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**SUB THEME: OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO ACCESS AND
SUCCESS.**

**Title: 'THE LEARNER RESOURCE CENTRE: A TRECHNIKON
SOUTHERN AFRICA INITIATIVE TO FACILIATE ACCESS
AND IMPROVE THE SUCCESS RATE OF OUR DISTANCE
EDUCATION LEARNERS".**

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Abstract

Sub theme: Overcoming Barriers to Access and Success

TITLE: "THE LEARNER RESOURCE CENTRE: A TSA INITIATIVE TO FACILITATE ACCESS AND IMPROVE THE PASS RATE OF OUR DISTANCE EDUCATION STUDENTS."

Student demographics in Gauteng (the most densely populated of our nine provinces) show that as many as 70 percent of our clients are full time, unemployed learners who have, for a number of reasons, (very often financial) elected to study by distance education. Many of our learners underwent an inferior schooling experience where they had little or no exposure to technology. Furthermore, the majority are learning through the medium of English, their second or even third language. These factors often culminate in a high drop-out rate and poor academic results.

Like many other distance education institutions, TSA does have a tutor system where the learner is supported by a few contact sessions and telephone assistance with tutors. However, because of the difficulties of studying through distance and their disadvantaged backgrounds it was recognized that further learner support interventions are required to assist our learners.

The Learner Resource Centres were opened in the five Gauteng regional offices at the beginning of 2001 in an attempt to deter learners from dropping out and improve their chances of passing.

This paper would discuss the establishment of the centres and how they have been structured to provide practical, computer training for information technology students, allow all learners to become computer literate, have access to library, internet and email facilities and allow computer access for research and assignment work.

A new Learner Resource Centre initiative in 2002 is the planned introduction of Peer Collaborative Learning (PCL) sessions because research has shown that learners learn most effectively from their peers. Ten high risk (high failure rate) first year subjects have been identified and trained peer-leaders will run weekly group sessions this year to assist learners and provide guidance with assignment, course and exam work in these more "difficult" subjects. Also planned for 2002 is greater involvement of the academics (both full time lecturers and part-time tutors) with both the PCL project and in subject specific video-conferences.

Technikon's Learner Resource Centres are in their infancy, but already their popularity has proved the need for such support for our learners in our developing country. This paper would be an opportunity to share our experiences of this venture with delegates from other distance education institutions and other developing regions, highlight our successes and failures and hopefully learn from others' experiences.

1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Technikon Southern Africa (TSA) is one of the largest providers of distance education diplomas, B Tech and M Tech Degrees in Southern Africa. At present we operate from a head office in Florida, Gauteng and through a network of 23 regional offices, (9 regional and other branch offices) all around the country. In addition to full time academic staff at the head office, learner support has traditionally consisted of a tutor system; which provides a variety of part-time services, such as telephone tutoring, contact sessions and in some subject areas, office availability. Also, a decentralised (regional) marking system exists to reduce the turn around time of the assignments.

2. LEARNER RESOURCE CENTRES IN CONTEXT

As a consequence of the TSA Integrated Learner-centred Distance Education Model (ILCDE), which was adopted in 1994, one of the focus areas of the TSA regional offices is to provide effective, decentralised, learner support to our learners. This ties in with the mission statement of TSA as a whole, which specifies that TSA plans to extend access to learners by offering quality, flexible learning opportunities by means of decentralised learner support systems. (Council Document: 2000:4) Furthermore, TSA's goals align with the requirements of the National Plan for Higher Education Act of February 2001, which recognizes the critical role that academic development programmes will play in improving the efficiency of Higher Education. The Act goes on to specify the importance of 'regional collaboration' in the development and delivery of said academic development programmes. The Act further stipulates that institutions have a 'moral and educational responsibility to ensure that they have effective

programmes in place to meet the teaching and learning needs of the students.
(National Plan for Education: 2001: 27-31)

Also included in the document, specifically for Distance Education Programmes, is the directive that the traditional correspondence method of learning is to be replaced by one that "incorporates the provision of learner support through a variety of mechanisms, including learning centres with audio-visual and computer-assisted support." (Ibid 2001: 59) In addition, the Education Ministry, in agreement with the recommendations of the Council on Higher Education agreed that "a national network of learning centres, (be set up) which would facilitate access and co-ordinate learner support systems." (Ibid 2001: 62).

