

The role of evidence in close-up higher education research: Towards evaluations of social justice programmes in higher education

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Abstract

As a programme's context is inextricably linked to any evaluation work that may be performed on it, evaluation should be linked to the real-world experience of the programme. A top-ranking South African university's global citizenship programme (hereafter called the GCSA Programme) was evaluated in 2015 and is used in this paper as an example to illustrate that a key component in evaluation work is a programme's context. The GCSA Programme is embedded in the South African higher education (HE) context at a time where the *#feesmustfall* movement is highlighting social justice issues in the HE environment. The GCSA Programme, which focuses on social justice, cannot be separated from the South African HE context in which it operates and this informs what evaluation questions were most useful for the programme stakeholders.

The levels in the Rossi et al. (2004) evaluation hierarchy were used as a theoretical framework to consider the evaluation questions that would best inform the GCSA Programme staff. In terms of this framework, a theory evaluation which included surfacing the programmes' underlying assumptions was conducted. This evaluation found a situation where, as student participants bring their own unique backgrounds and skill sets to the programme when they join, different outcomes may be achieved for each student. One of the key learnings this evaluation revealed was that the individual- and pedagogical-related assumptions (participants' backgrounds, skill sets, levels of engagement) are key influencers of the programme theory of the GCSA Programme. A process evaluation in order to assess whether the programme is reaching its intended recipients was also conducted. This showed that male students and several faculties are under-represented among the programme participants, indicating that the programme may appeal to certain subsets of the overall university community.

The emergent and flexible approach used in the GCSA Programme, centred on the individual student, is linked to key assumptions underlying many HE programmes. Understanding these assumptions can help towards the planning and design of an evaluation of the extent to which individuals can and do engage with programmes. The GCSA Programme evaluation findings regarding the challenge of measuring programme outcomes can serve as a lesson to all HE programmes, especially those that take cognisance of social justice issues, of the importance of a robust theory-based approach in programme design. For many HE programmes, considering their work through an evaluative lens has the potential to strengthen their offerings and promote critical reflection on the programme within its context.

Keywords

Theory evaluation, programme context, global citizenship programme, programme theory, programme design, target population

Introduction

Evaluation, by its nature, involves a close-up, applied research approach to the programme it focuses on. Developing a good understanding of what the programme does, for example, through interviews with programme staff and in-depth reviews of programme documents and available data, is important to produce an evaluation design that is relevant to the programme and its needs (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004). This helps to ensure that the evaluation process will produce data and results that are reliable, valid and useful given the context of the programme. For many higher education (HE) programmes, considering their work through an evaluative lens has the potential to strengthen their offerings and promote critical reflection on the programme within its context. This is becoming increasingly important within the resource-constrained South African HE environment (DHET, 2015). Being able to demonstrate that a programme has a good theoretical grounding, is well implemented and is producing the intended outcomes and impact can provide the evidence that funders and university management need to justify continued funding and support.

A global citizenship programme, which centres on social justice, at a top-ranking university in South Africa (subsequently called the GCSA Programme) was the focus of an evaluation carried out in 2015. This evaluation serves as an example to illustrate that a key component in evaluation work is a programme's context. Context in this paper includes both characteristics of the programme itself relating to the environment in which it operates, such as the assumptions underlying the programme, as well as who is targeted and served by the programme.

The GCSA Programme

The GCSA Programme is a broad-based learning programme that aims to expose students at a top-ranking university in South Africa to global debates and social justice issues. As a result of this exposure, the programme aims to produce graduates who are engaged citizens (GCSA Programme, 2013; McMillan, 2013). The target population is registered students at any stage of their studies. Engaged citizenship as an outcome is expected to be achieved through the following programme objectives (McMillan et al., 2010, p. 2-3):

- To expose students to a broad foundational knowledge on issues relating to global citizenship and social justice that go beyond the immediate requirements of their professional degree or major discipline;
- To develop students' capacity for leadership in contemporary global-political and social justice issues through improving their active listening, critical thinking and logical argument skills; and
- To promote students' awareness of themselves as future citizens of the world with a motivation to work for social justice through involvement in community service/volunteering.

The programme's design

The GCSA programme uses an adult education approach based on the engaged and critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire (Freire, 1972) in teaching about the concept of citizenship. This approach involves putting the student at the centre of the learning process based on the assumption that they want to learn and will take responsibility for that learning. Therefore, it is the task of the programme staff to facilitate the process of learning in such a way that it responds to the needs of those enrolled in the programme, providing them with the tools to take action as engaged global citizens (von Kotze & Small, 2013). This process revolves around activities that help the students develop their skills in critical debate, reflection and voluntary community service, which are the core elements of this programme (GCSA Programme, 2013). Each facet of the GCSA programme requires the students to reflect and think critically on their engagement with the world around them (GCSA Programme, 2013; McMillan, 2013). This enables students to start to imagine what a socially just world would be like, to believe that change is achievable through people working together and to take a leadership role in this process (von Kotze & Small, 2013).

