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# Challenges of First-Year Extended Curriculum Programme Students at a University in South Africa

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**Abstract.** The Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) is an academic foundation programme established and supported by South Africa's Department of Higher Education and Training as a route and an enabling environment for educationally disadvantaged, underprepared, unprepared, and at-risk students to access and succeed in higher education. However, beyond the academic concerns for students enrolled on this programme, there are social issues that could hinder the success of the enrolled students. This study examines the challenges of students enrolled in Extended Curriculum Programme in a selected university in South Africa. Using a qualitative research method, data was collected following a focus group discussion comprising twelve groups in the Faculty of Management and Commerce ECP first-year students. This study found that students face a number of challenges including information asymmetry, mismatch between high school subjects and university courses, transitioning from high school to university setting, inadequate and unequal academic support, and stigmatization. The findings imply a need for guidance and counselling in the choice of a future career at high school level, an awareness about ECP, and strengthened support beyond academic support by improving social integration and boosting ECP students' self-confidence. Government and institutions need to introduce educational anti-stigma interventions to correct individuals' and society's misinformed perceptions about ECP programmes and to promote awareness about the potential and possibilities of the programme.

**Keywords:** Extended Curriculum Programme; Foundation; Higher Education; Teaching and Learning; Challenges

## 1. Introduction

Education, which is one of the human capital development components alongside health, is an important factor that promotes socio-economic

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development. Investment in education has been identified as crucial for individual and household wellbeing as well as for the attainment of a country's desired economic growth target. Looking back, it can be said that the contemporary situation of the South African education system cannot be discussed outside the role of the previous apartheid system of government. One of the key features of South Africa's education system during the apartheid regime was pronounced education inequality and fragmentation (McKeever, 2017). The system, prior to 1994, was that of a racially divided system of schooling; there were differences in learning materials and learners' assessment; there was an imbalance in education funding that favoured the minority white community. This inequality was effectively promoted by the then Bantu Education Act of 1953. Thus, one of the many goals of the post-apartheid governments in South Africa, since the political transition in 1994, has been to address the historical disadvantages of racial minorities in accessing quality education at various levels of education. However, irrespective of the efforts of the government, the education system is still bedevilled by various contemporary challenges.

The two main contemporary challenges in the South African higher education are access and throughput rates. Access to higher education is an aspiration of every youth in the country who views this as a pathway to a brighter future (Jappie, 2020). In South Africa, the students from lower socio-economic backgrounds find it challenging to gain access to higher education for various reasons, such as poor schooling, and many students are unable to meet the minimum requirements for admissions and funding (Jappie, 2020).

According to the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET, 2020), there has been a decrease in dropout rates, but throughput rate is still very low. For instance, for undergraduate three-year degrees through contact mode, only 31.9% and 32.2% of intakes in 2015 and 2016 graduated in their third year, respectively, and 56.3% of intake in 2015 graduated in the fourth year. Also, only 47.3% and 63% of those that enter undergraduate degree qualify after the fourth and fifth year, respectively, for four or more year-undergraduate qualifications (DHET, 2020). This implies that less than 50% of those who enrol for a degree through the e-learning mode of tuition or contact never graduated (DHET, 2020). This is a great challenge for the system because the substantial investment in subsidies does not result in graduates. Furthermore, the cost is not only a monetary one, there is also a cost in human terms, as these young people leave the system without getting their degrees (DHET, 2020). Thus, there has been a concern about the low graduation output of various comprehensive South African universities (Petersen & Arends, 2018; Uleanya & Rugbeer, 2020).

