

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Mismatch between First-Year Students' Expectations and Experience alongside University Access and Success: A South African University Case Study

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## Abstract

*The widening of access into higher education institutions in South Africa has rapidly transformed the student population to become more diverse. Students vary in age, race, culture, backgrounds, educational experiences, academic potential and university expectations. Widening university access with the commensurate need for success requires intervention mechanisms to ensure university management addresses student challenges, especially at first-year undergraduate level. Access and success cannot be achieved without understanding students' university expectations and experiences, as these are critical factors that are integrated with retention and success. This paper examines the gap between students' expectation and experience and argues that the intensity of such a gap can negatively impact the goal of achieving access and success amongst students from diverse backgrounds. The study utilised a pre- and post-survey to collect quantitative data from 95 first-year teacher education students at a university of technology in South Africa. The results indicate that there is a significant gap between students' expectations and their actual university experience with regard to the following indicators: social engagement, academic engagement and seeking academic support. It is posited that such a mismatch between students' university expectations and experience can result in students feeling disconnected to the institution, which could lead to academic failure and high drop-out rates. This study recommends that an intentionally planned first-year experience programme is required to entrench a more inclusive and sustainable first-year experience for 'all students' which could close the gap between students' expectation and experience and access and success.*

## Keywords

*first-year experience; first-year expectation; gap analysis; higher education*

## Introduction

The South African Constitution of 1996 and the Education White Paper 3 (EWP 1997), entitled "A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education", allude to important transformation principles to eradicate all forms of unfair discrimination and advance

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the redress of past inequalities (Department of Education [DoE], 1997). One of the key imperatives of transformation is that student enrolment be expanded and access broadened to reach a wider distribution of social groups and classes (DoE, 1997). The post-school system that is envisaged in the post-apartheid South Africa is one that is more expanded and diverse, thereby ensuring that the quality, quantity and diversity of post-school education and training in South Africa are significantly enhanced. Issues of access and success are fundamental to meaningful transformation within the higher education milieu in South Africa. Public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have increased enrolment figures from 892 936 in 2010 to 985 212 in 2015 (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2016). The new enrolment trends show a different racial imbalance with more students from historically underrepresented groups entering higher education. For example, the African student complement increased from 64% of all enrolments in 2008 to 70% in 2013 (Council for Higher Education [CHE], 2013), a student population that is more representative of the country's national population. This drastic shift in diversity in enrolment demographics in South Africa's higher education has resulted in students entering universities from positions of extreme inequality in terms of schooling, race, class, and financial and other resources (Chetty & Pather, 2015). This has been underpinned by student expectations varying across the continuum from being realistic to unrealistic. Without students understanding this continuum, unfulfilled expectations can have a detrimental effect on successful performance. In essence, university management needs to make concerted efforts to ensure a match between expectations and experiences as this is an imperative for student success.

Although, the South African higher education system has made notable progress in terms of widening access, cohort studies have highlighted that approximately 30% of students drop out of university in the first year and about 55% of all students never graduate (CHE, 2013). While there has been growth in differentiation and diversity, many of the students entering higher education face a number of challenges. Such challenges include student preparedness (Bettinger & Long, 2009), low retention and success rates (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), and lack of provision of relevant first-year support (Tinto, 2007). Evidence points to HEIs in South Africa not being adequately equipped to accommodate the new student population entering university (CHE, 2013). South African universities need to be more assertive in gaining a full understanding of their incoming students' university expectations and experiences, specifically focusing on indicators relating to social engagement, academic engagement and seeking academic support. Gaining such knowledge could increase student success and retention, particularly in the first year of study. Additionally, such knowledge can inform effective and appropriate first-year support initiatives. A number of studies have revealed that an awareness of student expectations can reduce students' psychological stress (James, 2002); improve academic performance (Smith & Wertlieb, 2005); encourage social relations and integration (Bean & Eaton, 2001); and improve students' sense of belonging or sense of community (Thomas, 2012; Tinto, 1995). In this regard, it becomes imperative that universities re-evaluate intervention mechanisms to ensure that students' experiences are aligned to their expectations, thereby fostering success through access.

