Open access, retention and throughput at the Central University of Technology

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Abstract

The most debatable question in higher education today is: Why first ‘open access’ to promote massification and now ‘capping’ to restrict learner intake? (cf. SA Media Information 2004). Concerning the managing of this difficult and extremely sensitive issue, the Central University of Technology, Free State (CUT) has come a long way. Its position paper for learner throughput and retention (2003-2006) is testimony to this problem. However, the aim of this article is not to give a summary of the position paper, but rather to delve into contemporary literature and academic development support research outcomes for possible enlightenment. This is possible in the sense that there are no clear cut answers to be found either in the literature or in the CUT’s own documentation as yet. Senate resolutions in this regard are still in the process of being implemented.

It was therefore considered to be a wise approach to rather differentiate between open access, retention and throughput. All three concepts are so highly integrated that it is not very clear where the one begins and the other ends. A simple example to motivate this statement is that politicians of the day determine state subsidies for enrolments and outputs. Higher education institutions are proverbially regulated like the water flow from a tap when it comes to government funding, making it very difficult for such institutions to construct their three year rolling plans according to learner intake, and to balance this with financial planning.

Therefore, at this stage, learner support and academic development planning at the CUT is focused on the real academic concerns. Currently, learner service and academic development at the CUT stand within the context of value adding with regard to learners, lecturers, and the process of education. In order to enable members of the academic staff to continue providing quality education, it is important to emphasise personal development that meets the demands of the changing higher education landscape.

Learnership programmes based on self development, together with an adjustment in modes of teaching, are prerequisites for success. In order to complete the quality circle, members of staff should be motivated to compile their own teaching portfolios, where existing and new skills are noted. Such a teaching portfolio can also be used for the evaluation of teaching staff.

Another learner support strategy is to allow access for learners who do not meet the minimum requirements for entry into a specific programme, and to have a quality assured, recognisable foundation certificate with full articulation between and
within institutions. The actual structure of the course should be generic regardless of
discipline or faculty of study, although the learner’s chosen field of study will
determine the choice of core and elective offering. The foundation certificate will
comprise 120 credits at NQF level 5. As part of learner support and development,
learners and staff will also embrace the principles of diversity. Lecturing and
supporting staff must assist in this by setting the example in interpersonal relations,
especially to enhance learner satisfaction.

1 ORIENTATION

It is acknowledged that the improvement of learner retention and throughput rates,
thus ensuring equity in learner outcomes, will be one of the key drivers at the
Central University of Technology (CUT) for the next few years. How faculties and
academic support services at the CUT will deal with this requires innovative ways
of thinking and strategies. A number of strategies (e.g. supplemental instruction,
tutorials, foundation programmes, academic advising and learner counselling) are
already in place. Their effectiveness and impact will soon have to be assessed in a
vigorous way.

One should not forget that a substantial number of learners leave for reasons
beyond institutional control, such as lack of finances, poor learner-institution fit,
changing academic or career goals, or unrelated personal circumstances. Yet, there
exist a number of institutional factors contributing towards dropout and failure –
such as failing to create an environment in or outside the classroom that is
conducive for learners’ learning and educational needs. Some learners will not
return to the CUT because they are unhappy with the education that they are
receiving. Learners who lack the basic and fundamental skills, especially in
mathematics and writing, are finding it difficult to cope with the normal course
workload. Therefore, it is extremely important for the CUT to ensure that students
fulfil the prerequisite requirements before they are admitted. It may also be that
learners lack the motivation to achieve because they do not understand the
importance of education and/or do not know how to apply themselves. The lack of
appropriate role models or mentors in the academic environment should also not be
negated, particularly in the South African context. Finally, some learners are
overwhelmed with the transition from high school to university, and become
overly stressed by the dramatic changes (Van Rensburg 2004).

Referring to the title of this article, the subject matter differentiates into three
predominant pillars, namely open access, retention and throughput, which forms
the common framework in the global and national higher education market. (cf.
Naidoo and Sing 2005). Hypothetically, however, empirical evidence to help one
to think through this framework is not easy to find at this early stage at South
African higher education institutions. For example, the whole debate of ‘open
access’ for massification in the aftermath of political liberalisation in South Africa,
from 1994 to 1999, in the name of human rights versus the ‘capping’ to restrict learner intake since 2005. Now the logical question is: What happened to human rights to study at higher education institutions?

