

# AN EVALUATION OF A YOUNG ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

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## ABSTRACT

The University of South Africa is a mega-distance higher education institution offering degrees and diplomas to about 360 000 students worldwide. To deliver on its mandate, the university needs a skilled, dedicated and a motivated academic workforce. Attracting and retaining academic staff remains one of the biggest challenges, especially in the light of an aging cohort of productive senior academics and a general shortage of skills. A three-month full-time Young Academic Programme was designed and implemented to focus on the development of tuition, research skills and academic leadership. Since the programme has been repeated a couple of times since 2008 and have graduated 59 young academics, the university decided to evaluate the programme to determine if it was achieving its objectives. The evaluation of the programme identified various strengths and weaknesses. Most of the participants experienced the programme as inspiring, insightful and of a high quality. Some even reported that it was a life-changing experience. Positive contributions include solid exposure to teaching and learning and knowledge of the broader academic environment. Areas that need more attention are research methodology, community engagement, transfer of learning, mentoring and coaching.

**KEY TERMS:** development, evaluation, University of South Africa, Young academics, Young Academic Programme

## Introduction

The University of South Africa (Unisa) is a comprehensive higher education institution that provides a combination of the philosophies and programmes offered by former technikons (now universities of technology) and traditional universities. As many as a third of all students studying in South Africa are registered at Unisa (Unisa 2008c, 3). Open distance learning (ODL) forms an integral part of the way that Unisa functions, communicates with and provides higher education to students in South Africa, Africa and the rest of the world. By making use of ODL, the university provides a range of study programmes, from short courses and certificate programmes, up to three and

four-year degrees and diplomas, with postgraduate studies offered up to doctorate level. Unisa has a specific social mandate to provide open access to its students – especially working, poor, rural and under-prepared students (Unisa 2008c, 3). However, to be able to use ODL optimally and to teach the large number of students that the university currently has and to produce high-quality research outputs, the university needs a skilled and dedicated academic workforce. Over the years, Unisa has initiated a number of staff training and development programmes to address this aspect, one of which was the Young Academic Programme (YAP) that focuses on the development of young academics within the university. How universities train and develop their employees give them a competitive advantage. To enhance organisational efficiency and competitiveness, a strategic approach should be adopted regarding the ways in which its employees' capabilities are developed. Integral to the planning process, a core set of strategic learning imperatives should be identified and prioritised. The Young Academic Programme has been identified as a strategic training initiative at Unisa with the aim to improve the leadership and management skills of young academics to take up leadership and management positions within the Unisa academic structure in the future.

Higher Education South Africa (Hesa Report 2011, 1) indicated that higher education institutions in South Africa and elsewhere are finding it more difficult to recruit and retain academics and researchers for the future. It was noted that the current academic workforce at higher education institutions remains unrepresented of the South African population and about one fifth of academics are due to retire in less than a decade. This means that there are insufficient numbers in the existing academics cohort to replace them. This reality also faces Unisa as part of its on-going efforts to recruit talent in the academic sector.

Since the inception of the Young Academic Programme in 2008 until the end of 2010, a total of 59 young academics participated in the programme. Since the Young Academic Programme has been repeated a few times since 2008, the university decided to evaluate the programme to determine if it was achieving its objectives.

## **Objective of the article**

The main objective of this article is to report on the evaluation of the Young Academic Programme at the University of South Africa to determine if the programme has been successful in achieving its objectives. In doing so, this article will focus on the following aspects:

- ◆ an explanation of the research methodology used to evaluate the Young Academic Programme;
- ◆ an overview of the Young Academic Programme at the University of South Africa;
- ◆ an explanation of the objectives of the Young Academic Programme;
- ◆ the reasons for the evaluation of a training programme; and
- ◆ the findings of the evaluation.

This research reported here also aimed to answer the following questions:

- ◆ How effective is the Young Academic Programme in meeting its stated objectives and aims?
- ◆ What are the outcomes of this programme?
- ◆ Have the young academics who participated in the programme benefitted from it?

## **Research methodology**

The research predominantly made use of quantitative data collection methods by administering a comprehensive questionnaire that was completed by all the young academics who participated in the programme. The questionnaire was constructed in such a way that it allowed for self-administration. The majority of questions were on a scale of 1 to 5 with the intention of measuring the participants' experiences prior to and after the programme. A total of 43 questionnaires, out of a possible 59 (73% response rate) were completed successfully and captured for analysis and will be discussed in this article.

## **Overview of the Young Academic Programme**

The first Young Academic Programme was launched on 15 September 2008. The aim of the programme was to address some of the challenges that the university faces in the Unisa 2015 Strategic Plan and to develop young promising and talented academics for the future, in terms of academic development and management. The objective was to provide the group of young academics with the knowledge and skills required to be top achievers, not only in Unisa, but also within the national higher education environment and on the global stage. The programme also sought to enable young academics to assume a leadership role within their academic departments, colleges and the university one day (Unisa 2008f, 3–5).

