

Addressing the Underpreparedness of Students for Post-Secondary or Higher Education Study by Means of Academic Support Programmes

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Abstract. Institutions for higher learning seem to face various challenges of dealing with underpreparedness of students who register for the first time for post-school level of study. The transition between school level and post-school level of study therefore presents various academic challenges for those students. This predicament therefore suggests the need for academic support from higher learning institutions. The aim of this paper is to highlight and outline the academic needs and demands of the students, and to establish how the students, lecturers and academic support practitioners view and experience the existing academic support programmes at the Directorate of Student Development and Support (SDS) at a South African University of Technology, Tshwane University of Technology (TUT). An account of the benefits obtained from these academic programmes will be outlined. The findings suggest there is a dire need to increase awareness on the existing academic support programmes for students and academic departments and also to implement a tracking and follow-up system of students who successfully completed these programmes, in order to provide further support for senior levels of study.

Keywords: Underpreparedness, Academic Support, Academic Support Programme, Post-School

1. Introduction

The practice of open enrolment policies at post-secondary institutions induces them to serve the diverse needs of underprepared students. These needs range from academic to personal ones hence the students go through a major college adjustment. The classroom practices remain unchanged except for the fact that technology is highly used in the classrooms and many students who enrol in the institutions are underprepared to succeed in the post-school environment (Dotzler, 2003). Levine (2005) indicates that most post-school institutions admit students with questionable justified positive results. These students are hoped not to be ready for the real world. The academic needs of students such as mastery of study material, coping with examination stress, writing academic assignments and understanding real study material were found to affect the students' academic achievements (Friedel, Malachi and Midgley 2002). In the same vein, the relatively low number of academic achievers from disadvantaged backgrounds continues to be the academic dilemma (Sayer, De Saintonge, Evans and Woods 2002, 643). The political and historical factors were associated with this dilemma (McLean, 2001, 408) Underpreparedness in this context refers to the students' lack of the necessary academic skills as well as insufficient personal understanding of the academic culture and of what is required to be successful in the post-school or higher education environment (Dzubak, 2007). The academic skills of these students fall below those determined to be necessary for the post-school success and do not adequately prepare them for the rigors of post-school study and learning. Students' underpreparedness for higher education makes it necessary that the learning assistance of students should be seen as an integral part of a student's life within the higher institutions (Peach, 2005). Students require support and consultation opportunities before they can master self-directed learning for optimal progress (Brussow, 2007). This learning assistance needs to be planned for the students who are underprepared for higher education with precision and sensitivity in order to accommodate their individual differences.

Research has proved that numerous institutions of higher education take cognisance of the fact that students become confused and frustrated when faced with academic challenges. Student Development and Support units at various institutions, play a role in addressing the issues of underpreparedness of students for higher education and aim to develop their academic skills. The existing programmes offered, aim to address study skills, language skills, career development, life skills, academic and social mentoring and academic assessments. The aim of this paper is to present a report on research conducted to highlight the academic needs and demands of students and to establish how students, lecturers and academic support practitioners

view and experience the existing academic support programmes at a South African University of Technology. The findings proved that some of the lecturers and academic departments at the university are not aware and conversant with the academic support programmes provided by the Directorate of Student Development and Support (SDS). Those who knew of the services requested that they need to be forwarded with the reports of the students who utilised the services. It was discovered that some lecturers misused the SDS programmes to serve their own purposes.

2. Literature review

2.1. Academic Support needs of Students as Outlined by Various Researchers

Poor academic performance has shown to negatively impact on students' persistence level to study (Hrabowsky and Pearson 1993, 234-238). This seems to manifest when they experience academic challenges and therefore do not cope with the level of expectation for their courses. This can be overcome by providing students with the skills to cope with the challenges they face in their lives.

Freedman (1975, 75) identified the following areas of guidance as enhancers of students' academic achievement:

Personal guidance offers assistance to students with regard to their personal problems. They become able to distinguish their strength, weaknesses and abilities to perform well in various life situations. *Educational guidance* provides students with guidelines for effective studying and learning. Students are expected to apply the guidelines for memorising, summarising and making study notes. *Social guidance* prepares students to become responsible citizens. They acquire new knowledge, skills, attitude and values that are carried out of school and home. *Vocational guidance* guides students to develop and clarify the requirements of their career choices. Pursuing the right careers therefore heightens their levels of satisfactory and self-esteem. *Motivation*, students who do not perform well academically often become demotivated. Motivation initiates, directs and sustains goal-oriented behaviour among students; therefore students need the ability to set clear, workable and achievable goals that can direct their academic lives successfully. These factors promote better understanding of what is learned and increase self-esteem. Friedel, Marachi and Midgley (2002) consider achievement of goals such as mastery and performance-approach goals to involve learning, developing and demonstrating abilities in various academic fields. *Academic planning*, the ability to plan and set goals is necessary in different settings in the higher education environment. *Guidance and support*, McIntyre (1989) and Parelius (1996) lists essential academic needs of students as a set of focused activities and assignment, directions and skills to structure the learning tasks, tutors that will assist with study tasks and motivation and encouragement to achieve better academically and using computers. In order for students to perform these tasks successfully, they will require continuous guidance and support from the educators. *Voluntary participation*, in another study by Moore (2000) the students who voluntarily participate in a number of academic support activities showed significant improvement in their academic performance. It is argued that regardless of tertiary entry requirements and credentials, students benefit from utilising academic support programmes and services.

2.2. Academic Support Programmes as Implemented and Applied by Various Academic Institutions

Numerous institutions of higher education take considerable effort to provide academic support for students who experience academic challenges. This initiative serves to enhance the students' study skills and to motivate them to perform well while becoming competent students. In New Zealand. The Ministry of Education (2002, 1) **commissioned a report at Massey University** which highlights that student should have access to academic support services such as; pre-enrolment advice, academic counselling, opportunities to develop social networks, strategies to deal and manage study workloads, good quality teaching, access to orientation and induction programmes, peer tutoring and efficient ways to deal with institutional behaviour, environments and processes. **A position statement** released by Vanderwal, Hicks, McClowan and Carmichael (1995:2) outlines the academic needs for **Australian Universities'** students as academic language and learning skill, the development of life-long learning strategies where students are encouraged and supported, improved teaching and learning culture within tertiary institutions, an established holistic,

responsive and interactive approach to learning in relation to disciplines based on learning issues, teaching situations available to them on a one-to-one consultation and group discussions, an ongoing development of students' potential, opportunities for academic research, participation in appropriate professional development programmes. **The Supplementary Instruction (SI) Programme** was established at Delaware States University to increase students' academic performance and retention (Blanc, De Burh and Martin 1983: 80-89). This programme is open to all students in high-risk courses and provides assistance during the critical initial first week period of class. Bridgham and Scarborough (1992: 569) agree that institutions that use the SI Programme successfully support students academically in order to raise their academic performance. A Model for Academic Support to Engineering students at the **University of Cape Town (ASPECT)** coordinated by Dr Howard Pearce was established in 1988 to address the academic needs of students. The essential needs are classified as; acquiring proper learning strategies, oral and written communication, increased confidence to speak and ask questions in class, independent learning, guidance for improving study and time management skills and early orientation to welcome first year students to settle for the new academic year. **The Medical Funding for South African Black students (MESAB) Model of Mentoring Programme** was developed and established in 1985 to support disadvantaged black, coloured and Indian students at tertiary institutions (Denath, 2005). It was also launched to address the failure rate among first year students at technikons and universities. The MESAB Model of Mentoring currently provides students at various academic institutions with skills that address their underperformance. Senior students with the best academic results are recruited for the mentoring programme. **The Division of Academic Development Programmes** was established at **Stellenbosch University** to coordinate academic support programmes for current and prospective students (DADP Home online: Division of Academic Development Programmes). The division facilitates programmes like; bridging and introductory academic programmes, foundation programmes, language support courses and mentor and tutor assistance. Students are fully orientated towards both academic studies and campus life and that adds value to their personal lives as well. A study conducted by Du Plessis (1996, 1) at the University of Potchefstroom, confirms that the students generally experience problems in bridging the gap between school and university. **An Academic Orientation Programme** was instituted for all the full-time first year students. During the orientation workshops, a Learning and Study Strategy Inventory (LASSI) developed by Weinstein and David Palmer (1988) consisting of 77 items was administered for the first years in order to identify their learning strategies. The LASSI also provided information on important variables which influence learning. The Orientation Programme provides the students with insight and knowledge about themselves as learners and to give the students more insight into their own learning and study strategies. **The Directorate of Student Development and Support (SDS) at TUT** also faces a challenge to improve the success rates of students. Academic support programmes such as; potential and academic assessments, career and study counselling, personal counselling, reading and language development, writing skills, mentorship, disability support, life skills and student employment are rendered for the enhancement of students' academic performance.

