

Towards A Mainstream Curriculum Embedded Student Academic Development Programme in South African Universities

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ABSTRACT A trace of the history of academic development practices reflect that such programmes have operated for a long time as appendages to the mainstream curriculum. In line with the deficit theory, students in need of academic support have been identified and intervention programmes outside the mainstream curriculum were planned and implemented for such students. Challenges of such conceptualisation and implementation of academic development programmes are numerous. Further, this concept paper advances the argument that academic development programmes should be an integral part of the mainstream academic curriculum in a university. This paper engages in a critical appraisal of the history of academic development practices in universities. The advantages of academic development programmes embedded in the mainstream curriculum are discussed and a model for the conceptualization and implementation of such academic development programmes explained. In this paper the researcher concludes that challenges of student diversity in universities in South Africa call for a re-consideration of academic development practices to make them more responsive to students' needs. The researcher recommends deliberate policies and plans to integrate academic development programmes in mainstream programmes in School/Faculties and departments.

INTRODUCTION

Increase in diversity of student population in South African university has led to the enrolment of students who require academic support in order to succeed in their studies. Smith (2009) notes that academic development programmes as well as courses have been used very much in South African higher education institutions for a considerably long period of time now. On the purpose of academic development programmes in South African universities (Smith 2009: 109) states that:

The main aim of these interventions is to enable students from disadvantaged academic and socio-economic backgrounds to develop their literacy, quantitative and study skills so that they are able to achieve success in a particular course, and ultimately, a higher education qualification.

Such a view of the purpose of academic support programmes is premised on the deficiency theory. The university system viewed students lacking certain knowledge and skills hence they could not perform well. There was therefore a need to address the skills and knowledge gap by offering academic support programmes and

courses. The ultimate view was to bring the disadvantaged students to the same level with those performing well. The deficiency theory does not reflect the true causes of underperformance as this is not only students' problems. South African Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2010) raises a multiplicity of factors affecting students' performance and these are related to students, staff and the university system. The university system includes the curriculum and pedagogical approaches.

In South Africa, Academic Development (AD) is defined by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) as 'a field of research and practice that aims to enhance the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning in higher education, and to enable institutions and the higher education system to meet key educational goals, particularly in relation to equity of access and outcomes' (HEQC 2007:74). Academic Development takes different forms in universities. This is in line with Volbrecht and Boughey's (2004: 58) definition of AD as 'an open set of practices concerned with improving the quality of teaching and learning in higher education.' The purpose of AD is the same and it is one of enhancing teaching and learning yet there are different ways universities may plan and implement to realise the goal.

Volbrecht and Boughey (2004) identify three phases in the historical development of academic development. The first phase was the 'Academic Support' phase. The second one was the 'Aca-

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ademic Development' and the third one the 'Institutional Development' phase. Boughey (2010) notes that the phases are not very much different from each other but simply marked by the dominant discourse of the time. Discourse of the 'Academic Support' phase of AD revolved around the deficit theory. Universities considered some of the students they recruited as lacking certain skills, knowledge and values which made them fail to cope with studies. Universities were also concerned with quality and standards of students' academic discourse and writing abilities (Devereux et al. 2006). On the purpose of academic support Madni (2008: 3) states that:

The main purpose ... is to serve students' needs; and especially the needs of those students who are underprepared or have difficulty adjusting to the academic environment

Academic support was therefore meant to address students' deficiencies by offering perceived relevant support programmes to ensure that students would perform well in their studies. Students were therefore offered additional English language, mathematics and life skills courses to address their perceived deficiencies. All the courses including Academic literacy were offered outside the mainstream curriculum.

Some of the challenges associated with the academic support approach to academic development included the labelling of students as lacking hence stigmatising them (Latino and Unite 2012). In showing the problems associated with common academic support programmes for students Clark-Unite (2007: 15) argues that:

... generic skills-based approach became increasingly expensive to deliver; insufficient to meet students' changing needs, and perceived to be marginal and stigmatizing—"sending students to be fixed"—in the "clinical medical model" of student support.

This shows that the use of academic programmes which are appendages to the mainstream curriculum are of a generic nature and may not assist in enhancing student learning.

