

# Academic Support Programmes

---

**Peter Hunter and Sue Starfield**

*Peter Hunter is the Director  
and Sue Starfield the Assistant Director (Curriculum)  
of the Academic Support Unit at the University of Witwatersrand*

This article is in two parts: the first is concerned with overall policy and structure, the second with curricula and teaching strategies. Part Two is based upon a paper, by the second author, presented to a conference of the English Academy of South Africa in Pretoria on 7 July 1989.

## Part One

Academic support programmes may be seen as an interim strategy to help students from a disadvantaged school system to make the transition to higher education effectively. At a university such as Wits, this takes place in a context of multi-faceted debate and action concerning the kinds of changes in the university required by the changing demography of student intake and by the wider imperatives and priorities of South African society. The word interim is used because what is being worked towards, over the years, is a situation in which the appropriate pedagogical action is the responsibility not of a separate support structure but of the respective mainstream faculties and departments. (These latter may come to discharge some of their responsibilities in this respect through an intra-university pre-degree college.) But when the academic support moment was initiated in the early eighties, it was necessary to develop an inter-faculty team of specialists who could concentrate upon helping the students concerned, could develop the appropriate expertise and then in due course could meet requests from mainstream staff members and university committees for assistance in responding to the pedagogical and contextual problems of the students in question. At Wits this last process of response to the wider university has commenced in recent years, along with an acceptance, in certain mainstream units of the university, of responsibility for support work previously seen as the role of ASP only.

Tutorial and supportive work in relation to the students in question can of course in principle take place under a number of different types of structure.

The support may take the form of pre-degree studies, either within a special structure in a secondary school (a post-matric year) or in a free-standing institution such as Khanya College, or, (as in the British 'access' courses) in a special programme within the adult education sector, or in a special intra-university structure: a foundation year or an 'intermediate tertiary college'.

The alternative arrangement is to provide this support concurrently with degree studies: either in the form of an academic support programme or by amending, and/or adding variants to, mainstream degree curricula, to respond appropriately to the student intake's heterogeneity as regards preparedness.

The ASP's immediate responsibility has been the provision of supplementary and enriched teaching to those (mainly black) students who enter the university with the schooling which is very inadequate as preparation for academic study. Typically, the rote-learning predominant in these students' previous education has hindered them from applying to their academic work their skills in complex conceptualising, skills which are evident when they talk about things which interest them outside their formal studies. (See the discussion of 'cognitive academic language proficiency' in Part Two). Most of these students have problems with English language, and with learning how to study. Learning how to study effectively in English is of course best done in the context of the specific curricula being studied. So most academic support staff are subject-specific senior tutors attached to the respective departments. But there are also language and learning skills specialists, evaluators and those who co-ordinate the programme and advise students on non-academic problems.

When these programmes were established some eight years ago it was recognised, and in the case of some institutions explicitly stipulated, that responding to the problems of black students at mainly white universities themselves have resisted the notion of curricular and other institutional changes. But those responsible for institution and implementing academic support programmes have recognised that while this special tutorial work functions most immediately to help the student it also serves to provide the university with a better understanding of the students' problems. Informed decisions can therefore be made in the structure of mainstream teaching. It's inaccurate to suggest, as James Moulder has done, that these programmes are a strategy for avoiding institutional change and that the universities believe that there is nothing problematic about their teaching programmes. Certainly an awareness of the problems came late and is not sufficiently widespread today. But at institutional leadership and academic support programme level the need for wider university changes have been explicit for a number of years. At Wits for example the 1980 Academic Plan specifically recognised that the university was not educating its students to be sufficiently aware of the social and economic problems surrounding them, that not enough of research resources were being concentrated on the problems of our immediate surroundings, and that the university had historically served predominantly the white middle class community of the Witwatersrand. In these and other areas, such as teaching which takes cognisance of the heterogeneous nature of the student intake, the university has from time to time made specific policy statements. In December 1985 the Wits Council and Senate, while calling for the repeal of all apartheid legislation, committed the university to re-examine all policies and practices in the university, including teaching and research. They committed the university further to the cause of equal education facilities for all. In June 1988 the present Vice-Chancellor, Professor RW Charlton, at his installation deplored the fact that so few blacks were occupying senior positions in the university and there were (at that time) none on the university council, and he pledged himself and his administration to work to correct the imbalance.

