

## Masifunde. Developing an online study skills course as a free resource for first generation university entrants in southern Africa

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### ABSTRACT

The **Masifunde** project has created an online study skills course for first generation university entrants in Cape Town. It will also be available as a free resource for other institutions helping students facing similar challenges. **Masifunde** takes its name from a Xhosa expression which means "let us learn!"

The project is a collaboration between TSiBA Education (Tertiary School in Business Administration, Cape Town, South Africa) and Oxford University Department for Continuing Education (OUDCE) (see <http://masifunde.conted.ox.ac.uk/> for more details).

TSiBA, which means "to jump" in Xhosa, is a free-to-student tertiary level institution that offers emerging leaders an opportunity to study an enriched Bachelor in Business Administration (BBA) programme. Applicants are drawn from impoverished communities around Cape Town. Selection includes proof of matriculation, but not necessarily university exemption and passing a test for competency in Maths and English.

Most TSiBA students need support with study skills. However, though the TSiBA students share a similar background, they have a variety of pre-existing skills levels. Studying online means that students can take the time they need, without feeling that they are either holding back fellow students or being slowed themselves.

The project has adapted Oxford's existing online study skills course, designed for UK non-traditional mature students. The project started with a 1-day workshop at TSiBA, with tutors and students and other experienced in teaching study skills in South Africa, to inform the changes needed to adapt the Oxford course for the Masifunde audience.

The project will provide resources for youth beyond TSiBA: Masifunde is being made freely available on a Creative Commons License ([www.creativecommons.org](http://www.creativecommons.org)) to other HEIs, colleges and organisations to use themselves. The course runs on Moodle, the Open Source learning/course management system, bringing the course and platform within reach of many target institutions.

Masifunde is funded under the [English-African Partnerships programme](#) managed by the [British Council](#) on behalf of the UK [Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills \(DIUS\)](#).

### INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, students making the transition from high school to tertiary education commonly need study skills advice. Tertiary level education makes much greater demands on students' individual time management skills, note taking, and a more independent approach to learning.

First generation students coming from economically impoverished backgrounds in South Africa, as in other countries, face particular challenges as they join tertiary education. The Masifunde project is working to meet some of these student needs in a way which can respond to student feedback and be replicated at low cost in other institutions.

The project is a collaboration between TSiBA Education (Tertiary School in Business Administration, Cape Town, South Africa [www.tsiba.org.za](http://www.tsiba.org.za) and Oxford University Department for Continuing Education (OUDCE [www.conted.ox.ac.uk](http://www.conted.ox.ac.uk) ). **Masifunde** takes its name from a Xhosa expression which means "let us learn!"

This paper gives a first report on the development of the Masifunde course units for TSiBA Foundation Course students and the pilot runs of the units in March 2008.

### Background: TSiBA

TSiBA is a tertiary-level institution that offers a Bachelor in Business Administration (BBA) degree to economically impoverished students who would not otherwise have access to tertiary level education. The TSiBA BBA degree differs from the mainstream business curriculum as it includes a wide range of experiential learning opportunities and incorporates access (or "scaffolding") modules into the everyday curriculum. The TSiBA course also focuses on the ability to absorb meaningful knowledge and life skills.

TSiBA's recruitment process systematically focuses on local communities that are on the outskirts of the economic mainstream. Thus TSiBA's students generally live in the communities that make up the area

known as the 'Cape Flats', around Cape Town, though their origins may be elsewhere in the country. The search for TSiBA students includes criteria to ensure that the students who are awarded a TSiBA scholarship are students who would otherwise not be able to study due to their economic situation. The economic, gender, and racial background of TSiBA students in 2006 is summarised in Figure 1.

