

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Student Academic Monitoring and Support in Higher Education: A Systems Thinking Perspective

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### *Abstract*

*This article interrogates an Academic Monitoring and Support system (AMS), which was designed to enhance first-year student progression at a South African University. Institutional research evidence produced through engagement with AMS practitioners and university leadership, analysed through the lens of Systems Thinking, reveals a well-intentioned system, whose efficacy is compromised by systemic incoherence. The data suggests that loosely defined roles and responsibilities of AMS practitioners, their level of preparedness to provide academic support, their conditions of employment and job profiles, all act in concert to compromise the intended outcomes of the programme. The authors contend that opportunities do exist to re-engineer the Academic Development system to provide coherent, effective and sustainable support for students ‘at risk’.*

### *Keywords*

*academic monitoring, systems thinking, sustainable academic support, higher education.*

### *Introduction*

The widening articulation gap between schooling and higher education (CHE, 2013) necessitates alternative forms and models of student support in promoting student success. In response, universities have instituted academic monitoring and support programmes (Adams, 2006; Mngomezulu & Ramrathan, 2015) which find expression in a wide range of student-focused support systems and learning environments to reduce attrition. One such system is the Academic Monitoring and Support system (AMS) offered by the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), located on the east coast of KwaZulu-Natal. A key principle underlying the AMS at UKZN is an acknowledgement that higher education no longer enjoys the luxury of ascribing its performance (or lack thereof), to the underperformance of the schooling sector and the alleged under-preparedness of students (Monnapula-Mapesela, 2015). Based on evidence derived from research at the selected university and other South African institutions (see Dhunpath & Vithal, 2012), the authors contend that universities must accept that they are, at least in part, the source of under-preparedness:

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ideologically, structurally, and pedagogically, particularly, since organisational cultures often alienate students by failing to enable epistemological access (Morrow, 2009).

This realisation is beginning to inscribe a consciousness amongst members of the Higher Education community: that it can no longer defend the perpetuation of a university system that is structurally designed to fail the majority of students.

(Dhunpath, Mtshali & Reddy, 2013)

This is evident in the unsustainably low graduation rates which indicate that more than 24% of students ‘drop out’ of university after their first year, 14% graduate in three years, and approximately 52% graduate with their first degrees after an average of seven years, while 48% of the group never graduate (DHET, 2015). The latter 48% that never graduate is a matter of concern for the higher education sector, which warrants introspection.

The emergent consciousness around institutional under-preparedness is reflected in the variety of student support programmes developed over the past few decades in response to the exponential growth and diversity of the student body, changing learning needs, and highlighting the need for non-traditional approaches that transcend the tendency to pathologise students as carriers of academic deficit. Yet, in spite of the abundant attention lavished and support provided in the selected university, it has not witnessed a concomitant impact on the stubbornly high attrition rates. The question that plagues the academic community is: why do students continue to fail in spite of the interventions that are meant to help them succeed? In attempting to answer this question, the literature is brimming with allusions to gaps in students’ linguistic and numeric proficiency (Jaffer & Garraway, 2016); inadequate resources (Jaffer, Ng’ambi & Czerniewicz, 2007); inappropriate environmental conditions (Al-Zoubi & Younes, 2015) and outmoded learning spaces (Temple, 2007; Brooks, 2011). More recently, attention is being directed to the persistence of colonial pedagogies which fail to enhance student learning (De Lissovoy, 2010) while increasing and sometimes ambiguous calls for transformation have typified the higher education discourse.

The South African university selected for the site of this study, referred to hereinafter as UKZN, has a Senate-approved Academic Monitoring and Exclusions Policy, which requires the university to provide appropriate support systems that are able, in the first instance, to alert students to their academic progression status or their potential risk status. Thereafter, the early-warning indicators are expected to invoke appropriate interventions to prevent students from being relegated to ‘at risk’ status, from which rehabilitation is often difficult. According to the university’s Teaching and Learning Unit’s report on Academic Monitoring and Support (2013, p. 4), “Academic Monitoring and Support (AMS) is a key strategy in enhancing the quality of teaching and learning as a mechanism to improve student performance in undergraduate programmes”.