At Wits the immediate role of ASP is to maximise academic performance in the students disadvantaged by the inadequacy of previous educational opportunities. The concern is not only that these students pass their courses as well as possible, but that they become

learners who are critical, independent, exploratory, creative, and effective in processing, organising and communicating facts and ideas. (Just how to do this more successfully is obviously a matter of continuous learning on the part of the ASP staff.)

The longer-term concern of the ASP staff is to contribute its experience and insights to those developments in university policy and practice that are directed towards a more sensitive and vigorous contribution to the wider South African society.

The Wits ASP has stated that it should therefore be seen as part of a thrust in University policy concerned with the following developments:

- admission and support procedures encouraging the recruitment and retention of students from disadvantaged backgrounds;
- the evolution of teaching programmes which take cognisance of the heterogeneity of the student intake;
- curricular, research and outreach priorities more closely attuned than hitherto to the needs of national development;
- substantial increase in the number of black people in teaching decision-making and leadership roles in the institution;
- systematic mechanisms and procedures for consultation with the leaders of the wider South African community as well as those traditionally represented in the University's decision-making bodies.

While giving priority to students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds the programme is not limited to black students.

In 1988 about 800 students (nearly all first years) were involved to a greater or lesser degree in tutorial activities of the ASP. Degrees of participation vary from involvement in a study skills course to a spread of the first academic year over two chronological years, the spread including the addition of tailor-made tutorial support courses. With very few exceptions, ASP work is confined to first-year students, as resources to extend the often still needed assistance beyond that stage are not available.

In a large number of subjects there are additional small-group tutorials to clarify, basic concepts and develop learning strategies appropriate to their subjects.

Study skills courses cover effective reading, the integrating of the material being studied; the skills of listening, note-taking and memorising; essay-writing; time-management; preparing for and writing examinations. The conceptual skills component includes problem-solving strategies, precision and accuracy, and skills for comparing, classifying

and abstracting. Increasingly, such material is integrated with the subject-specific tutorials mentioned in the last paragraph. (See Part Two)

In English language, attention is given to: following the structure of lectures, recognising digression, distinguishing facts from opinions, asking for clarifications, and expressing opinions. Increasingly, language courses are integrated with the special subject needs of the specific groups of students being taught. (See Part Two)

In the case of some students, the first academic year is spread over two years.

In certain Science subjects, it is possible to spread an individual first-year course over two years, with the respective half-courses especially adapted to the relevant students' needs rather than simply covering half the content of the full course.

Under both these types of structural arrangement, additional tutorials are made available in academic skills and/or the specific subjects.

ASP has been offered to post-graduate students (BEd) in a joint venture between ASP and the Education Department. A seven-person team comprising three ASP tutors, the two study skills tutors, the Maths tutor and four members of the Education Department provide academic skills workshops for full-time BEd students. At present there are three groups running and they meet weekly for a two-hour tutorial. In addition the tutors attend the BEd lectures twice a week and attend a weekly planning meeting and the BEd tutors' meeting once a week. Part of the collaboration between ASP and the Education Department involves a joint research project (funded on grant from the Senate Committee on Teaching and Learning (which is examining issues in learning and teaching related to study and conceptual skills at a tertiary level in the context of the BEd programme.

In the eight years of its existence, ASP has become increasingly aware of the influence of non-academic factors upon the students' scholastic development. One of the ASP's assistant directors spends most of her time individually advising and assisting disadvantaged students with financial, residential and other personal problems.