According to Volbrecht and Boughey (2004), the second phase in the historical development of academic development (AD) was marked by the academic development discourse. This phase marked a major shift from 'focus on individual behaviour and individual minds to a focus on the social and the cultural and the way these are

implicated in power' (Boughey (2010:10). In the context of large numbers of students entering universities in South Africa in the post-independence era it meant that a large number of students required academic assistance and not a few students as the academic support phase viewed. Academic development became part of the institutional transformation agenda. In working on academic development programmes social cultural perspectives informed practice (Boughey 2010). This meant that the student performance was viewed in a holistic manner and not from the narrow deficit theory angle.

The third phase of academic development was marked by the institutional development discourse (Volbrecht and Boughey 2004). The existence of different policies in the South African Higher Education system influenced ways in which academic development was conceived and implemented. The establishment of HEQC and institutional audits meant that universities had to be more formalised in accounting the way they implemented teaching and learning as well as academic support. This has resulted in the existence of teaching and learning centres in universities responsible for coordinating teaching and learning functions by implementing of academic development programmes for staff and students. To show commitment at executive management level some universities in South Africa have since established Deputy Vice Chancellor portfolios responsible for teaching and learning. This is all in line with institutional development discourse in academic development.

Nature of Academic Development Programmes

Edwards (2000) argues that academic development programmes in universities have taken different forms over time. This ranges from bridging courses, extra tuition in English and Mathematics as well as additional courses.

Bridging Courses: Normally these are offered as 'stand-alone' courses. In instances where they are offered as separate programmes from mainstream university programmes, bridging or access programmes are meant as a precursor to registration in mainstream programmes.

The National Plan for Higher Education (Department of Education 2001) makes it clear that

some students owing to the nature of schools they would have attended are equipped with inadequate education and personal development skills and all this affects both entry into and success in higher education. Hence, the need to support such students to ensure smooth transition into higher education by bridging the gap between high school and university. Such support does not only focus on access but on success as well. The National Plan for Higher Education (Department of Education 2001: 23) aims to:

- facilitate access to tertiary education for motivated learners who have the will and potential to succeed;
- support learners who have already enrolled to achieve their fullest potential;
- offer alternative path to learners who find their selected course of study too difficult and desire to change it; and
- provide a multiple entry-level, and exit-level programme for learners at any level.

Therefore, a close look at The National Plan for Higher Education Plan (Department of Education 2001) shows that it attempts not only to ensure access into tertiary education but ensures students' success in programmes of study. The Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 (Department of Education 1997) further makes it mandatory that higher educational institutions support the needs of the learners. To this end, most universities in South Africa have different foundation or bridging programmes meant to assist students in both access and success (Machika 2007).

A bridging programme can be defined as an add-on to the mainstream curriculum, striving to prepare students for survival in the mainstream by providing support prior to the introduction of the mainstream curriculum. Felix (2002:3) explains that:

... it is important to note that traditional school leaving examinations do not always give an adequate reflection of academic potential. A major disadvantage with the bridging programme is that learners do not accumulate formal credits towards their mainstream studies.

The problems of some high schools that fail to adequately prepare students tertiary education gave birth to the notion of bridging or foundation programmes in universities. The argument is on assisting under prepared students with the potential to succeed. However, there

are different arguments with some scholars believing that there is no need to waste money on students who are not university material. Therefore, the need to evaluate access programmes in universities is important.

Lubben et al. (2009) make clear distinctions of bridging programmes, foundation courses and extended curriculum programmes. Bridging programmes are meant to re-mediate and re-visit gaps in school experiences before selection for degree programmes. Foundation courses are alternative introductory courses or modules aimed at strengthening conceptual understanding and providing academic literacy whereas extended curriculum programmes are degree programmes that allow an additional year of study in order to accommodate foundation courses and enable regular content to be spread over a longer period (Department of Education 2006).

