to access and select suitable study material, applying the skills to manage self and studies in the context of the academic module. The 24 credit module was delivered over 22 x 2 hour sessions as a year-long course during the students' first year of study to attain the educational aims. The module template can be obtained from the first author, who coordinates the module.

This study was conducted to ascertain whether the Fundamental Literacy Module impacted on the individual students' own literacy level and whether the course served as a useful tool for organising the students' own learning at the HEI.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative study was conducted to explore whether the Fundamental Literacy Module impacted on the students' literacy level and whether exposure to the course had equipped students in organising their own learning. The primarily qualitative research approach took the form of an in-depth study of the progress in a module for a cohort of in-service teachers over the course of one academic year. The qualitative approach involved the collection of data in an interpretive naturalistic setting in an effort to make sense and interpret the phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

### **Sampling**

The research, conducted in a systematic and methodical manner, aimed to gain insight into individual attitudes, behaviours, concerns and motivations for mature students when re-entering the study arena. The data was collected from first-year NPDE students (n=82) during time-tabled periods on the Fundamental Literacy Module at four intervals during one academic year. The entire year 1 group were selected to be part of the research sample.

## Data Collection

The researcher served as the primary instrument in data collection. As indicated in Table 2, data was collected at four intervals during the course.

**Table 2:**  
**Overview of data collection and data management**

<b>Data Set</b>	<b>N=82</b>	<b>Data gathering tool</b>	<b>Analysis</b>
1	81 respondents 98%	<b>Base-line indicator</b> – February Written Assignment	Data used to establish student' base-line competence and group them into co- operative learning groups
2	79 respondents 96%	<b>Mid-year Progress:</b> <b>July</b> Scaffold/Supported Written Assignment	Data used to ascertain students' progress to date, and to provide them with an opportunity to reflect on their learning experiences in the university setting thus far
3	9	<b>September</b> Questionnaire	Data used to determine at risk- students' perceptions on own academic challenges and feedback in terms of items to be included in course
4	69 respondents 84%	<b>End of October</b> Course Evaluation	Students provided final reflection on the overall impact of the course

Students provided final reflection on the overall impact of the course. Students' written assignment and questionnaires served as data sources. The base-line assignment as data source collected an introductory written piece that learners constructed about themselves at the first contact session. The introductory assignment further informed the grouping of the students into smaller co- operative learning groups for the rest of the course.

A second set of data was gathered approximately half-way through the module after the June semester exam. This written group assignment required students to reflect on their learning experiences of the first semester at the institution. The completion of this assignment was

supported by the course leader/ researcher who facilitated the session by scaffolding the activity in the following three ways.

First, smaller groups brainstormed the activity to generate ideas to frame their written piece. Secondly, groups created mind-maps to indicate how they would structure (organise) the information in a written format. Thirdly, the group presented their ideas to each other in a plenary session. The plenary session was also facilitated by the course leader/researcher. Each student had to design and submit an individual assignment which required them to present an illustration as evidence of planning and refinement. This had to be submitted with the completed written assignment which reflected on their learning experiences at the institution.

A third set of data was gathered through semi-structured questionnaires obtained from the identified 'at- risk' students by September. These students (n=9) had failed to obtain an overall year mark of 50% for the module and had been identified as being at risk of failing. This group was asked to complete an open- ended, self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire gathered information on their biggest academic challenge while enrolled at the institution. They were also asked to reflect on whether the Fundamental Literacy Module had addressed any of their academic difficulties and the extent to which their needs had been met by the module. The students were asked to list the topics where they had required or expected additional support.

The fourth and final data-set was gathered at the concluding session of the module in October. It was structured and presented in the form of a module evaluation and provided students an opportunity for their final reflection.

