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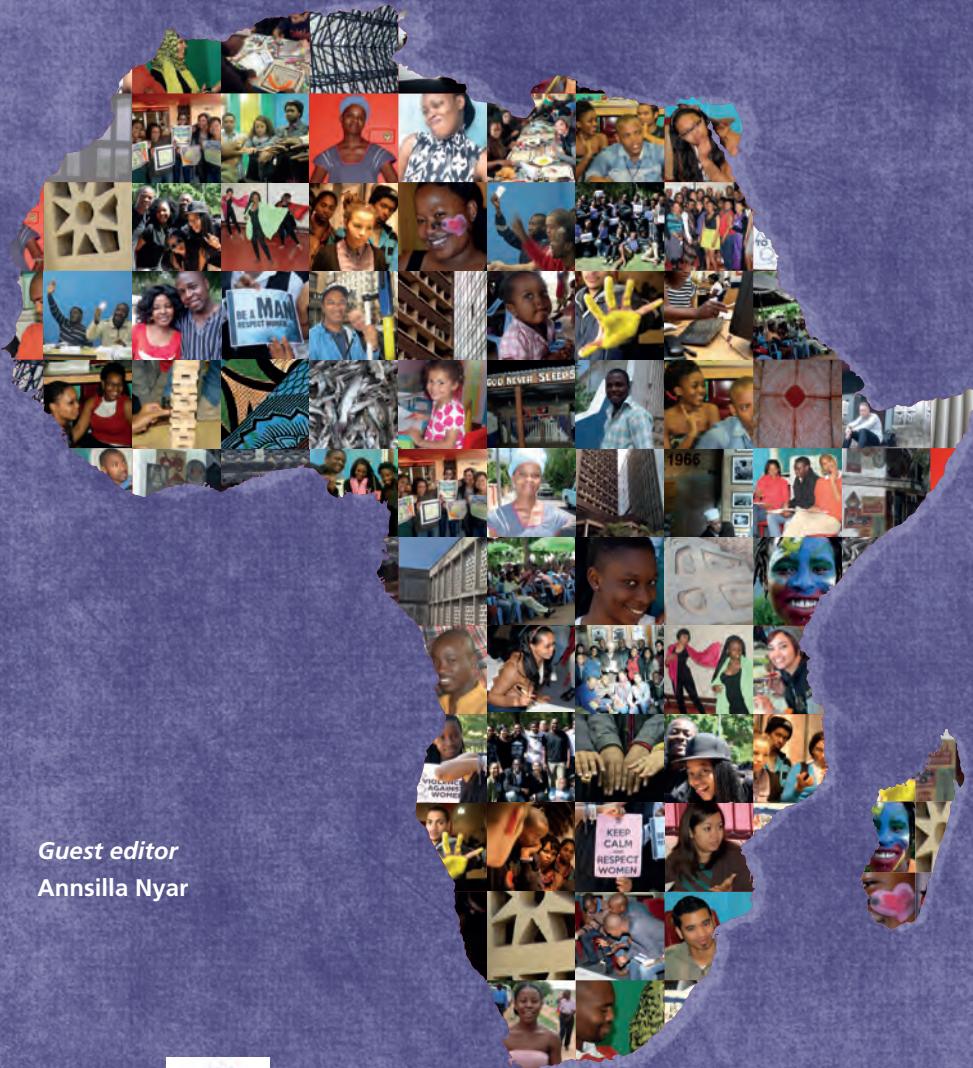
Deepening scholarship on the first-year experience

Guest editor
Annsilla Nyar

AFRICAN SUN MEDIA

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Journal of Student Affairs in Africa

The *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (*JSAA*) is an independent, peer-reviewed, multi-disciplinary, open-access academic journal that publishes scholarly research and reflective discussions about the theory and practice of student affairs in Africa.

Vision and mission

The *JSAA* aims to contribute to the professionalisation of student affairs in African higher education by publishing high-quality scholarly articles, research and reflective discussions by academics, professionals, researchers and students about student affairs and services in African higher education.

The *JSAA* strives to be the foremost academic journal dealing with the theory and practice of the student affairs domain in universities on the African continent, and an indispensable resource for national policy makers, the executive leadership of universities and colleges dealing with student affairs, deans of students and other senior student affairs professionals, as well as institutional researchers and academics and students focused on the field of higher education studies and student affairs.

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The scope of *JSAA* is indicated by keywords such as: student affairs, student career development, student counselling, student development theory and research, student discipline, student engagement, student experience, student finances and financial aid, student housing, disability/disabled students, student leadership and governance, student life cycle, student living and learning, student movement, student organisations, student orientation, student policy, student politics and activism, student sport, student support, academic development (and its intersection with the student affairs co-curriculum), graduate attributes, and teaching and learning support. This list of keywords is not exhaustive. Our key focus area is the core functions of student affairs and services in Africa.

Submissions are encouraged from scholars and reflective practitioners from across the globe. Submissions must be original and relevant to the mission, scope and focus of the journal. Especially encouraged are submissions from African scholars and professionals working in higher education on the African continent. Submissions dealing with student affairs issues from other contexts (e.g. the African diaspora; other emerging economies; developed countries) that are transferable to the African context are also considered for publication. Submit by email to: jsaa_editor@outlook.com.

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Student Affairs in a Traumatic Year

Birgit Schreiber,* Teboho Moja** & Thierry M. Luescher***

The year 2020 is a year that we will remember globally in higher education as having been most unusual, indeed, traumatic. If at the beginning of 2020 the year had a hopeful ring with plenty, as it comes to an end it is hard to just try and make sense of the extent that the experience of higher education has been changed so incisively within a short time for both staff and students. And the signs are already there that the post–COVID-19 period will not be short of new challenges either. Challenges like addressing the increased mental health issues students suffer due to the crisis, illness, loss of loved ones and more. Moreover, there are many student groups whose ability to learn has been severely impacted by the pandemic and lockdown, including students from poor households, rural students, and students with special needs. As we noted in our last editorial, for these students, the campus environment and the services offered by Student Affairs departments is normally able to level the 'playing field' of learning. It will require yet another extra effort by student affairs professionals, academics, administrators, fellow students and the communities and families to ensure that these students can catch up and have access to the same quality and quantity of learning opportunities within supportive contexts over the course of their studies as others who have been less impacted.

The first–year experience (FYE) holds for many student affairs professionals a special place. One group of students that has been particularly impacted by the campus and national lockdowns imposed by the global COVID-19 pandemic have been first–years. For much of the year, COVID-19 has robbed this cohort of first–year students of the thrills and fears, joys and cries, of a 'normal' first year. In those universities that start their academic

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year the second half of the year, the impact has been less profound. But in higher education systems like South Africa's, where the academic year starts in the course of February, first-year students experienced just a few weeks of induction into university life on campus.

The FYE provides the central theme of this issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*. It is the mission of *JSAA* to contribute to the professionalisation of student affairs *inter alia* through the development of partnerships with professional organisations in the field. In this spirit we are pleased to host for the third time an issue guest edited by Annsilla Nyar of the South African National Research Centre of the First-Year Experience at the University of Johannesburg. Her first guest-edited issue titled "The first-year experience, student transitions and institutional transformation" was published as *JSAA* 4(1) in 2016 and the second issue "First-year experience in perspective" in 2018 as *JSAA* 6(1).

Indeed, *JSAA* has been proudly associated with a number of guest editors over the years, starting with "Student power in African higher education", *JSAA* 3(1) of 2015, which was jointly guest edited by Thierry Luescher, Manja Klemenčič and James Otieno Jowi. This was followed by "Tutoring and mentoring", guest edited by Nelia Frade in 2017 and published as *JSAA* 5(2), and most recently *JSAA* 7(1) on "Space, language, identity and the student movement" guest edited by Philippa Tumubweinee and Thierry Luescher.

A guest-edited issue allows *JSAA* and the guest editor to focus attention on a specific theme and enables a particular kind of depth of scholarship. It mobilises a number of researchers, employing a range of research methodologies and frameworks to focus on that theme, thus advancing scholarship in this domain. This, too, is what Annsilla Nyar has done with this her third guest-edited issue, and *JSAA* is proud to be playing a part in developing the scholarship on the first-year experience (FYE).

In addition to the eight research articles and the reflective practice article on the FYE guest edited by Annsilla Nyar, this issue includes a campus report on the Stellenbosch University Experiential Education Conference which explored the intersection of experiential learning with student success. This was a particularly timeous and topical conference as we are moving into an era of distance- and online-learning which raises major concerns about the developmental experiences in the social and community domain of higher education.

As in every issue, we are happy to publish in this issue the review of a book relevant for student affairs professionals in universities in Africa and beyond. Birgit Schreiber reviews *Engaging Students: Using Evidence to Promote Student Success*, edited by Francois Strydom, George Kuh and Sonja Loots, which was published in 2017 by SunMedia Bloemfontein. With this book, the editors have been able to bring together an impressive set of contributions that illustrate in so many ways the importance of having good data to understand the student experience, enhance student engagement and ultimately improve student success. Schreiber argues: "It is a must-read for Student Affairs practitioners, not only in Africa, but in all contexts that seek to offer teaching and learning opportunities that advance equitable participation of the learning in the learning process."

We would like to thank a number of members of the International Editorial Advisory Board of *JSAA* and our reviewers. As we are gradually preparing the move of the Journal

to the University of Pretoria, we would also like to acknowledge yet again the support we have received over the last four and a half years from Stellenbosch University which has not only sponsored a number of issues but also generously hosted and administered the journal on their library's e-journal platform. In this regard, a special thank you goes to Ms Paulette Talliard of Stellenbosch University's Library and Information Service and the tireless support of Maretha Joyce.

South Africa's First-Year Experience: Consolidating and Deepening a Culture of National Scholarship

Annsilla Nyar⋆

This special edition of *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (*JSAA*) represents an important milestone for South Africa's First-Year Experience movement. This milestone is about reaching a particular stage of maturation in the drive to cultivate national First-Year Experience scholarship. It also shows the importance of the continued development of South Africa's only dedicated national centre for First-Year Experience, i.e. the South African National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience (SANRC), in terms of helping grow and nurture scholarship in the field.

Having once described the field of South Africa's First-Year Experience scholarship as "an aspiring academic community that is poised for future development" (Nyar, 2018, p. ix), it is now possible to say that the First-Year Experience is no longer at a developmental stage in South Africa. The collection of articles assembled in this special journal edition bear testimony to a now-thriving culture of scholarship, which helps define and consolidate South Africa's First-Year Experience as a coherent field of study and most importantly, ultimately helps academics and practitioners to better serve South Africa's student population.

A diverse range of topics are presented in the contributions chosen for this journal. This special edition begins with an important aspect of the First-Year Experience: the examination of stress, coping and adjustment strategies of first-year students by scholars Engelbrecht, Mostert, Pienaar and Kahl. Though limited by a small sample size, this study offers valid insights about the complex nature of the stressors associated with the adjustment of first-year students to university. The article invites serious questions about how best to effectively support students at this stage of their transition to university.

Scholars McGhie, Venter and Dos Reis address the problems confronting business education learners in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase of their education through a case study of two Western Cape schools. Through adopting a longitudinal research approach, they argue that the development and application of a South African readiness model for learners would make a significant contribution towards helping resolve some of the problems in South Africa's schooling system. This article is particularly distinguished by its strong engagement with relevant literature.

Scholars Combrink and Oosthuizen insert the COVID-19 theme into this special edition in a timely fashion through their thoughtful account of the effect of the COVID-19

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pandemic on first-year students at University of the Free State (UFS). This article presents some serious questions about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on first-year student transition.

The article by scholars Kapp, Mostert and De Beer sets out to address the all-important question of student motivation through an analysis of the psychometric properties of the Academic Motivation Scale-College version for South African first-year university students. The authors conclude that the scale holds value as a means to better understand the relationship between student motivation and academic success.

The article by Van Zyl, Dampier and Ngwenya proposes a model of student success intervention through a case study of the Integrated Student Success Initiative (ISSI) at University of Johannesburg (UJ). The ISSI is an interesting institutional initiative that uses data to identify at-risk students, design interventions, and evaluate associated outcomes.

Scholars Motsabi, Van Zyl and Diale present intriguing insights in terms of research on first-generation students, and further, those whom the authors deem as *black African* first-generation students. It is hoped that research of this calibre will help stimulate much-needed national conversations about the necessary support systems and structures for first-generation students.

The academic contributions in this journal reach a significant level of sophistication through the work of Tshwane University of Technology (TUT)-based scholar, Mason. Mason's two articles "Towards a Learning Mindset: First-Year University Students' Qualitative Perspectives on Gratitude in the Context of Learning Effort" and "My name is Matshepo … Mother of Hope: Examining Hope amid the First-year Experience" situate traits such as gratitude and hope as intriguing 'new' factors that can contribute to student success. Mason's scholarship prompts us to re-examine our existing narratives of student success, and opens up possibilities of a whole new field of enquiry around the implications for practice.

Orientation practice is often not conceded the critical attention that it deserves in the broader context of first-year experience and student transitions, more broadly. This edition concludes with the only Reflective Practitioner account in the form of a considered account of how to improve existing orientation practice at a national level. This article presents seven good practice strategies, as a means of helping improve national orientation practice.

I am confident that this journal edition contains some of the best, most readable and most stimulating articles on the subject of South Africa's first-year experience. The articles in their entirety serve as worthy reminders of the path that South Africa's first-year experience has and is taking, in the course of helping to change the futures of the country's students. It is anticipated that, with continued encouragement from the SANRC, further scholarship will emerge to 'drill deeper' into the many areas of possible analysis raised herein and provide finer-grained insight into the national FYE. It is also hoped that the contents presented here will inspire more contributors, particularly young and emerging scholars, to make future submissions to this journal and others, addressing topics of South Africa's first-year experience.

Coping Processes of South African First-Year University Students: An Exploratory Study

Liesel Engelbrecht,* Karina Mostert,** Jacobus Pienaar*** & Carlien Kahl****

Abstract

South African higher education institutions (HEIs) face significant challenges with high first-year student drop-out rates due to various stressors students are facing. The current study explores the coping of first-year students studying at a South African university. This qualitative study followed an exploratory, descriptive, interpretive strategy to gain a deeper understanding of students' coping during their first academic year at university. Ten participants were recruited through a trusted gatekeeper using purposive voluntary and later snowball sampling methods. Data were collected using the Mmogo method® and semi-structured individual follow-up interviews. Interactive qualitative and thematic analyses generated three themes: (1) the availability of and access to coping resources for first-year students; (2) coping strategies first-year students rely on to manage stressors at university; and (3) the effectiveness of selected coping strategies. Understanding the coping of first-year students could assist HEIs in intervening and supporting first-year students appropriately, to enhance their first-year experience (FYE) and overall student well-being. Though limited to a small qualitative study, the contribution to FYE literature is through exploring nuanced coping resources, strategies, and the effectiveness thereof for students, which challenges the 'one-size-fits-all' approach many universities may use. However, there are strategies and awareness of resources that could, in general, be helpful.

Keywords

coping effectiveness; coping resources; coping strategies; first-year experience; first-year students; South African university

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Introduction

The South African higher education sector has gone through significant state interventions in the last two decades, with higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa lagging behind its counterparts in other developing countries (Habib, 2016; Van Zyl, 2016). In the face of South Africa's challenging economic circumstances, higher education is a critical force for improved economic conditions through modernisation and development and has the potential to create tax revenue, increased savings and investments, and a more entrepreneurial and civic society (Altbach et al., 2019; Bloom et al., 2006).

HEIs focus increasingly on student attrition and completion of tertiary studies (Barefoot, 2005; Beer & Lawson, 2017; Turner & Thompson, 2014). Bernardo et al. (2016) explain that universities face high drop-out rates between students' first and second years of study. It has long been established that moving from high school to university can be stressful and demanding for first-year students (Tinto, 1982; 1993). Challenges first-year students face include (amongst others): academic performance, adapting to campus life, being more independent, financial concerns, time-management, and managing interpersonal relationships (Kotze & Niemann, 2013; Pretorius & Blaauw, 2020). Perceptions of excessive academic demands and workload from student schedules, examinations, assignments, and practical work could cause further stress (Jaffer & Garraway, 2016; Kotze & Niemann, 2013).

Millennial first-year students form part of a group of young individuals who are used to closer integration of technology, learning and communication (Kuron et al., 2015; Turner & Thompson, 2014). HEIs may impose novel demands on young individuals from this generational cohort, where students needs are not necessarily met. Therefore, universities may appreciate understanding the unique coping strategies that first-year millennials employ to deal with stressors, their perceptions of coping resources available to them, and how effective these strategies are.

While coping has been researched extensively in the past with different focuses (see Dewe et al., 2017; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004), the majority of coping studies have predominantly focused on the *quantitative* nature of coping in the work setting (Folkman, 2011; Robotham, 2008). Although some research has considered coping in HEI settings (Orel et al., 2017; Polanco-Roman et al., 2016; Strage & Sorkhabi, 2016), there seems to be a lack of in-depth studies exploring coping of first-year students in the uniquely South African university setting.

This study aims to use a qualitative exploratory strategy with a small group of South African first-year students to gain a deeper understanding of their coping in the context of challenges they face during their first academic year at university.

Literature Review

A definition of coping

Coping is defined as a person's cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage, reduce, minimise, master, and tolerate the internal and external demands of a person-environment transaction, which is appraised as taxing or exceeding the person's resources (Folkman

et al., 1986). 'Coping' is an umbrella term used to describe strategies, tactics, responses, cognitions, or behaviours that can be noticed (either by introspection or through observation) and could include internal events or overt actions that are appraised as demanding (Schwarzer & Schwarzer, 1996). Coping is also seen as the continuously changing, cyclical and iterative, interactional processes of emotional, cognitive and behavioural efforts that individuals make, the strategies and tactics they employ, and their responses to manage specific internal or external demands that arise in response to stressors. These stressors can be appraised as threatening, posing harm or loss, beneficial, or challenges to a person's resources (past, present, or future) (adjusted from Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The transactional model of coping

Folkman and Lazarus (1985) and Lazarus (1991) explain the transactional model of coping as an interaction between the person and environment that is very dynamic and highly fluid (in Goh et al., 2010). The central tenet of this model is that a potentially stressful event needs to be perceived to trigger appraisal, after which an individual assesses the stressor to be a potential benefit, irrelevant, or stressful. Following the primary appraisal as stressful, the individual will follow the secondary appraisal process, which takes the individual through a global assessment of their coping resources and their ability to react to the situation. After that, the outcome provides essential feedback as to whether further actions are required (Goh et al., 2010), which refers to how good the appraisal and chosen coping mechanism were in leading to a favourable outcome.

The framework considers the experience of stress resulting from the interaction between the stressor and the individual's perception of control over the stressor. This effect (positive or negative) will, in turn, determine the choice of coping strategy utilised (Boekaerts, 2002). The nature of the stressor and the appraisal thereof in evaluating the type of coping strategies employed and the coping resources available, play a role in this framework. The nature of stressors in this sample has been considered (Engelbrecht, 2020), but for this article, we were most interested in describing the coping aspect of the framework (i.e. coping resources and strategies).

Coping resources

Before an individual can decide if an encounter is taxing or exceeding their resources, a person–environment measure is implemented subconsciously, subtracting the demands from the available resources of the individual (Folkman, 1982). Suppose there are fewer coping resources than demands: In that case, the situation is perceived as stressful and potentially harmful, challenging, or threatening, and a coping strategy is chosen to be employed. Hammer et al. (1998) describe coping resources as a psychological capacity inherent to a person, which enables them to manage stressors more effectively and subsequently experience fewer symptoms. Coping resources could include: cognitive resources (capabilities to maintain a positive sense of self-worth, a positive outlook, and optimism); social resources (social networks and support in times of stress); emotional

resources (individuals' acceptance and expression of emotional responses to alleviate long-term negative consequences of stress); spiritual resources (guided by values derived from religious, family or cultural traditions which define their meaning of the stressful event); or physical resources (interacting with health-promoting behaviours to increase physical well-being and decrease negative responses to stress), (Hammer et al., 1998). The availability of these coping resources impacts the choice of coping strategy employed (Lazarus, 1984; Van den Brande et al., 2016).

Coping strategies

Coping strategies are defined as different strategies individuals use to manage stressful encounters and the accompanying, associated distress (Folkman, 2011). When an encounter is appraised as stressful, individuals initiate their available coping resources and choose an appropriate coping strategy in the hopes of alleviating the discomfort, addressing the issue, or challenging themselves. Accordingly, coping strategies can be categorised into two main types: (1) *Problem-focused coping* refers to the attempt to alter the stressor itself, such as finding a solution to a problem and developing a plan-of-action; and (2) *Emotion-focused coping*, which refers to the ways an individuals accommodate themselves to alleviate the feeling of stress, which range from distraction, avoidance, denial, venting, acceptance, focusing on the positive side to finding a more profound meaning from the situation (Folkman 1982, 2011; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Later, Carver et al. (1989) introduced *avoidance coping*, which refers to person- or task-orientated strategies that attempt to avoid the problem, encounter, or emotion elicited altogether. Coping strategies are expanding, as the sensitivity and complexities of measuring and classifying these coping strategies are evolving (Dewe et al., 2017).

Effectiveness of coping

The effectiveness of coping remains one of the most challenging concepts in coping research, as the effectiveness thereof is contextual. No coping strategy can be viewed as essentially positive or negative; some may be more effective in some situations than in others (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). An understanding of coping effectiveness can be generalised under two headings. Firstly, the coping outcome, which views effectiveness in the sense of goals that are achieved through the applied coping strategy. Secondly, the effectiveness of coping can be measured by the *goodness-of-fit* approach, which looks at the process rather than the outcome (Dewe et al., 2017). Such an approach suggests that the effectiveness of a coping strategy concerns the appropriateness of the appraisal the individual made, and how good the chosen coping strategy is in leading to a favourable outcome. Presumably, choosing a coping strategy that fits their appraisal and gains control over the tasks will have a more effective outcome (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

Research Methodology

Research approach and strategies

The study is part of a larger mixed-methods project known as StudyWell: Student Well-Being and Success. The focus of the project is on the development and validation of a comprehensive model of student well-being. It is necessary to scientifically explore student experiences in the South African HEI context, then develop and validate culturally sensitive instruments to inform and apply this model. This model could be used to determine essential predictors and moderators of student well-being, including coping strategies of students.

The current study reports on the qualitative exploration of coping as part of the broader student well-being model. The qualitative approach generated context-specific evidence, which enables researchers to determine the perceptions and meanings that the phenomena might have for participants in greater depth (Tracy, 2020). An exploratory interpretive descriptive approach (Thorne, 2016) was used. Such an approach explored first-year students' coping experiences at university. The researchers considered participants' explanations as relative, which meant their subjective interpretations of the world they live and study in was respected (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researchers accessed elaborate explanations from participants through the collection of data from different methods and analytical strategies (Tracy, 2020).

Participants, sampling and ethics

The present study focused on accessing information from students who: studied full-time, were first-year students for the first time, studying towards an undergraduate degree at a South African university, and were comfortable to talk in English for data collection (translators were available). Participants were purposefully selected using voluntary sampling through appropriate gatekeepers in line with ethics permissions and research conduct (ethical number: NWU-HS-2014-0165). Additional participants were recruited through snowball sampling. Ten first-year students participated in the study. All participants were welcomed to participate, and no limitations were set on gender, ethnicity, home language, living conditions, year of birth, and relationship status (Boehnke et al., 2011). The participants' included three males and seven females of whom five were African, and five were Caucasian. Six of the participants indicated their home language as Afrikaans, whereas three participants spoke Setswana, and one was English speaking. All participants were between 19 and 22 years of age at the time of data collection. Five participants lived off-campus and were not part of a town residence club. Four stayed off-campus, and formed part of a town residence club and one participant lived in an on-campus dormitory. As participation was voluntary and withdrawal carried no consequence, students who wanted to participate did so regardless of their demographic characteristics.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected in two distinct phases, each with its specific analysis techniques. Firstly, the Mmogo-method® (Roos 2016) was used. This visual, participatory method that explores personal and group experiences related to a specified research question. Participants were asked to build a model in response to the question: "*Tell us something about your experiences of being a student at the university.*" The data collection commenced with opening the group session with participants seated around a large table, signing informed consent, and providing their biographical information. Next, researchers clarified the research objectives and provided the building materials, i.e. malleable clay, beads and grass stalks and a material cloth. Participants were allowed time to build a model or interpretation of the research question using any or all materials provided. Afterwards, voluntary discussions followed on the individual models presented. The group discussions offered additional insights to participants own or each other's explanations. Audio (explanations and discussion elicited by the built models) and visual data (photos of the models) were recorded, and audio data transcribed for further analysis. A debriefing session followed to provide an opportunity for participants to settle emotions that may have been evoked during the process. Nine students participated in the Mmogo-method®.

