


Student-centred OdeL support in theology: Why? and how?

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Equipping students to become future-fit graduates who are competent to survive and thrive in an increasingly liquid and complex society presents an agonising challenge to educators at institutions of higher education. It seems that student-centred support is a key requirement for the renovation of open distance higher education. 'The complex fourth revolution world we are living in', the current unequal and diverse student body and the need to train students in theology to be agents of positive change and transformation highlight why student-centred edu-actions are required. Suggestions on how to create opportunities for, and how to implement effective student-centred support are presented through a descriptive qualitative approach. Although this is focussed on theology students, student support is needed in all disciplines and this structure can, if successful, also be transferred to other fields in human science. Nested in the centre of the Community of Inquiry model, the triangle of effective education provides the structure and foundation for both the discipline-specific and the more general fields of the pillars of higher education. Based on the foundation of this triangle, a toolkit for student success is proposed. The toolkit forms the inner part of the triangle; referring to who the students are, how they think, reason and act, culminate in how they change and grow through education. In addition, a short learning programme for educators is proposed to assist them in adapting their tasks to the changing environment and simultaneously supporting their students.

Intradisciplinary/interdisciplinary implications: Although the focus is on theology students and lecturers, both the toolkit and lecturer training programmes can be implemented for the promotion of purpose-driven and human-centred skills development and academic excellence in the larger disciplines and fields of arts, humanities, social sciences and religious studies.

Keywords: higher education; student support toolkit; ODeL lecturer training; diagnostic assessment; triangle of effective education; paradigm shift; fourth revolution world; theological training.

Introduction

More than 50 years ago, in his best-seller titled *Future Shock*, futurist Alvin Toffler (1970) quoted psychologist Herbert Gerjuoy who, in an interview, argued that:

[t]he new education must teach the individual how to classify and reclassify information, how to evaluate its veracity, how to change categories when necessary, how to move from the concrete to the abstract and back, how to look at problems from a new direction – how to teach himself. Tomorrow's illiterate will not be the man who can't read; he will be the man who has not learned how to learn. (p. 214)

Central to the three actions indicated above – learn, unlearn and relearn – is development and change. In the past, learning and change habitually worked together to drive innovation, discovery and progress. However, during the past decades, higher education and education in general moved from the driving seat to clinging onto the back bumper of the fast-moving vehicle of change and innovation.

Also of importance in this quote is the focus on the individual learner or student. This is in line with the development of Education 4 which focusses on individual lifelong and life-wide education. Moreover, it aligns with the opportunities provided by technological advancement (the Fourth Industrial Revolution [4IR]) and digitalisation (the fourth communication revolution) that has transformed humans into 'inforgs' (Floridi 2014:94), depicting the fourth human self-understanding revolution, and the fourth sociological reformation of personal freedom and choice (more on this later in the article). However, the 'tomorrow' that the two Americans are referring to in the above-stated quote, conflicts with the education system that was implemented to carry the early industrial revolutions with its focus on mass education in a one-size-fits-all model that is currently barricading progress and development in the South African educational system.

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The regression of higher education and its failing influence on society sounded many alarms. Prophecies on the expected death of institutions of higher education became common topics in most parts of the world (cf. Whelan, Walker & Moore 2013:22 – Australia; Deshpande 2016 – India; Eagleton 2015 – England; Wright & Shore 2017:2 – Europe). The 2016 New Media Consortium (NMC) report calls the problem of keeping higher education relevant a ‘wicket’ challenge (Johnson et al. 2016:32). One of the grounding reasons for these prophecies is the rapid and disruptive changes brought about by technology over the past 30 and more years. The world in which many of us were raised (with e.g., no Internet and no mobile phones) no longer exists, while classrooms and pedagogies did not change much over the past few centuries and are no longer relevant to society (cf. Gous 2022:215). Although technology historically brought significant change and disruption to education, the fruit of the current major fourth revolution is not fully utilised to lift education to the next level of progress and development that can keep this sector at the cutting edge of knowledge production and innovation.

A drastic and urgent paradigm shift is therefore needed to produce future-fit graduates who will be able to function optimally in a liquid and fluid society where the stability and consistency brought about and protected by the old educational system are no more. The core activities of teaching, learning and assessment should be the focal point when revolution, change, innovation and transformation are explored and implemented. This back-to-basics-with-new-tools approach can, especially in the South African environment where the student cohort is unequal and diverse (in terms of educational backgrounds, economic status, social status, digital fluency, etc.), equip students to become well-rounded, adjustable, competent¹ and capable graduates – or, in the words of Cross (2010:48), can ensure that students and graduates ‘become all they can be’. However, the hyper-speed with which technology is evolving and the demands put on society as a whole seem to be so overwhelming and demanding that both institutions of higher education and educators try to hold on to comfort zones where the minimum of input, effort and work is needed to keep the wheels slowly turning with little acceleration from technology (Oliver 2024:2 of 8).

