

## REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

# Who Are Our First-Year At-Risk Humanities Students? A Reflection on a First-Year Survey Administered by the Wits Faculty of Humanities Teaching and Learning Unit in 2015 and 2016

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### *Abstract*

*Do we really know who our students are as they enter university? This was the question that the Faculty of Humanities at the University of the Witwatersrand was grappling with. In response, the Humanities' Teaching and Learning Unit compiled a registration survey for first-year students to complete that gives an overview of who our incoming students are. The characteristics surveyed include students' demographic and personal variables, such as the regions they came from, parental and support influences, time demands, financial and technology considerations, motivation for attending university, reading frequency, and interests. The purpose of the survey was two-fold: firstly, to understand who our students are in terms of their background; and, secondly, to proactively determine what factors potentially place them at risk academically so that the Teaching and Learning Unit could identify, and direct students to or implement support mechanisms to assist them.*

*This article reflects on the survey that was conducted in 2015 and 2016 and rather than report on the findings of the survey, looks at how the survey and the “survey practice” adopted can be improved. The aim of this article is to reflect on the process used by the Humanities Teaching and Learning Unit to implement and improve a survey to determine different factors that potentially place first-year students at risk. Reflecting on this process, as opposed to reporting on the results of the survey, is important because it contributes to an action research process where future praxis is informed by reflection on previous action. This process is helpful to identify survey questions and administration that can be improved so as to gain more accurate data, as well as to identify proactive interventions that can be implemented to address risk factors students present and support students to be successful in their studies.*

### *Keywords*

*at-risk students; first-year experience; student success; student support; transition*

### *Introduction*

There are many factors that contribute to higher education students being potentially at risk of either failing or dropping out of university. These include their academic ability, traced through previous academic performance (such as school-leaving results), as well as

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other non-academic factors such as access to funding and food (Eiselen & Geysler, 2003; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001).

Historically, students in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of the Witwatersrand were understood in terms of limited data such as admission data, which covered basic demographic information, for example age, race, gender, home address, matric/school-leaving results and related Admission Point Score (APS). Little more was known about the diverse student population in the faculty and their potential needs, such as who might need additional support in the transition to university based on factors that place students “at risk”. Furthermore, students were only identified as being at risk after their Semester 1 (mid-year) results, and therefore missed out on opportunities to be supported early in the year.

The Humanities Teaching and Learning Unit decided to address this issue by devising a registration survey for first-year full-time students so we could better understand who these students were, and identify factors that might place them at risk academically and support measures needed. The survey was informed by a body of literature and staff input and conducted in 2015 and 2016. The 2016 version included amendments based on additional factors that had been identified. In both years, the results of the survey were shared with various forums within the faculty (such as the Undergraduate Studies Committee, the Teaching and Learning Committee and First-Year Coordinators) with the aim of increasing faculty and first-year lecturers’ understanding of their students and their potential risk factors.

This article gives an overview of the literature that informed the survey and reflections of the effectiveness of the registration survey. A number of factors were considered in compiling the survey, although this is by no means a complete list. Lessons were learnt from the administration of the survey as well as its compilation so that students’ support needs could be identified and addressed earlier in the academic year to assist them to succeed from the start of their higher education journeys. The article concludes with recommendations on how this “survey practice” can be improved, and future research projects that can assist with understanding and supporting incoming students.

### *Context and Problem*

The Faculty of Humanities at the University of the Witwatersrand employs two “At Risk Coordinators” in its Teaching and Learning Unit (TLU). These coordinators are tasked with identifying and supporting at-risk students, focusing mainly on first-years. The TLU understands the term “students at risk” to be those who require temporary or ongoing interventions to assist them to achieve academically in order to be successful at university, and/or not drop out of university.

Our problem in Humanities was two-fold: we only identified “at risk” students after the first semester (mid-year) based on their academic results, and secondly, we did not know enough about our first-year students. Previously, only students’ school-leaving results (APS – Admission Points Score for South African students) were used as an indicator of academic

success prior to commencing their studies. However, this is not the only measure. As we wanted to know more about our students and identify those who could be at risk earlier, we devised a survey that included a number of factors that could assist us in identifying them. We decided on a survey as the matric results of South African students that determine their APS are becoming less reliable – exam cheating is becoming a more frequent occurrence in some centres (Mlambo, Fredericks & SAPA, 2015; Peters, 2015). The National Benchmark Tests (NBTs) can be used to gauge academic readiness for higher education but NBTs are not used throughout the faculty. A survey seemed to be a reliable mechanism to assist us to gauge risk as well as understand who our first-year students are.

