

Reflection on Academic Interventions to Improve Academic Performance of Accounting Students in South Africa

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This study investigated the effectiveness of intervention programmes for first year Accounting students at Central University of Technology in South Africa. Data regarding intervention programmes for first years Accounting students were collected from 5 lecturers (Blacks: 40%, Whites: 60%), using *semi-structured individual interviews*. The data was thematically analysed and achieved through the process of open-coding. The study indicated that students are not attending their usual classes as specified in the timetable. In the circumstances, intervention programmes are not useful or necessary for Accounting students. The study also indicated that students do not honour other academic interventions such as supplemental instruction (SI). The results further showed that students do not value these interventions programmes organised by the Institution and a great deal of resources are wasted on these programmes because students do not take them seriously. Providing students with access to University, whilst being necessary, is not sufficient to ensure academic success in Higher Institutions in South Africa. The Universities must devise innovative strategies to attract students to attend and to create more interest in the interventions programmes.

Key words: *Accounting, intervention programme, performance, reflection, students.*

1. Introduction

Providing students with access to university is necessary but not sufficient to increase educational attainment levels. It is essential that universities create and implement student development programmes to address high attrition rates, thereby increasing retention and student success. Universities have strategic goals to increase student enrolments, but often fail



to address the need for students to be more persistent once they have matriculated and arrived on campus (Hossler & Anderson, 2005).

In recent times, most universities have put in place intervention programmes for at-risk students who are academically challenged. The aim is to improve their academic performance (Rural Education Access Programme, 2010:12). Intervention programmes such as orientation, bridging, mentorship programme, supplemental instruction and e-learning technologies are examples of supporting programmes introduced by universities.

These interventions address many aspects of the social constructivism as applied in this study. The support programmes appeal to interaction techniques where professional staff and more senior students assist at-risk students. Use of technological devices that both students and lecturers can put in place to address the bridging gap is necessary. It is believed that introducing these intervention approaches will help advance students' study skills and improve their academic success.

2. Context of The Study

2.1 Orientation

Students' university readiness, preparation for classes, commitment, expectations, adjustment, motivation, self-concept, perception in Accounting and personal attitude do not only affect how students approach learning activities, but also affects their progression to the wider higher education environment (Byrne & Flood, 2007). Hence, the argument holds that academic performance of students depends on personal preparedness to handle the traumatic transition from their respective schools to university. Consequently, the transition on its own, exposes first-year students to a risk in terms of academic failure due to unfamiliarity and uncertainty of the environment (Naidoo, 2012). In the circumstances, risk could be higher in the case of inappropriate orientation, as students would take longer before being familiar with where classes are and which lecturer will be lecturing them.

In order to overcome the challenges that are faced by first-year students, most universities intervene by introducing proper orientation programmes (Prebble, Hargraves, Leach, Naidoo, Suddaby & Zepke, 2004). Consequently, these intervention orientation programmes are sometimes scheduled for a week before universities re-open at the beginning of the academic year. During the orientation students will be shown all institutional facilities and educational resources, so that they will be able to attend from the first day that lectures commence (Indreica, Cazan, and Truta., 2011).

It is widely understood and acknowledged by researchers and practitioners that student engagement is a critically significant component for improved academic success (Kuh, Cruce,

Shoup, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2008). Student engagement begins at the point of recruitment and should continue throughout a student's academic studies. Universities that create a more inclusive and appealing campus atmosphere report that students become more involved and active in the learning process. Institutional and student development activities that facilitate student inclusion and actively engage students can increase academic achievement (Hossler & Anderson 2005).

2.2 Bridging programmes

Bridging courses are short intensive programmes designed for pre-tertiary students entering higher education (Poladian & Nicholas, 2013). It is a programme meant specifically for prospective students who do not qualify for, or meet university entrance level requirements (MacGillivray, 2009). In essence, bridging courses are only offered at an introductory level and may assist in narrowing the gap between high school and university studies. Subjects taught in bridging courses are a few subjects normally derived from the courses done at the first-year stream of the programme of the university (Thalluri, 2016). Bridging courses assist under-prepared students to successfully enter higher education.

