

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Paving the Road to Success: Reflecting Critically on Year One of an Undergraduate Student Support Programme at a large South African university

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### Abstract

*Student success, faculty and university throughput, and the need for adequate and appropriate student support remain prevalent issues in the South African and global higher education sectors. Subsequently, the Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management at a large South African university applied for Teaching and Development Grant funding in order to address these areas of concern. The grant was awarded and initially intended to help students at risk by implementing appropriate interventions to prevent them from dropping out of university or being excluded. However, being labelled as “at risk” was not well received by students and so the grant holders designed a new programme, adopting a decidedly more holistic approach. As such, the Road to Success Programme was born. The first three months saw those involved conceptualise, plan, and develop strategies, material, and interventions that were implemented in January 2015. The vision was to scaffold and support first-year students, particularly those in danger of being academically excluded, through an integrated network of tutorials, workshops, online support, and a series of resources called Toolkits for Success, in an attempt to help students achieve their academic goals. Despite a number of challenges, ranging from funding shortfalls and food security to students’ emotional wellbeing and resilience, 2015 proved invaluable in terms of refining strategies, gaining insight, and programme growth. Preliminary data shows an increased pass rate for students who engaged with the RSP, with higher pass rates linked to greater RSP attendance. Consequently, this article serves as a critical reflection of the RSP at the end of its inaugural year and will share data, highlight lessons learned and challenges faced, and discuss how the programme has been taken to scale in 2016.*

### Keywords

*access with success, higher education, holistic support, pass rate, socio-economic challenges, South Africa, student success, student support, success programme, throughput*

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## *Introduction*

The need for additional, often co-curricular, student support at university, faculty,<sup>1</sup> school, department, and/or course level, is prevalent throughout the South African and global higher education sectors (Andrews & Osman, 2015; Moser, Berlie, Salinitri, McCuiston & Slaughter, 2015; Naude & Bezuidenhout, 2015; Tovar, 2015). Nevertheless, factors contributing to the initial design and implementation of student-support interventions may vary significantly. Correspondingly, South Africa's Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), Council on Higher Education (CHE), and the South African Institute for Distance Education (*Saide*) concern themselves with these matters by facilitating development grants (e.g. the DHET's Teaching Development Grant (TDG), soon to be the University Capacity Development Grant, which aims to establish at-risk support interventions (among other things) at South African tertiary institutions and engage in projects to address student support and success (e.g. *Saide*'s partnership with the Kresge Foundation's Siyaphumelela Programme, which focuses on data analytics as a means of improving student success and retention). These are but some of the initiatives in place to address the many and varied challenges faced by the country's post-secondary institutions.

## *Contextualisation*

### **Background**

Massification of the South African higher education sector (Hornsby & Osman, 2014; Lucket & Sutherland, 2000) mirrors global trends over the last two decades (Bai, 2006; Giannakis & Bullivant, 2016; Kivinen, Hedman & Kaipainen, 2007; Lee, 2016; Pretorius and Xue, 2003; Ru-Jer, 2012; Trow, 2000; Trow, 2006; Yeom, 2016). Add to this increased attrition rates locally and abroad (Andrews & Osman, 2015; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Hughes, 2013; Martínez, Borjas, Herrera & Valencia, 2015; Mestan, 2016), the access with success dichotomy (Ngo & Kwon, 2015; Prakhov, 2016), socio-economic challenges faced by students in South Africa and many other countries (Dockery, Seymour & Koshy, 2016), and a variety of mental health concerns prevalent on university campuses worldwide (Hugo, Boshoff, Traut, Zungu-Dirwayi & Stein, 2003; Lund, Kleintjes, Kakuma, Flisher & MHaPP Research Programme Consortium, 2010; Williams, Herman, Stein, Heeringa, Jackson, Moomal & Kessler, 2008), and the scene is set for poor pass rates and serious threats to student success.