Sutherland (2009) observes that in South Africa, many of the students entering higher education programmes are under prepared because of insufficient life skills input at school level, which leads to valuable losses in human potential (Rooth 1997; Sutherland and Waetzel 2005). Life skills are specified skills that should be mastered and applied successfully to enable an individual to cope with general and complex problem situations and to make correct and meaningful decisions (Raijmakers 1993). Life skills that are vital in the changing higher education environment include assertiveness, time management skills, communication skills, planning skills and listening skills (Sutherland 2004: 120). Factors that could possibly be attributed to the difficulties experienced by higher education students include diversity within the school curricula, a lack of teaching quality, and a lack of interpersonal and intra personal life skills orientation (Vermeulen 2002). Higher education in South Africa could face a bleak future should the secondary school sector not perform at adequate levels (Frazer and Killen 2003). This situation places higher education institutions under further pressure in their quest to continue providing quality graduates to their customers. It is always a challenge as to how this would be achieved.

Augmented/ Add-on Programmes

Students register for a normal traditional and mainstream programme but the duration of the

programme is made longer because of additional academic interventions. Students who are identified as requiring additional academic support are the ones placed in the augmented programme. It is normally the first year that is divided into two years to enable students to be given extra tutorials. Other forms of intervention like Academic Literacy can be offered. Students can complete their studies either by reducing their workload and/or attending additional interventions offered to help a student cope with problems in credit-bearing subjects. Timm (2005) identifies the following characteristics of an augmented programme:

- a) The programme duration is more than the traditional mainstream programme
- b) The first year may be offered over two years
- c) The programme is related to a particular discipline
- d) Learning pace is slower as students are provided with extra tuition and additional academic instruction
- e) Augmented learners later join traditional mainstream learners as they progress with their studies.
- f) A senior certificate is required for entry together with other requirements stipulated by the Faculty.

Learners registered for credit-bearing subjects in an augmented programme necessitate that the institution get normal Department of Education subsidy but this would be reduced as learners would take longer to complete a qualification.

Extended Programmes / Foundation Provisions

This is a combination of credit-bearing and non-credit-bearing subjects that adds an additional period of study, which could range from six months to one year, to the completion of a programme. The Department of Education (2006: 2) defines an extended programme as:

A first year undergraduate degree or diploma programme that incorporates a substantial foundational provision that is additional to the coursework prescribed for the regular programme. The foundational provision must be equivalent to one or two semesters of full-time study, designed to articulate effectively with regular elements of the programme, and formally planned, scheduled and regulated as an integral part of the programme.

Bass (2007) contends that in an extended programme if the minimum time for completion is three years students are expected to complete the programme in four years. The first years of the extended programme is comprised of first-year credit bearing subject and added academic interventions. The core characteristics of extended or foundation provision programmes are that it is a three year qualification which is studied and obtained over an additional period of time and that students register for a specific programme when they enter the extended programme in the first year of their programme. Bass (2007) further states that the first year is completed over two years but in some cases foundation provision only extends the period of study by six months. In the first year extended programme students receive foundation provision in separate classes to traditional mainstream students. Serious and intense academic interventions are provided more in the first year than in the subsequent years. The first (and possibly the second) year is a combination of both credit-bearing and non credit-bearing subjects.

It is clear that while the terms access, bridging, foundation can be used interchangeably to mean one and the same thing there are differences in foundation and extended programmes as these are modeled differently.

Mainstream Curriculum Embedded Academic Development

The premise of this type of academic development programme is that all students require additional academic support hence academic development should be part of the mainstream curriculum and embedded in the discipline. Figure 1 shows a proposed model of how academic monitoring and support programmes can be infused in the mainstream curriculum.

The Proposed Academic Monitoring and Support Model

The model is premised on the realisation that effective academic monitoring and support programmes should be embedded in the teaching and learning project of the School or Faculty. Any support outside the teaching and learning programme of disciplines and departments is bound to be piece-meal, peripheral and ineffective.