Thus, one would suggest that bridging courses aim to close the gap between high school knowledge of Accounting and higher education expectations and standards of Accounting. Bridging courses can thus familiarise students without Accounting terminologies, recordings and interpretations which might lead to better academic achievement. Bridging could be considered as a foundation of Accounting, a building block to the main content as they register for their degree or diploma. It is therefore perceived that bridging programmes, regardless of subject or qualification, have shown to add value to improving students' academic performance and retention (Essack & Quayle, 2007). It is reasonable then to accept and recommend the inclusion of bridging courses as part of the intervention strategies and to introduce a mentoring programme to address the failure rate in Accounting.

2.3 Mentoring programmes

Mentoring programmes refer to a relationship between two individuals of a similar age, but one being senior and more experienced based on time, life experience and university study (Terrion & Leonard, 2007). Both mentor and mentee come together, either informally or through formal mentoring schemes, in the pursuit of fulfilling a combination of functions (Bozeman & Feeney, 2007). The mentoring relationship enables an increase in cognitive, affective and skill-based learning outcomes (Lee, Krauss, Saudi & Hamzah, 2016), as there is a transferring of knowledge and experiences by the mentor to mentee.

Cognitive knowledge that the mentor instils in the mentee comprises of effectively increasing interest and preparedness for the first-year subjects and helping them to make informed



decisions about time management and self-organisational abilities towards academic activities and university adjustment (Paglis, Green & Bauer, 2006). The seniors transfer and share experiences with first years.

Hamlet (2015:301) refers to a peer mentor as a way another student can serve as a resource, a helping hand, a sounding board, and a referral service to first-year students. On the same note, the job of peer mentors is to provide support, encouragement, and information to students in their department who are just beginning the graduate programme (Hamlet, 2015). Peer mentorship enhances learning and personal development and supports first-year students academically and socially. Furthermore, peer mentoring is supported by theorists, for example the zone of proximal development of Vygotsky. This theory suggests that students' guidance on the cognitive level of learning with the assistance of capable peers, can serve as a resource for a first-year student. As a result, the social integration of students into learning is considered to be a potential ingredient for students' academic achievement (Jackling & Mcdowall, 2008).

Mentors interact with the target group (mentees) of students, sharing knowledge and experiences (Snowden & Hardy, 2012). The University of Dundee in the United Kingdom appointed third-year Accounting students as volunteers to assist first-year students within the mentorship programme. They helped to address the issues of writing skills, study techniques and examination preparation (Fox, Stevenson, Connelly, Duff & Dunlop, 2010). The potentially failing students were identified by the mark they had achieved as their course mark. In order to address those vulnerable students in Accounting, the department of Accounting and the university introduced a mentoring programme.

The university's motive for introducing the mentorship programme was mainly to improve first year academic performance. Fox *et al.* (2010:150) measured the effectiveness of university intervention (peer mentoring), by comparing pre- and post-mentoring examinations of the first-year Accounting students (mentees). The findings of the study indicated that the peer mentoring scheme has shown a positive effect on first year Accounting performance. The same positive results were also found at two different universities in Australia (RMIT University & Deakin University) (Jackling & MCDowall, 2008). From these universities mentors gave an assurance that through their mentorship process they contributed to students learning and understanding of Accounting concepts. Confidence was developed through generic skills such as discussions, debate and presentations for undergraduate Accounting students. The mentees in this study confirmed having benefited from the mentorship programme in terms of practical information on motivation, study skills and time management.



2.4 Supplemental Instructional programmes

Supplemental Instruction (SI) is an academic intervention programme that encourages a peer-led academic support programme which aims to assist in high-risk and difficult courses and is offered to all students enrolled in the supported classes (Vorozhbit, 2012). The programme, like other intervention strategies, aims to improve students' academic performance and retention (Kilpatrick, Savage & Wilburn, 2011). In this case, Accounting would form part of those subjects classified as high-risk due to the high failure rate in the first year of university study. The SI sessions are held three to four times a week depending on the institutional arrangements with regards to time slots for SI sessions. The sessions are informal but well organised by the affected faculties. These sessions ensure that students who volunteered to attend sessions compare notes, discuss readings and concepts, clarify issues of confusion, and solve complex problems through the guidance of their SI leader (Holman Success Center, 2014).

