Promoting student engagement among commuter students: A South African case study

Benita van Zyl, Stellenbosch University, benitavz@sun.ac.za
Magda Fourie-Malherbe, Stellenbosch University, mfourie@sun.ac.za

ABSTRACT

Like most universities across the world, Stellenbosch University (SU) in South Africa is only able to accommodate a minority of its undergraduate student population in university residences. The remaining 75% of students are commuter students living in private accommodation and traveling to campus every day. Literature suggests that residential students traditionally demonstrate higher levels of engagement and participation in student communities than commuter students. Hence, a variety of interventions are undertaken to enhance commuter student engagement.

At SU the residential education and cluster initiative aims to address the needs of commuter students by providing a physical on-campus space for commuter students and by granting them access to common areas in residence dining halls and study areas. The purpose is to promote social interaction among residential and commuter students in the co-curricular environment. This initiative further seeks to create student engagement and integrated learning communities that are commuter-friendly and to promote active and collaborative academic and social activities outside the classroom. Whereas the initiative endeavours to integrate the campus experience of students that live in student residences and those that live off-campus and commute, it also aims at integrating the curricular and co-curricular experiences of students. Ultimately the aim is to improve student success (academic success) and student development in the co-curricular space. This study used program evaluation to gain a better understanding of the cluster initiative and hub, the extent to which it addresses the needs of commuter students and promotes commuter student engagement and success.

An electronic survey using a self-generated questionnaire that was sent to all the commuter students and residential students in the amaMaties cluster was used to gather information. The data collection instrument (questionnaire) was informed by the background knowledge that the researcher had of the ResEd and cluster initiative when the study commenced. Items generating qualitative and quantitative data were used in order to evaluate to what extent the expected outcomes were achieved. The researcher found that the hub had a significantly positive effect on the experience and sense of belonging of commuter students. They not only felt welcome in the space, but also found it a very useful facility in a number of ways.

Key words: commuter students; student engagement; student success

Introduction

Worldwide, the massification of higher education (Raby, 2018; Tight, 2019; Trowler, 2019) is continuing unabated. As a result, higher education institutions are experiencing increased numbers of both traditional (18-24 year old school leavers) and non-traditional (mature, working and part-time) students (Hornsby & Osman, 2014; Trow, 1973, 2005). At the same time, higher education institutions are experiencing financial cut-backs due to the economic downturn, lower than expected economic growth and the inability of most governments to adequately fund public higher education (Barr & Crawford, 1998; Cloete, 2016; Spaull, 2016). The combination of these factors has resulted in financial stringencies (Spaull, 2013; 2016) that are prohibiting higher education institutions from creating sufficient infrastructure for student accommodation, and hence, a significant escalation in the numbers of commuter students (Thomsen & Eikemo, 2010). The implications of massification and the increase in commuter student numbers for higher education institutions can be illuminated from international, national and institutional perspectives.

International perspectives

For the purpose of this study, the term 'commuter students' includes all students who do not live in university-owned housing. They constitute an extraordinarily diverse population (Davis, 1999; Jacoby, 1989, 2000b; Kuh, Gonyea, & Palmer, 2001; Ortman, 1995), including full-time students of traditional age who live with their parents, part-time students who live in rental housing near the campus, and adults who have careers and children of their own. The commuter student population will continue to become more diverse as access to higher education by part-time, adult and minority students, including subgroups such as student parents, veterans, first generation and fully employed students increases (Jacoby, 1989, 2000b; Long, 2014; Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2011; Ortman, 1995). Commuter students, who can also be distinguished as either 'walking' or 'driving' commuters (Jacoby & Garland, 2004), share a common core of needs and concerns (Clark, 2006; Garland, 2006; Jacoby, 2000a; Ortman, 1995).

Many commuter students struggle to find space or time to study at home, whereas for some the problem is even more basic: they lack a safe place to live (Donovan, 2006). The realities that commuter students face include the need for reliable transport, the need for support networks on campus and at home − as they have to juggle multiple life roles − and the need to believe that they belong to the institution (Garland, 2006; Guzman, 2019). Not only do they often lack a sense of belonging[iii] (Bloomquist, 2014; Fernandes, Ford, Rayner, & Pretorius, 2017; Jacoby, 2015), but in order for them to take full advantage of the higher education experience their basic needs must be met. Higher education institutions therefore need to make provision for commuter students' needs for housing, transportation, food, security, health care and childcare. In addition, these students should have a sense of being accepted as part of the campus community (Trowler, 2019).

John Garland (2006), coordinator of the National Clearinghouse for Commuter Programmes in the US (NCCP), believes that higher education should replace the myths around commuter students with the realities of commuter students' collective needs (Jacoby, 1989). Some myths about commuter students include that even

though they know they ought to get more involved in campus activities to experience student life, they will not get involved or participate, because they spend too little time on campus (Raby, 2018). The perception persists that commuter students do not want to get involved with fellow classmates, campus life or student activities, but research indicates that this is not true (Jacoby & Garland, 2004).