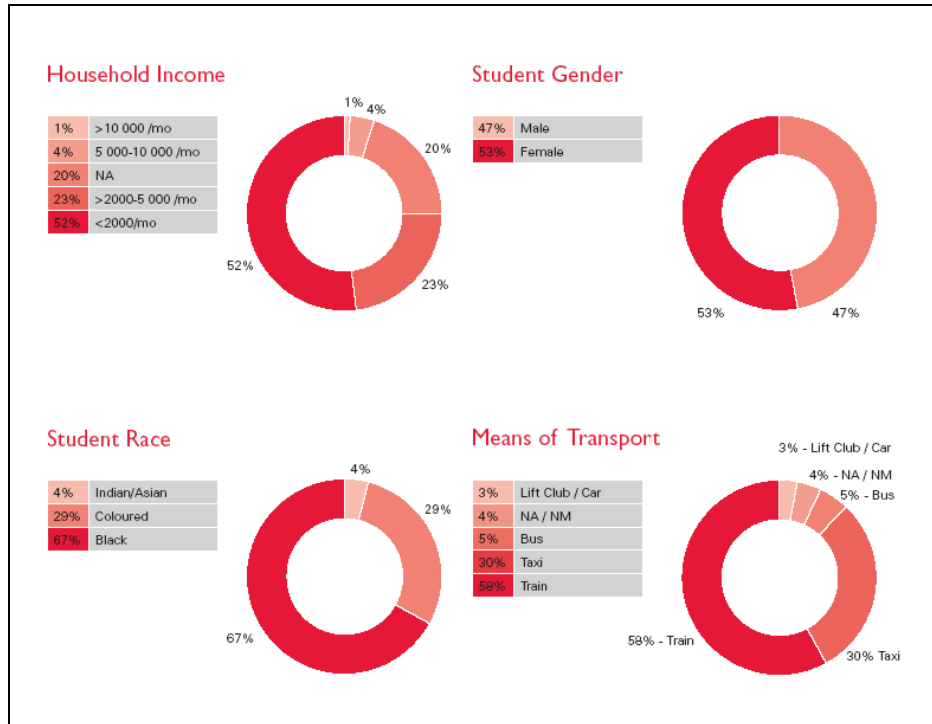


Figure 1. The economic background, race, and gender of TSiBA students. Almost all students travel to campus on public transport. Source: TSiBA *Annual Progress Report 2005/06*, Cape Town.

Applicants need to demonstrate that they have the academic potential to study at tertiary level. Selection includes interview, proof of matriculation, but not necessarily university exemption, and passing the University of Cape Town's Alternative Admissions Review Process aptitude test in Mathematics and English.

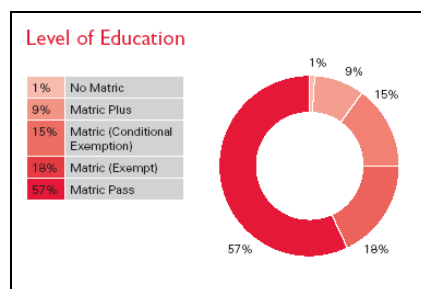


Figure 2. The level of education of TSiBA students at entry in 2006. Source: TSiBA *Annual Progress Report 2005/06*, Cape Town.

Successful applicants are granted a full tuition scholarship to study towards TSiBA's BBA degree. All tuition related costs (lectures, textbooks, exam fees etc) are fully sponsored by corporate donations and partnerships. Students are required to pay for their own transport, food and accommodation, and, for many, this remains extremely challenging.

Successful applicants study at TSiBA for a minimum of four years. Students are first enrolled on a one year Foundation Course, the Foundation Certificate in Business Administration. The Foundation Certificate is registered in the FET band (Level 4 in the South African National Qualifications Framework) and provides an essential bridge between secondary and tertiary education. The Foundation Certificate also serves as a qualifier for access into TSiBA's three year BBA degree.

TSiBA currently has just under 200 students and its pioneering students will graduate in December 2008.

## Background: OUDCE

Oxford University Department for Continuing Education (OUDCE) has offered courses for part-time non-traditional adult students for more than 100 years. To help mature students to return to study, or indeed, start higher education courses for the first time, the Department has developed a variety of face-to-face courses on study skills.

The increasing number of short online courses ([www.conted.ox.ac.uk/online](http://www.conted.ox.ac.uk/online)) offered by the Department in a variety of subjects has led to the development of an online study skills course [www.conted.ox.ac.uk/short](http://www.conted.ox.ac.uk/short) to match the previously existing study skills courses. The online course was created by OUDCE tutors and the OUDCE in-house online learning team, TALL (Technology Assisted Life-Long Learning [www.tall.ox.ac.uk](http://www.tall.ox.ac.uk)), with support from Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) widening participation funds to OUDCE.