The SI leader also attends each class session with students to stay up to date with the course and also to develop an understanding of the lecturer's lecturing style (The University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2014). Through the process of the SI sessions the SI leader should work closely with the lecturer in order to review session plans and discuss issues that students are experiencing during the formal lecturing. SI sessions create deeper engagement with – and enhanced learning of the material that was covered in classes (Stone & Jacobs, 2008).

According to the University of Missouri-Kansas City, as cited in Stones and Jacobs (2008), students who normally participate in SI sessions improve their critical thinking through debate amongst themselves and their SI leaders, as well as their reasoning skills. The students who attend supplementary instruction obtain new study strategies to increase their understanding of the subject, besides improving their general skills such as teamwork, communicating about a subject, and making presentations in front of others (Malm, Bryngfors & Mörner, 2012). SI sessions include information on note taking, anticipating test questions, vocabulary development, memory aids, and reasoning skills that characterise intellectual maturity (Harding, Engelbrecht & Verwey, 2011). Coupled together, these approaches can build and prepare first-year Accounting students for academic success.

Supplemental Instructional programmes (SI) were first introduced by Deanna Martin, at the University of Missouri at Kansas City (UMKC) in the 1970s. The university was faced with major changes in demographics of students and an unexpected rise in student attrition rate. Supplementary instruction came as an intervention to increase student success in high risk courses (Malm *et al.* 2012; Vorozhbit, 2012). Supplemental instruction since its inception has spread widely and is used by more than 1 500 institutions of higher learning and in nearly 30 countries worldwide, including South Africa (Naidoo & Paideya, 2015).



According to Esterhuizen, De Beer and Baird (2008), the supplemental instructional programmes are not remedial, instead they guide students with strategies on how to learn and what to learn. Therefore, first-year students are given an opportunity to learn skills such as problem solving, reasoning, decision making, evaluating concepts and models (Naidoo & Paideya, 2015). The implication is that students are also informed about how to get assistance and ask questions from peers, work in groups, and learn to present and discuss a given homework task. All the skills mentioned are required for Accounting practices to enable students to understand and perform academically in Accounting. Further implications could be that Accounting demands critical reasoning in almost all the topics to be covered at first-year level.

The main benefits obtained from SI sessions were appreciation of the diversity in students' learning styles, better understanding of course material, improved self-confidence as a learner, improved relations with lecturers, transfer of skills learned to other courses and understanding the value of collaborative learning (Malm *et al.* 2012). The SI programme also plays the part a supporting role, as SI leaders are senior students who have experience of the pressures of first-year Accounting, and are knowledgeable in assisting others with methods of learning. The emphasis is that SI is reviewed as a means of improving students' academic performance targeting difficult courses rather than high-risk individual students (Vorozhbit, 2012). Below is a discussion of how e-learning could also assist first-year students to improve their academic performance and eliminate many of the barriers that students are faced with regarding education and their performance.

3. Method

The study utilized a phenomenological qualitative inquiry (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh & Sorensen (2009) to get an in-depth understanding of the Reflection on Academic Interventions to Improve Academic Performance of Accounting Students in South Africa

3.1 Participants And Setting

Participants were a convenience sample of 5 Accounting lecturers (Blacks = 40%, White = 60%) of CUT in the Free State Province of South Africa.

3.2 Data Collection And Procedure

The study used *semi-structured individual interviews* to determine the reflection on academic intervention to improve academic performance of Accounting students in South Africa. The permission to conduct the research was granted by the Central University of Technology in the Free State of South Africa. The names of respondents were not identified for ethical reasons.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data was thematically analysed using open-coding procedures (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). Thematic analysis was used because of its flexibility and its usefulness in research that enables the researcher to get a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data (Braun & Clark 2006). These involved systematically organizing, categorizing and summarizing data and describing it in meaningful themes. Themes were assigned codes in an attempt to condense the data into categories.

4. Findings

This section reports on and discusses the findings of the study according to the three themes, which is extra classes and presentations, class attendance and absenteeism and intervention programmes. Below are the discussions of the results according to the three themes.

