How open should open be? Managed Open Admission at the University of South Africa

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1. CONTEXT

UNISA has positioned itself as an Open Distance Learning (ODL) university with an " … ODL character … that … necessarily shapes all academic offerings and support systems" (Institutional Operational Plan, 2008, p. 5). However, the "openness" is relative as all higher education institutions in South Africa adhere to externally and internally imposed entrance qualifications. While access into the institution is relatively open, the throughput, similar to the distance learning sector in general, is less than desirable. It led to the setting of throughput targets by the Department of Education which the university is obliged to meet in order not to incur penalties. In addition to the externally imposed conditions, there is also the moral imperative to assist students who have been given the hope of personal development, and by extension the development of their families, communities and the country, a fair chance to succeed. It is within the context of external and internal pressures to increase throughput that the Managed Open Admission Project (MOAP) was conceived.

The context and the role of the MOAP in the throughput process are graphically displayed in Figure 1.

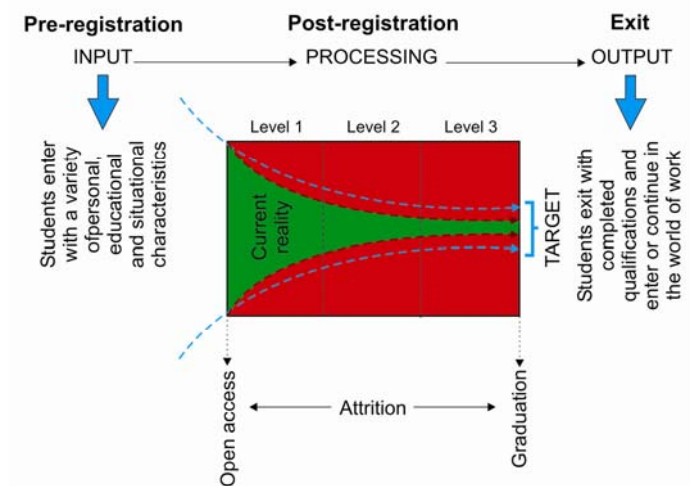Figure 1   Open Access Throughput Model

Figure 1 shows that students enter the system in the pre-registration phase with a variety of personal, educational and situational characteristics. A myriad of factors impact on the student population and lead to severe drop-out as students proceed through the system, especially in the beginning of their study careers (See drop-out at level 1). The dropout tends to stabilize from level two of the study programme

but the number of students who eventually graduate are extremely small compared to the number that started (van Schoor & Potgieter, in press). The approach that Unisa embarked on, to address the attrition rate, is to manage the entry into the process and to continue managing it up to graduation.

The output of the process is often neglected when the focus is so strong on input i.e. open access. Low quality output is of no benefit to the individual, or to society or the economy at large. The consequence is that in distance learning an extraordinary amount of work must be done at the input level which may lead to a limitation on openness.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDENTS THAT MAY INFLUENCE THE INPUT SIDE OF THE ODL PROCESS

The management of the throughput process is premised on information. Currently information about the input qualities of students is meager though it appears that the academic literacy skills required for performance at tertiary level, are not up to standard. This can mainly be ascribed to the South African school system which does not seem to prepare students adequately for entry into higher education. When the performance of learners in key areas such as numeracy and language literacy is considered, it seems that the problem starts early in their school careers. In Kwazulu-Natal it was reported that 68% of Grade 6 pupils cannot read, write or count properly (Naidu, 2006). The lack of a foundation laid at Grade 6 level seems to carry through to Grade 12 where of the 368 217 learners who passed the final school examination in 2007, only 6.9% (25 415) passed higher grade mathematics and 7.64% (28 122) passed higher grade science (Department of Education).