We compiled the survey based on literature on what constitutes academic risk, the first-year experience, and student retention and attrition. Staff input across the faculty was also considered. By understanding the background of first-year students and early identification of at-risk factors, support structures and mechanisms could be identified to assist students early in the academic year so that they could be more likely to experience success in their studies (Purnell, McCarthy & McLeod, 2010).

### *The Faculty of Humanities Registration Survey*

The first survey that the TLU drafted for the 2015 cohort included factors that students could self-report. Students were provided options to select from. It comprised 22 statements, covering a range of factors:

- **Demographics:** age; first/home language; region that the student came from
- **Parental/ support influences:** first-in-family/ first-generation student; parents' qualifications/level of education; family history of mental illness; students' special learning needs; residence during semester
- **Demands on time:** part-time employment; outside responsibilities; transport to campus
- **Financial considerations:** number of meals per day; funding for studies
- **Technology considerations:** access to technology; ability to use software programs (self-assessed)
- **Interest/Motivation/Involvement:** Bachelor of Arts (BA) as choice of degree; the University of the Witwatersrand as choice of university; career certainty
- **Reading:** when students last read a book; reading frequency

With regard to **demographics**, students' age, their home language and the region they come from impact on their academic achievement and "staying power", with older students having a greater tendency to drop out (Fike & Fike, 2008; Ishler & Upcraft, 2005). Students' proficiency in the language of instruction also impacts the demands they experience academically – students who have the language of instruction as an additional language tend to experience difficulty with their academic studies (Eiselen & Geyser, 2003; Stephen, Welman & Jordaan, 2004). The region that students come from can also act as an indicator of risk with students from certain provinces (e.g. Gauteng) being depicted as more successful in higher education (Soudien, 2014).

**Parental and support influences** include whether the student was first-generation, their parents' level of education, the student's special learning needs and where the student resides during semester. First-generation students tend to have a higher attrition rate than their counterparts – they experience more difficulty in being prepared for and adapting to the university environment, and tend to lack adequate family support (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004). This often correlates with their parents' level of education – students whose parents have lower levels of education and whose parents did not attend university, tend to have lower levels of academic achievement and lack the requisite parental support and understanding to encourage them in their studies (Fike & Fike, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004). Students with learning disabilities or special needs are potentially at risk, and an awareness of who these students are can assist in directing them to resources and interventions on campus that can contribute to academic success (Reed, Kennet, Lewis, Lund-Lucas, Stallberg & Newbold, 2009). Where students reside during semesters can contribute to the support they receive for their studies – students who stay in a university residence tend to have lower dropout rates than their day-student counterparts (Ishler & Upcraft, 2005). Students who stay at home during the semester may also receive adequate social support from their parents (Pascarella et al., 2004), or they may have additional burdens and responsibilities placed on them, such as reliance on public transport, chores and so on.

We also surveyed family history of mental illness for two reasons. Firstly, if there is mental illness in the family we posited that the student may be supporting or dealing with such a family member and this can place an additional stressor on the student. Secondly, mental illness tends to be hereditary (Hemmings, Kinnear, Lochner, Niehaus, Knowles, Moolman-Smook, Corfield & Stein, 2004) and experience in the Faculty shows that some students develop or become aware of mental illness in the course of their studies. These students often need time off for diagnosis and treatment, which then impacts on their academic performance, and potentially results in attrition (Megivern, Pellerito & Mowbray, 2003).

Students tend to experience a number of **demands on their time** outside the university context, impacting their time management and academic performance. These demands include part-time employment responsibilities (Ishler & Upcraft, 2005; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001) and “out-of-class” activities or responsibilities (Terenzini, Pascarella & Blimling, 1996), such as extra-curricular (sport, social clubs) activities and care-taking or household chores. Transport to campus potentially indicates additional demands placed on students' time because public transport is not always reliable in South Africa, with strikes, large numbers of passengers and long queues impacting on travelling time, which then negatively impacts students' time management and ability to cope with academic demands.

Students who experience **financial** difficulties experience additional stress in higher education (Bojuwoye, 2002) impacting their retention and academic success (Hinton, 2007). They tend to have difficulty focusing on their studies as they worry about whether they will be able to continue studying. However, students who receive financial aid tend to have lower dropout rates (Fike & Fike, 2008). Funding may be available from

a variety of sources, such as parents or family, scholarships, bursaries, loans or personal resources, each with its own set of advantages and disadvantages. An awareness of students' funding sources can assist with understanding additional sources of stress that may impact on students, their academic success and support needs.