One of the suggestions to prevail over these challenges is the introduction of Extended Curriculum Programmes (ECPs). According to the Council on Higher Education (2013), the foundational provision is designed to help students from underprivileged educational backgrounds build solid academic foundations to succeed in their programmes of study, facilitating equitable access and the desired outcomes (Department of Education, 2007). The Extended Curriculum

Programmes (ECPs) started in the 1980s as academic support programmes aimed at increasing access and opportunities for talented but inadequately prepared students to achieve sound foundations for success in higher education (Council on Higher Education, 2013). Currently, a number of South African higher education institutions (SAHEIs) offer ECPs which aim at providing students with further academic support in order to improve the pass rate and success of students in Computer Literacy, English language, Mathematics, and others. This programme has been offered to diploma and regular degree students, and leads to an additional one year of study. Considering the contemporary dynamic changes in the teaching and learning space, problems experienced by students in Higher Education (HE) appear to be on the rise, and as such, this study explores the contemporary ECP students' challenges in their first year. Though several studies have explored first-year university students' experiences, few of these studies have concentrated on the experiences of some of the students enrolled in the Extended Curriculum Programme or Foundation experience more broadly as part of their HE experience. The objective of this study is to assess the ECP students' challenges in a rural South African higher education institution. This study is premised on the assertion by Freire (1993) and Godsell (2017) that the experiences of learners are worth more attention through listening to their voices for policy purposes.

## 2. Literature Review

Higher education as a tool to level opportunities has necessitated the government's investment in education. Massification of programmes and broadening access to and participation in higher education has increased the dynamics of characteristics of students in higher education environments. These characteristics include first-generation students, students from low socio-economic status households, rural and disadvantaged environments, under-prepared students, as well as those entering higher education with low previous academic performance. Consequently, this has brought a new dimension to higher education challenges. As a result, governments and institutions specifically invest in first-year experience to promote persistence, and for future academic performance and achievement (Schreiner et al., 2020; Sterling, 2018).

The first year of undergraduate in HE is a critical period, not only because it is when commencing students establish a foundation for their future learning outcome, but also because it is a central enabling time for ongoing student engagement, learning success and retention (Nelson et al., 2014). Equally, considering the increasing cost of delivering higher education amid limited resources and the need for higher personal, economic, and social returns to education, it is imperative to understand student challenges and experiences to enable or to promote good experiences.

Several studies (Edjah et al., 2019; Baik et al., 2019; Ganss, 2016; Cheung et al., 2020; Uleanya & Rugbeer, 2020) provide detailed insight into the experiences and challenges (positive or negative) of first-year student groups in different national and institutional contexts. A study conducted in Ghana established that registration for courses, separation from family, movement on campus,

adjusting to lecturers' way of teaching, swapping between lecture theatres, coping with roommates and making new friends were the prominent challenges found among first-year students (Edjah et al., 2019). Baik et al. (2019) reported that freshmen with low tertiary admission scores in Australian colleges experienced less enjoyment of their courses, lower levels of academic engagement and engagement with their university communities, difficulties in comprehending subject material, and worries about finance. Gaps in expectations and the reality of college life (disconnect in expectations of academic rigour, study habits and extra-curricular involvement; Ganss, 2016; Kuh, 2011, difficulties with new friendships and involvement in opportunities due to lack of social skills were the experiences identified by Ganss (2016) among first-year students from rural Oregon communities in the United States. In Hong Kong, Cheung et al. (2020) reported the experience of various levels of depression, anxiety and stress among first-year community transfer students, mainstream students and international students. In South Africa, studies have also established that poor social integration, stigmatization, lack of acceptance, inability to work independently, lack of critical thinking skills, lack of self-confidence, as well as accommodation and transport challenges are experienced by first-year students (Uleanya & Rugbeer, 2020; Lekena & Bayaga, 2018; Pillay & Ngcobo, 2010). According to Kukkonen, (2020), student experiences cover the total engagement with the university right from first contact, through recruitment, learning, arrival, and university experience such as graduation, employment, and experience as alumni. Others include student accommodation, living arrangements, security and safety, as well as social inclusion.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design and Data Gathering**

