



UNIVERSITY OF
KWAZULU-NATAL™

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The Association for Academic Administrators

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BEST PRACTICE SESSION

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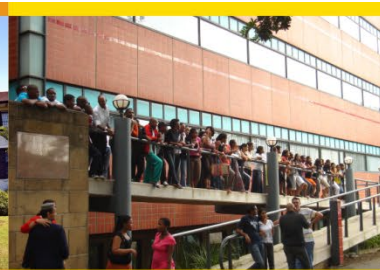
Best Practice: The role of AI contributed to technological changes that have improved the turnaround time for administrative processes.



EDGEWOOD CAMPUS



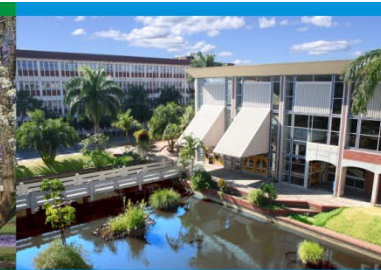
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UKZN INSPIRING GREATNESS

Opening and Welcome

Welcome to Break-away Group C.

- Thank you for joining us for this important discussion on: **Best Practices and how the role of AI and digital innovation are improving administrative turnaround times and strengthening the student experience.**
- Our focus today is on how technology and digital innovation are helping institutions improve efficiency, reduce delays, and ultimately enhance the student experience across the full student lifecycle.
- This is intended to be an interactive discussion, so we encourage you to share your experiences, examples, challenges, and lessons learned.
- To guide our discussion, we will focus on key stages of the student journey — from applications and admissions through to graduation — and explore how AI and digital tools are helping institutions respond more effectively to student needs.”

UKZN and AI-Enabled Student Support

- At UKZN, our focus has been on using AI and digital systems to streamline administrative processes while improving the student experience. Our goal was not to replace human support, but to enhance manual processes through more efficient, accessible, and responsive systems.
- One of the key drivers for change was the need to reduce queues, minimise telephone and email backlogs, and provide effective support to students who could not access campus before registration.
- Through AI-enabled tools and online platforms, we were able to improve turnaround times, reduce complaints, and provide students with greater visibility and support throughout their journey
- Unregistered students are not allowed onto campus.
- Communication is key. There was a great need to communicate effectively with them and ensure they receive a professional service in student academic administration.

Student Communication and Query Management

UKZN Key Best Practice across business units:

- **Student Tracker systems** are used to monitor student progress across the full lifecycle and identify and resolve delays early.
- **Freshdesk and ticketing systems** allowed students to log, track, assign, and resolve student queries efficiently. These platforms improve accountability, provide visibility on query turnaround times, and ensure that no student issue is overlooked.
- **Mzizi chatbot** and similar AI-powered virtual assistants are used to provide students with **real-time** responses to common questions relating to applications, registration, fees, examinations, and support services. This improves accessibility, reduces waiting times, and offers support beyond normal office hours.
- **AI-powered chatbots** providing instant responses to frequently asked questions and directing students to relevant support services. This made students feel supported and connected, even when communicating virtually, as their queries were addressed in real-time.

Student Communication and Query Management

UKZN Best Practice across business units:

- **Online acceptance of offers** enabling students to review and accept admission offers remotely through digital platforms. This improves convenience, reduces delays in confirming placement, minimises manual follow-up, and supports faster progression to registration.
- **Online exclusion appeals processes** allowing students to submit appeals electronically and receive regular progress updates.
- **Automated communication tools** such as email and SMS notifications for application, registration, and graduation updates.
- **Self-service student portals** supporting document uploads, registration, status tracking, and access to key information.

Effective Communication Platforms

Key Best Practice Points

- Chatbot and Freshdesk were introduced to address applicant and student queries efficiently.
- These platforms ensured students remained supported and connected, even in a virtual environment.
- Queries could be managed and responded to in real time, significantly improving turnaround times.
- Agents were trained using frequently asked questions provided by Colleges to ensure consistent and accurate support.
- Initially, UKZN used the CAO “Check Your Status” platform for applicants to monitor application progress.
- UKZN later expanded the use of Freshdesk to reduce the volume of emails and telephone queries received by staff.
- The system improved accountability, enabled query tracking through ticket references, and enhanced the overall student experience.