The proposed foundation model on which student support in the open distance e-learning (ODeL) environment can be constructed is the triangle of effective and flexible education (for more detail cf. Oliver 2019:3 of 8). Before providing a few short explanatory notes on this model to show where student support fits in, the focus falls on explaining *why* urgent and in-depth changes must be incorporated into the South African higher educational system. Suggesting on *how* such changes can be done, a proposed toolkit for student success that focusses specifically on the inner pillars of the triangle is linked

1. ‘Competency’ is the proven ability of acquiring knowledge and skills, while ‘capacity’ is the person’s confidence in their competency and, as a result, the ability to take appropriate and effective action in both familiar and unfamiliar and changing settings (Cairns 2000:1).

with a coincided educator development initiative. The transformation needed in higher education must start with student support while both required value formation of theology students and the small student numbers in this field provide a workable testing ground for implementing new pathways and paradigm shifts.

Why should student support be prioritised in open distance e-learning?

A long list can be compiled to indicate the reasons *why* student support is urgently needed in the South African higher education system. Most of these listed items could be grouped into three main categories: Firstly, the fragmented, complex and liquid 21st-century global society is disruptive and demands constant change. To this, the unique South African environment of uncertainty can be added. Ideologically, the majority of the African population demands a break from Western ways and the implementation of decolonisation and Africanisation. Secondly, the lived experiences and living conditions of students are extremely diverse and unequal. In addition to their different environments, most students are novice learners who demand an individual approach to student support. Thirdly, the education model needs adjustment. It must be student-centred, allow for interactive and expanded learning experiences and opportunities, and aim to provide transformation and positive change as a final outcome. A liquid, expanding and fully functional ODeL system implemented by skilled academics can empower students to become successful graduates who can survive and thrive in a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) world.

Global and South African challenges

We live in a complex world. Higher education cannot function in silos or ivory towers, isolated from the influences and changes that are transforming the world – neither can Christians who are confronted with the same challenges and are also expected to provide answers and guidelines to tough questions. The fragmented, liquid, uncertain, fourth revolution world requires theological educators to keep external circumstances in mind when focussing on providing education and training. It is not only the 4IR – expanding already into the 5IR, which is called the cognitive age, the 6IR with artificial intelligence (AI), and the 7IR with natural organic AI systems (NOAI-Systems) and the fourth communication or digitalisation revolution which are demanding attention from educators and the whole higher education system. We are currently also experiencing the fourth revolution in education, the fourth sociology revolution, and the fourth revolution in human self-understanding. Although we are still living in the Society 4 era, countries such as Japan and others are already creating Society 5 (cf. Table 1). These developments result in challenging new encounters with education, including how educators support their students.

TABLE 1: The development of the major fourth revolution Western world through their different eras.

Eras	Communication (Harnad 1991:39)	Sociology (Castro 2006)	Society (Levy 2005:64; Narvaez Rojas, Alomia Peñañiel, & Loaiza Buitrago (2021:4 of 16)	Human self-understanding (Florida 2014:90–94)	Education (Kulik 1984:3; Gerstein 2014:84–96)	Industry (Schwab 2016)
1st	Speech (± 40 000 BCE)	German, Dutch, English: Religion (16th century)	Hunter-gathering	Copernicus (1473–1543)	Educator-centred, passive education	Mechanisation (late 18th to early 19th century)
2nd	Writing (± 10 000 BCE)	French: Social (1789-99)	Agriculture	Darwin (1809–1882)	Interaction, collaboration	Energy (late 19th to early 20th century)
3rd	Printing (in the West) (± 1459 CE)	Russian: economic (1917–1923)	Industry	Freud (1856–1939)	Student-centred, blended	Electronics (last quarter of 20th century)
4th	Digital (from early 20th century)	Western: culture; social and personal freedom	Information	Turing (1912–1954)	Individualistic and sustainable	Technology (21st century)

BCE, before common era; CE, common era.

In addition to the impact of these global disrupting occurrences, South Africa is struggling with issues of uncertainty and instability. 56.75% of people living in the country are poor or extremely poor (Stats SA 2024), with not many opportunities to better their circumstances through higher education. For nearly 30 years now, electricity provision has been unstable, resulting in constant power outages that leave people in the cold and dark while providing ample opportunities for crime to flourish (Van der Merwe 2021). South Africa, with its high crime index, is often included in lists of dangerous countries (cf. Richardson & Xie 2024). In recent years, water shortages because of natural disasters and poor service delivery have added to difficult living conditions (Bartlett 2024; Heggie n.d.). Although the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has officially passed, diseases such as influenza, monkeypox and rabies are on the current list of health alerts (NICD 2024) while malaria and rubella remain a constant threat. These external factors all have negative implications on education provision and success in the country.

