



Vaal University of Technology

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First Year Experience Senate Report

January to June 2016

Centre for Academic Development

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Manager: First Year Experience

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1. Orientation 2016

1.1 Aim of the programme

Orientation 2016 kicked off on the 15th of January 2016, and was concluded on the 3rd of February 2016. The overall aim of the programme was to promote positive adjustment to the university.

1.2 Academic, sport and recretaional programmes

The faculty orientation programmes were aimed at introducing students to the dean, heads of departments and lecturers, disseminate programme specific information, promote positive relationships between faculty and students, develop skills that promote academic success, create a welcoming climate, orientate students to the university environment, including all student support services, and familiarise students with the campus environment.

The sport and recreational programme set itself out to introduce students to the sporting codes, student organisations, and student support services. The design of the programme allowed for students to interact with the various stakeholders. As such, the stakeholders (e.g. Campus Clinic, HIV/Aids Unit, Student Counselling, the Technology Transfer and Innovation Directorate (TTI)) had the opportunity to market their services and/or products. Student organisations were also given the opportunity to introduce their organisations. The group BOTC (Back Of The Caff) entertained the students at the time of the programme. BOTC is a group of artistic VUT students who like to share their talents.

Senior students that were selected to become mentors across all faculties were trained on the 27th to 29th of November 2015 to assist with orientation 2016 activities in the various faculties, including the social and recreational programmes. A refresher training took place on the 12th to 14th of January 2016. A total number of 110 mentors were trained. The mentors were trained on the following topics: relationship building, transition, goal setting, facilitation skills, learning styles, diversity, time management, group dynamics, basic counselling skills, and motivation.

1.3 Orientation framework

A framework was developed in 2015 to guide the design and implementation of orientation 2016. Following is Table 1 that gives an outline of the framework.

Table 1: Orientation framework

CAD's role and responsibilities	Faculties roles and responsibilities (per faculty)
1. A coordinating and support role.	1. Establish an orientation committee and appoint a coordinator.
2. Assist faculties with programme design.	2. Design and develop a faculty programme in collaboration with CAD and the other support services and stakeholders.
3. Coordinate and provide funds for the orientation programme activities.	3. Request the funding needed for programme implementation from CAD (include employees needed to assist with the implementation of the program, e.g. events coordinator).
4. Train the group leaders (mentors) to assist with orientation.	4. Attend the orientation progress meetings (e.g. October, November, December and January) to report on the programme design and the progress made on organising the event.
5. Graphic design support (e.g. faculty orientation programmes, posters, etc.).	5. Implement the Orientation 2016 programme.
6. Assist with the marketing of the orientation programme.	6. Assist in evaluating the programme.
7. Evaluation of the programme.	

The framework were presented on the 2nd of September 2015 to the representative of the four faculties and the support divisions. Stakeholders have agreed to work within the parameters of the framework.

1.4 Implementation outcomes

Table 2 indicates the student attendance per faculty programme.

Table 2: Faculty orientation student attendance

Faculty orientation	Date	No of students	No of students	No of students
Applied and Computer Sciences	15 January	70		
Management Sciences (Day 1)	25 January	379		
Management Sciences (Day 2)	26 January		353	
Management Sciences (Day 3)	27 January		243	
Engineering and Technology	27 January	498		
Human Sciences	1 February	736		
TOTAL		1683	596	2279

Table 3 indicates the student attendance of the sport and recreation programme.

Table 3: Sport and recreation programme student attendance

Sport and recreation programme	Date	No of students
Management Sciences	29 January	122
Engineering and Technology	29 January	149
Human Sciences	30 January	231
Applied and Computer Sciences	30 January	181
TOTAL		412

Faculties were receptive in terms of working with CAD towards developing and implementing an orientation programme within the parameters of the proposed framework. Five faculty staff members were appointed to take the role of coordinating the academic orientation programmes on behalf of their faculties, and to serve as a link between faculty and CAD. Since the framework was in a phase of been piloted, clarification of roles and responsibilities were ongoing. Generally, a balanced approach with respect to role taking and providing support was followed.

Based on the student attendance statistics, it was evident that there is a correlation between student attendance and the date of programme implementation. For example, the Faculty of Human Science's orientation event took place on the first day of the official commencement of the academic year (1 February 2016), with 736 students attending. In contrast, the Faculty of Applied Science's orientation event took place on 15 January, with only 70 students attending.

1.5 Recommendations

It was concluded that the orientation programme design and implementation have improved. It was also agreed that it had succeeded in reaching first year students, and addressing issues important to the adjustment of the first year students. The success may be ascribed to the new framework that guided the design and implementation of orientation 2016 that facilitated a higher level of commitment and support from faculty. However, in order to improve the programme, and to increase student attendance, the university will have to give more attention to

- 1.5.1 Ongoing explanation of the working framework to ensure clarity on roles and responsibilities,
- 1.5.2 The timing of the faculty orientation programmes (e.g. implementation during the first week of the official start of the academic programme; ensure that registration process are concluded at the time of programme implementation),
- 1.5.3 Improved programme design (ensure that all faculty programmes reflect the most common areas of emphasis within the context of best practices in orientation programmes; educate faculty about best orientation practices),
- 1.5.4 Advocacy for, and development of the roles and responsibilities of student mentors in faculty orientation programmes,
- 1.5.5 Student Support Services to play a more leading role in organising and rolling out the social and recreational programme for first year students,

1.5.6 Availability of the *My first Year Student Pocket Buddy* in both print and electronic formats, and

1.5.7 Provide first year students with support materials on relevant topics during the orientation period that are readily available to them (e.g. FYE Online Resource/Blackboard module).

Finally, the university may also consider adding a module to the first year curriculum to address specific matters pertaining to orientation and adjustment to university.

