

How Student Support Can Improve Certification Rates

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Are TVET Colleges in South Africa aware of the crisis in Basic Education and the impact on college certification and retention rates? According to Equal Education, a non-governmental organisation involved in education research and development: Past cohort matric results have revealed that up to 50% of students who start Grade 2 do not end up writing matric exams. The majority of these learners fall by the wayside between Grades 10 and 12. Equal Education (EE), urged that the matric pass rate needs to be looked at critically". EE found, "If 2014's pass rate of 75.8% was reconfigured to account for every student who enrolled in Grade 2 in 2004, only 36.4% of these original students actually passed." It is from this crisis-ridden context that TVET Colleges extract their student cohorts every year.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the bulk of TVET Colleges are at best acknowledging the knock-on effect of the crisis in basic education. Despite this acknowledgement, there seems to be confusion about how TVET Colleges should respond to the on-going effects triggered by the crisis at basic education level. Compounding the problem is the multi-factorial nature of student support requirements in general.

It is however, the absence of substantial and coordinated student support interventions from the majority of TVET institutions that has become the elephant in the room. In fairness, there are TVET institutions that are attempting to address the support-needs of students. In this case it would be proper to reference case studies at TVET Colleges such as Westcol and Tshwane North in Gauteng who are making active attempts at "profiling" or understanding their respective student population needs, using computerised screening methods. These college actively collect profile data in order to understand the support requirements of individual and/or clusters of students. The use of evidence and data are therefore becoming the new focus areas of the education change revolution at TVET Colleges in South Africa, seeking to intervene surgically, deploying resources pointedly and with greater impact. Colleges are increasingly veering away from wholesale general approaches to supporting students. The use of data-driven planning in this sense, is consciously aimed at the need for customised student support strategies that promote student success.

Are Many TVET Colleges Paying Lip-Service to the Concept of Student Support?

Considering the diverse context of the South African education and social landscape, students present at colleges with a range of barriers that make learning an extremely challenging task. At a very base level students entering TVET Colleges present with demographic obstacles such as having no access to water, electricity, over-crowding in homes, living in sub-standard conditions and so forth. Compounding this problem are negative social influences such as irregular travelling patterns, uncomfortable distances to campuses, poor nutrition, mental health challenges such as depression, post-traumatic and/or continuous stress influences and learning disorders etc. This list can be substantive ranging from high to low impact challenges. For intervention opportunities at college level, we examined the data evidence collected from over 30 000 students at South African TVET Colleges, using the dynamic "Student Profiler" system (www.doitprofiler.co.za).

Analysis of the data indicates that there is a plethora of opportunities for student support and how to improve certification and retention rates.

In attempting to make a difference it is argued that by drilling down into the student data, administrators and officials at both DHET and college level will become aware of the multiple levels of support required by each student. This approach refreshingly, leaves no room for speculative planning

processes and considers the uniqueness of individual challenges and the changing nature of each student cohort. Support interventions are therefore dynamic (responsive) and driven by real-time data.

Consider for example, that College A discover that one week after screening new students for both course suitability and student support requirements, that twenty percent (20%) of these students have an evident reading problem. They are struggling to form new words and therefore would have a problem to learn new terminology in a given course. Or, consider the fact that College B has close to 1500 applicants for an engineering course. After studying the new intake data, the college management discovers that the concept of “fractions” seems to be a problem for at least twenty-five percent (25%) of the new entrants? What if they knew exactly who these students were and what their needs are? In these two examples, rests the opportunity to improve student performance for this cohort. Intervention and support in these areas of individual student weakness may just be the reason why the student will achieve academic success.

Imagine, if one had the methodology to collect over 1200 data points that allows for significant insights into where student support is required, would you make use of such an opportunity? So why are colleges not trying to profile their students in order to find how they can support – where possible? “Too much time required and very little resources”, have been the standard retort. Thankfully, many of the more progressive and academically oriented colleges are realising that in order to achieve new outcomes they will have to do something that has not really been done before. The new approaches and strategies are of course embedded within a new-age thinking paradigm, an approach that understands the value of business-intelligence that is informed by quick, accurate and efficient quality data towards better planning and support. Consider this, it is estimated that if a student is screened for just 90 minutes, once a year, this would comprise 0,02 percent of the approximately 2000 hours of potential learning contact time for the duration of an annual course. Is this too much time to identify student needs? It is therefore the dedication of a college, committed to a vision of quality student support interventions that promote student profiling analyses, using the right tools of course!

By studying the current Profiler data collected at TVET Colleges, we have been able to conclude that student support programmes must be seen as the epicentre of every college’s success strategy. The data points to a “new-age” requirement that connects all staff, including academic and non-academic staff in a common student support strategy. The intervention points in the data, highlight the fact that student support initiatives should become more decentralized. It should become part of everyone’s daily business at the college.

It is advisable that every college should plan towards having embedded support programmes. Student success should be based on a screening strategy that identifies student risks and high priority support requirements. The Profiler data shows that colleges should at least aspire to have student support initiatives that range from study skills (time-management, organization and planning skills); remedial (literacy and numeracy) enrichment; assistive technology; life skill training; library access & induction; counselling; peer study groups; exam preparation initiatives; career counselling; writing skills development; reading clubs; sport & culture clubs; concession support, typing support programmes etc. Student success depends on the availability of these embedded services at any campus. These are not the only initiatives though, as there may be a wider range of initiatives not identified in the Profiler data.

The question now remains, “Do individual colleges have the political will to make the real changes required to increase certification and retention rates?” Let’s watch the TVET College space in years to come and observe the responses from college leaders.