Lastly, the establishment of Learner Resource Centres is in compliance with the Outcomes Based Programme Development guidelines drawn up by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). which stipulate that specified critical outcomes will only be achieved when "each programme ... also include(s) courses that require students to achieve numeracy, computer literacy and information literacy"(Du Pre 2000 : 40). In a distance education institution, such as TSA, these services could be made available to learners at their nearest campus which would be their regional office and LRC.

It was in line with these National Education directives and internal TSA guidelines, coupled with the identified learner needs (which will be discussed shortly) that prompted the pilot establishment of Learner Resource Centres in the five TSA Gauteng offices in 2001.

3. WHY LEARNER RESOUCE CENTRES HAVE BECOME NECESSARY AT TSA?

A Learner Resource Centre could be defined as a permanent dedicated area, open 6 days a week, that learners can visit to make use of support services (such

as a library, study area, discussion rooms, computers and printers) and where they can expect to find learner support programmes on offer to assist them with their distance education studies.

Gauteng is the most densely populated of South Africa's nine provinces and 48% of all Technikon South Africa's (TSA) students are resident here. In the past, TSA was the institution of choice of mostly older, employed (either full/part time) learners who were learning in order to upgrade or improve their qualifications. Over the past five years, our learner profile has changed dramatically. Data collected over the last few years revealed that 70% of TSA Gauteng learners who now register at the Florida regional office are young school leavers, largely unemployed and studying/learning full time. This becomes evident when one consults the data in Annexure A (Data obtained from Florida Student Profile Statistics 2000-1)

A consequence of this has been that many Gauteng learners have begun visiting their regional offices on a frequent, even daily basis and begun to identify with that office as their "campus". In addition, the statistics also confirmed our suspicion that although the majority of our learners select English as their medium of instruction, only 10% of learners who registered in Florida in 2000-01 were mother tongue English speakers. This is borne out by Annexure B and C. (Student Profile Stats 2000-1). This means that the majority of learners at TSA are learning in their second, or even third language. All TSA study material, administrative information, tutorial letters and most prescribed and recommended books are written in English. It is not surprising then that many of our learners have difficulty reading, understanding and expressing themselves in adequate academic English. It is clear that a need exists for practical language intervention methods or strategies and language learner support programmes in an attempt to assist learners who experience difficulties with English. Such programmes could be run from the decentralised Learner Resource Centres.

A further weakness for many TSA students is their lack of knowledge in the field of technology. Many of them have never had access to a personal computer in their homes or schools, have had little or no exposure to any computers and yet select to study Information Technology. (IT) There seems to be a perception amongst learners that IT is a field in which one finds well paid employment, hence they are attracted to register for IT courses in substantial numbers. (The increase in the number of learners registering for IT subjects over the last few years would support this.) The LRC would be able to provide computer access for IT and all other learners, introduce them to email and the internet, allow support services such as typing and printing assignments and offer basic computer courses, such as MSWord and Excel. In addition, the computer facilities of a LRC would enable TSA to tender to be a service provider for End User Practical Training as a means to generate much needed income. End User is a basic computer literacy subject offered by TSA whose practical component includes training in software packages such as MS Word and Excel. The practical component is a compulsory first year module for most Information Technology learners.

A further consideration in favour of the establishment of the Florida LRC particularly was largely practical. The library at the main campus in Florida could no longer continue to accommodate the many learners who were visiting on a daily basis to make use of their study area and facilities. It became clear that learners needed a "campus" where they could study, hold discussions with others, consult the library and have access to learner support services.(for example, computer and printer facilities, internet and email).