International university rankings are highly sought after despite attempts to move away from Western academic standards by focussing on decolonisation and Africanisation. In light of these conflicting priorities, it is difficult to successfully develop and implement alternative academic models and theories on the one hand and to use the work of African scholars in research and teaching while pushing for higher global rankings and accreditation on the other hand (cf. Fonn 2024; Hanke-Louw 2023).

Diverse and unequal student cohort

The time when higher education prescribed the matric curriculum has long passed. Because of the sub-standard level of basic education, the majority of current first-year students are novice learners. Students entering higher education at ODeL universities are ill-prepared and often struggle to transfer from the paced, structured, teacher-centred, outdated and one-size-fits-all basic education model to fit into the open distance and e-learning environment. The ability of many first-year students to use technology is skewed: They can use social media and play digital games but are not experienced in the academic use of technology. Students from less privileged backgrounds or rural areas

often do not have the basic technological and digital skills required to access and interact with their study material. Many theology students are older individuals who are full-time employed and have family and/or church obligations. They frequently experience the unfamiliar distance and e-learning environment as an obstacle to their academic aspirations.

The general picture of formal education results is bleak: Only 12% of learners who start Grade 1 get access to higher education while only 4% of these eventually graduate (Dyomfana 2022). Focussing on higher education, the dropout rate of first-year students varies between 50% and 60% in South Africa (Dyomfana 2022; Viljoen 2019). If students are met where they are, and not only find the educators waiting for them where they ought to be, it is hoped that effective student support can counter the high dropout, force-out and failure rates in the South African educational system (cf. Mutsila 2023).

The preceding scenario requires a more individualistic and multi-faceted approach as non-academic circumstances further complicate the lives of students in South Africa. These challenges often prevent students from performing at their best. It is impossible to list all the problems because they vary from one individual to another. In general, the cost of living and the lack of safety and security that influence accommodation, transport and sustenance in addition to the cost of education and spiralling debt are all major hampering factors (Van der Merwe 2021). Family obligations such as being breadwinners, single parents, taking care of siblings and the expectations linked to being a first-generation student can also become too much to bear. Health issues, personal emergencies, social life on campus, wrong study choices as well as laws on the migration of international students, are similarly mentioned as obstructions to academic progress (cf. Fundiconnect 2024). Interrupted service delivery impacts severely on online education systems which adds to stress and failure.

Problems in higher education

Universities in general do provide student support services such as counselling, career advice and tuition services, but these services alone are not sufficient. The underprepared,

unequal and diverse student cohort that is entering higher education, demands that the support system be significantly expanded beyond subject-specific content to include the teaching and training of basic knowledge and skills in a variety of fields necessary for academic progress and success. However, although this need has long been alerted to by educators and confirmed by low pass rates and high dropout rates, it seems as if the words of Tony Bates (2010:22) quoting a vice-chancellor who said that 'universities are like graveyards – when you want to move them, you do not get much help from the people inside' still ring true. Therefore, the call is for the university management to acknowledge student needs and assist them by availing finances and manpower to urgently develop effective bridging courses to enhance student support. Both internal and external resources can be used to develop a range of support structures independent of the formal, subject-specific academic systems to release pressure on both students and academics.

Academics are under pressure because of huge workloads. The wide range of key performance areas (such as teaching and learning, assessment, research, community engagement, academic citizenship, academic leadership, etc.) result in educators teaching existing and often outdated curricula, and not implementing new and developing technologies. The enormous amount of time and effort needed and the absence of recognition for work done demotivate academics to constantly upgrade modules and develop new curricula or invest in developing scaffolding as safety nets for student support. The inability to take on more work and resistance to develop new skills to effectively implement technology as well as acquiring knowledge and competencies in fields outside their areas of specialty often restrict educators from providing much-needed support in areas where students are struggling (e.g. critical thinking and problem-solving skills, language competencies, digital literacy and academic writing skills).

