

Targeted Undergraduate Student Support (TrUST): An Early Intervention Program for Struggling Medical Students

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ABSTRACT

The transition to medical school poses significant academic and emotional challenges, with around 10–15% of students struggling to pass examinations, which can lead to psychological distress and dropout if not addressed. At Patan Academy of Health Sciences, the Targeted Undergraduate Student Support (TrUST) program was developed as an early, personalized intervention to assist students facing academic difficulties by pairing students with volunteer faculty mentors, offering personal and academic counselling, and educational coaching to improve their performance. Of 20 struggling learners recruited in TrUST, 12 of them have been successfully promoted to clinical years. Therefore, TrUST is a promising institutional model but requires prospective evaluation using objective academic and well-being outcomes before broader implementation.



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INTRODUCTION

Entering medical school is a major life transition that demands academic rigor, determination, emotional resilience, and cultural adjustment. Approximately 10–15% of students are unsuccessful in medical school examinations, if inadequately and untimely addressed, it may lead to frustration and eventual withdrawal from the program.¹ While it is unrealistic to expect a 100% pass rate in medical education, institutions should nonetheless aspire to support every student toward successful completion. When students encounter learning difficulties, the academic system need to provide support tailored to their individual needs and, when necessary, offer alternative career counselling that aligns with their abilities and strengths.

RATIONALE FOR TARGETED UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT SUPPORT (TrUST) PROGRAM

The mentoring program was introduced since the commencement of the MBBS curriculum in 2010, recognizing the need to support the poor academic performance, which may be influenced by age, geographic origin, ethnicity, physical, emotional and mental health, socioeconomic background, prior educational

attainment, and language proficiency.²⁻⁷ In this model, every student, regardless of academic performance, is assigned a faculty mentor early in the program. Each mentor supervises two or three students, who are encouraged to independently schedule meetings for personal or academic guidance.

Although this program has provided substantial benefits, it has become evident that it is insufficient to meet the needs of students who face recurring examination failures. This could be due to the lack of individualised support system and early intervention which has been found to be effective in improvement of struggling learners.^{8,9} Without timely and structured intervention, these students risk repeated failures, resulting in academic year loss, heightened despair, and deterioration of psychological well-being, consequences that can be difficult to reverse. Addressing these challenges necessitates the conceptualization and implementation of a TrUST program that provides individualized assistance at the early stages of academic difficulty, thereby mitigating the risk of more severe consequences by the end of the academic year.

TrUST PROGRAM FRAMEWORK

Student Recruitment

As part of an early-intervention approach, students experiencing academic difficulties are identified after the first formative assessment, conducted 11 weeks into the Year I Basic Science curriculum. Eligibility criteria include failure in both theory and practical examinations, or a below-expectation PBL process assessment combined with failure in either theory or practical exams. Recognizing that voluntary engagement enhances program effectiveness, students are given autonomy to enrol in the program.

Mentor Assignment

The success of TrUST program relies on the commitment of faculty members who willingly participate in the initiative. A pool of volunteer faculty is therefore established, from which one mentor is assigned to each struggling student. In consideration of gender-sensitivity, female students are paired with female faculty mentors.

Confidentiality

Strict confidentiality regarding students' personal information is maintained throughout the program. Assigned mentors are instructed to safeguard all details, and students are informed of this assurance at the time of recruitment.

Initiation Procedure

An introductory email from the Basic Science chair initiates contact between the mentor and mentee, prompting them to schedule an initial meeting. Subsequent meetings are arranged according to the student's needs. Faculty mentors are advised to cultivate a supportive and non-judgmental environment that encourages students to openly discuss their challenges, enabling the development of appropriate intervention strategies. The structure and frequency of future meetings are tailored to the specific requirements of each mentee.

Intervention

The program's individualized interventions include motivation and emotional support, personal and academic counselling, educational coaching of relevant subject, and facilitation of psychiatric consultation when necessary.

Monitoring

The Basic Science chair meets with faculty mentors after each formative examination to review mentee progress and provide additional guidance or support as needed.

EARLY INSIGHTS

To date, 20 students from three MBBS batches have been enrolled in the TrUST. Although the program is still in its early phase, several encouraging outcomes have already been observed (Table 1). This study only illustrates descriptive findings, nevertheless the findings are consistent with other study where early intervention have improved performance of

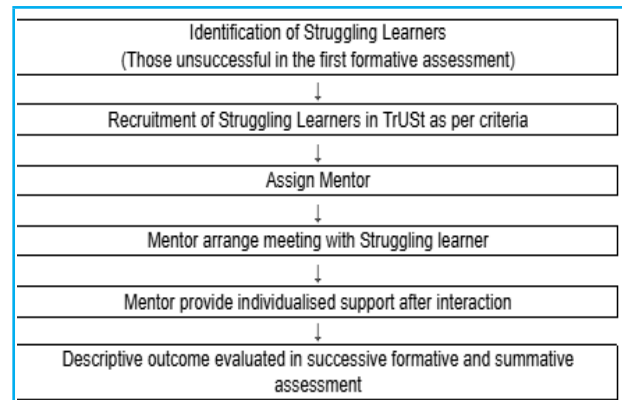


Figure 1. Flowchart of the TrUST framework

the struggling learners.⁸⁻¹⁰ Some of the struggling learners in TrUST reported that it has been helpful, and this is reflected by their improved performance in subsequent assessments. Some have explicitly expressed their gratitude for receiving such individualized support.

Furthermore, students who were not initially enrolled but later experienced a decline in academic performance have voluntarily requested to assign him/her a mentor, underscoring the perceived value and relevance of the program. Also one additional student who had not been identified by the program's recruitment criteria was later found to have been unsuccessful in the Year II examination, highlighting a limitation of the current student identification process.

Nonetheless, the TrUST is not without challenges. For some students, particularly those with lower cognitive abilities, significant academic improvement remains difficult to achieve despite sustained mentor efforts. Additionally, students experiencing underlying psychiatric conditions tend to display highly variable academic performance, with fluctuating periods of progress and decline depending on their psychological well-being. Their inconsistent outcomes appear to stem not from limited cognitive capacity but from psychological instability for which psychiatric and psychological consultations are sought.

Table 1. Summary of Struggling Learners recruited in TrUST

Description	Number
Struggling learners enrolled in TrUST	20
Promoted to clinical year	12
Unsuccessful in year I exam	3
Unsuccessful in year II exam	5
Psychiatric Referral	2

CONCLUSION

Early identification of struggle learners in the undergraduate medical program, coupled with individualized intervention strategies, has the potential to mitigate emerging psychological

stress and, in turn, enhance students' academic performance. However, the TrUSt is not without its challenges, and its successful implementation requires a resilient and adaptable support system. While these initial observations offer useful insights, they remain primarily subjective. Systematic research is therefore needed to rigorously evaluate the program's effectiveness before broader implementation.

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Design, Definition of intellectual content, Literature search, Manuscript preparation, Manuscript editing, Manuscript review, Guarantor; **Balakrishnan M Acharya:** Concepts, Design, Definition of intellectual content, Manuscript editing, Manuscript review, Guarantor.

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