‘Open Access in political literacy terms’ all of a sudden has not the similar meaning in higher educational terms. Yet, universities are accountable to accept all applicants and select, advice, place or refer them according to individual need. In this sense, universities become clearing houses within higher education institutions-consortiums to retain all learners as far as possible. Subsequently, there is no conflict of justice because retention forms part of a range of possibilities for learners to finish their academic careers. These possibilities include mobility, horizontal and vertical articulation, recognition of prior learning bridging courses and foundation programmes. Also, as far as space is concerned, e-learning (Web CT), generations of distance education and various forms of part-time or evening classes actually widen ‘open access’ and ‘retention’ within the vision of the Higher Education Act (Act 101 of 1997) to enhance a single higher education dispensation. If higher education institutions comply with the Act, it is a human right of all citizens to study at a university. Also, in financial terms, access to bursary and loan schemes construct the rest of the framework.

Throughput statistics, however, reflect a negative trend when comparing intake to output. Higher education institutions have also to focus more on academic development of learners through student counselling, supplemental instruction, tutorials and, of course, more financial support possibilities.

Academic research development in South Africa reflects multiple examples of academic models to construct new methodologies that can be compared to international scientific experiences. Still, there is much to be done in South Africa. Especially with the rapid development of educational technology, transnational permutation within southern Africa, the Commonwealth of Learning, United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the African Virtual University which is financially supported by the World Bank. (cf. Naidoo and Singh 2005).

As a result, contemporary statistics, up to date information, etcetera, are not yet readily processed due to the fact that the ‘capping’ policies were only introduced in 2005, while the full impact will only be known in 2007 when the system nears completion.

2 ACCESS

Current situations at South African higher education institutions are still in flux due to the implementation of the ‘capping’ policy. Thus, when analysing access at the CUT for example, the following dynamics determine the main perceptions for research:
2.1 Poverty problems

Without putting the cart in front of the horse, the financial factor is the most articulated aspect in post-apartheid South Africa, which makes it impossible for the majority of dropout learners to complete their studies, whether because of current financial problems or the legacy of their past financial scenarios.

Subsequently, financial aid has become a critical aspect at the CUT. One must not only manage the funds responsibly and direct them most expeditiously, but one must address the challenge of financial aid data and information most aggressively while examining financial aid policy, its administration and the disbursement of funds – to whom and how, follow-up, profiles of needy learners, and loans versus. bursaries. Furthermore, one is sometimes constrained by national policy, as well as the need to balance aid among the needy and academically meritorious learners, to provide access yet ensure equity and quality and, very importantly, to ensure that financial aid does not just draw the learner into the institution, but sustains him or her through his or her studies.

The CUT has a very comprehensive financial aid programme. In the budget planning, the already ample provision made for financial support to learners has been extended annually for the past few years and most of the money is provided by the CUT itself. Money is made available for both study and accommodation purposes, and is allocated on the basis of merit as well as financial need, in the form of bursaries or loans.

The bursary and loan system is administered by the financial aid office, working in conjunction with the academic sector, as well as learner services. Improvements in efficiency of delivery and optimal rates are continually being explored and implemented, and efforts are made to make learners aware of the financial aid they can obtain, provided they invest their efforts in their studies.

2.2 The open access problem

Democratic and human rights are at stake when a citizen of a country is denied any form of true academic education. It is one’s birthright to claim one’s free access to schools, vocational colleges, further training institutions and universities. On the other side of the coin, it is also the obligation of civilised democratic governments to provide sound and thorough education infrastructures for their citizens.

The Higher Education Act (Act 101 of 1997) proposes ‘inter alia’ 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’. Redress and equity, in turn, require systems that guarantee ‘... fair opportunities both to enter higher education programmes and to succeed in them’. This means that higher education institutions need to examine their entrance procedures, as in many instances existing criteria are contradicting the policy goals, (Fourie 2005).
Since the historical enlightenment of the university phenomenon from the dark ages when it was only accessible for certain religions cults, sects and churches, access to knowledge has grown into a hunger and thirst that will never be quenched or satisfied. Without labouring the current political debate of higher education institutions in South Africa, the focus will now be on international experiences and scientific views on the topic – especially in respect of the African-American learner situation in the United States (US).