After completing the Mmogo-method®, information was co-analysed by participants using interactive qualitative analysis (IQA) (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004). During the co-analysis, participants indicated that coping with university-related stressors was a prominent concern. A second data collection phase followed using face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth individual interviews (conducted at a later time). The interviews accessed additional insights into participants' coping strategies. Three of the Mmogo-method® participants agreed to follow-up interviews, while one additional participant was recruited. The individual interviews were conducted to provide detailed explanations through flexible, probing and clarifying questions (Patton, 2015) until the phenomenon was represented (Thorne, 2016). An open-ended question led the interview: "*Tell me about your experience when starting university,*" with additional probe questions on coping. Interview data were transcribed verbatim, translated into English where needed, and imported into ATLAS.ti version 8 with the Mmogo-method® data. The data were analysed using thematic data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As such, thematic analysis was applied through familiarisation with the data (reading and re-reading and noting key ideas); initial open coding, followed by selective coding; searching for patterns or themes; and reviewing and refining generated themes through meaningful links to the research question. Analyses were conducted in a group format to ensure quality and rigour and minimise researcher bias through multiple coders in the coding process (Friese, 2019; Tracy, 2020).

Selected data examples for this article include explanations from both the Mmogo-method® and interviews analysed. The initial purpose of the Mmogo-method® was to explore students' first-year experience (FYE) in general. The models that participants created (i.e. visual data) were expressions of their overall experiences (which extend

outside the scope of the current article). The explanations elicited from the discussion of the models and the interviews provided the researchers with text-data form conversations generated during both data collection phases.

Trustworthiness

Tracy's (2010) eight criteria for excellent qualitative research directed the quality of the present study. These were: having a worthy topic (relevant, timely, significant, interesting); obtaining rich rigour through sufficient and valid data; transferability of the findings; the sincerity of the researchers; the credibility of research, gaining resonance, and ensuring a significant contribution. In the current study, trustworthiness was ensured through researching a necessary and emerging topic and identifying clear boundaries for participation to gather applicable data. Using multiple data collection and analysis methods ensured triangulation, while researcher bias was reduced. Recording the methods and procedures ensured the transferability of the study (Morse, 2018; Tracy 2020). However, replicating results may differ as participants' experiences are subjective, and the meaning thereof socially constructed. Replication could be achieved by ensuring a detailed description of the process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Further, the research aims to contribute to the conceptual, theoretical, practical, moral, or methodological implications for first-year students, South African HEIs and FYE literature. Lastly, procedural, situational, and cultural ethics of this research study were taken into consideration. The researchers attended ethics and methodological training, while meaningful coherence was facilitated with appropriate literature, research questions, and interpretations of findings to ensure quality data were obtained.

Integrated Findings

Three[1] main themes emerged to understand first-year students' coping experiences as illustrated by participant explanations from both the Mmogo-method® and interviews, i.e.: (i) the availability and access of coping resources; (ii) coping strategies students rely on to manage their stressors at university; and (iii) effectiveness of coping strategies chosen by first-year students at university.

Once a stressful experience was encountered, appraised, and categorised, participants' coping resource availability was considered in terms of availability, accessibility, and nature (see Table 1).

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[1] The original dissertation that informs the current article (Engelbrecht, 2020), included a fourth theme on the nature and domains of stressors. Such findings align with extant literature that consider the challenges first-year students experience in transition to university (cf. Upcraft et al, 2005; Nelson et al., 2006). The domains of stressors were deemed to fall outside the scope of the current article, which more narrowly describes coping. Interested readers are referred to the original dissertation.

Table 1: Theme 1 – The availability, access to and nature of coping resources for students

Sub-themes	Formulated Meanings
Availability and access to coping resources	*Available/static/not used*: Identifying a resource as available yet not necessarily utilised in order to manage the stressor.
	Accessed/processed/used: A resource is available and accessed in order to cope with a stressor, which leads to a coping process/strategy.
Nature of coping resources	*Internal (inside a person)*: Resources found within a person which could alleviate stress, such as personal resources.
	External (outside of a person): Resources found outside of a person, such as social support in terms of informational, instrumental, and emotional support.

Students could choose to assess resources to which they had access or were available to them, e.g. internally, or externally as coping resources. Moreover, they could use these coping resources to manage stressful encounters or not. Some internal resources and personal resources reported, included: *"Let me help myself so that I can do better",* and: *"Also, drawing energy that is positive."* External resources included social support through emotional, informational or instrumental support to alleviate stress. Examples of emotional support were represented more frequently by the participants: *"Yes, and then my boyfriend, he is very supportive,"* and:

> *I think what made it a lot easier for me coming to university is the fact that I live in an apartment with my brother so that feeling of homesickness was kind of avoided in a sense by the fact that he was there and that I was not in a hostel or something like that.*

Some participants reported utilising social support for instrumental reasons, i.e. in order to find assistance to manage the stressor they are faced with: *"Let me ask my lecturer, let me go to facilitation, let me help myself so that I can do better,"* and: *"Having a friend when I don't understand, I will ask them: 'Can you please explain this to me?', and then he will just explain it to me, so definitely that is nice to have a friend."*

After the coping resources were identified, first-year students selected a coping strategy to deal with the stressors they experienced, presented in Table 2. The current study reports on three main coping strategies, i.e. the experiences and exposure to past stressors to find solutions based on experiences; supportive practices to balance emotions; and create distance to gain perspective and understanding.

Table 2: Theme 2 – Coping strategies students rely on to manage their stressors at university

Sub-themes	Formulated Meanings
Experiences and exposure of past stressors to find solutions	*Utilising university and hostel resources*: Utilising functions and systems of the university and hostels to manage a stressor such as Reception & Orientation (R&O) programmes to help the adjustment to university.
	Learning from past experiences: Learning from previous experiences from similar situations and using tried and tested methods to cope with the stressor
	Eliminating other activities: Cutting down on activities that are taking up most of one's time, to focus on the stressor.
	Time orientated: Managing time in order to relieve stress by making diary entries, lists, and plan-of-actions.
	Work harder: Just jumping in and working harder and not giving up when times get tough.
	Solution-focused: Finding a proactive way of solving the problem.
	Revision/facilitation/group studying: Revising of work, going to facilitation sessions, and group study, to alleviate academic strain.
	Seeking informational support: Seeking and gaining more information in order to understand the stressor or situation.
	Seeking instrumental support: Seeking support for academic reasons, from lecturers, friends, and family in order to help with academics.
Supportive practices to balance emotions	*Journalling*: Journalling emotions in order to re-evaluate the situation and consider different perspectives.
	Motivation: Motivating self through keeping the goal in mind and staying positive in tough times.
	Surrounding oneself with positivity: Ensuring you surround yourself with positivity from friends and family.
	Living a balanced life: Maintaining a balanced lifestyle by eating healthy and sleeping enough in order to cope with stressors and challenges of life/studies.
	Religious and spiritual practices: Practising religious beliefs or spiritual practices in order to cope with the stressor/challenge, e.g. prayer, reflection.
	Seeking emotional support: Seeking emotional support from lecturers, friends, and family in order to help with a stressor.
Distancing, perspective and understanding	*Distractions*: Distracting self and not dealing with the stressor such as smoking, watching series, or partying.
	Accepting outcome: Acceptance of fate of the challenges or ignoring the stressor.

Participants reported experiencing similar situations before, which assisted them in finding a way to manage stressors. For example, through being more time-orientated by planning, scheduling, and diarising timelines, as well as working harder to push through and get the job done, they dealt with time constraints and workload pressure: *"Sometimes, it is best if you have a list of things you need to do and start from the top and start doing it"*, and *"Like I know that if you want to get something in life, it is not easy, you can't take short ways … if you want to get out from that hole or whatever you are facing, you need to manage to go and follow your dreams as I did."* Others also reported relying on:

> *… that mentality of when things get tough you drop your head, and you start swinging, and now talking about it, it sounds like the mentality I had when things got tough I just started swinging and hoped it would be fine in the end, I just did it.*

Other participants reported supportive practices they used to balance their emotions and alleviate stressful situations. Examples included having the motivation to carry on, and participating in religious practices and prayer: *"I like to go to church because it is where I find myself, I find peace for my mind, and I get to rest."* Other examples included:

> *Then if the motivation is your thing, then get it! Anything that is going to help you, your mindset, to help you get up in the mornings help you; those are also my things, let's put those motivations on the wall.*

> *Uhm, I feel, if it wasn't for getting down on your knees and being like: 'Okay, I need help, and I need God to be in my life right now', I don't know how to explain it to you. I know it really helps me whenever I feel down or whenever I feel 'Okay, all my energy is gone', then I know where to get it from.*

Some participants preferred to avoid the stressors they face and distance themselves through distractions: *"Soos my vriende het nogals baie gehelp, soos dit was nogals lekker gewees ek het baie uitgekom en my kop van alles afgehaal"* [Like my friends helped a lot, like it was fun, I went out a lot and cleared my head from everything], and *"Okay, mainly at the moment now it's me listening to music and like drawing more."*

Finally, in some instances, re-appraisal took place after a coping strategy was chosen, where a participant could re-evaluate their perceived stressor and choose a different strategy altogether. However, the effects or outcome of a strategy could only be evaluated after implementation thereof. Some outcomes participants reported are noted in Table 3.

Outcomes included that it turned out to be a good thing at the end, growing up and becoming more mature, learning more about oneself and others, and having a sense of accomplishment in the aftermath:

> *So, I knew that this subject I have to work hard in, and in the end, it paid off.*

> *One thing I came to realise from my first year to my second year … I'm a very serious person, and things need to be very formal, getting to know myself in terms of how much of an introvert I am and also learning patience.*

> *The University for me is very involved and multi-cultural and multi-racial and different languages and different people which is really nice because you get to know a lot of people who are different*

Table 3: Theme 3 – Effectiveness of coping strategies chosen by students at university

Sub-themes	Formulated Meanings
Sense of accomplishment and growth	*Learning more about self and others*: Learning more about self and how you interact with others through self-insight.
	Good thing in the end: A feeling, in hindsight, that the stressor was a good challenge and looking at the positive side thereof.
	Sense of accomplishments: A sense of accomplishment when a stressor has been managed and having peace of mind afterwards.
	Matured/grown-up: Growing up and maturing in order to take care of oneself and becoming more independent.
	Better relationships: Forming a better relationship with friends and family, in the aftermath of the stressor.
	Proving them wrong: A sense of proving the people that doubted you wrong when you faced and persevered with the challenge.
Learn from experiences & applying change	*Helping others to not go through a similar situation*: Learning from stressors to advise others how to cope in a similar situation.
	Managing a similar situation better in the future: Learning from experience to gain skills to handle a similar situation better in the future.
	Start saying 'no': Learning when to say no to distractions, bad choices, and people.
	Negative emotions: The aftermath of a coping strategy results in a feeling of anger, irritability, grumpiness, and annoyance.
Supported transition	*Making university adjustment easier*: The challenge or stressor undergone made adjustments and transition to university easier.
	Increase academic knowledge: Gaining more academic knowledge through managing challenges.

and you get to see how they work and how they are and like you try and incorporate that into who you are and try to blend with them.

I've grown a lot. In my first year, I had to deal with a lot of responsibilities, more than you would have in school. And, uh, I've also learned, things are not always as it seems, and you have to make it for yourself.

Some adverse outcomes included:

When you sleep less, you are tired. Ja [yes], I think the worst thing you tend to get very grumpy, and that eventually has an impact on how you treat people as well, and that leads to people thinking that you are just a miserable person in general, which is not great.

Discussion

This study aimed to use a qualitative exploratory strategy to gain a deeper understanding of South African first-year students' coping in the context of challenges they face during their first year at university. The discussion below integrates and positions the current findings on coping resources students have access to and rely on, the strategies first-year students use to cope, as well as relating the effectiveness of coping with university demands.

Coping resources

Coping resources could be cognitive,, social,, emotional,, spiritual,, and physical resources available (Coetzee & Estherhuizen, 2010). Coping resources are described as the psychological capacity inherent in a person when stressors are managed more effectively (Hammer et al., 1998). Resources could be internal, personal, or external to a person. Personal resources, as mentioned by Xanthopoulou et al. (2007), include optimism, mastery, self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-determination, locus of control, and self-insight. Whereas external resources could be social support through instrumental, informational, and emotional reasons to cope with a stressor. Social support, as a resource, could be utilised by students to seek assistance and support from others to manage a situation more effectively (Bouteyre et al., 2006). The current study illustrated similar resources, though participants reported more significant reliance on social resources, possibly related to supportive relationships that are embedded within students' support systems.

Coping strategies

Extensive research has been done on coping (Dewe et al., 2017; Folkman, 1982; Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). The main findings of the present study agree with previous research with some nuanced differences of expression: experiences and exposure of past stressors to find solutions, supportive practices to balance emotions, and distancing, perspective, and understanding thereof (Carver et al., 1989; Endler & Parker, 1990; Folkman & Lazarus, 1988).

Some of the most commonly known coping strategies mentioned in the literature include eliminating other activities in order to focus on the stressor; being more time-orientated through planning and scheduling; being solution-oriented and task-driven; seeking more information to understand the stressor better; seeking instrumental support for academic reasons from lecturers, friends, family, and the university systems; getting the motivation to alleviate stress; surrounding oneself with positive energy; seeking emotional support from friends and family; distractions from the stressor; accepting the fate of the inability to change the situation; mentally disengaging from the stressor; and religious practices and prayer (Carver et al., 1989; Folkman, 1982; Folkman, 2011; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Pargament et al., 2011).

Some emerged strategies reported learning from past experiences to find a previously identified effective solution, or just working harder and pushing through. Other students preferred to rely on the university and accommodation systems to manage their academic

stress through facilitation, study groups, or dormitory programmes promoting university adjustment. Additional strategies included journalling emotions to gain new perspectives and living a balanced lifestyle through eating healthy, exercising, and sleeping enough, to alleviate stress.

Coping effectiveness

The effectiveness of an implemented coping strategy is subjective. While Zeidner and Saklofshe (1996) explain coping effectiveness in terms of goals reached, Dewe et al. (2017) instead explain effectiveness as to how good the appraisal and chosen coping strategy are in leading to a favourable outcome. Folkman and Moskowitz (2004) argue that the effectiveness of a coping outcome is the opportunity for personal control, and to gain control over tasks will result in a more effective outcome. Although the effectiveness of the outcome of coping is individualistic and subjective, most participants reported to gain some sense of accomplishment, learning experiences, maturing, and growing relationships, despite some negative emotions.

In conclusion, the first-year student experiences of their coping may be incorporated into the HEI systems to measure student attrition and enhance overall student well-being (Strage & Sorkhabi, 2016). Also, this could contribute to the implementation of more effective management, resource structures, information about the FYE within the HEI and adopting new techniques in supporting students' coping (Nyar & Mosebua, 2018).

Limitations and Recommendations

The present study has a limited sample particular to the participating university campus. As such, the findings' generalisation is limited. The sample consisted mostly of female, Afrikaans-speaking individuals, and other students from different backgrounds may cope with university transitions differently. Though the sample is small, the value and nature of in-depth qualitative research (Morse, 2018), offers preliminary insights of what first-year students may experience when coping with the demands and stressors of their first-year experiences. Future research should, however, acquire a more representative sample that resonates more broadly with the multi-cultural HEI setting in South Africa.

The recommendations of this study focus on the individual, the South African HEI, and future research. Firstly, the research could inform first-year students' experiences, and challenges faced at university and create awareness on students' coping strategies that yield more effective outcomes that first-year students and those working with first-year students may find valuable. For the HEI, these findings could contribute to knowledge creation on FYE and associated challenges. The current study explored possible coping resources which could be available to assist students and support HEIs in managing anticipated stressors. Lastly, the study provides nuanced insights into literature in terms of first-year experiences and first-year students' coping strategies that should consider that coping may extend beyond the one-size-does-not-fit-all approaches. There seem to be strategies and awareness of resources that could, in general, be helpful, that future research could establish. Finally, the current study could be replicated at other HEIs for comparative results.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Business Education Learners in the Further Education and Training Phase: Towards the Development of a South African Readiness Model to Strengthen Learners' Academic Performance

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Abstract

African and coloured students continue to perform poorly both at public schools and institutions of higher learning. There are two main reasons for their weak performance – a lack of literacy and numeracy skills, and being under-prepared. This article reports on two findings of a study that was conducted at two high schools in the Western Cape Province. The one high school was a quintile 1, and the other a quintile 4 school. The study aimed to implement intervention strategies over a three-year period for Grade 10 to 12 learners in the business-related subjects, Accounting, Business Studies, and Economics. The objective was to develop a readiness model that public schools in South African could use to overcome the challenges so that learners could be equipped with a strong foundation in their primary schooling. The study was situated within a critical education science paradigm and used a critical participatory action research design. Two groups of 30 learners formed the main research participants. Interventions strategies were implemented with the learners when they were in Grade 10 in 2017, in Grade 11 in 2018, and in Grade 12 in 2019. The results show that both groups of learners did not have an adequate rating of 50% and more subject content knowledge and skills when they arrived in Grade 10 in 2017 in all three subjects, and they did not manage to obtain a 50% or more rating in the three subjects in their final examinations at the end of Grade 12 in 2019. Based on the four key principles of the readiness model, recommendations are proposed that would assist public schools to develop and support the learners during the early childhood and foundation phase so that a solid foundation in literacy and numeracy skills could be laid.

Keywords

academic performance; high school; learners; readiness model

Introduction

The effects of South Africa's history of apartheid are still prevalent today, 26 years after democracy. The result is low throughput and high drop-out rates at public schools and post-school institutions for African and coloured students. Mlachila and Moeletsi (2019), and

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Spaull and Kotze (2015), state that almost half of South Africa's learners drop out of school before completing secondary education, and about one-quarter of learners who do write the Grade 12 examination do not pass. For example, the Department of Basic Education (2017) reported that 1 186 011 Grade 1 learners enrolled in 2006, but only 629 155 learners registered for the Grade 12 final examination (NSC) in 2017. This is a drop-out rate of 46.9%. However, only 534 484 learners wrote the Grade 12 examination (Department of Basic Education, 2017), which means that the 'actual' drop-out rate is 54.9%. We agree with Spaull (2019) who argues that education ministers need to accept that high drop-out rates and underperformance in Grade 12 are imbedded in weak foundations in primary schools, and specifically in the early childhood development and foundation phases.

In addition to the learners' weak foundation, is the challenge of progression. The policy on progression has been applicable in the General Education and Training (GET) phase since Curriculum 2005 and has been applied to the Further Education and Training (FET) phase since 2013 (Department of Basic Education, 2017). The policy states that a learner may only be retained once in the FET phase to prevent the learner from spending more than four years in a phase (Department of Basic Education, 2017). The rationale behind the progression policy was to minimise the high drop-out rate and maximise school retention while providing additional support to these learners (Polity, 2019). However, for 2017, there were 107 430 progressed learners, of which 34 011 wrote all seven subjects and only 18 751 passed the NSC examination (Department of Basic Education, 2017), equating to 55.1%. The progression policy implications are that the gaps between what the learners do know and should know (subject content knowledge and required skills) become increasingly wider. As learners progressed to the next grade, they fall further and further behind in the curriculum, making remediation almost impossible in higher grades as these learning gaps were not addressed and became learning deficits, which lead to failure and dropping out (Spaull, 2013).

A further challenge lies in the business-related subjects: Accounting, Business Studies and Economics. Many learners find these subjects challenging, and opt for 'easier subjects' or drop out of school completely (Spaull, 2013). The circle continues in that the few students who pass their Grade 12 with university endorsement find the demands of the business disciplines (Accounting, Business Studies and Economics) challenging at university. The result is that some of them take much longer to complete a three-year BCom degree, for example, while some drop out or are academically excluded due to poor academic performance. The sad reality is that these students become part of the high attrition rate of higher education, and more worrisome, they become part of the unemployment statistic and a liability to the government.

Therefore, intervention strategies to address these challenges in the early childhood and foundation phase are urgently needed as that is where the problem arises, and consequently, that is the area were interventions and academic support should be provided. This article reports on two findings of a study that was conducted at two high schools in the Western Cape Province. The study aimed to implement intervention strategies over a three-year period for learners who were in Grades 10 to 12, from 2017 to 2019. The objective was to develop a readiness model that public schools in South African could use to overcome the

challenges so that learners could be equipped with a strong foundation in their primary schooling, which should be built on throughout their secondary schooling, so that they will have the necessary subject content knowledge and skills at the end of Grade 12 and be ready for further studies.

We proceed by discussing relevant literature about the learners' weak foundation and underperformance, as well as the conceptual framework that was used in the study. We then discuss the research approach and research design, the research sites and the research participants. This is followed by a brief explanation of the data collection methods and how the data were analysed. Thereafter, the learner participants' results are presented and discussed, and we conclude the article with policy considerations and recommendations, as well as areas for further research.

The Lack of Literacy and Numeracy Skills

A lack of literacy skills is a major challenge in both the public primary and high schools in South Africa and is one of the most important reasons for the learners' underperformance. South Africa was the lowest-performing country (mean score of 320) out of 50 countries in the 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (Howie et al., 2017). The study showed that 78% of South African Grade 4 learners could not read for meaning in any language (all 11 languages were assessed); in other words, they could not "focus on and retrieve explicitly stated information, interpret and integrate ideas and information; and evaluate and critique content and textual elements" (Howie et al., 2017). This means that learners could not understand what they were reading. The percentage in the United Kingdom was 3%. On the PIRLS scale, approximately 40 score points are equal to a year's schooling. The implication is that South African learners' may be six years behind the top-performing countries' learners (Howie et al., 2017).

The lack of basic literacy skills combined with a poor grasp of a second language (English) further constrains their ability to master literacy skills in the transition to a second language from Grade 4 (the school's language policy is that learners are taught in their first language until Grade 3, and must be taught in English from Grade 4 onwards). As a result, their struggle to read for meaning or comprehend the curriculum is worsened.

Moreover, early numeracy skills are equally important for learners' mathematics learning at school. However, not many African and coloured learners have opportunities to learn and practice early numeracy skills. Hence, these learners perform poorly at the beginning of primary school and continuously perform poorly in Mathematics throughout their schooling career (Spaull & Kotze, 2015). An international study has shown that South Africa has the poorest performance when compared to other middle-income countries and low-income African countries that participate in assessments, particularly in Mathematics (Centre for Development and Enterprise, 2013). As such, it is too late to correct a lack of literacy and numeracy skills in Grade 12. These skills should be developed from Grade R onwards. For Accounting, Business Studies, and Economics, mathematical ability and reading with comprehension are paramount for abstract thinking and problem-solving (Spaull & Kotze, 2015).

Under-Preparedness of Learners

The consequence of poor-quality early childhood development and foundation phase education, together with progression, is that the opportunity to reduce learning gaps and develop the potential of learners, irrespective of their home language and background, is lost (Equal Education, 2017; Spaull & Kotze, 2015). Learners acquire learning deficits in the early grades, which continues until they reach Grade 12, resulting in under-prepared learners. Hence, the overinvestment when the learners are in Grade 12 will not have the desired outcomes because the largest investment is needed in the early school years (Equal Education, 2017; Spaull & Kotze, 2015).

Also, the Diagnostic Report of the Department of Basic Education (2016) highlights the following areas of concern in the NSC examination: Grade 12 learners' lack of independent or creative thought; their inability to cope with analytical, evaluative and problem-solving type questions; and the poor language skills of a vast majority who sat for the examination. These are the skills (in addition to subject-specific knowledge) that higher education institutions require prospective students to have when they are admitted to a diploma or degree programme.