The Young Academic Programme sought to align itself with three key goals embedded in the Unisa institutional operational plan 2008 to 2010 (Unisa 2008d), namely to:

- ◆ identify and develop leaders and managers and to improve staff capacity;
- ◆ recruit and retain high-quality staff in line with employment equity targets; and
- ◆ develop and implement appropriate leadership and management education and training programmes.

Candidates were selected from a pool of applications. A young academic is defined as someone under the age of 35 years who holds a minimum of a master's degree. To be considered for participation, an applicant must have been in the employment of the university for at least six months and preferably an employment equity candidate. The ideal candidate should also consider registering, or have registered, for a doctoral degree. Since 2008, the programme has been repeated five times by the university with a total of 59 young academics completing the programme.

The training programme that initially covered 13 weeks was later shortened to 8 weeks and the selected young academics are exempted from their normal work duties during this period. The curriculum of the programme focuses on three main areas namely:

- ◆ academic development;
- ◆ research; and
- ◆ management development within the South African higher education context, but also specifically in the Unisa ODL context.

To support these three main areas of development, sub-objectives were also addressed. These include:

- ◆ development of team cohesiveness and interpersonal relationships;
- ◆ an understanding of the higher education landscape in South Africa and ODL in particular;
- ◆ an understanding of the Unisa brand, colleges, regional centres and support services;
- ◆ development of participants' information and communication technology (ICT) skills;
- ◆ enhancement of research knowledge and skills and supervision capabilities;
- ◆ acquisition of general management skills; and
- ◆ acquisition of budgeting and financial management skills.

It was agreed during the inception of the programme that assessment of the participants would be undertaken to determine the impact of the training, as well as to provide support to the group of young academics to ensure that skills and knowledge obtained would be built on and shared with other academics through mentoring and coaching. Performance evaluation of the participants during the programme is also done regularly. Candidates are assessed through compulsory assignments, presentations and a final portfolio. Participants in the Young Academic Programme are also assessed

on their focus, participation in joint projects and presentations, creativity, growth and maturity, critical thinking and skills, leadership and punctuality as they complete each section of the programme (Unisa 2008f, 46–48).

Regular, action-oriented interactive discussions, debates and presentations to both internal and external audiences are assessed, as well as group work. Post-intervention assessment of the programme continues to determine the impact of the programme on the young academics. Support is also provided to the young academics to ensure that the skills and knowledge they acquire are passed on to other academics through mentoring and coaching (Unisa 2008e, 2).

### **Evaluation of the Young Academic Programme**

To determine whether the stated objectives of the Young Academic Programme have been achieved and to analyse the successes and outcomes, the programme was evaluated by the university. The importance of and the reason for the evaluation of training and development programmes and initiatives are well established and researched (Erasmus, Loedolff, Mada and Nel 2012, 206; Jackson and Schuler 2000, 385; Rothwell and Kazanas 1998, 264).

Evaluation of training can be defined as a systematic process of making judgements about the quality of a training or learning programme (Coetzee and Schreuder 2010, 404) and can normally occur before or during training (formative evaluation) and after the training (summative evaluation).

According to various authors (Grobler, Wörnich, Carrell, Elbert and Hatfield 2011, 323; Jackson et al. 2000, 386) most training experts agree that the training and development evaluation consists of at least four components, namely:

1. Reaction to training – questions like the following can be asked: did the participants like the programme and was the instruction helpful? Do the participants believe that they have learned something?
2. Learning – did the participants acquire the knowledge and skills they were taught? Can the participants talk about the subject and demonstrate the appropriate behaviour?
3. Behaviour of performance change – has performance in the work environment improved?
4. Results – did the training produce tangible results in terms of, for example, higher productivity or employee retention?

There are a number of models for the evaluation of training for example Phillips' Return on Investment (ROI) (Phillips 1997), Nadler (Nadler 1982) and Kirkpatrick (1994). In this article, Kirkpatrick's hierarchy will be described because it still has major impact on evaluation practices today and it was also the model used for this study. Kirkpatrick's hierarchy can be described as follows:

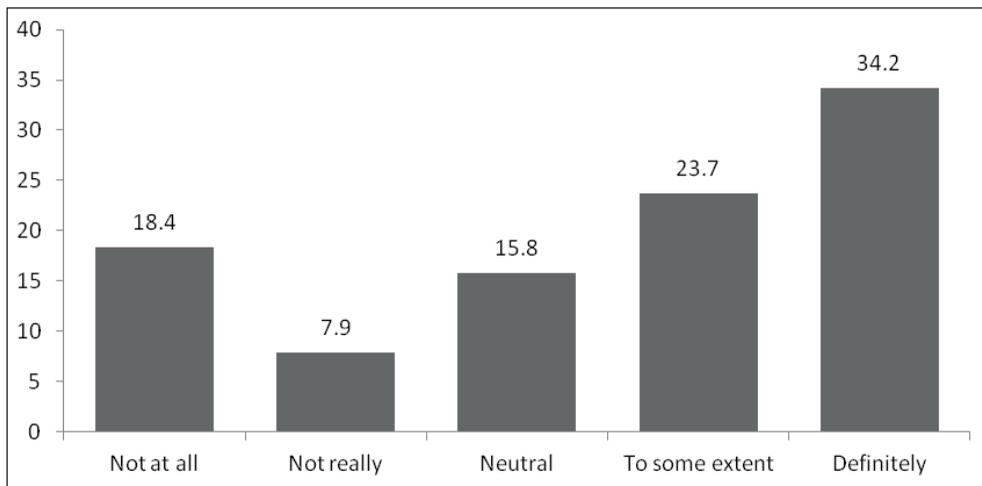
- ◆ *Reaction criteria* (level 1) are measures of trainee impressions of the training or learning programme; they thus provide an evaluation of how the delegates felt about the training or learning experience. Feedback forms, post-training surveys and online evaluations are examples of evaluation tools used at this level. Reaction evaluation is furthermore easy to obtain and quick to complete (Chapman 2012).
- ◆ *Learning criteria* (level 2) assess how much trainees have learned in the training or learning programme. Knowledge tests, interviews and observations, for example, are often used for this purpose. This level is simple to set up, but it is more complex for learning that is difficult to assess (for example attitudinal development) and costs will increase if the systems are poorly designed (Chapman 2012).
- ◆ *Behavioural criteria* (level 3) measure how well the behaviours learnt in the training transfer to the job. These may include, for example, ratings of on-the-job performance of behaviours taught in the training or learning programme, 360-degree feedback and self-assessments. The measurement of behaviour change is less easy to quantify and interpret than reaction and learning evaluation. The cooperation and skills of management are important factors, but often difficult to control and the management and analysis of on-going assessments are impossible without a well-designed system (Chapman 2012).
- ◆ *Results criteria* (level 4) provide measures of how well the training can be related to organisational outcomes. These may include, for example, an assessment of productivity gains, cost savings, error deductions, or increased customer satisfaction. Measures would typically include business or organisational key performance indicators, which should already be in place on account of normal management systems. The challenge of this level is to determine the trainee's degree of accountability and relevance at the beginning of the training, because it is important for the trainee to understand what is to be measured. Individually, results evaluation is not difficult, but across the organisation it becomes much more challenging and external factors have an influence on organisational performance (Chapman 2012).

After getting a clear understanding of Kirkpatrick's hierarchy and the way it can be used to evaluate the training and development programme, the findings of the evaluation of the Young Academic Programme will be considered in the next paragraphs.

## Findings of the evaluation

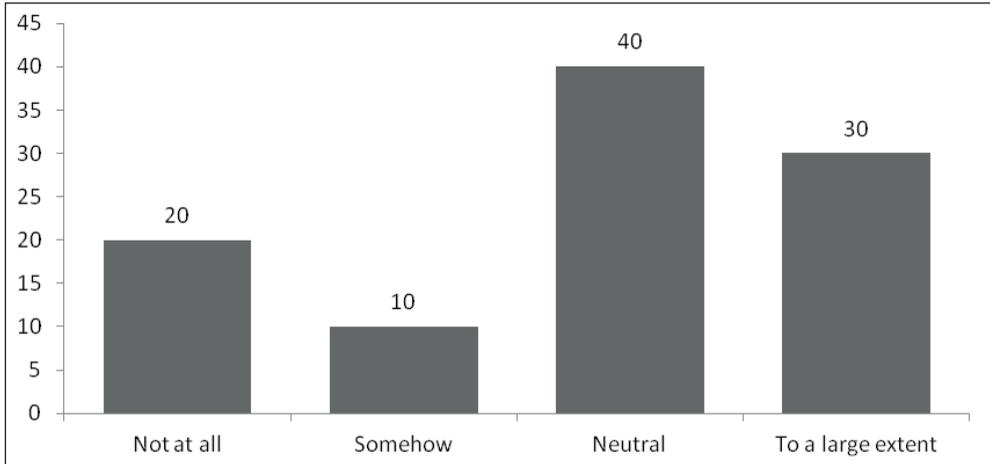
The evaluation of the Young Academic Programme firstly provided an overview of the demographic profile of the participants of the Young Academic Programme to date. The distribution of the participants by population group indicated that more than 71% of the participants were Africans, followed by whites (16.7%) and Asians (9.5%) with coloureds constituting the least number of participants with only approximately 2% representation. With regard to gender, 51.2% of the participants were male and 48.8% of the participants of the programme were female. The average age of the participants was 33 years with most of the participants having an average of three years' work experience at Unisa. Most of the participants on the programme came from the College of Law (30.2%), followed by the College of Human Sciences (25.6%) and the College of Economic and Management Sciences (25.6%).