From the literature reviewed, first-year student retention and success studies focused mainly on factors within the institution such as the quality of students' first-year university experience, student engagement and academic performance, without taking into account students' prior university expectations. The match or mismatch between student expectation and actual experience can provide insight into all of the aforementioned factors within the institution. This study takes into account students' prior university expectations and their actual experience in social engagement, academic engagement and seeking academic support at university. Student engagement can be defined as "the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes" (Hu & Kuh, 2001, p. 3). They add that this engagement includes activities inside and outside of the formal classroom. The Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER) defines student engagement as "students' involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high quality learning" (ACER, 2008, p. vi). There are various perspectives on student engagement, which according to Zepke and Leach (2010), allow a multifaceted lens to be placed on student engagement. This study takes into account the above two definitions of student engagement.

This study addresses the dearth in the literature on student expectation and experience by examining the intensity of the gap between incoming students' expectations of social engagement, academic engagement and seeking academic support, with their actual university experience. It can be argued that a gap analysis study between students' expectations and experience is critical to ensuring that the goals of access and success are achieved. Measuring the intensity and direction of the expectation–experience gap would provide a better understanding of the extent of the mismatch or alignment of students' expectation with university experience, which could inform appropriate actions taken to close this gap. This outcome could have a positive impact on student university transition, retention and success.

### *Literature Review*

Widening university access has drawn first-year students from varying schooling contexts. This action has opened access to a significantly large number of students, particularly from township and rural schools, which, according to the South African Human Rights Commission (2006), can be characterised as dysfunctional, vulnerable, alienated and lacking social cohesion. Students entering universities with such disparities in schooling could influence their university expectations. Nelson, Kift and Clarke (2012) acknowledge that the diversity in students' lives impacts on their university expectations, which they suggest reflects on a range of first-year experiences and students' engagement with the university. Slonimsky and Shalem (2006) identify these students as mainly first-generation university students with limited access to the social networks harbouring vast expanses of university experiences. Such under-preparedness for the complex nature of university study could impact on teaching and learning and student success (Moll, 2004). Therefore, the argument by Reason, Terenzini and Domingo (2006) that the first year is the most critical year for laying the foundation for subsequent academic success does require urgent consideration by higher education institutions when planning support initiatives for first-year students.

Universities need a multi-dimensional approach in understanding students' expectations and actual university experience. This approach will provide a more in-depth exploration of students' first-year expectation and experience, which can assist in improving student transition, retention and success. Awang and Ismail (2010) offer one such approach. They suggest that universities need to conduct regular first-year surveys concerning students' expectations and perception as part of their quality improvement exercise. They assert that the information collected can ensure that the services offered by the institution to their first-year students could be of the highest quality. Strydom (2015) suggests that universities need to create the following awareness amongst incoming students: how universities function; complexities of university readiness; opportunities to learn the required academic behaviours and expectations; social interactions; and diverse environmental factors, as all of these aspects can influence more realistic expectations, thereby reinforcing opportunities for success.

A substantive number of studies on student expectations reveal that students have unrealistic expectations of university experience with regard to awareness of courses to enrol in (McInnes et al., 2000); generic skills required for university study (Bamforth, 2010); and managing workloads and self-study (Van der Meer, Jansen & Torenbeek, 2010). Personal and circumstantial variables were also found to influence students' expectations, which ultimately interfere with student success. Kim, Newton, Downey and Benton's (2010) research showed that student expectations were strong predictors of academic performance and success. They assert that students' personal, social and academic related factors influence students' expectations of academic performance and success. A study by Creighton (2007) highlighted that students who felt accepted within the social environment of the university were more likely to return, while those who had unrealistic expectations were more likely to be unsuccessful. Additionally, Creighton found that isolation and a lack of support services did not facilitate learning, nor contribute in positive ways to student success. Tinto, Goodsell-Love and Russo (1993) assert that the congruency between students' expectation and university experience is a determining factor for students' access and success. They further explain that the aligning of students' expectation with their actual experience is necessary for understanding students' sense of belonging or fit. These authors argue that it is this sense of belonging that is linked to the students' sense of congruence and without this sense of congruence between the student and their educational pursuits, it can be assumed that these students are less likely to navigate successfully through the first year of university.