Much of the problem experienced in the general area of numeracy, and particularly in Mathematics and Science, can be traced back to a poor language foundation. English is the language in which most learners are taught from Grade 4 upwards but for the majority of them it is a second language. Blaine (2007) reports that of the almost 600 000 learners who have registered for the Grade 12 examination in 2007, 88% have registered to write English as an additional language. The lack of a good working knowledge of English and of being able to think in a mother tongue, has an effect on learners' ability to do Mathematics. Mathematical problems presented in word context, being able to make inferences, to separate fact from fiction and to follow instructions are all highly problematic for learners who do not have a strong language foundation. MacFarlane (2006) makes a distinction between basic communication and academic communication. Basic communication is the use of oral language supplemented by contextual clues such as facial expression, gestures and intonation. Academic communication operates in a non-contextual environment and relies heavily on text to convey meaning. While second language speakers may appear to be competent in the language during normal conversations, their disadvantaged status is cruelly exposed when it comes to academic communication.

The effect of the poor skill and knowledge levels that higher education inherits from the school system is that students find it very difficult to cope with the suddenly elevated academic literacy demands. Academic literacy is described by Cliff, Ramaboa and Pearce (in press) as:

> … that entry-level students possess some basic understanding of – or capacity to acquire an understanding of – what it means to read for meaning and argument; to pay attention to the structure and organization of text; to be active and critical readers; and to formulate written responses to academic tasks that are characterized by logical organization, coherence and precision of expression.

Poor skill levels lead to poor retention and throughput. Hlela and Zulu (2005) reported on a cohort of students who started in 2000 on various three year degree programmes. Of the initial group, 22% have graduated, 50% have dropped out and 28% are still in the system. Thus, 22% graduated in regular time, while 28% are probably repeaters.

From the evidence provided above, it can be concluded that students entering higher education are at risk. Without appropriate information it is not possible to estimate the academic literacy levels of students, nor is it possible to design appropriate remedial programmes to address the gaps. The pilot project aims to achieve these ends.

3.   THE MANAGED OPEN ADMISSION PROJECT (MOAP)

The MOAP was approved by Management in April 2007. The target group for the project was all new students who wanted to register for the LLB programme in the School of Law. The programme was chosen because it was a small, relatively homogeneous one. Preparations started immediately for the diagnostic testing and the development of materials for the University Preparation Programme (UNIPREP).

The MOAP is based on the model depicted in Figure 2.

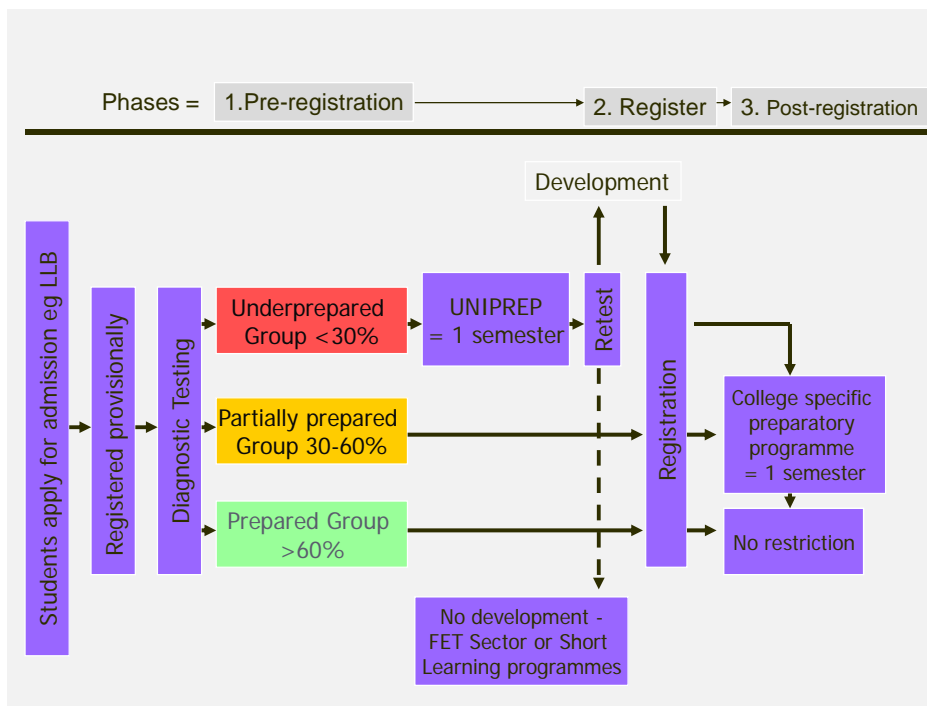Figure 2   The MOAP Streaming Procedure

Figure 2 shows that students apply for admission, which is not the custom in the current (old) system. Applicants are given a student number and are registered provisionally. After registration they are assigned to a test centre where they are to write the Diagnostic Test. The existing examination infrastructure was used for the testing which also allowed for international students to be included. The