## MASIFUNDE PROJECT



The project has taken the OUDCE online study skills course, designed to be taken by remote students who receive written feedback on assignments and exercises from their online tutor, and adapted it for use by TSiBA students, on campus.

The project started with a 1-day workshop at TSiBA in December 2007, with TSiBA tutors and students and others experienced in teaching study skills in South Africa, to inform the changes needed to adapt the Oxford course for the Masifunde audience. More details about the workshop and a brief report are available at <http://masifunde.conted.ox.ac.uk/>

The workshop identified a variety of changes that would be required to enable the Oxford online course to meet the needs of the target students in South Africa. Some of the changes were to the topics covered and other changes needed to be made to the examples and contexts used in existing units.

It became clear during the workshop that there were two levels of students needing support: first, TSiBA students starting the Foundation Certificate have basic needs for study skills assistance and, second, during the first few years of the BBA itself they have more advanced needs.

Students taking the Foundation Certificate need support with very basic study skills, ranging from taking notes in class, reading a textbook and getting the most from it, dealing with text anxiety and getting confidence in solving maths problems. The first task then was to create new units on these topics as a Foundation study skills course based in part of some units from the Oxford course. Julie MacFarlane was the author for these, using her experience of writing study skills guides and teaching the TSiBA Foundation Certificate students over the past four years.

The students taking the BBA course, having successfully completed the Foundation Certificate, have other study skills needs, which could be met by the existing Oxford course. However, the Oxford course units for these students have still needed adaptation, by a second South African author, Amanda Paulsen, with wide experience of teaching study skills in a southern African context. Among the things that have been changed are the geographical focus of the Oxford course on English places and history, now replaced with South African examples and contexts.

The Masifunde course has also been changed from the Oxford one that relied on an online tutor to a course whose content is delivered online but with interaction with tutor(s) in the class-room. The Masifunde course is delivered along side, and integrated with, the TSiBA English/Business Communication and Information Technology programmes.

## Conducting the Pilot Study

The Masifunde course units for the Foundation Certificate have been tested in a pilot study with the 84 Foundation students. The online study skills units have been integrated into the Experiential Learning component of the first year curriculum of the first term of the Foundation Year. The year cohort of students was divided into 4 groups of about twenty students. The Pilot was conducted in the TSiBA campus computer laboratories, with one networked computer available for each student.

The online study skills course is divided into six separate but linked units:

### Unit 1: Orientation

Students are introduced to online study skills and how to work within an online study skills course.

### Unit 2: Reading Strategies

This unit teaches students to read academic text by providing guidelines to develop their reading strategies and techniques.

### Unit 3: The Write Stuff

In this unit students are taught note taking techniques and how to write academic text.

**Masifunde**  
You are logged in as Tristram Wyatt. Student (Return to my normal role)

University of Oxford  
Continuing Education  
Delivering learning online

People  
Participants

Calendar  
March 2008

Global events  
Course events  
Group events  
User events

Recent Activity  
Activity since Saturday, 29 March 2008, 01:31 PM  
Full report of recent activity...  
Nothing new since your last login

Activities  
Feedback Activities  
Resources

Blog Menu  
Add a new entry

TSiBA EDUCATION  
let us learn!

University of Oxford

**Welcome to the Masifunde online study skills course**

The project takes its name from a Xhosa expression **Masifunde**, "let us learn!"

The online study skills course has been developed by TSiBA Education and the Oxford University Department for Continuing Education. It has been funded under the English-African Partnerships programme of the United Kingdom government.

We hope you enjoy participating in this course.

You are in the first group of TSiBA students to take the course. Your feedback is going to be very important to the success of the project.

Unit 1 Orientation

Unit 2 Reading Strategies

Unit 3 The Write Stuff

Unit 4 Tying it Together

Unit 5 The Final Countdown

Unit 6 Who is the successful student? units 6.1 and 6.2  
Unit 6 - continuing: units 6.3 and 6.4

**Evaluation**

Figure 3. Screen shot of the Masifunde course page (delivered in Moodle).