The support programmes cited above, developed organically over several years in response to contextual needs of each of the four Colleges (College of Science; College of Humanities; College of Health Sciences; College of Management Sciences), are expected to reduce exclusion and dropout rates and improve throughput and completion rates. To achieve this aspiration, students have the reciprocal responsibility of committing

themselves to their studies by monitoring their performance and accessing the available support, which typically takes the form of academic counselling and academic literacies support, as well as career and personal counselling. A more ambitious outcome of AMS is that students would be supported to successfully complete their studies in the minimum time specified for the particular qualification.

UKZN's response to the access for success discourse is articulated in the Academic Monitoring and Support (AMS) programme for 'at risk' students (2009), the key features of which are articulated below:

... academic monitoring and support [AMS] is important to retain students through a wide range of student-focused support systems and learning environments that enable them to complete their studies successfully. Students will only be excluded on account of poor academic performance as a last resort after all other avenues have failed to restore their academic performance to the required level. The policy commits the university to **identifying under-performing students [at risk]** timeously and providing the necessary academic support to **assist students to graduate in the minimum time** possible or redirect them and obligates students to attend and participate in the range of support that is made available. (UKZN, Academic Monitoring and Exclusions Policy and Procedures, 2009, p. 1)

The mandatory Senate-approved AMS system, intended to be a holistic support programme, comprises several allied components including the availability of the early-warning system to identify 'at risk' students.

Noting the underlying principles of the AMS programme and its espoused design features, this paper interrogates the programme through a systems analysis (Senge, 1990; Banathy, 1991; Kim & Senge, 1994). We place under the spotlight the structure, design and delivery of the AMS programme, interrogating the efficacy of its systems through the lived experiences of AMS practitioners. To this end, we reflect briefly on the historical development of academic monitoring and support as a construct that emerged out of a systems perspective on student support, which sought to mitigate the tendency to provide episodic and often incoherent interventions, which had minimal impact on student outcomes. We then subject AMS in the four Colleges and the university as a whole, to a systems analysis, to appraise the extent to which the AMS programme approximates the core tenets of systems thinking (Kim & Senge, 1994) which theoretically grounds the article. We do this because we believe it has the potential to transcend reductionist thinking on how component parts of a system work to deliver system-wide outcomes. Finally, we demonstrate through an analysis of data, that although the AMS programme is conceived on an awareness that nothing less than a coherent systemic response is required to shape institutional behaviour, at least as it relates to students at risk, the theoretical principles do not find adequate expression in practice. The paper argues that given the resources invested in the AMS initiative, its leaders have an obligation to advance scholarship in AMS, through an evidence-based approach, which is more holistic, and resonates with the key principles of systems thinking.

This paper directs its attention to three concerns: What accounts for the shape and form of AMS in relation to its historical trajectory? How do academic monitoring and support practitioners enact their roles and responsibilities in the different schools and Colleges? And, what is the effect/impact of their *modus operandi* on student success, particularly for students classified as ‘at risk’?

### *Academic Monitoring and Support: The Historical Context*

Shortly after the AMS programme was implemented in 2008, internal and external evaluations were conducted in the four Colleges: College of Science; College of Humanities; College of Health Sciences; College of Management Sciences. The evaluation reports indicate that the University has developed innovative intervention strategies for success, funded primarily through the Teaching Development Grant (TDG) sourced from Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). The 2010 Academic Monitoring and Support (AMS) Report reveals that in most Colleges, the interventions were compulsory for all students. Most Colleges made extensive use of Academic Development Officers (ADOs) in their monitoring and support activities, including academic literacies development and psychosocial support (Paideya, 2014). As early as 2010, concern was raised about the relative ‘instability’ of the support system, primarily because the programme was funded through the DHET grant, and consequently, it was staffed largely by ADOs on short-term contracts. Systems data from the UKZN’s 2014 data repository reveals that despite the substantial investment in academic monitoring and support, the graduation rate continued to decline from 20% in 2006 to 16% in 2014, with some Colleges experiencing higher dropout and exclusion rates than graduations in some programmes.

