

implementing learning support to address increasing student diversity needs

Theme: Examining the links between research, evaluation, policy and changing practice, including teaching, assessment and supporting learning

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Abstract:

University education, both in developed and developing countries, is expanding to bring in non-traditional student groups having diverse learning needs. Universities worldwide have therefore become concerned with diversity initiatives addressing and supporting learning needs of diverse student groups. In Sri Lanka, a South Asian developing country, there is immense pressure for university places that far exceed the numbers admissible. Social pressures have made governments to implement a quota-based university admission policy where the limited places are allocated to include underprivileged schools, bringing in students with diverse backgrounds and learning experiences. Such student diversity is also a reality in developed countries when financially pressed universities admit higher fee-paying overseas students who challenge universities to develop in them abilities and competencies that they seriously lacked at entry level.

We discuss here a process where a group of academic staff in a medical school in Sri Lanka succeeded in setting in motion a voluntary student support structure whereby the ill effects stemming from the diversity of students' learning backgrounds was addressed. Making use of our experience, seminar participants will explore how poor student learning that frustrate university teachers can be isolated to their causative factors for identifying distressing student needs, how different theoretical options can be found and evaluated as ameliorating interventions, how support structures and motivational mechanisms to network interested teachers can be activated, how responses from students and other staff can be reflectively evaluated, how structures to overcome learner impediments can be designed, and how sustainability of the evolved support programme can be ensured.