

Over the past few years, much emphasis at higher education institutions in South Africa has been placed on constructing higher education in a more collaborative manner. The #RhodesMustFall movement followed by #FeesMustFall protests in 2015-16 signalled that transformation at higher education institutions was moving at a very slow pace, and students' voices and engagement were absent. The Fallist movement called for the opening up of the higher education space to involve a more inclusive society. This meant that it was time for universities to redefine the students' relationship with the institution. The shift was from viewing our students as clients to viewing our students as partners in learning, teaching and student success. According to Paul Ramsden (2008), the success of higher education institutions is dependent on meticulous, deliberate and strategic participation of students in partnership with academics to improve teaching and learning and in this way also promote a sense of ownership.

The idea of students as partners was promoted by the South African government's Education White Paper 3 in 1997, which was seen as an important aspect of imagining a democratic relationship between higher education and those it serves. It states:

"The principle of democratisation requires that ... the system of higher education and of individual institutions should be democratic, representative and participatory and characterised by mutual respect, tolerance and the maintenance of a well-ordered and peaceful community life. Structures and procedures should ensure that those affected by decisions have a say in making them, either directly or through elected representatives ..."

With this in mind, therefore, the First-Year Transition Programme (FYTP) formed part of Operation Student Success, as initiated by the office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic. The idea was to partner with UWC's senior students in order to ensure the smooth transition of first-year students at our institution.

The FYTP, which forms part of the First-Year Experience, was introduced into all seven faculties at the University of the Western Cape. The first-year transition programme forms part of an intentional, collaborative partnership between the first-year students and the university. The foundation of this programme is the partnerships that are formed between: first-year students and mentors; mentors and FYTOs (First-Year Transition Officers); and FYTOs and staff members.

FYTOs and mentors are senior and postgraduate students who are located in all seven faculties across the university. The use of senior students as partners in co-creating spaces for first-year students to feel a sense of belonging and connectedness to the institution developed out of the institution's online First Year Expectation and Experience Survey. One of the findings from the survey reveals that first-year students feel comfortable seeking support and information from peers and senior students. To alleviate the "I heard it on the grapevine" syndrome, and the danger of first-year students receiving incorrect and unofficial information, the institution decided to build on this notion and capitalise on student partnerships to address issues relating to first-year university transition.

Partnership in this programme is framed as a process of student engagement, by means of which student and staff learn and work together to engage in first-year student transition interventions. The partnerships with the FYTOs and mentors allowed for student voices in planning and implementing the transition programme.

Partnership for first-year students in innovative programme

Senior and postgraduate students help first-years develop a sense of belonging and connectedness at the institution

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The training workshops held with FYTOs and mentors were crucial to ensure that first-year students receive accurate, reliable and official information. Who would be better placed to know about student challenges and struggles with first-year transition than older students? The FYTOs and mentors took pride in fostering an engaging learning and mentoring relationship based on mutual trust, respect and care of all parties involved.

The focus of the programme was to ensure that all first-year students would be able to navigate their UWC experience successfully with very little stress and anxiety. All first-year students were invited to be part of the transition programme, which includes one-on-one mentoring, mentoring circles, online resources and workshops. Below are some comments with regard to stress from the first-year students that formed part of the transition programme:

“It [the transition programme] has taught me so much. It affected me positively because whenever I need to offload work stress my mentor is there to guide me academically and socially.”

“It [the transition programme] has made it easier for me to handle the stress and work load that comes with being at university.”

“I was able to interact with others. I’ve learnt to be open and not hide things that are stressing me.”

The FYTP at UWC enhanced first-year students’ sense of connectedness and belonging to the institution. Students felt comfortable to seek help, make friends and make use of university services.

Here are some further comments from students:

“The programme helped me communicate with other students and also I was able to share my ideas, feel comfortable with others including my mentor and who helped me on how to overcome university’s challenges.”

“The mentorship was an asset to my FYE at UWC. I felt comfortable and at ease knowing that there was an experienced person whom I could contact for any type of help I required.”

Student partnerships in the First-Year Transition Programme have certainly created an enabling environment for first-year students to engage socially and academically, with confidence and pride, in the university and the wider university community.

Overall, we have learnt valuable lessons from partnering with our students in a manner that was based on the principles of respect, reciprocity and shared responsibility. The co-creation of knowledge through the student partnership did, at times, create some discomfort because most staff-student partnerships are conducted from the vantage point of staff being in a position of power.

But we would certainly like to involve our students as partners in other learning and teaching areas in the Deputy Vice Chancellor: Academic’s office. We are currently writing up our experiences so that this can contribute towards developing our UWC framework on students as partners in learning, teaching and student success.