### *The Access with Success Dichotomy*

The *National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa* (DoE, 2001) identifies as one of its key objectives the promotion of “equity of access and fair chances of success to all who are seeking to realise their potential through higher education, while eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination and advancing redress for past inequalities” (p. 6). The strategic

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1 In the South African context the word “faculty” does not refer to academic or lecturing members of staff, but a cluster or group of schools/units/departments concerned with a particular discipline or subject area.

objectives within this working paper remain clear: increase access to higher education for poor and disabled students in order to redress past inequalities and ensure that university staff and student profiles eventually reflect the demographics of South Africa. Yet fifteen years after its publication, inequities remain rife, with disparities in student participation and throughput rates evident across population groups (Higher Education South Africa (HESA), 2011). Moreover, admission to university is based on national exams that can discriminate against those who attended poorer and/or rural schools, thus favouring students from higher income groups or who may have attended better secondary schools, and elucidating why under-prepared students mostly come from under-resourced schools (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012). The demand for access to higher education also continues to increase at rates far greater than existing resources and infrastructure can accommodate (Shaik, Karodia, David & Soni, 2014) and many countries cannot provide access to all those who qualify for higher education (Gyimah-Brempong & Ondiege, 2011; Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2014). Additionally, there appears to be a direct correlation between access and funding, and between poverty and retention in African universities (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012). It is unlikely that simply focusing on access to higher education will address equity of opportunity; rather South African universities should be supportive environments where academics and students alike are willing to think innovatively. This can be achieved by adopting appropriately transformed learning and teaching strategies and techniques, ensuring staff and students have access to adequate induction programmes and holistic support, and through effective academic mentoring (Ratangee, 2006). Only by ensuring epistemological access to knowledge can knowledge be democratised, and in turn address disparities in throughput and graduation rates, as well as issues with the transformation of higher education institutions (Du Plooy & Zilindile, 2014; Ratangee, 2006). Yet this is not the only challenge faced by South Africa's tertiary sector.

### *Socio-economic Challenges in South Africa*

In 2015, the country experienced a tipping point when thousands of students across multiple campuses revolted against nationwide university fee increases. The #FeesMustFall campaign brought South African students' socio-economic plight to the public's attention, placing the spotlight on one of the major factors affecting access to and retention in tertiary education (Breier, 2010; Gyimah-Brempong & Ondiege, 2011). Research shows that a lack of information about the financial implications of tertiary education can cause students to avoid university, or it can allow them to enter without fully understanding the financial impact (Breier, 2010). South Africa has one of the highest levels of inequality in the world (Breier, 2010; Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2014), with most African families being particularly poor (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2014). One challenge is to provide resources to finance everyone who qualifies for admission to university. The principle of equity suggests that nobody should be denied an education on the basis of socio-economic status (Gyimah-Brempong & Ondiege, 2011), yet government funding is based on a shared-cost model, implying that the cost of education should be carried by both student and government (Gyimah-Brempong & Ondiege, 2011).

A large portion of students accessing higher education come from middle- or high-income groups, though the availability of grants, bursaries, scholarships, and student loans (e.g. the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), similar to the US Federal Pell Grant system) make it possible for poorer students to access tertiary education (Gyimah-Brempong & Ondiege, 2011; Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2014; Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012). Although NSFAS covers expenses other than tuition, it also tries to fund as many students as possible, which means students seldom obtain full funding. Subsequently, recipients are compelled to commute long distances, stay in accommodation not conducive to studying, and/or lack food and other necessities (Breier, 2010; Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012). Moreover, not all applicants receive NSFAS funding, while many prospective students remain unaware of alternative funding opportunities (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012). This lack of financial resources is one of the major challenges faced by students (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012) who often drop out because of financial obstacles. So, even after gaining access, a high number of poorer students will fail to complete their degrees (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012), while those who do stay are usually expected to support family members and as a result may go hungry or sleep in lecture theatres or libraries (Breier, 2010).

On a larger scale, government funding has not kept up with enrolment growth and subsidies have been consistently declining in recent years (Gyimah-Brempong & Ondiege, 2011), yet funding for higher education in South Africa remains lower than in countries at similar levels of development (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2014). To offset the declining subsidies most universities regularly increase tuition fees, which negatively impacts poorer students and exacerbates social and economic inequalities (Wangenge-Ouma, 2010). In South Africa, only about 31% of students contribute to the financing of tertiary education (Cloete, 2016), up from 24% in the last decade, while government subsidies have decreased from 49% to 40% in the same period (Cloete, 2016). Subsequently, the current approach to financing tertiary education in South Africa is insufficient and not sustainable (Gyimah-Brempong & Ondiege, 2011; Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2014), and intensifies other threats to student success.

