

INDIVIDUAL PROJECT-REPORT

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TITLE: IMPLEMENTING CHANGE – FROM GENERIC TO DISCIPLINE SPECIFIC AT THE CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, FS

1. SYNOPSIS OF THE PROJECT

I have reviewed the Academic Literacy Programme (ALC) at the Central University of Technology, Free State (CUT, FS). The ALP at the CUT, FS is a generic course that has to cater for students in four different faculties, that is, Humanities, Engineering and Information Technology, Health and Environmental Sciences as well as Management Sciences.

The project has been conducted as follows: a literature review regarding discipline specific academic literacy programmes; benchmarking and learning from other institutions where discipline specific academic literacy programmes are being used to improve literacy levels among students (proposed visits to UCT, CPUT and UWC-end of August 2015); designing a course and materials for a specific programme at the CUT, FS (Mathematics students in the Faculty of Engineering), having the re-curriculated course and materials evaluated, which the researcher intends piloting in January 2017.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Kaschula (2013), English and Afrikaans are languages of academia and students who do not have these languages as their mother tongue should be assisted to reach a level of academic proficiency. This should assist these students to be successful in their respective academic careers. In layman's terms this means equipping students with reading and writing skills that allow them to communicate with understanding and comprehension in their disciplines.

In a South African context it is generally accepted that many students enter university being underprepared for what is required of them, especially regarding academic literacy levels. Proactive universities are attempting to address this problem by implementing strategies to bridge the gap by means of bridging courses or introducing compulsory modules such as academic literacy to improve the overall success rates of first year students at universities. Van Schalkwyk, Bitzer and Van der Walt (2010) assert that academic literacy acquisition and competence does not flow naturally from being exposed to "disciplinary discourse". The authors have also reached consensus that those academic literacy modules with a discipline specific context could prove to be beneficial to students.

Paxton's (2005) study regarding Integrating Content and Language (ICT) in Economics has revealed that this approach could be beneficial for both students and lecturers. However, a prerequisite for this approach is buy-in from both economic and language experts to be successful. Similarly, if this approach is to be utilized in other departments then both content and language specialists should work together to achieve success.

1.4 THE PROBLEM

The researcher is concerned that the academic literacy levels of first year students stifle their learning to such an extent that they fail their first year or drop out from university. In addition, the way in which the current AL programme is implemented as a generic course could also be ineffective. The aforementioned is compounded because there are no full time appointments, tutors are appointed on an annual basis but as soon as they find permanent employment they leave the programme, tutor training is lacking, and finding suitably qualified tutors is problematic and absenteeism of students is a major challenge.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This research project has been informed by literature on generic and discipline specific approaches to dealing with academic literacy. In addition, course material from Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), University of Cape Town (UCT), University of the Western Cape (UWC) and the University of the Free State (UFS) institutions were evaluated to determine whether it would be suitable to use at the CUT, FS. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts in academic literacy. The information obtained from the interviews will be used to formulate course outcomes and objectives as well as the formulation of a course outline.

1.4.2 RESEARCH QUESTION

- How successful is the ALP at the CUT, FS in meeting the outcomes of the course?

1.4.3 ASSUMPTIONS

There are gaps in the ALP programme at the CUT, FS which will necessitate implementing new strategies in order to make the course more effective than what it currently is.

4. FINDINGS

The findings below are with reference to the qualitative part of the project. The researcher visited the following institutions: University of the Western Cape (UWC), University of Cape Town (UCT), Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) and the University of the Free State (UFS). It is evident that all tertiary institutions have implemented an approach to address academic literacy at their respective institutions. The approaches are somewhat different but are all aimed at improving the academic literacy of first year students at university and in so doing address the high failure rate among first year students. The academics who were interviewed are in agreement that first time entering students at tertiary institutions are not equipped with the knowledge and skills they need to be successful at university.