Moreover, there is a discrepancy between the pass requirements at school and university. It is generally known that learners only need 30% to pass at school, but at university, they need 50%. In a study of exploring youth transitions, the findings suggested that while many learners are being stuck in the education pipeline, others are exiting a schooling system that does not prepare them to enter either higher education or the labour market (Isdale et al., 2018). Chetty and Pather (2015) share a similar sentiment; they state that large gaps exist in students' subject content knowledge and skills, which are preventing them from entering and/or succeeding in higher education.

The under-preparedness of first-time entering students results in an inability to adapt to unfamiliar pedagogies and new and challenging assessment requirements, preparing notes, and dealing with a heavy workload, applying effective study techniques, and planning and time management skills, and to cope without family support (Mahlangu & Fraser, 2017; Nyamupangedengu, 2017). The learners' inability to adapt to the demands of higher education is referred to as the 'articulation gap' and has been identified as a key factor for student failure and drop out, especially for students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds (Council on Higher Education, 2016). It is for this reason that Morrow (2009) argues that widening formal access to higher education studies does not guarantee meaningful social and academic engagement, levels of retention and/or attainment of success in higher education studies. Thus, according to Morrow, public schooling is not providing learners with epistemological access.

Readiness Models Reviewed

Since the study concerns the readiness of Grade 12 learners for university study, three readiness model were reviewed. The first readiness model reviewed was that of Byrd and MacDonald (2005). Byrd and MacDonald (2005) explored the college readiness of first-generation students (older than 25) to attend a university via a two-year community

college in America. They examined the preparedness of students entering the college through the identification of three categories, namely skills and abilities, background factors, and non-traditional student self-concept. The first category, skills and abilities, include academic skills (reading, writing, mathematics, technology, communication and study skills), time-management, goal focus and self-advocacy skills. The second category, background factors, identifies factors that influence a decision to enrol or prepare for university. Included in these factors are family factors, career influences, financial concerns and college preparation. The third category, non-traditional student self-concept, identifies participants' sense of identity as a university student and the understanding of the culture of a university. The main finding of this study was that university readiness is more complex than often acknowledged and that all these factors, abilities and skills are necessary to meet the demands of university study (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005).

The second readiness model was Lemmens' (2010) readiness and retention model. Lemmens (2010) focused on the readiness characteristics that South African students present upon entering the university and the contextual or environmental dimensions in which the readiness characteristics are located. Lemmens (2010) based his theoretical underpinnings for readiness for university education on various theories and models as well as psychological perspectives related to academic success. He constructed his readiness and retention model on the work of Conley (2007). Lemmens identified four dimensions of readiness characteristics: a contextual dimension (parental, socio-cultural and financial), a cognitive sub-dimension (skills and abilities, and academic preparedness), a non-cognitive sub-dimension (educational values, self-efficacy, target goal, beliefs and behaviours, and coping strategies) and lastly, a biological dimension (gender and race). The contextual dimension functions as the 'cradle' for the development of psycho-social and cognitive skills that are expressed in behaviour, thoughts and emotions (Bandura, 1986). The cognitive dimension, especially those related to academic achievement at high school, forms the base for the evaluation of cognitive ability (Lemmens, 2010). The non-cognitive dimension represents the expectations and values of students and their self-efficacy, judgements and goal orientations. The main findings of his study revealed that the readiness characteristics showed a direct relationship with academic success and intention to withdraw.

The third and last readiness model is that of Conley (2007; 2014). Conley organises the key areas necessary for HE readiness into four key components in what he refers to as a readiness theory model, namely cognitive strategies, acquiring key content (content knowledge), academic behaviours, and contextual knowledge and skills. To provide a functional representation of the key aspects of HE readiness, Conley stresses the fact that in practice these components are not mutually exclusive or perfectly nested as portrayed in the model, but that they interact and overlap with one another. Conley believes that the absence of any of these skills could lead to failure just as surely as deficiencies in reading, writing or mathematics could.

A commonality amongst the three models is the fact that all three included not only cognitive and academic skills but also contextual factors about the learners' socio-economic backgrounds and their abilities and attributes. Thus, they demonstrate that gaining an

education is a socially constructed process. As such, following Dewey (1916) and Vygotsky (1994), we argue that university readiness is based on a social constructivist approach. The learners, as the most important role-players in the learning process, need to be enabled and supported so that they will gain a solid subject knowledge and skills base, together with the 21st-century skills at the end of their high school career to build on and construct advanced knowledge at post-school institutions.

However, the contextual dimension that includes the learners' socio-economic backgrounds, the school context and parental circumstances and involvement, and the learners' socio-cultural factors, plays a fundamental role in the learners' academic achievement and university readiness. It was for this reason that some of the dimensions and categories of the three readiness models reviewed were combined to arrive at a simplified augmented readiness model for the South African public schooling context. We argue that a South African readiness model should start with the contextual dimension and sub-dimensions because these factors are the determinants for which school a learner will attend, what resources and opportunities a learner will have, and what the learners' orientation and attitude towards gaining an education will be. For example, if a learner's parents are unemployed or have low-paying jobs, that learner has no choice but to attend a quintile 1 or 2 school, compared to a learner whose parents are in a higher income bracket. The higher-income parents will have more choice and can afford to place their child in a quintile 4 or 5 school.

Moreover, the school context and environment of where some quintile 1 and 2 schools are situated are not conducive for successful learning to take place as they are surrounded by gangsterism, drug and alcohol abuse, and crime. These circumstances are the lived realities for many African and coloured learners in poor and rural communities, which could negatively influence the learners' aspirations, self-efficacy and attributes. Aspirations, self-efficacy, attributes and skills development are sub-dimensions of the ownership of the learning dimension, which is placed second in the augmented readiness model. The cognitive dimension is placed as the third category because the argument is that, if the factors in the preceding two dimensions were in place, the learners would be able to concentrate and engage cognitively. They would stand a better chance to construct new knowledge in order to gain the necessary subject content knowledge and skills in the different grades.

The last dimension in the augmented readiness model, content knowledge, places the focus on the school and its ability to provide for the learning needs of the learners. This dimension is dependent on the first dimension, because, for example, a quintile 1 or 2 school will not be able to provide the learners with all the academic support and resources they need, while a quintile 4 or 5 school will be able to do.

Consequently, the augmented readiness model started with the contextual dimension and ended with the content knowledge dimension to arrive at the learners' academic achievement in Grade 12, and was used as the study's conceptual framework.

Research Methodology

A critical education science paradigm was used as the research approach for the action research study. It was used because proponents of this paradigm state that educational researchers can find agency through critical theory to engage in a social inquiry that transforms the space of schools, the practice of teachers, the treatment of learners/students, the sharing of different knowledge and the improvement of society at large (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Ryoo & McLaren, 2010). Ryoo and McLaren (2010) explain that critical theory is concerned with empowering people to overcome social circumstances. Similarly, Carr and Kemmis (1986: 156) explain that "critical education science has the aim of transforming education; it is directed at educational change and allows for participation and collaboration by stakeholders who are involved in education".

Following a critical education science paradigm, the study used a critical participatory action research (CPAR) design because it was not only about implementing interventions over a three-year period, but the CPAR design embodied the goals and principles of a critical education science research approach (Kemmis et al., 2014).

The research sites included two high schools in the Western Cape Province. High School A was a quintile 1 school (no fee-paying school), situated in a semi-rural African community. High School B was a quintile 4 school (a fee-paying school), situated in a more affluent community.

The study had seven different participant groups, but for this article, only one participant group, the learners who were the main participant group, is used. Ten Grade 10 learners in each of the three business-related subjects, Accounting, Business Studies, and Economics were purposively selected in 2017 at each school, totalling 60 learners. The code distribution system (Code 1 = 0-30%, Code 2 = 30-39%, Code 3 = 40-49% and Code 5 = 50-59%) that teachers use for grading the formal assessments were used to select the learners. All the learners at School A were African, with isiXhosa as first language, while most of the learners at School B were coloured, with Afrikaans (24) and English (4) as first language, and 2 learners were African, with isiXhosa as first language.

As already mentioned, it was a three-year action research process with the selected sample of learners that started in 2017 when they were in Grade 10, continued in 2018 when they were in Grade 11, and ended in 2019 when they were in Grade 12. Two intervention strategies were implemented with the learners in 2017, three in 2018, and two in 2019. The interventions were in the form of extra academic support that focused on a specific section of the content that was already covered by the teachers during normal school time. The reason why the interventions were on content that had already been taught was to strengthen and reinforce that specific subject content knowledge and skills section for the learners. The interventions started in Grade 10 with basic subject content knowledge and thinking skills (e.g. factual recall, low-level comprehension and application) and moved cumulatively to the more complex application and problem-solving issues in Grade 11 and Grade 12.

The data collection methods for the learner participant group included a self-reflective questionnaire, pre-tests, interventions and post-tests in each of the three years, the learners'

academic results, two reflection forms and six focus group discussions. For this article, the learners' average marks in the March Control Test for the three years in each of the three subjects are presented and discussed, as well as their November examination results for the three years also in each of the three subjects. Both the test results and the examination results were analysed through Excel and SPSS software. The learners' answer to the question whether the interventions assisted them to understand the work better are also included in the discussion, as well as the reflections of the main researcher at the end of the data analysis process.

It should be noted that ethical clearance was obtained for the bigger study from the institution where the study was registered. Fundamental ethical principles such as obtaining the necessary permission for accessing the research sites, obtaining consent from participants, explaining the purpose of the study, and protecting and ensuring participants' confidentiality and anonymity were strictly adhered to.

Results and Discussion

The learner participants' average March Control tests, and their average November examination results over the three years in each of the three subjects at both schools are presented below.

Table 1: March Control Test average marks in percentages: 2017–2019

Subject	School A: Learners' average marks in percentages			School B: Learners' average marks in percentages		
	March control test 2017	March control test 2018	March control test 2019	March control test 2017	March control test 2018	March control test 2019
Accounting	24.2	32.3	34.0	35.8	42.2	41.9
Business Studies	36.8	27.0	38.0	45.2	46.0	54.4
Economics	31.1	41.0	25.0	29.3	75.3	62.8

Table 2: November examination average percentage marks: 2017–2019

Subject	School A: Learners' average marks in percentages			School B: Learners' average marks in percentages		
	Nov exams 2017	Nov exams 2018	Nov exams 2019	Nov exams 2017	Nov exams 2018	Nov exams 2019
Accounting	31.6	25.0	33.5	42.0	51.6	35.0
Business Studies	19.1	26.6	32.8	55.3	36.2	39.2
Economics	33.4	32.8	32.4	50.0	79.5	44.4

For School A, the learners' March Control Test average marks show that in all three cycles, they did not have an adequate rating of 4 (50% and above) required for entry-level subject content knowledge and skills in the three subjects for the grades they were

in at the beginning of each year. At School B, they did not have the required entry-level subject content knowledge and skills in Accounting and Economics in Grade 10 in 2017, in Accounting and Business Studies in Grade 11 in 2018, and Accounting in Grade 12 in 2019.

Table 1 also reflects that for School A, the learners' March Control Test average marks in Accounting gradually increased in 2018 and 2019, while their Business Studies and Economics average marks fluctuated. There was a decrease in their Business Studies' result in 2018, which increased again in 2019, but for Economics, it increased in 2018 and decreased in 2019 below than what it was in 2017 when they arrived in Grade 10.

For School B, the learners' March Control Test average marks increased gradually over the three years for Business Studies, but the marks fluctuated for Accounting and Economics. There was a significant mark increase for Economics in 2018, from 29.3% in 2017 to 75.3% at the beginning of 2018, but it decreased to 62.8% at the beginning of 2019.

Table 2 shows an increase in the 2017 November examination average percentage marks for Accounting and Economics for the learners in School A. However, their average marks for Business Studies decreased from 36.8% in the March Control Test in 2017 to 19.12% in the November examination. There was a similar decrease in their November examination average results in all three subjects in 2018 and for Accounting and Business Studies in 2019. For the learners of School B, the November examination average percentage marks show an increase in all three subjects in 2017, but a decrease in Business Studies in 2018, and a decrease in all three subjects in 2019.

The November 2019 examination average results reflected that the learners at both schools ended their Grade 12 year with a lack of adequate subject content knowledge and skills, as they could not achieve an adequate rating of 50% and above in any one of the three subjects. This happened despite the interventions that were conducted with the learners in 2017, 2018, and 2019. And while the learners indicated in the self-reflective question that the interventions helped them to understand the work covered better, overall, the interventions could not provide the learners with the necessary academic support that they needed. A conclusion in the bigger study was reached that the interventions were a drop in the ocean – too little, too late.

These results reflect three important factors. First, that the learners were not adequately prepared in the previous grades; that was why they did not have a solid knowledge and foundational base when they arrived in Grade 10. An argument could be made that the learners at School A were at a further disadvantaged because they were not first language speakers of English. However, the learners at School B received instruction in their first language, but they too, could not pass the three subjects with 50% and above in 2019.

The learners' results (and thus, their performance) provide evidence for the discussion in the introduction and the literature review sections; the two schools did not prepare the learners adequately and they could not catch up, despite having received extra academic support. As Spaull (2013) suggests, the learners' learning gaps were not addressed and became learning deficits that cannot be alleviated in the FET phase.

Second, the learners' results in the March Control tests were better than some of their November examination marks in 2017 and 2018, but for 2019, all their March Control Tests results were better than their November examination results. This means that the learners' subject content knowledge and skills decreased over the academic year instead of increased. It also illustrates that the learners did better when a smaller portion of the work was assessed (the March Control Test focuses only on the first term's worked covered) than when the whole year's work is assessed in the examinations in November. In the bigger study, the main researcher reflected on this finding and made the inference that, because of the weak foundation that both groups had, the learners needed academic and language support throughout the academic year and not only two or three interventions.

The third factor pertains to the fact that the learners' results at School B were better than the learners' results at School A, and that they managed to obtain an adequate rating of 50% and above in Business Studies in 2017, and in Accounting and Economics in 2018. Their performance could be ascribed to the fact that they were attending a quantile 4 school and that they received instruction in their first language, while the learners at School A were at a quantile 1 school and they had to learn in a second and/or additional language.

The two quantile schools draw attention to the conceptual framework's contextual dimension that includes the school context, and the learners' socio-economic backgrounds. However, even though the learners at School B performed better than the learners at School A, they too, did not achieve an adequate rating of a 50% and above in all three subjects at the end of 2019 when they were in Grade 12. An inference could be made that, because they did not have a solid knowledge and foundational base when they arrived in Grade 10 in 2017, and despite having managed to obtain an adequate rating of 50% in some of the subjects in 2017 and 2018, their foundation was not strong enough to carry them through in the November 2019 examination. The two findings and discussion underscore what Spaull and Kotze (2015) and Chetty and Pather (2015) advocate about learners in public high schools not having a strong foundational base to succeed and progress to higher education studies.

In the bigger study, the main researcher reflected on the findings and the discussions and interpretations thereof, and concluded that learners who attend quantile 1 schools need much more academic and language support in each year of schooling because of having to learn in a second or additional language, and their socio-economic backgrounds.

Conclusions, Policy Considerations and Areas for Further Research

The literature reviewed in the earlier sections indicated the importance of a solid and strong foundation that should be laid in literacy and numeracy in the first two phases of learners' primary school education. The learners' academic performance illustrated that a few interventions during the FET phase are not sufficient academic support. Consequently, the first principle in a South African readiness model is the development of the learners' language and Mathematics skills in the early childhood and foundation phases and throughout primary school level so that a good foundation is laid for the secondary

and higher education bands. There should be an investment in training language and Mathematics teachers who will know how to teach effectively.

The second principle in the readiness model is the provision of ongoing language and numeracy support from Grade 1 onwards, which means that public schools should be provided with the necessary resources needed to enable the learners to succeed. It is suggested that extra academic support should start at primary school level because of the systemic issues that still exist and that will not be resolved soon. The damage caused by apartheid was too deep and severe, and it will take many more years, resources and a stronger economic system – all of which South Africa does not have readily available (Chetty & Pather, 2015; Equal Education, 2017; Spaull & Kotze, 2015).

Principle number three requires a revision in the current school's language policy. Learners should be allowed to continue to learn and construct new knowledge in their first language throughout their schooling careers. The fact that the current language policy requires learners to switch to English from Grade 4 onwards contributes to their poor literacy and numeracy skills, and ultimately, to their under-preparedness and weak academic results. Equally important, the progression rule should be removed, because as the statistics in the introductory section illustrated, progressed learners' have a backlog in the subject content knowledge and skills that they cannot overcome, which eventually leads to failure and dropping out.

Principle number four is that regular assessments on specific sections of the work covered should be implemented, as well as a scaffolded approach in which the assessments should be linked and connected so that the assessments are gradually increased to cover more complex content and skills. Having a scaffolded approach will assist in preparing the learners adequately for the final examination at the end of each year. However, it should be noted that much more academic and language support should be provided to learners attending quintile 1 schools as the poverty margin is higher at quintile 1 schools than at quintile 4 schools.

Finally, future research should be conducted at public primary schools across the five quintiles as this study was conducted at a quintile 1 and quintile 4 high school. The four principles of the readiness model could be used to effect positive change for learners at these schools. Researching the three quintile primary schools and applying the readiness principles will also test the effectiveness of the principles, and could provide insight on how the readiness model could be improved.

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First-Year Student Transition at the University of the Free State during COVID-19: Challenges and Insights

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Abstract

First-year seminars and university induction programmes are embedded with academic and social skills required by students to transition into their first year of study. The first-year seminar at the University of the Free State is a credit-bearing module called UFS101, and is a prerequisite for degree completion. Students are assessed through summative assessment opportunities throughout the year. In 2020, the UFS101 module embarked on new territory by condensing the contact time for the first semester into a week-long summer school. Furthermore, the summer school was presented a week prior to the start of university, with repeat sessions during the first week of class, and during the March holiday. However, due to national lockdown regulations as a result of COVID-19, a part of the cohort had to self-study the content via an interactive online study guide. This created four distinct groups of students: those who attended face-to-face classes, some face-to-face classes and some self-study, self-study only, and students who could not access the content. In order to measure their transition into university, a questionnaire was distributed to the students, and the results were stratified according to one of the aforementioned categories. Unique similarities and differences were observed in the findings. The results depict that effective content design is at the heartbeat of student transition, but that other factors such as face-to-face interaction with students, and access to resources assist with the transition into university. This study highlighted the need to explore the challenges students experience within their first six months at university, and substantiates that this type of exploration should be routinely conducted to assist with the understanding and implementation of first-year student support.

Keywords

COVID-19; first-year seminar; summer school; student transition; UFS101

The First-Year Experience and First-Year Seminars

The first-year experience (FYE) is a concept broadly used to describe different academic and non-academic interventions that form part of the first year of study within higher education (Tinto & Goodshell, 1994). The purpose of a FYE is to assist first-year students' academic and social integration into higher education institutions (Evans & Morrison, 2011).

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The FYE includes induction programmes such as orientation, and co-curricular interventions such as mentoring, student societies, and first-year seminars (FYS) (Crissman, 2001).

A FYS, also typically referred to as a University 101 programme, was first introduced to students at the University of South Carolina (USC) in 1964 (Townsend, 1994). The purpose of an FYS is to act as a vehicle to successfully integrate students into the university environment, as well as embed academic and social skills to be successful within university (Fallows & Steven, 2000). The reason for having both the social and academic integration strategies within a FYE and FYS relates to the high drop-out rates associated with students feeling disconnected and overwhelmed in the university space (Yan & Sendall, 2016). This statement explicitly encompasses differences encountered in the preparedness of different groups of students on the premise of their context which includes their background, high school education and socio-economic status, and is supported by different studies (Thomsen, 2012; Ulriksen et al., 2017).

According to Ulriksen et al. (2017), in order to understand student drop out and the strategies that universities can implement, an explicit effort has to be made by each institution to identify this gap, and apply it within the university's FYS space to address the needs students experience that complicate student transition. This means that a FYS will differ between institutions and that they will include teaching a variety of skills related to academic requirements for a specific institution as well as basic social skills (Gellin, 2003). Gellin (2003) further argued that although these skills are vital for university success and employment, the body of knowledge is limited regarding the impact of different institutional initiatives related to student transition.

Several studies assessed the value of a FYS, and whether or not a FYS assists a student to transition into the university environment and found that the value of an FYS is to foster a sense of belonging and map the academic expectations for a first-year university student (Starke et al., 2001; Porter & Swing, 2006; Buyarski & Landis, 2014). Tinto (1987) argued that students with a lower rate of academic success or institutional engagement are more likely to drop out of university. The argument was supported by six potential causes of student departure out of universities namely: adjustment, goals, commitments, uncertainty, congruence, and isolation – all of which are related to either social or academic adjustment, or a combination of both. Upcraft et al., (2005) added to Tinto's (1987) argument by providing tangible evidence suggesting that student transition is much more than the skills taught, and that the value of a FYS lies in the improvement of persistence through the combination of both social and academic skills, and not just the academic skills alone (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989; Upcraft et al., 2005). This means that FYS programmes have a clear focus on student transition from a social and academic perspective, unique to each institution. Kuh (2008) positioned FYS programmes as High Impact Practices (HIPs).

Kuh (2008) further proved that FYS programmes form part of a vast school of thought about theoretical and practical interventions that promote student success. This school of thought is geared towards student success by enabling deeper learning, a concept known as "student engagement" (Kuh, 2008). HIPs are academic activities that have shown to

improve student engagement, retention and graduation rates when students participate in them. According to Myers et al. (2019), the larger goal of HIPs relates to better university outcomes and includes a knowledge of cultures, strong intellectual and practical skills, and a sense of civic responsibility and community engagement, amongst others.

UFS101 as the FYS at the University of the Free State

To date, the concept of a FYS has expanded globally and is presented in a variety of higher education landscapes outside the United States, including universities and colleges in Germany, Austria, France, Korea, Great Britain, Australia and South Africa (Barefoot, 2004). Within the context of South Africa, the aim of a FYS is to foster a sense of belonging or institutional connectedness, introduce campus services and teach the academic skills required to be successful at university (Young, 2016). Furthermore, the theoretical underpinnings of a FYS for student transition within the context of South Africa have been investigated, emphasising a dimension related to student agency and personal responsibility as part of the transition process (Stoller, 2019).

The mode of delivery is different between the varieties of FYS programmes within institutions of higher learning across the world. Some are positioned as workshops in the co-curricular space, while others formally form part of the curriculum as credit-bearing modules with specific passing criteria (Culver & Bowman, 2019). Although the concept of a FYS has only been in implementation for less than a decade in the context of South African higher education, the FYS at the University of the Free State (UFS) has been in full roll-out since 2012. The FYS at the UFS (UFS101) is a credit-bearing, year-long module. This module is required for degree completion by all students, across all disciplines, in their first academic year of study. It is implemented across two UFS campuses, namely the Bloemfontein (BFN) and QwaQwa (QQ) campuses. The number of students registered for this module has increased from 2 000 students in 2012 to more than 8 000 students in 2019.

One of the primary goals of this module is to equip students with the skills they require in order to successfully integrate socially and academically into the UFS environment. The basis of the pedagogical model used is rooted in student engagement, the needs of the UFS, and the strategic vision from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) in South Africa (Kuh, 2008, DHET, 2017). Since 2015, there have been two distinct focuses in UFS101 each year. The content presented in the first semester is exclusively positioned as a FYS, with the focus on transitioning students into university by teaching the academic skills vital for university success. The second semester, although still within the space of a FYS, is positioned around common intellectual experiences to prepare students for the workforce by introducing them to strategies for lifelong success, and graduate attributes such as an entrepreneurial mindset, and leadership skills. Challenges have been noted within the context of South African universities that extend beyond what a University 101 programme can teach, but by embedding student engagement strategies within the FYS, the institutional transition for the South African context is strengthened from an evidence-based perspective (Strydom et al., 2017).