4.1 Extra classes and presentations

Some lecturers do not agree with having extra classes because they argue that if students do not attend other interventions that are already in place, such as SI, it would still be impossible for them to go for extra classes. They said if they do not honour other academic interventions, what would make them attend the extra classes? Lecturers were also adamant that the interventions that are already in place would be enough for students to excel, provided there is commitment and planning by students for their studies. Lecturers further indicated that based on their experiences, students are not attending the available interventions that are already in place for them, therefore they do not see how they will attend extra classes except that it will be another expense for the institution. Lecturers indicated that their students do not take their studies seriously. They also mentioned that the unpreparedness of students might retard their progress and achievement in Accounting. Therefore, there is no necessity to incur further costs in terms of time and money. L2:C2: *“ I do not see any necessity of extra classes because the type of students we have do not attend the interventions that are already in existence what would make them to attend extra classes except is another cost to the institution. ”*

Contrary to the statements above, other lecturers support the notion of extra classes as they believe that extra classes assist students to improve their academic performance. They pointed out that appropriate extra lectures could assist students to learn the work they may have missed. Participants further indicated that if extra classes can be implemented they will have a chance to deal with issues that were not clear to their students. L1:C1: *“Extra classes can assist them to cover what was not understood in class and extra classes could be effectively used for group work and the lecturer can give him/herself more time to assist the struggling students.”*

It is clear that other lecturers find two classes per week insufficient for students to grasp the subject content and to master the first-year programme. From other lecturers' point of view, two classes per week are not enough for Accounting. This means that more Accounting lectures should be allocated where they go through previous question papers and revise the work that was covered in class.

It is common knowledge that repetition brings understanding. When a concept is repeated several times it becomes easier to conceptualize. It is during extra classes or so-called intervention strategies that students become familiar with content not comprehended in class. Additionally, those who missed lectures can recap content that they missed. Although the perceptions of other lecturer participants are of the view that, there is no benefit in the implementation of extra lectures, the argument for inclusion exceeds the negative view, as stated earlier in this paper.

In addition, other lecturers are of the view that if students can be placed at Accounting firms for practical exposure purposes, this would improve students' academic performance, because students will gain first-hand practical experience. Students' involvement and participation are seen as key to solving the problem of the high failure rate in Accounting. This sentiment is echoed by all lecturers as indicated in the previous reporting portions of this study. Lecturers feels that if a participative approach is followed and students are encouraged to practice, come to classes prepared, and effectively interact this, would improve students' academic performance. The responses of all participants as cited above concur with the findings of (Omodara, Kolawole and Oluwatoyo (2013) that posits that students' participation and interaction with others in class and taking part in their studies, has a positive effect on academic performance.

4.2 Class attendance and absenteeism

The major argument presented by lecturers is that students either possess the notion that they already know the content which they actually failed in the previous year. These students are of the view that they know the content and thus need not attend lectures. Lecturers indicated that it is during this time that they miss out on guidance for the tests and examinations since the assessment questions differ from year to year. L2:C2: *"It is like a norm for them not to attend". Feels like to be a repeater one is not supposed to attend classes anymore, they act like they know more than what is already being done in classes. However, they miss a lot of information by not attending classes, the gap between what they have learned from their previous class to the next, becomes difficulty to catch-up. Our problem here is that students do not attend classes regularly."*

Participants also indicated that students are skipping classes because they have a lot of clashes. They indicated that because they are repeating a certain subject within the faculty it may clash with another subject of the second year. Lecturers reported that students seem to attend other

classes and skip Accounting classes because they feel like they know the work. L1:C1: *“Our students are carrying over modules so those modules clashes and they find themselves not attending classes those that clash with on the time table. Sometime they feel under the same group.”*

In addition, participants indicated that some students are also engaged in part-time employment within campuses and outside. The part-time employment does not neatly fit around class schedules and students seem to be missing classes because the class clashes with their work schedule. According to lecturer’s reports, students are working in order to cater for their wellbeing as well as their siblings. They asserted that the money that students receive from part-time employment may be the only source of income for their families and they depend on that money for everything pertaining to their lives. L3:C1: *“Some of our students miss classes because they work in the library, cafeteria other claim to be employed by private businesses outside campus to make a living.”*