The lack of student support and providing education that empowers students are evident from the persistent skills gaps that graduates grapple with. Compared to employers from the United Kingdom who believe that nearly 80% of graduates are not work-ready when entering the employment market (CMI insights 2021), the situation in South Africa is seemingly less severe. A recent study by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) reveals that about 31% of employers in South Africa state the lack of skills among graduates as the main reason for not employing them (Msuya 2023). However, the official unemployment rate among South African graduates aged up to 34 years, stood at 33.6% in 2023 (Msuya 2023). Apart from general career management support and training (e.g. how to search and apply for employment and how to compile a curriculum vitae [CV]), employability skills that should be addressed during the academic phase include teamwork, critical thinking skills and problem-solving skills as well as self-management, effective communication skills, flexibility, adaptability and resilience, initiative and self-directed development, digital skills, emotional intelligence,

innovation and creativity, and entrepreneurial skills (Adecco Group 2022; CMI Insights 2021). Focussing on discipline-specific content alone neglects important life-wide and transdisciplinary learning which are crucial skills that can ensure that graduates are equipped to thrive in a fast-changing world.

Close cooperation between institutional management and academics to create and sustain a comprehensive support package on the one hand and innovative educational strategies that are fitting for current circumstances on the other hand, can bring about the required paradigm shift in higher education. This cannot be a once-off, quick-fix intervention but must include a continuation of change and progress at all levels through constant testing, implementing and adjusting (cf. Ice 2010:158).

Christians as agents of positive change

Postmodernity and metamodernity tend to focus on the negative aspects of religion in general and Christianity in particular. However, for nearly 2000 years, Christians managed to bring hope and change at all levels of human existence (cf. Schmidt 2004; Hill 2005; Sunshine 2009). Society changed because of a transformation in worldviews regarding the sanctification of human life and the notion of liberty and justice for all. Christianity initiated charity organisations and influenced the development of health care, science, art, music, architecture, and much more (Schmidt 2004). The voice of the church affected cultures, politics, education, social structures and economic and labour practices. Although the guidance provided by the church and its prominent figures it is also not without errors. The current corpse-like existence (mute, deaf, blind and lame – Oliver 2021:2) of South African Christianity is contributing to the increasing numbers of crises the country is facing because of the lack of good education to the more than 80% of the population that claims to be Christians.

Christianity in South Africa could soon find itself on the brink of extinction because of affirming and mirroring the ills of society or creating personalised and often syncretistic interpretations of Christianity. Theological education must provide students with knowledge, skills and competencies that will empower them to become effective agents of positive change in the faith, social and environmental milieus in which they will find themselves after graduation. They must be encouraged to transfer these positive capabilities towards sustainable transformation. Because of the small student numbers in theology modules, these departments provide an ideal test ground to implement and assess optimal student support, proposed ideas, strategies, actions and outcomes.

The abovementioned reasons explaining why a fresh and expanded way of student support in the South African ODeL environment is needed, are by no means complete or detailed enough. It does, however, provide a glimpse of the elephant lurking in the corner of the higher education hall. Acknowledging that change is needed, the next and more

important question is how to bring about student support that can empower successful studies and sustainable development even after graduation.

How to support theology students in the open distance e-learning environment

Christians can and should be able to live life differently compared to 'the world'. This can be promoted by disruptive change in the theological education model. The proposed triangle of effective education focusses on holistically educating each individual. The outer triangle is focussed on providing a firm foundation for the academic side of theological training. The inner triangle is focussed on life-wide aspects of education that include literacies and competencies not directly linked to but essential for theological training and academic success in general.

The triangle of effective flexible education

The foundational structure of the triangle of effective and flexible higher education has student-centred teaching and interactive/amalgamated/intermingled learning as the two base pillars, with transformative assessment as the culminating pinnacle. As can be observed in Figure 1, this model is multifaceted. Each pillar consists of several sub-sections that interlink with each other, while various sub-sections interlink the different pillars. All linkages are flexible to enable expansion and change as and when needed.

Student-centred teaching caters to individual needs, growth and development, both as a person and as a student. Interactive and amalgamated learning implements all available media, formal, informal and non-formal learning environments and experiences to ensure individual success through all available learning opportunities. Transformative

and alternative assessments are active learning and growth opportunities that promote development towards life-wide and lifelong learning, and the formation of positive habits as well as the adaptability to change and transform.

The triangle of effective education model fits into the intersection of the teaching, cognitive and social spheres identified through the Community of Inquiry Framework of Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000:88) – see Figure 2.

The current focus is on the inner part of the triangle (Figure 1). This is the more indirect part of academic life that has a huge influence on the visible results of student performance. The aim is transformative in nature. The toolkit for student success must assist students to bridge the gaps between basic and higher education in such a way that they can proceed with and complete their studies. In addition, it is intended to change attitudes and behaviour, shaping theology students to become future-fit agents of positive change that can negotiate the current turbulence while assisting others to hope, cope, grow and develop.

