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de Klerk, Danie; Maleswena, Tshepiso; Spark, Linda

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Road to Success Programme: A Case Study
— University of the Witwatersrand (Wits)

Authors: **Mr Danie de Klerk***
Assistant Dean: Teaching and Learning;
Head: CLM Teaching and Learning Centre

Ms Tshepiso Maleswena*
Coordinator: Road to Success Programme;
Lecturer: CLM Teaching and Learning Centre

Mrs Linda Spark*
Senior Tutor: Information Systems Division,
School of Business Sciences

**Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management (CLM)*

The University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) is a large, research-intensive public university in South Africa, located in Johannesburg (the country's economic hub). Wits consists of five diverse faculties, has 1 160 full-time permanent academic employees (in addition to many sessional and professional/administrative staff), and boasts nearly 41 000 enrolled students across undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Within the Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management (CLM) (where the initiative discussed here resides), there are approximately 10 300 students across the faculty's undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, with roughly a 50:50 split between the two.

The Road to Success Programme (commonly referred to as the RSP) is the name of CLM's student success and support unit, which forms part of the faculty's Teaching and Learning Centre. However, rather than a structured programme that takes students through a series of tasks, activities and learning opportunities, Academic and Peer Advisors work together to provide holistic support (Lawton & Toner, 2020)

to CLM students. The authors outline the early years of the RSP in two papers (see De Klerk, Spark, Jones & Maleswena, 2017; Spark, De Klerk, Maleswena & Jones, 2017).

The RSP is made up of four full-time Academic Advisors (one of whom is the coordinator for the unit), while annually employing 15 Peer Advisors. Unlike the global north and Australia, formalised Academic Advising remains an emerging profession for South African higher education contexts (Strydom, 2017:104). Academic Advising is a confirmed high-impact practice (Moodley & Singh, 2015:95) linked to enhanced student experiences and improved student success, thus the urgent need for reliable literature about the permutations of Academic Advising for South African higher education as it evolves in relation to the unique realities of this country. Consequently, the authors share their approach for implementing Academic Advising, with a specific focus on Peer Advising, in CLM through the RSP.

Many higher education institutions (HEIs), especially in Africa, have enrolled more students than they have capacity for to address historical inequalities, resulting in massification of higher education (Hornsby & Osman, 2014; Luckett & Sutherland, 2000; Mohamedbhai, 2014). Many students entering HEIs are first-generation students, coming from diverse backgrounds and socio-economic statuses (Rendon, 1994; Jacklin & Robinson, 2007; Loots, 2009; Wilmer, 2008), most often thought of as underprepared for university studies (Maitland & Lemmer, 2011; Loots, 2009). Many students hold high expectations especially if they performed well at school (Hill, 1995; Jacklin & Robinson, 2007), but underestimate the workloads and pressures of tertiary education (Loots, 2009). This often results in students being vulnerable to the realities of university life.

HEIs have implemented interventions, structures and/or programmes that provide the necessary support to enhance student success (Engelbrecht, Harding & Potgieter, 2014; Hatch, 2016; Mohamedbhai, 2014; Pérez & Ceja, 2010). However, despite these measures, dropout rates remain high (Karp, 2011; Walsh, Larsen & Parry, 2009), and graduation rates remain low (Mohamedbhai, 2014). Possible reasons for this could be that interventions are purely academic (e.g., academic support tutorials), or passive when a student needs active help (e.g., referral to a non-academic unit for assistance), or simply do not meet the specific needs of the student (Karp, 2011; Rendon, 1994). Therefore, additional initiatives have been introduced such as counselling facilities, academic advisers or advising programmes, student support groups, "big brothers/sisters", staff-student mentoring, and peer tutoring (Lotkowski, Robbins & Noeth, 2004). Irrespective of the type of intervention, any programme or structure that is holistic in nature, is more likely to be successful (Maitland & Lemmer, 2011), as these often focus on non-academic issues and challenges faced by students, where these are likely to influence the students' academic success (Karp, 2011).