2. First year student motivational seminars

2.1 The aim of the seminars

The main aims of the motivational seminars were first, to create awareness about the academic and psycho-social support available to them, second, to inspire them through alumni's success stories, third, to create a sense of togetherness and belonging through art and culture, and fourth, to transfer skills so as to enhance their academic performance.

2.2 Implementation outcome

The venue for all the seminars was a tent that was erected in the open space between GW-building and K-block. The theme for the seminars was *The sky is the limit...* Alumni from the different faculties were invited to tell their stories, motivate the students, and to give guidelines to students on how to succeed in their studies.

Table 4 indicates the student attendance statistics for the faculty seminar programmes

Faculty	Date	No of students
Management Sciences	11 February	188
Applied and Computer Sciences	12 February	280
Human Sciences	17 February	435
Engineering and Technology	19 February	181
TOTAL		1084

Generally, student attendance of the seminars has improved. This may be ascribed to a higher level of commitment and support from faculty, as well regarding the seminars as an extended orientation activity.

2.3 Recommendations

- 2.3.1 Embed the seminars in the faculty academic plans as a standing activity.
- 2.3.2 Ongoing commitment and support from faculty.
- 2.3.3 Evaluate the seminars in order to optimise the programme design and implementation.

3. FYE faculty action plans

The FYE faculty action plan framework identified the following five key FYE project objectives:

- 3.1 To improve first year students' retention and success rates.
- 3.2 To capacitate staff to teach, mentor, guide and refer first year students.
- 3.3 To facilitate multidisciplinary collaboration in order to improve the first year experience.
- 3.4 To increase the student and staff pride in studying and working at VUT.
- 3.5 To advocate for improving the infrastructure of VUT to meet the basic agreed standards (e.g. functional IT systems, maintenance and cleaning).

Next is Table 5 that summarises the sub-projects.

Table 5: Summary of FYE sub-projects

Sub-project 1: First year students	Sub-project 2: First year student lecturers	Sub-project 3: Referral and support system	Sub-project 4: Project evaluation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish faculty FYE committees. • Design and implement faculty orientation programs. • Profile students (e.g. NBTs, LEC, BUSSE). • Provide faculty (HODs) with departmental profiles. • Identify, refer and support at risk students/groups. • Feedback to faculty about referred at risk students/groups. • Class attendance. • Student consultation with lecturers. • Mentoring and tutoring programmes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess first year student lecturers developmental needs, including soft skills training. • Conduct workshops to address developmental needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inform first year student lecturers about support services and programmes. • Faculty to identify at risk students. • Support services to design a referral and feedback system. • Inform first year student lecturers' about the referral and feedback system. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate the existing FYE programme to see what is working and not working. • Benchmark FYE best practices. • Redesign the programme where required. • Add other components as needed. • Involve first year student lectures and clarify their roles and responsibilities. • Measure the impact of the programme. • Evaluate, document and update the programme.

In order to develop a specific FYE action plan for the Faculty of Engineering and Technology, a workshop was conducted on the 1st of April 2016 with stakeholders from faculty to formalize and/or develop the action items.

Moreover, so as to develop the FYE action plan sub-project implementation guidelines, a consultation process was followed. The Faculty of Engineering and Technology, and stakeholders from the support divisions, were consulted on the 20th of May 2016 to develop an implementation guideline framework. The framework was integrated into the faculty action plan.

4. Staff development workshops for first year student lecturers

Two staff development workshops were conducted. Following is an overview of the workshops.

4.1 No Fear: A basic workshop for first year student lecturers' on how to go about students with disabilities.

Teaching is hard work and remains a complex and demanding task, and requires university lecturers to fulfill a multiplicity of roles. The VUT community of higher learning wants to empower students with disabilities to achieve success. Having a student with a disability creates additional demands, and lecturers may sometimes feel that they are not adequately equipped to go about the challenges that these students may bring. Great lecturers, however, work tirelessly to create challenging and nurturing environments for their students. For that reason, this workshop set itself out to enhance first year student lecturers' knowledge on what "disability" entails, explored different types of disabilities, looked into the challenge for lecturers working with disability students, and shared information on how to expand the classroom and environment for these students.

The workshop was conducted on the 1st of March 2016, and facilitated by Ms Joanne Barnard, Registered Counsellor at the VUT Student Counselling and Support department. Mr George Mvalo and Mr Mziwoxolo Nkwekwezi also spoke about the role of the Social Justice and Transformation department towards disability. Students with disabilities also shared their stories. A total of 18 participants attended. The participants were mostly lecturing staff from the Faculties of Human Sciences and Applied and Computer Sciences.

Participants indicated that they found the workshop relevant and informative, and identified the following aspects of the workshops as most useful: facts on, and myths about disability; different types of disabilities; challenges for lecturers; and listening to, and engaging with students with disabilities.

Moreover, at the time of the workshop, the participants indicated a need for a workshop on special learning needs.

4.2 The good university teacher is skilled more than a lecturer: Basic counselling skills for first year student university teachers

The workshop was a practical workshop that introduced first year student lecturers to the *what* and *why* of basic counselling, since they are mostly the first line of contact with students before they connect them with the relevant support they need (e.g. academic, emotional, finances, etc.). The workshop also provided information on the referral and feedback processes once students were connected with the relevant in-house support systems.

The workshop was conducted on the 15th of March 2016, and facilitated by Ms Veronica Moodley, Senior Psychologist at the VUT Student Counselling and Support department.

A total of 19 participants attended. The participants were mostly lecturing staff from the Faculties of Human Sciences and Applied and Computer Sciences.

Participants indicated that they found the workshop relevant and informative, and identified the following aspects as most useful: session on self-awareness; guideline on how to work with difficult students; boundary setting skills; guidelines for crisis management; and guidelines on identifying at risks students.