RE-CONCEPTUALIZING STUDENT SUPPORT IN RAPIDLY CHANGING TIMES

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ABSTRACT

It has been noted that without learning, there can be no success. Furthermore, at the most basic level, essential success implies successful learning in the classroom. This was the sentiment of Tinto and Pusser (2006, 8) two decades ago when the global turn to Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning was inconceivable. However, the Novel Coronavirus appeared in Wuhan, China at the end of 2019, and in 2020 the World Health Organisation announced COVID-19 as a global pandemic (Discovery 2020; WHO 2020) that caused major disruptions in all sectors of society and led to the unprecedented transition from the face-to-face mode of teaching and learning to online platforms in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) worldwide (Turnbull, Chugh, and Luck 2021). It soon became clear to researchers that the support offered to students to assist them in attaining academic success had proven inadequate (Al-Maskari, Al-Riyami, and Kunjumuhammed 2022) and that the support systems used by HEIs needed to be revisited. This article examines student best practices during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond to ensure that students enjoy optimal benefits as they strive for academic success. The article further suggests a student support theory that can be employed by HEIs to better assist students in the quest for attaining a postgraduate qualification.

Keywords: student assistance programs, student support, COVID-19 pandemic, education, postgraduate teaching and learning.

BACKGROUND

Whereas the rising number of online students has received much attention in the last few decades, authors have ostensibly devoted little attention to how students in fully online programmes may be optimally supported to ensure learning success and a subsequent increase in throughput rate (Manca and Meluzzi 2020). That was the case until the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, which spotlighted online students and their institutions. This included their

experiences, challenges, and agility to adapt to the rapidly changing field of teaching and learning (Motala and Menon 2020). Despite this, student success remains an essential component of higher education, and it can be used as a measure of quality within institutions (Alyahyan and Düştegör 2020).

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are under increasing pressure to produce more PhD graduates, and academic success is used more often to indicate the institution's academic performance (Alyahyan and Düştegör 2020). According to Kuh et al. (2006, 13), "Government and philanthropic organizations exhort the enterprise to confer more degrees to ensure a vibrant democracy, keep the country's economy competitive, and prepare the current and next generation of [university] students for an ever-expanding global workplace". On the other hand, students see a university degree as a powerful tool that can alter their economic prospects and benefit not only themselves but also their families and communities (Tiroyabone and Strydom 2021).

South African HEIs also bear severe pressure to improve academic success. Despite significant government funding incentives and many policy initiatives in institutions focused on student success, the success rate remains low, while the attrition rate is notoriously high (Subotzky and Prinsloo 2011, 177). Reconceptualizing student support remains a priority, but this was pointed out over a decade ago (Jacklin and Le Riche 2009). Addressing this phenomenon has become a national and institutional priority at all South African HEIs. It remains a crucial focus of the government's outcomes-based funding and enrolment planning framework (Department of Higher Education and Training 2004). As a further effort to remedy this situation, the National Planning Commission (National Planning Commission 2013) proposed the following to universities based on their vision for 2030:

- To increase the number of postgraduate students, among other things, via supporting international exchange partnerships for research (Motshoane 2022). It is proposed that by 2030, more than 25 per cent of university enrolments should be at the postgraduate level.
- To graduate more than 100 doctoral students per million annually by 2030. South Africa currently produces 28 doctoral graduates per million citizens per year, which is very low – by international standards. To achieve the 100 per million per year, South Africa needs more than 5 000 doctoral graduates per year, compared to 1 420 in 2010. If South Africa is to be a leading innovator, most of these doctorate degrees should be awarded in science, engineering, technology, and mathematics.

- To double the number of graduate and postgraduate scientists (while increasing the number of African and female postgraduates, especially PhDs, to improve research and innovation capacity and equity.

PROBLEMATISATION

Higher Education Institutions' online learning offerings have grown exponentially in the last two decades. This growth was accelerated when the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 an international pandemic (WHO 2020), leading to social distancing and limited physical interaction. Universities had to migrate rapidly from traditional teaching and learning to online offerings. According to Dhawan (2020, 7), online teaching and learning have become the "panacea for the crisis". Peters et al. (2020, 37) concur that "online distance education solutions became the Band-Aid Solutions and then the mainstay for conducting university business and course delivery". Remote student support became essential (Bouchey, Gratz, and Kurland 2021). This had a definite impact on students and the way they perceived student support.