Jacoby (1989) further posits that commuter students cannot become involved in learning in the same ways that traditional, residential students do. The mere fact that students commute to campus, profoundly affects the nature of their educational experience. Research has shown that by bringing classroom and out-of-class experiences together in the residential setting, student development and learning is enhanced (Kuh, Schuh, & Whitt, 1991); this, however, commuter students miss out on. Yet institutions can create opportunities to enhance commuter students' involvement in learning in ways that meet their needs (Jacoby & Garland, 2004); (Guzman, 2019). Rather than expecting commuter students to adjust their lifestyles and schedules, colleges and universities have the responsibility to specifically and intentionally design curricular and co-curricular mechanisms to involve commuter students in learning (Jacoby, 2000b, 2015).

Creating ways to increase the visibility and interaction of commuter students in classes and on campus remains a challenge (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2011). One of the most frustrating problems for these students is to get connected to lecturers and peers inside and outside the classroom, as they often arrive just in time for class and leave immediately after their classes have ended (Dwyer, 2015). Most commuter students seek to be involved in the campus community and in their learning, but their lives consist of balancing many competing commitments such as family, work and other responsibilities, in addition to their studies (Jacoby, 2000b; Jacoby & Garland, 2004). Students who do not have satisfactory living or transportation arrangements are not able to concentrate on their involvement in learning and their education is very often not their primary focus (Lowe, Miller, & Moffett, 2018).

In South Africa, many similar challenges around massification and commuter students are experienced by the higher education system.

National perspectives

The South African higher education system is characterized by huge growth in participation rates. In their review of higher education in South Africa after two decades of democracy, the Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2016) found that:

> *The strong demand for places in higher education, supported by the 1997 White Paper's commitment to equity of access, has manifested in substantial growth in black student enrolment over the last two decades.... Total enrolment has increased by over 80% to close to one million.*

After 1994, the demand for higher education access has grown significantly amongst African, coloured and Indian students, who were previously under-represented in higher education (CHE, 2016). According to the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training in South Africa (DHET, 2013), "participation rates in universities are also expected to increase from the current 17.3 per cent to 25 per cent

which means, from just over 937 000 students in 2011 to about 1.6 million enrolments in 2030". Higher levels of participation in higher education have unfortunately not been matched by improved student success and throughput rates, particularly for those who have been previously disadvantaged. Enhancing student success remains a serious challenge for the university sector, and has become a priority focus for national policymakers and for institutions themselves (DHET, 2013). Many of the students who have benefited from widened access are commuter students.

Very little research to identify and understand the specific needs of commuter students has, however, been conducted in South Africa. One exception is the Report of the Ministerial Committee for the Review of the Provision of Student Housing at South African Universities (DHET, 2011) which highlighted the necessity of investigating ways and means of providing for the needs of commuter students. This Report (DHET, 2011) pointed out that South Africa had seen an explosion in student enrolment in its residential university system, resulting in a mere 20% of enrolled students being catered for in institutional accommodation. The question is: what happens to the other 80%?

The above-mentioned Ministerial Committee identified a number of advantages that could be claimed for living on campus, and a number of disadvantages to living off campus, as indicated in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Advantages of living on campus vs challenges to living off campus

Factor impacting on studies	**Benefits of living on campus**	**Problems with living at home or with relatives**
Travel time and cost to get to and from classes.	Less time and money are spent on travel, and more on studying.	In many cases travel takes time which could be spent studying.
Living space conducive to studying.	Students have their own space (however limited) and access to library and internet.	Often students living off campus experience problems of finding space to study; they may have no local access to libraries or internet.
Safety.	Although safety is a challenge on campuses there are efforts to create a safe environment.	The travel arrangements for getting back to townships at night can be dangerous (taxis and long walks to taxi ranks).
Building a support network.	Particularly in the first year, study groups, mentoring and social activities are important.	Very often students find it hard to build support networks when they live away from the university.

Source: DHET (2011)

Evident from the above-mentioned report is agreement amongst South African university stakeholders that there are significant academic advantages for students who live on campus. These advantages include access to libraries and other university facilities and events, being in a more conducive environment for studying, and the

removal of pressure to travel long distances. It is widely believed that students living on campus have a better chance of fully engaging with their studies than those who live in the houses of friends or relatives, or in rented accommodation, and who have to commute on a daily basis. Institutions therefore need to think innovatively about addressing the challenges and needs of commuter students in a so-called residential university system.

Institutional perspectives

Stellenbosch University is a medium-sized residential university in South Africa. Of its more than 31 000 students, about 28 % live in university residences. Concerns about the learning experience of commuter and non-residential students[iii] at the University have been shared by staff and students for some time. For example, in 2008 a task team was appointed to investigate the experiences of commuter students and to make proposals to address their needs and concerns in order to enhance the quality of the university experience for this group of students (SU, 2009). The task team (SU, 2009) identified safety and security, transportation, meals, recreation facilities, facilities for small-group work and overnight accommodation (in case of transport failure) as common needs amongst commuter students.

An outcome of this report and its recommendations was the 'cluster' initiative and the establishment of the amaMaties hub[iv] in 2012 aimed at giving commuter students an educational experience that more closely represents that of residential students. This was supported by research (Astin, 1993; Brower, Inkelas, & Kurotsuchi, 2010; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1999) that indicated that:

- residences make the university 'smaller';
- time and space overlap in residences;
- residences are diverse living spaces;
- the social dynamics in residences support the academic mission of the university;
- learning and living are connected, and
- academic and wellness peer-coaching is more easily organized in living spaces.