The authors of this paper, however, contend that higher education institutions have a moral obligation to ensure that the students who gain access into their universities are understood and accommodated for inclusively. Students' expectations should be explicit to all first-year curriculum planners, academics and support units to ensure successful transition into university. The Rural Education Access Programme (REAP), which undertook a study on the factors influencing the success of previously disadvantaged students, concluded that rurality negatively affects students' success and found that insufficient finances was also a key reason for student dropout. In addition, REAP recognised that the "unpreparedness of

students” was commonly known “but the unpreparedness of higher education institutions for these types of students is less taken into account” (REAP, 2008, p. 6). This knowledge could also encourage a more constructive dialogue between all stakeholders to ensure a positive alignment of students’ expectations and university realities, thereby allowing for enhancement of student success.

The real challenges affecting student success require institutional support. Literature on the first-year student transition reveals that for students to successfully make the transition to university life, they need to develop a sense of belonging and connectedness with their new peer groups and the wider academic community. Thomas (2012, p. 12) defines students’ sense of belonging as “students’ subjective feelings of relatedness or connectedness”. Perry and Allard (2003) claim that students need to make connections between the experiences they bring with them to the new university environment and their new knowledge obtained at university. They stress that the ability to do this cannot be pursued in silo. University support in facilitating alignment of student expectations and experiences is integral for student success. In addition, the institutional support needs to be underpinned by appropriate timing in the provision for it to be effective.

Drawing from literature on university students’ expectation and experience, it is evident that there is a mismatch between students’ pre-university expectations and actual experience (Smith & Wertlieb, 2005). However, this study examines the extent of the gaps between students’ pre-university expectation and their actual university experience. The uniqueness of the study is that it explores the degree to which students’ expectations of their actual university realities are matched or mismatched. This study makes use of gap analysis to identify the intensity or size of gap between students’ expectations and actual experience. If first-year students enter university with a set of expectations shaped by their prior educational knowledge, background and histories, and are confronted with experiences that do not match these expectations, then there is a greater likelihood that these students will experience dissatisfaction and either drop out of university or struggle to fit in.

This study draws on Parsuraman, Zeithaml and Berry’s (1985) service gap idea that postulates that the quality of service perceived by a customer depends on the size and direction of the gap. They define service quality as the gap between consumers’ expectations and perceptions. The assumption underlying the service gap concept is that disappointment and withdrawal of support or use of service will result if expectations are not met. Gap analysis is not a new concept in the higher educational context and can be applied to higher education in a similar way to quality of services perceived by customers. For example, in LaBay and Comm’s (2003) study, they used gap analysis to evaluate student expectations and perceptions concerning their tutor’s services. In Legčević’s (2009) study, she determines the quality gap by measuring university students’ perceptions and expectations of educational services offered in the Law faculty in Osijek. In the present study, the gap between students’ university expectations with their actual university experience is examined alongside widening university access and success.

## *Methodology*

This exploratory study analysed first-year teacher education students' pre-entry expectations with their actual university experience of social, academic and seeking support integration. The aim was to gain a better understanding of the size of the gap between student expectation and experience in relation to its impact on access and success. This study employed a case study strategy conducted in the Faculty of Education at Cape Peninsula University of Technology, in Cape Town, South Africa. A self-designed questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data at two stages in the study. The first survey was a self-administered Pre-Entry Expectation survey, which was mailed to all first-year students accepted into the Bachelor of Education (BEd) programme prior to commencement of their academic study. An acceptable response rate of 65% was achieved. The second survey was conducted in the last term of the first year of study. All first-year teacher education students were invited to complete the First-Year Experience survey. The second survey had a response rate of 66%, but from a smaller pool of first-year students. Only students who completed the first Pre-Entry Expectation survey and the second First-Year Experience survey were considered as participants for this study. In this regard, a total of 95 first-year students who completed both surveys became the participants of this study.