In 2011, the Quality Assurance Unit at the University, together with external evaluators conducted an audit of the AMS programmes. The report highlighted a number of functional attributes and practices available in the four Colleges. These included the positive attitude to AMS, dedication and commitment of staff involved in the AMS programmes, the availability of some form of mentorship system and the involvement of senior academic staff in the AMS programme at both School and College level. However, substantial variations were reported relating to the conceptualisation of the roles and responsibilities of AMS personnel and their practices. The Teaching & Learning Portfolio cautioned in 2010 that unless the provision for academic monitoring and support was integrated into their mainstream budgets (as core business), the policy aspiration of a stable institutionalised and sustainable system rather than one subject to the vagaries of external funding, would be an elusive dream (AMS, 2013).

### *Academic Monitoring and Support: Through the Lens of Systems Thinking*

There is a growing recognition that our ability to address the academic needs of students requires that we do more than “simply tinker at the margins of our educational practices” (Tinto, 1999, p. 13). Consonant with Tinto’s notion of tinkering at the margins, the authors contend that for a systemic institutional strategy to develop traction, it requires systematic organisational support, which is adequately resourced and regularly monitored. It further

requires a collaborative effort or a “partnership approach” which “contributes to a cultural shift by bringing students, teachers and academic developers together” to support student learning (Barrineau et al., 2016, p. 79).

Ever since Aristotle’s claim that knowledge is derived from the understanding of the whole and not that of the single parts (Aristotle’s Holism), researchers have been struggling with systems, their component parts and their relative dynamics (Mele, Pels & Polese, 2010). Systems thinking is an interdisciplinary heuristic, which allows us to examine phenomena through a macro lens (Capra, 1997). It incorporates a wide field of research with diverse conceptualisations and areas of focus (Boulding, 1956; Maturana & Varela, 1975; Senge, 1990; Jackson, 2003). For the purpose of this paper, we have chosen Senge’s (1990) conceptualisation of systems thinking to understand the functionality of the academic support system at the university. We believe that systems thinking has the potential to explain the constituent components of AMS and the extent to which these coalesce to provide coherence, continuity and sustainability in a large learning organisation.

Systems thinking, as advocated by Senge (1990), is premised on five basic components for a learning organisation:

1. **Systems thinking**, which views the organisation as a living entity that enables or inhibits organisational success;
2. **Personal mastery**, where individuals are inspired to create conditions which generate successful outcomes;
3. **Mental models**, which require practitioners and managers to disrupt rituals of practice to envision new possibilities for success;
4. **Shared vision**, where individuals embrace the vision of the collective, rather than aspire to pursue individual interests; and
5. **Team learning**, which requires consistent interrogation of practices, critical dialogues aimed at enhancing successful practices.

Senge (1990) articulated basic principles of the learning organisation that may be restated as the need for organisational members to:

- (i) suspend traditional modes of thinking (mental models);
- (ii) engage in an open and transparent dialogic manner (personal mastery);
- (iii) have a clear grasp of how an organisation works (systems thinking);
- (iv) devise a plan that enjoys relative consensus (shared vision); and
- (v) apply the plan in a concerted and systematic way to pursue the vision (team learning).

A key impediment to achieving the ideal articulated above is that what is written and done in the name of effective management is that simplistic frameworks are applied to what are complex systems. Here, the focus is on the parts rather than the whole, and this accounts for the failure to see the organisation as a dynamic process. Ivanov (2011, p. 94) argues that “organizations often fail because of catastrophic malfunctions in structure” and that “these malfunctions are difficult to notice because of time delay in organizational cause and effect”. Ivanov goes further to add that “time flows differently in organizations than in

the physical world” (2011, p. 94). Kim and Senge (1994, p. 278), suggest that “organizations are in great need of new learning capabilities if they are to thrive in an increasingly complex, interdependent, and changing world”. They assert that managers’ attention is naturally focused on addressing their most important practical problems. Even though these problems might be resolved successfully, there is little to guarantee that new capabilities have been developed to address similar problems more effectively when they emerge in the future.