From the outset, ‘open access’ begins with the educational history of the potential individual applicant to an institution of higher education Predictors of success, as well as similarities and differences among learners across the racial spectrum, emerged for nearly all predictor and outcome measures to establish whether open access was the only factor with a detrimental effect on retention and throughput. Many examples in the literature can be compared to the South African situation, especially with regard to white and non-white applicants (cf. Strage 2000) (cf. also Student Development Update 2001).

Race, however, remains an important policy issue in the open access debate. The understanding of racial issues, for example in the US, is to be viewed in historical context of African-Americans who arrived with a social status of slaves. Subsequently, open access could be evaluated as a form of ‘affirmative action’ to enhance university admission policies. To suspend open access now, is to say that segregation has ended and that redress in higher education is complete. However, this is very far from the reality in the US, as well as in many other countries (cf. News Batch 2003).

Affirmative action or open admissions – what is the way forward? asks the International Workers’ Bulletin (1997). Unfortunately it will force the marginalised people back to the struggle, because they see it not as a lack of resources, but evidence of the fact that the wealth of the capitalist countries is still monopolised by an elite that rules in their own selfish interests (International Workers’ Bulletin 1997).

Meanwhile, since open access has been granted in South Africa and at many institutions abroad, academic developers have really done their utmost to make a scientific contribution by counteracting the legacies of the past.

Diversity on campus, admission decisions, academic and scholastic apprehension tests, as well as language policies were researched in all earnestness. Campuses became culturally sensitive (cf. Student Development Update 2001), yet this does not mean that the process is complete. The mother-tongue issue still remains one of the most sensitive challenges for immediate academic development support and research staff, especially in South Africa (cf. Evans 2001).

Subsequently, there is a critical shortage of bilingual (or multilingual) academe. Much is still to be done by higher education institutions via community involvement to overcome this problem (cf. Bernal and Aragon 2004). Owing to dynamic migrant community movements and changes, unique approaches are
demanded in an attempt to understand the migrant community and the curricular, instructional and support system needs of migrancy (Branz-Spall and Wright 2001).

In other words, higher education institutions are exactly developing communities and preparing them for open access. Denying these people access to higher education institutions is a contradiction in terms. It also means that higher education institutions are wasting their resources preparing and recruiting such new learner clientele with recognition of prior learning.

Community involvement is one of the mission statements of any higher education institution. Counsellors are directly involved in advising potential learners, who are still in school, about which career paths they should follow (Townsend 2004). Multiple sources are also related to the development of children’s racial-ethnic attitudes and their academic achievement (University Park 2004).

Open access should, thus, be regarded as part of the academic success story and not as a narrow-minded issue for political ends.

Neither should it only be evaluated in financial terms. It is a matter of finance and academics that should benefit all learners – particularly non-traditional learners with complex life circumstances in developing countries such as South Africa (cf. Hart 2003). Capping learner intake must be planned in conjunction with the academe.

The CUT interprets capping as the measurements of the Department of Education to regulate the new learner intake at this institution. The CUT decides how to allocate learners to programmes to balance the economy scales.

Senior learners who do not perform academically, and who are blocking the throughput rate are excluded according to the CUT policy. Yet, these students are advised to improve their academic skills at a Further Education and Training institution or college and are allowed to enrol at the CUT to finish their academic careers.

State subsidies for distance learners up to 250 per regional learning centre of the CUT will not influence new intakes at its main campus.

3 RETENTION

Losing a learner is not losing state subsidy and tuition fees or statistic-at-a-glance, but rather the career path of a human being – not a nobody in the system, but a male or female learner irrespective of race, creed, mother tongue or age, with a specific career path, hopes, dreams and ambitions. A living soul – not just a learner number. Retention is, therefore, regarded as synonymous with academic development at the CUT.

When retention is considered in this way, the picture is highlighted with the following human factors:

- Adjustment problems;
• The failure syndrome;
• Learning disabilities;
• Unsatisfied expectations;
• Need for academic support; and the
• Need for sustainable financial support.