Related to financial considerations is the socioeconomic status and income levels of the households students come from (Ishler & Upcraft, 2005). These factors were not surveyed but students were requested to indicate the number of meals they ate per day. Food security is often related to socioeconomic status. Access to meals was surveyed for two reasons – firstly, students who lacked food security could be directed to campus resources to assist them with meals, and secondly, low-income students are often academically underprepared for university (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008), impacting their academic achievement.

**Technology considerations** were included in the survey, as the university is becoming increasingly dependent on electronic platforms for students to access learning material and submit assignments. Students tend to have varied levels of access to and proficiency in ICT (Czerniewicz & Brown, 2010). Currently, if students do not have access to electronic mechanisms off-campus, such as computers or smart phones, they are likely to experience difficulty in keeping up with the demands of their studies. This can impact their time management as they need to schedule additional trips, at extra cost, to campus over weekends to access computers in 24-hour centres. Proficiency in using computers is also an important consideration – some students enter university having few or no computer skills and this can impact their time management, ability to access learning material hosted on electronic platforms, and ability to complete assignments timeously.

**Motivation** to succeed and the **level of interest** that a student displays in his or her studies contribute to academic success. Students who have a work-life orientation to their studies are more likely to achieve academically at university (Mäkinen, Olkinuora & Lonka, 2004), particularly disadvantaged youth who are goal-oriented (Dass-Brailsford, 2005). Certain traits, such as achievement motivation, also play a role in students' academic achievement (Busato, Prins, Elshout & Hamaker, 2000). Motivation and interest can be gauged through the students' choices of university, degree and career and how certain they are of these aspects. If students are uncertain of any of these factors, they are less likely to succeed academically (Willcoxson & Wynder, 2010).

In addition, students require a range of academic skills in order to cope with academic demands and succeed at university (Bojuwoye, 2002). These skills include **reading skills** (Pretorius, 2002). If students are not able to read at the required level for tertiary studies, they are less likely to achieve academically and cope in a higher-education environment. Reading is “a powerful learning tool, a means of constructing meaning, and acquiring new knowledge” (Pretorius, 2002, p. 169). The reading culture of students can be gauged by how often they read. This information helps to indicate whether students may experience academic challenges, as those who do not read frequently may struggle to deal with the volume of reading they are exposed to at university.

Students were requested to complete the survey in 2015 and 2016.

### *Administration of the Survey*

In 2015, the survey was paper-based and completed by first-year students at registration while they were waiting in line. This helped the students to pass the time and contributed to a high response rate (95%). The responses were then captured by two data capturers, which was a time-consuming process. The capture and analysis of the data took a month from registration and presented a time-lag.

In 2016, the university moved to online registration and not all students were present at the registration day. We changed our approach by setting up a google survey for students to complete, emailed them the link, and requested them to complete the survey. Although this approach assisted with reducing the time-lag in collating data and communicating the results, the response rate was lower – only 40% of students completed the survey. There was also confusion concerning the survey – the University implemented an online biographical questionnaire that was completed during registration and many students commented to the Teaching and Learning Unit that they did not complete the faculty survey as they thought both surveys were the same.

### *Ethical Considerations*

In both 2015 and 2016, there was an informed consent process – students were informed in writing at the start of the survey that the information they shared was confidential and would be used to research and identify how the Teaching and Learning Unit could better support students. Only the two data capturers in 2015, who had signed non-disclosure agreements, and the coordinators had access to the data. Hard copies of 2015 surveys were stored in locked cupboards in a coordinator's office, while access to the results of the 2016 online survey was password protected.

When students were identified for particular interventions, only the coordinators had knowledge of the particular factors that were considered for their selection. When students were contacted to participate or access interventions and/or support services, they were emailed or contacted individually rather than as part of a group.

Data reported to different forums and committees were presented as a group and no individual information was disclosed so as to protect the identity and confidentiality of students.

### *What We Did with the Survey Results*

The survey results were used to inform various interventions, disseminated to Humanities' staff through different forums, to identify students who had a particular need (food, special needs, etc.) and track potential at-risk students and their progress.