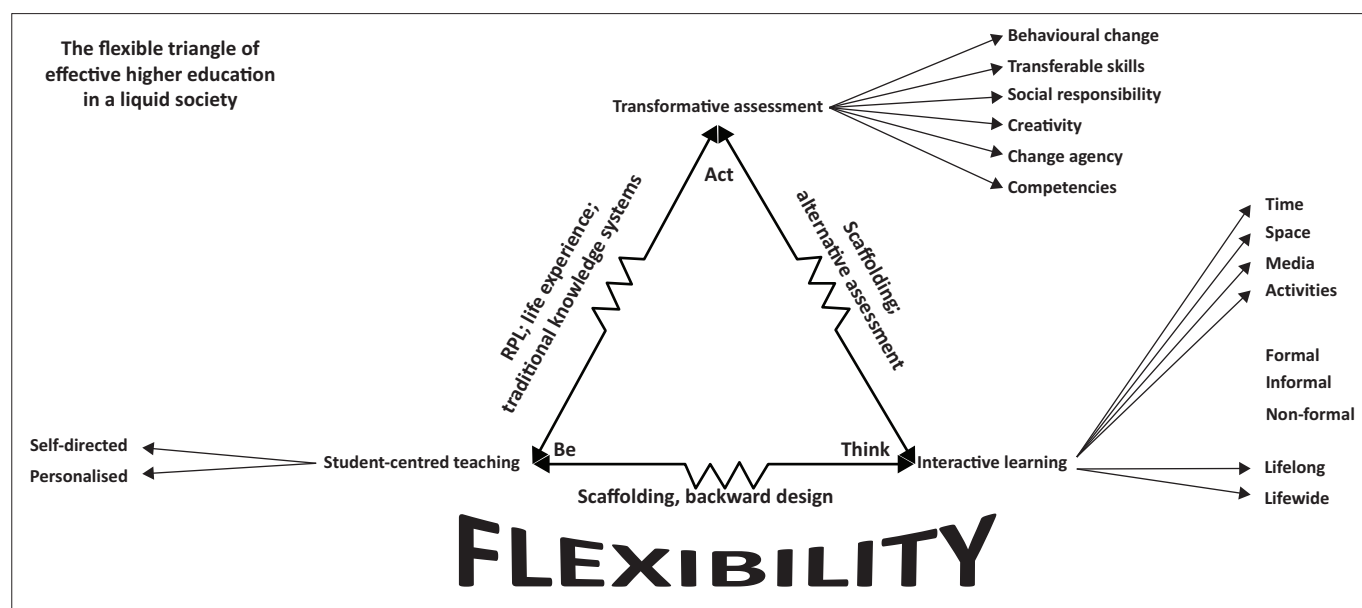
Edu-active student support

The inner triangle toolkit

Academics should, in line with the chaotic and turbulent world of change and technology that we are living in, be bold, disruptive and different in their approach to teaching, learning and assessment because of the following:

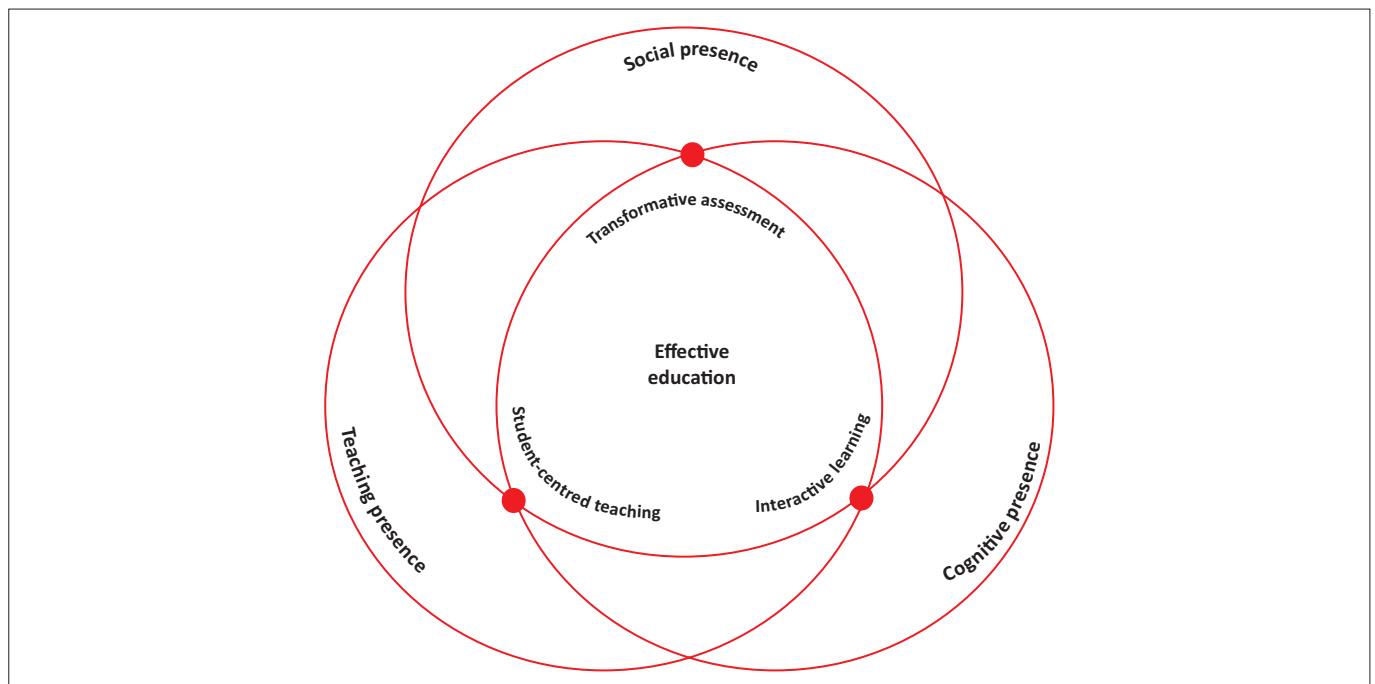
- Providing content is not teaching.
- Learning is not easy.
- Regurgitated information is not assessment.
- If there was no change, education did not happen.

