

Infusing Adjustment Issues into the Curriculum: the Skills for Success in Science Component of the Foundation Programme at UCT

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Introduction

Affective factors contribute to retention and efficiency rates in HE.

Previous studies have:

- Emphasised the importance of addressing social and emotional factors in facilitating adjustment.
- Highlighted the role of initial adjustment as a framework for subsequent success.
- Investigated alienation from the institution.
- Showed that improved adjustment facilitates overall functioning.

General Entry for Programmes in Science, GEPS

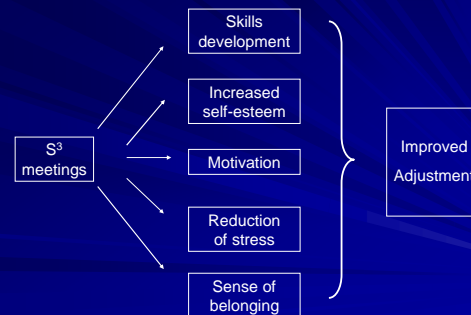
- Extended programme for science students identified as being from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Majority are English second language speakers.
- Curriculum takes account of poor preparation at school.
- Courses cover half the content of the first year curriculum; focus on understanding of key concepts of the discipline.

Skills for Success in Science, S³

Implementation of a 'life skills development' programme as a course in the GEPS curriculum with the objectives of:

- Improving adjustment to the tertiary environment.
- Improving ability to cope, to manage stress and academic workload.
- Fostering social and personal development.

Conceptual framework of the S³ programme



S³ addressed the following

- Adjustment
- Group work and co-operative learning
- Coping and stress management
- Resources on campus
- Assertiveness and communication
- Time management
- Study skills
- Examination competence

Structure of S³ programme

- Weekly group sessions (20 students) over the first semester in 2005 facilitated by a psychologist.
- Sessions were semi-structured and relied on a experiential-participative process e.g. role plays.

Attendance

- S³ programme not compulsory; students were strongly encouraged to participate.
- Attendance was over 80% despite sessions being held during the first lecture period.

Research questions

- What did students gain by participating in the S³ programme?
- Was the intervention effective in achieving its aim of improving adjustment to HE?
- Was there a lasting benefit for participating students?

Data collection

- Questionnaire (N=93)

Self-report instruments on academic motivation and overload, perceived stress, self-esteem and adjustment.

- Focus group discussions (N=7)
- Interviews with senior students (N=20)

Findings from questionnaire

- High degree of commitment to studies; associated with reduced attrition.
- Students who were well-adjusted:
 - Coped well with academic demands.
 - Were comfortable with academic environment.
 - Experienced low psychosocial stress.
 - Were committed to UCT.
 - Experienced high peer appraisal.

But for some students there is ...

- A poor fit between ability to cope and demands of HE.
- A high level of intrinsic motivation & good attachment to UCT yet they are in distress due to demands made on them.

Findings from focus group discussions

Most useful skills were:

- Time-management.
- Stress management and coping.
- Study skills and examination competence.
- Communication and group work.

Feedback on facilitators

They were described as:

- Helpful, approachable and friendly.
- Good listeners.
- Qualified to assist with any difficulties:

"... they made you feel like you could talk about anything ... she even listened when people said stupid stuff."

Findings 1

- Students thoroughly enjoyed the meetings.
- S³ meetings were "a break in the day" and a "must for all students".
- Preferred the early meetings which gave them motivation and energy for attending classes.

Findings 2

- Most valuable aspects were learning skills and the group experience; opportunity to share.
- S³ facilitated adjustment to UCT, helped them cope with being a first year student.
- Learned useful skills to manage their academic workload (main stressor).

Feedback from senior students

Three perceived strengths of the S³ programme

■ Confidence building

"Initially I was not trusting myself. I thought I would not make it. One thing they were actually pushing was the idea that no one is actually stupid".

■ Group support

■ Study habits

"They talk to you about that you are supposed to plan make sure everything is done before you go out, and don't take any crap from your friends."

Conclusions

- Encouraging results regarding the efficacy of the intervention.
- S³ enhanced the students' experience of and adjustment to UCT and their academic functioning.
- Results support the notion that improved affective factors (coping with stress and managing the work load) correlate with improved academic functioning.
- Long term benefits for students as shown by the responses from interviews with senior students.

Expanding the programme

- In 2006 the S³ programme was extended and runs throughout the year.
- Sessions on language skills, information literacy, reading skills and career development introduced from 2008.
- Appointment of part-time student development advisor; plans to extend aspects of S³ into mainstream first year curriculum.

Acknowledgements

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A final thought from the students



Drawing by Sbonelo and Brendon, GEPS 2005