

Student Academic Support as an intervention strategy to improve student performance

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Abstract

The students and their parents often view the rural universities and the FET colleges as being suitable for students who are underachievers as compared to the formerly white universities. This results in loads of 'walk-ins' that come only at the beginning of the academic year, who had not applied for admission the previous year. Such students are likely to have been rejected by their universities of choice and therefore end up on our doorsteps with already dented self concepts and muffled goals, if not completely directionless by the time they reach us. These students come to our universities and colleges being under prepared and in need of academic support. This paper will outline strategies that are being utilized by the Centre for Learning and Teaching Development (CLTD) at Walter Sisulu University (WSU) to assist students to cope with the demand of the academic life. These strategies suggest guidelines for improving student academic support as according to the researches done nationally and internationally.

1 Introduction

South African education has been involved in such dramatic changes which saw the enrolment of students of all races and backgrounds in the same institutions. This has resulted in students with the highest academic success getting bursaries to study in the formerly white universities, while the children from affluent families also prefer to enroll at the formerly white universities whose fees are comparably higher than those of rural formerly black universities. The formerly white universities are, therefore, every matriculant's dream which is only thwarted by one's poor performance. Most of the students who end up coming to the FET Colleges and the rural formerly black universities, formally termed Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs), are students who could not go to other institutions of their choice. The FET Colleges because of their practical nature are often viewed by most parents as being suitable for students who are not mentally gifted but "practically gifted" (*uphiwe aph'ezandleni*).

The greater majority of the cohort that ends up registering at the FET Colleges and the HDIs is usually under-prepared whilst some are simply oblivious about these institutions of learning. This state of under-preparedness has its own toll which includes poor throughput rates and high drop out rates. It is needless to say that these cost the institution a lot of money, than would be the case if there was smooth progression from entry to exit. The FET Colleges and the HDIs are, therefore, faced with the mammoth task of *churning* these groups such that by the time they get to the end of the mill they are a smooth, finished product if they are to be ready for use by the globally competent employer.

Student Academic Development Programmes which are support services for learners should thus be an integral part of every institution if there has to be high retention and throughput rates. The FET White Paper 4 of 1998 made a clear commitment towards this as it mentions that Career Guidance and learner support services will be a central element of the new FET system and also added that to meet the learner support services' needs, the government has to "*ensure that the provision is made in the new funding arrangement for furtherance of academic development, guidance, counseling, health and other learner support services*".

In addressing the issue of throughput rates the Centre for Learning and Teaching Development (CLTD) at the Walter Sisulu University (WSU) developed policies, strategies and action plans for learning and teaching development in the form of a throughput strategy correctly termed **WSU Throughput Strategy: Access, Retention and Success**. This Strategy incorporated the Student Academic Development programmes some of which been developed pre-merger. These programmes include the following form:

1. Standardized Assessment Tests for Access and Placement (SATAPS)
2. Orientation
3. Supplemental Instruction (SI)
4. Life skills curriculum
5. Mentoring
6. Academic Literacy
7. Writing and Reading Centre.

These student support strategies have been well researched globally and been proven to be good interventions for students success at tertiary institutions.

2. Standardized Assessment Tests for Access and Placement (SATAPS)

At WSU standardized assessment testing for access and placement are being conducted in English, Science and Mathematics including Mathematical Literacy. SATAPS are performed after admission and before registration. They serve three primary purposes:

a) Placement

SATAPS can be used to determine whether a student should enroll for a mainstream or an extended programme.

b) Supplement to matric results

SATAPS can be used in conjunction with matric results to ascertain whether a prospective has an aptitude not reflected by matric symbols.

c) Diagnosis

The tests serve to identify weaknesses, which can then be addressed by adapting curricula to specific needs.

3. Orientation

Orientation programme is done during the first academic week. It helps the students to overcome problems associated with course selection, if done prior to registration. At WSU Orientation is done after registration, due to the scarcity of accommodation, as residences are only allocated during registration. Even when done after registration, this still helps in informing the students more about the course that they have registered for. Evidence is very strong that Orientation programmes provide anticipatory socialization, whereby individuals get to be informed about the values, norms and behaviours that will be expected of them as well as those they will encounter at the new institution [10].