In order to achieve the above benefits for commuter students too, it was decided to organizationally integrate residential and commuter students into so-called clusters[v]. The cluster initiative aimed at creating a student culture that promotes student success and positive, diverse social experiences - a culture of developing all students to become effective role players within and beyond South Africa.

In addition, a physical on-campus space for commuter students in the amaMaties cluster village was built in 2011. The amaMaties cluster village consists of five residences and two commuter student wards, as well as physical spaces such as a dining hall, the hub, two backpacker rooms and a barbeque area – these facilities are used by all students, both residential and commuter, in the amaMaties cluster. The purpose of the hub was not only to provide a physical space for commuter students, but also to integrate residential and commuter students by granting access to commuter students to common areas in the residences such as dining and study halls. Within the hub in the amaMaties learning community, commuter students have access

to study space 24/7, and they can charge cell phones and use wi-fi to work on their laptops, or relax. They can also take meals at the dining hall, or buy food until 21:30 at the deli that sells light meals and snacks. They can also sleep in the backpackers' rooms in case of emergency or when co-curricular activities end late at night, and they can lock away their valuables in the lockers provided in the hub. Residential and commuter students can form study groups who meet in the hub, have mentor sessions, have small-group discussions with lecturers as part of the out-of-class experience and integrate in the social community of the cluster.

As pointed out above, the purpose of this initiative was to address the needs of commuter students, enhance their student experience, and so contribute to their success. At the same time, the initiative aimed at more effective integration of residential and commuter students in student communities.

Methodology

The research aim of the study was to determine what effect the amaMaties hub and the cluster had on commuter students, the extent to which their needs were addressed and if this facility contributed to the development of student engagement and learning communities.

In order to achieve this aim, the following objectives were set for the study:

- to determine to what extent the facilities were being utilized by commuter and residential students;
- to determine if the facilities fulfilled the basic needs of the commuter students;
- to determine if the commuter and residential students participated and engaged in learning communities (study, tutor and mentor groups);
- to determine to what extent social interaction among commuter and residential students was promoted;
- to determine if the academic experience and success of commuter students were enhanced.

The study was also prompted by a comparison of the academic performance of commuter students with those of residential students. Seeing that residential students, overall, academically outperformed their commuter counterparts, this study also wanted to investigate whether the hub and cluster initiative had a noticeable effect on the academic performance of participating commuter students.

Data was generated by means of an electronic survey (see Addendum A), distributed in 2015 and 2016 to commuter students as well as residential students of the amaMaties cluster. The self-generated questionnaire was informed by the background knowledge that the researcher had of the residential education and cluster initiative (Bryman, 2015). Items generating qualitative and quantitative data were included in the questionnaire (Creswell, 2012) with a view to evaluating to what extent the expected outcomes of the cluster and hub initiative had been achieved. Filter and follow-up questions, multiple-choice and semantic differential scale questions, as well as open-ended questions were used.

The questionnaire items focused on how and how often the facilities were utilized and whether the facilities addressed the basic needs of students with regard to meals, safety, rest and relaxation. In addition, the questionnaire tried to ascertain how often the respondents participated in learning communities such as study and mentor groups, and to what extent social interaction between commuter and residential students was promoted. The last part of the questionnaire focused on the usefulness of the hub and how satisfied respondents were with the hub and the amaMaties cluster.

In order to check that the questionnaire was easy to access, correct and complete, it was piloted before it was sent to the cluster population. The data was captured and compiled electronically by a staff member of the SU Division of Institutional Research and Planning (DIRP), and then given to the researcher to interpret, analyse and draw conclusions.

Data analysis

The questionnaire responses were captured in MS Excel and the tables were then used to analyse and interpret the qualitative and quantitative data and to make graphical presentations that illustrate the most important findings. From the population of 3034 potential participants, 342 students responded to the questionnaire. Of these, 126 were commuter students (response rate: 4.35%) and 205 were residential students (response rate: 6.92%), whereas 11 (response rate: 0.36%) students did not give consent and were marked as unknown, because no further information about them was available. The final response rate was 11.27%. Although this is a disappointingly low response rate, the actual number of valid responses (331) were enough for the researcher to draw preliminary conclusions.

Table 2 below indicates the respective number of respondents per gender and race.

Table 2: Respondents according to gender and race

GENDER	**Number**	**%**
Female	241	72.81
Male	90	27.19
RACE	**Number**	**%**
Asian	10	3.02
Black	26	7.85
Coloured	61	18.43
White	234	70.69
All	**331**	**100.00**

The residences and commuter student wards involved in the survey consisted of three female residences with 193 students per residence, one male residence with 311 students and one co-ed residence with 50 males and 50 females. The two commuter student wards, Libertas and Equité, had 1 019 (male) and 1 025 (female) students respectively. These students constituted the total number of 1 659 female students and 1 375 male students in the amaMaties cluster.

According to the survey results, 72.8% of the respondents were female students and 27.19% of the respondents were male students. The amaMaties hub is situated near three female residences (Serruria, Nemesia and Erica which supports the notion that female students have a stronger affiliation to the hub, as illustrated by the response rates in table 2.