The programme's staff is increasingly being asked to participate in activities related to but beyond the original brief of ASP.

Senior personnel have been involved in discussion with faculty secretaries on enrolment and orientation procedure. A number of faculties and departments have invited ASP staff members to provide consultancy on the teaching of heterogeneous classes. ASP colleagues have been invited to attend and comment upon lectures, to address staff meetings and consult with individual lecturers. ASP has provided a series of workshops applying the insights from ASP experience in conceptual skills to the teaching of first year tutorials in a variety of subjects.

Since its inception the Academic Support Programme at Wits has been under constant evaluation by a professional evaluator. This has entailed interviews with students and staff members involved in the programme, and analyses of the academic progress of students. The results of this continuing evaluation have been encouraging, and the findings have contributed to the regular review of the programme as a whole, and to the revision of certain of its aspects.

Longitudinal studies of academic progress have indicated that, in general, at first-year level the pass rate and the number of subjects passed within a year by black AS students have been at least as good as, and often better than, the figures for white students with similar matric results and other comparable groups.

As regards students in subsequent years of study the picture is more varied, and problem areas are under investigation. The results of such investigation seem to indicate that (as suggested above) the success of black students in particular is related not only to their educational backgrounds, but also very much to the conditions under which they live while studying and to the University environment itself.

Since 1982 there have been annual conferences of the ASP staff at universities where black students are in a minority. This sharing of experience and ideas has been formally embodied in the annual conference proceedings entitled 'ASPEcts', whose articles reflect concerns ranging from support strategies and material in specific subjects to overall issues of university policy on ASP and related issues. Members of the ASP staff also attend the conference of the SA Association for Academic Development, originating in black universities and devoted to ASP-type issues.

The core staff of ASP at Wits comprises a director, an assistant director (student affairs and administration), an assistant director (curriculum) who co-ordinates the tutorial work in collaboration with Faculties, an evaluator, and full or major-time tutors or senior tutors in each of English language, study skills, mathematics, botany, general biology, chemistry, physics, zoology, quantitative techniques, and commercial subjects, a co-ordinator of the ASP/Engineering WISPE project, and two secretaries. There are also about 30 hourly-paid tutors.

Four of the full-time staff are on the University's permanent staff. All other staff and operational expenses are met from private donations. Over the past eight years nearly all of this external funding has come from the Chairman's Fund of Anglo American and De Beers.

Certain departments provide ASP tutorials from their own existing resources rather than through the ASP budget, and it is expected that most future subject-specific growth in ASP provision will need to be handled this way. The central inter-Faculty ASP team will continue to provide faculties and department with support, evaluation and whatever degree of co-ordination of ASP is necessary. It will continue to respond to the non-academic needs of disadvantaged students, and, together with subject specialists,

will contribute to discussions on the evolution of curricular arrangements appropriate to a heterogeneous intake.

## **Part Two**

The term Academic Support Programme has come to refer not only to the structure of such programmes, but also to the pedagogical processes and curricular innovations which are being developed by the programmes. While the first half of this paper has dealt with the structural nature of an ASP, the second part will examine curriculum development in the Wits ASP and some of its pedagogical implications. In order to do this, it will be necessary to sketch the evolution of the Wits ASP from its inception at the beginning of the decade until 1989, describing the different phases it has undergone

### **Phase 1**

In what has been called Phase 1 (Hunter:1989), the ASP at Wits looked somewhat different to what it does today. The ASP was a small inter-faculty unit set up in essence to assist the 'new' students entering the university. Although the target population remains unchanged, this part of the article will show how curricula and pedagogical responses to the problems, as well as the definition of the problem itself, have shifted.

