

# THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

## Strategies for Academic Improvement in the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

Osei-Bediako Appau

Senior Assistant Registrar, Department of Academic Affairs,  
Akonte Appiah-Menka University of Skills Training and Entrepreneurial Development, Ghana

### **Abstract:**

*Reputable universities worldwide are centres of academic excellence. In the same vein, the University of Education, Winneba (UEW) per its vision statement aspires to become an internationally reputable institution of teacher education and research. Additionally, one of the core values of UEW is academic excellence. This paper focuses on ways through which students can attain academic excellence in the University. The paper achieves its aim by discussing some measures of academic excellence from the point of view of previous literature and the experiences of the author. The paper suggests several interventions for the Management of UEW to adopt and implement which is believed would go a long way to improve the academic achievement of its students, now and in the future. Among the key interventions to be considered for implementation is mandatory/voluntary enhanced tutorials in Communicative Skills, data analysis and deeper insight into research methods as well as the organisation of two week preparatory classes for failed students in a paper. Regarding the funding of the mandatory/voluntary tutorial classes that are to be held on weekends, the faculties and departments could bear the costs on their own or from a proposed corporate social responsibility fund to be set up by the University if it deems that appropriate and feasible.*

**Keywords:** Academic excellence, enhanced tutorials, preparatory classes, key interventions, corporate social responsibility, voluntary, mandatory, communicative skills and data analysis

### 1. Introduction

Vintage academic performance in a tertiary education environment is a sine qua non, something no player within the University setting would compromise on. The University of Education, Winneba (UEW) is very conscious of its mandate to train teachers and other professionals of international repute. Based on a result on this, everything should be done within the capability of the University to ensure there is quality assurance in whatever is done, especially, issues that are related to teaching and learning, and assessment of the students' academic performance.

In an attempt to reach the pinnacle of academic excellence among students on all UEW campuses and study centres, efforts have to be made to ensure that strategies are evolved to guarantee that there is sustained academic improvement. The crux of the issue is that some of UEW's students are not performing well academically. This reflects in the number of trailed papers that are recorded every semester across the campuses and study centres. This is coupled with the number of times some of the students are made to redeem themselves in terms of the trailed papers. Also, some of the students may not necessarily have trailed papers; however, the grades they consistently obtain during the end-of-semester examinations leave much to be desired. These eventually lead to marginal output in terms of class obtained upon graduation – examples abound over the years. As a University that aspires to reach higher levels in terms of academic excellence, some drastic measures need to be instituted to ensure that academic performance among students in the UEW improves to appreciable levels comparable to prestigious tertiary institutions across the world.

### 2. Related Literature

Generally, strategies for academic performance abound in the literature. A few would suffice. Firstly, Esme (2017) indicates that there are five strategies that when adopted by struggling students could help improve their academic performance. These strategies are: setting goals and working towards them; using a wider variety of learning resources; getting through the frustration period; sharpening one's examination techniques; and practising how to write successful examinations. A brief explanation of each of the strategies put forward is relevant in this context. With regards to setting goals and working towards them, Esme (2017) explains that the first step with any new student is to construct a set of goals since goals enable students to continuously track their progress and adjust accordingly. She says that it is considerably easier to make small adjustments throughout the year than to make a huge pivot during examination time or after mid mid-semester examination results have been published, as this is a common practice in schools. This helps students feel more in control, reducing anxiety during examinations. The process of setting goals also enables students to plan their time more effectively and quantify their progress. This, therefore, helps students to re-evaluate their performance and determine what they can achieve throughout the year.

In the words of Bruce Lee, 'Long-term consistency trumps short-term intensity'. In giving credence to this strategy for academic improvement, Marzano, Pickering and Pollock (2001) as cited in Doston (2016) buttressed the point that goal-setting as defined in 'Classroom Instruction' that Works, is the process of establishing a direction for learning. In the same way, Schunk (2009) clarifies that while goal-setting can lead to student motivation and higher academic achievement, simply stating a goal does not automatically benefit students. However, if implemented correctly, goal-setting has the potential to positively impact learning in the long run.