### *Mental Health Concerns on South African Campuses*

A number of publications by international scholars focus on the plight of students on campuses, yet there seems to be a lack of published knowledge about mental health interventions and challenges at South African tertiary institutions. Moreover, the conceptual framework on which empirical data from South African university cases should be based lacks the requisite theoretical underpinnings (Petersen & Lund, 2011; *Colleges Struggling with Growing Demand for Mental Health Services*, n.d.). As such, the design of methodologies for South Africa will have to be based on and adapted from research conducted at international colleges and universities, with an emphasis on effective education, awareness, and interventions. Cluver and Orkin's (2009) research is central to assessing elements contributing to mental health disorders in young people at South African universities. Bullying at school, children being orphaned by AIDS, and poverty are some of

the prominent contributing factors (Cluver & Orkin, 2009) and it has been documented that “[m]ental disorders account for a large proportion of the disease burden in young people in all societies” (Patel, Flisher, Hetrick & McGorry, 2007, p. 1303). Additionally, the World Health Organization’s AIMS report (WHO, 2007) provides a broad yet integral insight into the mental health systems that exist in this country. Where Cluver and Orkin (2009) focuses on specific demographics, the WHO-AIMS report (2007) provides a more nuanced account of South Africa’s mental health challenges, taking into account factors like the financing of mental health services, legislation, and policy frameworks that have been put into place. Subsequently, when considering the challenges faced by higher education in South Africa, it is not surprising that stakeholders have developed programmes and support structures to address student success (Engelbrecht, Harding & Potgieter, 2014; Potgieter, Harding, Kritzinger, Somo & Engelbrecht, 2015; McGhie & du Preez, 2015), in line with international practice (Bensimon, 2007; Hatch, 2016; Perez & Ceja, 2010; Perna, Rowan-Kenyon, Thomas, Bell, Anderson & Li, 2008; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Stanton-Salazar, Vasquez & Mehan, 2000; Wathington, Pretlow & Barnett, 2016).

### *The Road to Success Programme*

#### **Background**

In 2014, TDG funding was either directly awarded for projects in the Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management (CLM) at the author’s university or as part of projects for the entire university. The Faculty received money for a total of four projects and whilst each project constitutes a separate entity, they have been combined into an overall programme with a common aim: to improve first-year throughput, enhance student success, and provide effective support for undergraduate students. Subsequently, At-Risk Coordinators were employed to coordinate programme efforts, identify students at risk, develop and implement interventions, and engage with students in one-on-one and/or group settings. These positions are academic in nature and although they involve little or no formal teaching, data analytics, the scholarship of teaching and learning, and student success form part of the duties.

In the latter part of 2014 an intervention workshop was conducted for students classified as At Risk. The workshop was poorly attended, with the two major reasons students provided for not attending being a lack of integration into the normal academic programme (the workshop was conducted during the September study break) and students’ perceived denial about the stigma associated with being classified as At Risk. As such, the name Road to Success Programme (RSP) arose from the need for a positive, success-orientated student support initiative that runs parallel to the academic curriculum and one that students would want to participate in. So, although poor student performance, particularly at first-year level, was the driving force behind this project, the RSP aims to provide co-curricular, non-academic interventions that run concurrently with the standard academic support provided by courses. At the beginning of 2015 it was rolled out to all

first-year students in addition to small cohorts of readmitted<sup>2</sup> and At-Risk students, in an attempt to help them achieve their academic goals.

### *Overall Target and Benefit*

The core objective of this programme is to improve the course pass rates of first-year students by 10% and to provide At-Risk students with the requisite mentor/tutor support. The anticipated outcome of RSP interventions is to improve students' preparedness for formative and summative assessments, which would ideally result in improved student performance and throughput. Moreover, the additional interventions for At-Risk students should enable them to progress, particularly in instances where support addresses non-academic factors. Consequently, the programme comprises an integrated network of group tutorials, one-on-one consultations, online support, and toolkits that serve to support CLM undergraduates in an attempt to help them achieve their short-, medium-, and long-term academic goals. Additionally, it focuses on assisting students from the Faculty's three undergraduate schools in dealing with emotional, psychological, and socio-economic challenges, to ultimately ensure they realise their potential, graduate with integrity, and take responsibility for their own success.