Therefore, academics must implement stimulating scaffolding (i.e. challenging support without embarrassment) and



RPL, recognition of prior learning.

FIGURE 1: The triangle of effective higher education.



Source: Adapted from Garrison, D.R., Anderson, T. & Archer, W., 2000, 'Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education model', *The Internet and Higher Education* 2(2-3), 87-105. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2004.02.001>

FIGURE 2: The community of inquiry framework provides a practical setting for the triangle of effective education model.

appropriate technology in addition to all the tried and tested educational tools to teach uncertainty, learn through chaos and diversity, and assess transformation, growth and change.

The proposed toolkit for student success is focussed on the inner part of the triangle indicated in Figure 1 with the terms BE (strengthening behavioural intelligence), THINK (enhance cognitive intelligence) and ACT (increase proficiency in what they can do and how they behave). This short, comprehensive bridging programme should be integrated into the first-year modules to ensure early diagnosis and interventions towards enabling academic progress. Such a programme must provide layered interventions for each of the three different sections to accommodate the unequal competencies of students on aspects such as language proficiency, digital competencies, AI and media literacy, academic skills (such as how to learn and how to do research, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills) and life skills. The proposed programme consists of three modules.

The first module, called *BE*, focusses on strengthening the behavioural intelligence of students through self-management and interpersonal skills development. Self-management topics include self-understanding and acceptance; situational and spatial awareness; time management and planning; developing a growth mindset, curiosity, common sense and motivation; personal development plans; personal wellness and goal setting. Topics included under interpersonal skills are relationships and networking; cultural awareness; work ethics; teamwork and collaboration; negotiation and conflict management; empathy; and public speaking.

The second module, called *THINK*, focusses on cognitive capacity building (lifelong and life-wide) by stimulating critical, logical and creative thinking abilities. Open-mindedness is crucial. Both traditional and current issues need to be placed on the table for theological consideration together with guidelines for believers. Medical and ethical issues, how Christians interpret and use laws, regard war and peace, as well as cosmology and earth keeping all provide traditional (cf. Oliver 2016:5, 6) and challenging new debates (such as AI and alien life), for studying, debating and investigating. Theologians must think differently, disruptively and creatively from a Christian perspective about such challenges, and provide useful and practical guidelines. Theologians are not only required to guide and speak to believers in churches and to governing bodies and regulators, but must also guide society in general.

The final module is called *ACT*. This module expands students' proficiencies by focussing on developing and enhancing digital skills, media literacy, academic skills and language proficiency. It will also evaluate and track progress in value development and behavioural change and development on a personal level. The focus must be on supporting individual students in their unique circumstances towards growth, development and success. Faculties of Theology can serve as ideal hosts for these modules on people-focussed interventions and student support. If successful, this programme can be adjusted to be implemented in other departments and the school of humanities.