#### Unit 4: Tying it together

Students are taken back to basics, learning basic sentence construction, grammar knowledge and use of technical terms.

#### Unit 5: Assignments

The key focus of this unit is to teach students how to complete assignments and prepare for tests and exams.

#### Unit 6: The successful student

Students are encouraged here to identify the weak areas of their study skills. Time management is discussed in depth.

#### Feedback from the students

Although the students are just learning basic computer skills all of them seemed comfortable with the log-in procedure and accessed the course competently. Among the comments so far are:

"...I knew a lot of this stuff already but it is good to have it all together." (Mduduzi)

"... I will use this a lot..." (Basil)

"...It's going to be very helpful..." (Candice)

"...I really liked finding out my reading speed..." (Vuyo)

A more detailed analysis of student feedback is on the project wiki <http://masifunde.conted.ox.ac.uk/>

## WHY ONLINE

Most TSiBA students need support with study skills. However, though the TSiBA students share a similar background, they have a variety of pre-existing skills levels. Studying online means that students can take the time they need, without feeling that they are either holding back fellow students or being slowed themselves.

Offering the course online is good for independent learning. It will be available to the students to use in their own time throughout the year and the course units will be there online when the students are using the computers for writing up their assignments. The course also helps the students with keyboard skills too.

An important feature for the students is that it allows them easy click-through access to additional study skills materials including the Open University OpenLearn resources [www.open.ac.uk/openlearn/](http://www.open.ac.uk/openlearn/).

From a teaching point of view, offering it online means that we can change the course in response to student feedback and to tutor observations of what additional material, topics and examples, are needed (see later, Moodle). From an institutional point of view it allows scaling of the course for many students at once.

## Print version

However, one comment from students that we did not anticipate was a request to have the highlights (or all) the course available as a printout on paper. The reason became clear: at home or in their home neighbourhoods the students do not have access to the Internet so although in theory the online course can be accessed from any computer linked to the Internet, cost prevents the students from logging on away from the TSiBA campus. In response we will produce paper versions for the students, in particular for the resources which do not rely on the web.

## Why Moodle

The course runs on Moodle (currently version 1.7) <http://moodle.org/>, the Open Source Virtual Learning Environment/course management system, bringing the course and platform within reach of many target institutions. Moodle was originally an acronym for Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment.

Moodle gives flexibility to adapt the course to meet needs of particular student constituencies and to give a local context to examples. HTML skills not needed to edit the course – instead we were able to use the WYSIWYG edit features within Moodle. This means that the course could be tailored to local needs, even within an institution. Unlike a book or commercial or other locked down course materials including some Open Course Ware, it will be possible to freely update/adapt the materials under the licence (see below).

## WHERE NEXT

Now the course has been created, it can be taken by all TSiBA students, embedded in the core curriculum of the Foundation year and BBA.

One possibility to explore is that of building opportunities for peer-support within a cohort of students. Since the course can be accessed, behind a password and id, from any computer connected to the Internet, tutors and mentors could also offer support from a distance, allowing future generations of TSiBA graduates to help later students, and allow mentors in the business community to help students without leaving their desk. We may also explore how to use Moodle to deliver the training to mentors.

## MAKING MASIFUNDE AVAILABLE TO THE WIDER EDUCATIONAL COMMUNITY

Masifunde <http://masifunde.conted.ox.ac.uk/> is being made freely available for not-for-profit use under a Creative Commons License ([www.creativecommons.org](http://www.creativecommons.org)) for other institutions to use to teach their own students. Because Moodle is free and Open Source, the platform is within reach of many target institutions.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank the [English-African Partnerships programme](#) managed by the [British Council](#) on behalf of the UK [Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills \(DIUS\)](#) for funding. HEFCE provided the funding for the original OUDCE online study skills course. We thank the original author of the OUDCE study skills course, Brenda Thornton, for her willingness to allow the adaptation for the Masifunde project and we thank all those who are involved in the project, including the editor Bev Basson and TSiBA students who participated in the pilots, but whom we have not had space to thank personally. More details <http://masifunde.conted.ox.ac.uk/>