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## **TAU INSTITUTIONAL REPORT**

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### PROJECT TITLE

### **IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING THROUGH STUDENT SUPPORT**

#### **ABSTRACT**

The project was focused on how to maximise student support to improve teaching and learning during these current times by understanding their challenges, cultural background, previous training and enable students not only to transit into higher education but complete their enrolled programs successfully. The biggest two challenges were identifying students at risk in the large classes and supporting under-equipped students emanating from the under-resourced high school training they mostly receive. Hence, the project becomes instrumental in ensuring that none of the students are left behind as it seeks to provide an opportunity for students to receive counselling, academic, technical and financial support as these aspects directly impact their academic performance immensely. Although the project was focused on the undergraduate students in the life sciences division as a pilot program, the presentations at departmental, school, faculty and senate levels with additional online roadshows saw this TAU initiative seconded by senate to be part of all institutional student support operations. This effectively ensured that the TAU project influences the planning, execution, reviews and improvement strategies of all student support programs in the university.

#### **BACKGROUND**

During face-to-face interactions, students easily receive support from various programs towards their teaching and learning. Such support includes counselling support wherein students are able to walk to the counselling center to receive assistance, the counselling center bringing services to various student forums so as to reach out to them, or staff members identifying students requiring help as they interact with students in various platforms. Technical services such as technology support are provided to students during physical interactions and students are able to visit technical support staff when experiencing technical problems with electronic devices while the computer facilities are always made available to students for use. The sports and recreational facilities are used by students for personal fitness or rejuvenation and professional training as well. The mentors are assigned to student groups wherein the smaller student groups receive support and more attention to mitigate on any challenges encountered. Supplemental instructional leaders and tutors are assigned to various modules to assist lecturers in providing academic support to specific modules. The Kindi forum, wherein, the senior mentors mentor the student mentors is active in providing support to the mentors that are mentoring the students. Student housing provides an environment that support learning, keeping student-to-student interactions to the maximum and removing students from some of the difficult pressures they experience in some home steads. All these student support services become minimal during remote learning due the nature of the instituted regulations. Ways to maximise student support in a hybrid environment are required.



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## **AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

To address these challenges the overall aim of the institutional events was to stimulate dialogue on how to maximize student support to improve teaching and learning during these current challenging times and beyond. The main target areas identified to provide support for students were:

1. Academic support (tutors to provide assistance with subject content)
2. Online Facilities support (ICT tutor to be onsite to assist with online challenges)
3. Counseling support (Counselling to provide psycho-social support)
4. Student Development Unit(mentors, SI leaders, and Kindis forum)
5. Staff Development (Center for academic excellence to provide support to staff whenever training is required in relation to maximizing student support)

After setting out the objectives a set of events were crafted to present the intentions of project at departmental level to talk about who TAU is and how the project was formulated. The different types of student support programs affected by the move from venue-based to remote teaching and learning environment were identified. After identifying the challenges faced by students as a result of these interrupted support services, several interventions were proposed, requiring collaboration with university stakeholders such as ICT, counselling center, center for academic excellence and student mentorship department. The project was presented at school level to make other departments aware of the intended purposes and this was later presented to Faculty and received tremendous support at each level. When the project was presented at the Senate level, the Deputy Vice Chancellor in Teaching and Learning immediately tasked that the project be escalated to provide interventions at university level and make the project aims to form part of the university-wide student support programs. The project received unwavering support from Senate and the Vice-Chancellor and Principal and all forms of support were given to the project so that the contributions learned at TAU can be infused in all student support services aimed at ensuring that no student is left behind as we settle into the hybrid learning environment. As a result, this TAU project has now formed part of various student support services, contributing immensely to the currently offered services and developing ways to acclimatise them to the new hybrid learning system. The project received a warm welcome and relentless invitations of participation from student support programs and centers and is now a long term project infused into the long-term goals of the university. Finding suitable ample time to attend to the challenges was not easy and adjusting to ways in which each committee operated and suggesting news ways was not a walk in the park but the outcomes were encouraging and welcomed. The project remains a standing items in various seatings and received overwhelming support.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To achieve the set objectives, a pilot study was structured. The pilot study was mainly focusing of students in Life Sciences and evaluating the types of support afforded to them during the academic period. To set the process underway the following were done:

1. Establish the types of students support required by a majority of students.
2. Improves means of identifying students at risk of dropping out of programs.
3. Seek means to maximise efficiency of the current student support programs.