The GCSA Programme's curriculum focuses on providing participants with knowledge supported by skills and values relating to social justice to enhance their global perspective. The emphasis on social justice as a key element underlying the idea of citizenship is driven by arises in the South African context of large inequalities across society (McMillan, 2013). This situation has been highlighted in the South African HE context with the *#feesmustfall* movement surfacing at institutions across the country. During the GCSA Programme, various tasks promote student learning about a concept (e.g. gender equality), involving action related to that learning (e.g. a campaign centred around equal rights for women) and followed by reflection on a variety of viewpoints and activities (e.g. thinking critically about different views on the importance of gender equality and their relation to the students' own views). In the wake of the *#feesmustfall* movement, the GCSA Programme held special sessions, open to all students at the university, to promote dialogue around and encourage iterative reflection on this basket of issues.

The approach used in the GCSA Programme of learning, action and reflection is iterative and aims to allow students to understand the connections between themselves, the communities in which they live and work and the broader global context in which they exist. These three domains are represented in the three spheres in Figure 1. This figure indicates that the programme facilitates students in understanding what they as individuals can do (self), how organisations in which they find themselves can provide constraints and opportunities (organisation) as well as how this relates to their community and beyond (context) (GCSA Programme, 2010). All three of these domains overlap to develop the students as global citizens.

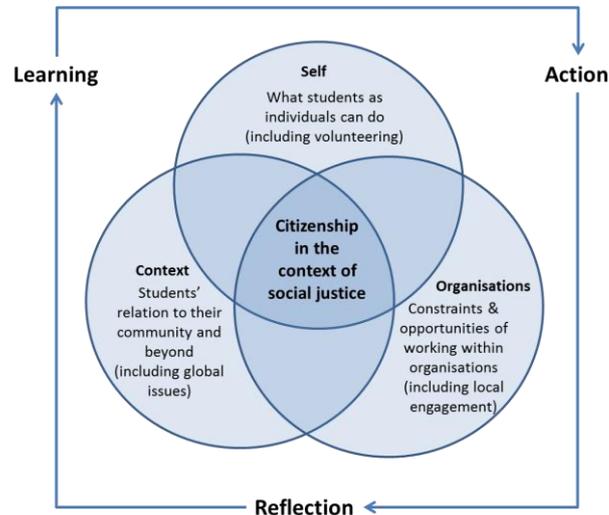


Figure 1: The GCSA Programme’s approach to engaging students with the concept of citizenship in the context of social justice. (Modified from McMillan, 2013, p. 46).

The GCSA Programme cannot be separated from the South African HE context in which it operates and this informs what evaluation questions would be most useful for the programme stakeholders to elicit answers.

Evaluation Questions

In the GCSA Programme evaluation undertaken, the levels in the Rossi et al. (2004) evaluation hierarchy were used as a theoretical framework in order to consider the evaluation questions that would best inform the GCSA Programme staff, the evidence that could be gathered to answer these questions and how this information could be leveraged to strengthen a working programme. Although the programme has clear objectives, as in many programmes, the causal logic of the programme was unclear. Part of articulating the GCSA Programme theory involved considering the assumptions underlying the programme. In addition, a process evaluation focusing on this aspect of the programme was undertaken in order to assess whether the programme is targeting and reaching its intended recipients. Both of these aspects of the evaluation shed light on the context in which the programme operates. As such, the evaluation questions considered in this paper are:

- 1 What are the underlying assumptions of the GCSA Programme?
- 2 Is the GCSA programme reaching their envisioned target population?

Using a close-up research approach, the aim of providing answers to these questions was to give the GCSA Programme staff an understanding of their practice in their institutional context.

Method

The way in which evaluations are conducted should be linked to the real-world experience of the programme. A programme’s context is inextricably linked to any evaluation work that may be performed on that programme. A key foundational starting point is to establish what evaluation questions would provide results that are useful to the programme stakeholders. In terms of taking a theory-grounded, holistic approach to evaluation a mix of qualitative and quantitative evidence may be best. Being ruled by dichotomies (e.g. considering only qualitative or quantitative methods) is not necessarily helpful. Whatever methods will be able to provide valid and reliable evidence to answer the evaluation questions, given the context, should be considered. In the case of the GCSA Programme, both quantitative and qualitative approaches were taken.

Theory Evaluation: What are the Programme's assumptions?