The objective of the Road to Success Programme (RSP) at Wits is to provide holistic support to students in the Commerce, Law and Management (CLM) Faculty, to enhance student success. Within the South African context, student success is defined (Spark et al., 2017) as a university student's ability to (i) cope with the transition from high school to university (McGhie & Du Preez, 2015); (ii) progress through the first year of study (Andrews & Osman, 2015; Manik, 2015); (iii) graduate from their degree of choice (Andrews & Osman, 2015; McGhie & Du Preez, 2015) within five years of first registration (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007); (iv) manage the psychosocial, socio-economic, cultural (McGhie & Du Preez, 2015) and academic demands (Potgieter, Harding, Kritzinger, Somo & Engelbrecht, 2015) posed by university studies; and (v) access relevant academic and non-academic support structures on university campuses (McGhie & Du Preez, 2015). Additional objectives are to improve course pass rate and provide supplementary support to students who are "at risk" of exclusion. This holistic support complements the academic support that students receive for their courses in the respective schools, by improving their preparedness for assessments, and assisting them in dealing with any emotional, psychological, and socio-economic challenges. The RSP has been running since January 2015. RSP Peer Advisors are senior undergraduate students from within CLM. The work done by RSP Academics and Peer Advisors draws on Ethic of Care (EoC) principles (Gilligan, 1993; Noddings, 1988, 2012). Tronto (2005) explains that EoC consists of four parts. Part 1, attentiveness, requires carers to be observant of the needs of others in order to respond to those needs (2005:252-253). In practice, this means Academic and Peer Advisors must be attentive to the needs of the students they work with to be able to help them effectively. Part 2, responsibility, implies that to practise care, carers are necessitated to take caring upon themselves (2005:253-254). In the experience of the authors, the need to help others is often a characteristic of individuals who gravitate towards Academic and Peer Advisor roles, which links to the responsibility dimension of EoC. Part 3, competence, stresses the importance for carers to be adequately competent and equipped to provide care to the care-receiver (2005:254-255). RSP Peer Advisors must apply for the 15 (coveted) positions annually, before being shortlisted, interviewed, and then (if selected) taken through initial and continuous training throughout the year (see training section below). Lastly, Tronto (2005) highlights Part 4 of EoC as responsiveness. In Tronto's example, this implies that care-receivers must be responsive to the care being provided (2005:255-256) (i.e., students must be responsive to the care provided by the advisor[s] they engage with). However, the authors interpret and apply responsiveness in two ways: (i) the former as per Tronto (2005); and (ii) the responsiveness of Peer Advisors to the various needs of the student.

RSP Peer Advisors lead small peer-learning communities for new-to-CLM first-year students, who were previously academically excluded and have been readmitted to CLM, and any other CLM undergraduates who may be interested in joining a peer-learning community. The learning communities for first years and readmitted students are conducted in semester one of the new academic year and are exclusively for students from the respective groups. The learning communities for undergraduates who do not fall into the aforementioned categories and who are interested in joining a learning community, are conducted in semester two, subsequent to the publication of mid-year results. Each community meets once a week for the duration of the semester (approximately six to eight meetings in total). Although attendance is compulsory for readmitted students (as per the conditions of readmission they are required to sign), sign-up and attendance remain voluntary for the other two groups. In addition to the peer-learning communities, RSP Peer Advisors are available for one-to-one consultations with any CLM undergraduate student who wishes to consult during scheduled times throughout the academic year.

Towards the end of an academic year, the recruitment process for the following year's RSP Peer Advisors commences. As mentioned earlier, these positions have become quite coveted within the faculty with only 15 spaces for the 60 to 80 applications usually received. At the end of November, a call for applications is sent to third- and fourth-year students registered in CLM, requiring them to submit applications by a certain date (usually just before Christmas). These applications must include a one-page letter of motivation explaining why the candidates deem themselves suitable for an RSP Peer Advisor position, a copy of their CV, and a brief explanation of their academic and non-academic commitments for the following year. As mentioned, applications usually far outweigh the available posts, which can be complicated if a Peer Advisor appointment is renewed for another year. This can happen in the case of eligible candidates who first commence with their duties at the beginning of their third year. In early January of the new year, the RSP Academic Advisors (under the leadership of the RSP coordinator) shortlist and interview selected candidates. There is pressure for the recruitment process to be finalised post-haste. This is because Peer Advisors must be appointed, trained, and ready to start engaging with new first-year students during the institutional first-year orientation week, all prior to the official start of the academic year. During interviews, the team tries to identify individuals who would suit the mandate of the programme, which means that personality traits and attributes far outweigh academic performance (although Peer Advisors should be passing all their subjects).

During interviews the team tries to identify individuals who would suit the mandate of the programme, which means that personality skills and attributes far outweigh academic performance (although Success Tutors should be passing all their subjects).

To aid in this regard, the following are the types of questions that are posed to the interviewees:

- Why do you think you are the ideal person to serve as a Success Tutor for the RSP?
- Please provide one example of a time in your life when you failed at something.
- Explain how you transcended and moved beyond that failure.
- What are your plans for the following year, and do you think you would be able to commit to the time-related requirements posed by the RSP?
- You may be faced with situations where students confide in you on matters of a personal nature. Do you feel comfortable adopting this "big brother/sister" role (provided you are given appropriate training)?