The young academics indicated that the programme inspired them to enrol for advanced degree courses to improve their academic qualifications. Just over a third (34.2%) indicated that the programme definitely inspired them to register for advanced degree courses, followed by 23.7% indicating that the programme inspired them to enrol for advanced courses to some extent, as can be seen in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Extent to which the programme inspired participants to register for advanced qualifications

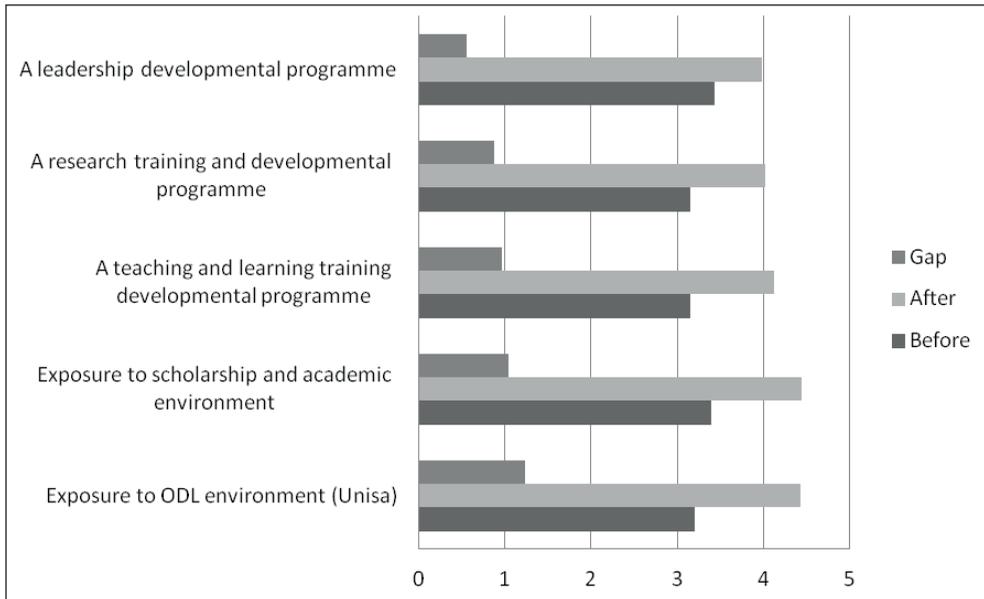
When asked to indicate the courses they were inspired to enrol for, the overwhelming majority of young academics, namely 78.8%, indicated that they enrolled for or felt encouraged to complete their PhD degrees. With regard to promotion, about 30% of young academics indicated that the programme positively facilitated their promotion, as can be seen in Figure 2.



**Figure 2:** Extent to which the programme aided participants' promotion

Apart from the demographic overview, intention to register for advanced qualifications and being promoted, the evaluation also focused on an overview of the outcomes of the participants' perceptions, attitudes, expectations and key lessons learned from the Young Academic Programme. This also included the level of participants' satisfaction with the programme, as well as participants' perceived relevance of the programme for their respective development needs.

The participants' perceptions and understanding of the Young Academic Programme before and after attending the programme were evaluated. This evaluation indicated that there was a large gap in terms of the understanding of the essence of the Young Academic Programme prior to exposure to the programme. The results inter alia indicated that a large number of the participants did not perceive the Young Academic Programme as an intervention to expose them to an ODL environment or to a scholarship and academic environment. The young academics' perceptions of the programme before and after participation are reflected in Figure 3.



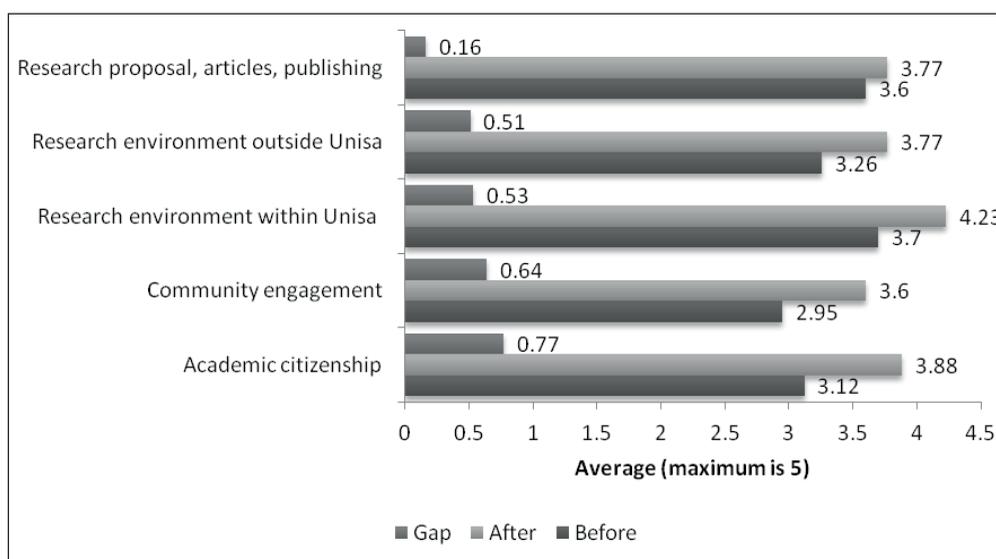
**Figure 3:** Participants' perceptions of the Young Academic Programme

The young academics were asked to rate their attitudes towards several variables before and after attending the Young Academic Programme. It appears that respondents used to be negative about ODL and Unisa as a whole prior to attending the programme. This is evidenced by the fact that the average ratings for the two variables prior to exposure to the Young Academic Programme were 3.02 and 3.14 respectively. However, the attitude ratings improved positively to about 4.33 and 4.35 respectively for ODL and Unisa as a whole after attending the programme. The young academics were requested to indicate the intervention responsible for this positive improvement in attitude. About 80% and 72.7% of the respondents respectively attributed their positive change in attitude towards ODL and Unisa as a whole to the Young Academic Programme intervention.