These findings all indicated that learners needed greater learner support and the establishment of Learner Resource Centres was the first step in an attempt to begin to provide such support.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Although we had established the need for improved, extended learner support and were able to argue why Learner Resource Centres (LRC) would play an important role in supporting distance education learners and improving their chance of success, we were aware that securing the necessary funds to finance such centres would be problematic. Like other distance education providers in South Africa, TSA has noticed a drop in learner numbers over the last few years and an increasing number of institutions competing for this dwindling market. As a result, it became clear, from the outset, that although there was support for the concept of learner centres, there was very little by way of financial resources that could be channelled into their establishment. The LRC's would have to be financially self-sustaining and 'pay their own way'.

We attempted to achieve this in a number of ways: Firstly, each LRC was to be coupled to an existing branch office. This meant that wherever possible, such as in Florida, branch offices could make space for the new centres within their existing premises, so that extra costs (such as rental of space for example) would be kept to a minimum. The budgeted running costs of the centres (such as stationery, telephones etc) could be monitored and initially paid for by the relevant branch office budget.

Secondly, it was envisaged that income had to be derived from the centres themselves and the services they offered. This would enable them to cover their own expenses. To date, the chief source of income has been secured from training Information Technology, (IT) End-User learners. As part of the practical component of this subject, these first year, IT learners need to complete a 40 hour training programme and then demonstrate they have mastered skills taught, by sitting an exam. The Learner Resource Centres, amongst other service providers around the country tender for this training. Some of the training needs are provided by the LRC's in Gauteng and the remainder handled by other, external service providers. This means that a percentage of the learner

fees paid by end user learners, who elect to complete the practical component of their course at one of the LRC's are channelled into that Centres coffers. In addition, an extensive 'menu of services' was drawn up to offer a wide range of computer courses, (ranging from basic to advanced) to learners. The payment for such courses would help to cover the centres expenses. At all times, the courses and services would be competitively priced, in comparison with those of other providers. For example, learners are charged R20.00 per hour to make use of the internet, for either research or private purposes. Most other service providers, such as internet cafes, charge between R25.00 -30.00 for the same service. The emphasis is on offering improved services for the learners and not on making vast amounts of money. At the same time, sufficient profit must be generated to maintain the centres, fund new learner support services, pay additional staff and cover the running costs.

No additional human resources were required as staff from Gauteng were dedicated to staff the Institute (explained in the next section) and initially each regional office took over running the centres attached to their offices. In January 2002, a dedicated Learner Resource Centre co-ordinator was appointed at the two largest centres in Pretoria and Florida. It was felt that existing staff could no longer continue to run both the branch office and the LRC properly. Administrative assistants (to handle reception, bookings, and enquiries) and computer trainers were drawn from the Experiential Learning Programme, (ETOP) initiated by TSA. This experimental system placed second third or fourth year learners in departments in TSA for 30 hours a week, where they could gain work experience in their chosen fields while they rendered a service to TSA. Learners who had successfully completed Information Technology subjects were interviewed and selected for the LRC's, so that they could assist other learners with their training needs.. In April 2002, due to budgetary cuts, the ETOP programme fell away and it became necessary to hire learner/student assistants to handle the day to day operations of the Centres and assist with End User Training. The Centre coordinators and student assistants are paid from the

Gauteng Resource Fund, whose balance at present, is made up of chiefly from money accumulated from the End User training student fees. A full time librarian is supplied to staff the LRC library and is paid for by the Central Campus Library.