A full theory evaluation would first require the development of an explicitly articulated programme theory as none currently existed for this programme. In order to elicit and develop a fully conceptualised and articulated programme theory for the GCSA Programme, a 3-hour workshop was held with programme stakeholders, facilitated by the evaluator. During this workshop, information about the GCSA Programme's rationale and underlying assumptions was elicited from key stakeholders (n = 5): the programme convener, the programme coordinator, the programme co-creator, the senior facilitator and the senior tutor.

Service Utilisation Evaluation: Who is the Programme reaching?

In developing a good understanding of what the programme does through an in-depth review of the available data, basic demographic participant data routinely collected via the programme application forms and the end of module evaluation forms since the Programme's inception was identified. A subset of this data was analysed in the current study in order to evaluate whether the intended target population has been reached. The GCSA Programme's module student records data from 2012 up to the end of the first semester of 2015 were analysed in order to explore the reach in terms of the target population in terms of gender and faculty.

Gender and faculty data of those who applied to the GCSA Programme was compared to that of those who completed a module of the programme (the programme is made up of three modules). Both of these sets of programme data were compared with the overall university student population data. The university student population data contained information on the gender of enrolled students as well as the percentage of students enrolled per faculty. The faculties are: Commerce, the Graduate School of Business (GSB), Engineering and the Built Environment (EBE), Humanities, Health Sciences, Law and Science. The average percentages between 2010 and 2014, which represent a five-year average, were used to compare to the GCSA Programme averages.

Results

GCSA Programme Assumptions

What are the underlying assumptions and theory of the GCSA Programme?

The workshop elicited implicit assumptions underlying the GCSA programme, which drew out elements of the programme's context as well as considerations for the programme activities and outcomes. The assumptions identified by the stakeholders were focused on what students bring to the programme as individuals. These key assumptions were: student attributes, student motivation for joining the programme, how open the students are to change and student baseline knowledge. Additional programme assumptions were related directly to the programme: the pedagogical approach of the programme and the facilitators, the background and experience of the facilitators, class size, and tutor training.

It also emerged that these individual- and pedagogical-related assumptions are key influencers of the programme theory of the GCSA Programme. In terms of the relationships between the activities that should produce the outcomes, the stakeholders held the view that indicating causal relationships between the programme's activities and different levels of outcomes was not appropriate in the context of the GCSA Programme. This is because they view the student participants as bringing their own unique backgrounds and sets of skills to the programme when they join. As such, depending on the student and how they engage with the programme activities and respond to the programme pedagogy, different outcomes may be achieved for each student, depending on their unique engagement with the programme activities.

GCSA Programme Target Population Reach

Is the GCSA programme reaching its envisioned target population?

To explore the reach of the programme in terms of its target population, as determined by its context within the university space, the GCSA Programme's student records data from the second semester of 2012 up to the end of the first semester of 2015 were analysed. A total of 708 students have applied for, and 348 have completed, a module of the GCSA programme during this time period. This equates to a completion rate of 49.2%.

The student gender data available for these years was compared to the total university enrolment data. This data aggregates instances where a student has registered for/completed more than one GCSA Programme module, reporting only unique student applications and completions (n = 478). The data, therefore, indicates gender per student. More female than male students apply for (nFemale = 289; nMale = 170) and complete (nFemale = 155; nMale = 90) GCSA modules. Approximately half of those who apply complete the programme. In terms of comparing the gender of students who apply to the GCSA Programme (%Female = 63.0%; %Male = 37.0%)

against those who complete (%Female = 63.3%; %Male = 36.7%), no difference is seen (Figure 2). When comparing the GCSA Programme data to the total student population data, a significant interaction was found ($\chi^2(1) = 18.85, p = 0.00$). When compared to the average proportion of female (52.2%) and male (47.8%) university students, women are more likely to apply to participate in the GCSA Programme (63.0% of the applications) than male students (37.0% of the applications).

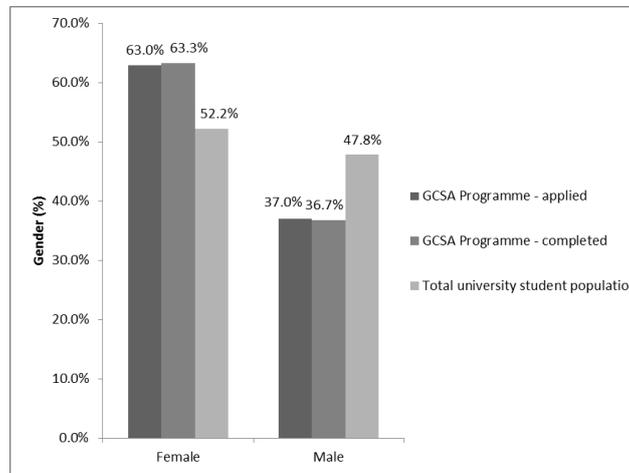


Figure 2. Gender of students who have applied for (%) and completed (%) the GCSA Programme (2012 – 1st semester 2015) compared to the gender in the total average student population (%) from 2010 – 2014.