The research approach used in this study is a qualitative research method to understand the perceptions and challenges of ECP students. Qualitative research is a technique that is adopted to make sense of feelings, experiences, social situations or phenomena as they occur in the real world (Blanche et al., 2006). Data was gathered through focus group interviews, with a total of 12 focus groups of five participants in each group. Focus groups were used to provide a platform for cross-checking individual and social construction and multiple realities associated with notions that have tendencies to create controversy (Vicsek, 2010). The focus group discussion was conducted and recorded through Microsoft Teams and the recorded interview transcribed. In addition, content analysis was used as a tool for making sense of the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Neuendorf, 2011). This study adopts a summative content analysis method (Silverman, 2001) which enables researchers to prudently scrutinize data in order to discover the rate of recurrence of views, themes and contextual reflection of these views and to observe emerging forms. Researchers were keen to discover the strength of the participants' views and opinions and considered it useful to use the summative approach because of the benefits it brings to the analysis.

### ***Participants and Sampling Procedure***

The participants for this study are first-year students of Extended Curriculum Programme in a university in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. The majority of these students are black South Africans, from previously disadvantaged groups. The undergraduate ECP offers a four-year Bachelor's degree instead of a three-year degree, planned to provide a curriculum response to enhance students' access to the university and eventual success. The study utilized a purposive sampling to select 60 students from the Faculty of Management and Commerce who are currently enrolled in the ECP. The ECP students considered in this study generally registered in the Faculty of Management and Commerce Extended Curriculum Programmes Qualification: B Com, BCom (Accounting) and BCom (Information Systems) at the university. According to the curriculum design, the three-year degree is extended over a longer period of time. The students who enrol in these programmes will do their studies over four years, instead of three years, allowing them more time to do their foundation courses in the first two years. The fully foundational courses have a year, which is fully preparatory for regular first-year level courses in the subject concerned. Extended curriculum courses blend regular course material alongside substantial foundational material and, as a result, are considerably longer in duration than a pure, regular course.

### ***Ethical consideration***

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University's Research Ethics Committee (UREC, 2022), and a written informed consent form was obtained. These students gave their consent after being informed about the study. Participants were well-informed that their involvement in the study was non-compulsory.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

Five thematic challenges were identified based on the data gathered from the focus group discussions that were conducted for this study. These five themes are: asymmetric information about ECP, mismatch between high school subjects and ECP courses, transitioning from high school setting to university setting, stigmatization, and inadequate and unequal academic support.

### ***Information asymmetry about ECP***

Information asymmetry is defined as a situation of imperfect or incomplete information among economic agents that would enable them to make efficient decisions (Lee, 2016). Information asymmetry is important in the education sector in the areas of school, programme, and module selection. Beyond the desire to be enrolled in higher education, students need to have sufficient knowledge about the course they are to be enrolled in, the criteria, duration, and the demands required of them by the programme, among others. Existing studies (Watson et al., 2010; Amani, 2016;) have shown that feasible choice and decision-making depend on knowledge and information. According to Flood and Parker (2014) a lack of adequate awareness of students about a university's programme can demotivate them and constrain them from seeing the potential in the programme. Incomplete information could also reduce motivation, reduce academic performance and increase dropout when the unexpected begins to

show up during the programme. This theme is deduced in the responses of the students in this regard:

*“Actually, no one told me about the foundation programme, this was how I got into the programme; I was initially admitted for business management for mainstream, but when I got to the university, I could not register for it because it was already full. So, I was given the alternative to register for information systems, the foundation programme.”*

*“I heard about the programme as a walk-in student, so when I arrive, they said because of my point I have to be a part of the foundation and that's when I heard about foundation programmes. (I did not qualify for mainstream and was told that there are spaces in commerce and management foundation programme).”*

*“I don't know anything about the programme, I was just told to apply for it.”*

*“A friend from home told me about the programme and encouraged me to apply. Right now, I didn't quite know anything at the moment about the programme.”*

*“Basically, I know a little bit about the programme. I am not fully informed about the programme.”*

*“I have never heard about the programme. I saw it on the board that I can apply for the programme.”*

Plausible reasons for information asymmetry are inadequate awareness about the programme prior to their enrolment, and poor participation during orientation programme. Meanwhile, knowing about the requirements of a programme, the advantages, opportunities, disadvantages, conditions for success and prospects in different lines of work are essential for decision-making (Sharf, 1992). Consequently, there is a need to improve the level of awareness and the methods used in providing information to prospective students about ECP.