## **Instrument**

The Pre-Entry Expectation survey information was collected in two parts. The first part collected biographical and background characteristics information. The second part contained 35 expectation statements covering items relating to academic preparedness, social and academic integration, perceptions of lecturer expectations, and seeking institutional support. Students were asked to rate all items on a 4-point Likert scale with respect to their expectations and perceptions of university experience. To give participants a range of responses to the statements, a Likert scale consisting of four categories ranging from 4 being 'strongly agree' to 1 being 'strongly disagree', was provided. The reason for using a 4-point scale is that participants are required to make a decision on the statement. As noted by Cohen et al. (2008), there is often a tendency for participants to opt for the mid-point. In the First-Year Experience survey, the same 35 statements from the expectation survey were used. All the expectation statements were changed to experience statements and presented in the same order with the same 4-point rating scale.

## **Data analysis procedure**

Quantitative statistical analysis was conducted by using a computer software package (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences: SPSS version 22.0). Comparison of the two sets of scores was done using the paired sample *t*-test, as normality conditions were satisfied. Of the 35 pairs of indicators computed, 25 statements, around 71%, were found to be statistically significant at the 5% significance level, with the majority of the statements yielding *p*-values less than 0.001.

The gap scores for each statement were measured by examining the average mean expectation score with the average mean experience score. According to Juillerat (1995) student satisfaction can be defined by the positive and negative gaps in the expectation level and actual experience. In this study the gap score was obtained by calculating the difference between the average mean score for each expectation statement paired with the corresponding experience statement. A positive difference between the mean expectation score and the mean experience score indicated that the students' actual experience exceeded their expectations. A negative gap score indicated that the students' expectation was not met by their actual university experience. A p-value of less than 0.05 indicated the level of significance of the gap. Descriptive and statistical inferences were used to interpret and present the findings of this study.

### **Validity and reliability**

The self-designed survey used in this study was piloted, tested and revised to ensure reliability and validity. To determine the reliability of the survey instruments, the authors made use of Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) to determine the internal consistency and average correlation of the 35 items in the survey instrument. The Cronbach's alpha for the 35 items ranged from 0.564 to 0.776. The overall coefficient score of 0.668 obtained for this study can be regarded as an acceptable score, bearing in mind that this was a newly developed instrument.

Two layers of informed consent were sought. First, approval was sought from the institution's Faculty Ethics Committee. A formal proposal was submitted to the committee, providing full disclosure of the aim, objectives and procedures of the research project and the participants who would be selected for the project. A research ethical clearance compliance form was completed. The second consent was obtained from the participants. Written consent was attached to the Pre-Entry Expectation and First-Year Experience survey. As an introduction to the survey a brief summary of the research project was highlighted, also stating that filling in of the questionnaire was optional; no costs would be incurred since a self-addressed envelope was provided for the expectation survey; and finally, confidentially would be preserved with regard to participants' information and identity as completed.

### ***Findings and Discussion***

The aim of the study was to determine the size of the gap between students' expectation and actual university experience in relation to students' engagement in academic, social and seeking support. The findings from this study indicate significant gaps between first-year students' expectation and their actual university experience. In the current study, a negative gap indicates that students' expectations were not met. This implies that students' mean expectation scores were greater than their mean experience scores. A positive gap implies that students' expectations were met and in some occurrences, it actually exceeded their expectations. In this regard, the mean experience score was greater than the mean expectation scores. From the tables below, it is evident that an overall negative average gap

score was found in all three categories: social engagement (-0.53), academic engagement (-0.65), and academic support (-0.56). These results imply that there was a mismatch between students' expectation and actual experience. In this study, students' expectations of their actual first-year university experience were not met. In order to better understand the findings of this study the authors needed to gain a comprehensive overview of their participants, their profiles and background characteristics. The next section describes the participants' backgrounds.