In Phase 1 of the ASP, the courses offered were skills based. The identification of the skills that needed to be taught to students was based on the assumption that because of their prior educational experiences, students lacked certain skills that are essential for academic success. Courses were therefore offered in study skills and English language, in logical reasoning, critical thinking and in conceptual skills. These courses were not directly related to the subject areas students were studying but can be defined as discrete and decontextualised. Tutors based in the central ASP taught these courses to students from different faculties and departments. Courses, were, in the main, voluntary, supplementary, concurrent and non-credit-bearing. In other words, students were not obliged to attend ASP, or if there were some form of faculty compulsion, this was rarely enforced. ASP was taken in addition to the existing curriculum for which the student was currently enrolled and was not given credit; as the primary aim was to supplement the skills students lacked, thereby enabling them to pass their credit courses. Some subject support was offered in the early years, i.e. support related to specific subject areas, and this mostly took the same form, i.e. voluntary, supplementary and concurrent. The problems that this model poses will be discussed below. From the outset, subject support was conceived of as being something other than 'extra lessons'. The emphasis in subject support tutorials which were run by senior students or in some instances by lecturers in the department concerned, was on the skills required rather than on the contents of the subject. Being concurrent, all forms of support were closely tied to the existing curriculum. In other words, they did not attempt to 'bridge' the gap between school and university by providing a foundation of what was perceived to be 'missing' but rather 'supported' students with skills needed in existing courses. This was no doubt one of the reasons for the change in the programme's name from 'Bridging' to 'Academic Support'.

The sorts of problems that arose with this model of ASP can be summarised as follows. (This is not meant to imply that this type of ASP is totally unsuccessful. On the contrary, many students were helped by it, and it was also an essential learning phase for those starting out in ASP which was a completely novel concept in tertiary education in South Africa at that stage.) The main drawback of this approach was that students were not necessarily transferring the skills acquired in the study and other skills courses to their credit courses, largely because of the decontextualised and extremely general nature of the skills taught. As has been pointed out, while it is possible, for example, to train students to take notes in a variety of different ways, one may merely be training unsuccessful students to perform the same activities as a successful one without their necessarily knowing what the constituents of success are. Recent research has, however, shown that the difference between a successful and an unsuccessful student is often not so much the technique used but the former's awareness of why s/he used the particular technique (Cloete & Schochet: 1986). At Wits, the conceptual skills course for Arts Faculty students using the Feuerstein Instrumental Enrichment Programme was found not to work well with this category of students. Problems experienced were the inappropriate levels of the tasks; their distance from academic work; the need for experienced tutors to help students 'bridge the gap' from decontextualised exercises to 'real' academic tasks (Slonimsky & Turton: 1985).

A report on the English language bridging programme (Blight: 1981) highlights some of the problems with the language courses:

*There is often tension between wanting subject-related language teaching materials and having a diversity of subjects represented in a group. Then there are many subject areas about which we have little knowledge. On the other hand we sometimes notice a lack of interest if we use material of a general nature or of relevance to only a proportion of our students.*

English language courses soon attempted to follow the English for Specific Purposes approach to course design and to relate language to the purposes it would be used for in specific subject areas but this was not an easy task. Although it made pedagogical sense (and might also overcome student resistance to a 'language course') to teach, for example, writing a definition, expressing cause and effect relationships, paragraph structure and essay writing, within the context of a particular subject, it proved impractical and ineffective. Overloaded language tutors often had to prepare material relevant to four or five different subject areas and consult with subject specialists to ensure that the language materials accurately reflected the concerns of the discipline. Small numbers of students and erratic attendance compounded the tutors' problem: student resistance was not so easily overcome and language tutors had difficulty with the conceptual demands of the subject. Interesting and more productive variations on this approach have appeared in Phase 2 of ASP (see below)

Another problem was a degree of 'consumer resistance' to courses perceived as being exclusively for one section of the student population and which might therefore stigmatise them in some way. Moreover, the relevance of skills courses was not immediately evident to students and this resulted in motivation problems. Other problems faced by the ASP included erratic attendance due to the voluntary nature of the support tutorials,

and student overload due to their concurrent, supplementary nature. Weaker students were paradoxically carrying a heavier load than their colleagues as they could be attending up to four or five additional tutorials a week.