Positioning the First Semester of UFS101 as a Summer School

In 2020, there was a strategic shift to position the first semester of UFS101 as a summer school within the UFS context. The rationale for this change was motivated by institutional evidence, illustrating that fast tracking the skills students require at university assists with their transition to university. Summer schools are common practices across the world (Achille et al., 2018; Vinas-Forcade et al., 2019). Summer schools typically fall into three categories, namely (a) summer exchange programme; (b) a module presented in a condensed version in order to repeat or lighten credit load during the semester; and (c) summer bridge course (Colombo & Falcone, 2016; Chastonay & Mpinga, 2018; Eblen-Zayas & Russell, 2019). The impact of summer school programmes in this context have been studied across various disciplines (Tomasko et al., 2016; Cooper et al., 2017).

Some of the more pronounced benefits of summer school programmes are preparation for university, as well as the skills needed to function in the world of work, and the introduction of non-technical skills pivotal to student success (Bir & Myrick, 2015). Another benefit of a summer school programme is the enabling of equitable education for students from diverse secondary schooling backgrounds through the teaching of academic skills required to be successful at university (Kretovics et al., 2005; Larsen et al., 2017). These benefits of a summer school align with the objectives of a FYS, and the relationship between these programmes has been studied extensively (Chism, 2008; Strayhorn, 2009; Hansen & Schmidt, 2017; Velazquez-Torres, 2018).

The change in UFS101 would fall into the category of a summer bridge course, but will be referred to as a summer school within the context of this study. This is because not all students would be taught the skills they need to be successful at university before they start with their academic course work – the reasoning is detailed in the paragraph below.

Due to the administrative load and logistics required to navigate the large cohort of UFS101 the attendees of the summer school were split into three groups, to respond to the observed registration patterns of first-year students. The students in group one were directed to attend both UFS101 and Orientation as both programmes were presented in the same week, before the start of the semester. Orientation in this instance refers to the institutional first-year orientation programme, intended to help students navigate university systems, introduce students to university life and promote resources students can engage with to assist their journey – such as library information sessions, art and cultural activities and student support structures. In group two, the faculties agreed to allot 10 hours in the timetable to UFS101, in the first week of the semester. Group three was scheduled to attend the summer school during the March break.

Table 1 is an overview and account for the three groups of the summer school that took place in 2020.

Table 1: Group allocation for the UFS101 2020 summer school

Group	Date	Student register by
Group 1	27–31 January 2020	23 January 2020
Group 2	3–8 February 2020	31 January 2020
Group 3	March break	Late registers

2020 and COVID-19

The disease COVID-19, was reported in sub-Saharan Africa on 29 January 2020, and the first reported case appeared in South Africa on 5 March 2020 (Osseni, 2020). Innovative solutions were created to share information with the South African public about the disease in the initial stages of the pandemic, but there remained a high degree of uncertainty of what the pandemic would mean for all sectors of the economy (Marivate & Combrink, 2020). To avoid a national disaster in the context of a highly infectious and poorly understood disease, the South African government initiated a state of disaster and a national lockdown that suspended all but the most critical economic functions (Amir Singh, 2020). This lockdown was introduced as a five-level strategy, each having an impact on certain sectors of the South African economy (Hatefi et al., 2020). As a result, institutions of higher learning shut down, and academic activities had to rapidly move online.

This shift had significant implications for the UFS101 module as the third group, which comprised a combination of students who registered late, and students who missed a few sessions in either group one or two, were supposed to attend the summer school during the March break and could not do so as a result of the national lockdown. The academic skills were presented in a workshop-like setting to groups one and two, and made available to students on Blackboard, the university's Learning Management System. For group three, the content had to quickly be converted to a low-tech self-study guide that students could download from Blackboard and work through offline. The UFS101 outcomes and assessments remained the same, but the teaching activities, mode of delivery and timelines had to be adapted for emergency remote teaching and learning. The move to emergency remote teaching and learning resulted in the decision to convert the content to a low-tech self-study guide, while the institution (and country) was working on ways to support students to participate in online learning.

The national lockdown's effect on the mode of delivery meant that there were now new groupings of students – students who had attended the summer school face-to-face, students who had attended some of the classes face-to-face and some self-study, students who engaged only with the self-study content, and students who did not attend face-to-face classes and could not access the self-study guide. Therefore, the aim of this study was to apply a qualitative inquiry on the UFS101 student population for 2020, related to their transition into university.

Methodology

An online questionnaire was administered from the 7 July 2020 to 7 August 2020 to students registered for UFS101. These quantitative questions were adapted from Morse (2010), and focused on student transition. The online questionnaire was low-tech (less than 1MB) and mobile friendly, however sampling error could have been caused through the exclusion of students who did not have access to a device, data or internet connectivity (Morse, 2010). All the quantitative questions were illustrated, tabulated and analysed using Python version 3.7.[1]

In the analysis, a descriptive examination was performed on the categorical variables to gain contextual perspectives between the different stratified groups. This approach is supported by the research of Boeije (2013), where it is noted that this type of research design contributes towards new knowledge of the investigation by laying a foundation for future research, while focusing on the fundamental description required in order to gain a generalised understanding of the study population (Boeije et al., 2013). The analysis of quantitative information assists with the identification of trends and defines different areas that require improvement, as illustrated in the recommendations of this study. The interpretive framework created by the paradigm draws from interpretivism (Henderson, 2011; Ricciardi, 2009). This methodology is desirable for addressing the proposed research questions in the context of large cohorts (Morse, 2010; Sreejesh & Mohapatra, 2014). Additionally, none of the findings of this study contain any identifiable characteristics or data linking the evidence to a specific student. Ethical clearance was granted under the scope of UFS-HSD2017/0206 in 2017 and remains active until September 2021, with the required amendments made to the protocol in order to conduct this research.

Results and Discussion

Participants

In Table 2, the distribution across faculty and campus of the 1 933 participants is illustrated. There are seven faculties on the BFN campus and four faculties on the QQ campus. In total, 38.6% of students on the BFN campus and 37.5% of students on the QQ campus completed the questionnaire.

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1   Python Packages: Pandas and Numpy

Table 2: Demographic distribution of the study population

Faculty	BFN (n = 1 587)	QQ (n = 346)
Faculty Economic & Mgnt Sciences	18.6%	11.3%
Faculty of Natural & Agri Sciences	19.3%	3.8%
Faculty of Theology	0.3%	0.0%
Faculty of Education	24.4%	61.6%
Faculty of Health Sciences	10.0%	0.0%
Faculty of Law	5.9%	0.0%
Faculty of the Humanities	21.4%	23.4%

In order to understand which mode of delivery the students belonged to, the information was stratified in four categories: face-to-face classes at the start of the year; some face-to-face classes and some self-study; no face-to-face classes and complete self-study, and could not access the UFSS101 content (Table 3).

Table 3: Different modes of delivery were experienced by students on the premise of the lockdown

Category	BFN (n = 1 587)	QQ (n = 346)
Face-to-face	60.6%	49.7%
Some face-to-face, some self-study	16.0%	26.9%
Self-study only	21.9%	19.9%
Could not access content	1.5%	3.5%

Measurement of challenges and transition

Students were asked what were the biggest challenges experienced within the first six months at university (Table 4), whether or not UFS101 assisted their transition (Table 5), how UFSS101 assisted their transition (Figure 1), and the positive vs negative experiences of UFS101 (Figure 2). Students who participated in the questionnaire were stratified amongst four groups, namely: face-to-face (n = 1 133); some face-to-face and some self-study (n = 347); self-study only (n = 417); and, could not access the content (n = 36).

As shown in Table 4, time management was the biggest challenge experienced by both face-to-face students (60%) as well as self-study students (56%). An interesting observation can be seen between the students who could not access the content and did not have access to the internet (64%), and their concern with where to find academic support (44%). Overall, the majority of the students reported time management, difficulty adjusting to the new environment, and how to effectively study as their biggest challenges. This coincides with findings from Mah & Ifenthaler (2017), and Adams & Blair (2019), measuring academic success and time management of first-year students, and the challenges associated

with this. Although only a small percentage (3% to 17%) reported food security and accommodation as challenges, this highlights the complexity of challenges that university students face. These findings coincide with that of Van Breda (2017), who highlighted the levels of vulnerability students face that have an impact on their academic performance. In addition to this, Henn et al. (2017) reported that there are first-year students within the South African context who are faced with constant hunger and stress related to their finances, also seen as a challenge in Table 4. In addition to this, no electronic devices was a challenge observed by all groups.

Table 4: Challenges students experienced within their first six months

Challenge	Face-to-face (n = 1 133)	Some face-to-face, some self-study (n = 347)	Self-study only (n = 417)	Could not access content (n = 36)
Time management	60%	53%	56%	39%
Difficulty adjusting to the new environment	57%	53%	55%	61%
How to effectively study	53%	50%	43%	25%
Financial pressure	29%	31%	35%	33%
Where to get academic support	26%	26%	28%	44%
No electronic devices/internet	20%	29%	34%	64%
Social pressure	16%	23%	21%	8%
Accommodation	10%	11%	16%	17%
Food security	8%	8%	8%	3%
Working while studying	4%	8%	7%	17%

Students were then asked if UFS101 assisted with their transition to university (Table 5).

Table 5: The assistance of UFS101 in transition to university

Category	Yes	No	No answer
Face-to-face	90%	8%	2%
Some face-to-face, some self-study	90%	10%	1%
Self-study only	83%	15%	2%
Could not access content	33%	61%	6%

Students were asked to provide reasons why UFS101 assisted with their transition to university, and the majority of students agreed that it was through the content that was taught (face–to–face [67%], some face–to–face, some self–study [67%], and self–study only [64%]). In this specific item, students who could not access the content ranged between 25% and 42% for all the selected items. Only 12% of the self–study only students selected the "by meeting other first–year students", as the nature of their interaction with the institution was for a brief period of time within their first year, and they did not have the opportunity to engage with the UFS101 summer school face–to–face.
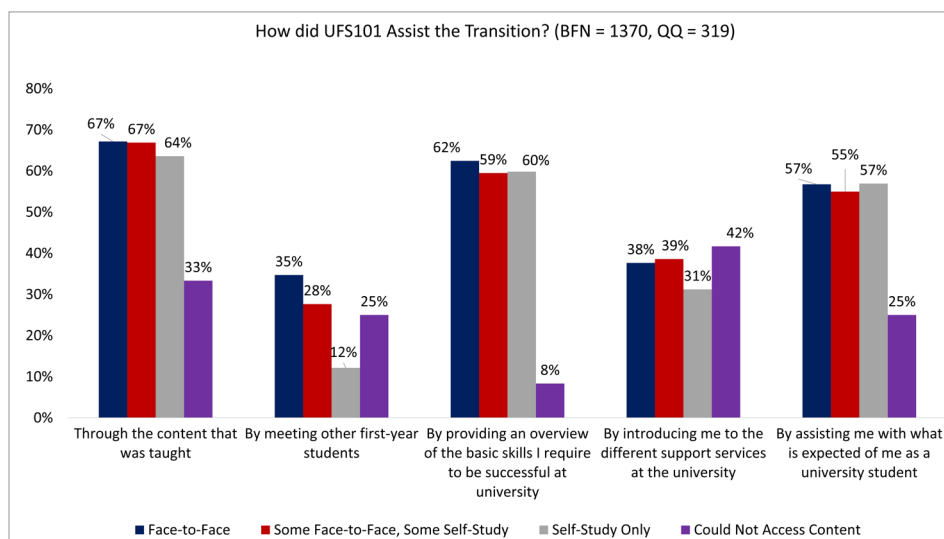
Figure 1: The ways in which UFS101 assisted student transition into university

In the context of the four groups, the self–study only students are a representative sample of students who could only engage with the content online, and they reported that the UFS101 content assisted them with what is expected of them at university (57%). In addition to this, the self–study group reported that UFS101 provided an overview of the basic skills they require to be successful within university (60%). This specific part of the cohort illustrated that the content was sufficient in assisting student transition, but illustrated the lack of social cohesion that the other students experienced (face–to–face (35%), some face–to–face, some self–study (28%)) as a result of the physical interaction with other students.

Students were asked if they had a positive or negative experience with UFS101. Overall, students reported that they had more of a positive experience with UFS101 than an undecided or negative experience. The majority of students who could not access the content did not have a positive or negative experience of UFS101.
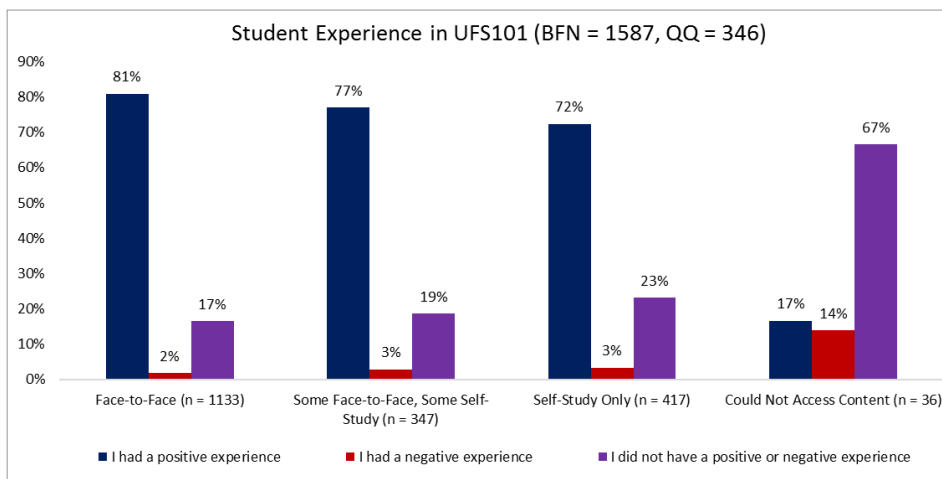
Figure 2: Student experience within of the first semester of UFS101

Students who said that they had a positive experience with the content were then further asked to provide context around why they had a positive experience. In total, 1 486 students' responses were taken into consideration (BFN = 1 196, QQ = 290). When their responses were stratified according to the four categories, a few unique themes emerged. The first theme was that across all four categories, the majority of students attributed their positive experience to learning something new. In addition to this, face-to-face (65%), some face-to-face, some self-study (68%), and self-study only (65%) reported that UFS101 broadened their perspectives around concepts that they did not know. According to Dziewanowska (2017), an opportunity for development presents itself when students are learning new things, and equally, broadens their perspectives. Lastly, the biggest difference between the groups was observed in the reason why students had a positive experience, as seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Reasons for positive student experience of UFS101 in the first semester

As observed in Figure 3, there was a significantly higher percentage of students who had a face-to-face interaction, or some face-to-face interaction that attributed the positive experience with UFS101 to the module assisting with the transition into university, than s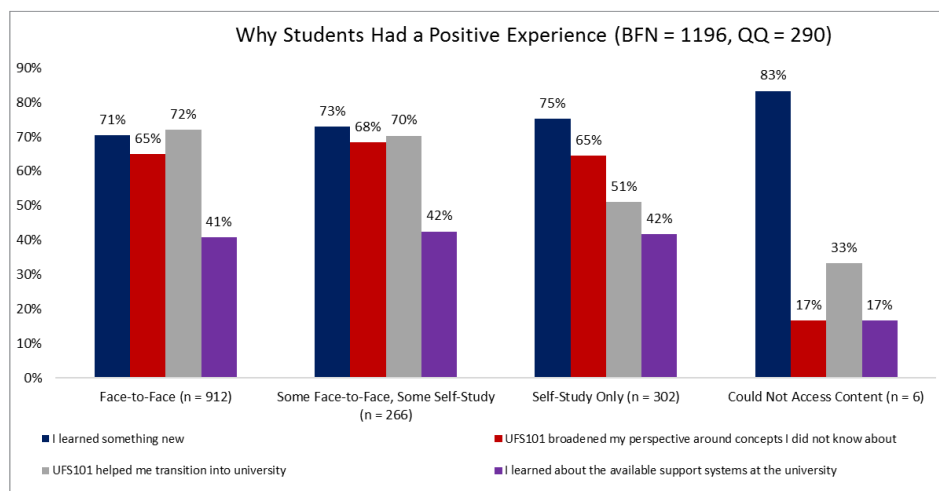tudents who did not have that interaction. This strengthens the argument that content alone is not enough in student transition (Upcraft et al., 2005; Kuh, 2008; Young, 2016) and suggests that the benefit of face-to-face interaction be further investigated as a contributor to a successful transition to university. An important finding was that the differences and similarities reported on was consistent across students from different faculties or fields of study.

Conclusion

According to Gadinger (2014), immense pressure is placed upon institutions to produce more graduates – this requires an intentional focus on improving student transition. According to Kuh (2008), implementing FYE programmes as HIPs contributes towards successful student transition. In this study, the impact of COVID-19 and the ensuing national lockdown on the FYS at the UFS was investigated. The descriptive observation highlighted that there were unique differences between the four stratified groups that need to be explored further, such as the challenges students face in the first six months of university and the effect of different modes of delivery (face-to-face vs online self-study) on student transition. COVID-19 brought with it a reminder that institutions of higher learning need to not only scale online learning for all students, but also acknowledge the challenges that accompany online learning. Some of these include investigating the technological needs of students who cannot access university infor-mation, and exploring the differences between a face-to-face model and a blend of face-to-face and online in terms of student success. Lastly, this type of investigation should be regularly performed to understand first-year transition and how to effectively implement a FYS, and thus optimally support first-year students.

Acknowledgements

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Investigating the Appropriateness and Validity of the Academic Motivation Scale-College Version for South African First-Year University Students

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Abstract

South African universities have one of the lowest graduation rates in the world, especially amongst first-year university students. South Africa's first-year university students are taxed with tremendous challenges. One of the most important amongst these challenges is considered to be academic motivation, which is strongly related to students' academic success. Despite this, to date, little work has been undertaken to source and validate a reliable instrument to measure students' academic motivation. This article is based on the proposition that there is a pressing need for a valid and reliable instrument that measures academic motivation and its effect on students' academic success. The psychometric properties of the Academic Motivation Scale-College version were examined for first-year university students. The findings are promising for using this scale to measure academic motivation of first-year university students.

Keywords

Academic Motivation Scale-College version; convergent validity; criterion validity; discriminant validity; factorial validity; first-year university students; reliability

Introduction

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa are confronted with tremendous challenges and are generally not adequately equipped with warning systems or methods to proactively identify students at risk (South Africa, DHET, 2014). As a result, the university performance of first–year students may be compromised and motivation can become impaired as students begin to doubt their ability to achieve academic success (South Africa, DHET, 2014; Haynes, Daniels, Stupnisky, Perry & Hladkyj, 2008).

Academic motivation is conceptualised as a student's level of interest, their attitude as well as their determination towards their academic course, whereby purpose–driven action (whether mental or physical) is initiated and sustained (Jones, 2009; Schunk, Pintrich

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& Meece, 2008). Students who are academically motivated are described as effective, meticulous, driven, focused, well-prepared and knowledgeable (Fraser & Killen, 2005). Accordingly, students who are academically motivated experience feelings of satisfaction, competence, and stimulation, and pursue rewarding activities (Köseoğlu, 2013; Vallerand et al., 1992). On the other hand, students who lack academic motivation will not apply extra effort, resulting in poor academic performance, often doubt their ability to succeed academically and doubt their intentions for pursuing a tertiary education (Fraser & Killen, 2005; Legault, Green–Demers & Pelletier, 2006).

Ryan and Deci (1985, 1991) categorise motivation as intrinsic, extrinsic or a–motivated. Based on this categorisation, Vallerand and his colleagues (1992, 1993) developed the Academic Motivation Scale-College version (AMS–C), a measure of college students' academic motivation in education. The AMS–C has been validated for students attending HEIs in countries including Canada, England, Portugal and the United States of America (USA) (Baker, 2004; Cokley, 2000; Cokley, Bernard, Cunningham & Motoike, 2001; Lopes et al., 2018; Vallerand et al., 1993). It was also tested for its cross-cultural factorial validity amongst students in the USA and Ghana (Osei Akoto, 2014).

Although the AMS–C has been validated in other countries, it is challenging to transfer psychometric instruments across cultures (De Klerk, Boshoff & Van Wyk, 2009). Various studies resulted in the conclusion that without revalidating an instrument, it is risky to apply instruments developed in other countries to a South African sample (De Klerk et al., 2009). These risks include language ability and translation equivalence, as some individuals might interpret words as well as meaning of words in a different manner, including reverse-worded items and mixed-worded scales (Van Eeden & Mantsha, 2007; Wong, Rindfleisch & Burroughs, 2003).

The AMS–C is a promising measure to use in the HEI setting. However, no studies could be found that tested the applicability and validity of the AMS–C for South African university students. The objective of the present study was to investigate the adequacy and appropriateness in terms of validity and reliability of the AMS–C amongst first-year university students in the South African context; more specifically, to test the factorial validity, reliability as well as the convergent, discriminant, and criterion validity of the AMS–C.

Literature Review

Factorial validity and reliability

The three components of motivation are defined as follow: (1) Intrinsic motivation is the doing of an activity not for the few dissociable consequences, but the inherent satisfaction thereof; (2) Extrinsic motivation is the completing of an activity to realise some dissociable outcomes; and (3) Amotivation is a lack of intention to act or the absence of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000a; 2000b).

The AMS-C measures the three types of motivation with seven sub-scales (Vallerand et al., 1992; Stover et al., 2012):

1. Intrinsic motivation includes the following subscales:
   - *To know*: when a task or subject is carried out for the pleasure of obtaining the knowledge;
   - *Towards accomplishment*: when satisfaction is derived from generating products or when one's personal limits are superseded; and
   - *Experienced stimulation*: when activities are developed to discover pleasing aesthetics, intellectual or sensorial sensations.

2. Extrinsic motivation includes the following subscales:
   - *Identified*: when choices are driven by extrinsic motives;
   - *Introjected*: when behaviour is guided by the need to improve one's self-esteem and/or to circumvent anxiety and guilt that may arise from not carrying out a certain task; and
   - *External regulation*: when behaviours are driven by others in an attempt to avoid punishment or to receive a reward.

3. Amotivation is a single dimension measured with four items. It is characterised by an indiviual's lack of purpose, an absence of power over their actions, or explains an inability to act.

With regard to the factorial validity of the AMS-C, support for the seven-subscale structure was found amongst a sample of students in the USA (Cokley et al., 2001). However, a more recent study conducted amongst a sample of undergraduate students in Britain, found that the broader three-factor structure (i.e. *intrinsic motivation*, *extrinsic motivation* and *amotivation*) is a better fit to the data (Baker, 2004). The three-factor structure was suggested by Baker (2004) as a solution to the high intercorrelations found between some of the subscales. Thus, it is expected that a three-factor structure will be a better fit to the data compared to a seven-factor structure.

H_1: Academic motivation comprises a three-factor structure, consisting of intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation and amotivation.

Various studies indicate favourable reliability scores for the AMS-C. The original study conducted by Vallerand et al. (1992) found Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the seven-factor structure ranging between 0.83 and 0.86. In another English-speaking sample the internal consistency ranged from 0.60 to 0.86 (Vallerand et al., 1993). In a more recent study, the internal consistencies in a sample of USA students also proved to be satisfactory, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.65 to 0.77 (Osei-Akoto, 2014). It is therefore expected that the three factors of the AMS-C will be reliable.

H_2: The three factors of the Academic Motivation Scale-College version (AMS-C) will show high internal consistency (a^3 0.70).

Convergent validity and discriminant validity

Convergent validity tests if constructs that are anticipated to be related are, in fact, related to one another; while discriminant validity tests whether constructs that should not have any relationship, in fact, do not have any relationship with one another (Shuttleworth, 2009). The current study examined whether the three AMS–C factors (intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation) were moderately related to each other and ultimately explained the relationships between the latent variables as well as the strength of the relationships.

H_3: *The three AMS-C factors are moderately related to each other and will demonstrate convergent validity.*

H_4: *The three AMS-C factors are moderately related to each other and will demonstrate discriminant validity.*

Criterion validity

Criterion validity is used to measure the capability of an instrument to give an explanation for variance in any other variable with the motive of imparting evidence in order to predict future results (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 1993). For the purpose of this study, two important outcomes of student motivation were included: students' satisfaction with their studies as well as self-reported academic performance.

