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FACILITATING STUDENT SUCCESS THROUGH *SIYAPHUMELELA* INTERVENTION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VENDA

1. INTRODUCTION

Student success is a global agenda. Every Higher Education Institution worldwide has a passion for student success. Student success is not only crucial for the social and economic outlook, but it also entails ethical and legal imperatives. For instance, drop-outs and delayed completion have financial implications for students, parents, institutions, and the government. Success also gives an impression on the quality of education offered by the institution. Key student success outcomes often looked at globally include access, retention, attainment, and progression. Each institution however has its definition of student success such as a 60% pass rate in a module at Univen.

Social injustice is one of the deters to student success, especially with the increased access to higher education. Students from affluent backgrounds enrol and succeed smoothly compared to their counterparts. Univen, being a historically black university, seeks to achieve an improved success rate in undergraduate at-risk modules through the Siyaphumelela project. Hence, this TAU project selected five of the ten identified highest risk modules across the university (University of Venda's 10 highest risk modules: Based on 2014-2019 module data, n.d.). Univen defines the highest risk modules as modules "with the highest likelihood of negatively impacting on the highest percentage of students per programme in terms of Time to Degree Completion, which will subsequently affect the students' success and programme throughput rate". The highest risk modules are most crucial in hindering the completion of qualifications by students judging by the performance of a module within a stipulated time frame.

The project links with Projects 2 (enhancement of student throughput and success) and 6 (institutional collaborations and partnerships) of the Univen UCDP (2021-2023). Furthermore, strategic thrust 1 of the Institutional Strategic Plan (2021-2025) talks about student-centeredness and engaged scholarship. This project aims to enhance the improvement of student performance in identified at-risk undergraduate modules. The objectives are to determine students' and academics' perceptions of poor student performance in the five highest-risk modules in the Faculty of Science, Engineering and Agriculture, departments in

Natural and Mathematical Sciences, to explain poor student performance in the study modules and to develop an intervention strategy for improved pass rate in the highest risk modules.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research design is mixed methods through a concurrent triangulation strategy (Niewehuis, 2012). Two focus group discussions have been conducted to collect qualitative data from the student leadership and academics. Purposive and consensus selection strategies were followed respectively. Focus group 1 constituted 6 members of the student leadership in office 2020 to 2022 academic years. The SRC presidents, the chairpersons of the Faculty of Science, Engineering and Agriculture, the Ministers of Education and Ministers of information, external and internal relations participated. Focus group 2 comprised 5 members, 2 HODs and 3 lecturing staff involved in the teaching of the highest-risk modules. Both group discussions were conducted virtually on Microsoft Teams. The University ethics committee protocol was closely followed. With the participants' permission, the sessions were recorded and notes were taken. Then two broad questions asked were:

i. Can you please tell me what you think causes the high failure rate in the high-risk modules?

ii. Can you suggest possible solutions for the improvement of student performance in these modules?

Probing was done to ensure coverage of the aspects of student admissions, instruction, student support, staff support, student attitudes, staff attitudes, infrastructure, ICT, and social justice. The qualitative data were analysed with a content analysis latent approach. The proceedings were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Themes were formulated.

The quantitative part of the project is not yet done. It would be a student survey and use of the institutional data of the identified modules at risk. The project also intends to employ the University of Free State to conduct a Classroom Survey of Student Engagement (Classe). Classe is a diagnostic tool using two instruments to collect lecturers and student data from a specific module (Strydom et al, 2017). The project will in the end develop and implement a model that will facilitate improvement in the study modules.

3. PROJECT OUTCOMES
3.1 Study results

Data indicated several possible areas, some similar to Adeyemi (2014) findings, to look at about the poor performance of students in the study modules. Adeyemi (2014) found staffing, the Lecturer's commitment and interest, institutional calendar stability and instructional

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methods to be significant predictors of student achievement. It is thought that the possible poor student performance causes begin with student unpreparedness for the university journey. Unpreparedness could be due to the basic education experience, poor programme/module selection and poor or lack of student advising strategy. Perceived causes also implicate poor administration. The shortage of administration staff could be the cause of late student admissions and poor communication. Teachers show a lack of interest in assisting students to perform well. While coming to class prepared and "overprepared", attitude to students and the lack of transparency and unfairness with regards to assessments derail students. There is poor planning and a lack of coordination between different directorates/divisions of the university. An example given was a high-standard building standing there for three years non-functional due to no furnishings and equipment put in place compromising quality teaching and learning. The other challenge is unclear roles of the support divisions where academics needing service will be tossed from one pillar to the other. An example is the signing of contracts for tutors towards the end of the semester. It was not clear whose responsibility it is between CHETL and HR. Lack of university support and unresponsiveness of the management on issues raised by the academics was a dear concern. Timetabling coined with absenteeism (clashes) was a frustration for academics while students felt the problems were often resolved. This information implies that certain academic challenges miss the student leadership as they depend on the reports from the students. The authorities tend to compromise the university rules due to administrative faults.

There was a sense of demoralised spirit amongst academics. The set of criteria used for the identification of the highest-risk modules was not accepted. The reason was that the lecturers should have been engaged in coming up with them. They expressed the need for an academic Indaba to change the university culture of imposing on academics. They indicated that the university engages academics more on non-academic issues and then expects good results. The other challenge is the offering of service modules to several other programmes. Students from other programmes show more commitment to their major modules and no or minimal commitment to the modules they take from the faculty. The proposed solution is a staffing boost and a separation of students.

The analysis that was done for the change strategy is still relevant. Amongst other activities, the constitution of the community of practice will include the academics and student leadership in the Faculty of Science, Engineering and Agriculture.

3.2 Achievements and challenges

The proposal was finalised, an institutional change strategy was developed, and one institutional event was successfully carried out. The turn-up of the event was commendable, and engagement was good. Amongst the attendees were the senior management and different internal university stakeholders including students. The event drew the presence of the HOD, Academic Development Unit from the Centre for Teaching and Learning. I had also invited and was honoured by the presence of my TAU supervisor and one member from my peer learning group. I also had a special meeting with the DVC, Teaching and Learning looking at how we can expand the TAU institutional project to improve student orientation and address certain other audit issues. I was again invited by the acting executive Dean of the Faculty of Heath Sciences to present my project at the school board. I delayed in submitting for ethics because at first, I thought for the first phase I will not publish the results. I however had the change of mind and decided to submit for ethical approval as well mainly to be able to apply for funding from the University Research and Publication Committee.

The major drawbacks were the disruptions in the support system I had created for myself in the institution. The two personnel from the *Siyaphumela* project left due to demise and work relocation. The support I thought I had secured with the highest Teaching and Learning office through the institutional event did not materialise. When I requested funds for the Classe, I did not get them. This disappointment however, motivated me to apply for ethics so that I could register the project and apply for funding from the institution. The other challenge encountered was the student protest that deterred the plan for student data collection. The university has not been functional for two weeks. On the third week students were sent on early recess.

3.3 Future work

The project is continuing. Only focus groups were done.

- Further explanation will be obtained from the student surveys and the institutional data.
- A second institutional event will be organised and carried out.
- A relevant intervention will be planned and implemented.

4. CONCLUSION

The work is progressing. Personal and professional growth is evident.

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Annexure 1

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