Detailed information of the feedback of the respondents are represented in the tables below. Most questionnaire items had an eight point scale. For ease of interpretation and comparison, the responses in the bottom four categories and responses in the top four categories were consolidated, resulting in only two categories.

Findings and discussion

Each of the objectives listed above is discussed with reference to the findings from the data collected.

Utilization of facilities by commuter and residential students

According to the data derived from the questionnaire, more residential respondents than commuter respondents were aware of the location of the hub, and similarly paid more visits to the hub.

Table 3: Visits to the amaMaties hub by commuter and residential students per term

COMMUTER STUDENTS					**RESIDENTIAL STUDENTS**				
PERCENTAGE %					**PERCENTAGE %**				
	TERM 1	**TERM 2**	**TERM 3**	**TERM 4**		**TERM 1**	**TERM 2**	**TERM 3**	**TERM 4**
Percentage of students with zero to 5 visits	60.81	68.92	68.92	64.21	Percentage of students with zero to 5 visits	51.26	47.24	53.77	50.26
Percentage of students with 6 to 11+ visits	39.18	31.08	31.08	45.79	Percentage of students with 6 to 11+ visits	48.74	54.77	46.23	49.75

During the first term, the residential respondents visited the hub more frequently than the commuter respondents. This can be related to the orientation program that took place at the start of the first term. The commuter students leave the spaces early in the afternoon or evening, whereas the residential students live in the residences close to the hub. The second and fourth terms are known as the ‘academic’ terms, because the mid-year and the final exams of the academic year occur during these two terms. A significant increase in visits from the commuter students happened in the fourth term. This can be because it is the final term of the academic year, which means less social activities. The commuter students also became familiar in the space which gave them a sense of belonging and a well organised space to study. The least visits to the hub were paid during the third term, because many social activities are usually scheduled during this term.

The hub is situated near the three female residences in the amaMaties Cluster and is therefore seen as a safe space to enter during the day or night. Feedback from the commuter respondents about the space:

> *The hub is always available when I need somewhere to be, or to get food, or to meet up with people. It is extremely useful for meetings and houses a lot of our PSO activities. It gives a lot of students the opportunity to study in a safe environment that does not involve having to walk back to res late at night.*

A significant increase in visits of commuter respondents occurred during the fourth term with more commuter that residential respondents visiting the hub more than six times. This could possibly be related to the fourth term being the final academic term of the year, and the hub being frequented more for study purposes. Another explanation could be that, after nine months, commuter students experienced an increased sense of belonging within the space. Faces became more familiar, and they now felt welcome in the facilities of the amaMaties cluster. Overall, the differences between commuter and residential students in terms of the frequency of their visit to the hub are relatively small. Close on 23% of commuter respondents visited the hub 11 or more times, while this percentage for residential respondents was just more than 33%.

Addressing the basic needs of commuter students with regard to meals, safety, rest and relaxation

Table 4 below demonstrates that commuter students used the amaMaties hub more frequently (40.54%) to rest and relax than residential students (29.15%). This can be explained due to the fact that residential students can go to their residences to relax, whereas the commuter students do not have another space to go to during the day.

Table 4: Residential and commuter respondents using the amaMaties hub to relax

	Most often 1 - 4	**Least often 5 - 8**	**AVERAGE RANKING**
Commuter students: Relaxation	40.54	59.45	**5.19**
Residential students: Relaxation	29.15	70.86	**5.34**

A comment from a commuter student was that:

> *It provides a place for me to study, relax and eat during periods when I don't have class because I'm unable to go home.*

When determining if the needs of the commuter respondents with regards to meals had been addressed, the respondents indicated that the meal offering at the dining hall was not used as frequently as was expected. More residential respondents used the meal offerings, which can be a result of bursaries that include meals and thus making it easier for residential students to book a meal, whereas commuter respondents rather bring food from home or prepare food at their flats, as illustrated by the following response of a commuter student:

> *I generally bring my own lunch to campus in the mornings. I make my own food in my flat. I prefer cooking for myself.*

The high administration fees to book meals at the dining hall also prevented most of the commuter respondents to eat or book meals there. The deli proved to be more popular because, when students forgot to book meals at the dining hall, they could easily buy food at the deli with their student cards.

The space was further recognized as safe and secure, and respondents felt at ease to leave their personal belongings unattended. Notices of lost-and-found goods demonstrate this behaviour. This created a sense of connection (Stevens, 2000) and respect for one another in the cluster.

Regarding relaxation, the respondents also used the other facilities in the cluster village quite often. The majority of the commuter respondents indicated that they felt familiar and welcome in the space, because it created opportunities where they could meet with a diversity of commuter and residential students and, therefore, they did not feel excluded.

Participation in learning communities (study, tutor and mentor groups) in the hub

Most of the commuter and residential respondents regarded the hub itself as an excellent space to study − either alone or in groups. Respondents found it easy to interact with fellow students in the cluster across faculties and year groups. The commuter respondents engaged with their learning in several ways, whereas first-year respondents were guided by their mentors in the hub.