### **Data Analysis**

The data gathered from students' written work at the base-line test and the mid-year assignment were analysed in terms of the language and grammatical errors committed by the students. According to James (1988) in Darus and Subramaniam (2009: 486) errors in writing such as tenses, prepositions and weak vocabulary are the most common and frequent type of errors of second language speakers. The information gathered at the base-line test informed lesson planning to address these shortcomings, whilst the information gathered from the mid-year assignment provided feedback to the course instructor on the effectiveness of her teaching. The students' grades were also used as an indicator of students' progress on the course.

The data gathered from the two sets of questionnaires were analysed by coding the students' responses. Coding is an interpretive technique which organises the data into categories. Coding involves a process of 'assigning some shorthand designation to various aspects of the data, which will allow the researcher to retrieve specific pieces of the data' (Merriam, 1998). The qualitative data were first coded individually by each of the researchers and then collaboratively to obtain consensus on the themes.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Conducting the research in an ethical manner is one of the ways in which validity and reliability can be ensured in qualitative research. The question of ethics in qualitative research involves informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and finally the integrity of the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis (Howe and Moses, 1999). The researcher was privy to confidential material in this study. The nature of the research led the researcher into private spheres; deep personal experiences and cultural and cross-cultural factors and inhibitions which helped researchers understand specific lived experiences of African teachers (Tillman, 2002).

Ramos in Orb, Eisenhauer and Wynaden, (2001) highlights the ethical dilemmas present in studies of this nature. These dilemmas arose from the researcher/participant relationship; the researcher's subjective interpretations of the data and the design itself. In this study the dual role of the researcher as teacher and data gatherer allowed the opportunity to gather 'uncontaminated' data. The intention of the researcher was to observe participants in their natural environment as students grappling with the HE environment. The study was thus designed to allow the researcher the opportunity to observe students and engage with adults in their natural learning environment. These interactions were facilitated through the researchers' role as teacher.

Consent was sought from the student sample upon their completion of the course. Participants were unaware during the course of the module that data was being gathered for research purposes, which aided in the gathering of authentic and honest responses. The reasons for non-disclosure were explained and consent was sought from each participant for the use of the gathered data upon the conclusion of the module. This provided participants with the opportunity to exercise their right as autonomous persons to agree/disagree voluntarily for data to be used for the intended purpose. The group agreed and gave the researcher permission to use the gathered data used for research purposes by signing consent forms. The research has descriptive validity which Maxwell (1992) defines as the accuracy of the behaviours, events, objects, settings and influences reported by the researcher; for example,

that which is reported is actually what happened or what was heard or observed. The internal validity of the study was maintained by ensuring a process of data collection which spanned a period of 10 months (February to October). This relatively long period enabled the researcher to obtain an accurate and holistic picture of the setting and phenomenon under study, which in the case of this study is whether students were progressing on the course.

The data was analysed independently by the researcher who gathered the information at the site of the research and verified by the co-researcher as a way of ensuring the trustworthiness and quality of the findings. Consensus on the interpretation of the data was reached in subsequent discussions and is presented in the following section.

## **FINDINGS**

The findings are presented firstly in terms of the participants' biographical data, and secondly of students' reflections on the challenges reported at three strategic points during the academic year. The three data collection points as detailed in Table 2 occurred (1) at the first contact session with the class, (2) six months into the course following the mid-year assessment and (3) at the last contact session of the year. Additional reflections were gathered from 'at risk' students, three months after the mid-year assessment. The students' perceptions of factors impacting on their learning environment and in their interaction with the lecturer, are also reported.

### **Biographical details of participants**

The participants (n=81) consisted of 74 female and seven male students. The ages for the group ranged between 20–60 years with the majority 53% (n=65) aged between 31–50 years. Except one, all the participants were employed at public schools by the provincial Department of Education. Most participants 37% (n=45) matriculated between 1990 and 2000. The participants were mainly teaching in the Foundation and Intermediate phases (64%; n=9). Few taught in the Further Education and Training phase (5%; n=6), the Senior phase (n=1) and in the ABET (n=1) phase.

