

INTERVIEWS AND DIALOGUE

## Understanding the UJ Institutional Student Success Initiative (ISSI)

Annsilla Nyar\* & Celine Meyers\*\*



**Dr André van Zyl** has a Master's Degree in Strategic Management and a PhD in Higher Education. His main research focus is in the area of student success with specific focus on first-year students. He has spoken at various national and international conferences. Dr Van Zyl was responsible for initiating the First-Year Experience initiative at UJ and he has spearheaded the setting up a National Resource Centre for the FYE in South Africa. The SANRC is now fully functional and housed on the APB campuses of UJ. He has been working at UJ since 2004 and has worked as a Learning Development facilitator, FYE coordinator and since late 2012 as the Director of the Academic Development Centre at UJ.

### *Introduction*

Celine Meyers from the South African National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (SANRC) recently spent time with Dr André van Zyl, Director of the Academic Development Centre at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), in order to learn more about UJ's recently-implemented Student Success Initiative. Dr Van Zyl has been involved in this important new initiative since its inception. The interview with Dr Van Zyl highlights important components of the UJ Institutional Student Success Initiative (ISSI) and outlines some of the thinking behind the institution's key efforts to successfully transition students all the way to the graduation stage and beyond.

**Meyers:** Please give us some background about the UJ ISSI and how it fits into the broader strategic objectives of the institution.

**Van Zyl:** The University of Johannesburg has taken the matter of student success seriously for a long time. Taking it seriously means looking at student success more broadly and holistically. We started the First-Year Experience (FYE), the Senior Student Experience (SSE) and even the South African National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (SANRC) with the help from the department and colleagues overseas. UJ has over time developed an atmosphere where student success

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and the professionalisation of teaching and learning have both become central to what we do as an academic endeavour. UJ is target-driven in this regard. We have looked at the undergraduate success rate and the minimum time plus one completion rate. It is not the minimum time per se, because students often need a little bit more time to complete their studies. Ideally speaking, we want to plan for an extra year ahead. This is my personal point of view of course! We focus on a minimum time plus one, because there's an element of realism in what we do. Minimum time plus one is more attainable.

Little pockets of activity related to this initiative have existed for a long time, but it's only been 'pockets'. Things were done in a way that wasn't fully institutionalised. Therefore UJ moved towards institutional action by creating the First-Year Experience Committee for a much more focused institutional student success. This initiative was the next logical step.

In late 2017, UJ looked to the ADC for leadership. I worked with a few of my colleagues, along with Prof. Rory Ryan, Executive Director: Academic Development and Support at UJ, on this. We came up with a plan which served at the top management of the institution. They were happy with the proposal. That plan has been refined and structures have been put in place. Now we are in the first phase of implementation.

These initiatives feed into a number of the institutional strategic objectives, for example: (1) academic success and excellence and (2) the living and learning experience of the institution. UJ has for the past few years spoken of 'affordable excellence'. This initiative feeds directly into this objective. On a personal level, it is very much institution-facing so that it can influence student success and experiences. It is focused firstly on the institution.

**Meyers:** When will the UJ ISSI be formally introduced? What is the structure like? Will there be someone who leads the initiative? Please explain your own involvement with the UJ ISSI.

**Van Zyl:** Immediately after October 2017 we set up the plan and had it approved. Part of the plan was to put institutional structures in place that haven't always existed before. For example, we created a new institutional committee called the Student Success Committee. This committee is chaired by Prof. Ryan. The Vice Deans for Teaching and Learning of all eight faculties sit on this committee. The committee focuses exclusively on student success. It met for the first time in November 2017. Between the beginning of October and the end of November 2017, we identified all the priority modules, communicated these and the plans were already set up in November 2017. It was an incredibly fast start.

The actual implementation started in February 2018 when classes began. We met with lecturers and looked into the relevant interventions. FYI, a priority module is a module where we are losing the greatest number of 'funded credits' (this is a technical term). It basically means 'where are most students getting stuck in terms of numbers?' If you have a large module that has 3000 students, regardless of high success rates, you could still be on the high priority index. This index lists the top 20% of modules institutionally where students are failing. We then select the top 5 by faculty. The exception was the College of Business and Economics, because it is a quarter of the institution. Given this, we selected modules in consultation with the Vice Dean of Teaching and Learning. We set up certain

teams, internal structures, and a Student Success Committee. From January 2018, we set up appointments with the lecturers as well as workshops for students in priority modules.

The official university structure is as follows: We have a Senate Teaching and Learning Committee (STLC) which reports to Senate, the highest organisational structure at UJ. The Student Success Committee falls under the Teaching and Learning Committee. It is led by Prof. Ryan and the DVC for Teaching and Learning, but they are not directly involved in it. There are many people working on this initiative, but the main implementation is done by myself and my team.