### *The First Year*

In the first quarter of 2015, thirty (30) Success Tutors (senior undergraduate students) were appointed, following a shortlisting and interview process. They were trained through CLM's Tutor Training Programme and the university's Counselling and Careers Development Unit, and would facilitate non-academic student support across the aforementioned RSP focus areas. With the success of the programme hinged on student buy-in, a marketing campaign was launched (involving the design of pamphlets, banners, shirts, social media sites, and posters) to inform undergraduates of the RSP's support and benefits. Additionally, an academic literacy programme was developed and implemented, while Toolkits for Success formed the foundation of all non-academic group tutorials, covering things like time management, study skills for university purposes, note taking, planning, reflective practice, and more. In quarter two the RSP started working on initiatives pertaining to clothing and food provisions for needy students, with a corporate partnership starting off what would become the RSP Food- and Clothing Banks.

The commencement of semester two saw the RSP conduct one-on-one interviews with all first-year students who had failed two or more examinations at mid-year, as well as the entire cohort of readmitted students (a condition of their readmission). These interviews allowed for greater insight into students' circumstances and requirements. Because of the programme's holistic nature, both cohorts were channelled into focus groups (with a

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2 At the authors' university there is a system that requires students to meet a particular set of minimum requirements at the end of an academic year to remain a registered student. Students who do not meet these requirements are excluded from the faculty in which they are studying. An appeal process could see a student readmitted the following year, providing they adhere to certain conditions of readmission.

maximum of 10 students per group), which met once a week, capitalised on the diversity of the students (they were from different degree programmes and years of study), and used reflective practice to scaffold students through semester two. Quarter four was characterised by sessions on study planning, examination preparation, and peer support as a means of making sure students were on track for the end-of-year examinations. End-of-year evaluations were administered and students were asked to evaluate the RSP and their focus groups, but it should be noted that the #FeesMustFall protests had a crippling effect on the evaluation process.

### *Challenges and Mitigation Strategies*

A plan to use the university's Learning Management System (LMS) to conduct forums was stymied by slow response times and server problems. Scheduling and venue booking for the more than 1,000 students who signed up for the RSP also proved challenging, as the RSP does not form part of the mainstream curriculum and is not accommodated on the academic timetable. This was resolved by using the LMS to allow students more flexibility in booking their sessions (a functionality not affected by the aforementioned server problems). At one point storage space for clothing and food became a problem, but this was overcome by acquiring additional office space. The RSP still finds that some students do not read their emails regularly, fail to carry out instructions, and often do not take the mandate of the programme seriously until it is too late. The biggest challenge faced in the final quarter of 2015 was the #FeesMustFall student protests, which saw the university close for nearly two weeks. Many RSP students had their study planning and momentum disrupted by the temporary suspension of the university academic programme, which in turn led to increased anxiety and stress. The RSP tried to manage these concerns as best they could.

### *Analysis*

#### **Descriptive statistics**

Approximately 1050 first-year and readmitted students were signed up for the RSP in January 2015, which marked the beginning of semester one and a new academic year. By the end of the semester 772 students had engaged (i.e. attended one or more interventions) with the programme, which constituted a 74% overall engagement. In semester two about 500 readmitted and At-Risk first-year students were signed up for the RSP, with 342 having engaged with the RSP by the end of the semester (i.e. 68%). Although this means fewer students engaged in semester two than in semester one, the team ascribes it to two factors: (1) fewer students were signed up in the second semester, and (2) the #FeesMustFall protests that occurred during the fourth quarter.

Table 1 below contrasts the overall faculty pass rate with the average pass rates of RSP students who engaged with a specific percentage of sessions (i.e. 70% to 79%, 80% to 89%, and 90% to 100%). Semester one (2015) results seem quite sporadic, which can be attributed to the fact that it was the programme's first semester, while semester two (2015) results start



alluding to a link between student engagement with the RSP and academic success. This provided the core team with evidence that RSP interventions appeared to be benefiting students and influenced the adjustments realised in semester one of the following year. The table shows a clear upward trend in the pass rates of students who engaged with the RSP in semester one of 2016 and reflects that greater RSP attendance is linked to average pass rates above the overall faculty average.