The programme will start with diagnostic testing (Figure 3). The test will measure all the desired outcomes and expected competencies in each of the three categories of the triangle's

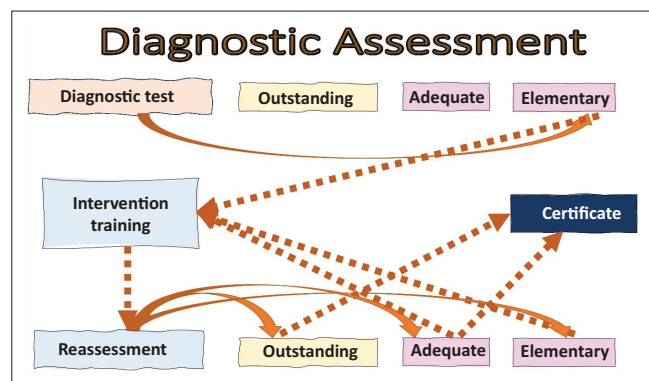


FIGURE 3: The diagnostic tests and pathways that will support the toolkit for student success.

pillars: Be, think and act. Depending on the outcomes each student will be declared fully competent, or sufficient, or in need of assistance, for each of the three categories of the tests. To qualify for the certificate, results from all three categories must at least be on an adequate level. Outstanding results in all three categories will result in certification without the need for further interventions, while those who obtain adequate results in all three categories can choose to participate in the interventions or opt for the certificate. Those who need further assistance in one, two or all three of the categories will have to complete the intervention courses. After working through the course material with added support where needed and completing competency exercises, a re-assessment will take place for the required categories. Hopefully, the content and support provided through this short course will equip and encourage our students towards academic success.

Empowering open distance e-learning educators

Although the toolkit will be directed to support students, academics will also need to learn, unlearn and relearn to ensure a correlation between what, why and how they teach, learn and assess, and the support and guidance needed by and provided to students. Ideally, an online short course for educators should be introduced to be implemented alongside the student toolkit. Like the toolkit, it must also focus on the three foundational pillars of the effective education model. However, in this case, the training for educators focusses more on the outer parts of the pillars for effective education. By questioning the way we teach, learn, assess and seek alternatives, better practices and new pathways to implement the pillars, we can build valuable attributes for our graduates while offering lifelong learning opportunities for educators.

Student-centred teaching is well-established at Unisa. However, in a fast-changing world, educators need to ensure that they are up to date with who the current cohort of theological students is, what their circumstances and needs are and what their work and social environments are. The focus of teaching should be on the students (people) and not primarily on content. How students should interact with content and technology such as the use of AI, large language

models and ethically sound behaviour must form part of student-centred teaching. Different models of teaching such as pedagogy, andragogy, heutagogy and academagogy or omnigogy² are fit for purpose in specific circumstances and with specific outcomes in mind, and should be applied accordingly. In the new dispensation, curricula must be open, allowing for self-directed paths towards the development and growth of students. This implies that academics must let go of their total control over the curriculum, allowing for variety, disruption and the unintended but necessary development of new curriculums on current topics and developing fields.

Non-discipline-specific teaching of things such as the flattening and flipping of Bloom's taxonomy for real-life problem solving, cognitive dissonance as a trigger towards change, the red car theory³ and the importance of mentors, coaches and trainers in the educational process must be included in foundational teaching support. Fun, adventure and surprise must return to teaching. Current technological developments that enable the use of serious games, gamification and digital game-based learning can ensure that teaching levels up to new and exciting heights. However, the technical support needed and the time and costs involved in such endeavours are obstructing progress in this regard. Narratives (stories) are one of the oldest educational tools. Through the process of Africanisation and decolonisation, this can once again be used as a valuable tool to bring joy and entertainment into the learning environment.

One who teaches needs to learn, unlearn and relearn to stay relevant and up-to-date with developments and changes in the education environment. Lifelong and life-wide learning are prerequisites for academics. The test for critical thinking is whether a person can apply it to their own thinking, perceptions and biases. The questions academics should ask themselves are: When last did I change my mind? How can I expect students to change if I am still clinging to old and outdated ideas, tools and views? How can I use devices and technology to improve my teaching, assessment and student support? Regarding learning, academics must focus on questioning, creative thinking, micro-learning, exploring technology, non-discipline-specific skills, knowledge and capacity building. Online platforms allow for the use, recognition and encouragement of all forms of interactive learning. This implies that there should be no restrictions on time, space, media or activities that can be implemented to encourage sustainable learning behaviours. In addition, prior learning and experience must be recognised and where possible, linked to current learning through creative and flexible curriculum design and workflow. Formal, informal and non-formal learning are useful options to ensure that

²Academagogy, also known as omnigogy is the fluid and flexible actions of instructional systems (Mackh 2015:124). This means that pedagogy, andragogy and heutagogy must be implemented as, when and where needed within a specific curriculum to ensure that basic, advanced, threshold and new knowledge, skills, and competencies can develop and grow.