Table 5: Commuter and residential respondents' participation in study groups

	Most often 1 - 4	**Least often 5 - 8**	**Average ranking**
Commuter students: Participation in study groups	48.64	51.35	**4.49**
Residential students: Participation in study groups	56.29	43.71	**4.12**

The facility was mostly visited to study alone, but a number of the respondents worked together in groups, which made it easier for them to connect with students that were studying the same courses. The more they visited the hub, the more familiar the faces became and as a result they did not find it awkward to pose questions to a peer who was studying the same course.

> *It is a brilliant space to study after hours that allows one to sit in an open manner and discuss academic problems if need be. I made engineering friends by studying in the hub and being forced to walk up to them to ask if they could solve the engineering problems that I struggled with.*

Commuter respondents met with their mentors in the hub more frequently than the residential respondents, and they indicated that academic, social and emotional support in the space were valuable to them.

> *It is very useful for mentor and PSO meetings as well as during the welcoming period.*

The average ranking for commuter students' participation in study groups (4.49) was slightly higher than that for residential students (4.12).

By engaging in mentor or study groups in the cluster, commuter respondents indicated that they were given the opportunity to acquire new skills such as time management, as well as new study methods (by working on their own and by working with others). Although mentor groups were important to commuter respondents because these groups created connections between first year respondents and their mentors, we believe that the first-year respondents could have used the opportunity to meet with their mentors more frequently. The respondents reported that the cluster helped them academically, as it provided a variety of academic support platforms.

It can be concluded that being part of the cluster motivated both commuter and residential students to become more engaged in terms of academic work, social interaction and participation in cluster activities. The support given by mentors to first-years also contributed positively in facilitating their transition from school to university.

Promotion of social interaction among commuter and residential students

Research has demonstrated that student involvement is positively related to student success (Kuh et al., 2011). In addition, research on student engagement has emphasized that involvement, which has an important influence on student success and retention, matters the most during the first and second year of study (Astin, 1984; Kahu, 2013). Kahu (2013) importantly points out that student engagement does not only result from appropriate teaching practices and student behaviours, but also from the time that students invest in learning and from their social and academic integration. Our study found that using the hub and being in the amaMaties cluster made interaction with other people (commuter and residential students) more convenient and also more fun for commuter students.

Table 6: Commuter and residential respondents' use of the amaMaties hub to socialize

	Most often 1 - 4	**Least often 5 - 8**	**Average ranking**
Commuter students: Socialize	59.46	40.54	**4.09**
Residential students: Socialize	37.7	62.30	**5.18**

More commuter students than residential students frequently used the hub to socialize. Almost 60% of commuter respondents were using the space to socialize quite often (with rankings from 1-4), whereas less than 40% of residential respondents used it as often to socialize. This is a clear indication that commuter students need a space on campus during the day to socialize, while residential respondents mostly use their residences for this purpose. The following comment illustrates this:

> *Private quiet area suited to studying, eating and socialising especially for PSO (commuter) students.*

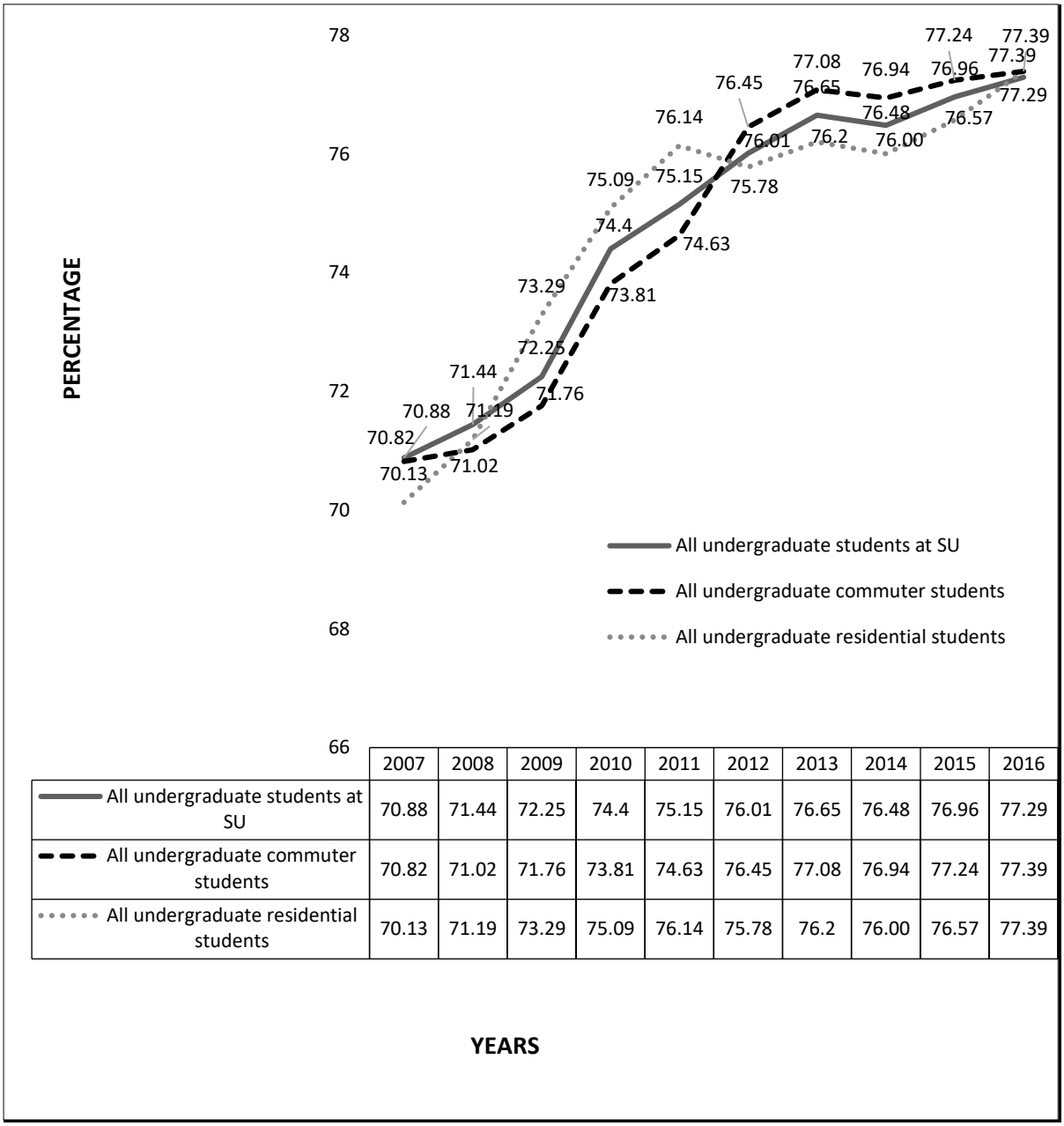
A comment from a commuter student emphasizes the multi-functionality of the hub:

> *It creates an environment that encourages holistic well-being of amaMaties students. It gives me an alternative, safe area to get food, relax, and study. It is a nice place to study, socialize and also to be part of a residence vibe.*

However, when meetings and events were organised at inconvenient times during the day, or when no parking was available, commuter respondents did not participate. Poor communication about the existence of the facilities and what it offers to the commuter students, according to some of the respondents, was another reason for not visiting the hub or for not participating in activities and events in the cluster. The respondents argued that they would have been more involved if the communication was more informative and timeous.

Academic success

Responses to the questionnaire gave evidence of the enhancement of the academic experience of the commuter and residential respondents, but in order to evaluate whether commuter students' academic performance was affected by the hub, longitudinal statistical data was consulted. This included students' performance in their first year of study, compared to their school-leaving results, with differentiation between commuter students in general and amaMaties cluster students specifically, and differentiation between commuter students and residential students. The academic performance of all SU undergraduate students was also tracked and compared to the performance of residential and commuter students. Lastly, the changes in graduation rates of all SU final year students, residential students and commuter students were compared. Not all of this longitudinal data can be discussed here, but for purposes of illustration **Figure 1** gives a visual representation of the average performance of all undergraduate SU, commuter and residential students, from 2007 to 2016.



	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
All undergraduate students at SU	70.88	71.44	72.25	74.4	75.15	76.01	76.65	76.48	76.96	77.29
All undergraduate commuter students	70.82	71.02	71.76	73.81	74.63	76.45	77.08	76.94	77.24	77.39
All undergraduate residential students	70.13	71.19	73.29	75.09	76.14	75.78	76.2	76.00	76.57	77.39

Figure 1: SU undergraduate, residential and commuter students' average performance, 2007-2016

Source: APS (http://admin.sun.ac.za/trackwell/ssg11) & http://admin.sun.ac.za/trackwell/ssg16)

A steady improvement in the averages of undergraduate students is illustrated by Figure 1 with sharper increases from 2009, the year in which the students actively became part of the clusters at SU. The *commuter students* had an average of 70.82% in 2007, and the improvement continued until 2016 (77.39%). The *residential students* had an average of 70.13% in 2007, which improved to 77.14% in 2011. Many reasons can be given for why commuter students' academic performance surpassed that of residential students from 2012 onwards, but we argue that one of the reasons could be the establishment of the physical space (hub) that addressed both physical and

social needs of commuter students, and created a space where commuter students could study and participate in study groups. It also gave the commuter students a sense of belonging within the amaMaties Cluster.

However, the average for the same students decreased to 75.78% (2012) and started to increase again towards 2016 (77.39%). The average for *all undergraduate* students at SU increased from 70.88% (2007) to an average of 77.29% (2016). Noteworthy is the fact that the averages for the *commuter* and the r*esidential* students in 2016 (77.39%) were exactly the same.

Conclusion

From our investigation we could come to the conclusion that the amaMaties hub and cluster had met the stated outcomes of the initiative to a large extent, but could furthermore also conclude that the hub and cluster had positively affected the student experience of both commuter and residential students.

It gave the students an opportunity to not only focus on their studies, but it also created opportunities in co-curricular spaces and in learning communities to meet other students who did not form part of their immediate surroundings in classes and residences. It furthermore provided a space where unlikely friendships were formed and conversations happened.

The cluster initiative and hub demonstrate a novel approach to holistic commuter student engagement and development within the South African higher education context, and as such provides guidelines to student affairs practitioners at other universities in South Africa and internationally.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Astin, A. W. (1984). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of college student personnel, 25*(4), 297-308.

