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A comparative case study of the academic development and student support initiatives and programmes in two schools at the University of the Witwatersrand

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Abstract

Student success at university is dependent on various academic and non-academic factors. Some students may face barriers to their success due to these factors. Academic development for students and staff, as well as student support programmes can play an important role in helping students to overcome the barriers they may be experiencing. This study aims to differentiate between different forms of academic development and student support, and their functions as well as to understand how these types of programmes or initiatives were conceptualised and operationalized at WITS. An important aim was to understand the provision of academic development and student support from the top-down, through examining WITS's policies on these issues.

This was done through a comparative case study of two Schools in different Faculties at WITS. A series of interviews was conducted with practitioners working within programmes, at Faculty and School-level, and those who have had extensive experience within the field. What emerges from this research is that there are different programmes or initiatives in place in both Schools. These include teaching and learning development initiatives, student academic development programmes and student support programmes. However, without a policy or guidelines, the nature of academic development and student support tends to be uneven and each of the practitioners had varied perspectives based on their experiences in the field. There are various challenges faced by the programmes, but these are navigated differently by the practitioners given their context and agency. This unevenness and the varied experiences of the practitioners in this study tend to suggest the need for a policy to guide the implementation of academic development and student support.