The relationship between study satisfaction and academic motivation can be explained by examining theory on the three innate psychological needs for satisfaction outlined and described in the Self-determination Theory (STD) (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). These innate psychological needs for satisfaction that inform self-motivation include autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000b; Zhang, Solomon, Kosma, Carson & Gu, 2011). Therefore, the conditions of these innate psychological needs either hinder or support students' academic motivation (Zhang et al., 2011). Consequently, academically motivated students experience feelings of satisfaction, competence, and stimulation, and pursue activities that provide rewards (Köseoğlu, 2013; Vallerand et al., 1992).

H_5: *Academic motivation will be significantly and positively related to satisfaction with studies.*

The concept of academic motivation can also be associated with students' self-rated academic performance. A study of disadvantaged South African students found that adjustment to university and academic performance was positively correlated with *intrinsic motivation* (Petersen et al., 2009). *Intrinsically motivated* students use increased productive studying strategies, prefer demanding tasks, enjoy their classes more and exhibit consistent student involvement (Ames & Archer, 1988). *Extrinsically motivated* behaviours are implemented for some outcome external to the task itself, such as obtaining rewards or circumventing retribution (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). A study conducted by Baker (2004) concluded that both *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* motivation, as well as *amotivation* on some level, predict students' academic performance.

H6: *Academic motivation will be significantly and positively related to self-reported academic performance.*

Method

Research design

A cross-sectional design was used to perform data collection and attainment of the research objectives for the present study.

Participants and procedure

Permission for the study was granted by the Ethics Committee of the North-West University (ethical certificate number: NWU-HS-2014-0165). Data was gathered during August to November 2018 through a web-based survey. The researcher ensured that prior to inviting students for voluntary participation, awareness was created about the study. All the appropriate information regarding the purpose and intentions of the study and informed consent was incorporated and explained.

Participants were first-year students studying at a South African university. The researcher only included full-time students registered for their first year of study. A convenience sample method was used ($N=611$) of whom 394 (64.5%) were female, 217 (35.5%) were male and age ranged between 17 and 19 years. In terms of ethnic origin, 338 (55.3%) participants were black, 236 (38.6%) were white, 28 (4.6%) were coloured, and six (1.0%) were Indian.

Research Instruments

In addition to a biographical questionnaire, the following instruments were used:

Academic motivation was measured by the AMS-C (Vallerand et al. 1992), which consists of 28 items and is measured on a seven-point scale (1 = *Does not correspond at all* to 7 = *Corresponds exactly*, with a midway point at 4 = *Corresponds moderately*). The 28 items, divided into four items for each of the seven subscales, were used to answer the following question: "Why do you go to college?" in an effort to measure the following:

- Intrinsic motivation – to know (e.g. 'because I experience pleasure and satisfaction while learning new things').
- Intrinsic motivation – towards accomplishment (e.g. 'for the pleasure I experience while surpassing myself in my studies').
- Intrinsic motivation – to experience stimulation (e.g. 'for the intense feelings I experience when I am communicating my own ideas to others').
- Extrinsic motivation – identified (e.g. 'because I think that a college education will help me better prepare for the career I have chosen').
- Extrinsic motivation – introjected (e.g. 'to prove to myself that I am capable of completing my college degree').
- Extrinsic motivation – external regulation (e.g. 'because with only a high-school degree I would not find a high-paying job later on').
- Amotivation (e.g. 'Honestly, I don't know; I really feel that I am wasting my time in school.').

Satisfaction with studies was measured with the use of adapted items based on work–related scales developed by Hellgren, Sjöberg and Sverke (1997). Items were adapted to fit the student context and are measured with three items (e.g. "I am satisfied with my studies"). All items were scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Self-reported academic performance was measured by asking participants to provide two self-reported indications of their academic performance including their academic average (an average of all their subjects) and a main average (an average of their main subjects).

Data Analysis

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to determine factorial validity. Based on the findings of previous validation studies reported in literature, two models were tested: a seven–factor model (specifying all seven subscales of the AMS–C) and a three–factor model (including the three broad factors of the AMS–C: extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation and amotivation).

In order to test the models' goodness-of-fit, the following fit indices were applied: traditional chi–square (χ^2) statistic, Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) and the Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). An adequate model fit was considered when the CFI and TLI values were larger than 0.90, thus a conformist process was used in this study (Byrne, 2001). Concerning the RMSEA, values below the cut–off threshold of 0.08 indicated a good model fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). The SRMR cut–off point was set at less than 0.05 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The reliability of the scales was determined by calculating Cronbach's alpha coefficients. The composite reliability indicator was calculated where a value of 0.70 and above was considered acceptable (Akkucuk, 2014; De Farias Júnior, Mendonça, Florindo & Barros, 2014).

To determine the convergent validity, the correlation matrix was examined to identify how the AMS–C factors are related to each other. The correlation coefficients, where effect sizes are used to generate the practical significance of the results, were used to determine the relationship that exists between the variables (Steyn & Swanepoel, 2008). Furthermore, $r \geq 0.30$ (medium effect) and $r \geq 0.50$ (large effect) were used as cut–off points for the practical significance of the correlation coefficients (Cohen, 1988). With regard to discriminant validity, the correlations between all the latent variables need to be below Brown's (2015) 0.85 guideline. Additionally, CFA was used to compare measurement models where the correlations between the factors of interest are constrained to 1.00. When the correlation is unconstrained, a non-significant difference would indicate that discriminant validity does not exist.

Finally, the criterion validity of the AMS–C was tested. Regression paths were included in the final measurement model. The standardised beta coefficient values (β) and the significance of the regression paths as well as the size and direction thereof were considered. The variance explained in the criterion variables (in terms of R^2) were also taken into account.

Results

Factorial validity

CFA was used to test two competing measurement models: a seven-factor model (specifying all seven subscales of the AMS-C), and a three-factor model (specifying the three broad factors of the AMS-C). The results can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Results of the measurement models

Model	χ^2	df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Seven-factor	1177.62	329	0.95	0.94	0.07	0.05
Three-factor (before)	2148.36	347	0.90	0.90	0.09	0.08
Three-factor (after)	1984.67	344	0.91	0.90	0.09	0.07

Notes: χ^2 = chi-square; df = degrees of freedom; CFI = Comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis index; RMSEA = Root mean square error of approximation; SRMR = Standardised root mean residual

At first glance, the seven-factor measurement model appeared to be a better fit compared to the three-factor model. However, very high intercorrelations were found between some of the subscales of the seven-factor measurement model:

- Intrinsic motivation – to know and intrinsic motivation – experience stimulation: $p = 1.006$
- Intrinsic motivation – towards accomplishment and intrinsic motivation – experience stimulation: $p = 0.95$
- Intrinsic motivation – to know and intrinsic motivation – towards accomplishment: $p = 0.92$
- Extrinsic motivation – introjected and extrinsic motivation – external regulation: $p = 0.85$

The fit indices of the alternative three-factor model were also not optimal (RMSEA = 0.09). To explore how the model fit could be improved, modification indices were inspected. It was evident that error terms should be allowed between three pairs of items, including:

- Extrinsic motivation – external regulation, item 3: "Because I want to have 'the good life' later in my life"; and item 4: "In order to have a better salary later on."
- Extrinsic motivation – introjected, item 12: "Because I want to show myself that I can succeed in my studies"; and intrinsic motivation – towards accomplishment, item 20: "Because my university allows me to experience a personal satisfaction in my quest for excellence in my studies."
- Intrinsic motivation – experience stimulation, item 14: "For the pleasure that I experience when I learn interesting things"; and intrinsic motivation – to know, item 22: "For the pleasure that I experience when I discover new things that I have never known before."

After these error terms were allowed to correlate, the three-factor model was improved. More specifically, the χ^2/degrees of freedom ratio was slightly above 3.00 (Kline, 1998; Ivan, Herteliu & Nosca, 2008). The fit also improved in terms of the CFI and SRMR indices (Hoyle, 1995), although the RMSEA was still slightly above the suggested cut-off point of 0.08 (Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Van de Schoot, Lugtig & Hox, 2012). Based on these results, it seems that a three-factor model should be preferred above the seven-factor model. All of the items had statistically significant and acceptable factor loadings (λ), ranging between 0.38 and 0.92. Since the standard errors for all the items of the three factors were small, accurate estimates are assumed (Payton, Miller & Raun, 2000). These results provide evidence for *Hypothesis 1*.

Reliability, convergent and discriminant validity

Table 2 provides the reliabilities and correlation matrix for the latent variables.

Table 2: Reliabilities and correlation matrix for the latent variables

Variables	α	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Amotivation	0.87	–	–	–	–	–	–
2. Intrinsic motivation	0.92	–0.23★	–	–	–	–	–
3. Extrinsic motivation	0.86	–0.34★	0.72★	–	–	–	–
4. Satisfaction with studies	0.93	–0.40★	0.58★	0.35★	–	–	–
5. General academic average	N/A	–0.28★	0.24★	0.07	0.34★	–	–
6. Main academic average	N/A	–0.23★	0.29★	0.11	0.38★	0.79★	–

Notes: α = Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient; ★ = Correlations are statistically significant p ≤ 0.001; Values ≤ 0.30 = medium effect; Values ≥ 0.50 = large effect

Cronbach's alpha coefficients ($\alpha \geq 0.70$) were calculated for the three-factor model to establish the reliability or internal consistency of the AMS-C (Cronbach, 1951; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). As shown in Table 2, all the reliability coefficients were acceptable, therefore support and evidence were provided for *Hypothesis 2*.

The results in Table 2 show that extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation and amotivation all correlated with one another. The effect sizes ranged from small to large. These results provide evidence for the strength of the relationships between the academic motivation variables, supporting *Hypothesis 3*.

The results also provide evidence for the discriminant validity of the AMS-C, where the correlations between the subscales were below the 0.85 guideline (r's ≤ 0.85; Brown, 2015), providing evidence and support for *Hypothesis 4*. Furthermore, a series of models were tested where the correlations between the factors were constrained to 1.00 and then compared to the unconstrained model. All these models showed that the constrained model did not perform better than the unconstrained model ($p \leq 0.05$), providing further support for *Hypothesis 4*.

Criterion validity

Criterion validity of the AMS-C was investigated with specifying the structural model by using the final three-factor measurement model and inserting structural paths in line with the study's hypotheses. The results of the structural model are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Regression paths for the structural model

Structural path	β	S.E.	p	Result
Intrinsic motivation → Satisfaction with studies	0.70	0.05	0.001★	Significant
Extrinsic motivation → Satisfaction with studies	–0.27	0.05	0.001★	Significant
Amotivation → Satisfaction with studies	–0.34	0.04	0.001★	Significant
Intrinsic motivation → General academic average	0.40	0.07	0.001★	Significant
Extrinsic motivation → General academic average	–0.32	0.07	0.001★	Significant
Amotivation → General academic average	–0.30	0.05	0.001★	Significant
Intrinsic motivation → Main academic average	0.45	0.06	0.001★	Significant
Extrinsic motivation → Main academic average	–0.29	0.07	0.001★	Significant
Amotivation → Main academic average	–0.23	0.05	0.001★	Significant
Notes: β = beta coefficient; S.E. = Standard error; p = Two-tailed statistical significance; ★ = p ≤ 0.001				

The structural model showed an acceptable fit. The χ^2/degrees of freedom ratio was slightly above 3 (Kline, 1998; Ivan et al., 2008) and the fit indices showed acceptable fit: CFI = 0.93; TLI = 0.92; RMSEA = 0.07 (Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Hoyle, 1995; Van de Schoot et al., 2012). All the regression paths were significant ($p ≤ 0.05$). These results provide evidence to support *Hypotheses 5* and *6*.

Discussion

The primary purpose of the study was to validate the Academic Motivation Scale-College version (AMS-C) in a sample of first-year South African students by examining the factorial validity, reliability, convergent, discriminant and predictive validity of this instrument.

The results of the CFA showed that very high intercorrelations were found between some of the subscales of the original seven-factor model. These high intercorrelations indicate problems with multicollinearity, which result in the unsuccessful calculation of discriminant validity (Kline, 2005). For this reason, Kline (2005) suggests to either eliminate one of the variables or combine the high-correlated variables. The seven-factor model was therefore not considered an acceptable measurement model. The model fit of the three-factor model was also not entirely satisfactory, but improved after error terms were allowed between three pairs of items which contained conceptually similar words (DeLisi, Hochstetler & Murphy, 2003). Although the RMSEA index was 0.09, a recent study by McNeish, An and Hancock (2018) stated that new statistical evidences and simulations have shown that these fit indices are highly influenced by measurement quality. Therefore, a three-factor model is presented as the best factor-solution for the AMS-C and is in line

with other studies that found support for a three-factor model (Baker, 2004; Stover et al., 2012). The findings showed acceptable Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients ($\alpha \geq 0.70$) for all three AMS-C factors (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001): intrinsic motivation ($\alpha = 0.92$), extrinsic motivation ($\alpha = 0.86$), and amotivation ($\alpha = 0.87$), demonstrating good reliability for the three factors. Convergent and discriminant validity were also established.

The criterion validity of the AMS-C was examined to determine whether the three factors of academic motivation were significant predictors of students' satisfaction with studies and students' self-rated academic performance. The results showed that intrinsic motivation was the strongest predictor for all three outcomes: Satisfaction with studies, general academic average and main academic average. Extrinsic motivation and amotivation both negatively predicted all three outcomes. Extrinsic motivation proved to be the strongest predictor for both general academic motivation and main academic motivation. On the other hand, amotivation proved to be a slightly stronger predictor for satisfaction with studies than extrinsic motivation.

Practical Implications

The present study shows preliminary support that the AMS-S has potential to validly and reliably measure first-year students' academic motivation. The use of the AMS-C could enable HEIs to adequately determine different motivation levels of first-year university students, specifically because students experience many challenges during their first year at university and are therefore at risk of decreased academic motivation. HEIs are therefore encouraged to use instruments like the AMS-C to proactively identify students at-risk and make available supporting interventions, where students can be made aware of their motivation levels and seek assistance as an additional resource if necessary. These supporting interventions can empower students to not only reach their academic goals but also reach their long-term goal of graduating. Consequently, universities are assisted by an additional tool that empowers them to deliver more work-ready graduates.

Limitations and Recommendations

The study was conducted at one specific university and not nationally across different institutions. This limits the applicability of the findings. It is recommended that replication studies are conducted nationally across South Africa. These studies could also add to the existing literature by obtaining more knowledge about the outcomes in similar and dissimilar contexts. This study made use of a cross-sectional design. To draw more significant conclusions about the relationship of the three academic motivation factors as well as students' satisfaction with their studies and students' self-rated academic performance and other outcomes, a longitudinal research exploration is suggested. In addition, a mixed-methods research design can be included, such as interviews, reflection diaries or focus groups to explore the meaning of the items of the AMS-C and minimise the potential of measurement and non-measurement error (Dillman, Smyth & Christian, 2014).

Although this study used Classical Test Theory (CTT), a widely known and predominant measurement paradigm in test analysis, there are also shortcomings to this approach (see Rusch et al., 2017). Future studies can also include the advantages of Item Response Theory (IRT). The basic assumption of IRT is the independence of the latent ability of the participant on the content of the measure or test (Baghaei et al., 2016). IRT permits analysis of responses from a specific sample to a bank of items and assumes that responses from participants depend on non-measureable respondent characteristics (i.e. latent traits and on the characteristics of items (Baker, 2001). This could add valuable information on the adequacy and appropriateness of tests used in the higher education context.

Conclusion

In summary, the results provided stronger support for a three-factor model. Favourable reliability scores provided evidence for the internal consistency. Results also supported the convergent and divergent validity of the AMS-C. Finally, the three academic motivation factors predicted students' satisfaction with their studies as well as students' self-rated performance, providing evidence for the criterion validity of the AMS-C.

Authors' Note

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Effective Institutional Intervention Where It Makes the Biggest Difference to Student Success: The University of Johannesburg (UJ) Integrated Student Success Initiative (ISSI)

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Abstract

Low levels of student success in South Africa have persisted as a seemingly intractable problem. There have been some gains in student success over time, but with a participation rate of approximately 18%, the current success rates still represent massive financial and human losses to the country. Internationally there is a trend to move towards interventions that are more strongly data-informed at every step and the available evidence indicates that these interventions are more likely to have the desired effect. This article reports back on the first 24 months of implementation of one such intervention, namely the Integrated Student Success Initiative (ISSI), at the University of Johannesburg (UJ). The ISSI uses data to inform every step of the process which includes planning, selection and targeted intervention and evaluating possible impacts. The ISSI is showing promise as an effective strategy for improving student success and is allowing the institution to focus its limited resources where they have the potential to make the biggest difference.

Keywords

collaboration; data informed interventions; integrated initiatives; student success

Introduction

In South Africa (SA), student success in higher education is a matter of national debate and concern. This is mainly due to persistently low success and throughput rates. Enrolment figures in higher education institutions (HEIs) have remained on a steady upward trajectory since 1994, yet success and throughput rates have been relatively low when contrasted with the number of students enrolled for each particular cohort (Moodley & Singh, 2015; Mkonto, 2018; Murray, 2014). The South African Higher Education system has more than doubled in size from the 495 356 students registered at the advent of democracy in 1994 (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2012) to just over 1 million registrations in 2019 (Essack, 2012, p. 49; DHET, 2019b). Student success has, however, not

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shown similar improvements. As the Council on Higher Education (CHE) puts it: "…the system has not yet come to terms with the learning needs of the majority of the student body" (CHE, 2013, p. 4).

Universities have also found it challenging to develop the necessary support and intervention strategies to support student success (UNESCO, 2017). This misalignment manifests itself in the high drop-out rates, low success rates and sluggish throughput rates that characterise the sector (DHET, 2019b). Although there have been recent improvements in the main metrics used to measure the effectiveness of the South African tertiary system (DHET, 2019a), the fact remains that with a participation rate of between 17% and 18%, of the top-performing school-leaving students, approximately 30% to 40% of entrants leave the system without graduating (DHET, 2019a). The South African system has been called a low participation, high attrition system (Fisher & Scott, 2011), which translates into high levels of human and financial wastage.

Even though higher education systems generally face similar struggles, this wasteful situation is especially problematic in the South African context. The higher education sector in South Africa plays a crucial role in facilitating upward social mobility as well as in raising the economic activity of the nation (Maluleke, 2018). These important goals are, however, threatened by inferior success rates of first-generation, low-income students who make up a large proportion of students who do not persist for longer than the first semester of their first year (Essack, 2012).

For this reason, it is understandable that South African universities have come under increasing pressure to address the high failure and drop-out rates (Manik, 2015). As a result of the country's recent historic developments, many first-generation, or non-traditional students, have entered into the higher education system. These first-generation students often enter the university underprepared for the challenges they will face and as a result struggle to adapt to university life and its demands; and they are more likely to withdraw from higher education without completing their qualifications (Escobedo, 2007). In addition to this, higher education institutions across the country have struggled to cope with "the students they have" and in many ways remain under-prepared for the students they enrol (CHE, 2013). It is evident that universities need to design intervention strategies that mitigate the high drop-out and failure rates. Tinto (2014, p. 6) argues that without academic, social and financial support "many students do not complete their programmes of study". "It is my view," he continues, "that once an institution admits a student, it becomes obligated to provide, as best it can, the support needed to translate the opportunity access provides to success" (Tinto 2014, p. 6). This challenges South African universities to implement effective intervention strategies to improve student success rates.

In many instances, student-success initiatives have been based on the background knowledge and preferences of the staff who design and implement them. As Crisp et al. (2019) point out, institutions (and the staff teaching in them) often make incorrect assumptions about their students when designing their interactions with them. After interventions were completed, it has often been left up to anecdotal evidence to evaluate whether any particular intervention had worked. This basically ad-hoc approach to student

success has shown itself to not be sustainable or systemically effective. This article argues for a much more rigorous process to guide student success work which is data-informed at every step.

Data-informed intervention initiatives have become popular in institutions of higher learning since the early 2000s (Van Vuuren, 2020, p. 137). For example, predictive modelling initiatives such as the Konstanz Information Miner (KNIME) used at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) allows the institution to "recognise students with a high probability of dropping out by the second year of study" (Lourens & Bleazard, 2016, p. 129). Another similar initiative is the State Action for Education Leadership Project II (SAELP II) developed by the Ohio State University. This initiative has allowed higher education institutions to "analyze the educational needs of students who are not showing adequate progress" by manipulating and analysing data to track these students (Cooley, Shen & Miller, 2006, p. 59). Educators are better placed to respond effectively to the needs of students and to improve success and throughput rates than ever before.

Pathway to Success (PWAY) at the Louisiana State University is another data-informed student success intervention that relies on academic, non-academic, and personal attribute data to tailor institutional interventions for each student (Fowler & Boylan, 2010, p. 2). The PWAY intervention approach goes beyond merely addressing academic challenges to incorporating non-academic and personal challenges as well. The retention rate (i.e. the percentage of students from the original cohort who persist with their studies from first year to second year) of first-time entering first-generation students at the Louisana State University increased from 29% to 52% in 2009 following its initial implementation at the institution (Fowler & Boylan, 2010, p. 8).

Another academic intervention programme that has reported positive results is the so-called "Affirmation intervention," which has been credited with improving the success rates of minority students at Stanford University (Dee, 2015, p. 149). This intervention is centred on self-affirmation exercises that students undertake, which encourages them to identify and reflect upon their core personal values. The findings of the study showed that at-risk students, who underwent self-affirmation exercises, credited these interventions with motivating them to excel academically and with inculcating positive attitudes to learning (Dee, 2015, p. 150). Thus, data-informed interventions appear to be achieving promising results. They seem to be relatively effective at identifying student success challenges and addressing these through tailored interventions.

The student success problems in the South African system have proven very difficult to address effectively and often well-intentioned initiatives have proven to be expensive and relatively ineffective. To address the complicated set of factors that contribute to high levels of drop-out and low success rates, data-informed intervention programmes are necessary. It is therefore imperative that data is effectively used in at-risk student identification, intervention design, and evaluation. Such a data-informed approach holds the promise of facilitating the implementation of effective interventions as well as the creation of enabling structures and systems that eliminate learning challenges. The evidence seems clear that underperforming subgroups of students have been shown to stand a better chance of

excelling academically if well-planned and effective interventions are put in place as recommended by Appel and Kronberger (2012) and Aronson, Fried and Good (2000).

As Tinto (2014, p. 21) stated during his visit to South Africa: "Effective student support does not arise by chance. It is not solely the result of good intentions. Rather it requires the development of an intentional, structured, proactive approach that is coherent, systematic and coordinated in nature."

The University of Johannesburg (UJ) has built up a good reputation for its innovative efforts at improving student success. Some UJ initiatives have included the UJ First-Year Experience (FYE since 2010) and the UJ Senior Student Experience (SSE since 2015). The institution has taken substantial steps to improve student success, which have resulted in notable gains. The module credit success rates improved by more than 10% over the past eight years, and currently fluctuate between 85% and 86%. Feedback has also indicated that students are continuously reporting positive perceptions of their experience of their tuition and the support they receive at UJ.

Other institutional data have been more worrying. These included the indications that only approximately 37% of UJ students from the 2012 entering cohort completed their qualifications in minimum time (M); which increased to roughly 55% of the same group in minimum time plus one year (M+1). These figures illustrate that the high module credit success rate does necessarily translate into high minimum time completion rates. The Integrated Student Success Initiative (ISSI) at UJ, which is the subject of this article, represents a new data-informed intervention strategy, aimed at addressing this problem, that has shown real promise.

UJ Context

The data-informed approach used in the ISSI starts with investigating the underlying attributes that students arrive on campus with. The UJ student population has been studied in some detail since 2007 using the Student Profile Questionnaire (SPQ). Data generated by SPQ has been collected during the annual orientation (also referred to as the First Year Seminar) since 2007. In all, the total dataset contains 57 934 student records collected over the 14 years across all UJ faculties and campuses. The SPQ dataset has shown that the majority of UJ students are non-traditional university entrants, who hail from circumstances that tend to make academic success at university less likely than would otherwise be the case (Azmitia et al., 2018).