Astin, A. W. (1993). *Assessment for excellence: The philosophy and practice of assessment and evaluation in higher education*. Phoenix, United States of America: Oryx Press.

Bloomquist, E. S. (2014). Developming a Sense of Belonging for Commuter Students: A Mixed Methods Study. 94.

Brower, A., Inkelas, M., & Kurotsuchi, K. (2010). Living-Learning Programs. *Liberal Education, 96*(2), 36.

Bryman, A. (2015). *Social research methods*: Oxford university press.

CHE. (2016). *South African higher education reviewed: two decades of democracy*. Pretoria, South Africa: Council on higher education.

Clark, M. R. (2006). Succeeding in the city: Challenges and best practices on urban commuter campuses. *About Campus, 11*(3), 2-8.

Cloete, N. (2016). For sustainable funding and fees, the undergraduate system in South Africa must be restructured. Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2016/a0146Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*: Sage publications.

DHET. (2011). *Report on the ministerial committee for the review of the provision of student housing at South African universities* (978-0-621-40731-0). Retrieved from South Africa: www.dhet.gov.za

DHET. (2013). White paper for post-school education and training. building an expanded, effective and integrated post-school system. Retrieved from http://www.dhet.gov.za/SiteAssets/Latest%20News/White%20paper%20for%20post-school%20education%20and%20training.pdf

Donovan, R. A. (2006). A Room of Their Own for Commuter Students. *Chronicle of Higher Education, 53*(10), B24-B24.

Dwyer, T. (2015). Persistence in higher education through student–faculty interactions in the classroom of a commuter institution. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 1-10.

Fernandes, A., Ford, A., Rayner, G., & Pretorius, L. (2017). Building a sense of belonging among tertiary commuter students: The Monash Non-Residential Colleges program. *Student Success, 8*(2), 31-42.

Flagg, B. N. (2013). *Formative evaluation for educational technologies*: Routledge.

Garland, J. (2006). Commuter students: Myths, realities, and helpful theoretical frameworks. *Student Affairs Leader, 34*(12), 1-6.

Guzman, J. J. (2019). *Student involvement and student unions: a case study of commuter students at a California State University.* (M.A.), California State University, Fresno. Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/10211.3/211092 https://library.fresnostate.edu/ database.

Hornsby, D. J., & Osman, R. (2014). Massification in higher education: Large classes and student learning. *Higher Education, 67*(6), 711-719.

Jacoby, B. (1989). *The student as commuter: Developing a comprehensive institutional response* (0962388262). Retrieved from

Jacoby, B. (2000a). Involving commuter students in learning: Moving from rhetoric to reality. *New directions for higher education, 2000*(109), 81-87.

Jacoby, B. (2000b). Why involve commuter students in learning? *New directions for higher education, 2000*(109), 3-12.

Jacoby, B. (2015). Engaging first-year commuter students in learning. *Metropolitan Universities, 15*(2), 12-30.

Jacoby, B., & Garland, J. (2004). Strategies for enhancing commuter student success. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice, 6*(1), 61-79.

Kahu, E. R. (2013). Framing student engagement in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education, 38*(5), 758-773.

Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J. H., & Whitt, E. J. (2011). *Student success in college: Creating conditions that matter*: John Wiley & Sons.

Kuh, G. D., Schuh, J. H., & Whitt, E. J. (1991). Some good news about campus life. *Proquest, 23*(5), 48-55.

Lieberman, L. D., Fagen, M. C., & Neiger, B. L. (2014). Evaluating programs that address ideological issues ethical and practical considerations for practitioners and evaluators. *Health promotion practice, 15*(2), 161-167.

Long, L. D. (2014). Does it matter where college students live? Differences in satisfaction and outcomes as a function of students' living arrangement and gender. *The Journal of College and University Student Housing, 40*(2), 66-85.

Lowe, M. S., Miller, W., & Moffett, P. (2018). Commuter Campus in Transition: Meeting the Changing Needs of Students through Mixed-Methods Assessment: ALA Editions.

