

**PROJECT TITLE:** Blended Integrated Student Support and Engagement for Sustainable Academic Success and Holistic Student Wellness

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**AIM:** The primary aim of this project was to develop an automated system to promote student engagement with Student Support Services in the CHS for sustainable academic success. The secondary aim/ objective was to determine and describe how the blended, integrated **technology model** can promote students' engagement with Student Support Services (SSS) for sustainable academic success and holistic student wellness during the first academic year.

## **BACKGROUND TO PROJECT**

**Context.** Entry into university is an exciting experience for students, however the transition from a secondary to tertiary institution places many demands and challenges that students need to negotiate to achieve academic success. At this developmental stage, students grapple with several psychosocial issues which may impact negatively on their overall academic performance. Whilst many students adjust, others have great difficulties in separating themselves from past experiences and in adjusting to the academic and social life of the University (Tinto, 1993). Research into the first year of undergraduate study shows that majority of students who drop-out or fail higher education courses do so in their first year (Bourner et al., 1991; MacDonald, 1992; Woodley et al., 1992; Benn, 1995), resulting in the first year being termed as a 'make or break' year. For this reason, the first year students are targeted as the primary beneficiaries of this project, which will be piloted on the First Year Bachelor of Nursing students.

The Student Engagement and Student Success Impact Evaluation Report (2013-2017) of the College of Health Sciences at UKZN revealed that 33% of all students who were academically excluded during that period had not completed the SWAT Assessment and that 66% of students failed engage with other Student Wellness Interventions offered by the Student Support Services during that period. This was confirmed by the findings of a previous audit on student failure that was conducted at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) in 2005 which recommended that steps needed to be taken to improve student academic performance, address student failure and facilitate student retention. The Audit report further proposed that student support

for students at risk should be centrally located **as a social justice intervention** (Africa, 2005).

In response to Africa (2005)'s report, the College of Health Sciences, Student Support Services developed a strategy to enhance the holistic development to respond to the needs of the first-year students in CHS –named Student Wellness Academic Transformation (SWAT) programme. The SWAT is a multipronged, comprehensive, and integrated academic and psychosocial support programme designed to proactively and timeously identify and support students at risk. It is aligned to the UKZN Academic Monitoring and Support Policy and is offered in collaboration with college professional services, academic leaders, teaching and learning personnel and central student services. The SWAT programme pays closer attention to the non-academic factors impacting student success and moves the focus beyond the 'inside the lecture room' teaching and learning to the 'outside the lecture room' experiences. SWAT further allows for direct, active engagement with students in the College allowing for student-centered and holistic approaches to SSS as well as strengthened collaboration between academic and support services, on student retention and throughput. However, it was observed that during student protests and during the closure of the university due to the national lockdown related to the Covid -19 pandemic which resulted in remote teaching and learning, students were unable to access and engage with student support services, at the time when they are most vulnerable and in need for such support services. It became imperative to **align the SWAT programme, including the initial SWAT assessment, to the remote teaching and the blended learning approach adopted by UKZN in March 2020.**

**PROCESSES/ METHODS:** The project team conducted a series of consultation meetings with the Student Support Services team, Information Computer System and Academic Computing teams to discuss the development of the proposed automated system, its functionalities including ability for students to complete the initial SWAT Assessment; identify and flagging students who are at risk through their responses to the Assessment; making appropriate referrals to the right services remotely for face-to face engagement with different practitioners for interventions; recording and monitoring engagement with the services and keeping a dashboard of all student engagement with Student Support Services. Compliance with the UKZN Learning Management System, while maintain the blended approach remained a critical component of the project. A private ICT

company, Govco was appointed by ICS to work with the Project Team in the actual development of the automated system to promote student engagement with Student Support Services for sustainable academic success. Govco used the following Development Life Cycle – (i) Analysis of our needs/ requirements and Design (ii) Development and integration to the UKZN ICS system (iii) **Testing and Bug Fixing** (iv) Deployment and Go Live and (v) Support and Maintenance.

A series of meeting were also held with the UKZN Management including the College Academic Affairs Board; College Management Committee and University Teaching and Learning Office for their support initially and to later to appraise them of the progress made we were making.

**Prior to Deployment and Going Live**, we conducted the Testing and Bug Fixing process by asking 6 participants to “test drive” the newly developed automated SWAT Assessment and the functionalities of the system. An email with the following link (similar to what will be used for students was sent to all 6 participants and were given instructions to complete and give feedback on a their experiences:

<http://ecmapps.ukzn.ac.za/Questionnaire/main.html?ID=5fd62acf-b387-4558-b260-2fdac2df3263>

Each participant completed own questionnaire and submitted to the Project Team for Content analysis.

#### **Preliminary findings:**

- (1) **Accessibility of the Link:** Link took a while to load – but was easy to access whether using laptop or smartphone – *“Yes, but takes quite a while to load before you can start the questionnaire”*. Another respondent said *“I tried completing the assessment the 1st time , took me 26 minutes to complete but it was stuck at “Submission” for 18 minutes so I refreshed and had to restart and submitted. Once again am waiting to submit the past 15 minutes”*. This could be a challenge for students who are always on the move and want to do things quickly.
- (2) **Ability to update personal information:** Most were unable to update personal information- e.g. add new cell phone number – *“Some areas were greyed out, but I was unable to edit and add my contact details.”*
3. **Ability to navigate between each of the SWAT domains:** Of the 8 domains, the two critical domains in terms of the student’s physical and mental health wellness were identified to have problems. *“I was able to easily navigate to each domain, but on*

Mental Health, a pop up appeared saying “submission failed”, when I was not even submitting anything”. Another response was: *“I was able to proceed to next domain easily, but on the health domain, the drop down menu was not available to select for the questions: How often do you consult your doctor? Have you been diagnosed with any of the following illnesses – but no illnesses popped up? This was a real Red Flag as it meant that the associated risks could not be identified as quick as we want.*

4. **Ability to save and be able to come back and complete the questionnaire:** *“It saves works well, I was able to go backwards/previous within the domain easily. I was able to go back to another domain and when I return to the “active” domain, it continues*
5. **General comments on usability:** *“Buttons are a little small (for someone who may not be computer literate, might find it difficult to manoeuvre the mouse accurately due to not having the muscle memory, you have to be on point to select the radio button)”*

The preliminary findings were shared with the ICS design team and the Govco consultant, who had to “go back to the drawing board” to “fix the bugs” before going live. Weekly meetings are currently held between the Project Team and the ICS team and the external consultants on the progress in fixing the “bugs” are at this phase.

### **Achievements and Challenges**

The primary objective “to develop an automated system to promote student engagement with Student Support Services in the CHS for sustainable academic success” is partly achieved. Adding the “test and fix the bugs” step before going live with students proved to be very used to the Project Team as we were able to identify and correct problems before going live. The KZN floods also caused delays in the development phase. This means that we may not be able to achieve the secondary objective *“to determine and describe how the blended, integrated **technology model** can promote students’ engagement with Student Support Services (SSS) for sustainable academic success and holistic student wellness during the first academic year”* on time for the end of the Tau Programme. However, the lessons learnt during the development phase will make-up for this.