To mitigate the effects of mission drift amongst leaders, Kim and Senge (1994) advocate decentralising the role of leadership to harness the capacity of organisational members committed to common goals. Hence, while all individuals have the capacity to learn, the structures in which they function are often not conducive to reflection and engagement. Furthermore, practitioners may lack the tools and guiding ideas to make sense of the situations they face. In a learning organisation, leaders are designers, stewards and teachers (Senge, 1990). They are employed, ostensibly, for their capacity in building organisations, where members continually expand their capabilities to understand complexity, clarify vision, and improve shared mental models. Banathy (1991), applying systems thinking to examine the design of educational systems, suggests systems analysis through three lenses: a “still picture lens”, used to understand the **components** comprising the system and their relationship; a “motion picture lens”, used to understand the **processes** and dynamics of the system and a “bird’s-eye view lens”, used to understand the **relationships** between the system and its peer and supra systems.

Banathy (1991) identifies five reasons why our efforts to effect transitions in educational systems have been met with so little success. First, improvement efforts can be viewed as “piecemeal” or through “an incremental approach”. These can be considered as improvement efforts lacking quality and coherence with little to guarantee that new competencies have been developed to address similar problems more effectively in the future. Second, there is “failure to integrate solution ideas” (ibid., pp. 38–41) into action plans. Here, various recommendations and reports are proposed as improvement ideas, but these fail to be organised into a comprehensive system of reform. The failure to connect again harks back to a lack of systemic reform. Third, a “discipline-by-discipline study” is adopted rather than a systemic view, where we fail to recognise the complexity of current concerns surrounding higher education and have not grappled with the nature of education as a societal system, a system interacting with other societal systems embedded in a rapidly and dynamically changing macro society. Fourth, a “reductionist orientation” is adopted where complex situations are reduced to manageable pieces and solutions to each are sought. This promotes insular thinking typified by “staying within the boundaries of the existing system” (not thinking ‘out of the box’), where improvements and reform initiatives have focused on the system as it exists and have stayed within its boundaries, with only occasional attention to broader societal issues. All five are examples of paradigm paralysis, or “mumpsimus” – defined as “persistence in a mistaken belief” (Betts, 1992, p. 38), an attempt to interpret current experience using old models and metaphors that are no longer appropriate or useful.

We have chosen to deploy systems thinking as a lens to interrogate AMS practices in an attempt to provide useful indicators of potential slippages and fractures impeding the optimal functionality of AMS as a systemic institutional strategy, particularly the stubborn adherence to fragments rather than the adoption of a holistic, systems thinking approach to institutional development. The question that remains unanswered is: how do we re-engineer the AMS system to be proactive rather than reactive, when dealing with student progression? Does systems thinking, as a conceptual lens, provide the academy with a global view of student progression? Does it allow for proactive solutions and mechanisms for early-warning tracking which inform appropriate action? In the section that follows, we interrogate the efficacy and actual outcomes of the AMS programme by examining the profiles, roles and responsibilities of the AMS practitioners in each of the four faculties at UKZN.

### *Producing the Evidence*

#### **Design**

This paper sought to understand the existing academic monitoring and support structures within the university. A mixed methodology approach was adopted and data was collected via a questionnaire (n=50) and semi-structured focus group interviews (n=2) between 2013 and 2014. To gain access to the AMS practitioners in each of the four faculties, the Academic Leaders of Teaching and Learning in each of the Schools were contacted to identify the respective AMS practitioners. Different categories of AMS practitioners were targeted for the study, namely, Academic Development Officers (ADOs), Academic Development Coordinators (ADCs), Academic Leaders (AL) and Supplemental Instruction Leaders (SI). The data generated from questionnaires were analysed statistically, to produce emerging trends and patterns while data obtained from interviews were thematically analysed. The two sets of data were triangulated to ensure validity and reliability. Requisite gatekeeper and participant ethical clearance and consent were obtained.