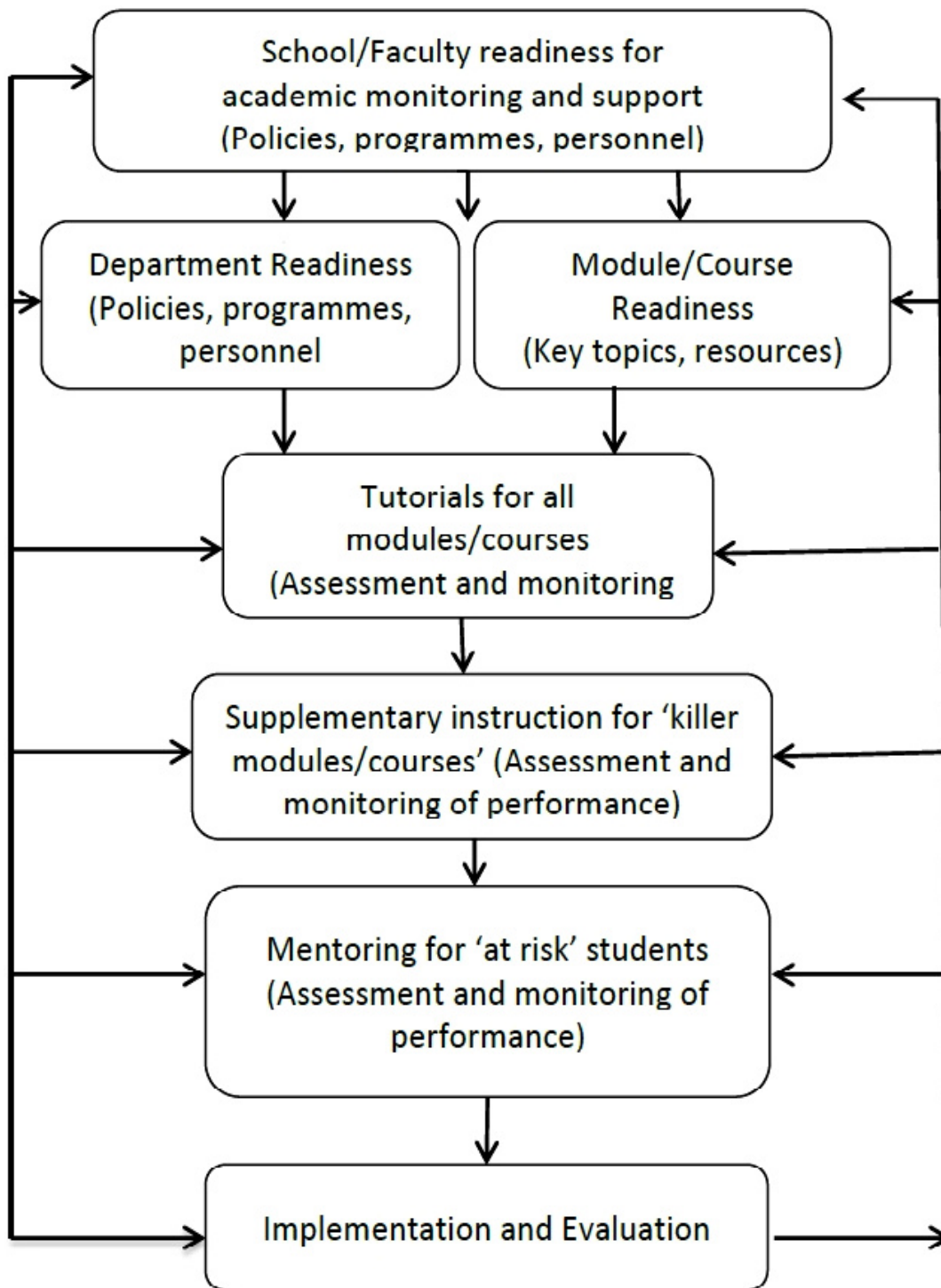


Fig. 1. Proposed academic monitoring and support model

Faculty/School Readiness

A committee responsible for teaching and learning in the School/Faculty in consultation with all Heads of Departments and the facilitation of the Centre for Higher Education teaching and Learning should come up with a school/faculty-specific students' academic and monitoring policy. Such a policy should look at proactive and reactive ways of supporting students in the School/Faculty so that they meaningfully engage in learning and attain the set learning outcomes. The policy should spell out all the expectations, roles and responsibilities of lecturers, students and support staff in the School. Personnel responsible for the implementation of the Policy should be identified. The committee on teaching and learning in the School/Faculty or any other committee set up should coordinate academic monitoring and support functions of the School by working closely with Departments.

