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IMPLEMENTATION OF A COMPREHENSIVE STUDENT-CENTRED APPROACH TO EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The term student-centred learning is widely used in the teaching and learning literature and many terms such as flexible learning, experiential learning and self-directed learning have been linked with student-centred learning. The key factor is to focus on the student, on his or her learning experiences and development, well-being and retention so that institutional learning programmes are delivered in ways that are demonstrably in the student's best interests. However, the author is of the opinion that the implementation of a comprehensive student-centred approach to education requires that all role-players in the educational process must be focused on student success. This study explores strategies to introduce a comprehensive student-centred approach to education at the Central University of Technology, Free State.

Keywords: Student-centred approach, comprehensive educational approach, paradigm shift, total quality management, quality management in education

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1. Introduction

The term student-centred learning is widely used in the teaching and learning literature. Many terms have been linked with student-centred learning, such as flexible learning, experiential learning and self-directed learning.

The exhausted term "student-centred learning" can mean different things to different people. In addition, in practice it is also described by a range of terms and this has led to confusion surrounding its implementation. The paradigm shift from a lecturer-centred to a more student- centred approach to education places the student in the centre of the educational process. The lecturer-focused transmission of information formats, such as lecturing, have begun to be increasingly criticised and this has paved the way for a widespread growth of student-centred learning as an alternative approach to education.

According to C'Sullivan (2007), one of the many pitfalls with the implementation of student- centred learning is the fact that many institutions and lecturing staff claim to put student- centred learning into practice, but in reality they are not.

2. The Central University of Technology Viewpoint on Student-Centred Learning

The theoretical standing of student-centred learning on the formulation of a single comprehensive definition is absent in the literature. However, it appears to relate primarily to the constructivist view of learning in the importance it places on activity, discovery and independent learning (Carlile & Jordan, 2005).

In light of the above, Lea et al. (2003), summarise some of the literature on student-centred learning.

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Student-centred learning refers to:

- The reliance on active rather than passive learning.
- Increased responsibility and accountability on the part of the student.
- An increased sense of autonomy in the learner.
- An interdependence between student and lecturer.
- Mutual respect within the learner lecturer relationship.
- A reflective approach to the teaching and learning process on the part of both lecturer and student.

The key factor is to focus on the student, on his or her learning and development, well-being and retention so that our programmes and support services are delivered in ways that are demonstrably in the student's best interests. All the role-players in the educational process (academic and support services) must be focused on student success, because it takes a whole university community to educate a single student!

CUT's viewpoint should be to develop a comprehensive student support system (a holistic approach) to provide the intellectual, social, emotional and physical support that individual students may need to succeed in the higher education environment.

3. Applying the Service Quality Equation

Brenders et al. (2008) argues that university life involves many interdependent processes and services (service delivery systems) that need to operate synchronously and reliably over a long period of time. The service delivery systems at CUT (see Table 1) may poorly serve students and therefore be a critical factor in student dissatisfaction and the enhancement of a student-centred approach in several ways.

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Table 1. Service delivery systems at CUT

Service Delivery System	Academically Driven	Support Service Driven
Supplementary instruction programme		X
Extended curriculum programme	X	X
Information literacy programme		X
Academic Language Proficiency Programme	X	X
Student evaluation of teaching		X
Work Integrated Learning	X	X
Online student support (Web-based courses)	X	X
Orientation of first-year students	X	X
Student satisfaction surveys		X
Wellness programme		X
Counselling services		X
Development of study skills - workshops		X
Reading development		X
Career development training		X
Curriculum development & re-curriculation of programmes	X	X

The nature of CUT's transformation requires steady and determined development of its capacities - especially its human resources. The regulation(s)/manual(s) managing or regulating each service delivery system may be more in line to its own internal policies, procedures, constrains and self-perceived problems than to CUT's vision and mission in which it is embedded. A higher education service delivery chain (from marketing till graduation) can result in poor service unless a systematic view of the overall process is appreciated and understood. What really matters to students, the outcomes they ultimately receive, will not be optimized at the sites of service unless the service is understood systematically within an institutions service mission (Heskett et al., 1997).

The value delivered by CUT to students is best seen through the eyes of students as they move through a typical day, term, semester or academic career. If procedures and problems multiply, the value of the services for students decreases. It is important to

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understand that students are not passive consumers of services, but interactive participants in the service delivery process. Their perceptions of the aims and motivations behind the institutions student service policies and procedures will influence their contribution to the service delivery equation, both in what they expect and in their strategies to get it.

In strategising a student-centred learning approach to education at CUT, focus group discussions were held with staff members in the Schools of Communication Sciences, Health Technology, Radiography, Biomedical Technology, Electrical and Computer Systems Engineering, Government Management and Entrepreneurship and Business Development. The same questions were used during each focus group discussion and it became clear that the following aspects should be taken into consideration to make the subject matter understandable to students:

- Lecturing staff should know how to apply theory into practices – they need practical skills, didactical skills and industrial knowledge.
- We are serving the most diverse group of students that higher education has ever seen and lecturing staff should know how to interact with students.
- The attendance of subject related conferences and seminars by lecturing staff are very important to stay abreast of their field of study.
- Directors of School should make sure that lecturing staff make use of teaching methodologies applicable in their field of study.
- Student assistants should be available to assist fellow students with academic and non-academic responsibilities.
- Students should be engaged in technology – they need 24/7 technology accessibility.
- There is no substitute for spending face-to-face time with students in class.
- Every CUT employee is a valuable part of student academic success.

