

THE IMPACT OF EXTENDED CURRICULUM PROGRAMMES: GRADUATION TRENDS AND STUDENT NARRATIVES

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Abstract

This study investigates the efficacy of Extended Curriculum Programmes (ECPs) in Science and Commerce at the University of Pretoria, specifically designed to mitigate the enduring effects of educational inequality in South Africa. By providing an alternative pathway for students who do not meet standard admission criteria, *Extended curriculum programmes (ECPs), Graduation rate, Educational inequality, Cohort analysis and Student experience* - these ECPs offer access to four streams: commerce, physical sciences, mathematical sciences and biological sciences, with the goal of enabling students to graduate within the minimum time plus one year (n+1). A cohort analysis, conducted from 2017 to 2020, reveals a modest but positive trend in student graduation rates within the (n+1) timeframe, increasing from 17% to 19.5%. However, the study also highlights significant challenges, with approximately 33% of students discontinuing their studies by the fourth year. Furthermore, a substantial portion of the remaining students require longer than the stipulated timeframe to complete their degrees. To gain a deeper understanding of these quantitative findings, the research incorporates a qualitative dimension through interviews with ten randomly selected students who commenced their studies in the foundational ECP year. These interviews explore the students' lived experiences, identifying factors that facilitated or hindered their academic progress. The insights gleaned from these interviews offer a nuanced perspective on the ECPs' effectiveness, highlighting both successful strategies and areas necessitating improvement. Student generated recommendations provide valuable, practical suggestions for enhancing the ECPs and fostering greater student success. These recommendations offer actionable insights that can inform program adjustments and contribute to improved student outcomes. Ultimately, this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the ECPs' performance, combining quantitative data with qualitative perspectives to inform strategies for enhancing student success and addressing the enduring challenges of educational inequality in South African higher education.

Keywords: *Extended Curriculum Programmes (ECPs), graduation rate, educational inequality, cohort analysis and student experience.*

1. Introduction

The Study University offers four streams of Extended Curriculum Programmes (ECPs, on a dedicated Campus, and three of which are Bachelor of Science (BSc) Programmes and one a Bachelor of Commerce (BCom) Programme. The BSc Stream is comprised of a) BSc Extended Physical Sciences, b) BSc Extended Mathematical Sciences and c) BSc Extended Biological and Agricultural Sciences. The BSc extended curriculum programme, formerly known as the BSc Four-year programme was implemented in 2008 whereas the BCom extended curriculum programme formerly known as BCom four-year programme was implemented in 2012.

The ECPs were designed for students who are not academically prepared but who have the potential to succeed and obtain their degree. While these students, however, have achieved from their matric results a bachelor's degree endorsement they have not meet the minimum requirement for enrolment in the mainstream modules. The programmes include an additional year of study which aims to enhance students' basic knowledge and skills before they progress to more specialist studies in later years. Thus, the students admitted in the first cohort of this study, class of 2017, should complete their first degree in December 2020 (n+1) and their graduation take place in the subsequent year. Students who embarked on these programmes have much greater opportunity to succeed as students who need assistance to bridge the gap between school and higher education are provided with dedicated support (Engelbrecht *et al.*, 2014; Pearce, *et al.*, 2015). In this paper, students who commenced their journey in the ECPs, will be referred to as 'ECPs students'.

2. Design

With over a decade of implementation, this research seeks to evaluate the impact of Extended Curriculum Programmes (ECPs) on its students population. Thus, the aims of the study were to: a) determine the degree to which ECPs have significantly influenced students' trajectories and achievements. b) explore the experiences of ten randomly selected group of ECPs graduating students, providing qualitative insights into the perceived effects of these programmes. c) analyse the movement of ECPs students across different qualifications and faculties to identify preferred pathways and destinations associated with graduation.

3. Objectives

The main objective of this research is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the impact and experiences related to the (ECPs). Specifically, it seeks to quantify the effect of ECPs on graduation trends, illuminate the lived experiences of participating students, and map the academic trajectories of these students through various qualifications and faculties leading to graduation. This understanding will contribute valuable insights into the future of ECPs at the University.

4. Methods

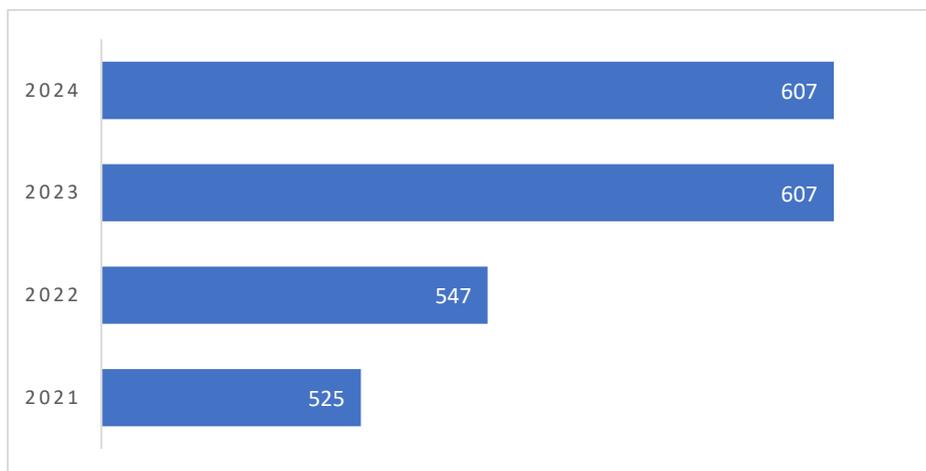
Mixed method was used in this research. The tracking of ECPs students' pathways and gaining insights from the responses to the open-ended questions of the ten randomly selected students.