It is clear that lecturers need to take cognisance of their lecturing duties as well as professional ways of dealing with students who are sometimes sensitive about certain academic issues. This implies that lecturers must also be properly trained in dealing with, and treating students professionally. In almost all responses, similar conclusions were drawn with regard to the problems caused by absenteeism. Regular lecture attendance was seen as the most probable remedy for failure. It becomes imperative that students realise that absconding from lectures may cause them to fail. Therefore, it is clear that by honouring lectures students have a chance of engaging with each other during discussions and thus have an opportunity to question and benchmark as they interact. By so doing they gain a greater chance of exchanging ideas, opinions and understanding the subject better.

Lecturers commented that students’ lack of class attendance is a negative factor influencing first-year Accounting performance. During the interviews with lecturer participants, it became apparent that absenteeism by students was a concern. Lecturers highlighted that if students do not attend lectures regularly, there is a missing link between what they should have learned from the previous lecture and the current lecture (that is moving from known to unknown). This breaks the momentum of learning. However, every time students miss lectures they make excuses for not attending and it becomes habitual.

Lecturers’ perspective on absenteeism concurred with (Steenkamp Baard, and Frick. (2009), who purport that students with a better record of lecture attendance performed significantly better compared to students who demonstrated poor lecture attendance. Subsequently, students complained and made arguments that lecturers are also not honouring their lectures and have a negative attitude. This implies that when students have negative attitudes towards a lecturer, it could create more negativity or at times lead to a complete rejection of their studies.

Another major issue that was established from the empirical findings was that students' failure and absenteeism seemed to be influenced by the fact that lecturers rush to complete the unit, module or chapter. The implication is that lecturers start a new chapter before students have mastered the content in the previous chapter. Hence a different approach to lecturing could assist to overcome the problem as students fail to comprehend and master all knowledge as per the study guide, per semester.

4.3 Supplementary instructional programme

Lecturer participants reported that whenever they promised their students another chance to write a test if they attend a certain percentage of their SI session, there is a good improvement in the pass rate of students. They indicated that the benefits have worked for them in terms of improving students' performance. L1: C2: *"Since student introduced to SI and told that if they attend 50% of SI classes they will be give third test to improve their marks. Their marks have improved and number of failures is decreasing even though is not with the high number but there is a significance improvement."*

Participants indicated that since students were motivated by the provision of the third test, they could see a great improvement. They are experiencing more engagement from students in class and they ask questions that were not clarified in the SI classes. Furthermore, lecturer participants indicated that they use the wellness centre which caters for students who need food and financial support. They pointed out that the interventions are helping and improving students' academic performance because students' basic needs are well-catered for at the wellness centre. L1:C1: *"They are improved on their study habits and engaging in classes. Wellness centres assist us also with needy students so we always refer them and they are always be given food parcels."*

Participants indicated that the introduction of the bridging course equips students to be admitted to the main stream and assists them with their academic performance. The basics of the first-year Accounting content are covered and gives students a greater opportunity to understand when they enrol for main stream. Participants further mentioned that at present the course is introduced at one campus and they are already reaping the benefits of the course. L2:C2 asserts that: *"Bridging course for now has been introduced on one campus the roll-out to the other campus is next year. Students who does do not qualify to get into the main stream of Higher Certificate in Accounting programme (NHC) because of low M-score they state at the AAT (Association of Accounting Technicians) programme once they pass, they then accepted in the main stream."* Students need to be encouraged to use the programmes and the benefits should be clearly indicated.

Lecturers emphasised the value of the intervention programmes on campus such as SI, mentorship, wellness centres programmes, and language proficiency classes where students are taught about academic writing and bridging courses. All these programmes are meant to

address the academic challenges of the risk subjects at the first year of university academic challenges. In order to encourage students to make use of the SI lectures, students are persuaded through various intrinsic and extrinsic rewards such as improving their marks in the planned summative assessment. One of the ways intervention strategies could improve academic performance is to introduce other corrective strategies such as bridging courses in addition to the SI programme.