In summing up the main characteristics of Phase 1 of ASP at Wits in terms of both its underlying theoretical bases and their pedagogical implementation, it is possible to isolate the following traits. The model can be called a 'deprivationist' one: students are seen to lack skills, not because of inherent deficiencies, but rather because of the poor schooling system to which they have been exposed and the extent of socio-economic disadvantage. There is a core staff based in the central unit who offer decontextualised skills support; a few departments have subject specialists who run ASP tutorials; support is primarily concurrent, voluntary, supplementary and non-credit. These courses tend to lack face-validity and students are often unable to transfer skills to subject areas. Finally, the setting up of a separate unit to 'compensate for' the students' lacks, runs the risk of peripheralising the institution's response to these students. While the ASP from its inception saw helping to 'change the university' (Glennie: 1980) as one of its goals, its structural position did not facilitate this. Lecturers in departments were not subject to much pressure to reassess either their teaching or the contents of their curricula, and could continue to focus on research, which remains the most highly rewarded academic activity.

## **Phase 2**

Phase 1 ASP continued well into the mid-80's and continues today. Phase 2 can be described as a gradual shift away from Phase 1- type tutorial support towards a model in which skills-based support becomes more integrated with the subject support the student is receiving and with the student's curriculum as a whole. These developments are paralleled by a shift in focus from an understanding of the student as locus of the problem to a clearer realisation of the nature of the problems posed by existing university structures, curricula and teaching. ASP then attempts to look at the student within the broader context in which learning is (or is not) taking place and becomes involved in what may be called 'staff sensitisation'. As will become apparent, the shift towards Phase 2 does not mean less work for the ASP but rather a different sort of involvement, for departments 'on their own' are not able to respond adequately to student learning needs. We must stress that Phase 2 is not a homogeneous approach to a clearly identified problem but should rather be seen as a number of differing responses to a problem which is in the process of being understood and where a constant interaction between the ASP, students and lecturers in departments is part of the clarification process.

One important influence on the support programme and on the university itself has without doubt been the rapid increase in students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds and a growing awareness of the extent, severity and complexity of the problem. With a relatively small group of students requiring assistance it seemed reasonable to hand the 'problem' over to the ASP and expect it to be solved. As student numbers increased, and for the first time in some courses L2 speakers from DET schools outnumbered L1 speakers, there was a realisation that sending students to study skills

courses and event providing an extra weekly subject-specific tutorial were not adequate responses. The department would have to examine its teaching programme, its contents and the skills required of students. What has been called the 'clinic' model of ASP would no longer suffice (Shochet and Cloete: 1986)

In essence, the shift from Phase 1 to Phase 2 involves the movement away from discrete skills courses to a more integrated approach in which skills, processes and contents are seen as inextricably linked. Although the ASP still offers general study skills courses, they are fewer in number and this is the case with English language tutorials too, mainly due to the introduction of the English Second Language credit course for Arts students. Separate courses in critical thinking and conceptual skills have fallen away. The bulk support remains supplementary, concurrent and voluntary but the emphasis has shifted to subject support, with the consequent integration of skills with subject content. A greater number of subject support tutors have been appointed and are housed in their respective departments or faculties. In a few instances, departmental lecturers have taken on responsibility for ASP in their departments. Increasingly, a small group of study skills and language tutors from the 'core' ASP is involved in tutor-training functions - either training ASP subject support tutors in skills which tutors then integrate into the demands of the subject responding to requests from mainstream departments for assistance and guidance in dealing with the needs of educationally disadvantaged students. ASP has undergone a degree of decentralisation into the faculties and departments, with a resultant shift in the role of the 'central core' which is tending to play more of a 'consultancy' role. The ASP's particular contribution arises from its history of involvement with student learning and the knowledge and experiences acquired in this process. It is this history and knowledge that the ASP is able to impart to staff in academic departments and transmit to ASP tutors, more especially those based in departments. The central ASP thus becomes a resource of accumulated skills to be drawn on. It must be stressed that the Phase 1 to Phase 2 shift can only be seen as a trend. It would be extremely premature to talk of a university in which Phase 2 support is the dominant approach. Many departments are operating with Phase 1-type support, some offer no support at all, while others have regressed from a situation in which support was being offered to a no-support situation.