### **Initial base-line assessment**

An initial base-line assessment required students to write a short introductory biographical essay upon entry (first contact session) to the course. The written piece was assessed for clarity of expression in an assessment activity that counted 10 marks. Fifty one percent (n=42) of the cohort obtained a score of four and less. Forty percent (n=33) scored 4 and less and 10% (n=9) scored a mark that ranged between five and 10 marks.

The scores on the assessment task enabled the identification of the main focus areas for improvement and instruction. These included primarily, commonly misspelled words, errors in punctuation (such as the use of capital letters), the correct use of prepositions, the use of correct tenses and general sentence construction. The identified difficulties were addressed as part of the course.

### **Mid-year reflection**

This assessment was conducted after a six month period. This written assignment aimed to elicit how students adapted to the academic environment. Data gathered from the group indicated the following themes:

i) Anxiety around difficulties linked to being a student

Students reported anxiety over issues of finance, meeting the required standards at the institution, attending classes on Saturdays and difficulties in securing transport to and from the lecture sessions as illustrated in the following excerpts from student essays...

I also had a problem financially because I was not used to going to school on Saturdays and holidays.

I spent too much money for the deposit, and also spent money for transport because I am living far from school.

Some expressed concerns around their ability to pass the examinations and doubted their ability to be successful in course assignments. Some respondents were anxious about not being able to keep up with notetaking in class and indicated that they struggled to keep up with the pace of work 'because we are chasing time'.

Taking notes whilst the lecturer is busy teaching is not easy.

ii) Anxiety and fear about entering the Higher Education system

Respondents reported anxiety around studying at an institution of higher learning; meeting new people and the possibility of not being able to understand different lecturers (due to fears around using English as a medium of communication).

As illustrated by the quotes from students below, some respondents became anxious at the thought of interacting with lecturers from other race groups.

It was my first time to deal with white lecturers. I was so scared.

Coming in the lecture, a white man was speaking English that was a problem for me speaking English the whole day...

### **At-risk student feedback on questionnaire**

Questionnaires were distributed to nine students who scored a Duly Performed Mark (DP) of less than 50% on the module. Two of the nine (n=9) students completed the questionnaires.

The difficulties identified by both respondents are related to aspects that impacted on their private lives, i.e. outside of the actual academic environment such as problems with illness and death within their own families. Both respondents indicated how these events impacted on their ability to concentrate on their studies. Neither of the respondents identified their language ability as an academic obstacle. Respondents did not answer the questions relating to course content, teaching methodology or the need for interventions at the university to support them more effectively in the future. One of the respondents indicated that the course did not address her difficulty, but did not elaborate further on this.

### **Course evaluation**

The end-of-course evaluation was conducted to elicit information on the impact of the course on students' learning. Respondents (n= 69) were required to rate their overall learning experience on the course, and offer an opinion on the following teaching and learning related areas:

#### **Teacher Learner-Lecturer Interaction**

Respondents were invited to reflect on the teaching strategies used during the contact sessions and the extent to which they perceived the strategies to be either learner- or teacher-centred. Eighty four percent (n=58) indicated that they perceived the teaching strategies as learner centred. Nine percent (n=6) thought it had elements of both while 7% (n=5) perceived it as being teacher centred.

#### **Classroom Climate**

In this section, respondents were requested to indicate the extent to which they felt valued and respected on the course. Ninety four percent (n=65) of the respondents felt valued and respected while 6% (n=4) did not. Due to the size of the group (n=81) classes were conducted in one of the larger venues which is primarily used during exam times. This led students to report an unsuitable teaching venue; the size of the group and an inability to hear the lecturer as additional factors which impacted on how the classroom climate was perceived.

One respondent had the impression that 'coloured' students were favoured. The group included Black (n=61); Coloured (n=5); Indian (n=2) and White (n=1) students.

### **The impact of the course on their personal classroom practice**

Of the 69 students who answered this question, 97% (n=67) respondents reported that learning on the module impacted favourably on their own classroom practice.