### **First-year students' profiles**

From the total sample of 95 participants, 77% were female and 23% male. The majority of the participants (53%) were under 20 years of age, attending university directly from school. A substantive portion of 40% of the participants were in the 21–29 year age group. Most of the participants (53%) indicated English as their home language, while 23% indicated IsiXhosa and 21.5% indicated Afrikaans. A large majority of the participants (83%) indicated they were first-generation students, implying that they were the first members in their immediate family to attend university. Finally, only 6% of the participants were able to fund their own studies, while 53% sought outside funding in the form of bursaries and loans. A total of 41% of the participants indicated that their parents funded their university studies. The profile of the sample participants was representative of the first-year BEd student cohort in the faculty. The participants' background characteristics provided context to the data collected in the pre- and post-surveys. The findings from these surveys are discussed in the following sections under three main headings: (i) social engagement, (ii) academic engagement, and (iii) seeking academic support.

#### **(i) Social engagement: Gap analysis**

Table 1 below shows the gap analysis for five social engagement indicators which included 'joining social clubs', 'attending social functions', 'making new friends', 'making friends from different racial groups', and 'social events on campus will be a distraction'. The highest positive gap is observed for 'making friends' (0.15) indicating that the participants' actual experience at university of making friends was higher than their prior expectation. However, this result was not found to be significant with a p-value of 0.063. The highest negative gap is observed for 'joining social clubs' (-1.24), indicating that students' expectations of joining clubs at university were higher than their actual experience and therefore not met. This result was found to be significant with a p-value of <0.001. Significant p-values were also noted for 'attending social functions' (p = <0.001) and 'social events will be a distraction' (p = 0.003). Both these statements indicate a negative gap, -1.07 and -0.34 respectively, implying that students' expectations were not met. The indicator 'making friends from different racial groups' also produced a negative gap, -0.14. However, this score was not significant (p = 0.054).



**Table 1: Gap scores of social engagement indicators**

Social engagement indicators	Expectation	Experience	Gap	p-value
Joining social clubs	3.12	1.88	-1.24	<0.001
Attending social functions	3.20	2.13	-1.07	<0.001
Making new friends	3.34	3.49	0.15	0.063
Making friends from different racial groups	3.47	3.33	-0.14	0.054
Social events on campus will be a distraction	2.15	1.81	-0.34	<0.001
<b>Average</b>	<b>3.06</b>	<b>2.53</b>	<b>-0.53</b>	<b>-</b>

Students' mean expectation score of 'social events being a distraction' was close to the level of disagreement (2.15) while their actual experience on this indicator shows a score close to strongly disagree (1.81). This result actually corroborates the negative gap in statements 1 and 2 in Table 1 above. All statements had a lower level of agreement than their expectations. This result could be due to a number of variables either within or external to the university environment, such as the university not having many social events or clubs, poor advertising of social clubs and events, students' heavy workloads and full timetables, lack of transport, financial constraints, students not feeling as if they belong, and/or personal obligations. Spengen (2013) argues that students with a deficit in social capital can fall behind socially and academically, and are more likely to have higher levels of non-academic engagements due to problems associated with integrating into university life. However, regardless of the reason for non-social engagement, the exclusion of first-year students from the university's social activities can cause great insecurity and hesitation within the university environment whereby these students will view themselves as cultural outsiders (Spengen, 2013).

According to Thomas (2012, p. 12), feeling a sense of belonging can be defined as "students' subjective feelings of relatedness or connectedness" to the university. In Pather's (2015) study, it was found that students' lack of connectedness to the wider university community was mainly due to their financial constraints and family obligations. For students to successfully make the transition to university life, they need to develop a sense of belonging and connectedness with their new peer groups and the wider university community. For Bourdieu (1984) integration and a sense of belonging are informed by one's habitus and past experiences. As Spengen (2013) asserts that first-generation students generally come from a background where there is an absence of advantaged knowledge, resources and information acquired from social networks, this results in these students not being able to adequately understand higher education as a conduit to overall success. This lack of social capital can create unrealistic expectations of the students' social engagement within the higher education milieu. This section's findings highlight the urgent need for universities to make a conscious effort to enhance students' social engagement so that students can feel more socially connected to the institution.

**(ii) Academic engagement: Gap analysis**

This section outlines the gap analysis of first-year students' expectations and actual university experience within the following academic engagement indicators listed in Table 2 below: time spent preparing for lecturers; time spent at the library; social media contact with the lecturer; conversations with the lecturer outside of class time; and regular feedback from the lecturers.