The next section of the paper will describe some of the new developments in ASP with regard to the integration and contextualisation of skills, and will provide a theoretical justification for contextualisation.

### **Theory and Practice of Phase 2 ASP**

Some of the North American literature on bilingual education is useful for our understanding of the issues we are dealing with and in developing a response to them. In considering the relationship between language proficiency and academic achievement, Cummins (1984) suggests that the type of proficiency needed at university level can be labelled cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). This type of proficiency is defined as context-reduced and cognitively demanding. Context-reduced communication relies on linguistic cues to meaning, and the successful interpretation of the message will

depend heavily on knowledge of the language itself. CALP is characterised by the typical academic reading and writing tasks where the student has to rely solely on the written word for meaning. This contextualisation of language proficiency helps us to understand why, for example, although many of our students appear proficient in oral, face-to-face interactions, they struggle with written assignments and academic reading. In other words, our students may be proficient in basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) but not necessarily so in CALP. We should be aware of this distinction and not confound different types of proficiency. In pedagogical terms, the message is that we may need to teach CALP skills more explicitly to ex-DET students, as most available information indicates that these skills are not being acquired in DET schools either in the L1 or the L2. The question then for ASPs is how to teach the skills - separate skills courses or an integrated approach? In terms of the framework outlined above, it should be clear that teaching language skills within the context in which they will be used, will assist both with reducing the disembedded nature of the language, and with reducing the cognitive demands of the task. This approach is felt to be potentially more powerful than the discrete skills approach in which students still need to make the transfer to the specific subject areas.

### **Some Examples of Phase 2 Projects**

Staff training workshops with the emphasis being placed to a much greater degree on subject support, training workshops are being run for ASP subject tutors who wish to develop their knowledge of how students learn and how to teach language and study skills. With the wide range of subjects being offered by the ASP, it is impossible to make these subject-specific but it is hoped that the tutors will be able to apply the skills to their own subjects. Tutors are already reporting interesting applications in their own domains. For example, in Botany ASP where essay writing is a central component of the course, a process approach in writing has been adopted this year and students are responding well.

### **An integrated approach: ASP and Engineering**

A key aspect of Phase 2 support has increased Faculty and/or departmental involvement. The Wits Integrated Study Programme for Engineering (WISPE) is a joint venture of the ASP and the Faculty of Engineering. What is unique to this programme in terms of the history of ASP is its holistic approach to curriculum development. In order to tackle the problem of massive first-year failure rates, particularly among DET students, it was felt that the concurrent, voluntary, supplementary model outlined above was not adequate. A further problem that needed to be addressed was the discrepancy between the first and second year Engineering curricula. While students might pass first year with intensive subject support in Physics, Maths and a couple of other courses, nothing prepared them for the Engineering content and pace of the second year. From discussions with the Faculty, it also transpired that L2 students had language problems which needed to be addressed if they were to become competent engineers. Given the above factors, it was decided to restructure over three years the first two years of what is a four-year curriculum (Kotecha & Rutherford: 1987).