It is also not a matter of intelligence or of the haves and the have-nots. Adjustment problems affect even the most gifted. For example, research done by Chan (2003) at Chinese schools regarding adjustment problems and multiple intelligences among gifted learners in Hong Kong showed that they are as vulnerable as their non-gifted peers to social and emotional problems in their childhood and adolescence. Subsequently, counsellors at higher education institutions play a pivotal role in assisting gifted learners not to drop out. This fact counteracts the focus of marketing and recruitment staff of higher education institutions, which is to reap only the cream of the crop. Problems of retention remain the same. Most higher education institutions also depend on bridging and foundation programmes, as well as supplemental instruction methodologies to recruit or to retain learners. Open foundation courses such as those in the Faculty of Education at the University of Newcastle, in Australia, provide pathways to degree level with mixed part-time study (Chantwell and Grayson 2002). Enabling programmes, thus include distance or part-time andragogical methods for adult learners to improve their academic capabilities. The CUT’s managers and deans of faculties visited various Australian higher education institutions and merged similar methods with that of the local University of Free State.

In turn Brophy (1998), who conducts research into teaching problem learners in the US Department of Education, highlights failure syndrome learners – those learners who are commonly described as persons with a low self-concept, or who feel defeated or frustrated. Cognitive retraining strategies like efficacy, strategy and attribution training are modelled in special techniques for resisting the failure syndrome.

Counsellors, of course, regularly have to check learner programme records and computerise formative and summative evaluations. In this way, counsellors form a safety net for failing learners at the CUT (cf. Wilson 2003).

It is also a fallacy that serious learners do not seek help for their learning disabilities. However, it is the sensitive and caring lecturer who is responsible, in the first instance, for generating positive reactions in order to boost self-perception and self-esteem and to enable them to report learning disabilities (cf. Hartman-Hall and Haaga 2002).

Learner satisfaction forms the crux of that towards which academic departments should strive. The academic environment should always be realistic, investigative, social, enterprising and artistic, while simultaneously displaying a sense of conventional orderliness (Umbach and Porter 2002).
Quality of teaching adds value to course material. Once all has been said and done to create the perfect environment, lecturers should never underestimate their learners, especially their prior learning skills, since this could also frustrate rather than enhance learner satisfaction (Wiers-Jenssen, Stensaker and Grogaard 2002).

Alternative approaches to assessing the very important concept of learner satisfaction imply that universities should reengineer their academic and administrative support systems to adapt to learner needs and continuously adjust alternative approaches. Learners are customers, and client satisfaction must be part and parcel of strategic objectives – just as in the business world. Several aspects – from confusing registration processes to slack efforts when it comes to retaining the loyalty of the alumni – are all in all detrimental to any higher education institution. Overall learner satisfaction is the key concept (Elliot and Shin 2002).

However, the core business is practical academic lecturing to retain learners at the CUT. Recognition of learner commitment and a sense of belonging in the lecture hall, library or laboratory lay the cornerstone of learner retention. The sentiments ‘It is mine’; ‘I belong here’; ‘I am happy’; ‘I do not want to quit’ build moments of fun and excitement (cf. Quay and Quaghia 2004).

Professional types of indicators to evaluate academic achievement also form part of institutional research and self-evaluation. The Myers-Briggs type of indicator, for instance, investigates patterns of psychological types among engineering learners. Cognitive, affective and physiological traits are relatively constant indicators of how learners perceive, interact with or respond to the academic environment (O’Brien, Bernold and Akroyd 1998).

Demographic information is also very important for conducting the Myers-Briggs type indicator, thus ruling out sensitive racial and gender issues and focusing only on the inner self of the individual learner. This analysis could help higher education institutions to adapt or adjust. Little research in this important field has been done at the CUT at this stage owing to the incorporation of the former Vista University as a satellite campus, as well as transnational agreements with South African Development Community countries, Chinese and Belgium universities.

Academic development units in the US used to wait for the academic faculties and programme heads to come to them for guidance; however, this scenario has since changed to also reach out to the academe. As a result, academic development units have stimulated integrated and interactive processes, which means that faculty developers should also play a more active role in institutional transformation (Fletcher and Patrick 1994).

