

Southern African Association for Institutional Research

23rd SAAIR Conference

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Faculty of Management
Department of Transport and Supply Chain Management

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Enabling academic administrators to
manage traumatic interactions with clients

Example #FeesMustFall



Contextualising the research

- The role of administrative staff in Higher Education
- Administer the academic life cycle of students
 - Application
 - Registration
 - Assessment
 - Graduation
- Supporting role: academic staff and students
- First contact with students

Contextualising the research

- Changing behavior of students observed and experienced, #FeesMust Fall from 2015 onwards
 - Incidents
 - “Revolutionary greetings”
 - Verbal abuse
- Continuous changes in processes resulting in additional work, impact on the administrator’s practice



Contextualising the research

- Debriefing and motivation required to enable administrative staff to manage interactions with clients, additional workload



Identified interventions

- To enable administrators to manage traumatic interactions it was important to:
 - facilitate opportunities to “hear the administrative voice”
 - provide relevant practical tools to enable administrators to manage trauma
 - focus on positive aspects
 - strengthen the ability to work in a team
 - benchmark and contextualise within UJ and other Universities

Operational considerations

- Obtain institutional buy-in for the identified intervention
- Money matters as a result of #FeesMustFall
- Faculty of Management: Pilot project
- UJ HR project
- Opportunity for other Departments and Divisions



Planning the research

- Research theme: derived from the researcher's practical experiences
- Research focus and approach
 - Qualitative research: to ensure a flexible design
to enable reflection
to gain a holistic view
 - Case study: University of Johannesburg
Faculty of Management
Department of Transport and Supply Chain Management
 - Ethical considerations

Research question

“How can administrative staff be enabled to manage traumatic interactions with clients?”



Research objective

To select and avail relevant tools that administrative staff can utilise to manage traumatic interactions with clients,
for example

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Research focus

- Personal growth
- Strategic and ethical behavior
- EQ awareness



Research focus

- Dealing with diversity and difficult situations
- Improve self-control and self-development
- Functioning as a team

Intervention

- Ongoing communication between facilitator and manager in planning the intervention for 45 administrative staff members
- First intervention: two groups of 23/22
3 hour sessions
interactive group work focusing on research objectives
role of the facilitator
- Three weeks between first and second intervention to enhance skills



Intervention

- Follow-up session in smaller groups to discuss experiences
- Second intervention: two groups of 23/22
 - 3 hour sessions
 - interactive group work focusing on research objectives
 - role of the facilitator
- Continuous strengthening of behavior by manager
- Individual sessions with facilitator on request
- Additional intervention focusing on transformation and inter-cultural relationships

Discussion of results

Academic administrators are able to manage traumatic interactions with clients #FeesMustFall when they:

- Build and maintain trusting relationships
- Ensure and maintain clear and open communication
- Demonstrate responsiveness and adaptability



Discussion of results

- Develop the ability to cope with diversity
- Develop the ability to work in a team
- Display expert knowledge and skills required when performing duties

Strategy for academic administrators to manage traumatic interactions



Can administrators manage traumatic interactions with clients as a result of the intervention?

- Difficult to determine when working with people
- Burning of auditorium at UJ and further disruptions in September and October
- Positive response from staff
 - Staff could successfully apply relevant tools to manage trauma

Future research

- Escalation of the intervention
 - within UJ: other Faculties
 - Skills Development Forum
 - Higher Education Faculty Administrators Forum



Closing

- #FeesMustFall 2016 ongoing, not a once-off event
- Training to enable professional functioning is important
- Feedback to assist or strengthen this intervention important and welcomed

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