**Table 2: Gap scores of academic engagement indicators**

Academic engagement indicators	Expectation	Experience	Gap	p-value
A lot of time spent on preparing for lectures	3.31	2.73	-0.58	<0.001
A lot of time spent at the library	3.09	1.70	-1.39	<0.001
Social media contact with lecturers	2.62	2.17	-0.45	0.002
Conversations with lecturers out of class	2.76	2.52	-0.24	0.004
Regular feedback from lecturers on assignments and tests	3.34	2.75	-0.59	<0.001
<b>Average</b>	<b>3.024</b>	<b>2.374</b>	<b>-0.65</b>	<b>-</b>

All these academic engagement indicators show a negative gap, which implies that students' expectations, were higher than their actual experience and therefore not met. All the statements in Table 2 show a mean expectation score that has a higher level of agreement than the mean experience scores. The gap analysis for all the statements are regarded as significant with p-values being <0.05. Students' expectations exceeded their actual experience with the biggest mean gap of -1.39 being scored for 'a lot of time spent at the library'. Students' expectation of spending time at the library scored a high level of agreement, 3.09 as opposed to their actual experience score which indicated a strongly disagree score of 1.70 with a significant p-value of 0.001. A significant p-value of 0.001 was also indicated for the mean gap of 'a lot of time spent preparing for lectures' -0.58 and 'regular feedback from lecturers' -0.59. The mean gap of the 'social media contact with lecturers' (-0.45) and 'conversation with lecturers outside of class time' (-0.24), indicated a significant p-value of 0.002 and 0.004 respectively.

The findings in this section indicate that students had high expectations with regard to academic engagement. Smith and Wertlieb (2005) contend that unrealistically high expectations make it difficult to adjust to university life, thereby inculcating higher levels of non-adaptation. However, the participants in this study demonstrated high expectations of academic preparedness by anticipating spending much time preparing for lectures and also spending a vast amount of time at the library. Contrary to this expectation, the students' actual experience indicate that this expectation was not met. Jansen and Van der Meer (2011) highlight that students' preparedness for academic education is one of the most important factors for success at university, and it can be expected that students who feel better prepared for university will have less trouble with university transition.

The results also found that the participants' high expectation of getting feedback, having social media contact and conversations with lecturers outside of class time was not met. Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews and Nordström (2009) support this finding. They indicate that first-year students seem to hold expectations that academic staff will provide quick feedback to students about their work and that academic staff will be readily accessible to students. According to Spengen (2013), students who enter university with social capital benefits, display higher levels of class participation and higher interaction with academic staff. However, students lacking such social capital benefits do not possess the resources and knowledge to fulfil their roles as students thereby hindering their development and success. It is therefore critical that universities acknowledge these tensions and seek intentional strategies to close these gaps, which could impact on the risks associated with student access and success.

### (iii) Seeking academic support: Gap analysis

Table 3 shows the gap analysis of students' expectation with their actual university experience under the following four seeking academic support indicators: seeking assistance from lecturers; seeking assistance from librarians; seeking assistance from peers and friends; and seeking assistance from senior students and tutors. All results indicate a negative gap between the mean expectation and experience scores. This implies that students' expectations of seeking assistance exceeded their actual experience of getting academic support at university.

**Table 3: Gap scores of academic support indicators**

Academic engagement indicators	Expectation	Experience	Gap	p-value
Seek assistance and advice from lecturers out of class time	2.07	1.58	-0.49	<0.001
Seek assistance from librarians with finding information	2.47	1.82	-0.65	<0.001
Seek assistance from peers and friends with academic work	2.30	2.23	-0.07	0.330
Seek assistance from senior students and tutors with academic work	2.30	1.27	-1.03	<0.001
<b>Average</b>	<b>2.29</b>	<b>1.73</b>	<b>-0.56</b>	<b>-</b>