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4. Towards A Comprehensive Approach for Quality

It is evident from literature that an approach for quality management in higher education will have to be more comprehensive (holistic) to effectively meet the requirements of a student- centred and quality driven institution. In developing a comprehensive approach, a clear distinction has to be made between the university support services and the academic/lecturing staff community (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2007).

To the support service functions in a university, the general features of an industrially applied Total Quality Management (TQM) model, focusing on the products of delivery by measuring, monitoring and continuously improving the support service processes are quite appropriate. At a theoretical level, they have been four models (Transformative Model; Engagement Model of Programme Quality; University of Learning Model and a Model for a Responsive University) to enhance the Quality Management in Education (QME) at the academic level – each with its own unique perspectives on educational quality (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2002).

The need for distinct approaches to the support service functions and academic areas are based on their distinctiveness of emphasis. In the support service, the student is clearly the customer and the focus of all processes. In the teaching and learning functions, students play the key role of a participant and the focus is on the attribute of their learning, as determined by the global parameters of content and resources governing the curriculum design and the parameters of delivery and assessment practices (Vazzana et al.).

5. Implementation Strategies

Smith and McCann (2009) indicated that in spite of the structural difference in the scope of the TQM and QME processes, there is a substantial commonality of requirements in the

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implementation phase. Both processes focus on the well-being of the student, while collaboration is a key requirement in both.

The question arises what structures are currently in place to monitor and evaluate the implementation of TQM and QME practices at CUT? In other words, what functional quality assurance criteria exist to enhance student-centeredness. An investigation into support service quality assurance practices revealed that the majority of support service departments are never or seldom subjected to any form of continuous formal quality assurance evaluation - to ensure quality and continuous improvement in support services to students. Discussions with four support service heads of department indicated that they support the idea of continuous quality assurance evaluations, but emphasised that it should be conducted in a professional manner. They indicated that Total Quality Management processes should be implemented in the activities with the accompanied strategies listed in Table 2.

Focus group discussions were held with academic staff members in the schools, indicated in paragraph 4, with regard to the implementation of the principle of QME in the teaching and learning process. They all agreed that to enhance the quality in education, the question on "how to define excellence in teaching" must be answered before one can proceed with any kind of quality evaluation. However, the problem with this question is that it may not be answered in absolute terms. A major reason for not having a useful and practical definition of excellence in teaching, for example, is therefore that teaching may be too broad a concept to be limited by a single definition – as may be the case with the term "student-centred learning". Excellence in teaching may also varies according to discipline, course design and level of lecturer and student experience. A more useful way of thinking about excellence in teaching (a student-centred approach) is in relative terms: To what extent has improvement in practise revealed an individual's capacity for continual growth, development and intrinsic instructional worth to the faculty or school? They all agreed that the existing QME activities

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and strategies, mentioned in Table 2, contribute to a more student-centred process to teaching and learning quality.

Table 2. Summary of TQM and QME quality assurance

Total Quality Management (TQM) For Support Services		**Quality Management in Education (QME) Teaching & Learning Practices (Academia)**	
Activities	*Strategies*	*Activities*	*Strategies*
Functional activity audits.	To conduct internal audits of all relevant support services.	Teaching and learning practices.	To conduct internal audits according to HEQC criteria.
Quality assurance surveys.	To conduct first year/senior student surveys of all relevant support services.	Student surveys.	To conduct first year and senior student surveys and disseminate the outcomes for correctional purposes.
Functional activity evaluations.	To conduct student evaluations of all relevant support services functional activities.	Student evaluations	To conduct online student evaluations of teaching and subject content.
Vacancies.	To full all essential support service vacancies.	Mentorship programme.	To develop and implement a mentorship programme for newly appointed academic staff.
Strategic planning.	To conduct strategic planning sessions for all support services.	Curriculation / re-curriculation.	To ensure that all programmes measure up to HEQF specifications.
		Staff development.	To assist academic staff to develop their didactical knowledge, skills and abilities.
		Academic leadership.	To enrol Deans, Directors of School and Programme Heads for formal leadership programmes.

6. Some Reflections

In the 21st century, student access and student learning and development must not be constrained by traditional concepts. These concepts must be expanded to prepare students for a global society.

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Historically, access has been defined as providing students with educational opportunities at affordable cost. This definition must broaden to embrace the idea of "access to success." The concept of access involves inter alia creating and maintaining a system that focuses on the academic preparation of students, the effectiveness of admissions policies, the institutional flexibility required to meet the needs of our students, and the enhancement of student support services.

The key to enhancing learning and development of all students hinges on the ability of CUT student support services structures and academic management to create a superior learner- centered educational environment. This environment should be academically challenging and stimulating, engage participants in active and collaborative learning experiences, foster productive interaction between students and academic staff, offer diverse educational opportunities, and provide a range of support services that promote academic success. This expanded concept of a learning environment also considers the changing nature of work and its influence on how students are prepared for their chosen profession.

Students must have sufficient access to the resources and learning experiences necessary to achieve their full potential as individuals. To facilitate this opportunity, the implementation of a learner-centered approach to education is of utmost importance.

7. Some Reflections

The title of this paper, Implementation of a comprehensive student-centred approach to education, suggests that the CUT must create an environment that supports the student as a whole person. It should meet the individual needs of a broad range of students who have different levels of knowledge, skills and cultural backgrounds. The development and implementation of a student-centred approach to education, although not an easy task, could play a significant role in enhancing the overall quality of an institutions teaching and learning experience. However, part of the success of such an approach rests on whether it addresses the

needs of a particular institution, whether the system can be owned by the entire institutional fraternity and whether it delivers the expected results.

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