When we collated the results in 2015, we identified students who presented six of the 22 at-risk markers surveyed; for example, if a student was first-generation, an additional-language English speaker, had access to two or fewer meals a day, last read a book more than six months prior to registration, had restricted access to ICTs and lived in rented accommodation. These factors were considered with students' APS and identified students were invited to apply to attend the First-Year Experience (FYE) camp. This camp assisted

students to develop skills for university success, such as academic writing, goal setting, time management and so forth. The TLU sponsored 30 applicants to attend this camp during the first-semester break in 2015.

In 2015 and 2016, the survey results were presented to Humanities staff through different forums. Presentations were given to the Teaching and Learning Committee, the Undergraduate Studies Committee, First Year Coordinators and lecturers, and staff in campus support structures such as the FYE office and the Careers and Counselling Development Unit (CCDU). Feedback and discussions during these presentations indicated that the survey exercise was useful and helped staff to understand the first-year cohort of students. We were also able to gain ideas on how to improve the survey and possible strategies to assist students; for example, additional support that is needed for additional-language English speakers for reading and managing the volume of reading they are required to do. The presentations helped to raise the participants' awareness of first-year issues and encouraged various support strategies to be considered.

We used survey data to identify students who had a particular need (food, special needs, etc.) and then emailed or contacted them individually to direct them to relevant campus support structures. Students who lacked food security were directed to the Student Affairs' food bank and those with special learning needs were informed of the Disability Unit, where they could be assisted. In addition, an email was sent to the entire cohort each year, detailing where different campus support structures could be located. This was done as a mitigating measure in case we overlooked some students, or some may not have disclosed particular information, or did not complete the survey (for example, if they registered late).

We correlated students' marks with the survey results in order to understand which factors, or combination of factors, place students most "at risk" (for example low-income, first-generation students (Engle & Tinto, 2008)). We intend to conduct a longitudinal correlation study that will help us to identify "at-risk" students early in the first semester so that we can proactively direct them to the assistance they may need to be successful at university. We are, however, cautious of stigmatising students and will continue to be sensitive in the way that we deal with them. The correlation study, however, is likely to evolve; based on feedback from our presentations and through our subsequent research and experience, we have reflected on the survey and how it can be improved.

### *Reflections on the Survey*

After administering the survey in 2015, we noticed that there were aspects that the survey did not take into account and that could be (some of which, were) added to the 2016 version to enhance the quality of the data gathered and give further indications of students' risk and potential support needed.

#### **What the 2015 survey did not take into account**

It would be naïve to think that the surveyed aspects were a complete list of factors that determined if students were at risk academically or of dropping out. There is a range of other factors that students bring with them that contribute to their success or lack thereof,

as well as experiences they have during their studies. The factors that were included in the survey are those that students could readily self-report and were not available elsewhere in the university: for example, students' school-leaving results and APS were not surveyed as these are available in university databases. The role of previous academic performance should not be negated, as there is a strong correlation between this and academic achievement in higher education (Eiselen & Geyser, 2003; Ishler & Upcraft, 2005; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001). However, there are other factors that impact student performance, which can be broadly categorised into four areas: academic, personal, support and university experiences. Some of these factors could be included in future versions of our registration survey, or be independent studies.

**Academic** factors include academic self-efficacy (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001; Nel, Troskie-de Bruin & Bitzer, 2009); students' study habits; communication skills (Eiselen & Geyser, 2003); the development of academic skills for higher education (Purnell et al., 2010; Reed et al., 2009); and the academic achievement students experience at university (Muckert, 2002). University under-preparedness is an important factor that needs to be considered – South African students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, “are increasingly underprepared for higher education studies” (Nel et al., 2009, p. 974) and an awareness of this lack is crucial in order to develop effective programmes that develop the academic skills students need. The TLU developed some academic development programmes but the efficacy of these needs to be evaluated.

**Personal** factors comprise the students' expectations and whether those expectations are matched (Bean & Kuh, 1984; Purnell et al., 2010); students' motivation and level of commitment to attending and staying at university (Dass-Brailsford, 2005); personality factors that contribute to student resilience (Busato et al., 2000) or “grit” (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, Kelly, 2007); integration into the social and academic systems of the institution (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980); and students' assimilation of the university's values and their capacity to reject prior attitudes and values that may inhibit them from continuing with higher education (Elkins, Braxton & James, 2000).

**Support** factors in the form of students' support networks and their ability to develop these, including peer support; the ongoing support students receive from parents and family during the course of their studies; and students' participation in support programmes also play a role in their performance (Dass-Brailsford, 2005; Purnell et al., 2010).