Effective Communication Platforms

- Applicants and students could submit documentation to the Application and Fees office via Freshdesk, and they were given a ticket number as a reference. The feedback to the student could be tracked on Freshdesk via a report.
- UKZN also introduced a Tracker system, which applicants and students could use to track the progress of their requests from application up until registration.
- When offers are made to applicants, they receive an SMS, email and a letter via iComms informing them of the outcome of their offer and the link to accept the offer
- MS Teams has also been used very effectively, as staff would call students and assist them in accepting their offers and registering online.
- Teams is also used for Webinars and counselling sessions, when students receive negative term decisions.
- Academics communicate virtually with students via Student Central, Moodle and Learn.
- Students can use their phones to register online and view the platforms mentioned above.

Application, Selection & Admission

- Matriculants can apply online via the Central Applications Office (local matriculants) and via the UKZN online application platform. Staff then assess the applications and communicate with the applicant as indicated previously.
- When the matric results are released, staff then assess the applicants' results and communicate with the applicants via SMS, email and send them offer letters via iComms.
- Applicants can accept their offers virtually by logging onto the link sent to them via SMS. This allows them access to the University system to upload their documents and accept the offer. Staff then audit the documents and capture the admit status. The platform does allow the student to request assistance.

Registration

- Students can apply for accommodation online, and when they are accepted, they register online for the accommodation and academically.
- The online registration system is very effective. Students can communicate with the academic and professional service staff via a comment block. If they are satisfied with the feedback received, they accept the registration after the academic approves it. Students are aware that AI is not replacing the communication with lecturers and tutors.
- Students also undertake the change of curriculum process virtually.

Registration Continued..

- The benefit of these processes being online is that there is evidence of advice given to the student and the student accepting the conditions.
- When the checking of results is done, students receive term decisions virtually via iComms.
- Students who are excluded can appeal online.
- The exclusion appeal process is undertaken via Teams by the Exclusion Committee.
- Students are then advised via SMS of the outcome of their appeal. They are then given personal counselling and curriculum guidance virtually.

Graduation

- Graduation invitations are issued electronically to students, supporting efficient and timely communication
- During the COVID-19 period, graduation ceremonies were successfully conducted virtually, demonstrating institutional agility and continuity
- Students submit proof of fee clearance and updated contact details via digital platforms upon receipt of the invitation
- These digital processes contribute to improved administrative turnaround times and a more seamless student experience at UKZN

Examination

- The Exam Result schedule is checked virtually by a Team of academics and administrators.
- The system will propose term decisions based on the students progression in a particular semester. The Administrator will assess the academic record of the student, and based on the performance from the commencement of the qualification, will accept the proposed term decision or capture another decision such as degree complete for instance. This information roles over directly onto ITS.
- Once the results are released, the students view them on Student Central. They then receive their term decision letters, and for those students who are excluded, they would be advised to appeal online.
- Some students may qualify for a special exam, and would apply virtually to the School as well.
- UKZN has blended learning, so some examinations will be online and most are in person examinations.

Conclusion

- AI and digital innovation are playing a critical role in transforming the student experience.
- This approach demonstrated how academic administration can strategically use AI and digital innovation to improve operational efficiency while maintaining a student-centred support environment
- Tools such as Freshdesk, chatbots, online acceptance of offers, and Student Tracker systems have helped to deliver faster, more transparent, and student-centred services.
- By embracing these technologies, the institution can improve turnaround times, reduce student stress, and enhance overall satisfaction.
- AI and technological innovation are essential in modernising administrative processes. When implemented effectively, these tools improve turnaround times, enhance service delivery, and support a more responsive and student-centred administrative environment.

Acknowledgements

- This presentation, delivered by Mrs Marion Kisten and Ms Karen Sallie, Consultants in the Office of the Registrar: Student Academic Services at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), outlines best practice at UKZN in leveraging artificial intelligence and digital technologies. It highlights how the role of AI has supported technological advancements that have significantly improved the turnaround time for administrative processes and enhanced the student experience at UKZN.

Questions and comments