5. COORDINATION OF ALL THE LEARNER RESOUCCE CENTRES

Although each centre operates independently and is coupled to its respective branch office, to be really effective and provide a quality learner support it was decided that a central office (Bureau/Institute) was needed to assist with their establishment. The Institute would plan and provide resources, monitor activities and services, tender for training contracts, and maintain standards of the training and services at all the Centres. The Institute would not be involved in the day to day running of the centres, but would act as an overall body to ensure maintenance of standards by all the individual Centres. They are currently based in the Pretoria Regional Office, but liase between the 5 Centres in Gauteng. They control the budgets (monitor income, control spending) allocate physical resources to the centres, (for example the leasing/purchasing of computers) initiate and supervise establishment of centres in other provinces and monitor the establishment of new products and services at the existing Centres. All these functions are overseen by the Institute, in collaboration with each regional office. A further important function undertaken by the Institute has been to initiate and supervise the establishment of Resource Centres in other provinces. Todate 3 LRC's have been opened in Kwa-Zulu Natal, one in Cape Town and one in the North-West.

6. OPERATIONAL ISSUES

Although the Institute ensures that the standards of training and policies of each LRC are 'up to scratch' they do not interfere in the day to day running of the centres. This is managed by each branch office. In the Florida office, a booking system has been introduced to ensure that the study area and computer time is

effectively used. In June 2002 software was installed that will allow a computer run, booking system. We hope that this will allow more efficient use of time and cut down on 'unused' hours. Access to the centre learners show proof of registration at a reception desk when they enter the Centre. In time, we hope to install an electronic access control system, to ensure the safety of library books. At present, we issue 'pass out' cards when students leave the library and centre for any reason or length of time. TSA security staff are on duty to make spot checks of bags and equipment to check that library books are not being removed from the premises.

7. PEER COLLABORATIVE LEARNING (PCL)

Each Gauteng LRC plans to launch a Peer Collaborative Learning (PCL) project from third registration intake, later this year. Most of the research from both the UK and USA (Bidgood, P: 1994, Donlan M & Kay P:1995, Donlon 1999, Saunders & Gibbon :1998) indicates that peer-assisted or supplemental instruction ('students helping students/learners helping fellow learners') is a very effective learner support tool.

A lack of funds to launch the project has meant certain delays, but each LRC, in collaboration with the Academic Development Centre of Technikon S A has now gone ahead and advertised, selected and trained suitable 'student leaders' in subjects with especially high failure rates. It is planned, that small groups of first year learners will meet, at the different Centres, several times a week, under the guidance of their 'leader', who has already passed that level of the subject, to discuss study material, course content, assignment topics and such-like. Running simultaneously with the project will be a combined Gauteng action research project to monitor the effectiveness of different aspects of PCL, (such as the leader training, assignment and exam results of participants etc) This research

will inform decisions as to whether the project should, in the future be continued, and expanded; to more subjects and more Centres.. The research project is also being used as a means to provide funds to establish the PCL programme. Successful, well-attended Orientation and Exam Preparation Days have been held at the Florida LRC for each registration cycle. Learners are being introduced to distance education, assignment writing skills, study strategies, time management and given assistance with their exam preparation. They are also made aware of the facilities and services on offer in the Centres.

8. LESSONS LEARNT

Since training IT learners has been the main source of income for the LRC, we have found that it is essential, in each of the three registration periods to 'sign up' enough learners for their practical training, so that sufficient money is guaranteed to pay additional salaries and running costs. Since in our later registrations (second and third) traditionally register fewer students this has meant more energy and time needs to be directed towards marketing the Centres services and attracting sufficient numbers of learners. At times we have run very low on funds because we did not attract enough learners to undertake their practical training at one of our centres.

A second area that needs improving is the utilisation of existing computer time. A learner may reserve time and then for many reasons not use the full time booked, or he may reserve an hour and unless asked to leave may continue to use the computer/printer etc for longer that he has paid for. This problem has lead to the decision to view software access and booking programmes, which efficiently manage the time available and 'block access' when the allocated time has passed. This software is presently being used on an experimental, 'demo' basis until such time as a decision is made about which programme would be most beneficial.

Access control and learner identification are further areas that need improvement. The theft of several library books in the last few months has shown us that random checks by security personnel, pass out cards and LRC identification cards are insufficient to ensure the safety of books and Centre property. Financed permitting, we hope to install some electronic safety devices to improve security of TSA property.