5. Discussions

By embracing the Extended Curriculum Programmes (ECPs), we have opened doors to a significant number of aspiring students who might otherwise have been denied access to higher education. A rising number of ECPs graduates are successfully completing their degrees and embarking on fulfilling careers. This is a testament to the transformative power of education and the dedication of our students, faculties and staff. By providing a supportive teaching and learning environment and tailored academic support, we have empowered these individuals to overcome challenges and achieve their dreams.

Of the cohort that started in 2017, only 17% completed their studies in December 2020 and their graduation takes place in the following year. This percentage demonstrated a steady increase, reaching 19.5% in 2024. The bar graph presented in Figure 1, utilising data from University Graduation Ceremonies between 2021 and 2024, reveals a noteworthy pattern of consistent and substantial growth in the annual number of graduates. Although the data is cumulative, including students who take more than $n+1$ years to graduate, this upward trend is clearly evident. This achievement underscores the transformative impact of the ECPs and the dedication of our students and faculties. However, the cohort analysis also highlights significant challenges; approximately 33% of ECPs students discontinuing their studies by the fourth year.

Figure 1.



The Study University offers a wide array of academic programs across various faculties, providing students with numerous pathways to success. A total of 2286 ECPs students who started at the Study University received their degrees from the 2021 to 2024 graduation ceremonies, as undergraduates or postgraduates students. The table below showcases the movement of ECPs students across different faculties with Natural and Agricultural Sciences and Economic and Management Sciences being in the lead with more than two third of students (68%) graduating from various degrees within these two faculties.

Table 1. Number of Graduates who started their academic journey from 2017 to 2020 receiving their degrees from 2021 to 2024.

Faculties	2021	2022	2023	2024	Total number of graduates: 2286
Natural & Agricultural Sciences	220	204	220	208	37.3%
Economic and Management Sciences	107	156	219	219	30.7%
Engineering, Built, Environment and Information Technology	88	77	64	66	12.9%
Health Sciences	76	61	64	72	11.9%
Education	18	12	12	12	0.24%
Humanities	8	7	13	12	0.17%
Law	6	13	7	8	0.15%
Veterinary Science	1	15	8	9	0.14%
Theology and Religion	1	1			0.01%
GIBS Business School		1		1	0.01%

Students were asked to share their lived experiences, identifying factors that facilitated or hindered their academic progress and areas necessitating improvement.

In general, all the students appreciated the slower pace, smaller classes, and the opportunity for reflection and adjustment to university life. Student 1 stated: *“It provided a crucial foundation that facilitated my later success in mainstream programmes”*. Students 2 and 3 initially felt some disappointment about being in the Extended Curriculum Programmes but later they recognised its value in preparing them for their chosen fields. All students recalled the shift to online learning during the pandemic (COVID-19) leading to a feeling of isolation. The pandemic presented significant challenges with online assessments. They had to increase self-discipline.

All students emphasised the necessity of hard work, dedication, and perseverance to succeed in their studies. They acknowledged that the university journey can be challenging and requires consistent effort. They also valued the support systems available to them: family, lecturers (faculty members) and tutors, friends and peers played a crucial role in supporting them through difficult times, especially during the pandemic and when facing academic challenges.

Student 4 and 5 mentioned the importance of taking breaks, pursuing extracurricular activities, and making meaningful connections to enhance their overall university experience.

The following were the advice and suggestions made by the students: a) Have different tutors for maths and physics tutorials who can offer alternative explanations to the lecturer, b) improve the facilities with faster computers and more diverse seating areas in the library, c) do not discontinue the programmes due to their positive impact on students' journeys, d) expand the range of events, clubs, and sports on the study campus to foster a stronger sense of community, and e) implement a programme to help students navigate the increased workload and pace when transitioning to a different campus and faculty.

The current students were encouraged to be curious, seek for help, persevere, enjoy the journey, and to maintain a clear sense of purpose.

6. Conclusions

The analysis clearly shows that ECPs do give access to students who could not have been admitted to science and commerce fields due to their matric results not meeting the minimum criteria for mainstream degrees. These 2286 students would not have graduated if they did not start at Study Campus. Moreover, in the paper by Ogude *et al* (2019), previous and successful students attest that during their time at this Campus, they received the necessary support, which enabled them to successfully complete their degrees.

More than a decade after its inception, the study University's ECPs continue to give students access to higher education and to lay a solid foundation by equipping them with the knowledge and skills necessary for success in mainstream higher education. Although the number of successful students is below 20%, this success could not have been possible if the access was not denied to them. ECPs put into practice the shift of policy emphasis from "access to success" (Lubben *et al.*, 2010; Slabbert & Friedrich-Nel, 2015), which is the main drive of the university in South African context.

Providing a supportive teaching and learning environment, along with tailored academic support, we have empowered individuals to overcome challenges and achieve their dreams. However, with approximately 80% of ECPs students taking longer than n+1 timeframe to successfully complete their studies and with about 33% of students dropping out the programmes by their fourth year of studies and students migrating to other Faculties (and 112 various qualifications) at the university rather than graduating from the opted programmes for which they originally opted, the management of the University reviewed the ECPs offerings. Based on the graduation trends and students' narratives, the University has introduced, in 2025, 11 new programmes; ten in the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences and one in the faculty of Economic and Management Sciences.

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My Colleagues from the Department of Enrolment and Student Administration (DESA) used a service indicator to backtrack the cohorts that started at the Study Campus from 2017. The data of ECPs graduates in table 1 above were pulled from the University-Graduation Ceremonies from 2021 to the 2024.

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