Project title: Developing a framework for measuring the success of student support programmes at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN)

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1. Aim and Processes

1.1 Introduction and background to the study:

UKZN is a multi-campus institution that enrols approximately 48,000 students annually. In adherence to the ethos of the UKZN Transformation Charter, the university prioritises and targets 75% of its planned enrolments from quintiles 1 to 3 schools. There is a relatively equal representation of students coming from urban versus rural communities. However, most enrolled students are from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and resource-poor settings. As a result, substantive Academic Monitoring and Support (AMS) is required to transition undergraduate students and enable them to achieve and maintain good performance and graduate (throughput).

1.2 Need for the study:

While there are some standard AMS programmes across the Colleges at UKZN, these are offered in different formats, with varying prioritisations and have varied understandings of how to measure programme and student success. The lack of a common framework of measures for programme success impedes our ability to offer holistic and progressive student-focused support programmes. It is also essential for existing student support programmes to be responsive to shifting contextual milieus and national priorities in higher education.

1.3 Objectives of the study:

The study aimed to develop a common framework for measuring the success of student support programmes at UKZN. This framework has the potential to steer us towards provisioning that is more student-focused, meaningful, and responsive, as well augmenting the capabilities of the staff providing the programmes. This would contribute to favourable and successful student academic performance and throughput. The study's objectives were as follows:

a) To identify the UKZN or College specific policy or programme frameworks guiding AMS staffs' work of supporting students and monitoring their academic performance.

b) To identify and describe the specific measures emanating from the policy framework that guide the provision of academic support to students for measuring student academic success.

c) To explain and discuss the extent to which the policy framework enables the measurement of student academic success

1.4 Theoretical approach of the research

Systems Thinking was adopted in this study. The UKZN AMS programme was previously analysed through the lens of Senge's (1990) systems thinking by Paideya & Dhunpath 2018). Systems thinking "has the potential to explain the constituent components of AMS and the extent to which these coalesce to provide coherence, continuity and sustainability" in UKZN, (Paideya & Dhunpath, 2018, p. 37).
of this study.

1.5 Questions answered in the research:

The study was guided by the following research questions:

a) What UKZN or College specific policy or programme frameworks guide your work of supporting students and monitoring their academic performance?

b) What are the specific measures emanating from the policy framework that guide in the provision of academic support to students for measuring student academic success?

c) To what extent does the policy framework enable the measurement of student academic success?

2. Research approach/ methods:

2.1 Choice of a case study

This research was exploratory, descriptive, and adopted a qualitative case study design. The interpretivist paradigm was most suited for this type of enquiry and the research questions raised. The AMS programmes of the four Colleges of UKZN (Humanities, Agriculture, Engineering & Science, Health Sciences, Law & Management Studies) constituted the case study. The AMS programmes are based in the College Deans of Teaching and Learning Offices.

2.2 Target population

The study participants were key staff working in the AMS programme in the four Colleges, and they were able to reflect on their experience, knowledge, and understandings of how to measure programme and student success in four Colleges at UKZN. The sample population was delimited to the AMS Heads, the AMS Coordinators, Academic Development Officers (ADOs) and academic mentors.

2.3 Sampling procedure/framework

The availability of an updated sampling frame, that is the list of AMS staff currently employed in the four Colleges, made it possible to use probability sampling to select a sample of the mentors. Given the large number of mentors in each college, a proportionate stratified random sampling procedure was adopted. The sample was stratified by college. A census sampling frame was adopted for the AMS Heads, Coordinators and ADOs in the four Colleges.

2.4 Sample size / Number(s) of participants

All ADOs, Heads of AMS and Coordinators were interviewed. As noted in Section C a stratified random sample procedure was used to identify participants from the AMS mentor grouping in the colleges.

Table 1: Target population

College	HEAD AMS	ADOs	COORDINATORS	MENTORS
CAES	1	6	1	24
CH	1	14	1	58
CHUM	1	13	3	50
CLMS	1	16	1	72
TOTAL	4	49	6	304

2.5 Recruitment of participants (actual fieldwork)

The AMS Heads in each of the four Colleges were approached to provide the list of staff per category as reflected in Table 1 above.