#### ***Mismatch between high school subjects and ECP courses***

One of the notable attributes of the High School Curriculum is that every single student in the contemporary era is well-prepared for their future career and equipped to face challenges. The success of this preparation can be measured by the alignment of the high school leavers' subjects and the course they enrolled in at the university. Corazon et al. (2020) found that when there is a gap between high school subjects and courses enrolled into in the field of study at university level, some students are stressed and no longer have an interest in a university education, as was reported by the students interviewed for this study. Their responses clearly indicate that their courses at ECP do not build on the subjects done at high school. For instance, some of the students are enrolled in management and commerce courses which are not associated with their track of high school subjects, as deduced from the following responses of participants:

*“My background is different from what I am currently doing. What I did in high school is actually different from what I'm doing now, because the subjects that I did in high*

*school are not equivalent to what I'm doing now, and it is challenging for me. I am a social science student."*

*"...most of the modules have been challenging while others have been manageable. Learning courses I have never done in high school has been quite stressful."*

*"Since I registered as a student in the programme, it was not easy for me to understand the courses because I was a science student in high school. I had no idea of business-related subjects."*

*"As a person who did social science subjects in high school, I was shocked to find out that AMB is basically pure Mathematics. It has been difficult and stressful; it has taken a toll on my mental health because I sometimes feel stupid in comparison to others, and with Economics module as well also being new to me, it has been extremely hard for me to cope."*

*"Since from the first time I registered as a foundation programme student, it was not easy for me to understand because I was doing sciences in high school."*

*"It was hard for me to adapt in commerce during the first semester, because, in high school doing science, so I had challenges because I had no clues in business."*

It can be inferred from these responses that misalignment is present between the high school subjects and the university courses of the ECP. A student's knowledge of his/her career path and desire for the career path determines what course he or she will take at the university. This implies that a student who is knowledgeable about what he/she wants to become will choose subjects at high school that align with his/her university's courses and career choice. According to Coles (2021), desire defines the reason someone acts or behaves in a certain way, thus a strong desire for a specific career path determines what courses a student will take in college. In addition, students who have a strong desire in their career can choose a better pathway in college as they will have chosen strands that align with their current college courses. This is important because the interest of students plays an essential role in strands and courses; students become involved in a curriculum which they are interested in; they tend to study and work better when they are not excluded. The existence of this mismatch underscores the importance of career guidance in high school. Studies (Upoalkpajor, 2020; Savickas, 2015) have shown that career guidance enables students to align what they learn with their aspirations, interests, and capacities, and test these with existing opportunities. Career guidance also helps an individual to know about the available training and educational opportunities and the requirements for admission, as well as the choice of a suitable field of study.

### ***Transitioning from high school to a university setting***

Transitioning from high school to a higher education is widely recognised by the greater number of students as an important step to an independent private and academic life (Murtagh, 2012; Young et al., 2020). This transition phase can lay the foundations for success in the university and future endeavours (Thompson

et al. 2021; Krause and Coates 2008). Equally, it has been acknowledged in the literature (Hassel & Ridout, 2018; Lekana & Bayaga, 2018) that such a transition is a concern for students as some transition experiences could lead to dropping-out or poor academic performance if not properly managed. Lekana and Bayaga (2018) noted that limited or poor preparation for change, and overwhelming new responsibilities and challenges make the move from high school to university a difficult one. The experience of transitioning from high school to university is often difficult to process because transition itself is difficult and needs time and effort for emotional and social adjustment to minimise the impact of the problems encountered during the process. Leaving high school for university can be a time of increased vulnerability because the youths entering university have to take on a new academic part, navigate adult roles, economic responsibilities, and build new social networks (Laursen & Collins, 2009; Aquilino, 2006). Transition challenges are revealed in the form of academic expectations, technology adoption, and socialization. Quoted excerpts below are the experiences of the first-year ECP students who were interviewed in this study:

*"I have experienced difficulties trying to adapt to the university system. When I started the programme, I got overwhelmed because I didn't know what to expect in the course that I'm doing and don't know anything about the programme. Everything was difficult for me."*

Studies by Turner and Brown (2010) and Thomas and Whitten (2012) identified social support as an important source of social integration and well-being during the transitional period. In addition, the supposed social support in the first year of university is linked with other sides of emotional welfare such as motivation, less insecurity, lower expectancies of dropping out, and a greater sense of belonging (Rosenthal et al., 2011). It is necessary for these students to learn the coping mechanisms for transitioning from high school to a higher institution of learning, such as personality traits, perceived support, environmental and individual resources (Wood, et al., 2008; Turner & Brown, 2010). Students in the transitioning phase need the support of lecturers to feel comfortable and motivated. Many said that:

*"I have experienced difficulties trying to adapt to the university system."*

*"Maths is a difficult module and most of us don't get it because we've done maths literacy in high school, and now that we are trying to adapt to pure maths, it's quite difficult."*

In terms of technological adoption, it is known that even before the Covid-19 pandemic, there had been an increasing incorporation of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) elements into university education, but with Covid-19 and the current Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) drive, ICT (computer-based learning) in education has become an indispensable combination. In education, ICT is evident as remote lectures (attending online classes), submitting assignments online, taking assessments online, searching for materials online. Consequently, ICT skills are imperative for any higher



education students' academic success in the university. A transition problem arises in this case when a student who has not been exposed to the use of ICT tools at high school or private life is expected to utilize the tool for learning in the university setting. This ICT adoption transition challenge is clearly alluded to in the comment below which emerged during the focus group interview conducted for this study:

*"I didn't have experience in using laptop. At first, I could not keep up with the use of Blackboard, I couldn't login to join classes, it was a struggle using the computer."*

*"We are first-year student and not exposed to the use of technology."*

*"Everything was difficult, I didn't know about Blackboard. It was very hard completing my assignment since I am not familiar with Blackboard."*

This problem of transitioning to ICT adoption is also reported in the study by Mbodila et al. (2016) who noted that institutions in rural areas of South Africa are flooded with first-year students who are considered to be underprepared and had no access to computers before their enrolment. Also, most students from the rural areas usually lack knowledge of computers when they arrive at the university which accounts for their difficulties when searching for study materials, typesetting their assignments and submitting them online, as they have had no experience in the use of this technology at high school. This shortcoming speaks to the level of digital readiness of high schools in South Africa and their students in the era of 4IR, and the reality of the undeniable digital divide among South Africans. This reality is in line with the allusion by Faloye and Ajayi (2021) that students from underprivileged schools encounter challenges with computer application programmes and hardware components. Apart from a rural background, the socio-economic background also promotes this digital divide. However, the digital divide and its effects on students could be limited if high schools are ICT enabled and compliant, and continual training is offered to needy students.