³The Red Car Theory is a concept that deals with the phenomenon of heightened awareness and selective attention. It posits that once something has been brought to our attention, we start noticing it more often, not because it has become more prevalent, but because we've become more attuned to noticing it (Hossain 2024).

students grasp and master thresholds and anchors that are difficult to comprehend but essential for academic progress and the development of theological insight.

Failure should never be a final outcome. It is a part of life and a necessary learning experience. Failure does open opportunities for scaffolded learning. Scaffolding (cf. Rosenshine & Meister 1992:32) can assist students to grasp concepts and information that are slightly too difficult and therefore require a 'cognitive stretch' (Fox & Helford 1999:162) to succeed by providing additional support and information, as well as feedback, feedforward and feed upward⁴ assistance. Scaffolding provides a safe space for growth and failure without disgrace. The effective use of scaffolding gets students interested and motivated to move from dependent to interested and involved in their studies and the impact thereof.

Value formation is key to theological training. Traditional tests and exams are not ideal for assessment in the ODeL environment. Numerous alternative and creative ways can be used to test or evaluate students' growth, change, development, skills, knowledge and understanding. Micro-assessment tasks are well suited to focus on evaluating key capabilities while projects and portfolios can show progress and development over longer periods or bigger volumes of work.

Celebrating progress is just as important as celebrating success. It is not only about obtaining a degree, but also about each small victory, advancement and step towards transformation and change that make the education journey a joyful and rewarding experience. Both educators and students must be made aware of this and encouraged to celebrate small victories and achievements as this will boost motivation and provide support when facing obstacles.

Edu-action in terms of student support is a frontline initiative to meet the students where they are and, well knowing where they should be, guide, train, tutor, coach and teach them in such a way that they can become competent agents of positive change that grow in knowledge, skills and competencies while also becoming experts in subject-specific fields. The triangle of effective and flexible education model provides a broad foundational space to allow for student support in all three major aspects of education, namely teaching, learning and assessment. It could also be used for workshops and short courses to ensure that academics are equipped with up-to-date skills and knowledge to best support their students.

Conclusion

The dissonance between the outdated educational system and the fast-developing and overwhelming changes we are currently experiencing at all levels of life points towards the

urgent need for transformation in higher education. This research focussed on two important questions regarding a paradigm shift to student support in theological education, namely 'Why?' and 'How?'

Explaining why student support is needed, the fragmented, liquid, complex and changing 21st-century world sets the broad stage. This is narrowed down to the unique South African situation with its restricted basic services and the problematic tension between Westernised higher education standards and the need for Africanisation and decolonialisation to make higher education relevant and useful in daily life. The diverse and unequal education levels and living conditions of students and the difficult task of changing systems and patterns in higher education further highlight the need for an unlearn and relearn shift to support novice first-year students. A comprehensive bridging programme, integrated into the first-year modules can diagnose and address some of these problems. Such a programme must provide layered educational interventions.

Based on the triangle of an effective education model, a toolkit for student success that is generic to students in theology and other fields within the humanities, is proposed to house important topics and content for student support. The inner triangle is used to develop competencies on self-knowledge, interpersonal relationships, developing cognitive abilities and empowering transformation in behaviour. Together, these pillars focus on who the students are and can become, how they need to think, reason and learn, and how the effect and growth gained from the learning process can transform them to be successful in a liquid and unstable world.

Although universities do have structures for student support, it is primarily through contact with lecturers where effective support can have a significant influence on students. The small student numbers in theology make these modules and courses ideal testing fields for the implementation of the student support toolkit.

Hand in hand with the toolkit for student success, a short learning programme based on the outer parts of the three pillars of effective education namely student-centred teaching, interactive learning and transformative assessment, must be developed to ensure that lecturers are capable of using what is offered by the developing new technologies and revolutions in society to effectively support students. A short unlearn and relearn course will assist lecturers in using the toolkit effectively and in adjusting and getting up to date with current trends and opportunities to bring about effective change.

The envisioned result from implementing the full-scale triangle of effective education model is successful graduates who are capable lifelong and life-wide learners and agents of change and transformation within their work, faith, social, and economic communities and

4. Upward feedback in the academic sense refer to fitting specific information into the bigger picture or larger context on the one hand and further focus attention on where specific content and activities feed into reaching the projected outcome and end goal of current work.

environments. It will also assist lecturers with lifelong and life-wide teaching as well as implementing effective curriculum design strategies and, to support students, implement interactive learning and assess transformation and progress that all are flexible, liquid and adjustable to changes and challenges in society.

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Author's contribution

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