### **Learning Guides**

Respondents offered comments on the usefulness of the module guide in supporting their learning. Ninety seven percent (n=67) indicated that the guide was very useful. Three percent (n=2) thought that it was not useful. Of concern was a comment from one of the respondents who did not find it useful indicating uncertainty about the purpose and reason for a course guide.

I did not know what the Learning Guide/Course Guide is all about.

### **Additional comments**

Additional comments recorded in the open-ended section of the course evaluation were read and categorised independently by the two researchers as either positive, negative or general comments. Fifty one students offered comments (74%) relating to the course.

#### Positive statements such as...

At first I did not understand the way of teaching, but the UFL module helped me in writing assignments for other modules.

I told the lecturer she is too fast. She is not worried about it, she just changes her strategy. She is very calm and firm.

Liked the strategy of group work – helped me very much.

I have learnt to be punctual and disciplined and to work with groups.

#### Negative statements such as...

I would like to speak in Xhosa sometimes because I do not know how to explain something in English. The lecturer should be able to translate into Xhosa because some of us have difficulty in speaking English.

I am a slow learner. Lecturer did not work according to my pace.

University must have a standard way of doing things. The way of adding tests and assignments. Need more computers to accommodate most learners at the university.

#### General comments such as...

Give first years a clue of what is expected from them re: DP's; late assignments; copying assignments from previous students/give student's information in January.

In some modules we were asked to give back information as it appears in notes. We give back our own understanding of it. Sometimes we do not understand what is in the manual.

## **DISCUSSION**

For many adults, the process of deciding to become a student is neither quick nor a once-off event; rather it is a complex and extended process, and specific factors may have salience at different times (Williams, 1997; Reay, 2005). It is possible to identify a number of stages in the development of learner identity. Beginning as a 'non-participant', potential mature students move through an 'aspirant' phase where they explore the idea of becoming a participant in an HE programme. Next they advance to the decision-making stage where as a 'decider' they engage in weighing their options. Before students commit to becoming an 'applicant', they may need to upgrade their qualifications and organise their financial and domestic affairs to support their studies. These preparatory arrangements may take time and several years may have passed between initially considering and entering the aspirant stage and actually applying to an HEI.

This process however varies for different adult learners. For some potential HE students the process may be much faster (there may be greater support available - family, friends, etc.) and not everyone has to pass through each distinct stage. Little is known about how potential mature students weigh the personal advantages of studying at an HEI and gaining a qualification or how they seek to overcome the perceived barriers to begin the transition process to become actual students. To what extent, for instance, is the desire to improve one's employment prospects more important than an intrinsic interest in a subject?

Motivations are complex, and the barriers are many (McGivney, 1996; Pascall and Cox, 1993). For this group of students the added qualification as stipulated by the South African National Policy on teacher qualification, brought prospects of permanent employment and an increased potential for income. An additional promise of financial aid for up-skilling from the Department of Basic Education might have facilitated the enrolment for many participants, but the shortfall, as students incurred additional expenses was unanticipated, and added to their stress and frustrations. These adult students, many of whom stem from disadvantaged communities and areas with minimal contact with English speakers further needed re-orientation and group support to navigate the many challenges in the HE system. While the situation is not unique to SA, the scale of under-qualified teachers amongst the poor, disadvantaged, most socially marginalised Black African communities are disconcerting. A study in the UK similarly identified how complexities of ethnicity, gender and marital status intersect with, and

compound, the consequences of social class and the resultant difficulty during transition for single working-class mothers (Reay, Ball & David, 2002).

The HE environment is generally geared towards supporting learners entering the system straight after school. None of the support services at institutions of HE make special provision for mature-entry students. Support services (apart from the library) are generally not available over weekends or after hours. Mature students often also fail to understand their responsibility in seeking additional forms of academic support to supplement the face-to-face contact sessions. The HEI's established support structures include seeking additional information from lecturers.