#### **Data collection**

Fifty out of a total of sixty-seven AMS practitioners from across faculties responded to the questionnaire, which included biographical data and a detailed account of their job profile. Responses were analysed and clustered thematically. The emergent data was complemented by two focus group interviews with between six and eight ADOs and/or ADCs from each of the faculties in each focus group. The College ADCs/ADOs were interviewed to obtain a clearer understanding of the nature of academic support and monitoring work which informed their different roles and responsibilities as AMS practitioners. In addition, the focus group interviews were undertaken to ensure trustworthiness of the questionnaire data and veracity of the conclusions reached. Further, the focus group interviews were utilised to clarify certain aspects of the questionnaires data and determine how AMS practitioners interpret their roles and responsibilities in relation to the official university policy.

## *Findings and Discussion*

Three main themes emerge from the two data sets, namely, lack of coherence, lack of consistency and considerable variance of AMS practices, profiles and functions of AMS personnel. These are analysed below under the categories: Nature of Employment; Remuneration Ranking; Gender Distribution; and Job Profiles.

### 1. Nature of Employment

The data suggests that there are significant variations in nomenclature of AMS personnel in each of the faculties who perform the roles of ADO (Academic Development Officer), ADC (Academic Development Coordinator), AL (Academic Leader), AMS (Academic Monitoring and Support staff) and SI Leaders (Supplemental Instruction Leaders). This variation in the existence of multiple nomenclatures or descriptors in the field of Academic Development is acknowledged by Ouellett (2010) and Kensington-Miller, Renc-Roe and Moron-Garcia (2015). Kensington-Miller et al. (2015) claim that the categorisation of the role of academic developers can impact on their ability to do their job, resulting in the undermining of their credibility. Hence, understanding the effect of the variations in the categorisation of their roles and their tenure is significant in this study. The theme – nature of employment – evolved from the data that presented variations in the classification as well as the duration of AMS practitioners' employment contracts.

**Table 1: Nature of employment**

Nature of employment						
Contract period	ADC	ADO	AL	AMS	Counsellors	SI Leaders
Permanent	1		1			
2–3 years	1	3		1		
1 year	3	9				
10 months		8			2	
>10 months		5				16

Table 1 (above) indicates that the majority (86%) of the AMS practitioners had a one-year or shorter contract position and that there were only two permanent positions out of the 50 analysed questionnaires. The two permanent positions were that of the Academic Leader of Teaching and Learning in Health Sciences and an ADC in the College of Management Sciences. This enables one to understand the type/nature of academic monitoring and support programmes offered by each of the faculties. According to Tinto (2005, p. 5), “institutional policy must provide for incentives and rewards for Faculty, as well as staff, to work together to construct educational settings” that promote effective learning for all students. The fact, however, that 86% of the practitioners were on one-year contracts or less makes one question how ADOs develop adequate competencies in these positions to enable them to support at-risk students. Banathy (1991) refers to these efforts to improve and change as part-orientated and a fragmented approach arising out of a reductionist



scientific view. With this in mind, one has to ask: what impact do short-term contracts have on the AMS programme as a whole?

The data reveals that employing AMS personnel for short periods does not allow for proper support and training of these personnel so as to enable them to fully integrate into the AMS programme in support of students' academic success. Senge (1990) argues that we tend to think that cause and effect will be relatively near to one another. Typically, we look to actions that produce improvements in a relatively short time, such as short-term contracts and externally funded just-in-time programmes. However, when viewed through the lens of systems thinking, short-term improvements often involve very significant long-term costs, such as the failure to yield significant improvements in student outcomes as evidenced in the declining UKZN graduation rates from 20% in 2006 to 16% in 2014.

## 2. Remuneration Ranking

The data (see Table 2, below) shows a variation in the four faculties with respect to the different ranking of AMS practitioners in terms of their status and remuneration structure at the university.