### ***Stigmatization***

Stigma is a perceived or actual violation of another person's identity (Maringe and Jenkins, 2015). It is also an extreme discontent or disapproval of a person for reasons of attributes that differentiate them from other members of a society. Maringe and Jenkins (2015) opine that stigma is not only derived from other people's disapproval, it also comes from how the disapproved feel about their state. Studies (Zhang et al., 2021; Goffman 1963) have acknowledged sources of stigmatization in the society include race, disability status, colour, gender, age, language, sexual orientation, nationality, legitimacy, ethnicity, and health condition, among many others. Specifically, there are three categories for examining sources of social stigma: personal traits sources, tribal stigmas which relate to real or imagined traits, and visible external sources (Goffman, 1963). These identified sources can be continuous or discontinuous sources of social stigma. When they are continuous, it implies that these sources will possibly include various forms of the same phenomenon. According to Sartorius (2007), stigmatization may affect people's feelings of loss of identity, feelings of being

socially excluded, discriminated against, prejudiced, all of which have been considered as a major causes of depression. In this study, participants interviewed during the focus group discussion mentioned their experience of stigmatization and how they felt excluded, alienated, and under-rated in the university. Relevant excerpts below are quoted to support this claim:

*“The senior students told me I am still in high school and that I will only start my first year at the beginning of the next year.”*

*“I have seen posts on social media where people wrote on social media that people who are doing foundation programme are still in their high school, and some others make negative comments on social media about us. They do not know how I found myself in that situation.”*

*“I have met some students who look down on me when I tell them what I am doing in the university and that makes me feel like I am not really doing a productive course since I am not in the mainstream.”*

*“I always ask myself; so, there are people who are doing mainstream and I'm here doing something else. I think it's been me who is feeling weird about it. But at the end of the day I told myself it is okay.”*

*“Some of the students I have met make me feel like an external person, an outcast, there is no sense of belonging, someone who doesn't belong in the university.”*

Ostensibly, stigmatization of students is one of the experiences or challenges faced by ECP students as mentioned by the participants interviewed in this study. Studies (Ogude et al., 2019; De Klerk et al., 2006) found that students who enrolled for extended curriculum degree programmes are stigmatized. One of the motives of the programme is to give access to inadequately prepared and previously disadvantaged students (Dhunpath & Vithal, 2012), which may be the reason why mainstream students perceive that students who enrol in the programme are academically inadequate. Also, the ECP students are smaller in number than the mainstream students within the general population in the university, and they can easily be side-lined and seen as inferior to the mainstream students. It is important that students have a sense of belonging, in order for them to successfully achieve their academic outcomes (Bradley & Graham, 2000).

#### ***Inadequate and Unequal Academic Support***

Support of students is vital to student life and academic success in a university. This support could be academic, social or emotional. Academic support refers to a variety of academic intervention plans such as educational services and instructional methods provided to students in order to help them improve their learning progress, meet the teaching and learning standards, catch up with their peers, and succeed in the university. Also, academic support consists of a variety of teaching and learning styles, and academic counselling such as tutoring study skills, assignments and test-taking skills (DoE, 2003). This support covers a wide range of educational strategies and includes tutoring services, teacher advisors,

social support, supplemental courses, extra-classroom activity programmes, and volunteer mentors, as well as instructing and counselling students. Academic support can be provided to all students in a school, individual students, or a specific student (Brophy, 1998). Studies (Balfanz et al., 2002; Ammigan and Drexler, 2022) have shown that providing academic support services to students increases academic success; hence, many institutions of learning have implemented support service programmes to increase the retention rate of their students. Effective tutoring programmes provide direct instruction, individual attention, motivation and correction of errors which may increase students' academic skills. In this study, inadequate support is not the only issue identified by the participants; unequal support is also identified, as some of the participants reported that there are differences in the level of support received by ECP students across the university. They said:

*"We don't have much support because they always have that mentality, that this is university and by now we should know."*

*"We don't have much support structure as foundation students. We need support groups around us both mentally and academically."*

*"I have not received any support from the programme."*

*"Umm. For example, accounting students mainstream, they get extra classes on Saturdays. So that means that will boost their performance and they also get extra things like free voucher for airtime, they also get book allowance from another bursary. They get more support. They prioritize them, more especially their mental health."*

*"And I'm pretty sure that if one of the students from accounting mainstream has the problem, I'm sure they have that one person they can call or make an appointment with."*