Students are invited to join the programme on the basis of their April test results. About

twenty places were offered each year, chiefly to students from DET schools. They then retain two credit courses - Physics 1 and Maths 1 - and are offered a language and communication course and several other courses which are specifically designed to prepare them for the courses they will do the following year. All of these courses are non-credit bearing but compulsory. In the second year of the programme, students complete the remaining first-year courses, do preparatory courses for the second-year mainstream courses and continue with language and communication. In the third year of WISPE, students do second-year Engineering courses specific to their chosen branch and receive additional assistance with them, once again continuing with language and communication. Next year, the first group of students to have gone through WISPE will rejoin the mainstream and enter third year. Initial results are encouraging, student participation is good, and the retention rates are reasonable.

The subject specific tutors on the programme are all drawn from the Faculty of Engineering and are either staff or senior students. In a small way, ideas about ASP and methods of assisting students are thus being infused into the Faculty. The language and communication course is highly contextualised within the students' subject areas - it is science and engineering related in all respects. It was soon realised that any attempt to teach 'language' or 'English' to Engineering students would be resisted. The course is prepared and taught jointly by a language tutor and a scientist who is particularly interested in science education. This seems to be a most productive form of team-teaching which could be implemented elsewhere. Students do project work based on science and engineering topics and are taught study skills relevant to their courses. This approach appears to meet a high degree of student acceptance.

## **Variations on team-teaching**

### **Zoology and Study Skills**

A subject support ASP tutor (Zoology) and a study skills tutor ('core' staff) are collaborating on integrating relevant study skills into the Zoology 1 ASP. Students attend two ASP tutorials per week and one practical session. This approach involves occasional team-teaching, some sessions being taken solely by the study skills tutor and some, more recently, by the Zoology tutor who, over a period of a couple of years, has acquired the ability to integrate the skills (Mashishi & Still: 1987). Cognitive skills such as previewing, prediction, inferencing, with particular emphasis on reading, and metacognitive skills such as self-assessment, planning and self-management, are thus being applied to Zoology content, and students are shown how to use these skills in relationship to their textbooks, practical-work, lecture note-taking, and essay and exam writing.

### **The History Department**

A variation of the above approach. There is no full-time ASP subject tutor in History - the work is shared by departmental staff and some senior students. The department is keen to take more responsibility for ASP but feels ill-equipped in terms of relevant skills.

History 1 now has more L2 speakers of English than L1 speakers and it was this development which largely prompted the department to approach the central ASP for assistance. A study skills tutor was approached to provide a course for the History students in addition to the subject support they were receiving. It soon became apparent that the study skills could best be taught by being closely related to the students' actual needs in History. Students requested the study skills tutor to assist with their essays and tutorials and to help with difficult readings. Thus reading skills were taught using the students' prescribed work, and specific essay topics and how to approach them were discussed. Students working in small groups discussed how they would go about answering a particular essay topic and then practised writing an introduction setting out their main argument. Students responded well to the tutor's integration of the history content with the study skills. This meant that the tutor's task became, in a sense, more onerous, as he had to become acquainted not only with the content of the syllabus but with the particular approach demanded by the History Department. This he did through talking to lecturers, attending lectures and carefully examining the History curriculum. Unfortunately, the study skills tutor is able to assist only a relatively small number of students from the History Department, but a process of sharing insights with the department has been set in motion.

### **The Consultancy Model**

In this approach the seeds of what might become Phase 3 of ASP can be glimpsed. The central ASP becomes a consultant to a department as a whole. The department itself may perceive its request to ASP as arising out of a need to assist ASP students specifically or to improve the quality of learning and teaching for all students. There is a realisation on the part of the department that skills are best taught in the context of the discipline but this is combined with an awareness that lecturers do not automatically possess the necessary teaching skills.

