

Reviewing the implementation of the MUT Tutor Programme to standardise operations

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AIMS AND PROCESSES

The primary aim of the project was to look at the incongruities and disjuncture of the tutor programme at the University. This initiative was to ensure that the tutorship programme is standardised across all the faculties at the Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) to enhance student development. The conceptualisation of the project prior to the TAU session one meeting was really a good base to identify significant institutional gaps that needed to be addressed within student support (focusing on the tutorial system). However, this was not sufficient. Arriving at the first TAU session and working within my enquiry group platform both enhanced the project to take shape and form. It also positioned me to have an accurate perspective of my role as the one who must be the implementer of the project. This formative process was enlightening in also redefining my leadership role as an academic. It also created a new trust towards the implementation of the required change strategy and subsequently becoming a change agent that by owning the process. Now going back to the drawing board, the first step was to identify key team members that were relevant in the conceptualisation, administration, and evaluation of the project from an internal perspective (on the basis of their understanding of the MUT context). Secondly, I had to also outline the tasks, activities and resources that were required to implement the project. Therefore, the formulation of a change strategy was a significant tool in mapping out this territory, to effect the change needed by the university. Our Teaching and Learning Centre (TLDC) was instrumental in creating the right platforms within the institution for me to implement the project. The centre provided additional background information on student development initiatives and a holistic analysis of the existing gaps. The key informants on this project were, first and foremost, the Deans of all the three Faculties, namely Natural Sciences, Engineering and Management Sciences. I was able to engage all the Deans from the onset during an informal briefing session. I was fortunate to attend an institutional research meeting where

all the Deans were present, and this opportunity allowed me to propose a meeting to present the project to them, which they were keen to support and requested for a combined meeting instead of an individual presentation. This created an opportunity for a combined first meeting, where I obtained the necessary buy-in and support on the implementation process. Furthermore, the Deans facilitated for me the relevant platform to present this project at the inclusive Faculty Board meetings and to announce details of the project rollout plan. Therefore, my first institutional event was the presentation to the Deans to first get their consent to motivate the HOD's (who were the targeted audience) through the EXCO forum (and then the second part of the first institutional event was the announcement of the project to the Faculty Board meetings to engage staff members). The primary aim of the project was to look at the incongruities and disjuncture of the tutor programme at the University through a designed assessment tool to investigate key focus areas, namely selection and recruitment, administrative, budgeting processes, resources access and students with disabilities. One of the key milestones was to first obtain the necessary ethical clearance of the project (RD/23/2021) which was granted. To effectively rollout the project, I had to meet the project timelines in accordance with statutory meetings in the calendar of the institution. I had to leverage my time to formulate the implementation strategy. What was also important to note is that our first student assistance policy was waiting for approval in the University Council, after it had been tabled at the previous rounds of Faculty Board meetings. Therefore, the flow of this project was in sequence with the rolling out of this policy. This created a synergy of placing the tutor programme at the top of the agenda of the institution. The other key learning from the milestone emanated from the ability to involve HOD's to complete the survey before the second institutional event. Part of my objectives involved engaging the Dean's in their respective roles within the faculties, whilst gaining their perspectives as the key custodians of faculty tutorial budgets through a formal presentation. The formulated presentation aimed to also highlight the need for coherence of standards across the faculties and collaborative participation in this review. The institutional database according to the MUT academic structure, details of all the HOD's were established and action research was conducted from that database. Purposive sampling was used to reach the HOD's and to request their consent and full participation. A measuring

instrument, namely an online questionnaire, was developed prior to the second segment of the first institutional event (part of the Faculty Board announcement) to give guidelines to the HOD's, and to encourage for transparency and the involvement of staff in support of HOD's before data collection and to make substantial recommendations. The second institutional event was part of reporting the captured perspectives from the faculties on the study findings as well as how HOD's interact with the tutor programme.

Project timelines were followed through consistently and this ensured that no delays were encountered. Initially, the experience proved to be nerve-wrecking since most departments expressed extreme frustrations about the systematic gaps that were identified. The support was phenomenal from all the important stakeholders, namely, the Faculty Deans, HOD's of various departments and the TLDC. Data collection was conducted to ensure that HODs complete within the set time lines. This required interventions as several disruptions of the academic programme occurred and HOD's faced enormous pressure. This required me to undertake proactive decisions and strategies to engage them within the specified times. TAU session two enlightened me even further and was instrumental in building on other gaps identified and foreseeing opportunities, with great assistance from my enquiry group leader. Also, it is important to mention that after my TAU session two, I was inspired to further create platforms that can enhance this project. As a result, I designed a more structured reflective platform for our tutors to engage them in reflective practices from their activities. This was necessary to not only look at the system from a departmental operational level, but also to consider a more tailored approach for the tutors. The second institutional event is where I had to share the findings from the project survey at an institution level. I was excited to present the findings since the study objectives were achieved within the stipulated timelines. One of the aims of the project was to provide recommendations, and these were forwarded to the relevant structures in the institution. Deliberations from the second event triggered interactions to collectively revise operations accordingly in order to ensure that the quality of tools are utilised in the administration process and that the processes flows systematically and is user-friendly. A follow-up meeting was conducted in the Faculty EXCO for further deliberations on the submissions of the study recommendations to further engage key departments on the implementation process. This project has led to

the development of other avenues which will expand different aspects of the tutorship programme, including interventions on monitoring the entire system as well as tutor participation and engagement. Future interventions, include developing a more systematic training for tutors and incorporating reflective practices also for students with the tutorship service within the scholarship of teaching and learning. One of the obvious gaps reported in the findings is the need to address the social justice discourse for students with disabilities. This is exacerbated by the limited availability of data and sufficiency of supporting resources, which must be further explore. This is a critical part of advocacy that can assist towards the systematic integration of students with disabilities within the university. The formulation of this project could not have come at a better time, as we continue to grapple with issues of social justice as a university and as a nation. Systems of student support must address the current needs of the day and ensure a more synchronised approach within the university in order to support students to advance themselves further within higher education. A step in the right direction through this project, was the pronouncement and solidarity formed on the existing gaps and recommendations thereof, which are now part of a strategic intervention. As I reflect on how far we have come as an institution, I am delighted to have been part of this project, especially during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The opportunity enlightened me to build my own capacity towards finding avenues, opportunities, and the recalibration of my role as an academic. I have gained collaborations and built strong partnerships with my peers both internally and externally in a thrust towards redefining higher education in this era. Thank you to the TAU leadership team for this opportunity and the resources they provided for me during the programme. The knowledge and skills gained were phenomenal. Gratitude also goes to my enquiry group and my enquiry group leader who made significant contributions towards my personal development, we journeyed together in a constructive manner. Our group was a significant portal in shaping us to be became creative and to build momentum, which was necessary for the entire TAU experience. The TAU journey has been a great learning process of self-discovery, as well as a transformational and a resourceful platform. I have been empowered to be a leader through this programme and to be the change agent that I ought to be, not just within the academic space, but also as a South African Citizen and a Global Citizen.