Academic developers became change agents that take the lead in:

- Learning assistance models;
- Supplemental instruction;
- Adjunct course offerings;
- Expanding academic support;
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- Staff adjunct courses;
- Marketing programmes; and
- Comprehensive learning programmes (Commander and Stratton 1996).

The above-mentioned points are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to retaining learners at the CUT. Notwithstanding all the professional efforts to retain learners, the proof of the pudding is still in getting them to the finish line.

4 THROUGHPUT

A typical example how quasi-academics and politicians prefer to refer to higher education institution success rates is the term ‘throughput’. This is similar to the conveyor belt syndrome of a factory: Input and output production terminology that often creates the ‘revolving door’ for learners to move through as fast as they can. This often contributes to the unnecessary failure rate for learners still in the articulation phase. Whether it is vertical or horizontal articulation or mobility from one institution to another, it still clashes with the term ‘throughput’. It just becomes another direction for the ‘revolving door’ phenomenon. As such, it does not lie easy on the tongue at the CUT.

Academic pass rates, achievement and lifelong learning at the CUT are rather more appropriate to investigate in order to establish the real causes of failure and the factors that affect learner success. In other words it would also show how to enhance learner success by redesigning institutional management styles. Again, the CUT learners are not regarded as products but as human beings. In this respect, it is a first priority to investigate how learners cope with academic failure – especially previously disadvantaged learners in developing countries. Finally, it is not fair to discriminate against learners at risk, and they should instead be referred for counselling in risk courses such as mathematics, science and technology. Counselling should either be made available. Either at the CUT or at the Recognition for Prior Learning Centre managed jointly with the University of Free State, through the use of bridging or foundation programmes.

In conferences all over the world, it is often debated that higher education institutions cannot willy-nilly adapt industrial approaches to monitor course delivery in their quality assurance evaluations. In short, universities are not factories. A good example in support of this is staff-learner ratios. How does one analyse the so-called throughput of a science lecturer as opposed to that of a ceramic arts teacher, for example, at the CUT? (cf. Chadwick 2002).

The philosophical debate around the world to extend the theory and practice of academic development has proved that it is far too complex only to compare numerical output and statistical figures (cf. Baume 2003).

Causes of failure at higher education institutions also differ from institution to institution. To a great extent the following are more or less universal problems – also at the CUT (Causes of Failure in College 2004):
Lack of ability and poor school preparation;
Selection of the wrong higher education institution;
Failure to assume responsibility;
Interference from psychological problems;
Lack of personal standards of quality;
Poor language skills;
Inappropriate choice of a major;
Vagueness surrounding long-range goals;
Misunderstanding of the amount of work required;
Other social activities; and
Poor distance education delivery.

A variety of academic developers have created models for predicting learner completion. One of the best known models is there Billing’s model, which classifies four categories of variables:

- Background;
- Organisation;
- Attitude; and
- Environment.

Although these variables are highly integrated with one another, specific variables can be accentuated according to individual case studies (Chen 1998).

The CUT’s psychometrists offer professional assistance to those learners at risk, however, in many instances such learners do not report their academic or personal problems to the respective student support services.

Also, the CUT continuously revise its policy, process and planning in order to redefine quality to enhance learner success. Linking open access with academic achievement requires a delicately articulated grid of academic and support research to be put into practice, and which can pinpoint learner needs and identify appropriate resources to achieve desired pass rates, learner retention and academic success for graduation (Passaro, Lapovsky, Feroe and Metzger 2003).

The most important factor for learner satisfaction, as previously discussed, is course or programme structure. Under this section of ‘throughput’, a critical issue at the CUT that still remains is whether an individual learner understands his or her course. In the final analysis the onus is still on the learner to know what he or she is supposed to do in order to succeed at the institution of higher education (Distance Education Report 2004).

Coping with academic failure in a competitive world is virtually inevitable Grewal and Lafreniere (2003). This also affects the academically unsuccessful learners at the CUT.

The manner in which learners deal with failure differs. Some learners have, since their first school year, been constantly exposed to fear of failure. When
experiencing failure, some learners become discouraged and depressed and decide to suspend their academic studies. Other learners may view failure as a challenge to try again, and use it as a motivation to complete their studies. In such a case it would be unfair to expect them to speed up their throughput tracking record. In short, coping styles also differ (Grewal and Lafreniere 2003).

