



The GAPS Think Piece - Issue 9

Education Development Unit (EDU) Commerce

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Why the need for EDU Commerce ... what is the issue?

South Africa has a 17 per cent participation rate in higher education with major racial disparities: only about 10 per cent of black students gain access. The overall graduation rate after five years is only 35 per cent; South African graduation rates of black students are less than half of their white contemporaries.

In 2009 only 16 per cent of chartered accountants in South Africa were black so this is a national as well as an institutional issue. The Commerce faculty at UCT is viewed as prestigious in terms of results and reputation and its entry requirements are some of the highest in UCT (and South Africa). It has been a challenge to increase access, but also to ensure that students graduate from programmes that have had notoriously high drop out and failure rates.

The majority of black and coloured university students in South Africa come from impoverished, rural or working class backgrounds; they are first-generation university students, with English as their second or third language. These students find themselves in the same classes as students from economically and academically privileged backgrounds. An elite university such as UCT faces two major challenges in teaching and learning practices: firstly, to ensure the success of talented, but often academically ill-prepared students, and secondly, to deal with a very diverse student enrolment in the same programme (different from the case of a university with a more homogenous disadvantaged student body).

Students entering the EDU programme have achieved good school-leaving results and have shown initiative and determination in being admitted to university, despite their disadvantaged backgrounds. However, irrespective of their prior dedication and hopes for their future, most experience a crisis of confidence in the new environment.

After bitter past experience at UCT it has been found that while separate programmes offer important support for a time (usually up to a year), ultimately students have to face the pressures of a challenging degree programme where they are not given extra support. Often students leaving separate programmes



fail or drop out when they join the regular programme because they are not able to keep up with the pace of work or the material.

How does EDU Commerce address the issues? ... the EDU story

The EDU recognised that the standard approach to specialised programmes had a very limited capacity to aid students to adjust to the academic environment. They realised that many of the methods employed had a negative impact on students by reducing them to remedial status. The EDU revolutionised their approach, which now includes a number of key factors that have dramatically altered the academic success and confidence of these students. The focus of the Unit is on building a learning community through a flexible approach that acknowledges the backgrounds and experiences of their students – and embraces diversity and differences.

The Commerce EDU works at multiple levels: provides choice for students to choose to be on the programme, rather than simply 'placed'; excellent teaching and creating an exciting learning environment with outstanding results; multiple configurations of planned degree and curriculum so that students are not homogenized regarding so-called 'disadvantage'; works throughout the degree and at a post-graduate level; works with academic and affective factors relating to the social, emotional and broader aspects of students' lives; creates a value-added experience that develops a range of graduate attributes; builds on the strengths and agency that the students have, transforming our own practices and giving voice and confidence to students to progress successfully.

Good practice in this project has been a springboard for similar practices in the mainstream. These include a forum known as the Commerce Education Group that has met every 2 weeks for the past 15 years. It provides supportive engagement with any issues that pertain to teaching and learning; presentations are mainly from academics in the Commerce Faculty. Other elements of good practice that have been adopted across the faculty include tutor training, a Teaching and Learning Working Group, writing consultancy (working individually, in large classes and with lecturers), student development services (including counselling), and a staff mentoring scheme.

It is important to the faculty that all mainstream academic staff think like teachers as well as accountants (or whatever their discipline is). Partly this is because, while EDU course students have very good teaching in their first year with dedicated EDU lecturers, they complete the rest of their degree with mainstream lecturers and thus these lecturers also have to be able to deal with the diversity in their classes.

Implementation ...how the EDU works

The model described here attempts to move from a deficit model of academic development for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (i.e. by making up deficits the students have in language or other skills) to a model that attempts to



harness students' agency to make them active participants in their studies as well as foster a sense of belonging to a learning community. Rather than earlier models that focussed on 'assimilating' students into pre-defined expectations, this model seeks opportunities to capitalise on the strengths that students bring from their different backgrounds. The results from the innovations are intended to impact on and change the faculty's practices as a whole, to the advantage of all students. The model also provides supportive conditions for students throughout their degree, not just for an initial period or 'add on' support.