The students perceived their limited vocabulary as a barrier in learning and they noted some difficulty in following the lectures. Their skills in notetaking were also inadequate. Lack of confidence in their communication ability prevented students to approach lecturers when facing such difficulty. In this study it was therefore necessary to use group work and scaffolding strategies to build students' confidence and to provide a learning environment to support their active participation in academic matters. The students also found it easier and more comfortable to use their peers as a resource than to risk exposing their inadequacies in the traditional didactic classroom setting.

The mature students in this case study did not comprise a homogeneous group. They differed in age, gender, ethnicity, educational background, personal circumstances and their motivation to be successful as students. Their decision to become students impacted heavily on their lifestyles and work lives. Furthermore, mature students have multiple roles and responsibilities, which carry considerable emotional and financial burdens. Despite the fact that the students value and prioritise their learning, it was clear that the decision to enter HE is highly constrained. Considerable uncertainty exists amongst potential entrants in relation to the financial arrangements for entry into HE. While available bursary schemes such as the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) implemented in 1999 provides aid to school leavers to achieve a first qualification, many mature students are left to fund their own studies.

For this group of mature students, willingness to enrol for the qualification was influenced by the promise that the course would be funded by the Department of Basic Education. The bursary that the students however received only covered their tuition leaving them disillusioned and out-of-pocket. The students had to cover the outstanding amount in addition to other expenses incurred due to their status as a student. Many students in this study incurred costs to travel to and from contact sessions in an economic climate where transport

costs had become exorbitant. Those students who travelled from places further afield on a weekly basis added further strain to their already fragile financial situations. The finding that students fear increased debt upon entering HEIs are not new. A study of students of lower socio-economic backgrounds in the UK affirmed that such students may be deterred from advancing their qualifications due to a fear of debt (Callender & Jackson, 2005).

Nevertheless, regardless of their individual backgrounds, all mature students had concerns about their abilities to learn at a university. While some initially lacked confidence at the start of their studies, they however do demonstrate a willingness to be successful once they have committed to the course. Mature students unlike those entering HE straight after school, place a higher value on class attendance and would seldom stay away from contact sessions for insignificant reasons.

Mature students are often goal-directed and previous studies, albeit on a medical programme, had indicated the preference of mature students to work alone (Singaram, Dolmans, Lachman & Van der Vleuten, 2008; Van Wyk & Moodley, 2013). In this particular study the students, however, valued the group learning process that had been advocated during contact sessions. Students were encouraged to work co-operatively and in teams. In traditional classrooms, teachers manage the critical balance between teaching and learning. This has a direct bearing on the level of interactivity between students and teachers. A by-product of peer learning is that the interaction amongst students increases, and that the interaction with the teacher increases. Increased interaction is vital for establishing the foundation for the acquisition of skill. It also extends the possibilities for knowledge creation and knowledge acquisition (Purnell, Callan, Whymark & Gralton, 2004).

## **CONCLUSION**

This study focused on how mature students progressed in one module in an initial teacher training course aimed at up-skilling un- and under-qualified teachers. The teaching approach followed in the delivery of the module was the scaffolding of learning through group work and collaborative learning. The multiple challenges in becoming proficient in the language of teaching and learning (LOLT) while at the same time attaining academic content and skills required that the learning be carefully supported to facilitate the learning process (de Jong & Harper, 2008). The scaffolding process during contact sessions entailed flexible grouping which allowed student's access to their peers to discuss content in their mother tongue and time for collective problem-solving and joint project completion (Reiss, 2008). The approach provided and accommodated mature students' unique linguistic and cultural needs.

It is recommended that lecturers involved with teaching mature students be aware of their need to be affirmed in their academic endeavours. Mature students, once convinced of the value of pursuing further study, will see it through until the end. They have a bigger chance than their younger counterparts of staying motivated and ultimately being successful if they perceive the learning environment as being caring and supportive.

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