**Table 1:** Evaluation of participants' attitudes towards certain aspects in their work environment

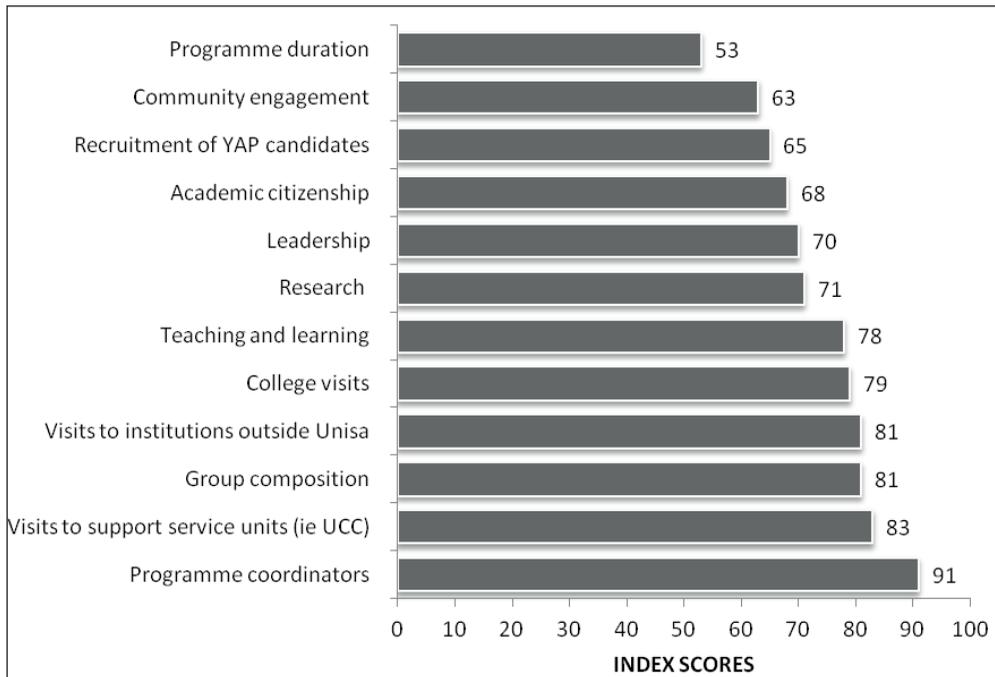
ATTITUDE	Before	After	Gap	YAP	Other	Both
Higher education environment	3.37	4.33	0.95	72.4	3.4	24.1
Open distance learning (ODL)	3.02	4.33	1.30	80.0	2.9	17.1
Unisa as a whole	3.14	4.35	1.21	72.7	.0	27.3
Unisa students	3.28	4.28	1.00	57.1	.0	42.9
Your colleagues	3.37	4.09	0.72	62.5	8.3	29.2
Your job	3.47	4.33	0.86	58.6	3.4	37.9

With regard to the expectations and the lessons learned from the Young Academic Programme in relation to research, community engagement and academic citizenship, the results showed that the young academics did not really learn much in the area of research proposal writing or the research environments outside and inside Unisa respectively. The average rating in terms of their expectations going into the programme and what was learned increased minimally from 3.6 to 3.77 for research proposal, article writing and publishing. The expectations in terms of learning more about the research environments outside and inside Unisa measured 3.26 and 3.7 respectively while the average of what was learned stood at 3.77 and 4.3 respectively, indicating that the young academics learned more about the research environment within Unisa than in the research environment outside Unisa.



**Figure 4:** Participants' expectations and realised outcomes with regard to research, community engagement and academic citizenship

The young academics' general satisfaction with regard to the Young Academic Programme indicated that the participants of the programme were extremely satisfied with the programme coordinators (91), visits to support service units (83), group composition (81) and visits to institutions outside Unisa (81). Conversely, the respondents were least satisfied with the programme duration (53), content relating to community engagement (63) and the recruitment of the Young Academic Programme candidates (65) as can be seen in Figure 5.