4. Supplemental Instruction (SI)

Supplemental Instruction (SI) is based on the theoretical principle of collaborative learning. Literature on student development and retention builds on what was researched earlier in suggesting that various areas of collaborative learning are helpful to students [3]. SI targets high-risk courses and not high-risk students, as some tend to think. High-risk courses are courses with a consistent high failure rate. Senior students who had performed well in those particular courses are recruited and hired by the institution to assist the junior level student. These student facilitators which are called SI Leaders, are trained so that they can assist students in developing the kind of thinking and problem-solving skills that will help the students to master difficult course content [3].

The overriding philosophy for SI is; “*Tell me, I forget, Show me, I remember*”. This is extracted from Edgar Dale’s Cone of Learning which states that we remember:

10% of what we read
20% of what we hear
30% of what we see
50% of what we hear and see
70% of what we say
90% of what we say and do

In researches conducted, data consistently show that SI attendees outperform non-SI attendees, withdraw at lower rate, and graduate at higher rate than those who do not participate in SI [3].

At WSU the SI Supervisor conducts an audit of all courses at the beginning of each year to check the recurrence of failure in courses, and those with high failure rate are declared high-risk courses. The SI Supervisor then approaches Departments concerned with the proposal for the introduction of SI sessions to students. The introduction of SI sessions in high-risk courses has resulted in marked increase in performance among students.

5. Mentorship

Mentoring, unlike SI sessions, is a one-on-one support mechanism. It can be traced to Vygotsky's theory of learning in which it is acknowledged that learners can learn a lot on their own, but will not be able to break through their own personal "knowledge ceilings" without the guidance and help of a mentor [7]. Vygotsky believed that knowledge is socially constructed and that learning develops as a result of dialogical and dialectical interactions between teachers and students and between students [3]. Peer collaboration to both academic and social integration is important in achieving positive student outcomes [10].

6. Life Skills

Life Skill is any skill which enables a person to interact meaningfully and successfully with the environment and with other people [8]. Life Skills can indeed be seen as coping tools to survive everyday emotional, social and cognitive onslaught [7]. Some researchers opine that Life Skills programme should not be offered as an add-on to the regular curriculum but should be integrated into an overall academic programme [9].

WSU offers Life Skills as an academic support course to all Extended Programmes. Its modules equip the students for meaningful and successful living and the ability to cope with the university demands as they include such topics as; Time Management, Study skills, Decision making and Problem Solving, Stress Management, Goal Setting, Presentation Skills, Sexual Health to mention a few. Life Skills is offered on the premise that students need to develop certain skills to be able to deal with their new found freedom and lack of guidance from parents. The change that they find themselves facing is both social and academic [6].

The mainstream First Year students are often subjected to the Academic Wellness Workshops twice a semester (subject to the availability of time to the Life Skills lecturers who are more often multi-tasked). In these Workshops the facilitators select topics which are of more relevance to the students at a given time, like “Note Taking Skills” at the beginning of the year and Exam Preparation Skills” towards examinations.

7. Academic Literacy

Academic Literacy is offered as an academic support course which is meant for students at risk of English as a medium of instruction. It is an intervention for students whose First Language is not English and who also did not get a good English mark in matric and in SATAPS. The question that Academic Literacy seeks to address is; “Is it possible to effectively teach a course which requires a high level of competence in the language to a group of students with low language proficiency?” Without (language) competence, learning becomes nothing other than a series of rote learning and an empty repetition of critical terminology without understanding [5].

Academic Literacy therefore addresses the learners’ reading and writing skills with the emphasis being placed on sections where under-performance was generally picked up during the analysis of SATAPS. Students are also exposed to a lot of reading, writing and editing. The learning tasks are supposed to model real-world academic tasks [1].

The research conducted by Academic Literacy lecturer at WSU reported an improvement of 20% from the SATAPS performance among some groups of students.

8. Writing and Reading Centres

The Writing and Reading Centres (WRC) are Computer laboratories which are installed with the Language soft ware so as to help students to learn English through playing some games and engaging in some exercises in the computer. The facility, though time tabled for the Extended Programme groups, is also available to the main stream students for utilization during its free slots. The WRC Coordinator and trained Student Assistants also assist students with academic writing.

9. Conclusion

If the students are offered an adequate academic support, they become motivated to undertake an active and meaningful approach to their studies. The FET Colleges because of their importance to the economy of the country cannot miss the great call to Student Academic Development in a quest to produce a holistically equipped student.

Some of the academic support strategies that have been discussed in this paper can also be utilized by the FET Colleges especially those that have entered into partnerships with the Universities as according the recommendations of the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (AsgiSA) and Joint Initiative of Priority Skills Acquisition (Jipsa).

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