**Table 2: Staff rank**

Staff rank	ADC	ADO	AL	AMS	Counsellors	SI Leaders
Professor	1					
Senior Lecturer			1			
Lecturer	3	3		1		
Tutor	1	18			2	16
Unknown	1	3				

Table 2 suggests that more than half of the AMS staff are ranked at Tutor level (74%) followed by 7 practitioners (14%) at Lecturer level with respect to remuneration ranking. Consequently, the majority of staff are ranked at Tutor level, despite their qualifications, which ordinarily would see them appointed at higher levels in the academic career trajectory. Here, academic rank is determined by the funding source which in turn determines monetary reward, which is linked to status and value of academic development labour. Kensington-Miller et al. (2015) claim that the role of the academic development practitioner has a liminality 'more to do with paradoxical and often disempowering institutional positions and cultures' to which they need to adapt and which may cause their existence and roles to be delimited.

Kim and Senge (1994) suggest that when adopting a systems view, the essential quality of the parts resides in its relationship to the whole. In other words, if the majority of the AMS personnel are ranked at Tutor level, there should be adequate support for the progression of these individuals so that the entire system benefits. It is questionable whether university leadership has recognised the complexity of the human activity systems in which human beings are the most valued; and the ones to be served by the system in order for the system to develop (Banathy, 1991).

### 3. Gender Distribution

Another significant finding in this research was evidenced, as shown in Figure 1 (below), in the dominance of females in the AMS programme in all four faculties, suggesting that AMS is gender-biased.

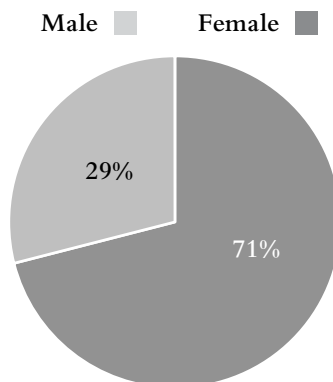


Figure 1: Gender distribution

Figure 1 reveals that of the 50 AMS practitioners surveyed, 71% were female while 29% were male. These results prompt the question of whether AMS is gendered by design and considered a ‘nurturing’ programme and hence dominated by females. A more cynical analysis would signal a marginalisation of women academics to the periphery of mainstream academic activities, which might actually have unintended consequences, particularly as it relates to the help-seeking behaviour of men, which makes for a useful study outside the scope of this paper. Understanding embedded cultures could assist in improving the success of AMS programmes as it would reveal the AMS organisational culture and the mechanisms and processes it produces that are not necessarily readily observable, but often reside within the gaps between policies and practice.

### 4. Job Profiles

The data suggests that the AMS practitioners perform several roles within the AMS programmes which is evident in Figure 2.

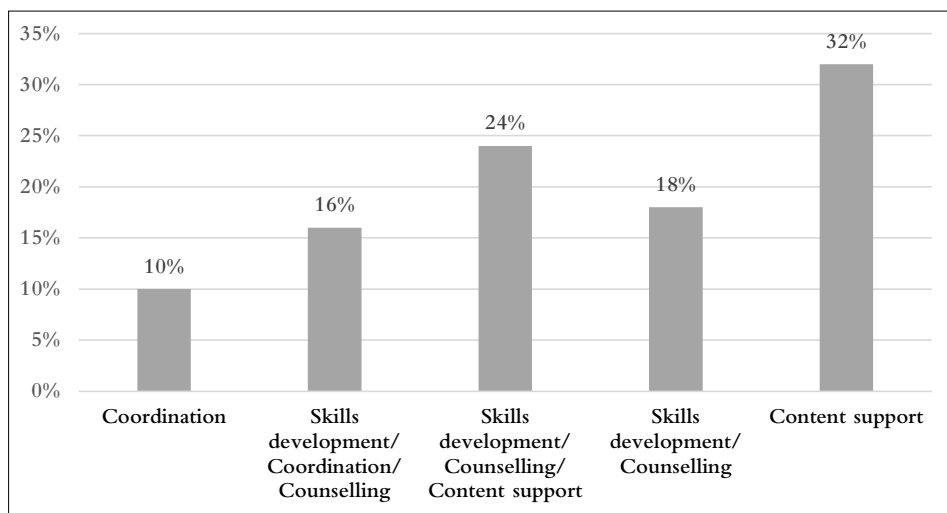


Figure 2: Role of AMS practitioners (n = 50)