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4. Host institutional events wherein student support in teaching and learning can be constantly discussed.

## **THE PROCESESS**

The first event was held at Department level in the form of a presentation to explain who TAU is and how the outcomes would benefit teaching and learning especially for students in our department. The main focus was on ensuring that the presentation generates debate and awareness around the areas of student support in relation to student performances and teaching and learning outcomes.

The outcomes of the presentation were packaged in the form of a video clip and powerpoint presentation that was shared in a broader school meeting involving various departments within the school of Molecular and Life Sciences. A representative member from each department was identified to ensure that these aspects are feature in their respective operations. It was then deemed fit to use the video clip as a means of a remote way to reach more staff and students to explain who TAU is and its expected outcomes in relations to teaching and learning. The presentation was also featured at Faculty and Senate meetings to the extent that the DVC in Teaching and Learning recommended that this initiative form part of various bodies with immediate effect. These bodies included student counselling center, risk management and center for academic excellence. As a result I was invited to be part of operational meetings in these department who provided a warm reception and their willingness to include these TAU initiatives in their current operations and welcome inputs. Although the initial plan of this TAU project was to pilot the project to only our school, senate identified this as a critical area that can provide alternative solutions to the current ongoing challenges experienced in student support across all faculties. As a result, the TAU project is now scaled up and implemented at university level to provide support to institutional structures that have direct impact on provision of student support.

## **PROJECT IMPACT**

After conducting the institutional events, several developments took place and some formal programs were amended to feature this TAU initiative. These key deliverable and outcomes associated with the institutional events included:

1. **Inclusion in annual curriculum review sessions:** Student support forms part of a critical review requirement during curriculum review sessions to listen to the voice of current and alumni students and highlight various forms of student supports required by students and produce a detailed documented account of challenges faced by students and solutions provided. Interestingly, during the curriculum review sessions, other TAU session topics such as social cohesion and language policies were given room for dialogue as they impact directly of teaching and learning dynamics.
2. **Featured item in Departmental, School, Faculty and Senate meetings:** TAU reports now form part of periodical reporting to provide accounts of the form of academic support afforded to students in relation to teaching and learning.
3. **TAU inputs now part of student counselling center operations:** As a result of senate debates, the request was extended to the student counselling center to include these TAU initiatives in their operations. In these subsequent meetings with the student counselling and support staff, various key strategic areas were identified that will benefit from this involvements. The TAU component is now a



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recognised feature in counselling and support to assist in maximizing ways and means to provide services to students.

4. **TAU inputs now invited to be part of center for academic excellence operations:** Senate approved the involvement of this TAU initiative in student risk assessments. This also resulted in the invitation to participate in the processes of not only how the student mentors are trained but also on how the kindis are trained. Kindis are the staff who are trained to train and support the mentors. Both the kindis and mentors ultimately provide solid academic supports to the students and have direct impact on teaching and learning and student performances.

Based on these experiences, the TAU events stimulated debates and generated the need for more feasible and operational model systems that can be developed, refined, adopted and approved for application across all faculties as standard practise to improve teaching and learning by maximising student support.

### **CHALLENGES**

Identifying students at risk was easier during venue-based interactions but became a challenge in a hybrid environment dominated by remote learning. Student performances and assessment outcomes were mainly used to identifying students at risk. Identification of emotionally and behaviourally struggling students with psycho-social challenges proved challenging to achieve in a largely remote-based system.

### **REFERENCES/READINGS**

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