On the issue of using a wider variety of learning resources, it requires using several learning strategies such as memorizing, recalling, paraphrasing study materials, among others. Esme (2017) emphasises that overall, anything that gives you a different perspective on a theory, idea or problem will act to enhance learning. A good example of this is to look at the earth from a single image. It gives you a perspective of what the earth looks like, but you never get the whole picture until you look at it from several different angles (and get several different perspectives). Similarly, different associations and analogies are indeed used in learning abstract materials. It is also factual that everyone has had that experience where they have not understood something properly, and then suddenly it clicked with an analogy that resonated with them. In sum, it is advisable if a variety of learning resources and strategies are used to study difficult materials as a way of improving one's academic performance.

Another set of strategies that have been suggested in the literature to help improve academic performance among students was put together by the Oxford Royale Academy (2017). This source indicates that if academically struggling students adopt all the 14 strategies or some of them, it is believed that could go a long way to improve one's grades or academic performance considerably. The 14 academic improvement strategies evolved by the Oxford Royale Academy were: (i) adopting a positive mental attitude; (ii) working out where you are falling short; (iii) talking to your teachers; (iv) paying attention in class and asking questions; (v) organising your life; (vi) improving your note-taking skills; (vii) improve your essay-writing skills; (viii) find the right learning style for yourself; (ix) improve your memory; (x) stop procrastinating; (xi) allow plenty of time for revision; (xii) make learning more fun; (xiii) hire a private tutor, and (xiv) go on a summer school.

It is widely agreed that adopting a positive mental attitude is the way to go in one's attempt towards enhanced academic performance. On the part of Becton (2019), positive, productive learning environments are keys to students' academic, emotional and social success in school. Unfortunately, positive learning environments do not just happen automatically - they must be created. It is in positive learning environments that students who consistently get lower grades or marks can develop a positive attitude towards learning and not get bogged down that they are failures. Teachers and counsellors can make this happen.

One other important strategy that struggling students should take note of is paying attention in class and asking questions for clarifications. The act of paying attention and asking questions is a step towards a positive learning attitude, meaning the strategies work together - thus, the strategies are complementary. For instance, when students open up to teachers and counsellors about their poor academic performance, such persons already know the problem that confronts them and want a solution to those challenges in their academic work. This is a good step since teachers and counsellors would normally give tit-bits that would deal with note-taking, positive attitude, essay writing, learning strategies and staying focused on everything a student does to get good results in the end.

The third and final set of strategies for academic improvement is advanced by Atieno (2018). She states that, among others, a plausible strategy for better academic outcomes among students is the relationship between behaviour and academic performance. She explains that experts say that taking measures to improve academic performance and outcome starts with improving the behaviour of students in the classroom. Although it may seem challenging, teachers play a large role in creating an environment that encourages learning, improves student behaviour and creates better academic performance at every level of education. Teachers can accomplish amazing feats when the appropriate strategies are implemented to improve the behaviour in the classroom.

Atieno (2017) stressed that teachers must provide students with hands-on assignments which are believed to enhance the students' understanding of what is taught in class. According to Atieno, a colleague teacher suggested that teachers should also encourage and involve students in hands-on projects such as research, real-life activities and practical works. According to this proposition, when students do research, it contributes to their knowledge development and practical improvement and eventually results in improved academic performance. Furthermore, Atieno holds a view that if teachers and facilitators of the learning process are to believe in students and offer them support, almost every student would put up a good academic performance. This is because when there is clear communication, it gives room for students to express themselves on whatever issues they may have. Additionally, when teachers point out what they want and expect exactly from their students, it improves students' understanding and yields better results among students in assessment processes. Finally, Atieno notes that teachers should focus on achievement. She explains further that teachers as facilitators of the learning process are to ensure the success of their students to the extent that they should focus on strategies that always improve on excellent academic achievements. She concludes by stating that a guided curriculum helps improve learning, and so teachers should be able to focus on the academic needs of each student. When they do so, it provides students with the ability to achieve better in a particular subject, if not all the subjects that are in the curriculum.