When asked what AMS personnel's key role function was, 32% of respondents indicated that they provided academic content support and therefore are probably disciplinary experts in their related fields. The main role of AMS personnel would seem to be a combination of academic skills development, academic counselling and content support, which is represented by 24% of the responses. This explains why only 32% of the AMS personnel are involved with content support. It is apparent that 10% of the AMS personnel have only a coordination role of AMS programmes within the different Colleges. The focus group interviews reveal that AMS coordinators are expected to oversee the scheduling of the different AMS activities, provide support to the tutors involved with academic support and monitor AMS programmes in faculties. A further layer of complexity is the different Colleges' interpretation of the AMS policy, resulting in varied roles and responsibilities of the AMS practitioners.

This variation in the roles and responsibilities of AMS practitioners in each of the four Colleges may be explained by Banathy's (1991) assertion that a "discipline-by-discipline" study of education involves staying within the boundaries of existing systems. Such improvements produce changes at the margins but fail to recognise the complexity of current arrangements surrounding higher education systemically, signalling the need for a developmental approach, which takes into consideration recommendations and reports proposed for improvement of practices.

Considered collectively, the four broad themes, namely, Nature of Employment, Remuneration Ranking, Gender Distribution and Job Profiles highlight how academic monitoring and support practitioners enact their roles and responsibilities in the different Schools/Colleges, which might be at odds with the original conception of the AMS programme as a holistic, coherent, systemic intervention.

### *Fractures between Policy and Practice*

Analysis of focus group interview data with AMS practitioners suggests noteworthy findings: several AMS personnel bemoaned the marginal status of their work in relation to the core business of teaching, learning and research. Despite the espoused policy, which deems the AMS programmes to be institutionalised, the actual position as experienced by practitioners suggests that the programme has not been sufficiently incorporated into the School or College structures, leaving AMS practitioners to function in isolation relative to the College's *de facto* core business. Tinto (2005, p. 2) emphasises that “institutional commitment is more than just words, more than just mission statements” but is “willingness to invest the resources and provide the incentives and rewards needed to enhance student success”. Relegating the programme to the periphery of the academy limits the systemic impact of the initiative or as Banathy (1991) suggests: the lack of commitment to participation results in “failure to integrate solution ideas”. This proposition is evident in the AMS practitioners’ claim that “numerous reports and recommendations are suggested through different avenues (meetings, workshops, colloquiums etc.), however, these are not sufficiently embraced and acted on to produce a coherent and comprehensive system”.

To accentuate the relegation of AMS programmes as ‘unofficial’ business, academic support practitioners claim that they are typically “not regarded as scholars with the obligation to research and advance the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL)” in their academic domains. This relegation results in programmes being perceived as an alternative space “where students go to get band aid” rather than an institutionalised, evidence-led programme that is an integral part of the curriculum (Phillips, 1993). The fact that AMS programmes in the majority of Colleges are externally funded in their entirety and the majority of personnel are contract staff leads to the assumption that such programmes are not seen as core business and could abruptly be terminated.

Academic Development Coordinators (ADCs) reported that they felt they were not being as effective as they could to be because of time constraints accruing from having to support and mentor tutors and students from two or more campuses. This argument again coheres with Banathy’s proposition (1991, p. 149), that “piecemeal” interventions or “an incremental approach” to change precipitates failure, since resources are being spread so thinly that their effectiveness is being compromised, resulting in a dilution of quality and coherence with little to guarantee of future reward in student progression and quality of outcomes.

This absence of substantive support is exacerbated by the organisational structure of the university, which accords responsibility for academic development to Academic Leaders (AL). Academic Leaders, located at the level of the School within the College, are expected to provide pedagogic leadership for AMS within their particular disciplinary cluster. While structurally this location of leadership is potentially effective in identifying and signalling at-risk students for coordinated support, this is undermined by the rapid turnover of Academic Leaders (AL). The turnover is ascribed to the blurring of boundaries between academic, administrative and reporting responsibilities. Consequently, many ALs find the sheer volume of the workload and the absence of concomitant reward a disincentive to continue in leadership positions, as noted by practitioners:

Constant change in Academic leaders of teaching and learning who came with different leading styles and different understanding of the AMS programmes has been very challenging.