Department Readiness

A truncated policy drawn from the school/faculty's students' academic monitoring policy should inform departmental operations on students' academic monitoring and support. The way tutors, mentors and supplementary instructors are identified, trained, engaged, supervised and remunerated should be clarified in this policy. The university's teaching and learning centre or equivalent should provide generic facilitation training skills which should be matched with discipline-specific expectations provided by module coordinators. Departmental academic monitoring and support policies should also spell out how students are assessed and monitored to ensure early detection of potential 'at risk' students and the planning and implementation of appropriate interventions. The issue of monitoring and early warning strategies are important. Tutors are expected to offer a wide range of discipline-specific academic support programmes namely extra tuition to groups, individual attention, academic writing, study skills, lay counselling, among others. Of importance is the keeping of record, constant formative assessment and monitoring of performance.

Module/Course Readiness

The module/course lecturer should ensure that in planning for the teaching of the module/

course, the issue of academic monitoring and support is given attention. Key topics that give students challenges should be identified and measures of ensuring academic support put in place. Resources required to ensure meaningful teaching should be planned for and this includes the use of appropriate teaching methodologies, teaching technologies and other relevant materials. The necessary formative assessment tasks for each of the topics should be planned and detailed rubrics designed and made available to students before they work on assessment tasks. Training and retraining of tutors, supplemental instructors and mentors should be done by the module lecturer.

Tutorials for all Modules/Courses

There should be time-tabled tutorials which are made compulsory for all students in all modules/courses. Tutorials give students extra support in grappling with module content and this can be done in smaller groups by making use of trained tutors. Tutors may assist in students' areas of difficult and assist them on one-to one basis depending on how large the classes are. Students' who do not experience difficulties with module/course content should be given extended and challenging work during tutorials. They may also be asked to assist other students. In tutorials, issues on academic writing, study skills, examination preparation skills and time management should also be given attention.

Supplementary Instruction for 'Killer' Modules/Courses

'Killer' modules/courses are those modules or courses that have high failure rate in the department. Lecturers should be aware of such modules and ensure supplementary instruction is given for such modules. This is over and above tutorials. The argument is that students need more time and tuition on more difficult modules compared to time and tuition they may get for common modules.

Mentoring for 'At Risk' Students

Students repeating a module need to be assigned to trained tutors who will work with not more than five students. Tutors provide more individualised support to students to ensure that

students repeating a module get the necessary guidance to pass the failed modules.

Implementation and Evaluation

Every process of academic monitoring and support should constantly be evaluated through students, tutor and lecturer performance. Findings of the evaluation process should feed into the whole academic and monitoring and support programme with the view of improving the programmes and subsequently student attainment.

CONCLUSION

Academic development programmes in South African universities have evolved from deficiency-model based academic support programmes that were meant to 'fix the student' to more institutionally responsive and broad-based initiatives that seek to address the curriculum, infrastructure, teaching and learning as well as assessment approaches. Such approaches seek to ensure that access to higher education is not only widened but also matched with students' success. Mainstream embedded academic development programmes are proactive approaches to academic support for students contrary to reactive ones that may come too late to assist students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the discussion the following recommendations are made:

- Students' academic development programmes should be embedded in mainstream curriculum as teaching approaches as well as academic writing skills are discipline specific and should be offered in disciplines as part of mainstream teaching.
- Policies and procedures should be in place in Schools and Faculties to spell out how academic monitoring and support initiatives are implemented.
- School/Faculty based academic development practitioners should be trained discipline experts who are also experts in curriculum and teaching and learning issues. This will ensure that discipline-specific academic development programmes are offered to students as opposed to generic programmes offered outside disciplines.

- Academic development programmers should be timetabled and implemented in the same manner as the mainstream curriculum.
- Constant monitoring of the academic performance of students is imperative and clear early warning signs for underperformance should be in place to identify underperforming students.
- Academic monitoring and support programmes should be constantly evaluated by soliciting views of students and staff with a view to buttress on strengths and ameliorate deficiencies.

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