UJ students have consistently indicated that the majority of them (between 55% and 65% since 2013) are worried that a lack of money will be the cause of them not completing their qualifications. The expansion of the National Student Finincial Aid System (NSFAS) since 2019 did result in an improvement in these figures, but only by about 5%. This, in turn, links to droppingout for financial reasons as well as very pressing problems such as a lack of food. These worries and their implications negatively influence student success.
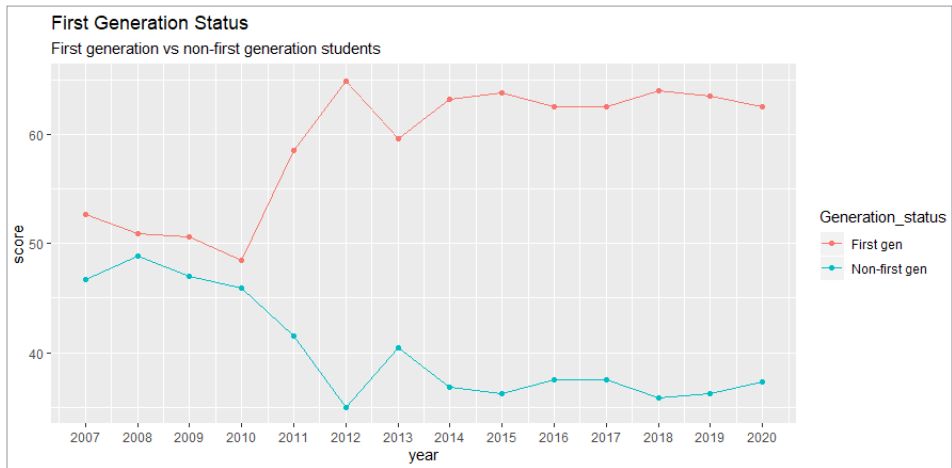
Figure 1: First generation vs non–first generation students

A second factor that has emerged is that more than 60% of newly enrolled UJ students over the past 9 years have indicated that they are part of the first generation in their families to enter higher education (first-generation students). These students often lack family support and the cultural capital needed to succeed at university.

In addition to being worried about money and being part of the first generation of their families to enter higher education, students also reported poor study habits with about 38% of students having spent 10 or fewer hours per week on academic work during grade 12. This is concerning in that if these poor study habits are maintained after arriving at UJ they contribute to academic struggles.

Lastly, many newly entering UJ students have an English literacy background that does not adequately prepare them for the rigours of university study. The only language of instruction at UJ is English, but the majority of students who enrol at the institution are not first-language English speakers. The number of students who are non-first-language English speakers has increased consistently since 2016. In 2020, 75% of students indicated that English is their second, third or fourth language.

It is clear that the "average" student at UJ is a non-traditional university entrant. The majority of new entrants are first-generation students, non–first-language English speakers, who typically did not study very hard at school and are worried that a lack of money will affect their ability to complete their studies negatively. With more than 40 000 undergraduate students, it is often difficult to know where to best intervene to improve and optimise student success in a situation where the institution must teach such a large contingent of non-traditional students, while making use of its limited resources as effectively as possible.

The Decision of Where to Intervene

The second way data are used, is to decide where to intervene. Institutionally, it made most sense to intervene at the level of the modules, as reaching every individual undergraduate student was practically impossible. The main question was how the modules to include in a systematic set of interventions could best be selected. In the past, the majority of module-level student success work was done with lecturers who volunteered to participate, but this often led to the non-optimal use of resources and it also meant that modules where assistance was needed most, often did not receive enough attention. Another approach that has been tried was to focus on modules with the lowest pass rates. This, however, caused a lot of resistance and negativity which, in turn, hindered interventions and their effectiveness.

To counteract these problems in a data-informed manner, the decision was taken to rather identify modules where the greatest number of students could be assisted. The focused ISSI efforts and resources would then be used where they had the potential to make the biggest difference. The concern was with optimising the potential efficacy of the intervention for both the students, who were enrolled in the modules, and for the institution that wants to maximise module credit success. This approach resulted in the selection of modules that made both human and financial sense, which meant that it was easier to motivate both Faculties and Academics to participate in the ISSI.

To enable the selection of the modules where the greatest possible difference could be made, the ISSI implementation process uses the Priority Module Index (PMI, explained below) to identify the 20% of modules across the university where the greatest number of module credits were lost during the preceding year's corresponding semester (semester 1 of 2018 results are used to identify the 2019 Semester 1 Priority Modules). The first step of the PMI analysis produced an institutional PMI list. Because of the size bias in the PMI formula and the massive variations in Faculty sizes at UJ, it was decided to not intervene only in the institutional-level top-priority modules as this would have facilitated interventions in a small proportion of the 8 UJ Faculties (the ones with the largest groups). In a second step, the UJ list was therefore then disaggregated into Faculty lists from which the 45 participating modules in any particular semester (10 for the College of Business and Economics and 5 per Faculty for the remaining 7 Faculties) are identified for ISSI intervention.

The formula used to create the Priority Module Index is based on the Pareto Principle, which is alternatively referred to as the 80-20 rule or the trivial many and the vital few (Boslaugh, 2012). The principle is not a hard-and-fast rule, so much as it is a crude generalisation applied to a range of fields from economics to census studies. In economics, this rule is applied to income distribution in an economy and holds that "in many circumstances, 80% of the activity or outcomes stem from 20% of the causes" (Boslaugh, 2013, p. 105). For example, it is possible to state that in many countries, 80% of the national wage bill is distributed to 20% of the working population (Boslaugh, 2013). To create the PMI lists, the Pareto Principle was used to develop an algorithm to identify the 20% of modules that account for 80% of funded credits lost to course failures at UJ. The formula uses module pass rate, class size and module credit value in its constitution and once these

variables have been used to calculate the UJ Priority Module Index (PMI), it results in a list containing the 20% of modules that contribute 80% of the module failures at UJ. The list is in order from the highest PMI score to the lowest, but all modules in the list are in the UJ top 20% of module failure contributors. The PMI calculations for a specific semester are done as soon as the final results for the corresponding semester of the previous become available. This provides substantial time for the process below to then unfold. Higher education institutions are often good at identifying risk, but it has been found to be much trickier to know what to realistically do to mitigate the risk.

ISSI Intervention Process

Once the Priority Modules for a specific semester have been identified, the Academic Development Centre, in close collaboration with the various Faculties, decide on the best way to intervene to support student success in each of the selected modules. This planning process is completed through collaborative discussions between senior ADC staff, the various Vice-Deans for Teaching and Learning, and the module lecturers. A Faculty-generated plan forms the basis for the preparations by the support divisions for an initial meeting with the module lecturers. This meeting consists of an intervention leader and representatives of all the appropriate support services to ensure a multi-disciplinary approach to interventions. At this initial meeting, the problem and plan are discussed further and the intervention is refined before implementation proceeds, which normally lasts for the semester. The interventions are usually limited to between 3 and 5 to ensure realistic expectations and traceability and typically consist of a selected and customised combination of activities.

The lead-time built into the ISSI process allows a variety of institutional resources to be focused on the selected PMI modules in addition to the interventions aimed at supporting student success mentioned above. These resources are also targeted where they can make the biggest difference and where their availability can be made part of teaching plans and module processes. Additional institutional resources that are focused accordingly include a strategic tutor fund to provide additional tutor support to ISSI modules, the prioritisation of UJ funded e-books in PMI modules and an ISSI implementation fund that is used to fund small, once-off implementation expenses.

To ensure that the ISSI is adopted as an institutional approach, UJ has also re-focused and expanded its committee structure to facilitate and support the ISSI implementation. The whole project is coordinated and supported by an institutional Student Success Committee (SSC) involving high-level representatives from all stakeholders and functioning as a subcommittee of the UJ Senate Teaching and Learning Committee (STLC). Each Faculty also has a Teaching and Learning committee and a Vice-Dean for Teaching and Learning to enable, support and provide oversight to the ISSI implementation in each Faculty.

The ISSI has been implemented for the past 2 years (4 semesters) and the question of its efficacy arises, as part of its data-informed approach. The most important measure of potential influence would be to evaluate the results of modules over time as well as to monitor activity in each module. The ISSI implementation up to this point has shown promising signs of improvement, as is discussed below.

How Do We Know if the ISSI is "Working"?

In this section, the performance of modules that participated in the intervention over its 24-month existence is evaluated in order to look for indications of improvement. No strong causal claims can be made when the potential influence of an intervention on a variable such as module success rate is investigated. It is, however, also true that improved module success is a necessary condition for any positive influence to be observed.

Figure 2 is a representation of the Admission Points Score[1] (APS) per Faculty over the five years from 2015 to 2019. This figure shows that the previous academic performances of students differed from one Faculty to the next, but did not differ substantially from one year to the next in any given Faculty. Therefore, the academic preparedness of the groups of students whose current academic performance will be compared remained relatively stable and was not a significant factor in determining academic performance.
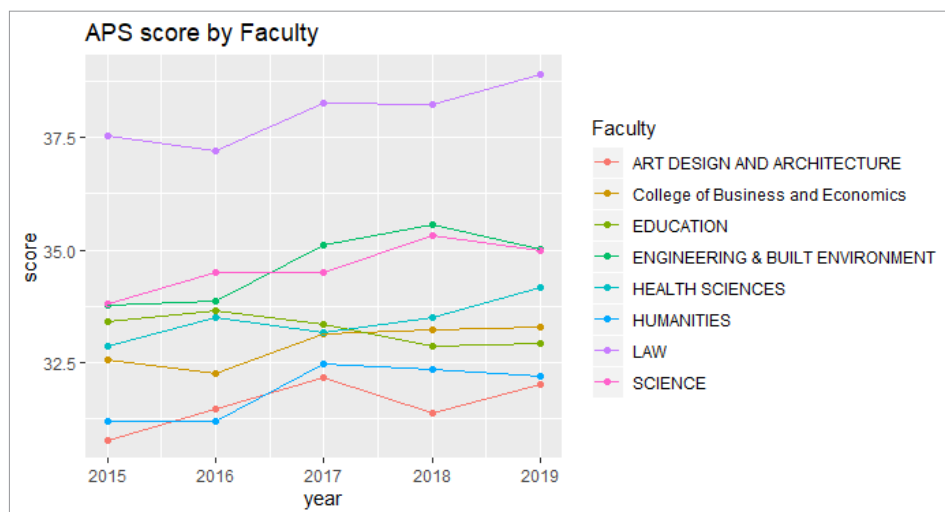

Figure 2: APS score by Faculty

Academic Performance of Modules Involved in the ISSI

To investigate the influence of the ISSI, the context of the academic interactions and the student results were considered. To do this, the student academic performance in modules that were exposed to the wide-ranging activities of the ISSI in 2018 and 2019 were compared directly to the previous year's performance, i.e. 2017 and 2018 and 2018 to 2019 in the same modules.

Before comparing the academic performance of modules involved in the ISSI per annum, they were compared per semester. The academic performance of the modules being compared is first shown in the semester preceding the ISSI involvement (pre_

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1   The APS score is used in the South African higher education sector to calculate a prospective student's level of academic attainment in high school. It is used as a crude measure of readiness for tertiary studies.

ISSI_successR) and then during the semester of ISSI involvement (ISSI_successR). Figure 3 shows the success rates of first semester modules using boxplots to represent the distribution of the 25th and 75th percentiles, the median, the mean and any outliers. The academic performance of the first semester modules that were exposed to the ISSI improved by 3.1% on average and the impact on how these success rates are distributed clearly indicates a general improvement in success rates. The 3.1% increase resulted in modules typically obtaining success rates of between 60% and 100%. Only one module recorded a success rate of below 60%, while another recorded a 100% success rate. The cluster of eight pre-ISSI modules that recorded success rates of less than 60% have mostly migrated beyond this threshold.
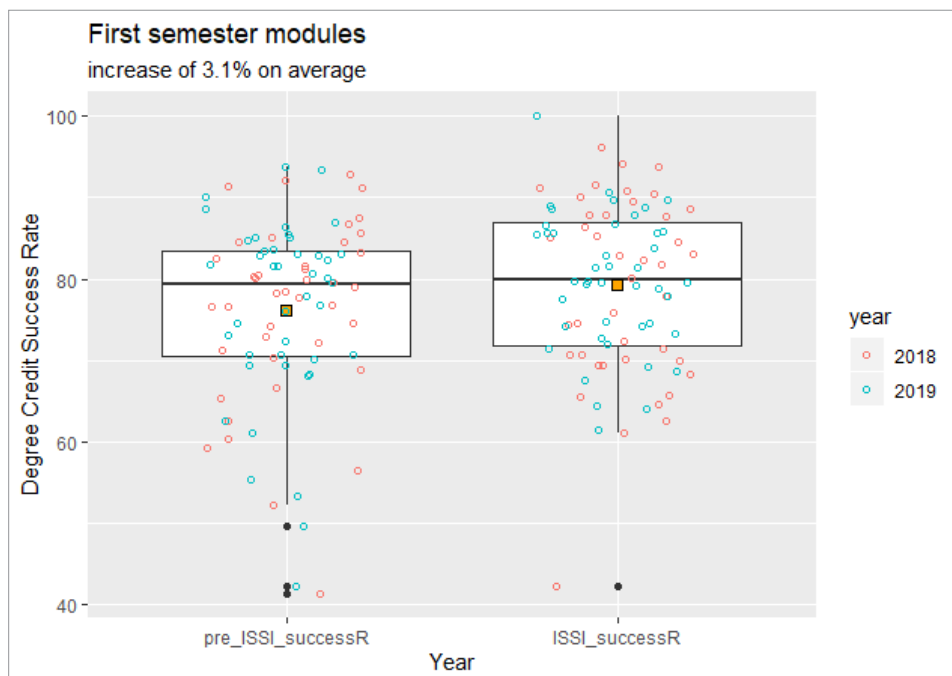

Figure 3: First semester modules

Figure 4 illustrates that second semester modules which participated in the ISSI increased by 3.4% from the pre-ISSI to the ISSI involvement phases. When one considers the blue and red points arranged along the y-axis of each group, it is notable that a cluster of 2019 second semester modules responded well to the interventions of the ISSI. Five 2019 second semester modules recorded success rates of below 60% before they participated in the ISSI. Subsequently, two modules narrowly missed out on recording success rates of more than 60%. At the opposite end of the scale, it is notable that a larger group of modules moved beyond the 90% mark. Before they were exposed to the interventions of the ISSI, only two modules recorded success rates of 90% or more. After exposure to the ISSI, nine modules have achieved success rates of more than 90%.
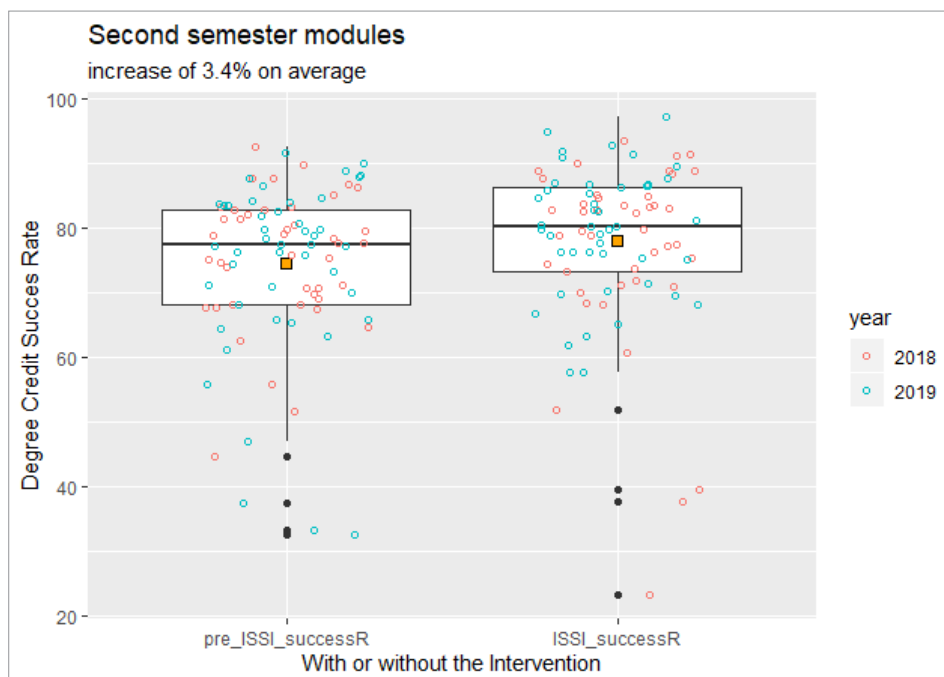
Figure 4: Second semester modules

Figure 4 hints at an observation that becomes clearer when boxplots are drawn showing the data grouped by year of participation in the ISSI. Figure 5 illustrates that the modules that participated in the first round of ISSI interventions (2018) improved by 2%. A group of modules underperformed in the second semester of 2018. During this time the processes and procedures of the ISSI were still being refined and it is likely that this led to significant changes in the way that certain modules function. As a result, this may have influenced success rates negatively as academic staff found themselves adapting to new teaching and learning methods and processes.

On the other hand, Figure 6 suggests that the interventions of the ISSI have become more efficient and effective over time. Whereas a cluster of modules under-performed significantly in the second semester of 2018, in 2019 the second semester modules improved significantly. An average increase of 4.5% can be observed for modules that participated in the ISSI in 2019.

Even though the module success rates of modules involved in the ISSI is in many ways a crude measure, and because any claims to direct causality would be ill-advised, the patterns seen above appear to indicate a link between ISSI interventions and improved module success rates. When the improved pass rates are translated into individual module passes, it is clear the ISSI has contributed to thousands of additional module passes.
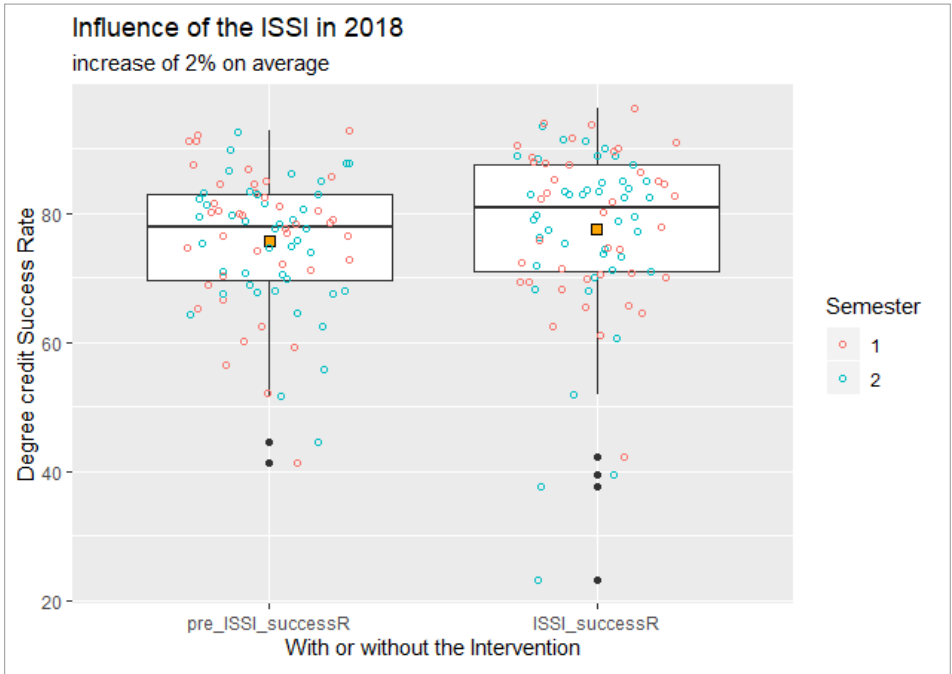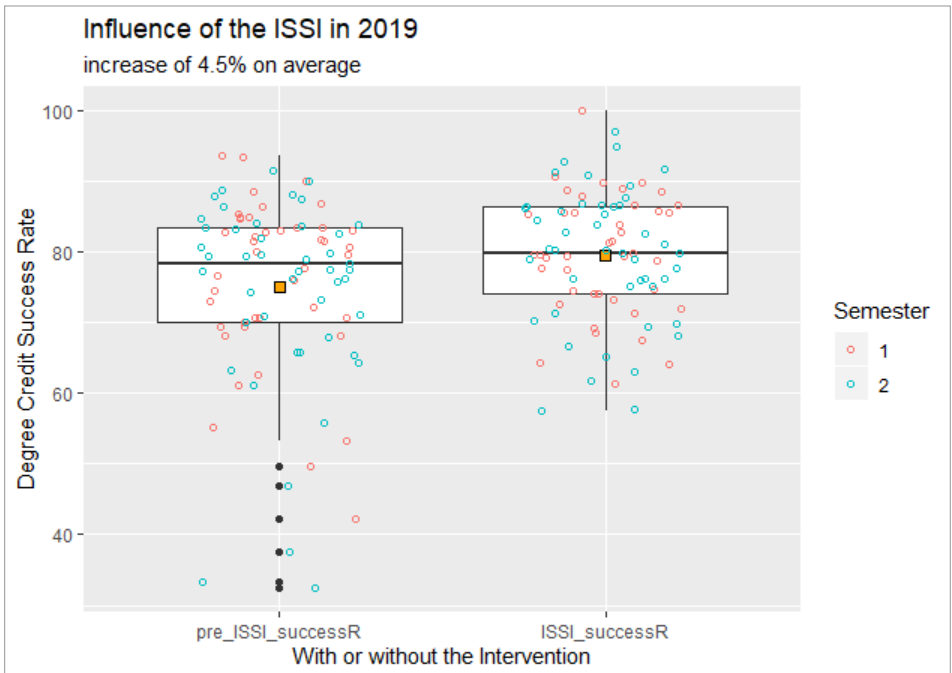
Figure 5: Influence of the ISSI in 2018

Figure 6: Influence of the ISSI in 2019

Lessons Learnt and Conclusion

The two years of ISSI implementation at UJ have contributed substantially to the way in which student success matters at the institution are conceptualised and implemented. Some of the main lessons learnt include the following:

An institutionalised approach to student success has the potential to bring the enablers and disablers of student success to the surface and to move towards substantial improvements in student success.

An approach that uses data at every appropriate part of the process allows for the student success conversations and practices to be held at higher academic levels and to move away from being merely anecdotal.

An institutional student success strategy provides a vehicle that is able to instigate, combine and institutionalise student success contributions from across the institution as a whole, and when it works this creates a synergistic collaboration that is very powerful for enhancing student success.

Data-informed but action-orientated high-level institutional structures, such as a Student Success Committee, as well as appropriate Faculty Committee structures that support student success make implementation possible. Focusing institutional resources where they can make the biggest difference (and by using data in the process) can have a powerful effect on student success.

When academics and support staff work together in teams and in structured ways, it often leads to creative and effective collaborative partnerships that create environments that enable effective student learning and student success. These partnerships also tend to persist long after officially sanctioned interventions have been completed.

The conceptualisation and implementation of the UJ ISSI has brought a sea change in the student success efforts at the institution. The structures, policies and systems that have emanated from the SSC, or that have been influenced by it, and the positive effect of the ISSI may potentially benefit students and the institution for the foreseeable future.

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The Academic Persistence of First-Year First-Generation African Students (FYFGAS): A Framework for Higher Education in South Africa

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Abstract

Since the dawn of democracy, South African universities have seen increased access to higher education from African students, the majority being first-generation students (FGS). This increase to access came with challenges of retention and throughput amongst first-year first-generation African students (FYFGAS). Despite these challenges, there have also been FYFGAS who have successfully passed their first year and completed their qualifications. This article used a mixed method approach with a sample of 311 FYFGAS who were registered in a standard first-year course in three faculties at a university in Gauteng. Quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire and qualitative data were collected from individual semi-structured interviews. Analyses included the use of Structural Equation Modelling which provided interesting insights into the inter-relations between various factors. Findings from the data analyses were used to create a framework of persistence for FYFGAS in higher education. The framework focuses on the resilience factors of first-year students and the role of the institution in ensuring that these students are successful. It also provides a guide for institutional interventions aimed at improving the persistence of FYFGAS.

Keywords

first year; first-generation African students; first-generation students; higher education; persistence; resilience; social support

Introduction

Many studies have been conducted in an attempt to understand student retention and persistence in higher education, specifically first-year persistence (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Tint, 1975, 1993, 1997). Persistence in the first year of study at university is vital because it serves as an introductory and transition year to higher education, and increases the likelihood of qualification attainment. Yet, it has the highest drop-out rates (Tinto, 2006-2007). In South Africa, the drop-out rate of first-year students is estimated at 33% (CHE, 2013; DHET, 2019).