**Table 1: Engagement rate and student pass rates**

Semester and Year	RSP Engagement Level	Average RSP Student Pass Rate	Average Overall Faculty Pass Rate
Semester 1 (2015)	70% to 79%	100%	70%
	80% to 89%	56%	
	90% to 100%	66%	
Semester 2 (2015)	70% to 79%	82%	85%
	80% to 89%	66%	
	90% to 100%	100%	
Semester 1 (2016)	70% to 79%	62%	69%
	80% to 89%	70%	
	90% to 100%	77%	

***Recommendations and Lessons Learned***

In the authors’ experience, students (and staff) often harbour negative perceptions about support initiatives, so increased awareness of a programme, its benefits, and its successes must be emphasised. Students suggest these programmes require additional work and commitment, so mechanisms to include support activities within their existing timetables are vital; our toolkit on time management has been crucial in this endeavour. The statistics show that student buy-in and attendance serve as both input and output to the success of these programmes, so a strategy for marketing the benefits and highlighting the successes is required to encourage engagement. Academics are often the first to identify non-academic issues with students, so their awareness, support, and recommendation of these programmes are vital. Moreover, grant-funded programmes usually receive financial support for a fixed period of time. As a result, it is necessary to seek and request funding to sustain such programmes. Approaching businesses, investigating alternative revenue streams from within the university, running additional paid-for courses, and answering proposals where funding is offered, are a few of the possibilities.

While many will argue that it is not the role of academics (or indeed a university) to provide food, accommodation, books and/or clothing to students who are not paying for them, in an environment where students are severely impacted by socio-economic factors, it is important to assist where possible. This may include involving external entities looking for pro-bono engagements, or simply asking the university community for donations.



In most universities there will also be specific departments that deal with some of these matters, so it is necessary to make students (and staff) aware of all available help. It should be noted that the operational activities of these programmes require a substantial time commitment from those involved. As such, it is important to focus on collecting data on these initiatives and conducting studies to determine which interventions are useful and/or successful, provide evidence to stakeholders, and publish research in the area of student support.

### *Towards the Future*

The Road to Success Programme has made some salient strides in its year of inception (2015). This progress, coupled with increased student engagement, allows the team to infer that the future will be more effective in terms of student involvement. The year 2016 has seen the emphasis shift from a first-year student focus, to rolling the programme out to all CLM undergraduates. From a supplementary-support perspective, the RSP's corporate partnerships have helped create male and female clothing banks and donated food to the RSP foodbank. An intensive awareness drive was launched to reach out to students, while a sponsored weekly hot-beverage station aimed to encourage students to pay-it-forward by donating food and toiletries to help fellow students in need. Other future initiatives include: a faculty-specific Academic Literacy Programme (ALP); formalising the RSP as a compulsory, co-curricular initiative for all incoming first-year students; an annual CLM pre-university school prior to the commencement of the new academic year, offered to all new first years; work-readiness initiatives through partnerships with internal and external stakeholders; Success Tutor training and development initiatives; and an interdisciplinary Enquiry-Based Learning course for all CLM undergraduates. The RSP continues to evolve through the scholarship of student support and success, data analytics, and student engagement, alluding to a promising future.

### *Conclusion*

With the massification of the tertiary sector, concerning success rates, and socio-economic challenges unlikely to dissipate anytime soon, the need for proactive and pre-emptive solutions to address these issues become imperative. In this paper the authors outlined their holistic student support and success initiative in the form of the Road to Success Programme. The aim was to allow others insight into their unique approach to enhancing student success, which serves to supplement and complement the academic programme. The authors hope the lessons they have learned and subsequently shared in this article will provide others working in the space with practical advice to help conceptualise, develop, implement, and enhance their own initiatives. The RSP remains dedicated to evolving and refining their student success and support programme, and in the long run address (at least some of) the challenges faced by higher education both locally and globally.

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