**Meyers:** What is UJ hoping to achieve with the UJ ISSI?

**Van Zyl:** Firstly, we are trying to push up the minimum time completion plus one and secondly, we want to address the issue of module completion rates. While we do not expect immediate results, we are hoping to see slight improvements in the module success rate. This initiative feeds into the professionalisation of teaching and learning at UJ. It immediately starts treating academics like professional teachers. This initiative has also helped to re-invigorate the ADC. We have become real agents of change within the institution. This has helped to strengthen the existing positive atmosphere for teaching and learning at UJ.

**Meyers:** Student success is a multi-faceted concept. How does UJ define student success?

**Van Zyl:** At UJ, we believe that student success has to be defined at least as the minimum time plus one completion. If you complete in the end, it is still some sort of success, but the ideal success and what we would hope to see happen, is at least minimum time plus one. That is what we define as student success.

**Meyers:** Is there a theoretical underpinning behind the UJ ISSI?

**Van Zyl:** Yes there are many. It depends on what interventions and theories we use. The ideas of theorists like Vincent Tinto play a grounding role in giving us language to work with. It is very fashionable to criticise Tinto these days, but nobody is currently putting a better framework on the table. It is still by far the best broad sociological framework we have by which to understand matters of student success. At UJ we also believe in William Purkey and Betty Siegel's theory of 'invitational education', i.e. we have to be intentionally inviting of success for our students. We are now asking ourselves "How do we become more intentionally inviting to student success?"

**Meyers:** How will this initiative differ from UJ's current suite of diverse student success initiatives?

**Van Zyl:** This initiative will often replicate the content of other things and in some instances it will develop new content. It will differ in the sense that we are slightly more intrusive. Let us rather use the term "intentionally collaborative". We are saying to our fellow UJ colleagues "student success is part of your responsibility. Let us work together on purpose and in a data-informed focused way, let us test what we do and if it does not work, let's do something else next year". These are all aspects that are new to UJ. We have always wanted to work along these lines, but we have previously never had this kind of

institutional momentum and top-management support to do so. Also, stronger institutional structures, which are less dependent on particular individuals, are now being put in place.

**Meyers:** What kind of data will be used to support the initiative?

**Van Zyl:** The data we are using comes from UJ's institutional database. Our colleagues from the Division of Institutional Planning for Evaluation and Monitoring are responsible for overseeing this database.

**Meyers:** How will monitoring take place?

**Van Zyl:** Two things can be monitored, i.e. activity and impact. Regarding activity, we have documented all our activities on Dropbox. It has also become part of the job description and performance management agreements of relevant ADC staff who are working on this initiative. Measuring impact is much more difficult as the module success rate is a highly complex issue. How can we, for example, say that the impact is truly related to this initiative? While we do not expect improvement in all modules, we are hoping to see an average improvement in the 41 priority modules. We have to be careful in how we claim impact.

**Meyers:** The Blackboard Predict (BBP) Students Analytic System is used by UJ to identify students who are at risk. Would you say that BBP is used evenly and consistently across the institution? Is there sufficient knowledge by staff of how to use BBP data and the best approach therein toward students?

**Van Zyl:** The answer to both of your questions is unfortunately no. This is in part because it is a very complex system and we have only rolled it out to one faculty. We are planning to roll out a part of it to another faculty only in second semester. It will take us at least three years to get this up and running across the institution. Blackboard Predict is not central to the ISSI. It is running parallel to it and thus far, the response to it from both students and staff has been immensely positive. They are finding it very useful, because it tracks you over time and gives individual feedback. It warns you about your students. We are careful about the term 'at-risk'. We do not call our students at-risk, even when they are failing, given that it labels students in a negative way. Of course, it is not an incorrect term technically, but the highest part about the Blackboard Predict is communication. For example, we do not tell lecturers they teach poorly and the same goes for our students. Blackboard Predict is there to identify 'at-risk', but most importantly, it is there to activate success. Finally, I would like to emphasise that this is not the same as ISSI and a number of workshops have been rolled out to the Faculty of Law to ensure sufficient knowledge of how to use the BBP and this has been implemented. However, it will probably take us a decade to get BBP properly embedded across the institution.

**Meyers:** Is there anything else you would like to add about the initiative?

**Van Zyl:** Implementation of such an initiative requires institutional buy-in as well as patience. Without patience, prior work and proper institutional structures, this cannot be accomplished.

It is clear that UJ's student success initiative is characterised by strong leadership and vision as well as an underlying ethos of 'invitational education'. The initiative is still in the early phases of implementation and South Africa's higher education sector will be watching developments at UJ with a view to learning more and understanding how different universities can adopt similar approaches.

***How to cite:***

Nyar, A. & Meyers, C. (2018). Interview with André van Zyl: Understanding the UJ Institutional Student Success Initiative (ISSI) [24 April 2018]. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 6(1), 99–103. DOI: 10.24085/jsaa.v6i1.3069