Maslow, A. H., & Lewis, K. J. (1987). *Maslow's hierarchy of needs*: Salenger Incorporated.
Mertens, D. M. (2014). *Research and evaluation in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods: Integrating diversity with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods*: Sage Publications.
Ortman, J. (1995). Commuter students in colleges and universities.
Raby, R. I. (2018). *Community Colleges and Global Counterparts: Institutional Changes to Support Massification of Higher Education* (pp. 12 - 23). doi:10.4018/978-1-5225-5861-3.ch002
Spaull, N. (2013). South Africa's education crisis: The quality of education in South Africa 1994-2011. *Johannesburg: Centre for Development and Enterprise*.
Spaull, N. (2016). Important research inputs on feesmustfall. Retrieved from Spaull, N. https://nicspaull.com/2016/09/29/important-research-inputs-on-feesmustfall/
Stevens, R. A. (2000). Welcoming commuter students into living-learning programs. *New directions for higher education, 2000*(109), 71-79.
SU. (2009). *Report of the task team for the advancement of the integration of PSO students in learning and living communities*. Stellenbosch University.
Terenzini, P. T., Pascarella, E. T., & Blimling, G. S. (1999). Students' out-of-class experiences and their influence on learning and cognitive development: A literature review. *Journal of college student development, 40*(5), 610-623.
Thomsen, J., & Eikemo, T. A. (2010). Aspects of student housing satisfaction: A quantitative study. *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment, 25*(3), 273-293.
Tight, M. (2019). Mass higher education and massification. *Higher education policy., 32*(1), 93. doi:10.1057/s41307-017-0075-3
Tinto, V. (2000). What have we learned about the impact of learning communities on students? *Assessment UPdate Progress, Trends, and Practices in Higher Education, 12*(2), 4.
Trow, M. A. (1973). *Problems in the transition from elite to mass higher education*.
Trow, M. A. (2005). Reflections on the transition from elite to mass to universal access: Forms and phases of higher education in modern societies since WWII. *Institute of Governmental Studies UC Berkeley, 96*, 1-67.
Trowler, V. (2019). Transit and Transition: Student Identity and the Contested Landscape of Higher Education. 87-104. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-96113-2_6
Wholey, J. S., Hatry, H. P., & Newcomer, K. E. (2010). *Handbook of practical program evaluation* (Vol. 19): John Wiley & Sons.

[i] In the South African context the term 'university' includes the 'college' referred to in American literature, and will be used inclusively throughout the article.
[ii] Sense of belonging refers mainly to the perception of inclusivity and support from peers, lecturers and other staff of the institution.
[iii] A distinction can be made between commuter and non-residential students, with 'commuter students' referring to students who drive to campus daily, and 'non-residential students' those who live in private accommodation close to campus. For the purpose of this study the term 'commuter students' will be used which includes both groups of students.
[iv] A hub is a physical space primarily for use by commuter students at Stellenbosch University.

[v] A cluster consists of a number of residences and commuter student wards that are geographically grouped together.

Addendum A

AMAMATIES QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear Student,

The purpose of this questionnaire is to obtain feedback from students in the amaMaties cluster regarding the cluster village. The cluster village includes the hub, conference hall, Tinie Louw Dining Hall, deli, braai area and overnight rooms.

This survey is part of a study to evaluate to what extent the amaMaties hub and cluster village contribute to addressing the needs of commuter students, to promoting student engagement and to forming healthy student communities. The study is done towards a Master's Degree in Education. Ethical clearance and institutional permission to conduct the study have been granted by the appropriate institutional structures.

Completing the questionnaire will take less than 10 minutes of your time. Your honest feedback will be appreciated.

1. To which residence or PSO do you belong? (X)

Equité Female PSO		
Erica Female Residence		
Helderberg Male Residence		
Huis Neethling Coed Residence		
Libertas Male PSO		
Nemesia Female Residence		
Serruria Female Residence		

Other: ***Please specify***		

2. Please indicate your ***race***. (X)

Asian	
Black	
Brown	
Coloured	
White	
Other	

3. Please indicate your ***gender***. (X)

Female	
Male	

4. Do you know that there is a **hub** building for the ***amaMaties***-cluster? (X)

YES		NO	

5(a) If you answered "**yes**" to Question 4, have you visited the **hub**? (X)

YES		NO	

If you answered "no" to Question 5 (a), please go to Question 10.

5(b) If you answered "**yes**" to Question **5 (a)**, please indicate ***how many times this year*** (per term) have you visited the **hub** (X)

FIRST TERM

0		1-5		6-10		11 or more	

SECOND TERM

0		1-5		6-10		11 or more	

THIRD TERM

0		1-5		6-10		11 or more	

FOURTH TERM

0		1-5		6-10		11 or more	

6(a) What do you use the **hub** for? (X) Please **rank** your choices in terms of what you use it for most often to least often, where

1 = most often used for *and* 8 = least often used for

	To socialize
	To study by myself
	To participate in study groups
	To relax
	To participate in mentor sessions
	To eat: at the Tinie Louw Dining Hall
	To eat: at the deli
	To make use of the lockers
	I don't use it at all
	Other: ***specify***

6(b) What **other services** (apart from those listed above) would you like to be provided by the **hub**?

7. How useful do you find the ***amaMaties*** **hub**? (X)

1 = not useful at all; 7 = very useful

Not useful at all **Very useful**

1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Please explain your score:

8. How satisfied are you with the hub? (X)

1 = very dissatisfied; 7 = very satisfied

Very dissatisfied **Very satisfied**

1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Please explain your score:

9. To what extent do you feel welcome in the hub?

1 = not welcome at all *and* 7 = very welcome

Not welcome at all **Very welcome**

1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Please motivate your score:

If you do **NOT** use the **hub,** what would cause you to use the **hub**?

11(a) Do you know that meals can be booked at the **Tinie Louw Dining Hall**? (X)

YES		**NO**	

11(b) Do you take **meals** at the Tinie Louw Dining Hall? (X)

YES		**NO**	

If ***NO,*** why not?

12. How have you experienced the amaMaties **cluster since you have been part of the cluster?**

Thank you so much for completing the questionnaire!

All queries can be directed to Mrs Benita van Zyl (benitavz@sun.ac.za)

Centre for Student Communities

Link: https://equipu4.formstack.com/forms/amamaties