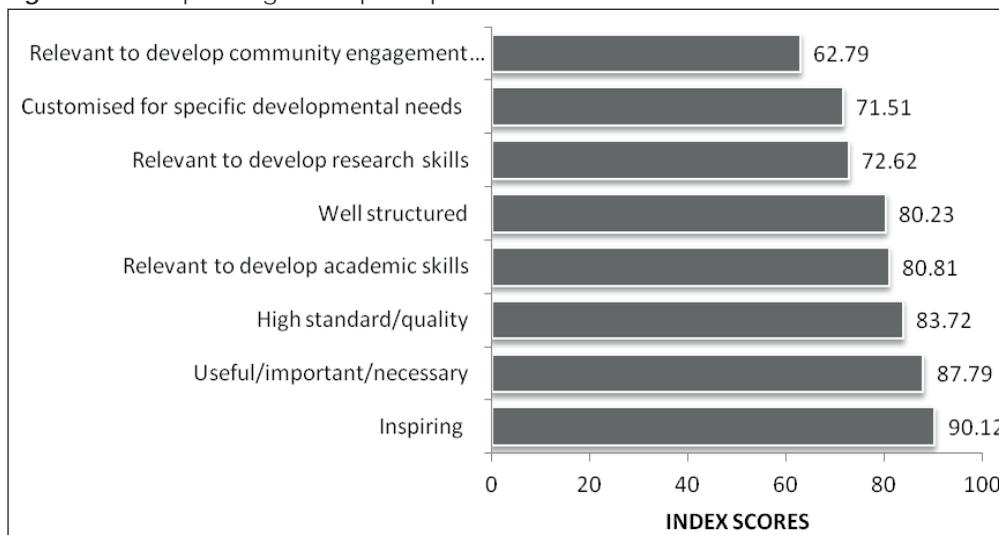
**Figure 5:** Participants' general satisfaction with the Young Academic Programme

The young academics who were extremely dissatisfied with the programme items as shown in Figure 5 above were requested to give reasons for their dissatisfaction. It was evident that the respondents were not happy that the programme runs for a three-month period. Young academics stated that the programme is far too long as they had fallen behind in some of their daily office activities, such as research, on account of the programme. Some of the other responses relating to the time frame of the programme included, 'No person was doing my job while I was on YAP, as such there was a lot of tension between me and colleagues. I was behind with everything and it was frustrating.' With regard to research, the young academics stated that, for example, 'Too little focus on research – need more information in that regard.' The recruitment of young academics was also criticised, 'Thought it was a strict process of application and selections – then upon entering programme, I realised that many were just pushed into the programme.'

Apart from these negative views, statements made by the young academics regarding the Young Academic Programme were generally very positive. It is clear from Figure 6 below that the participants strongly agreed that the programme was extremely inspiring (90.12), useful and necessary (87.79) and that it was of a high standard and quality (83.72). On the other hand, the respondents felt that the programme was not that relevant to developing the participants' community engagement skills (62.79), less

customised for specific developmental needs (71.51) and not relevant enough in terms of developing research skills (72.62).

**Figure 6:** Participants' general perception indices



Those young academics who strongly disagreed with the listed statements about the programme were requested to provide reasons for their disagreement. Some indicated that the programme was not adaptable to different participants, and research and community engagement activities were not adequately addressed.

The young academics were requested to rate their level of aptitude in relation to particular variables before and after attending the programme on a 5-point scale, ranging from extremely poor to excellent. Based on their responses, it emerged that the programme was very inspirational and boosted their self-confidence. The competency gap between pre- and post-intervention for the two variables shows that the participants' levels of inspiration (morale) and self-confidence were very low prior to exposure to the programme. Nearly two out of six of the participants attributed their increased inspiration level to the YAP, while almost 60% attributed improvement in their self-confidence to the programme. Furthermore, the programme did well to increase their level of enthusiasm and decisiveness from a respective average of 3.60 and 3.48 prior to exposure to about 4.53 and 4.40 respectively after the exposure. About 56.7% and 64% of the respondents attributed their improvement in the two respective variables to the YAP. However, the respondents felt that the programme did little to improve their level of trustworthiness, accountability, dependability and integrity, which were already at high levels prior to their exposure to the programme, as can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Average evaluation of skills development by type

Skill	Before	After	Gap	YAP	Other	Both
	Average	Average	Difference	%	%	%
Inspiration	3.37	4.60	1.23	62.2	.0	37.8
Self-confidence	3.58	4.63	1.05	59.4	.0	40.6
Enthusiasm	3.60	4.53	0.93	56.7	.0	43.3
Decisiveness	3.48	4.40	0.92	64.5	3.2	32.3
Responsiveness	3.58	4.42	0.84	53.6	.0	46.4
Assertiveness	3.53	4.30	0.77	55.6	3.7	40.7
Flexibility	3.51	4.21	0.70	52.0	.0	48.0
Tolerance	3.72	4.40	0.68	65.2	.0	34.8
Vocation skills	3.67	4.33	0.65	65.2	4.3	30.4
Cooperation	3.91	4.51	0.60	52.0	.0	48.0
Integrity	3.98	4.56	0.58	40.0	.0	60.0
Dependability	3.67	4.21	0.54	56.5	.0	43.5
Accountability	4.05	4.53	0.48	52.6	5.3	42.1
Trustworthiness	4.12	4.56	0.44	18.8	6.3	75.0

Although the young academics felt that their interpersonal skills remained mostly the same before and after the programme, they believed that their leadership skills improved after attending the programme, from an average of 3.31 to 4.31, with nearly 70% of the respondents attributing this improvement to the Young Academic Programme intervention.