Furthermore, students' **university experiences** contribute to their performance, such as their holistic student and campus experience; membership of campus clubs or organisations; teaching and learning experiences; and the adjustment difficulties they may experience that can assist or hamper them (Bean & Kuh, 1984; Purnell et al., 2010).

### Enhancing the survey

From our dealings with students, and feedback gained from presentations to faculty staff in 2015, there were other factors that could have been included in the 2016 survey. The factors included: the size and type of schools that students matriculate from; family



circumstances; the amount of time students spend on social media; and their motivation to attend university.

The size of the schools that students matriculate from was included in the demographic section of the 2016 survey. This aspect provides insight into the students' ability to locate resources and support – it is probably easier to find assistance in a small school (e.g. 300 learners) versus a large school (1 500 learners). There may also be a correlation between the setting and type of school the students matriculated from – the language of instruction, whether the school is rural or urban and public or private – as the quality of education in these types of school varies and contributes either negatively or positively to matriculants' levels of university preparedness and their subsequent academic success (Bojuwoye, 2002; Pretorius, 2002).

Another aspect that could be included in the survey is the family circumstances of students, for example, if parents are married or single. From exit interviews conducted with students who deregistered during 2015, there appeared to be a stronger likelihood of attrition if students came from single-parent households. This aspect can provide insight into parental/support influences as well as the financial considerations sections of the survey. This question was not included in the 2016 survey as we felt it was intrusive and needed to be piloted.

There is apparently a correlation between the amount of time students spend on social media and their academic achievement (more time on social media leads to lower academic achievement) (Sauti, 2015); so this aspect was included in 2016 in the section relating to demands on time.

The reason why students attend university links to their motivation to study (Kift, 2004) and is a factor that would be helpful to understand – for example, whether students are at university for their own reasons or under duress as a result of parental pressure. This aspect was included in 2016 under the section concerning students' interest/motivation/involvement.

In terms of administering the survey, a paper-based approach seems to be more viable for yielding a high response rate. Students will be given the opportunity to complete future surveys during Orientation Week when they have a slot with the TLU. Not all students have access to devices to complete the survey online and the TLU will have to factor in time for capturing paper-based surveys.

The survey could be a viable mechanism to test these additional factors and check for correlations with students' results or attrition in order to understand the impact of these factors on student risk. The survey should also be verified statistically so as to get a more accurate tool.

### *Conclusions and Recommendations*

The South African higher education landscape draws a diversity of students from various regions and backgrounds, with markedly different high school experiences. Knowledge of who our students are can assist educators to adapt their teaching and university structures

in order to be better prepared to host and support incoming students. For this reason, the practice of the registration survey should continue as valuable information is gained. The survey can be enhanced by including additional aspects discussed in this article. However, gauging the risk factors that students present should not be considered the only predictor of student success. There are a number of other factors that impact student persistence, resilience and academic achievement. Identification of students' risk factors will, however, assist with directing them to support structures and interventions that can assist them earlier in their higher education studies.

The results of the survey should be communicated to faculty staff as early as possible in the academic year so that they are aware of the cohort they are engaging with. The information can assist teaching staff with their teaching strategies in order to effectively communicate with and support students. An efficient method to ensure a quick turn-around time between the survey and the report disseminating the results needs to be investigated.

In light of this reflective discussion, there are possible future research projects that can assist with understanding and supporting incoming students. These include the following:

- Students who register late should not be negated. They may require their own survey to assist in identifying additional support structures needed to help them catch up the work they have missed.
- The survey should be tested with different intakes of students and collated with students' mid-year and first-year results to identify potential predictors, or combinations of factors as predictors, for students at risk of failing or dropping out. This will enable the validity and reliability of the survey to be examined.
- To further ensure the validity and reliability of the survey, survey questions could be rigorously tested through statistical analysis.
- It could be worthwhile to have students complete the survey again at the end of their first year to determine if their at-risk factors have changed and if there is a correlation with their marks as a result. For example, students move in and out of campus residences during the year and their academic performance may be impacted as a result.
- A follow-up study should be done to identify how students are and can be supported by the university system (at institutional, faculty, school and course level). Support gaps can then be identified and strategies put in place to further assist students to be successful in their studies.
- Other factors identified in this article can be researched in more depth to gain insight into how these factors impact students and how students can be better supported to manage these factors, for example, the role of academic, personal, support and university experiences (factors that this article did not investigate and report on).

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