A brief overview of academic literacy at the different institutions indicates the following: At the UFS the academic literacy teaching for first year students are managed the Centre for Teaching and learning. The course is different for the different faculties. The learning outcomes for the course include the following: using a particular strategy to organise and comprehend texts, identifying and understanding the functions of discourse markers in texts, being able to make

inferences on a given text, accurately completing comprehension-based and problem-based tasks in the mode of written comprehension, extending and improving the vocabulary of students, summarising main ideas of a written text and taking notes and learning how to prepare for written texts.

The academic literacy module is a compulsory module at UWC in the Faculty of Teacher Education. They do not use a single approach to improving academic writing skills of students. The course is structured in such a manner that it utilizes a discipline specific approach but embedded is a skills based approach that focuses primarily on the acquisition of skills. The content of the course has the following outcomes in mind: academic socialization which with orientation to buildings, location of venues, checking e-mails regularly, introduction to discourses, taking responsibility for your studies and time management ; academic reading and writing but not English proficiency; academic writing especially argumentative and discursive but not really narrative writing; focus on introductions, body and conclusion, transitions, paragraph writing; exposure to journal articles; In-text referencing; bibliography-Harvard method used in social sciences and APA used in Natural Sciences; exposure to academic texts in line with field of study; introduction to concepts such as ontology, epistemology, pedagogy, scholarship, scholarly, field of enquiry and; unpacking of journal articles. The faculty has 1 permanent Academic Literacy co-ordinator, 1 tutorial co-ordinator and 10 tutors who are employed on a part-time basis. The academic literacy coordinator presents lectures to approximately 250-350 students. Work is then then consolidated in tutorial classes which are compulsory. Assessments include two major assignments which is essay based, one online assessment and shorter assessments given during tutorial classes.

At CPUT a discipline specific approach to teaching academic literacy is utilised. classes approximately 50 divided into two groups –deal with approximately 20 students, all students in arts course do the same work until September when they choose a specific discipline, permanent staff but limited, different departments responsible for own academic literacy, different faculties do not communicate with each other regarding course content-working in silos and the duration of course is one year.

At CUT, FS a generic approach is still being used. All four faculties receive the same tuition. The course is compulsory and is managed by the Department of Communication Sciences. There are 32 tutors who have been appointed. They receive training at the beginning of the year. The course outcomes include but are not limited to understanding and engaging in academic texts, developing and improving students' vocabulary, reading for study purposes, being able to argue a point, paraphrasing, summarising. Overall it is aimed at assisting students to cope with reading and writing demands at higher education institutions.

At UCT the academic literacy is managed by the Centre for Higher Education Development. There are permanently appointed staff members who work in the centre. The course focuses on knowledge and understanding practice, the development of skills in learning, listening, reading and note-taking, developing skills for academic essay writing, assisting students for examination preparation as well as group facilitation and interaction. It is discipline specific and lecturers in CHED

work closely with course convenors in the disciplines to develop adjunct academic literacy modules or to integrate AL into the first year courses.

1.6 INTO THE FUTURE

The aforementioned findings have provided guidance for the researcher to compile a draft study guide that will be used as a pilot study to be implemented in 2017. The HOD for Mathematics and the HOD of Communication Sciences are designing a course specifically targeting Mathematics students in the Faculty of Engineering. We have already had several meetings. A discipline specific approach will be used for these students. The duration of the course will be 1 year. A tutor from Academic literacy will be appointed for these students as well as a tutor for Mathematics. They will jointly present the course. The course will be managed by the HOD for Mathematics and The HOD for Communication Sciences. One of the problem areas identified by the Mathematics HOD is a problem with vocabulary. This aspect will be embedded in the course and all texts will come from the Mathematics textbook that has been prescribed for the aforementioned students. .

1.6 RECOMMENDATIONS

The researcher recommends that the CUT moves from a generic approach to a more discipline specific approach where content and language are integrated to improve the overall academic literacy of students.