In one particular case study, African-American learners who had previously developed negative attitudes toward their schooling were guided to offer their own methods on how to become positive about their studies through self-motivation and self-talk, that is, by telling themselves ‘I think I can, I know I can’ (Tucker, Herman, Pederson, Vogel and Reinke 2000).

Again it is a matter of self-motivation, but certainly with much sincere encouragement from the lecturer and the counsellor. Pursuing a higher education qualification becomes an academic journey for all parties concerned. Parental support and motivation are also important for earning an academic degree, certificate or diploma (Martinez 2003) – not only for the sake of success rate statistics, but also for personal human development. After all, education and skills training are not some things that can be taken away by educational policies that are forever in a state of transition and transformation to keep abreast with global political development.

5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Academic development, support and research provide most of the solutions to constant transformation and improvement (cf. Greater Expectations 2003). Combining open access with retention and academic success rates demands constant academic and support strategies and practices that pinpoint learner needs and integrate resources effectively (Passaro, Lapovsky, Feroe and Metzger 2003). These ideals are also pursued by academic planners and developers at the CUT.

Access to education from Grade 1 to postgraduate studies is, and still remains, a democratic right. Rapid technological development forces people to be continuously educated in a lifelong learning process, whether through full-time, part-time, distance or any other form of service learning offered – for example, at the CUT.

Dealing with retention and throughput, therefore, remains an institutional matter for the CUT and requires institutional commitment and effort. The principles for institutional action directed at minimising failure are aimed at, among other things, ensuring the following:

- An institution-wide policy commitment to learner development;
- Structures and processes that are consistent with institutional policy;
- Ensuring that new learners enter with, or have the opportunity to acquire, the skills needed for academic success;
- Programmes in which the emphasis is on maximising learner development;
- Programmes for academic staff that ensure effective learning;
• Acknowledgement through practice that support for learners’ academic development needs to be augmented by support for their personal development; and

• That retention is an integral part of educational policy and practice, and not a free-standing issue.

Of particular relevance here is the contribution of the Unit for Academic Development (UAD) at the CUT. Obviously learner support services also have a major task to fulfil in this regard, while the institution should ensure that sufficient funding is available for students to keep them in the system. Funding will increasingly become difficult as tuition fees are escalating, while government’s subsidy is diminishing.

The UAD of the CUT, among others, strives to provide the following:

• A professional development programme that will equip lecturers with the necessary skills and knowledge pertaining to proper curriculum design, writing of learning outcomes, facilitation (teaching) skills and assessment, and so forth. The ‘Grow our own timber’ project for new and junior academic staff members is part of the professional development programme. A concern, however, is the lack of a leverage to ensure that ‘older’ permanent academic staff members, who are not familiar with the latest trends in teaching and learning, become involved.

• Informal training of staff by means of a variety of strategic topics such as collaborative and co-operative learning strategies, learner centredness, peer tutoring, the scholarship of teaching and learning, and problem-based learning.

• Assistance for academics with the integration of WebCT/e-learning into modules with the aim to enrich and complement classroom teaching and learning.

• Introduction of multimedia tools that can convey course materials to learners in a visual and graphic form, which could help to clarify abstract concepts.

• Development and maintenance of a website for the UAD with the most relevant and practical information on teaching and learning issues for academic staff.

• Feedback to deans, directors of schools and programme heads based on the learner evaluation of academics, with subsequent feedback into the system.

• Initiation and conducting of in-depth research on dropout and retention in faculties (Van Rensburg 2004).

Responding to the above framework for ‘open access’, ‘retention’ and ‘throughput’, the Senate of the CUT has already approved the following action steps:

• The investigation by the Dean: Academic Development of the effectiveness of current learner support programmes/initiatives, including the learner – academic orientation programme;
• the integration/formalisation of key academic skills into all first-year programmes and inclusion thereof in the Corporate Academic Plan 2005-2020 (limited credits to be available in each qualification for this purpose); and
• making the following two modules compulsory for all the new academic staff to complete within the first two years of employment, and within four years for other academic staff members: First, Learning facilitation and second, The assessment of learners in higher education.

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