

ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTIONS IN TEACHING AND LEARNING – DO WE KNOW WHAT OUR STUDENTS NEED?

Dr Nombulelo Phewa, Tuition and Facilitation of Learning, Unisa
NPhewa@unisa.ac.za

Introduction

In July 2011, Unisa students who had registered for the second semester for the course ACN203 were requested to participate in a pilot study which was a diagnostic assessment of their academic literacy needs. 156 students heeded the call and took the test online. The test items were categorised into skills clusters, which were further categorised into competencies that were assessed. Students' performance in each of these skills clusters was represented by means of a percentage, and the same applied to competencies. Although the cut-off point had been determined as 50%, this quantity was not cast in stone and could be changed should the academics concerned wish to do so. It was based on the performance of the lowest quintile of this cohort. The assessment scores were analysed with the aid of a computer program referred to as classical item analysis (CIA). This program helped to highlight the tool's performance and thus enabled a redevelopment process to improve the tool. The second version of the tool was scheduled for piloting in the first semester of 2012. After the first semester's registration period, students were contacted by various means with a request to participate in the pilot study. 422 students responded to the call, took the test online and immediately received responses: firstly, their overall total score and secondly, correspondence indicating that they would be contacted by an e-Tutor with further information relating to the test results.

Findings

1. Management Accounting is a numeracy-based subject, and our assumption was that those students who performed poorly in this test would be experiencing a struggle with the language proficiency skills clusters of the tool rather than the numeracy-oriented ones. To our surprise, the contrary proved to be the case. We have found it interesting that most of the students scoring below 50% in the skills clusters assessed performed poorly in the quantitative and reading literacies. Most students seem to be struggling with the skills clusters "reading for meaning" and "understanding information presented visually", although poor performance in the skills cluster "understanding of basic numeracy" also seems to affect quite a sizeable number.
2. The finding we illustrate below corroborates the first finding, in that the competencies where this cohort seems to be experiencing difficulties are the reading, visual and numerical competencies, contrary to our assumptions. We illustrate this in Table 3, which is also translated into a histogram in Figure 2, for the same purpose of visual clarity, as mentioned previously.

3. A third finding, which also resonates with the findings of the previous pilot (second semester 2011), is that even those students whose overall total score is well above the cut-off point, have indicated that they experience some difficulties in certain areas that were assessed. These would have been easily hidden or camouflaged by the high total score. This finding further strengthens the need for diagnostic assessments to help not only the overtly struggling students, but also to enhance the performance of those who are not usually or ordinarily perceived as being in need of academic development support.

We attach a schedule of students' results, indicating the skills clusters and competencies that the test assessed. We have indicated such cases by highlighting them in yellow, with the cells indicating areas of low competency in red.

The schedule of results also illustrates the overall total score for each individual learner. The seven skills clusters are represented numerically as 1 to 7 because writing out the headings in full would take too much space; these are as indicated in both the table and figure above.

Conclusion

This study has found that the present cohort seems to be experiencing difficulties in the areas of reading and visual literacy as well as numeracy. We are planning to make a presentation on this report at the next CEMS e-Tutor Pilot meeting, where we will enable our stakeholders to engage us on these findings. We would like to state that the recommendations we provide here are not exhaustive, but will be subject to discussion after such presentation.

Having said that, we would like to recommend that:

- I. The students concerned be referred to academic literacy programmes which are implemented in 14 regional offices. This service is also available electronically; the students just need to register as users by making use of the following e-mail address: acalit@unisa.ac.za ;
- II. E-Tutors be given the schedules indicating their allocated students' performance on this test, with a view to helping them enhance their skills, especially in the areas highlighted in red;
- III. Lecturers concerned should "beef up" the academic development support needed in the learning materials. DCLD support may be sourced for this initiative; and
- IV. DISS may have to be requested to organise training for the e-Tutors, especially in addressing the students' academic development needs as indicated by the results of this test.