### **3. Suggestions/Strategies for Academic Improvement at UEW**

It is quite clear that there are several strategies for academic improvement and these strategies are well-documented as captured in the related literature section. At the UEW, there should be agreement on some home-grown or locally-brewed strategies that when discussed and adopted would go a long way to help facilitate the improvement in the

academic performance of students. The strategies that are to be discussed would not only help students of UEW but could be adapted by other schools for use since they are going to be experiential. From this background, a need for academic improvement is a call well-made, as such, a few suggestions for academic improvement among struggling students in UEW are discussed in the subsequent paragraphs.

Firstly, it is suggested that there should be compulsory academic improvement classes on weekends for weak students. Here, weak and struggling students fall within the category of students who, at the end of the first semester in the first year, have a cumulative grade point average (CGPA) of between 1.0 and 2.49. Such students should be helped to lift themselves. Apart from these struggling first-year students, continuing students, who are level 200 to 400 students, who, at any point in time, obtain a CGPA of less than 2.5, should be compelled to attend these compulsory academic improvement classes. What are these Compulsory Academic Improvement Classes all about? Contextually, the compulsory or mandatory academic improvement class is an extra tuition lecture session that is meant to give further tuition to weaker students. They have to be organised during the weekends when the University's normal teaching timetable would not be operational. At these suggested Mandatory Classes, the courses to be re-emphasised are Communicative Skills courses, and Research Methodology and Data Analysis. This is being suggested because most students are so weak in the English language that this problem needs to be dealt with to ensure that all students can perform above board when it comes to the use of English as an official instructional and working language. Besides this, as higher education students, all students should be able to undertake research of all kinds and to do proper analysis with any data that is given to them.

The mandatory academic improvement measures can be termed voluntary academic improvement measures. This is because students, who always obtain a GPA of 2.5 or better, would still want to improve and score something in the region of first-class or second class upper. Such a category of students would want some extra tuition to perform to their optimum. There should be an avenue for students to take advantage of and help maintain the academic excellence we seek to reach and maintain in our attempt to become an internationally reputable educational institution of learning, teaching and research.

With regards to the organisation and sponsorship of the suggested mandatory academic improvement classes, the responsibility for organising and sponsoring the classes must be spearheaded and borne by the Faculties and Departments. This can be done under the window of corporate social responsibility (CSR) of the University. In line with the organisation and sponsorship of the classes, Teaching Assistants and Master of Philosophy Students must be carefully selected from the Departments to teach at these compulsory/mandatory/optional/voluntary academic improvement tutorial sessions. The budget for these classes should be catered for from a suggested CSR Fund to be set up by the University to enable this idea to come to fruition.

Now to the question of why these suggestions have to be looked at closely and considered for implementation. First of all, it should be borne in mind that students, once admitted and succeed to graduate, become alumni who wear the image of the university wherever they go or work. It is incumbent on lecturers, administrators, and management to ensure that 'products of this university' are among the best on the job market, irrespective of the degrees obtained. It is believed that these suggested mandatory/optional classes would complement the officially agreed tutorial sessions. Because of constraints of time and space, these classes would have to be held on weekends or evenings where applicable to allow very weak students to catch up with the competitive academic (pursuits) standards that UEW abides by.

A cursory look at some of the application letters written by some of the students of UEW is very worrying (samples of such letters are attached as Appendix A). This cannot be allowed to flourish in this University; something needs to be done to stem the tide before things get out of hand. The truth is all (lecturers, administrators and management) bear testimony that the situation is not acceptable, yet, these stakeholders only discuss and talk about them, and allow these obvious anomalies to pass, without any conscious effort in addressing them. It was high time key actors in the education delivery process adopted some pragmatic measures to deal with them. It is hoped that in addition to individual and group counselling that are offered to students, there should be more tutorial sessions in the form of compulsory/mandatory/optional academic improvement classes.