**Table 3:** Average evaluation of management skills development by type

Skill	Before	After	Gap	YAP	Other	Both
	Average	Average	Difference	%	%	%
Leadership skills	3.31	4.31	1.00	69.2	.0	30.8
Planning skills	3.35	4.33	0.98	60.6	6.1	33.3
Organising skills	3.35	4.33	0.98	62.5	3.1	34.4

With regard to research skills, the results revealed that there was a general lack of understanding of the overall research environment amongst the young academics. This is evidenced by the fact that the overall rating score for all research-related

activities as listed increased from an average of 2.78 prior to the programme to about 4.02 after the exposure. The highest gap was recorded in the level of understanding of the Unisa research support services (1.72), the NRF rating (1.58), Unisa research funds (1.57), Unisa research policies (1.56) and the support and development programmes for previously disadvantaged individuals (1.49), as well as research proposal writing (1.14). However, the Young Academic Programme succeeded in bridging the gap, as the overwhelming majority of the participants attributed their improved understanding of these activities and concepts to the programme, as can be seen in Table 4.

**Table 4:** Average evaluation of research skills development

Service	Before	After	Gap	YAP	Other	Both
	Average	Average	Difference	%	%	%
Unisa research support services	2.56	4.28	1.72	82.9	2.4	14.6
National Research Foundation	2.49	4.07	1.58	80.6	.0	19.4
University research funds	2.60	4.17	1.57	82.9	.0	17.1
Unisa research policies	2.67	4.23	1.56	79.5	.0	20.5
Support and development programmes for previously disadvantaged individuals	2.35	3.84	1.49	81.8	.0	18.2
Research proposal writing	2.95	4.10	1.14	50.0	3.6	46.4
Presenting conference papers	3.14	4.05	0.90	54.2	4.2	41.7
Article writing	3.14	3.95	0.81	56.5	4.3	39.1
Preparing conference papers	3.12	3.91	0.79	52.2	17.4	30.4
Data analysis	2.86	3.60	0.74	63.6	9.1	27.3

Table 5 below indicates that the level of research output of young academics increased after exposure to the programme. The average score for articles attempted (not submitted) increased from an average of 1.16 to 1.40, with the total number increasing from 50 to 60 after exposure to the YAP. However, this improvement is attributed overwhelmingly to both a combination of the Young Academic Programme and other interventions. Furthermore, the number of articles submitted but not published increased from 40 to 44 after the programme. This improvement is attributed equally to both the Young Academic Programme and other interventions (36.8%). The number

of master's and doctoral students supervised also increased dramatically from 23 to 61 after exposure to the programme. Once again, this improvement is attributed to both the Young Academic Programme and other interventions.

**Table 5:** Average evaluation of research output

Output	Mean (before)	Mean (after)	Sum (before)	Sum (after)	YAP	Other	Both
Articles attempted (not submitted)	1.16	1.40	50	60	34.6	23.1	42.3
Articles submitted but not published	.49	.60	21	26	36.8	26.3	36.8
Number of articles published	.92	1.00	40	43	26.7	33.3	40.0
Number of own research participations from M & D studies	.33	.64	14	27	36.4	18.2	45.5
Number of M & D students supervised	.53	1.42	23	61	33.3	25.0	41.7
Number of papers delivered at international conferences	.65	.58	28	25	37.5	31.3	31.3
Number of papers delivered at national conferences	1.12	1.07	48	44	30.8	30.8	38.5
Number of other research projects, excluding M & D studies	.23	.72	10	31	50.0	6.3	43.8

As far as teaching and learning are concerned, the young academics felt that the programme played a significant role in improving the level of understating of particular teaching and learning approaches and tools applied at the university. Table 6 shows that there was an immense improvement (as illustrated by size of the gap) in the understanding of the concepts of curriculum development (1.47), integrated learner support (1.47), student-centredness (1.33), team approach (1.28), integrated assessment (1.26) and overall teaching skills (1.02). The majority of respondents attributed this improvement to the Young Academic Programme. In terms of delivery and communication modes in teaching and learning, the same trend in the level of

improvement can be seen in the table below. The level of understanding for these items increased from an average of 2.90 prior to attending the programme to an average of 4.06 after exposure to the programme. Again, the majority of the respondents indicated that these improvements are attributed to the Young Academic Programme.