3. Methodology

3.1. Population and Sampling

Qualitative approach as described by De Vos (2002:74) is utilised to elicit participants' account of meaning, experience or perceptions. This approach helped to produce descriptive data in the participants' own written or spoken words. The researcher was able to identify the participants' beliefs and values that underlie the phenomena of enquiry and also discover and interpret their world views. Qualitative data analysis as a primary inductive process of organizing data into categories and identifying patterns was used (Terre Blanche and Durrheim, 1999). Phenomenological data analysis was used to categorise the data (Tesch 1994: 92). Meaningful shared themes in different research participants' descriptions of their common experience were identified. Segments of the texts that are meaningful and the description of the themes found in the meaningful units of data were provided. A detailed literature review was conducted to gain in-depth understanding and insight on the research problem. The literature serves to provide with information available for the topic of study (Gulcat, 2004:40). The variables of enquiry are examined in order to establish if they have been studied. The qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to

gain a detailed representation of the participants' beliefs about perceptions or accounts of a particular topic of study (De Vos, 2002:302). This type of interviews allows flexibility while the researcher is able to follow up particular interesting avenues that emerge in the interview. The interviews were conducted with fairly open framework and allow a focused, conversational, two-way communication (Laforest, 2009:1). Open-response questions were asked to obtain participants' opinions and reactions on the subject matter (Creswell, 1994: 11). An estimated population of one thousand two hundred and nine (1209) first year students from **Operations Management, Accounting, Mechanical Engineering and Agricultural Sciences at TUT** were identified for the study. Five academic support practitioners and an estimated (30) lecturers having direct contact with the students that are referred to Student Development and Support, formed part of the population. Purposeful sampling method was applied to select the research sample. Purposive sampling allowed the judgmental sampling that involves the conscious selection by the researcher of certain participants to include in the study (Burns and Grove, 1998:750; Macmillan and Schumacher, 1997:397). The participants were selected on the basis of their participation in the support programmes as well as their availability. Only eight first year (8) students were selected from the identified population of 1209 first year students. Only two participants were selected from each identified study area, namely; **Operations Management, Accounting, Mechanical Engineering and Agricultural Sciences**. A total sample of eight students who regularly utilise at least more than two types of academic support services were chosen to participate in the study. Only four (4) lecturers and four (4) academic support practitioners participated in the study.

3.2. Findings

The findings of the study were discussed according to the literature review and the interview responses acquired from the research participants. The literature study confirmed the common and essential aspect of academic needs and demands of students within the higher education institutions and the significance of addressing them to optimise their academic achievement. The summary of common and essential academic needs and demands of students as outlined by academics and for academic institutions are: **Educational needs** are study skills, reading and language skills, computer skills, group discussion, tutoring, life skills, vacation school, orientation and bridging programmes, teaching and learning, time-management, writing skills, memorising skills. **Personal needs** are motivation, goals setting and planning, life skills. Social needs are mentoring, life skills, and presentation skills. **Vocational needs** are disability needs, employment skills, skills transfer. **Financial needs** are financial aid for disadvantaged academic achievers students. **Students' participation** occurs when the students voluntarily participate in a number of academic support activities. **Collaborative methods** are these peer study groups used to add valuable experiences that enabled the students to acquire content knowledge. **Academic support/ planning needs** were promoting authentic learning among students in order to encourage them to take responsibility for their own learning. **Guidance and support needs** are when students perform academic tasks successfully through continuous guidance and support from educators and academic support practitioners.

Table 1: The summary of common and essential academic needs and demands of students as outlined in the literature review for students to be prepared for post-school study

Educational	Study skills, reading and language skills, computer skills, group discussion, tutoring, life skills, vacation school, orientation and bridging programmes, teaching and learning, time-management, writing skills, memorising skills
Personal	Motivation, goals setting and planning, life skills
Social	Mentoring, life skills, presentation skills
Vocational	Disability needs, employment skills, skills transfer
Financial	Financial aid for disadvantaged academic achievers students

All the student participants confirmed to have benefited from undertaking the programmes and will still continue to utilise the service to their best advantage as it optimises their academic progress. They all agreed that they would refer their fellow students for assistance. The results showed that the students' positive experience of the support services counteracts these poor performances. The students indicated that their performance improved when they overcome their negative challenges. The academic support practitioners

expressed satisfaction from the feedback that they receive from the students. There is a need for the implementation of an effective feedback system among academic departments and academic support structures that allow for follow-up and tracking of students who completed academic support programmes at SDS. There is a concern about the transfer of learned skills from students.

4. References

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