

Preparing students for study

WITH the inception and growth of the South African democracy in the past 20 years has come an increasing expectation and demand for post-school education. Most school leavers currently aspire to finding a place in the university sector.

This of course may not be suitable for all school leavers nor for the South African economy, but that is another debate. For a host of reasons, basic education is not always able to prepare Grade 12 pupils for direct access to university education.

This has led the higher education sector to question its access processes by asking questions like: if the pupils are not achieving the results for access to university through no fault of their own, is it fair to exclude them? If it is unfair to exclude these pupils, the question that arises is: how do you identify pupils who have a reasonable chance of success and should be given such an opportunity for further study?

In other words, how do we provide a mechanism which leads to access for success? The Centre for Access Assessment and Research (Caar) was established at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) to seek evidence-based answers to these questions.

Prior to the merging of three Port Elizabeth-based higher education institutions into NMMU in 2005, all three had been asking these questions and had established different models of "alternative access". The model retained after the merger is developmentally focused and applicant centred.

It includes the assessment of core academic proficiencies, learnt over the course of a pupil's

school career and which have been identified as being essential for academic success at university. The proficiencies that have been identified are reading comprehension, numeracy, mathematical reasoning and problem solving.

These proficiencies are assessed through three short standardised tests. Test scores have been correlated with success in the first year of each of the university programmes at NMMU.

Test sessions are conducted via a computer-based testing process at the university's Port Elizabeth and George campuses as well as with eight independent psychological practices throughout South Africa for those candidates who are unable to travel to the university venues for testing.

Information additional to the test scores is gathered at the testing session from the candidates regarding their career and personal goals, study habits, additional studies and academic activities. These answers, together with school subjects and marks, test scores and research information gathered by the Caar consultants about the various study programmes, are used to develop a holistic picture of each candidate.

The profiles are used to best place the student in an academic programme where he or she has a reasonable possibility of success and opportunity to achieve his or her expressed career goals.

This individual, holistic, applicant-centred

In my View



David Jenkins

profile approach makes this a unique application of access testing in South Africa. It places an applicant in a programme that is best suited to the applicant's current academic development and career interests, and where he or she is likely to have the best chance of being successful.

This access assessment approach has a focus on academic success factors. The university has a wide range of additional

services focusing on and providing support for the other factors impinging on university success.

The Caar consultants are registered psychologists, from a range of registration fields, who work together to establish the most accurate profiles of what makes applicants successful, using insights from the information gathered. Each consultant develops expertise in a range of programmes, and in consultation with academics from these programmes sets standards and develops profiles of candidates who are most likely to succeed in their studies.

Each candidate is individually assessed and evaluated, and a placement decision is made using a range of inputs. In addition to the placement of applicants into study programmes, areas of academic development are identified

which the applicant can work on to strengthen his or her chances of academic success.

These "developmental recommendations" are not only shared with the candidate, but also with the students' academic programme leader and with university support units that provide developmental assistance for students.

The access programme has grown to such an extent that about 50% of first-year students who register at NMMU have come through this access route (approximately 5 300 students for the 2015 and 2016 intakes).

Furthermore, in recent years, it has been established that close to 40% of graduates have been assessed by Caar as part of the university's admissions and placement process (approximately 5 000 of the 12 500 graduates over the last two graduating sessions). Interestingly, 25% of NMMU's graduating postgradu-

ates, some with masters and doctoral qualifications, entered their undergraduate qualification via the access testing route.

Without the access programme, thousands of students wouldn't have gained undergraduate admission, let alone been able to graduate and proceed to postgraduate studies. This access route then not only provides access to the university, but clearly lives up to the adage of "access for success".

Dave Jenkins is director of the Centre for Access Assessment and Research (Caar) at NMMU.

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