Bridging courses are normally attractive to students because they are credited. For example, Campus 2 has introduced the bridging gap to first years in order to narrow the gap between the high school Accounting content and course demands at the university. Lecturer participants are of the opinion that this intervention strategy might work and improve the first-year results by the time students are due to enter the main stream. According to the Rural Education Access Programme, (2010) the majority of institutions of higher learning around the world went an extra mile by introducing these intervention programmes for students who are at risk of failure, with the aim of improving their academic performance.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Students come from different backgrounds with many academic challenges. The finding of the study suggests that to address these challenges to Accounting students, the lecturers can identify types of students and refer them to the wellness centre where they can be assisted with academic language (language proficiency and effective mentorship programmes). The study indicated that mentorship programmes should start during the first two weeks of orientation to identify the problems faced by Accounting students as early as possible and address them in time.

It should be noted that students also have their own intelligence, personal qualities, cultural backgrounds and their respective languages all of which can contribute meaningfully to the learning process, if recognised by lecturers. Therefore, every acknowledgement of any little contribution makes a student feel important and that will slowly build their confidence. It is a clear indication that multilingual tutorials influence the manner in which knowledge is attained and the truth that students construct, perceive and reach during the learning process.

For example, topics like “Accounting as a system”, cause them to relate to a systems approach in Accounting such as input, process and output towards their daily lives (culture). It will also allow them to form their own interpretations as to what they think is expected of them. They will understand the topic far better than a lecturer giving them abstract information in relation to the determination of outputs which they can determine, based on the example provided to them. Simplifying the Accounting terms such as assets being their possessions, the usage being depreciation and calculations would make the subject easier and interesting and students will enjoy it and pass. It is critical not to underestimate students’ intelligence.



The result of the study also advises that Accounting students do a lot of theory and it is critical to invite personnel from different industries who are the beneficiaries of the graduates of Accounting to engage with them, and make them aware of what is expected of them by those industries. Creation of a platform for students to interact with external people within the Accounting field might encourage them to change the behaviour of coming to class late because they will know that in the corporate world late coming has cost implications and will not be tolerated. This may help because they do not know the content and the ethical conduct of any individual within the field. Engagement with external stakeholders changes a students' perspective which may lead to improved results. Students' results are of interest to every stakeholder, be it Accounting firms, auditing firms, government organisations, financial institutions, parents and sponsors.

The practical part of building that relationship between the students and the external stakeholders will tremendously improve the results as they would want to work in those firms and emulate the young graduates who work there. Through such relationships the firms might even take on some students to be trained, in that way everyone will be motivated. Results and students' motivation can be improved in different ways which might lead to improved academic performance. The invitation of external stakeholders to play a part in the learning environment could endorse high quality learning outcomes. This may motivate students even more and the engagement prepares them to work harder towards a future they understand other than an imaginary future.

The study further indicated that Accounting students cannot manage their time and the study further proposes that students should manage their study times by developing schedules that stipulate appropriate times for each subject. The institutional facilities (reading labs, library and information centres etc.) that are provided for study should be utilised effectively. These facilities for learning and studying should be utilised to their full capacity

Students should show commitment and perseverance by adhering to study time-tables, attending lectures, consulting expert sources, and attending intervention sessions. It is of paramount importance that students commit themselves to completing and submitting their work on time.

The findings of the study show that at first-year level students take a longer time before they adapt to the new university environment. It is clear that university routine is a completely new way of doing things according to new Accounting Students. Consequently, the study suggests that intensive programmes to orientate and support Accounting students is needed throughout the year and not just once to enable adjustment to university life. The study revealed that traditionally, classes have always been taught with heavy textbooks, notebooks, pencils and chalkboards. Over the past years we have seen new teaching tools emerging such as whiteboards, projectors and educational computer games. However, in encouraging the student engagement universities must devise innovative ways for learning to take place as technology



is becoming more and more predominant. This will cause students to attend and become more interested in the intervention programmes.

6. Limitation of the study

The study excluded the rest of the first-year students who enrolled for Financial Accounting 1 for the first time in 2016. They could have possibly provided information regarding Accounting performance at first-year level. In this study, methodological variables that could be cited as limitations of the study included difficulty of access to student participation. If total access was attained, the response rate could have reached between 90 to 100%.



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