Students apply directly to the EDU programme (a positive choice) rather than being 'placed' there because they didn't have enough points to gain entry to the mainstream (seen by some as a stereotype of 'failure'). Although some students who didn't gain entry to the mainstream programme and were given the option of enrolling on the EDU programme rather than not receiving a place at UCT are 'placed' (25-30% of the intake), this is a big difference from support programmes of the past where nearly all the students would have had no option other than an extended programme with no flexibility or recognition of different abilities.

There is a focus on being proactive and reactive to student needs. On admission, students receive individual advice from EDU academic and administrative staff on curricula, financial aid, housing etc. Peer support is an integral part of the community and senior students are encouraged to take on leadership roles and to mentor junior students. Every first-year student is assigned to a senior EDU mentor (3-4 students to one mentor). There is a compulsory weekly small group (15-20 students) course in the first semester (which appears on the degree transcript) with a curriculum designed to support students with the transition to higher education. Staff work with students individually and in groups; professional counselling sessions are available according to need or demand as the year proceeds.

Students in the EDU programme attend compulsory 'Career Discovery' small groups focussed on career direction and the development of graduate attributes. There are also programmes in leadership training, tutor training and staff mentoring (and indeed, acting as a mentor or tutor itself develops important skills). Awards evenings and regular class meetings all give students a 'voice', expression and motivation.

On the social side, outings and events are organised, often by students, and there is an EDU newsletter twice a year.

How do we know it is working?

The EDU is now regarded as the 'flagship' of the Commerce Faculty. The results of the EDU approach speak for themselves. Over time, a fundamental shift has occurred regarding the demand from students to join the programme. Some interesting statistics on the access and success of the EDU are as follows:



- The EDU moved from 40 first year students in 2000 to 282 students for 2016 (1202 total for all cohorts). This equates to 24.5% of all first year students and 49.44% of Black (Black, Coloured, Indian and Chinese) first year students in the Faculty of Commerce.
- First-year results in the EDU programme have mostly out-performed those in the 'mainstream' programme.
- The graduation throughput rate increased rapidly from 40% in 2001 to approximately 78% at the end of 2015. This is far above the national average of 31% for business/ management programmes.
- There has also been an impressive increase in the numbers and percentage pass rates of Education Development students writing professional exams like the Chartered Accountant Board Exams. To date, approximately 320 students have qualified as Chartered Accountants and pass rates for the professional examinations have ranged from 78% to 96%.
- Large bursary programmes make it a condition of bursary recipients to be part of the Education Development Unit. This is an indication of their belief in the value of the programme and the great benefit that it brings to students.

The EDU programme has been successful in mostly removing the stigma previously attached to separate remedial skills programmes by providing a 'value-added' experience throughout the degree, as well as including choice and appropriate placement in combinations of courses in the admissions procedure. This has increased diversity in the programme as well as a variety of curriculum options and has stimulated change in the mainstream.

Mainstream academic staff pay more attention to teaching and learning than they might have done in the past. This is evidenced by multiple evidence relating to attendance at CEG, tutor training, professional mentoring and curriculum content and design.

Associate Professor June Pym has been the Director of the Education Development Unit (Commerce) at the University of Cape Town, South Africa since July 2001. Her leadership has radically increased the size of the unit, the extent, breadth and depth of the work, the graduation rates and the broad graduate competencies and confidence of students. Her involvement in the writing and editing of the book "Surfacing Possibilities: What it means to work with first-generation Higher Education Students" (Pym, J and Paxton, M, eds, 2013), has been pivotal in engaging with the principles that guide work with first generation higher education students. Her research interest and outputs have all been in the field of what makes a difference in the teaching and learning environment of first generation higher education students. She was received numerous awards acknowledging her work, including the Higher Education Teaching and Learning Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA) National Excellence in Teaching and Learning Award in 2014. A book detailing aspects of the EDU experience has been written: J. Pym and M. Paxton (eds), Surfacing Possibilities: What it Means to Work with First-Generation Higher Education Students. 2013 Champaign, Illinois, USA: Common Ground Publishing. ISBN 9781612291925.

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