process was preceded by an extensive communication campaign to inform students of the new procedure. It differed from the previous one where no application was necessary and students could register on a fairly "open" basis. Two test sessions were arranged, namely in October 2007 and January 2008 to allow for as many students as possible to be included in the process.

The Diagnostic Test is a standardized test of academic literacy, assessing mainly language literacy but also aspects of numeracy. It consists of 59 multiple choice items and four items that assess writing ability. The multiple choice items were scored mechanically and the raw data were analysed using a marking template that provides a range of skill scores to be used for interpretation and further action. The outcomes of the writing part of the test were not included in the streaming, based on advice from experts at the University of Cape Town.

Students were informed of the results by means of a letter. The letter was accompanied by a more extensive information sheet that explained the rationale for the procedure, guidance on what it means to study through Unisa and how to use a publication called Unisa Your Career Choice (UYCC).

Students who were found to be prepared were allowed to register without restriction. The partially prepared group was also allowed to register but only for a restricted college determined programme. After completion of the programme students are allowed to continue in the unrestricted programme. Underprepared students were not allowed to register but were referred to the UNIPREP programme. After one semester of the UNIPREP, students have to rewrite the diagnostic test. Their pre- and post intervention scores are compared and if the comparison indicates significant development, such students are allowed to register for the restricted programme. Students who show no substantial improvement are counseled to consider other options more appropriate for their potential.

4. PRELIMINARY RESULTS OF THE DIAGNOSTIC TESTING

A project of this scope requires substantial cross-departmental collaboration. It was necessary to communicate constantly to inform stakeholders of the nature of the project. Full management support is required and strategic and operational decisions should not be compromised by ad hoc decisions. The pilot showed that the process was definitely executable and that the required infrastructure is in place.

At this stage in the life of the project it is possible to consider some of the results of the diagnostic test and to determine the way in which the data can be used to assist Unisa in managing access and to provide support to its students. Table 1 shows the categorization of the large group of testees in terms of the three ability levels.

Table 1   Categorization of the overall group

	n	%
Prepared	812	39
Partially prepared	947	46
Underprepared	305	15
Total	2064	100

Table 1 shows that the partially prepared group was the largest. The prepared group was considerably larger than expected while the underprepared group was surprisingly small. Two possible explanations can be put forward for this phenomenon. Firstly, the test may be too easy for the test group though it will not be possible to pass judgment on this option until the academic performance of the group has been correlated with the test results. As the students progress through the year, key academic events will be determined and correlational studies will be done. Key events are, for example, how many students drop out in the first semester, how many gain entry to the examination, how many modules do they pass and what is the overall pass rate of students. A second explanation is that the students who apply for entry into the LLB programme is at a higher literacy level than was expected. To test this assumption, comparisons will be made between colleges with regard to the quality of their applicants. It will be possible to make such comparisons during the course of 2009 when two new colleges enter the project.

The diagnostic test is primarily a language literacy test with some numerical items included. The test does not measure language knowledge but a number of skills that would normally be required to cope at higher education level, using English as the medium of instruction. Table 2 provides an overview of the skills that are assessed and the outcomes for the total group (n=2064) with regard to the multiple choice questions (mcq's).