2.6 Inclusion and exclusion selection criteria

The study excluded the four College Deans of Teaching and Learning because they operate at the strategic level and do no directly provide support to students. The study also excluded the FYE comprehensive programme which was initiated as a pilot project in the current academic year (2022). The Writing Place was excluded because not all Colleges have a Writing Place programme. There are other AMS staff groups that were excluded as they are specific to some Colleges and not all, for example, Hotseat Tutors, Supplemental Instructors, or Supplemental Coordinators.

3. Literature review:

3.1 Measuring student success from AMS programme activities and interventions

Since 2013, annual AMS Colloquia have been held to discuss and reflect on programme interventions, successes, challenges and opportunities with the ultimate objective of increasing student throughput and reducing student exclusion to a minimum. A key theme which emerged from 7th Colloquium was the importance of AMS and the need for a rigorous evidence base to support AMS interventions and practice. (Colloquium 2018).

The invited papers to the 7th Colloquium focused on the following areas of measuring and documenting the impact of AMS interventions on student success; quantitative evaluations of AMS programmes (including uptake), cohort analysis of the effect of AMS on student outcomes (retention, dropout, graduation) among others. Evidence of the positive impact AMS interventions was presented by all the four Colleges of UKZN in the colloquia held in 2018 and 2021. However, evidence of student success

was either discipline or college specific. In the CLMS, 17% of the students who were 'At Risk' 2016 had managed to acquire the maximum credits and move to good academic standing in 2018 (Colloquium, 2018). Similarly, students in the same College who attended at least five sessions were about 9% more likely to graduate in minimum time than those who never attended any session (Colloquium, 2012). One primary objective of the annual AMS colloquia had been the development greater coherence between college-based AMS initiatives that are centralised into a university-wide AMS Unit and intrinsically mainstreamed into all T&L.

4. Achievement and challenges

4.1 Achievements of project

The knowledge gap that this study filled was a tentative framework for measuring student success (across colleges) through AMS programme activities and interventions which were derived from the envisaged AMS institutional infrastructure mentioned earlier and informed by sound empirical research and theoretical grounding.

4.2 Challenges of project

Challenges of AMS programmes include the following among others, staffing, clarity of roles and responsibilities of AMS staff, inconsistency in AMS practices, sustainability (QPA, 2013, Colloquium 2018, Colloquium 2021). Concerning staffing, some Colleges have employed permanent AMS staff which make for continuity while others employ contract staff. It has been argued that "by employing staff on short-term contracts, the institution is adopting what Banathy (1991) (as cited by Paideya & Dhunpath) regards as a reductionist orientation: of providing ad-hoc solutions to an enduring systemic problem (Paideya & Dhunpath, 2018). Addressing these challenges meaningfully constitutes an integral part of the process formulating strategies to mainstream and build a sustainable institutional AMS infrastructure in UKZN. A framework for measurement of student success within and across colleges is an important component of this institutional infrastructure.

4.3 Key achievements, outstanding tasks, and learning points achieved via the TAU3 individual project

4.3.1 Key achievements

Key achievements included the following:

- Mentoring two emerging scholars;
- Working as a community of practice on the digital artifact;
  - Common threads in individual group member projects
- Deeper understanding of student success;
- Deeper understanding of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL), community engagement (CE), and the pedagogy of care; and
- Improved understanding of the higher education teaching landscape.

4.3.2 What still needs to be achieved?

The following still need to be achieved:

- Data from mentors still to be collected and analyzed;

- Framework incomplete without the mentors' data;

- Journals articles to be written;

- Based on findings results to be workshopped with key stakeholders in 4 colleges; and

- Results to be used as evaluation data for improving AMS programmes.

4.3.3 Key learning points

The key learning points include the following:

- Better time management would have made the process less painstaking!!!

- Reflecting on my role as a change agent;

    - Ability to stand back and reflect on my leadership role – *"Am I a transformative leader?"*

    - *Has my teaching facilitator knowledge improved?*

- Managing roles, leader, practitioner;

    - Which hat takes priority?

- Learning to appreciate me more – not losing sleep over the things I cannot control; and

- Gratitude

    - When the right opportunity (TAU fellowship) presents itself take it!

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