Students exposed to wholesale changes in their learning ecosystems, such as the move to emergency remote teaching and learning, soon developed feelings of frustration, disorientation, and a lack of academic identity. Non-academic support also emerged as an essential factor. A general fear of failure was also evident (Cox 2009). These issues could delay or even cancel their studies (Sverdlik et al. 2018; Czerniewicz et al. 2020). Postgraduate students also experienced a lack of motivation. They reduced self-efficacy and self-worth during their studies, and the literature shows that such experiences are even more prevalent among online students (Sverdlik et al. 2018; Aguilera-Hermida 2020). To this end, this article focuses on best practices in student support and the need to revisit the type of support given to students post-COVID-19.

COVID-19: A DISRUPTION IN STUDENT SUPPORT

The COVID-19 pandemic can be described as a respiratory illness caused by a coronavirus of the genus Betacoronavirus. This virus was spread mainly by contact with infectious respiratory droplets and is characterized mainly by high temperatures and respiratory ailments that may progress to pneumonia and respiratory failure. The COVID-19 pandemic compelled commercial and educational institutions globally to migrate from traditional teaching and learning activities to online collaboration. The higher education sector was also affected. Consequently, the South African government ordered all universities to close and suspend all contact sessions for academic programmes and instead resort to online teaching and learning

methods (Nyoni and Ngqila 2022).

The Internet has confirmed its place as an integral part of education, causing HEIs to adjust their teaching and learning methods from traditional interaction to various online and blended options. With the enforced move to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, even those institutions that offered limited or no online learning options were forced to move all of their offerings to an online platform. The pandemic also highlighted the need for improved student support systems, causing HEIs to rethink student support to address student needs and uncertainties brought about by the pandemic.

STUDENT SUPPORT AS A PRECURSOR FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Student success can be used as a quality metric within institutions (Alyahyan and Düştegör 2020; Ciobanu 2013). There are, however, various interpretations and definitions of student success. Whereas academic success is reportedly one of the most widely used constructs in educational research, researchers are yet to develop a suitable and acceptable definition. York, Gibson, and Rankin (2015, 1) have described the construct as amorphous, citing this as a reason why no reasonable definition has been forthcoming.

Researchers appear hesitant to explain the construct definitively, as "the term has been applied with increasing frequency as a catchall phrase encompassing numerous student outcomes" (York et al. 2015, 1). Tiroyabone and Strydom (2021, 3) define student success as:

> "in addition to passing grades, the development of cognitive and social-emotional competencies, as well as the acquisition of proficiencies that speak to the demands placed on 21st-century graduates by employers. This includes actively participating in a team, working with and learning from diverse people and environments, and recognizing and living out the social responsibility of a democratic citizen."

Kuh et al. (2006, 6) postulated that definitions of student success are often borne out of ingenuity and necessity as institutions are compelled to include a more diverse student population. Considerations of race/ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, and age must be included in the definition or description of academic success (Schneider et al. 2021). Kuh et al. (2006) further argued that the definition of success must address three pertinent questions. Firstly, what do we expect from students before and after enrolling in higher education? Secondly, what happens to students during their higher degree studies? Lastly, it is essential to know the implications of these definitions for informing policy and improving student- and institutional performance in practice. Based on these questions, student success can be defined as "academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction,

acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational objectives, and post-college (university) performance" (Kuh et al. 2006, 7).

STUDENT SUPPORT BEST PRACTICES BEFORE AND DURING COVID-19

Before the COVID-19 pandemic emerged in 2020, best practices related to online student support were mainly based on enhancing the holistic student experience by offering cognitive/academic, emotional/affective, and systemic/institutional support (Tait 2000; Simpson 2003; Kuh et al. 2006). Simpson (2003) emphasized the significance of considering the sub-divisions within these categories to ensure that students benefit optimally from the support offered for academic success. However, the pandemic resulted in a distinct change in student support needs and subsequent best practices related to student support (Bouchey et al. 2021; Neuwirth, Jović, and Mukherji 2021). The forced move to online teaching and learning due to the pandemic forced HEIs to transition from traditional to online teaching and learning, and despite online pedagogy being familiar to some institutions, for many, this change signified sailing in uncharted waters – with no compass to direct their journey. This resulted in several institutions using teaching methods previously designed for face-to-face pedagogy and applying those to online teaching and learning.

Most university staff, students, individuals, and groups from other sectors of society considered the pandemic temporary and waited to return to normal (Neuwirth et al. 2021, 143). However, this was not to be, and the world soon searched for meaning in the new normal under the auspices of the COVID-19 pandemic (Motala and Menon 2020). This migration not only implied a change in the delivery of pedagogy but also required revisiting what was previously considered best practices in higher education. Education specialists soon realized that the narrative concerning the future of education had to change from "resumption" to "re-envisioning and re-imagining" (Neuwirth et al. 2021, 143). The pandemic, furthermore, required educational leaders – who found themselves in "uncharted territory" – to use a "new toolbox of intellectual stimulation, idealized influence, and inspiration" to navigate these alien waters and be better prepared for any crisis of this magnitude (Fernandez and Shaw 2020, 41).

