

# **Fact or fantasy? Implementing Supplemental Instruction in an ODL context, the case of University of South Africa (UNISA)**

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## **Abstract**

The study contributes towards an on-going University of South Africa (UNISA) agenda on “High Risk” modules and challenges of reducing high attrition rates especially among first year students (UNISA, 2010). There are many efforts aimed at addressing the challenge of high failure and dropout rates at UNISA but to a greater extent many of them have not performed as expected. Many institutions continue to report high attrition rates among distance education students (Nash, 2005). At UNISA the figure stands at 59%. This study proposes the use of Supplemental Instruction (SI) as the most effective validated intervention programme to improve students’ success. However we can mention that some of the reasons that contribute to students’ high drop outs rates among distance learning students include poor direction and feedback on assignments, general university preparation, lack of guidance and information prior to enrolment, perceived lack of support from lecturers, problems with time management and students trying to accomplish too much on their own.

Some research shows that distance education is not easy and that it requires the same amount of work demanded by face-to-face studies (Basaza, Natalie and Wright, 2010: 89).

**Key terms: Supplemental Instruction, Open distance learning.**

## **Proposal**

### **Purpose of the study**

This is an exploratory study aimed at establishing the feasibility of implementing Supplemental Instruction (SI) at the University of South Africa as a critical strategic intervention to contain high student failure and dropout rates in certain modules in high risk modules that have a performance history or track record of being failed over a period of time, say five years or so and thus negatively impacting on retention of students in a university system. SI is a mainstream academic support system for students in high risk modules. The students receive support from trained SI leaders (students who have already completed the module successfully) in small, informal groups. SI is a validated most effective academic strategy in curbing failure rates among students especially at first year first entry level in a university and it has been found that implementing it as an academic strategy improves students’ performance and their retention in the system. One thing unique about this strategy is that it is a student peer

to peer learning strategy, employing the services of former “at risk” modules students who have successfully completed its work as academic leaders. Utilising this supplemental Instruction will help close the gap, specifically between students’ admissions into certain modules and their completion and graduation from these modules. This study is unique in that it focuses on individual course-completion rates but with the understanding that performance in any one module impacts on performance in a learning programme and performance of an institution since the issue of performance is both systematic and systemic.

## **Problem Statement**

The problem that this study is addressing is performance in “High Risk” modules. Poor performance and failure eventually leads to high attrition rates, which is what UNISA is experiencing. This university has in place all manner of learner support, mediated and non-mediated, high and low technology to support learning and teaching; tutorials, assessment, face-to-face and online discussions and tutors, the list goes on and on. But the problem is not fading, meaning therefore there is more to students’ high failure rates in some modules. Based on this our assumption is that the problem has to do with curricula offerings, specifically some content within these offerings. With experience there are certain curricula components that have tendency of being difficult and problematic, despite the measures a lecturer might have tried to put in place. This study therefore proposes that other means rather than teacher initiated or run could be tried to see whether they would work, for instance subject and student centred academic intervention.

## **Student attrition rates**

Research suggests that there is no one remedy for students’ attrition (Kember, 1995). Kember proposes that distance education institutions should approach the attrition problem systematically and systemically. The systematic approach to the attrition problem would mean that any educational institution faced with this problem and plans addressing it should carefully design and carry out interventions step by step, from the beginning to the end and should involve all stakeholders within the institutions having a stake in students’ tuition and learning. Systemic approach on the other hand implies that any change in the system will have an impact on other components or larger parts of the system as a chain of events.

## **Supplemental Instruction Explained**

Studies in Open Distance Learning (ODL) and metacognition suggest that students should assume the role of “self-regulated learners” to both persist in college and master difficult academic subject matter (Weinstein and Stone, 1993). Supplemental Instruction is a collaborative learning intervention for enhancing students’ understanding of course material and for improving students’ overall learning and critical problem

solving skills. The effectiveness of SI lies in the fact that it is focused on modules/courses “at-risk”, not to students “at risk”, and also participation in this programme is voluntary and as such it does not stigmatise participating students. Normally most academic interventions addressing failure rates tend to stigmatise those who participate in them and as a result many students usually choose not to participate in them, at their detriment. It is also worth mentioning that with SI any registered students in an “at risk” course is free to participate for the main aim of improving their grades, that is, it is open to lower performers as well as high performers. The lower achievers definitely benefit more but high achievers also benefit to a great extent in that participating in SI allows these students to perform to even higher levels. It is because of this feature of being non-remedial, that students tend to participate in SI in large numbers.

In the Supplemental programme students as peer facilitators/leaders work together with a course lecturer to prepare the content of SI sessions. The understanding behind SI is that lecturers through their experience are aware of contents within their modules that have the tendency of being problematic, year-in-year-out, and despite the academic strategies that a lecturer might have practiced to improve students’ performance, students continue performing dismally in these parts of the module. SI leaders/facilitators do not in any way repeat the lecturer’s whole presentation but rather only specific challenging aspects of the course. As we indicated earlier student leaders/facilitators are students identified in collaboration with the course lecturers as having performed satisfactorily and completed the “at risk” course. Of great importance also is to mention that individual “at risk” modules’ participation in the programme is sanctioned by departmental leadership with clear knowledge of the course lecturer/s, it is made clear that the lecturer is not being targeted because he or she is deficient in her/his work as a lecturer. With this approach too no one lecturer is stigmatised.

The SI coordinator and the departmental leadership identify senior students or interested others recommended by the course coordinator to serve as SI leaders. Students identified to serve as SI leaders would have successfully completed the target course themselves and have an overall performance percentage of more than 65%, have accepted interpersonal and communications skills needed to lead others. In addition SI leaders have to attend all course sessions, read all course materials, understand given learning tasks and conduct an appropriate number of SI sessions throughout the semester. Lastly SI supervisors continuously monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the SI programme, in a contact university, observing SI sessions, establishing attendance and assessment data. Supervisors meet regularly with SI leaders to discuss the effectiveness of tutorial strategies used and group dynamics observed during SI sessions. At the end of the course or semester the SI coordinator and SI supervisors undertake an overall evaluation of the success of SI sessions based on SI attendance rates, variations in end of semester grades between SI participants and non-participants and successful course completion by SI participants.

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