The student faculty data available for these years and modules was compared to the university enrolments. This data reports only unique student applications and completions ($n = 478$), except in cases where students have listed two different degrees/faculties at two different time points ($n = 3$), resulting in a total of 481 students in this data set. The data, therefore, indicates unique faculty per student. In terms of comparing the faculty of students who apply to the GCSA Programme (Figure 3), Commerce is over-represented in the programme (%CommerceGCSA = 44.3%) compared to the percentage of Commerce students in the total student population data (%CommerceUni = 23.4%). The percentage of Humanities students in the programme (%HumanitiesGCSA = 30.3%) is comparable to the percentage of Humanities students in the total student population data (%HumanitiesUni = 28.2%). All other faculties are under-represented in the programme.

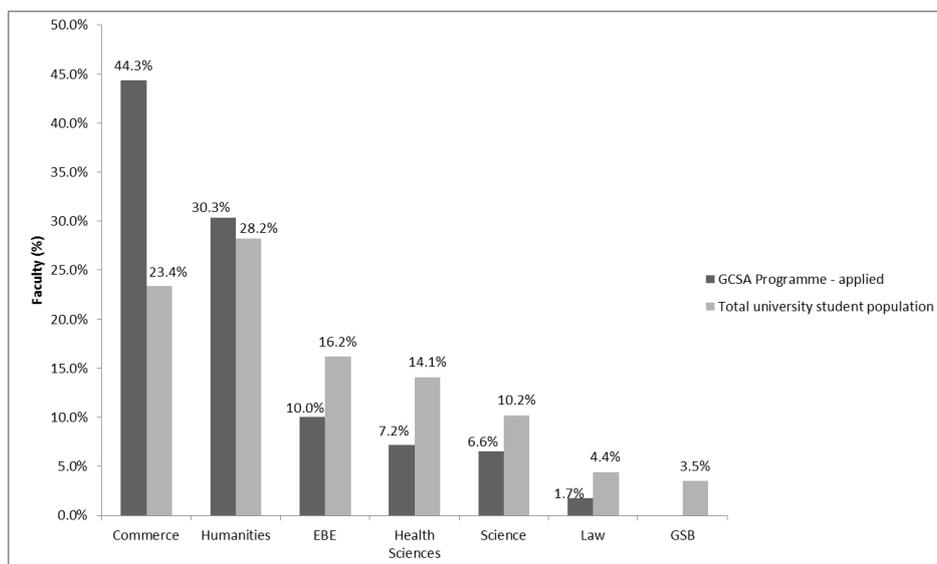


Figure 3. Faculty of students who have applied for (%) the GCSA Programme (2012 – 1st semester 2015) compared to the faculty breakdown of the total average student population (%) from 2010 – 2014.

Discussion and Conclusion

This evaluation considered both qualitative and quantitative methods in answering the evaluation questions, exploring the programme's context. This combined approach strengthens the findings as it allowed an internal perspective into the programme and its operations from both the current programme staff as well as from the routinely collected programme data.

The theory evaluation revealed that the individual- and pedagogical-related assumptions (participants' backgrounds, skill sets, levels of engagement) are key influencers of the programme theory of the GCSA Programme. The GCSA Programme staff relies on the programme's pedagogy to bring about the desired programme outcomes through the student-centred approach. As the student population changes over time, the validity of these assumptions may well change as this context that the programme operates in changes. The programme's emergent and flexible approach, centred on the individual student, is a key assumption underlying many HE programmes and can help to provide evidence of the extent to which individuals can and do engage with the programme. As such, considering the work of the programme through this close-up evaluative lens at various points has the potential to strengthen the offerings by providing timely information and promoting critical reflection on the programme within its changing context.

Under this uncovered model of assumptions, individual engagement with the GCSA Programme could be effected by many individual student demographic and other variables. Through an in-depth data review, when comparing the programme data to the university student population data, it is clear that female students and students from the Commerce and Humanities faculties are over-represented in programme applications relative to their percentage of the student population. This data provides a starting point for the programme to assess if the institutional context and individual student characteristics are effecting who is interested in and participates in the GCSA Programme.

In providing the above evidence through evaluation of HE programmes in general, especially in contexts focused on social justice, a greater understanding of how programme staff intend to work with the students that participate in their programme and if this is appropriate in their context can be uncovered.

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