The population and diversity of students enrolled in the ECP programme heightens the need for academic support services in order to efficiently serve the needs of these students. The issues of social inclusion were raised by some of the participants interviewed, as well as unequal distribution of academic support across the programme. According to O'Shea (2016), first-year students, especially those who did not meet the university admission requirements, face greater difficulties fitting into the university's culture. These students have feelings of alienation, loneliness, isolation, inadequacy, and have different academic experiences from the mainstream students, as is the case of ECP students. Hence, the need for support programmes (academic tutoring, peer support, and training) which will help their smooth transition and adaptation to the university's culture. Since ECP specially admits students with lower academic ability, support services are imperative during their first year at the university to enhance academic success. It is important for ECP students to be provided with all the necessary and equal support in an environment in which they can feel comfortable.

Some students might feel that the degree or the university was not their first choice, but although they were not accepted elsewhere, with proper student

support they can feel at ease with the transformation process. It is the responsibility of the institution to ensure that students receive the necessary support, and are provided agencies that will respond to their unique situations and implement ideas that afford the individual's uniqueness necessary to scale the rigours of academic life (O'Shea, 2016; Gyamera, 2018). It is therefore imperative for the management of the institution to reflect continuously on the curriculum development and design of the programme which provides the essential learning tools for these students as a managerial strategy. The amount of support provided to these students in their first year and the sustainability of the process of their learning depend on the interventions designed during continuous reflection (Slabbert & Friedrich-Nel, 2015). These challenges are essentially academic and social-related challenges, in accordance with a number of studies (Wangeri et al., 2012; Prelow et al., 2006; Sanoff, 2006; Jemal, 2012).

### **5. Conclusion, recommendations and future research**

Access and throughput rates are some of the challenges facing the South African higher education, and to increase access and throughput rates, the Extended Curriculum Programme was designed. The programme is meant to help students from underprivileged schooling backgrounds build solid academic foundations to succeed in their various programmes of choice, facilitating equitable access and outcomes, thereby increasing throughput rates. There is an increase in the difficulties experienced by various categories of students in higher education, including ECP-enrolled students, as a result of dynamic contemporary changes in the teaching and learning space across the world and in South Africa. These challenges appear to differ across groups of higher education students. While several studies have examined first-year students' experiences and challenges in higher education, a number of these studies have concentrated on the difficulties some of the students enrolled in the Extended Curriculum Programme or Foundation programme experience more broadly as part of higher education experiences. A continuous understanding of the dynamic challenges of this group of students is necessary to achieve the aim of the ECP in the country.

This study used a qualitative research method and information gathered through 12 focus group discussions to examine the challenges of ECP students in a rural-based, higher education institution in South Africa. The summative content analytical technique adopted in the study showed that ECP students face a number of challenges which include information asymmetry, the mismatch between the choice of high school subjects and university courses, transitioning from the high school setting to the university setting, stigmatization, and inadequate and unequal academic support. These challenges were shown to be distressing to some students whose academic performances have been negatively affected and to others who may feel that their present academic performances are directly tied to their success at the university and later life, and perceived future opportunities.

Therefore, based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are suggested:

- I. There is a need to establish and organise a guidance and counselling unit or programmes, as it may influence the choice of a future career at the high school level. This can increase career focus and correct the identified mismatch between high school subjects and the university courses.
- II. Interventions and programmes that will increase awareness of concerned students and the public about ECP are imperative. This has the potential to correct society's misinformed perceptions about the ECP programme, promote awareness about potential and possibilities through the programme, and boost ECP students' social integration and self-confidence among other groups of higher education students.
- III. There is a need to strengthen institutional support for ECP students beyond academics.

Future research needs to use a longitudinal research design to examine whether the challenges faced by ECP students remain the same in their second year and, likewise, investigates the coping strategies employed by these students in mitigating these challenges.

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