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As students at university face academic pressure and challenges that could derail them from continuing with their studies, it is necessary to understand how and what makes them persistent in the face of adversity. Martin and Marsh (2009) refer to this resilience as academic persistence. This study investigated the contributors to and co-determinants of the academic persistence of first-year first-generation African students (FYFGAS) in higher education (HE).

Theoretical Framework

In this article, the researchers drew from two persistence theories: The *Longitudinal theory of interaction* by Vincent Tinto (1975, 1993) and the *Comprehensive model of student learning* by Terenzini and Reason (2005). At the same time, the researchers were interested in the resilience of FYFGAS and therefore, also used *positive psychology* as a third lens to review student persistence.

Tinto (1975, 1993) posits that students' persistence and departure are influenced by a longitudinal interaction of their attributes and the university environment both academically and socially. He further postulates that the students' pre-entry attributes which include demographics, previous school experiences, and personal qualities, influence their decision to pursue or terminate their studies. Tinto (1975, 1993) believes that students who persist are well integrated academically and socially into the institution which influences further commitments and success. Integration is pivotal in this theory as it leads to increased commitment to degree completion and to the institution itself.

Terenzini and Reason (2005) base their theory on that of Tinto, but extend it to include the organisational aspect of the institution. Their comprehensive model takes into account the pre-entry attributes, the university as an organisation with a specific culture and the students' interaction with their peers that influence adaptation and transition. This theory emphasises the students' experiences within the institution and how these experiences can lead to persistence.

Lastly, academic resilience (Martin & Marsh, 2009) was used as a third perspective to investigate the contributors to and co-determinants of the academic persistence of FYFGAS in HE. Academic resilience manifests in the students' capacity to overcome chronic adversities that threaten academic activity and success (Martin & Marsh, 2009). This definition includes the ability to achieve academic excellence despite often being burdened by numerous risk factors simultaneously. Therefore, resilience is the ability to do well and maintain a positive outlook despite the challenges and adversities of life.

Rationale

First-generation students (FGS) are a growing subgroup within the higher education student population. These students, whose parents have no higher educational qualification or have not attended a university, find themselves at a distinct disadvantage. International literature (Engle, 2010; Rood, 2009) indicates that FGS are more likely to be underprepared for higher education and are more likely to leave university without graduating.

With improved access to higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa, there has been a steady growth of African students, the majority of whom are FGS (Scott et al., 2007; Van Zyl, 2010). While the reasons for the high failure rate amongst African students have been researched (Fisher & Scott, 2010; Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014), few or no studies have been conducted to understand the contributors and determinants of success and persistence amongst FYFGAS. This lack of knowledge hinders HEIs in developing relevant support strategies that would enable their success.

Statement and Research Problem

Despite a significant increase in the number of FYFGAS in South African higher education institutions, there is still no in-depth understanding of the profile of these students. Secondly, the high attrition and drop-out rates amongst this group means attempts at promoting persistence are failing. Additionally, the majority of studies have viewed these students from a deficit perspective and therefore, while there are some students who do persist and succeed, there is no clear understanding of the strengths that enable them to do so.

In this study, an attempt has been made to research the contributors and determinants of persistence amongst FYFGAS in the South African context.

Research Methods

Design and setting

Participants in this mixed method study were first-year extended degree students in the Science, Humanities and Economics Faculties registered in 2014 at a university in the Gauteng Province, South Africa. The quantitative data were collected through a non-probability convenience sampling method. The sample consisted of 311 students. The target population was easily accessible and available at the time of this study. All extended degree students, who were in class attending a common extended degree module in the sixth week of the academic year, were selected to participate in the study. For the qualitative part of the investigation, purposive and criterion-referenced sampling was used to select participants. Participants were FYFGAS who had completed the initial quantitative questionnaires, had persisted through the first semester, and had passed all their first semester modules in 2014. Permission to conduct the study was granted through the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education at which the researcher was registered for the duration of the study.

Measures

Quantitative section of the study

For this section of the study, a single questionnaire was composed which firstly consisted of the biographic information. It secondly contained three relevant subscales of the Academic Behaviour and Attitudes Questionnaire (ABAQ), namely achievement motivation, locus of control and self-efficacy. The ABAQ measures participants' beliefs, attitudes and values

associated with six non-cognitive aspects related to academic behaviour and performance. It has been widely used and validated, including in the South African context (Bloye, 2007; Jacobs, 2010). The third section of the questionnaire consisted of social support questions taken from the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS), Module B. The California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) is a comprehensive youth health risk and resilience data collection instrument. It assesses nine external resilience assets and six internal resilience assets (Hanson & Kim, 2007; WestEd, 2003). Students are also asked to indicate their perceptions of three protective factors, namely, caring relationships, high expectations and opportunities for meaningful participation in each of the four key environments of school, home, community and peers (Hanson & Kim, 2007, p. 7). The CHKS has been successfully used amongst South African youth (Johnson & Lazarus, 2008), and therefore was regarded as suitable for students in South African HE.
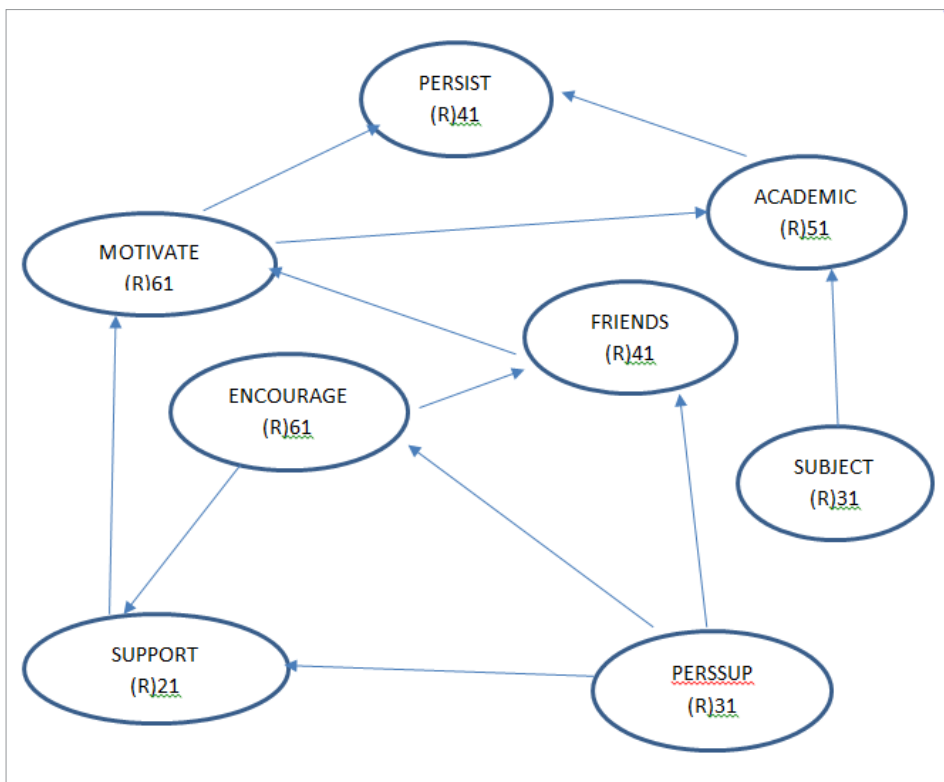

Figure 1: A structural equation model with the hypothesised relationships between the variables selected from the ABAQ and CHKS and persistence

Analysis

For the analyses of the data, it was decided that first-generation methods, such as multiple regression, which are suitable for assessing constructs and relationships between constructs (Alavifar et al., 2012), were not suitable. Structural equation modelling (SEM) was then selected to investigate persistence in HE, which is known to be a complex and multi-layered problem. SEM enabled the researcher to perform test models with multiple dependent variables using several regression equations simultaneously. This study contained complex and latent variables and thus was suitable for SEM. The partial least squares path modelling (PLS-SEM) was used. PLS-SEM is a particularly useful method when researchers aim to analyse success factors and the sources of competitive advantage (Sarstedt et al., 2017). The goal of PLS-SEM was the explanation of variances instead of co-variances. This technique allowed estimation of complex cause–effect relationship models with latent variables (Sarstedt et al., 2017).

All the data generated from the questionnaire were firstly included in a Principal Component Analysis (PCA – utilising Varimax Rotation with Kaiser Normalisation) to 'reduce' the number of variables and to identify any underlying structures in the data. Twelve factors/components (only factor loadings ≥ 0.5 were used) were extracted (the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was equal to 0.757, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant at the 1 percent significance level – indicating that factor analysis should yield reasonably distinct and reliable factors (Field, 2013). The total variance explained by the extracted components was equal to 66.395%. The following extracted components were obtained through the PCA analysis:

- Factor 1: Adult encouragement – external
- Factor 2: Person support – internal
- Factor 3: Friends' support
- Factor 4: Persistence
- Factor 5: Academic ability
- Factor 6: External activities
- Factor 7: Internal motivation
- Factor 8: Subject motivation
- Factor 9: External influences
- Factor 10: Self-blame
- Factor 11: Reason to study
- Factor 12: Expectations

The above 12 factors explained 66.40% of the total variance. After several iterations of the basic model were run, the final measurement model resulted in a relatively good model fit with APC = 0.253 ($p < 0.001$), ARS = 0.139 ($p < 0.008$), AVIF = 1.040 (Ideally ≤ 3.3), GoF = 0.290 (Medium ≥0.25), AARS = 0.133 ($p < 0.011$), AFVIF = 1.217 (Ideally ≤3.3), SPR = 1.000 (Ideally = 1), and RSCR = 1.000 (Ideally = 1).

A good-fitting model is one that is reasonably consistent with the data and does not necessarily require re-specification (Kenny, 2011). Use was made of R^2 and path coefficients to test the fit of the model. The model was evaluated for goodness-of-fit

to determine how well the 'Perceived Intention to Persist' model explained specific situations. The latent variables included in this model (mostly based on the results of the PCA), the above 12 factors, were combined into eight groups for further analyses, namely:

- Group 1: (Encouragement) consisting of the variables from Factor 1 and Factor 9.
- Group 2: (Person support) consisting of the variables from Factor 2.
- Group 3: (Friends' support) consisting of the variables from Factor 3.
- Group 4: (Persistence) consisting of the variables from Factor 4.
- Group 5: (Academic ability) consisting of the variables from Factor 5 plus Question 2 (which was not included in any of the factors).
- Group 6: (Motivation) consisting of the variables from Factor 6, Factor 7 and Factor 8.
- Group 7: (Subject) consisting of the variables from Factor 11 and Question 19 from Factor 8.
- Group 8: (Support) consisting of selected variables from Factor 1 and Factor 2.

The Qualitative Study

In the qualitative phase of the study, focus groups and individual interviews were conducted to collect data. The study investigated the students' actual experiences of HE and the perceptions of the determinants and contributors to their persistence. The qualitative findings are reported more fully in Motsabi, Diale and Van Zyl, 2020.

Results and Discussion of the Framework

The findings of this study were combined and resulted in the creation of a framework for the persistence of FYFGAS as indicated in Figure 2.

The model was derived from a combination of theory and the qualitative and quantitative research results of the study. The various aspects of the model are explored in more depth below.

Pre-entry attributes

The first part of the framework is known as pre-entry attributes. This refers to the background experiences and characteristics of the FGS. Many FYFGAS enter with a combination of pre-entry attributes that places them at a distinct disadvantage. These factors may include coming from financially deprived environments where parents are unemployed, single-parent or even child-headed families. They all come from homes where the previous generation had no higher education qualification meaning they have less academic support at home than non-first-generation students.

Additionally, most FYFGAS attended their primary and secondary education in areas with poorly resourced schools, where often, teachers were inadequately qualified and used an African language to teach instead of English. Proficiency in the language of instruction therefore becomes a challenge for these students (Du Plessis & Gerber, 2012).
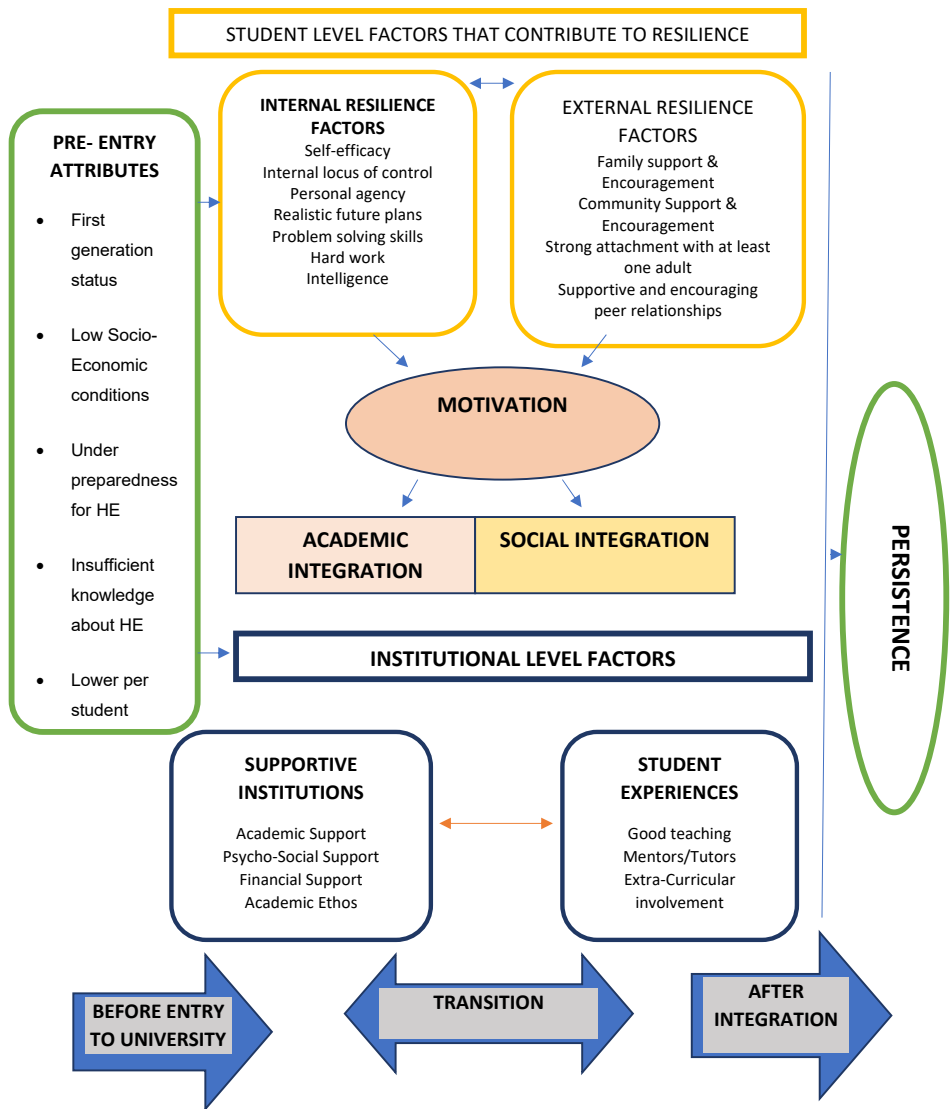
Figure 2: Proposed framework for the persistence of FYFGAS in higher education

These pre-entry risk factors create a distance between the student and the institution, which hinders a smooth transition. Those students who were able to successfully adapt and adjust seem to have psychological resilience attributes and dispositions that serve as a buffer against risk. These buffering factors are divided into two: firstly, internal resilience factors and secondly, external encouraging factors.

Student level

Internal resilience factors

FYFGAS who exhibit personal–psychological attributes that include self-efficacy, internal locus of control, personal agency and hard work, are better placed for success and persistence. Students who believe in their potential to succeed tend to be more positive and resilient and can motivate themselves to behave in more positive ways (Bandura, 1994). Self-efficacy is closely related to an internal locus of control, which is a belief that one is responsible for one's actions and their outcomes (Neill, 2006). Therefore, they will spend psychological energy on their studies while focusing on their academic goals which Astin (1999) refers to as 'involvement'. FYFGAS who have an intention to persist, get fully involved in the first term of the first year.

FYFGAS who have personal agency and take the necessary initiatives to accomplish their goals perform better and thrive. They will expend extra energy to help themselves such as attending extra classes or consulting a tutor or mentor.

The level of motivation was found to be directly linked to persistence in both the quantitative and qualitative results of this study. When university became challenging, they would talk to either parents or peers who would encourage them to persevere. These students persevered despite adversity because they really wanted to complete their qualification.

External resilience resources

External resilience resources such as community, family and friends assisted FYFGAS as they navigated higher education, as they tended to cushion the students from the impact of the challenges they faced. FYFGAS who had supportive families tended to experience less stress and exhibit high resilience (Wilks, 2008). Both quantitative and qualitative findings indicated that these students take their parents' and family's support seriously.

Many parents instilled the importance of attending university in their children. Some students indicated that when things got tough, it was their parents who encouraged them and reminded them of their resilience. This relationship had a strong influence on how they faced their challenges (Westbrook & Scott, 2012).

Involvement in their communities enabled the students to integrate their university culture into their home environment. In the African tradition, it is believed that one's education is not for self, but the community. Some students were supported by their communities in the form of teachers who set certain success expectations for them. Luedke (2014, p. 158) found that these 'cheerleaders' play significant roles in instilling high expectations of the students and provided guidance to them throughout their university education.

Peer support and encouragement also played a key role for FYFGAS, especially within the university. In this study, it was discovered that peers would make great efforts to support each other, providing accommodation, encouragement, food and other forms of assistance.

Senior students sometimes provided academic support and skills necessary to navigate higher education. Students who made friends who could face challenges with them, found it easier to adapt and persist.

All these forms of support led to the students feeling motivated, making it easier to engage in learning for the pleasure and rewards that could be achieved. Being motivated also makes it easier to integrate and socialise at university, internalising the values of the institution (Próspero et al., 2012) resulting in institutional and goal commitment (Tinto, 1993).

Institutional level factors that contribute to FYFGAS' persistence

In terms of student persistence, successful institutions were those that helped their students in their transition and retained them towards degree completion. Tinto (2012) reconsidered the role of institutions in advancing student persistence in that HEIs should cater and commit to educating all their students.

Institutional level support

Academic support

Students who felt confident of their academic skills and trusted that they could cope with the expected workload, had a higher intention to persist. Therefore, FYFGAS, who had lecturers who gave appropriate assessments and suitable feedback on their performance on time, were more persistent as was highlighted by Tinto (2012).

Furthermore, success and persistence were improved by the availability of resources such as libraries, laboratories and computer centres. Some students had difficulties acquiring computers or tablets that are necessary tools for learning. The institution was able to provide all first-year students who had financial aid with these devices, and that contributed to their success and persistence.

Psycho-social support

Higher education institutions (HEIs) that provided emotional and academic support to the first-year students indicate that they understand the needs of their students. Being a first-year student can involve times of loneliness and other forms of psychological distress and students need orientation to the new milieu of HE. This is especially true for FYFGAS because they come from areas and families where university culture is not discussed and prepared for. Orientation at the beginning of the year provided these students with skills, knowledge and values that were beneficial to their studies and prepared them for the challenges ahead.

Financial support

One primary reason for persistence for FYFGAS is financial support. Financial aid has been found in numerous studies of FGS as a major contributor to student persistence (Breier, 2010; Jones et al., 2008). While most of their parents paid for their fees, almost all of the

students in this study intended to apply for financial aid as their parents' finances could not sustain them. Institutions should have financial aid offices that provide information on bursaries and financial aid which is information not readily available to FYFGAS. Presently, in South Africa, this challenge has been partly addressed through the government in 2018 offering free education for all new students where their household combined annual income is lower than R350 000 per annum (Tshwane, 2018).

Student experiences

The students' experiences of the institution both in and out of class enhances their willingness to stay. For example, experiences with other students and lecturers in the lecture hall contribute directly to their decision to persevere as this is where they meet for learning and social exchanges (Tinto, 2006–2007).

Good teaching counts in persistence

Tinto (2012) posits that students are at university to learn which takes place primarily in the classroom. FYFGAS found that lecturers who acted in caring ways towards them increased their likelihood of persistence and retention. Lecturers who prepared and taught their courses with all the students in mind, made it easier for new FYFGAS to participate in class and feel that they also matter. These lecturers realise the academic barriers that their students face such as the overwhelming workload and turnaround time for assignments. McGhie (2012) states that African students are disadvantaged because they must construct meaning in a second language, so good teaching creates a positive feeling and students become more eager to learn.

The role of tutors and mentors in enhancing student experiences

Tutoring is often an integral part of a university's teaching-learning process and an essential strategy for improving students' academic success and goals (Morillas & Garrido, 2014). Tutoring is regarded as a 'high-impact practice' as it helps to improve the performance of first-year students. Participants in this study highlighted how the tutors helped them in understanding their course content and also helped them to solve any difficulties that arose.

Another initiative involving senior students who helped the FYFGAS to persist in their first year was the use of mentors. These are students who were not obliged to develop new students' academic skills but were there to help socialise them into the institution. According to Tinto (1993), social integration is vital in ensuring that students commit to the institution. This integration that serves to create a sense of belonging happens throughout the year.

FYFGAS, who have a positive experience from these interactions with senior students, stand in good stead for persistence and success. Combined with their psychological resilience factors, FYFGAS who find HE exciting and challenging will enhance their learning opportunities.

Experiencing involvement in extracurricular activities

Student retention and success is bolstered by a strong sense of belonging in HE students. This belongingness is nurtured through mainstream activities that all students participate in (Thomas, 2012). Involvement in extracurricular activities provides university students with opportunities to meet and connect with other students, explore areas of interest, and contribute to the campus and community (Andring, 2002). FYFGAS who got the chance to create networks and feelings of belonging, were integrated into the institution's social system which enhanced their chances of persistence. Astin (1984) believes that for students to learn and grow, they need to be actively involved in their environment. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) state that studies have proven the correlation between involvement and its positive relationship to persistence and educational attainment.

Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions

The main recommendation from this study is that HEIs should nurture all the first-year students and should understand their student communities in order to be able to provide them with the necessary support that they need. This can be done through collecting data on the profiles of their students. FYFGAS need personal and social support resilience skills. Universities should provide programmes that enhance these skills, such as training on assertiveness, locus of control, etc. and programmes on mentoring, peer counselling, tutoring and team-building during orientation. Furthermore, universities can design strategies that include parents and families in the life of the first-year student. This study also revealed the importance of student funding and academic development skills for FYFGAS.

Conclusion

This framework sought to explain what it means to be a FYFGAS in higher education and indicates the factors that contribute towards persistence and how HE could develop strategies to help them to succeed and persist through the first year. FYFGAS come from poor environments, have experienced inadequate educational preparation and have parents who do not have a university education, but through their own resilience and institutional support, they are able to thrive and succeed. In using the framework, HEIs will be able to assist these students to persist and complete their studies.

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Towards a Learning Mindset: First-Year University Students' Qualitative Perspectives on Gratitude in the Context of Learning Effort

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Abstract

Signature strengths, such as gratitude, can assist students in navigating the demanding first-year experience. However, more research is needed to explore the role of gratitude in relation to cognitive benefits for students. This article reports on a constructivist grounded theory study that explored South African students' conceptions and enactments of gratitude with regard to their learning efforts. Qualitative data were collected in individual open-ended interviews (n = 22, age-range = 18-23) and analysed using three interdependent coding phases (initial coding, focused coding and theoretical coding). The resultant grounded theory was titled 'Thanks: Gratitude and learning resilience amongst first-year university students'. The findings revealed that gratitude could take many forms and has a positive qualitative impact on students' learning resilience, and that gratitude and learning resilience are emancipatory in nature. Limitations and areas for further research conclude the discussion.

Keywords

first-year experience; gratitude; positive psychology; resilience; well-being

Introduction

The practice of writing down five things that one is grateful for on a weekly basis can bring about significant increases in well-being and decreases in ill-being (Emmons, 2008). Gratitude practices have been related to higher levels of resilience, improvements in life satisfaction and lower levels of depression (Fredrickson, 2004a). These findings could have particular relevance for university students.