Toquero (2020), and Turnbull et al. (2021) have presented recommendations for HEIs to change their offerings to ensure that students remain academically focused. According to Toquero (2020), integrating environmental and general healthcare courses in the curriculum would go a long way in helping HEIs respond to student needs. Allowing all students to access healthcare courses would empower them to care for themselves and their families' health needs. Educating more students on environmental issues would also help to reduce the negative impact on human health (Keselman et al. 2011). Toquero (2020), moreover, suggests that HEIs

incorporate online mental health- and medical services for students for this purpose since the pandemic has had a grave effect on student mental health in general. An online counselling service could significantly improve student support in this regard.

Turnbull et al. (2021) recommend that institutions integrate synchronous and asynchronous delivery modes. "Synchronous" refers to real-time interaction between students and lecturers, whereas "asynchronous" is not time-sensitive. The assimilation of these modes would afford students flexibility in terms of time, and students would experience the sensibility of having devoted sufficient attention to the asynchronous component of the lesson or task. However, Romero-Ivanova et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of platforms such as Zoom, MS Teams, or Google Meet that allow institutions to stay in touch with students in real time.

Further recommendations made by Turnbull et al. (2021) included institutional support during the pandemic. These comprised specific improvements in student support, such as providing students with a clear plan and guidance regarding decisions about their course. This author also suggested that HEIs provide resources for staff and students who are grappling with the transition to online and blended learning and, where applicable, pay for popular social media platforms, e.g., Facebook, utilized by the institutions to communicate with students and academic staff (Davies et al. 2020; Hartshorn and McMurry 2020).

Udeogalanya (2021) argued that digital literacy is fundamental to academic success, especially for first-generation university students who have no one in their families to learn essential skills from. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused digital literacy to become a basic need. Therefore, institutions must provide training for staff and students (Turnbull et al. 2021), not only for study purposes but also for students to use in their careers upon completion of their studies (Udeogalanya 2021).

Turnbull et al. (2021, 6413) also suggested blended learning as an option for students, as many reported a preference for the traditional, face-to-face mode. Blended learning is a hybrid environment that "combines the benefits of traditional F2F learning spaces while exploiting online technologies that enrich learning content and delivery options." They also claim that this mode of delivery may be the most suitable option for institutions post-COVID to leverage lessons learned from the experience while retaining the advantages of traditional F2F approaches" (Singh, Steele, and Singh 2021).

ACADEMIC ADVISING – A CHANNEL FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Scholars agree that improving academic success is pertinent to effecting social and emotional change and addressing social injustices (York, Gibson, and Rankin 2015; Jagers, Rivas-Drake, and Williams 2019). This is of particular significance in South Africa after being declared the

most unequal country in the world owing to racial inequalities – despite Apartheid (the separation of people based on race, ethnicity and colour) having ended thirty years ago (World Bank 2022). This racial disparity has affected many sectors of society, including education. In a report on the need for academic advising in South African universities, Tiroyabone and Strydom (2021) indicated that, between 2000 and 2008, 19.8 per cent of South African students who commenced their tertiary qualification in 2005 – in the traditional face-to-face mode – graduated following three years of study. Of the remainder, 57.1 per cent graduated after six years of study and 63.6 per cent after ten years, painting a bleak picture for higher education in the country.

Extant literature emphasizes the need for a structured, intentional intervention programme to assist students in attaining academic success. Academic advising, which has been described as a "locus of learning" (Lowenstein 2013, 245) and a "safety net" (Tiroyabone and Strydom 2021, 4), has been identified as one such intervention. According to de Klerk (2022 and 2023), academic advising is well established in the global north and Australia but is still an emerging field/topic in South African higher education. White (2015) clarified that academic advising may or may not solve the problem or change the curriculum. Still, it is worth trying, as it could create a channel for communication between students and their lecturers that, in the end, will assist students in becoming more conscious of their choices. Whereas no formal definition of academic advising exists, Larson et al. (2018) described it as using knowledge to successfully empower students and university staff to traverse academic connections in higher education.

In South Africa, academic advising stems from information gathered via the South African Survey on Student Engagement (SASSE) in 2010 (Tiroyabone and Strydom 2021). The University of the Free State (UFS), which was one of two universities that piloted the survey, described academic advising as a "developmental teaching and learning high-impact process, which is aimed at enhancing student success" (Tiroyabone and Strydom 2021, 5). The information gathered by the survey included students' participation in a wide variety of educational activities; students' interaction with lecturers and their peers and the degree to which they engage with diversity; the way students perceive the university environment; estimates of educational and personal growth since starting higher education; and background and demographic information (University of the Free State 2022).