**Table 6:** Average evaluation of teaching and learning skills development

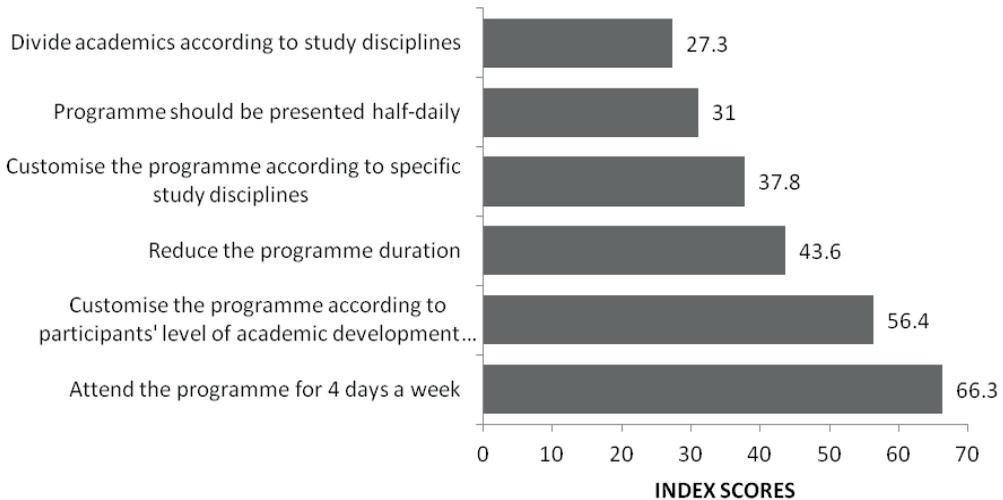
Teaching and learning	Before	After	Gap	YAP	Other	Both
	Average	Average	Difference	%	%	%
Curriculum development	2.84	4.30	1.47	70.6	.0	29.4
Integrated learner support	2.88	4.35	1.47	71.4	.0	28.6
Student-centredness	2.95	4.29	1.33	69.7	.0	30.3
Team approach	2.95	4.23	1.28	68.8	.0	31.3
Integrated assessment	2.93	4.19	1.26	61.3	.0	38.7
Teaching skills	3.38	4.40	1.02	59.3	.0	40.7
<b>Delivery mode and communication</b>						
Video conferencing/satellite broadcasting	2.74	4.30	1.56	70.6	.0	29.4
Regional centres	2.63	4.16	1.53	82.4	.0	17.6
myUnisa	3.07	4.33	1.26	67.7	.0	32.3
myLife	2.86	3.98	1.12	53.6	7.1	39.3
SMSs for teaching purposes	2.91	4.00	1.09	65.4	3.8	30.8
E-learning tools	2.36	3.45	1.09	50.0	.0	50.0
E-mail for teaching purposes	3.31	4.17	0.86	54.5	4.5	40.9
Tutorial letters	3.49	4.30	0.81	60.9	.0	39.1

The young academics were asked which challenges they faced prior to attending the programme and after completing the Young Academic Programme. Participants cited an increased workload as the main challenges prior to and after attending the programme as can be seen in Table 7.

**Table 7:** Challenges faced in daily office operations by young academics

Challenge	Before	After	Gap
Increased work load	3.37	3.88	0.51
Demanding superiors	2.74	3.23	0.49
Lack of operational support	2.69	3.12	0.43

Lastly, the young academics were requested to make recommendations that would improve the Young Academic Programme. As seen in Figure 7 below, participants were in favour of attending the programme over a four-day period per week while the fifth day is spent in their offices attending to their office responsibilities. They were also in favour of customising the programme in accordance with the participant’s level of academic development.



**Figure 7:** Recommendations made by young academics

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The completed questionnaires indicated that a large number of the young academics did not perceive the Young Academic Programme as an intervention to expose them to an ODL environment or to a scholarship and academic environment. However, the programme did help to change the young academics’ attitudes, especially towards ODL and Unisa as a whole. The results showed that they did not really learn much in the area of research proposal writing or the research environments outside and inside Unisa respectively. In terms of satisfaction with the programme, the participants were

extremely satisfied with the programme coordinators, visits to support service units, group composition, and visits to institutions outside Unisa. Conversely, the respondents were least satisfied with the programme duration, content relating to community engagement and the recruitment of Young Academic Programme candidates. It is therefore recommended that the programme remain in an 8-week format rather than the original three-month programme, that more time be spent on community engagement and that the selection criteria for participation in the programme be clearly communicated and applied properly.

The participants strongly agreed that the programme was extremely inspiring, useful and necessary, of a high standard and quality. The survey results showed that the programme inspired candidates to enrol for advanced degree courses, especially PhD studies.

The young academics felt that the programme was not relevant enough in terms of developing research skills. In the area of research, the results revealed that there was a general lack of understanding of the overall research environment amongst the young academics. The programme did, however, improve their knowledge and understanding of Unisa research support services, such as the NRF, Unisa research funds, Unisa research policies, and the support and development programmes for previously disadvantaged individuals. However, much can still be done in the area of preparation for presenting conference papers, article writing and data analysis.

In the area of teaching and learning, the Young Academic Programme played a significant role in improving the level of understating of particular teaching and learning approaches and tools applied at the university. There was an immense improvement in the understanding of the concepts of curriculum development, integrated learner support, student-centeredness, the team approach, integrated assessment, and overall teaching skills. In terms of delivery and communication modes in teaching and learning, the same trend in the level of improvement has been recorded. The level of understanding communication and delivery modes in teaching and learning increased dramatically. Therefore it is recommended that this part of the programme remain as it is.

Generally, the Young Academic Programme at the University of South Africa can be seen as very successful as the Principal and Vice-Chancellor, Prof. Mandla Makhanya stated in 2011 that he was touched to see the Young Academic Programme grow to the level it had grown. 'Little did we know when we launched this programme that it would have such an impact' (Unisa: e-news 2011, online).

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