The largest negative gap is observed for 'seeking assistance from senior students and tutors' (-1.03) with a significant p-value of 0.000. Two other significant p-value of 0.001 were indicated for 'seeking assistance from librarians' and 'seeking assistance from lecturers' with a mean gap of -0.65 and -0.49 respectively. The smallest negative gap of -0.07 is observed for seeking assistance from peers and friends. This result indicates that there was a close correlation between students' expectation and their actual experience with regard to peers and friends assisting with academic work. However, this gap was not significant ( $p = 0.330$ ). From the results, it is evident that participants' preference, from highest to lowest, with

seeking academic assistance at university were from their peers (3.23), librarians (2.82), academic staff (2.58) and senior students and tutors (2.27). This finding indicates that peers and friends become an important source of information and support to the first-year students. This study's finding collaborates Pather, Norodien-Fataar, Cupido and Mkonto's (2017) research findings that found students sought academic assistance from peers that they identified as more knowledgeable and/or like-minded, also acknowledging that their peers were more easily accessible.

Darlaston-Jones et al.'s (2003) study acknowledges the lack of engagement between academic staff and students. They reveal that students tend to feel ignored by their lecturers and inhibited about contacting them even when seeking assistance with academic issues. Tinto et al. (1993) identifies this lack of integration between students and academic staff, outside of the classroom environment, as one of the contributing factors to student dropout. Ball and Vincent's (1998) concept of 'grapevine knowledge' is supported in this study's findings. The grapevine knowledge indicates that students seek assistance and information from peers and friends known to them. Ball and Vincent refer to this information received from friends and peers as hot knowledge and acknowledge that students perceive this information as valuable and more honest and trustworthy. These authors add that information received from the institution, particularly academic and support staff members, is regarded as cold knowledge. Baker, Ramsay, Irwin and Miles (2017) proclaim that non-traditional students find seeking information from the institution uncomfortable to access. The results in this section show that students' preferred source for seeking academic support was from friends and peers, and not from university staff, senior students and tutors, as they had perceived prior to entering university. In this regard, university academic and support staff need to improve on providing a more inviting connection with first-year students. Additionally, institutions need to provide mentoring skills to first-year students early in the academic year so that these students can be equipped to support one another. The danger of incoming students relying on peers and friends for academic support and institutional information could result in limited or incorrect support, advice and information offered to fellow students, which could have an impact on the students' academic success.

### *Conclusion*

The study has provided a detailed view of first-year students' expectation and university experience relating to social engagement, academic engagement, and seeking academic support. In analysing the gap between students' expectations and actual university experiences alongside students' university access and success, it is argued that student success is a product of an environment that supports students' expectations of university realities. Access and success at university is indicative of students fulfilling their expectations relating not only to academic learning, but also to broader career, social and personal goals. Institutionally, student success is pivotal to universities preparing and supporting students for life beyond the university milieu. Therefore, universities need to be responsive to student expectations and experiences by developing strategies that prepare and support

students in achieving success. Investments in scrutinising students' expectations and experiences requires careful analysis of factors relating to expectations and experience that allow students to connect with the social, academic and support structures of the institution as this would have a direct impact on success.

In this study, the realities of the first-year students' social engagement, academic engagement and seeking support were not commensurate with their expectations. Success can be impeded if the reality of students' expectations is not met. An alignment of expectations with experiences can significantly help students to feel more connected with the university, thereby contributing to positive learning outcomes. Universities need to address incoming students' realistic and unrealistic expectations with their actual university experience so as to foster students' sense of connectedness to their new learning environment. In this regard, university initiatives need to be intentional and inclusive. Creating an awareness of the demands of higher education and addressing any university misconceptions of the first year of study is critical for academic and social adjustment into the university environment. This will also assist in closing the gap between student expectation and university experience. Addressing the misfit and helping students to connect with the opportunities of university life not only helps in the transition to university but also helps students to understand the culture and expectations of university life. By doing so, students tend not to become demotivated when their university experiences do not match their expectations. However, institutions also need to be sensitive to students' expectations and make a conscious effort to align the institutional structures to satisfy the type of students who are entering higher education in the twenty-first century. Most often, academic success is related to students' expectations being fulfilled and therefore it is imperative that universities understand the student expectation–experience alignment to ensure academic access, retention and success.

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