The ADCs/ADOs again bemoaned the lack of support or ineffective support they receive, impeding their progress and success within AMS programmes. Kim and Senge (1994) and Banathy (1991) concur that most often, improvement efforts lack quality and coherence where individuals lack the tools and managerial skills to understand the complexities of situations they face. The efficacy of the initiative is compromised as the structures in which they have to function are not conducive to engagement and reflection. This leads to the inability and paralysis in attending to the learning of individuals or groups in the organisation.

A key finding from the analysis of AMS practitioner roles and responsibilities is that there appear to be considerable variations across four faculties with regard to nomenclature of AMS personnel, variations in AMS personnel's qualifications, variations in duration of contracts and variations in job profiles. This is typified in the varied key role functions that AMS practitioners occupy, with some offering content support and others concentrating on soft skills. Yet others assume a pastoral/academic counselling role. The inclusion of the pastoral/academic counselling role in AMS satisfies the monitoring aspect in the AMS policy, providing students with counselling support and guidelines on how to conduct themselves in academia (Barrow, 1999), but adds a further layer of responsibility, which should ordinarily be devolved to specialist counsellors.

A further area of concern emerging from the data, which accounts for the relative instability of the system, is the ad-hoc staffing arrangements, with only 2 out of 50 respondent AMS practitioners employed in permanent positions – where the majority of the AMS practitioners (40 out of 50 responses) are post-graduate students. Typically, they take up AMS roles to 'support' themselves while completing their studies. Thus, inadvertently, support is redirected from students to practitioners. A closer look at the interview excerpts reveals that the AMS practitioners were preoccupied with personal concerns such as job security and job satisfaction. It could also be argued that by employing staff on short-term contracts, the institution is adopting what Banathy (1991) regards as a reductionist orientation: of providing ad-hoc solutions to an enduring systemic problem. While the institution has recognised the problem of unsustainable student progression, there is little correlation between the problem and the attendant solutions, particularly the absence of a systems orientation in conceiving of effective solutions. Aptly articulated by one Dean of Teaching and Learning: "We have now reached a stage where, given the resources we invest in the programme, we must recognise the need for institution-wide approaches to enhancing AMS" (personal communication, 2016).

### *Concluding Comments*

The institutional research into the Academic Monitoring and Support programme at UKZN was prompted by the persistently high dropout rate and the low success rates, especially in 3-year degree programmes, despite the declared institutionalisation of the

AMS programme which was designed to ameliorate the problem of student progression. In summary, AMS practitioners' roles and responsibilities are mediated by the fact that despite the official Senate policy, which provides for the institutionalisation of AMS, it has not been sufficiently embraced, integrated and systematised at UKZN. Notably, as asserted by Banathy, (1991, p. 5) a “reductionist orientation” is applied to a complex academic environment, evident in the leadership's partial understanding of the role of student support as core to the university's mandate in promoting student success. The dissonance between leaderships' partial interest in AMS seems to have resulted in AMS practitioners feeling undervalued and marginal to the university's mainstream activities. This is intensified by their predominantly short-term contract positions, which mitigate against substantive development of their skills and their capacity to deploy these skills productively. The data further indicates that quality and coherence within the AMS system is compromised by unstable leadership and requisite resources being spread thinly, diluting the quality and efficacy of support.

Given the extent of the problem of student attrition, and the considerable human and material resources invested in the AMS initiative, a key question that we raise is whether AMS practitioners and those who provide leadership have the obligation to advance scholarship in AMS, through an evidence-based approach, based on the principles of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL). If the university seeks to gain traction in SOTL, then the university has a pristine opportunity to design a coordinated research agenda, where making *praxis* public is valued as the *raison d'être* of practitioners who are constantly reflecting and innovating to enhance the quality of teaching and learning and student outcomes. This, the authors contend, is less reductionist, less interventionist and more scholarly an approach that will extricate AMS from its crisis of credibility.

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