Once all interviews have been conducted, the panel deliberates until they reach agreement on the candidates to be appointed. This process is then followed by training of the tutors. Tutors are remunerated according to the time spent on the various interventions and activities, and they are required to complete registers or time sheets and are paid at the end of each quarter of an academic year.

The initial training of RSP Peer Advisors is divided into two parts. Part 1 (in-house training) is conducted by the Academic Advisors and (where applicable) other members of the CLM Teaching and Learning Centre (Spark et al., 2017:80). Part 2 is conducted through the University's Counselling and Careers Development Unit (CCDU) by professional psychologists (Spark et al., 2017:80). Peer Advisor training aims to equip Peer Advisors with a broad range of skills and abilities that will strengthen their interactions with students. Part 1 focuses on Peer Advisor responsibilities, how to conduct peer-learning and one-to-one student engagements, how to elicit responses in group settings, essential processes, and rules relevant to CLM, and how/when to refer matters to Academic Advisors, in addition to fostering a sense of unity through team building. During Part 2, CCDU psychologists provide training on matters like crisis management and containment, appropriate referral procedures where students may require further or specialised intervention, providing personal and emotional support to students, and the fostering of coping strategies. At the time this case study was written, the RSP coordinator and Academic Advisors were working on enhancements to the Peer Advisor training programme.

The personal development of RSP Peer Advisors remains a top priority for the RSP coordinator and Academic Advisors. An RSP Peer Advisor:

- has an exceptional ability to adapt and be flexible to changing demands for growth and development in the personal, academic, social, economic and professional realms, coupled with well-rounded, practical experience;
- is a problem-solver with the ability to form individual and informed opinions;

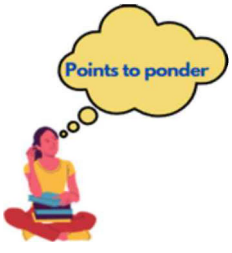
- is reflective, empathetic, sophisticated, socially responsible and responsive to societal needs and contextual factors;
- is contextually aware and sensitive to diversity;
- is globally conscious and applies that knowledge in context;
- is an active agent for change; and
- does their work with thoughtful, meticulous planning and diligent execution.

At the time this case study was being written, the RSP was investigating awarding RSP Peer Advisors with certificates of competence, working with institutional Student Affairs to register Peer Advising for inclusion on the co-curricular transcript, and enhancing Peer Advisor training and evaluation in line with the above.

Evaluation occurs continually in formal and informal settings. Academic Advisors engage with RSP Peer Advisors informally on a regular basis during the academic year. This is supplemented by more formal engagements such as Peer Advisor meetings at the end of quarters one and three, and a formal Peer Advisor symposium at the end of each academic year, where Peer Advisors deliver presentations on certain topical student success and support issues. The latter has a dual purpose: (i) to give Peer Advisors an opportunity to provide comprehensive feedback about their interactions with students, their personal experiences as Peer Advisors, and to make recommendations for improving/enhancing the work of the RSP; and (ii) to help the RSP Coordinator and Academic Advisors to evaluate the Peer Advisors, in addition to garnering feedback on ways to enhance RSP activities. At one point, Peer Advisors were also required to submit reflective reports twice a year. Although there are plans to reinstate this measure, practical and logistical challenges have seen it placed on hold for now. Finally, at the time this case study was being written, additional evaluation strategies were being developed and piloted (e.g., an evaluation survey for students who engaged with RSP advisors to be administered twice a year).

No guidelines, exemplars or literature about the rapid migration of Academic and Peer Advising services to remote/virtual modalities for South African higher education contexts (or any context for that matter) existed when South Africa went into lockdown in March 2020. The RSP developed and implemented a four-day orientation programme to orientate students to Emergency Remote Learning (ERL) (see De Klerk, Krull & Maleswena, 2021) prior to the recommencement of quarter two in April 2020. Fortunately, Peer Advisors had been recruited and trained at the start of the academic year, which meant the RSP coordinator and Academic Advisors had an established working-relationship with them. Following the initial disruption brought by the move to ERL, the RSP implemented a strategy to allow student and Peer Advisors to continue interacting via the institutional Learning Management System (LMS). This was free of mobile data costs for all registered students, which

made most sense, to afford as many students as possible the opportunity to engage with Peer Advisors during that challenging time. Looking to the future, the pandemic has introduced new modes of advising that had not previously been explored. The possibilities of a future where a blend of in-person and online Peer Advising is standard practice for RSP advisors is already being discussed, which is essential for making sure the work of the RSP is responsive to the needs of all the students it works with.



- Student leaders' personal characteristics, personality traits, skills, attitudes, and attributes far outweigh academic performance.

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