There are several advantages related to academic advising for students and academic and support staff. Firstly, academic advising aids in introducing students to their responsibilities as students and enables fruitful engagements between all parties – contributing to student retention. Secondly, some first-year students, hailing from structured schools with pre-set timetables, tend to feel overwhelmed when arranging their courses, especially during the first

semester at university. Academic advising can assist by creating a sense of ease and informed choices. Furthermore, academic advising is all-encompassing and is not confined to course-related information only. Matters such as student accommodation, healthcare, and career choices can also be discussed, and students can receive assistance with such and other matters (Abumalloh et al. 2021).

TOWARDS A THEORY OF MEANINGFUL STUDENT SUPPORT DURING A PANDEMIC

The findings of this study have led to the emergence of a theory of how to provide adequate student support during a crisis such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, a crisis cannot be planned for (Hu 2020); that constitutes a crisis after all. However, the COVID-19 pandemic presented many opportunities to assist HEIs in being better prepared in the event of a repeat of such a phenomenon or similar. Drawing from current literature and the data gathered in this study, an emergent theory on providing adequate student support during a pandemic suggests the following considerations.

As Simpson (2013) noted, student success depends on an interplay between various types of support, ultimately leading to academic success. A strong and active student-supervisor relationship in which both parties are actively involved has been one of the pillars of student support and academic success. Effective and timely communication between supervisors and students ensures academic success. However, the recent pandemic has highlighted the need for this relationship even more. This is significant because online students, characterized as feeling lonely and isolated, have had such emotions intensified by the fact that they no longer had a choice as to whether they preferred to pursue online studies or follow the traditional mode of learning (Kaufmann and Vallade 2020).

Furthermore, institutional facilities such as writing centers, tutors, and postgraduate schools have had to increase their interactions with students to fill the void created by the lockdown, which aimed to curb the spread of the virus by limiting physical contact between persons. The need for technical support has also gained prominence during the pandemic, as all students had to study from home and thus required a digital device with which they could not only access learning material and interact with lecturers and other students but also interact socially. The need for adequate training on using the Learning Management System and other online platforms became pertinent. Without this, students could easily be excluded from their learning communities.

Additionally, the need for a reliable Internet connection played a vital role in students' online learning experiences. The continuous load-shedding and unplanned electricity

interruptions only increased students' anxiety and uncertainty. They had no alternative but to attend classes, collaborate with lecturers and fellow students, or submit examinations and tests online.

One significant factor to consider is the need for a suitable space conducive to study. While the lockdown may have limited social movement and the virus spread, many students were excluded from educational activities due to environmental factors. Many students needed an appropriate physical space to study and attend online classes. However, this was impossible for many due to space constraints at home. In addition, being home with the rest of their families implied that some students had to assist with household chores, which they would have been exempted from had they attended a class or stayed on campus.

Before the pandemic, students hardly mentioned the pandemic concerns, such as the health of family members. However, the high mortality rate caused by the Coronavirus led to students fearing for their families' health (Kwenandar et al. 2020; Lautenbach and Randell 2020). Furthermore, while the fear of failure has been a concern for students for decades (Cox 2009), the pandemic exacerbated this.

Based on the data and findings, meaningful and relevant academic support in crisis times can be understood as processes and activities that acknowledge students' realities, contexts, backgrounds, and home environments. Additionally, their levels of access to technology and the Internet, knowledge and prior experience of using technology, and their level of ease of online communication are all responsive to student needs. Adequate student support should be activity-based. Academic activities should be relevant to students' learning and build on the knowledge acquired through collaboration and interaction with others and their environment. It should be accepted that students and the institution are situated agents of learning, and each is responsible for attaining academic success.

While the institution is required to provide emotional, academic, and technical support, it is incumbent on the student to display an attitude commensurate with a will to succeed. This requires specific personal attributes such as good time-management skills, intrinsic motivation, and a high level of self-regulated learning, with less dependence on lecturers and their input. Students should furthermore assume agency by initiating and sustaining multimodal online communication with supervisors and fellow students through active learning and by developing a conceptual understanding of learning content through active engagement with online resources (Chiu, Lin, and Lonka 2021).

Whereas academic success is highly dependent on a student's personal attributes and work ethic, the community and society significantly contribute to achieving the ultimate goal. Family, friends, and social network support can positively affect students' experiences, especially in

times of great uncertainty, such as a pandemic.

CONCLUSION

Requisite postgraduate supervision is a significant factor in attaining academic success in online learning and other modes of teaching and learning. The effects of various methods, such as academic advising, to support postgraduate students have been proven relevant in the current educational climate. This article highlighted the need for improved student support systems, allowing HEIs to contribute meaningfully to academic success.

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