9. CONCLUSION

Although the Learner Resource Centres in the Gauteng regional offices of TSA have only been open for 18 months, the positive response they have received from learners has been heartening. Although many 'teething' problems continue to be experienced, thus far they have managed to pay their own way, while slowly sponsoring new learner support initiatives and acquiring new technology. In the second half of 2001 and first few months of this year, the Institute has been instrumental in establishing Learner Resource Centres in other cities and provinces. To date, 5 new LRC's have been opened.

There is still much that needs to be done to adequately meet both student needs and to fulfill the directives from the Education Ministry, but the LRC's are at least a step in the right direction.

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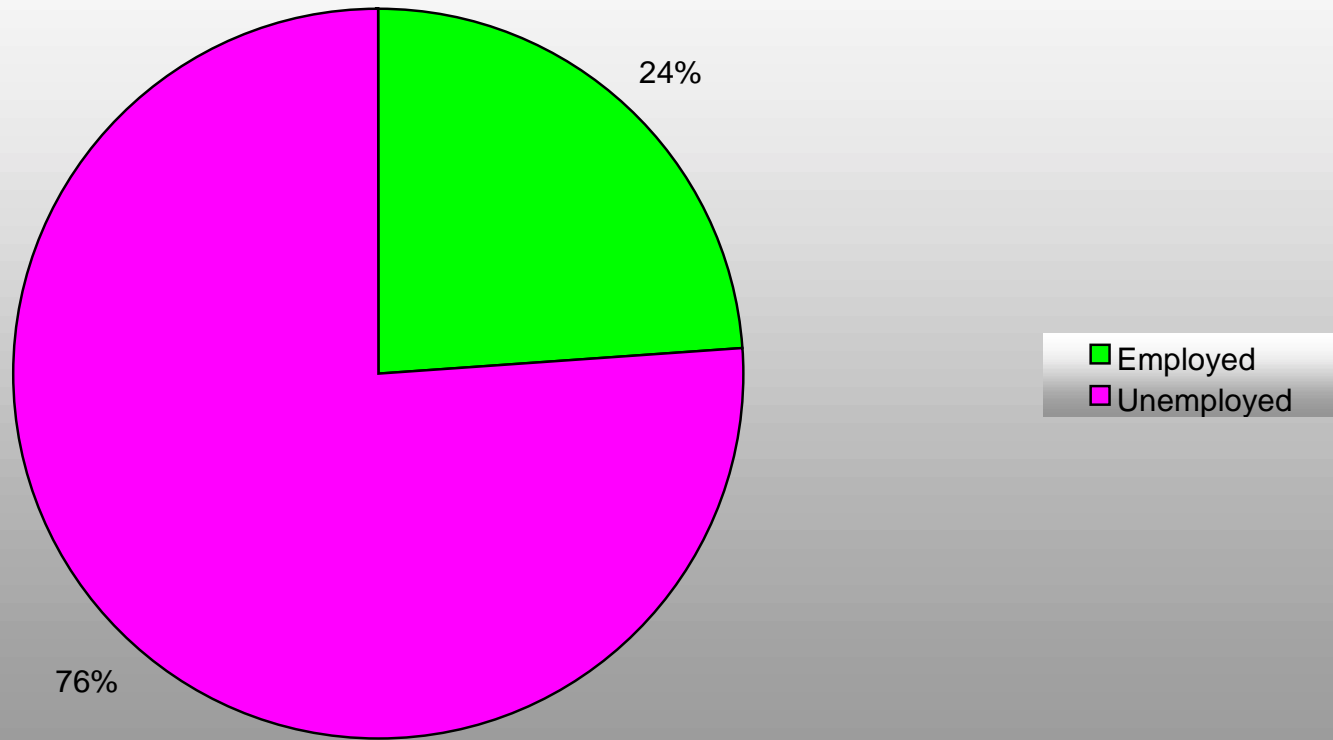
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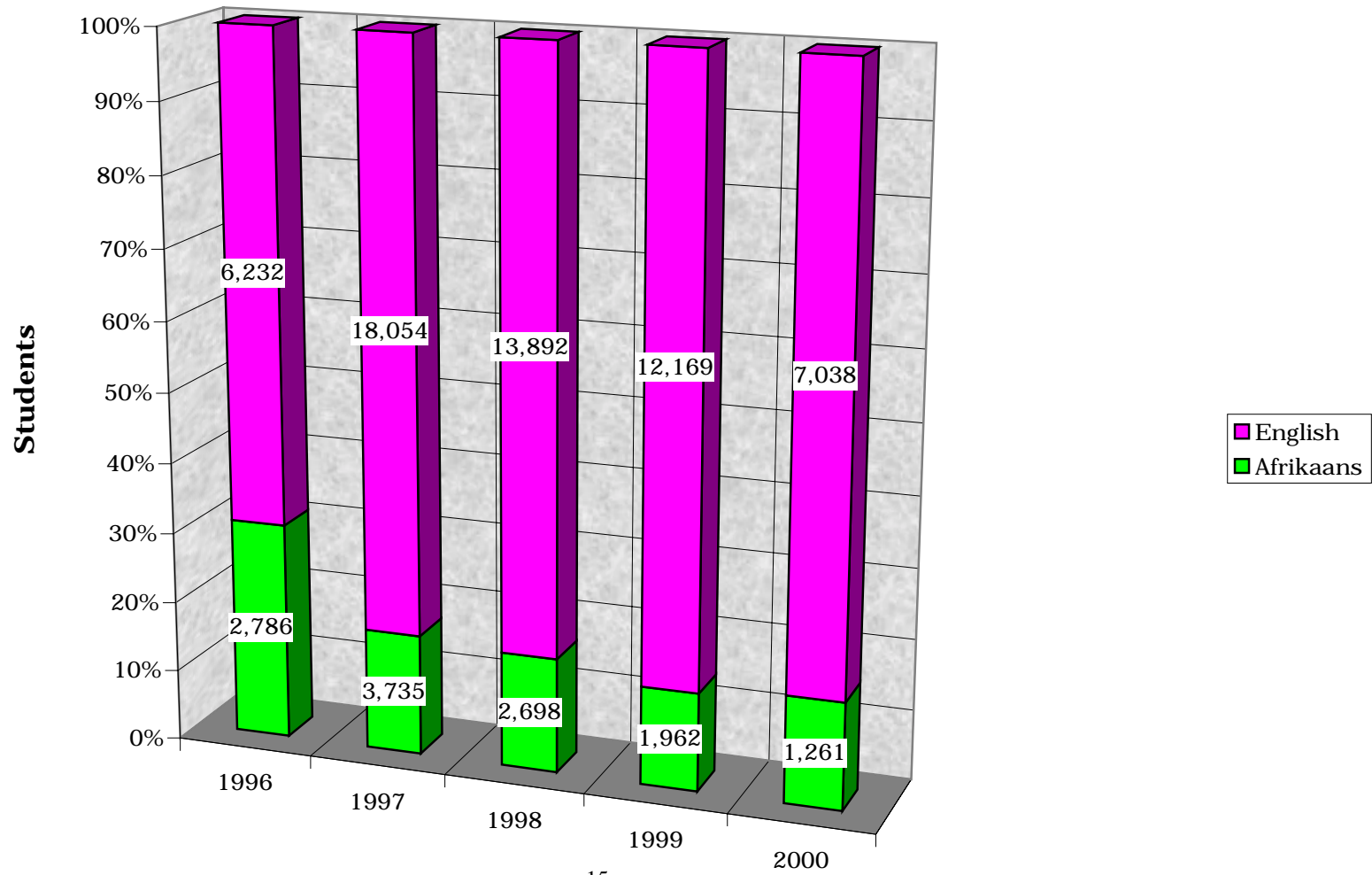
Annexure A

Percentage Students Employed / Unemployed



Annexure B

Preferable Language



Annexure C