Closely related to the mandatory classes that have been discussed is the organisation of preparatory classes for students who are referred in a paper or two. It has been observed over some time that most often the results of written Resit papers are so abysmal that some of these students write the papers more than once. Evidence abound as such samples of some of the poor performers have been collated and presented in Appendix B. The way out of this rather disturbing state of affairs is to organise preparatory classes for those who have been referred in a paper. The contention here is that this category of students did not understand the course well so if they are simply given the option to write a Resit paper without any form of guidance or preparation, the likelihood that they would repeat the mistake made earlier is high. What had been observed over the years, which distinguished audience will agree with is that those, who even pass, hardly get any good grades; most of the time, they receive a D grade, which is so bad and this eventually has a telling effect on their GPA and overall academic performance. This disturbing situation must not be allowed to continue. Something can be done about it as UEW strives to achieve excellence. In this instance, a preparatory class is highly suggested as an alternative.

The Preparatory classes should be organised over two weeks and they must be paid for by the trailed students. These preparatory classes would take the form of guiding students on the demands of a question and clarifying issues for them so that they know what is expected of them. To ensure this suggestion is carried through successfully, the University must respect its own rules and regulations on feedback to students' academic performance. This is contingent on the fact that the Departmental Examiners' Board meeting must be held six weeks after the last semester paper is written to be followed by the Faculty Examiners' Board meeting to somehow authenticate the results discussed at the various

departments. If these provisions in the Handbook of Examinations and Review of Academic Programmes are strictly adhered to and enforced by Management, it would go a long way to identify students who are trailing so that they would be communicated to by the Departments promptly to aid in the planning of the preparatory classes.

Another measure that could help improve the academic performance of the students of the University is to start lectures right from the beginning of the semester or session and ensure that the stipulated two or three credit hours are utilised fully during the teaching session. To make this strategy practicable, tutors should be assigned to every course so that practical aspects and tutorial sessions are carried through to the letter.

In line with the full utilisation of lecture periods is the issue of the enforcement of regulation on students' attendance at lectures. What is being proffered is that there should be vigorous checking of attendance by teaching assistants (TAs) who are assigned to lecturers/courses so that students' persistent absenteeism could be curtailed. One would concede that the checking of attendance of large class sizes would be difficult but it is doable.

Also, it should be borne in mind that teaching in a large class is not very effective; so, if the class size is too large (like 250-300), it should be broken into two. In this case, more lecturers, by way of part-timers, must be found to handle the additional class (es). Even though this measure has implications for the University's finances, it is worth it because one cannot talk about quality education without cost.

#### 4. Conclusion

Management of the UEW should bear in mind that there are quality education standards worldwide; as such these principles cannot be overlooked since the University's ultimate objective is to become a centre of excellence in tertiary education delivery in Africa and beyond. In the light of this, all hands must be on deck – meaning there must be conscious efforts to reach that pinnacle of academic success. The achievement of all these fine ideas come at a cost and hard decisions have to be arrived at, not forgetting about the sacrifices that have to be made by all and sundry, if the University is to achieve the objectives set out in the current corporate strategic goals.

#### 5. References

- i. Atieno, L. (2018). *Strategies to improve academic outcomes*. Accessed from <https://www.newtimes.co.rw/lifestyle/strategies-improve-academic-outcomes>
- ii. Becton, L. (2019). *Strategies for building a productive and positive learning environment*. Accessed from <https://www.educationcorner.com/building-a-positive-learning-environment.html>
- iii. Dotson, R. (2016). Goal setting to increase student academic performance. *Journal of School Administration Research and Development*, 1(1), 44-46.
- iv. Esme, J. (2017). *Five strategies to improve academic performance*. Accessed from <https://www.tutorfair.com/blog/five-strategies-to-improve-academic-performance>
- v. Marzano, R., Pickering, D., & Pollock, J. (2001). *Classroom instruction that works*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
- vi. Oxford Royale Academic (2017). *Fourteen ways to improve your grades if you're underperforming*. Accessed from <https://www.oxford-royale.com/articles/improve-underperforming-grades.html#aId=8e065dbc-e065-48eb-b80a-a919669b5277>
- vii. Schunk, D. (2009). *Goal setting*. Accessed from <http://www.education.com/reference/article/goalsetting/>