### **History of Art Workshop**

The History of Art Department has many students who fit into the 'traditional' disadvantaged categories. However, many students are admitted on lower matric ratings than the rest of the Arts Faculty students and appear to struggle with the demands made on them by the course. They therefore fall into a more general 'underprepared' category. The department approached the ASP with a request for input on ways of improving teaching in the light of the sorts of problems students were perceived to be experiencing. Three mornings were set aside for the staff workshops which were run by language and study skills tutors from the ASP. All the lecturers from the department attended and participated actively. The first session was spent on outlining current theories of learning and the major concepts of the study skills programme. Day 2 was based on a lecture simulation given by a member of the department. A distinctive challenge in the department is that students not only have to listen and take notes in lectures, but also to look at slides which convey information on the period or artist under discussion, and integrate this information into their notes. All participants in the workshop took notes and reflected on the processes involved. This proved to be a most useful exercise, leading to discussion of skills and processes that students would need to possess and master, in order to perform the task successfully. The final session was spent on writing processes.

The department reported increased awareness of the variables involved in the 'teaching itself, and not just the content'.

The limitations of such an approach are primarily those of a lack of sufficient time. For it to be successful or to allow its success to be assessed, the contact between the ASP and the department needs to be both prolonged and fairly intensive. ASP staff need to audit lectures, examine samples of students' writing, interview students and staff and assess the demands the course is making on the students, both implicitly and explicitly. This level of intensity could only be attained with one or two departments per year; and is simply not possible with more, given the other demands made on the ASP.

### **Phase 3 Envisaged**

What might Phase 3 of ASP look like? We have already sketched out an embryonic form it might take - the 'consultancy' offered to the History of Art Department which perhaps belongs more in Phase 2 but does stretch beyond the bounds of ASP, when the latter is defined as dealing with a distinct group of students. In Phase 3, the central ASP will shrink or remain static, while subject support, provided either by the central ASP or by the departments themselves will expand. The ASP will continue to fulfil a consultancy/advisory role and to train tutors (its own and others) in learning skills. We may see more integrated programmes, along the lines of WISPE, either run jointly with the ASP or solely by departments. The central ASP's training and consultancy function will increase, provided enough appropriately qualified people can be found. Phase 3 would involve major structural and curricular reform, with faculties taking greater responsibility for support. Intermediate tertiary colleges are widely discussed at present. At Wits the Faculty of Science hopes to open its College of Science in 1991. Students would be able to proceed to the second year of the degree via a two-year preparatory college where content and skills will be taught in an integrated way. Some recent criticism of ASPs has failed to take account of Phase 2-type developments (which have occurred on other campuses as well) but has instead focused on what is essentially a Phase 1 model of ASP. While Phase 1 approaches to ASP are still being implemented, they are not considered optimal and are decreasing in frequency. Phase 2 ASP, which has been ignored by the critics, has the potential to assist in substantial improvements of the university's curricula and in the teaching and learning processes that occur. ASP alone can neither change the university nor prevent it from changing. It can however be an active participant and one of the main agents in the innovation process, and this is where Phase 2 and Phase 3 developments can play a major role.

## References:

- Blight, N (1981):  
English Language, Bridgeletter, University of Witwatersrand, 2, pp 5-7
- Cloete, N and Schochet, I (1987):  
Alternatives to the behavioural technicist conception of study skills, Higher Education, 15, pp 247-258
- Cummins, J (1984):  
Implications of bilingual proficiency for the education of minority language students, in Language Issues and educational policies, ELT Documents 119, The British Council & Pergamon, pp 21-34
- Glennie, J (1980):  
Evaluation and the Bridging Programme, Bridgeletter, University of Witwatersrand, 1, pp 3-5
- Hunter, Ap (1989):  
The transforming of learning: the evolution of an Academic Support Programme, to be published in the South African Journal of Higher Education.
- Kotecha, P and Rutherford, M (1987):  
The first year of Wits Integrated Study Programme for Engineering: a case study. Aspects, 8, pp 147-152.
- Masishi, K and Still, C (1987):  
ASP in Zoology: Integrating skills and content. Aspects, 8, pp 259-260
- Slonimsky, L and Turton, R (1985):  
Developments in the conceptual skills programme for ASP in the Faculty of Arts, Aspects, 6, pp 61-66.