Table 2:   Mean skill scores over the three preparation categories for the 59 mcq items

Skills	Prepared	Partially prepared	Underprepared
Reading for meaning	77.66	56.3	34.26
Skimming and scanning	77.66	56.3	34.26
Vocabulary derived from context	80.79	60.03	41.65
Understanding metaphor	86.16	68.72	40.79
Inferencing	69.24	51.72	31.76
Understanding relations between parts through devices of cohesion eg. pronouns	83.31	59.08	30.08
Understanding communicative function	67.00	45.62	31.80
Understanding relations between parts of text by recognizing indicators in discourse eg. introducing ideas	88.79	70.53	46.69
Understanding text genre	75.09	63.03	43.47
Separate essential from non-essential	73.92	50.40	29.84
Understanding visual information	76.73	45.51	19.54
Basic numerical concepts	78.39	46.55	19.9

Table 2 shows marked differences between the preparation categories. The general reading ability of the group is shown in the first two rows. The difference between the prepared and the underprepared groups is 43.4% which implies that the latter group would struggle in a text based environment which is typical of Unisa. If only some of these students are allowed into the system without providing additional help, their chances of succeeding are very slim. Even the partially prepared group is showing signs of deficiencies that will require significant help to overcome. The ability to understand metaphor is an area of concern particularly in an environment where concepts are conveyed by example. An item that stands out is the ability to make inferences which is a key determinant in studying and understanding concepts. Ideas are conveyed in the study material and it is expected of students to build their own conceptual constructs which they have to be able to apply in their studies, their assignments and the work environment. It seems to be an area of concern over all three categories.

The problem with regard to making inferences is exacerbated by the inability of, especially the underprepared group, to understand relations between parts of sentences or paragraphs and especially to separate essential from non-essential material. The last skill item is very prevalent in student's struggles to study effectively. If they are not able to identify the main points and to lift them out, they tend

to resort to memorizing large sections of text without proper understanding. This may lead to underperformance in examinations particularly in subjects where understanding is a key requirement.

The most revealing data are given in the last two lines where the performance of the group in the interpretation of visual material such as graphs and figures, as well as basic numerical calculations are presented. The differences between the prepared and the underprepared groups are 57.19% and 58.49% respectively. The partially prepared group also showed significant gaps which all tends to indicate that the underprepared and the partially prepared groups will struggle with numerical content in their courses. It is interesting to note that the prepared group's scores tended not to vary by much while the scores of the other two groups varied considerably. This shows that prepared students by and large have the full range of academic literacy skills required for performance, while the partially prepared and underprepared students have specific gaps that have to be addressed before they can expect to participate fully in the academic endeavor.

Analyses of the registration patterns indicated that 1095 of the 2 064 students who were tested, registered at the time the data were reported. It means that 53% of the initial applicants registered in one or other programme. The reasons for the lower number are not clear and will be investigated but it may be due to the following:

- After writing the test students became aware of their shortcomings and chose a different, hopefully more realistic option. This possibility is supported by the fact that of the initial group of prepared students, 62% registered. Of the partially prepared group 54% registered and of the underprepared group 29% registered.
- Students may apply to a number of institutions, especially a "good" cohort like the one involved in the project, and then they take up the more preferred option eg. a residential institution.
- The information material sent to students with their results served the purpose of giving them a better understanding of distance learning and of how it may serve their long term goals. Other more appropriate options may have been considered.

The MOAP procedure may therefore eventually curb enrolment and limit it to those who are genuinely committed to studying with Unisa. The analyses also served to identify a number of cohorts that will be tracked to determine their academic performance as they proceed throughout the year.

5. HOW OPEN SHOULD OPEN BE?

Open admission should always be the ideal and attempts must be made to provide as many students as possible to apply to the University for admission. Once provisional admission has been granted the University should accept the responsibility to guide the applicants appropriately and to provide them with a variety of options that would serve their personal skills, needs and goals. After guidance has been given in terms of appropriate information and structures, the onus reverts to the students to act according to the options offered to them.

The pilot has indicated that even students who are certified by the school system to be prepared for access to higher education may have significant academic literacy gaps that have to be addressed. Confirmation or disconfirmation of this and the impact on academic performance will come from further research and correlational studies. At this point in time it seems that the open admission system used at Unisa up to now cannot continue in its present format. The University will have to accept more

responsibility for appropriate guidance and support of the students who are allowed to register. If this is not done little credence is given to the laudable ideals of ODL and the opening of the doors to learning will for many be nothing more than revolving doors.

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