A corpus of literature indicates that stress levels and the subsequent adverse effects are disproportionately higher amongst university students in comparison to the general population within the same age cohort in research across the globe (Bewick, Koutsopoulou, Miles, Slaa & Barkham, 2010; Grøtan, Sund & Bjerkeset, 2019). The stressors associated with university life are particularly prevalent during the first-year experience when students are expected to navigate numerous university-related demands and deal with maturational challenges (Arnett, 2015; Scott, 2018). Hence, stress can exacerbate a sense of unwellness amongst university students and leave them unfocused in their learning efforts

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(Mason, 2017; Richardson, Elliot & Roberts, 2017). Research is needed to explore ways in which students can be assisted in enhancing well-being and resilience in learning against the backdrop of stressful university experiences (Marcotte & Levesque, 2018; Mason, 2017).

Positive psychology (PP) emerged as a burgeoning field of research that argues for the identification and operationalisation of character strengths to promote well-being and resilient learning (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The concept of signature strengths forms the bedrock of PP (Seligman, 2011). Signature strengths refer to stable yet malleable capacities and virtues that prompt people to act in specific ways (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The use of strengths has been positively associated with higher levels of well-being and resiliency in learning and serve as a buffer against the deleterious effects of stress (Dahlsgaard, Peterson & Seligman, 2005; Niemiec & Lissing, 2016). Seligman and colleagues developed the Values in Action (VIA) classification of six virtues and 24 strengths (Dahlsgaard et al., 2005; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Gratitude is included as a signature strength in the VIA classification and refers to the capacity to recognise and appreciate benefits from others and to reciprocate with positive actions (Wissing, Potgieter, Guse, Khumalo & Nel, 2014). Gratitude has been extensively studied and is positively associated with a constellation of spiritual, physical and emotional benefits (Emmons & Stern, 2013; Kashdan, Mishra, Breen & Froh, 2009; Ma, Kibler & Sly, 2013). Additionally, gratitude is related to cognitive benefits, such as broadening and building people's perspectives and skill sets (Froh et al., 2010). The cognitive benefits associated with gratitude, such as enhancing resilience in learning, could prove valuable to students within a university context (Wilson, 2016).

Despite decades of research on gratitude, an evaluation of the literature revealed two gaps. Firstly, few studies have investigated the cognitive benefits of gratitude related to enhancing learning efforts amongst first-year university students (Guse, Vescovelli & Coxford, 2017; Howells, 2012). Assisting first-year students in improving learning efforts is a critical responsibility of those working in student counselling contexts and could contribute positively to the academic project (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014). Secondly, there is a paucity of qualitative studies that have explored participants' lived experiences of gratitude (Göcen, 2016). A qualitative exploration of the cognitive benefits of gratitude regarding learning efforts could offer a grounded description of students' thoughts, feelings, and perspectives. Such data could contribute to the existing body of mostly quantitative studies by adding to a nuanced and more holistic understanding of gratitude. Moreover, insight into the students' qualitative experiences of gratitude concerning learning efforts could guide the contributions that persons working in student development centres can make to the first-year students. Consequently, the purpose of this article is to report on a qualitative study that explored the cognitive benefits of gratitude in relation to learning amongst first-year university students.

Gratitude Amongst University Students

Gratitude is a social emotion that consists of two interlocking processes. The first process indicates that an individual has attained a positive outcome and the second, recognition that an external source, such as another person, nature, or a spiritual deity, has contributed to the

positive outcome (Emmons, 2008). In the case where gratitude is directed towards other persons, it can be described as a form of reciprocal altruism, and it aims to foster mutually beneficial relationships (Emmons & Mishra, 2011). Data suggest that gratitude is connected positively to a variety of prosocial outcomes, for example, well-being, positive youth development, and quality of life (Kashdan et al., 2009; Ma et al., 2013). Correspondingly, gratitude is negatively related to indicators of psychological distress, such as anxiety and depression (Emmons & Stern, 2013). However, the experience and practice of gratitude play out within a context characterised by a unique set of intangible variables, such as cultural influences, political realities, and personal dispositions (Göcen, 2016; Wissing et al., 2014). Hence, the expression of gratitude should be interpreted from the vantage point of a particular context and not in a blanket manner.

Wilson (2016) indicates that gratitude is one of seven signature strengths that appear to be predictive of academic success in educational settings; the other strengths that are predictive of academic success are grit, zest, self-control, optimism, social intelligence, and curiosity (cf. Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich & Linkins, 2009). Whereas the majority of these seven signature strengths have been studied in relation to students' learning efforts (Duckworth & Seligman, 2006; Icekson, Kaplan & Slobodin, 2019), only limited studies have been conducted on the effects of gratitude on students' learning efforts (Howells, 2012; Wilson, 2016). The literature on the role of gratitude in relation to learning efforts reveals four overarching themes, namely focus in learning, resilience in learning, gratitude as a pathway to hope, and the broaden and build perspective.

Regarding focus in learning, Howells (2012) adopts a positive and affirmative approach by suggesting that students intend to be focused learners. However, many students lack the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to be focused learners (Mason, 2019). Due to the stressful nature of the first-year experience, students may enter the educational context in a state of distress that could limit their capacity to be focused learners (Howells, 2012). Distressed states tend to feed off each other in a downward spiral that leads to negative attitudes or beliefs that further exacerbate unfocused learning (Wilson, 2016). It is hypothesised that gratitude practices can assist students in approaching their learning in more focused states, which may culminate in upward cycles of engagement and ultimately in engaged learning (Howells, 2012).

The notion of resilience in learning is related to Dweck's (2016) conception of fixed and growth mindsets. A fixed mindset, also referred to as an entity theory of intelligence, refers to a personally held belief that persons have pre-established and set quantities of skills, talents, and capacities. Persons who hold fixed mindsets may mistakenly construe learning encounters as threatening to their psychological well-being since they regard themselves as being limited in terms of skills, talents, and capacities. Furthermore, persons who hold fixed mindsets will focus on coming across in a positive light and not necessarily on acquiring new skills in a learning situation. A growth mindset, described in terms of the incremental theory of intelligence, indicates that people can develop the skills through persistent effort and grit (Duckworth & Seligman, 2006; Dweck, 2016). It is theorised that gratitude could assist students in cultivating growth mindsets, thereby strengthening their resilience and perseverance in learning (Howells, 2012).

Research has suggested that gratitude and hope are closely related (Witvliet, Richie, Root Luna & Van Tongeren, 2018). The concept of hope involves three interdependent aspects. Firstly, hope entails a positive and meaningful future perspective that creates a dynamic tension between persons' current and future or desired states of living. Secondly, hope requires pathways thinking, which is the capacity to engage in creative problem-solving in addressing challenges and stressors in the pursuit of relevant life goals. Lastly, hope is dependent on the personal agency that would allow persons to be proactive and deliberate in the pursuit of their goals. Research has indicated that individual differences in hope are significant predictors of students' overall grade point averages and graduation rates (Dixson, Keltner, Worrell & Mello, 2018; Snyder, Shorey, Cheavens, Pulvers, Adams & Wiklund, 2002).

Based on the broaden and build theory postulated by Fredrickson (2001, 2004b), positive emotions such as gratitude generate broad thought-action repertoires that form stable intellectual and social resources. For example, positive emotions could enhance problem-solving capabilities (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005). Consequently, it is posited that gratitude as a positive emotion could be empowering in nature by assisting students in concretizing a sense of resilience in the face of stressors (Emmons & Stern, 2013). In this regard, Wilson (2016) found that students who were supported by educators to reflect on gratitude towards learning reported higher levels of gratitude compared to a control group who were not supported.

Notwithstanding the immense contribution of research on gratitude related to human well-being (Emmons & Stern, 2013; Froh et al., 2011), reference to the qualitative effects of gratitude on learning effort amongst first-year students is scant (Howells, 2012; Wilson, 2016). Therefore, this article endeavours to contribute to the field by sharing findings from a qualitative study on students' perspectives on the role of gratitude in learning efforts.

Method

Research design and approach

A qualitative design articulated from a constructivist grounded theory perspective was adopted to conduct the study (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory aims to describe processes and drivers as depicted through participants' lived experiences. Since grounded theory is regarded as an appropriate approach in areas where there is a limited understanding of social processes, it was deemed an applicable methodology in this study (Glaser, 2002). Furthermore, grounded theory was selected because it allowed the researcher to advance an argument on the value of gratitude to students' learning efforts, thereby making it possible to create a framework for possible interventions. Lastly, a constructivist approach was adopted due to the flexible, albeit rigorous analytic processes that allowed for the postulation of a grounded theory resonant with participants' realities as creators of knowledge (Charmaz, 2006).

Context

The study was conducted at a large South African residential university that hosts approximately 60 000 students. First-year students comprise nearly one-quarter of the student population at the specific university. The student population reflects the broader South African demographics, namely 51% female, 80.7% African, 8.8% coloured, 8.1% white, 2.5% Indian/Asian (Statistics South Africa, 2016).

Participants

Data were collected from 22 first-year students using a nonprobability, purposive and voluntary sample (female = 13, male = 9, age-range = 18-23). Criteria for inclusion were that participants had to be 18 years of age or older and be enrolled for academic studies at the university where the study being reported on was conducted. Open invitations for participation were sent to students who had recently completed a learning and study skills intervention program at the specific South African university. It was anticipated that students who had attended the learning and study skills intervention programme would have obtained a good understanding of learning effort and could, therefore, be in a good position to reflect on the role of gratitude in the learning process. An open invitation to participate in the study was sent to all students who met the criteria. A total of 45 students voluntarily agreed to participate. It was determined that theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2006) was achieved after 20 interviews. Subsequently, it was decided to conclude the data collection procedure after 22 qualitative interviews.

Data Collection and Procedure

Data were primarily collected through individual open-ended interviews. The two guiding interview questions were: *What role does gratitude play in your learning and study efforts? How do you enact gratitude when you engage in the learning process?* Additional probing questions (e.g. *Can you provide an example to illustrate your response?*), requests for additional information (e.g. *You raised an interesting point, please tell me more*), and probing techniques (e.g. summarising and reflecting on participants' responses) were used to illuminate participants' experiences during the interviews.

From this point forward, theoretical sampling guided the remainder of the interviews. For example, during the first three interviews, it became clear that stress within the university context played an important role in participants' conceptions of the role of gratitude concerning their learning efforts. Consequently, participants in the subsequent interviews were explicitly asked about the role of stress in their learning efforts (e.g. *Stress appears to be an essential factor that influences learning efforts amongst students. What are your thoughts on the topic?*). The interviews, approximately 45 minutes to an hour in duration, were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis and Rigour

The software program ATLAS.ti version 7, was used to manage the data analysis process. As a first step in the qualitative analysis, I immersed myself in the data by transcribing the

interviews and repeatedly reading the data set. Next, data were analysed through three interdependent coding phases, namely initial coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding.

The initial coding was conducted at a granular level focusing on two- to three-word segments at a time. Initial coding was used in coding the first five interviews. Then a process of focused coding followed whereby the initial codes that made the most analytic sense were selected for further conceptual coding. Lastly, the conceptual codes formed the basis for additional theoretical coding. Despite the linear description of the coding process here, the procedure was iterative and required constant comparisons between codes, memos, and field notes.

To ensure rigour, Charmaz's (2006) model of credibility, originality and usefulness served as a criterion to evaluate the quality of the emerging grounded theory. Credibility was ensured through obtaining rich data from participants and subsequent participant verification. Additionally, ongoing reflexive memoing assisted in enhancing credibility. Originality was pursued through a literature check and ensuring that the emerging grounded theory offered a novel representation of the data. Usefulness was achieved through the explication of the emerging theory to the research context. The findings from the study were presented to a subset of five students from the sample of 22 participants who voluntarily agreed to attend a feedback session. This subset of students was representative of the total sample in terms of gender and age (female = 3, male = 2, age-range = 18-23). Participants agreed that the proposed grounded theory accurately represented their perspectives.

Research Ethics

The Research Ethics Committee of the university where the study was conducted approved the research project (Ref.#: REC/2014/07/003), and participants gave individual written informed consent. All identifying information (e.g. surnames, names, and student numbers) were treated confidentially and removed before data analysis. No course credit or financial benefits were offered for participation.

Findings and Discussion

The data analysis revealed an emerging grounded theory that was titled *Thanks: Gratitude and learning resilience among first-year university students.* The proposed grounded theory narrates the demands that students encounter within the university setting and how gratitude aids in establishing an emancipatory state that enriches learning efforts. The grounded theory comprises five interlinked phases, namely (1) arriving at university, (2) being overwhelmed; (3) turning inward with a purpose; (4) the benefits of gratitude; and (5) the learning mindset (Figure 1).
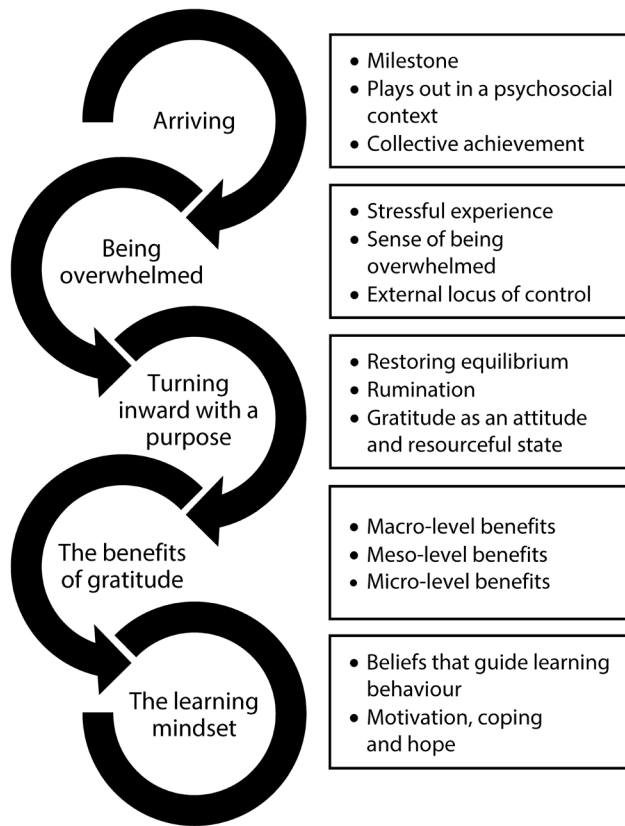
Figure 1: Phases of the proposed grounded theory

In Figure 1, the five phases are represented as interweaving spirals. These interweaving spirals illustrate the idea that the phases are iterative and do not necessarily occur in a linear and compartmentalised manner. The main features of each phase are included in Figure 1 and elaborated upon in the following sections.

Selected verbatim quotes are included to validate the interpretations. The referencing system in parenthesis denotes participant number (e.g. P#1 for Participant 1), gender (M = male, F = female) and age. In the sections that follow, the five qualitative phases are presented. Then, the findings are summarised and discussed.

Arriving

The storyline of the proposed grounded theory begins with students' arrival at university. Entering university is regarded as a significant milestone in the lives of young people (Chickering, Dalton & Stamm, 2006). Amongst other things, entry to university provides the context for psychosocial growth and development and preparing for one's future occupation (Blimling, 2010). Participants indicated that arriving at university was a notable milestone in their lives, as shown by Participant 1: *"So, coming here* [university] *was like a dream come true. I felt I am on track and moving to become the person I want to be"* (M, 19).

The culture in which psychosocial development and the process of entering university takes place has a significant effect on individuals (Blimling, 2010). Thus, students' experiences may be contingent on the dynamic interplay of diverse factors within the psychosocial environment (Arnett, 2015). This is particularly relevant within the South African context.

As a country steeped in decades of conflict and animosity, racial oppression and inequality strongly influenced the domain of higher education and resulted in asymmetrical educational opportunities (DHET, 2017). The abolishment of apartheid and the advent of democracy saw concerted efforts by the authorities to widen access to higher education (Wilson-Strydom, 2015). However, the widening of access did not necessarily translate into student success (Sosibo & Katiya, 2015). Data indicate that close to half of students drop out of university before graduating (DHET, 2013). Moreover, many South African first-year students are first-generation students who are not native English speakers, come from disadvantaged schools, and experience an array of socioeconomic challenges (Scott, 2018).

Consequently, arriving at university is regarded by some as a significant and collective achievement in the lives of students, their families, and the country as a whole (DHET, 2013; Scott, 2018). Participant 7, an 18-year-old male, explained the experience as follows: *"I come from a rural area … everyone celebrated when I was accepted to university … I am the first person from my family to come to university … it is important for us."*

The aforementioned is a significant finding, as Western cultures, where the majority of gratitude research has been conducted, tends to adopt an ontology centred on individualism (Arndt & Naude, 2016). In contrast, many persons of African descent tend to adopt a collectivist world view (Baloyi, 2008). Hence, the spirit in which the value of gratitude is studied and understood may, in some instances, be steeped in a theory of individualism. This particular finding suggests that the cultural background of participants influenced how they understood, amongst other things, the milestone of entering university. Participant 17 offered some additional context in this regard: *"Being grateful is about celebrating everybody's success as one's own … we celebrate together"* (F, 18).

Thus, arriving at university was an event described in terms of collective achievement and shared gratitude. As such, it set the stage for further learning and studying as participants prepared for their future roles.

Being overwhelmed

Participants generally agreed that university life is stressful. This is consistent with the literature that confirms that stress levels and their subsequent adverse effects are particularly prevalent amongst university students (Bewick et al., 2010; Grøtan et al., 2019). Research suggests that students struggling with high stress levels and mental health problems are more likely to report low academic performance compared to students reporting few or moderate symptoms of mental health distress (Grøtan et al., 2019). Consequently, distress can affect mental well-being and negatively impinge on students' academic success.

Several categories of stress emerged from participants' qualitative responses. These categories included intrapersonal (*"… [I] feel like a failure…"* [P#11, F, 19]), interpersonal (*"… causes me to fight with loved ones…"* [P#19, F, 18]), spiritual (*"… sometimes I doubt the purpose of it all…"* [P#7, M, 20]), financial (*"… university studies are expensive … it's putting stress on me…"* [P#1, M, 19]) and emotional (*"… feel anxious and sad…"* [P#16, F, 22]) stressors.

Stressful experiences could give rise to negative emotional states, which in turn narrow and restrict, versus broaden and build students' thought–action repertoires (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005). Subsequently, the capacity to access intellectual and social resources required for optimal learning, as would be the case with a broaden and build experience, could become diminished (Fredrickson, 2004b). This culminates in a context where it becomes normative for students to adopt fragile versus resilient attitudes in response to their learning efforts (Wilson, 2016).

As students struggle to cope with ever-escalating levels of stress amid a context of diminished agency, a sense of powerlessness can emerge (Mason, 2017; Richardson et al., 2017). This sense of powerlessness was confirmed by the data and described by participants as feeling overwhelmed. The following two quotes give voice to participants' experiences:

> … I get confused with the busyness, and it's like an overwhelmingness that gets hold of my mind … it's so difficult to cope with studies at those times … it robs me of all my motivation.
>
> (P#15, F, 19)

> When my life is hectic when there are too many stressful things happening, I feel someone else is driving my life … I would describe it as helplessness … circumstances are dumbing me down.
>
> (P#17, F, 18)

The quotes above illustrate that students face a series of challenging situations that have a cumulative effect and may become overwhelming: *"… during the semester, I said to myself that this is too much; I need to deal with these problems"* (P#6, M, 18). Moreover, the sense of feeling overwhelmed infringes on students' capacity to learn and study, as illustrated by the following quote: *"Feeling stressed out doesn't allow me to study … all the energy all drawn out of me, I cannot focus … feel unmotivated"* (P#8, F, 23).

Another central idea that emerged from the data was that students tended to view stressors as factors external to them and over which they had little control. In this regard, Seligman (2011) suggests that how people routinely explain events in their lives has a significant impact on their sense of resilience. Persons who perceive that they have limited control over external events (such as stressors within the university context) and therefore adopt an external locus of control would be more likely to struggle with focus and resilience in learning (Grøtan et al., 2019; Howells, 2012; Wilson, 2016). In this regard Participant 14 indicated the following: *"Sometimes I feel as if I cannot cope with a situation … I do not have the skills to cope … exam times would be an example"* (F, 20).

Persons from collectivist nations have reported higher scores on external locus of control compared to individualistic societies (Rossier, Dahourou & McCrae, 2005). Hence,

the inclination to exercise control over a person's life is consistent with the world view of individuality and self-reliance found primarily in Western contexts (Arndt & Naude, 2016; Baloyi, 2008). Subsequently, a reliance on individualistic agency may not be considered as vital to participants in non-Western contexts. Notwithstanding their inclination for collectivist thinking, participants indicated that they retain high levels of autonomy by turning inward when attempting to address the sense of being overwhelmed.

Turning inward with a purpose

In the face of feeling overwhelmed, numerous students indicated that they turn inward. The decision to turn inward was described as moving into a reflexive space where challenges could be considered and addressed in a composed manner. Participants described the process as follows:

> For me, it is my safe space … I retreat to my safe space when life becomes too hard … it allows me to think … (P#17, F, 18)

> My inner sanctuary helps me unwind from stress … it is where I make sense of things again. (P#20, F, 19)

Turning inward can take on many forms. Participant 6 noted, *"I meditate to calm down"* (M, 18), whereas another participant explained that *"I lose myself in reading…"* (P#22, F, 18). Other participants point to prayer (*"Praying to God is my security…"* P#3, 19, M) and exercise (*"Running to clear my thoughts"* P#5, 18, M) as forms of turning inward. Participant 20 added that she derives benefits from turning inward through *"… discussions with my brother … he helps me gain a better understanding of the opportunities that I have received"* (F, 19). In reaction to the participant's response, the following question was posed during the interview: *"Can you give me an example of how your brother helps you to gain a better understanding?"* She answered as follows: *"For me, it is about thinking clearly and looking for what is good … he is a pastor [the participant's brother] and he is very good at that sort of thing"* (P#20, 19, F). The importance of religious belief also emerged as a form of solace for participants (*"…my belief in God helps me during difficult times"* P#14, 20, F). This is consistent with previous research that found religiosity and spirituality to be essential aspects in promoting a sense of purpose and meaning amongst students in university settings (Wissing et al., 2014), especially in African contexts (Mason, 2017).

Thus, regardless of the form that turning inward takes, participants appeared to enter a state where a sense of equilibrium could be restored. This sense of balance, or an inner sanctum, offers participants the opportunity to establish distance between themselves and the challenges that they encounter, and allows them to generate energy to engage with their studies in a meaning-directed manner. This notion was expressed as follows by Participant 8: *"…it is about getting to grips with life again…"* (M, 23).

Students' conceptions of turning inward are synonymous with Howells' (2012) notion of an innermost attitude. She explains that an innermost attitude necessitates thinking from the depths of a person's being (Howells, 2012). Hence, it is a state of deepened reflective thinking and practice that could have a positive effect on a person's thoughts, feelings, and

emotions. In such instances, gratitude is not the expression of appreciation, but an attitude towards life steeped in, amongst other things, positivity and growth orientation (Dweck, 2016; Emmons, 2008).

However, a small subset of participants (4/22) indicated that they tended to ruminate when turning inward. One participant explained her experience as follows: *"If my mind is tired and I worry a lot, thinking about my problems makes it worse. I can say that I become fearful, or angry at other times"* (P#10, F, 19). In response to this answer from the participant, I, as the researcher, posed the following question: *"Are there times when you think deeply about your life and manage to find answers?"* The participant retorted: *"If I am not tired, I would say that I feel positive … feeling tired makes me see things quite negatively … when I had a good day, and I think about those good experiences, yes, then I feel much better, then I find answers to problems"* (P#10, F, 19).

Consequently, it appears that reflecting on essential matters while in a resourceful state might be more critical than merely turning inward. Stated differently, embracing gratitude as an attitude towards life, as opposed to the mere expression of appreciation, could prove beneficial to students. Participants in subsequent interviews confirmed this conjecture. Amongst others, Participant 12 mused that *"When I choose to think about hard things … when I am comfortable or thankful for what is good when I think about it at those times, I find better answers"* (F, 21). Participant 20 also highlighted a similar sentiment: *"Being grateful … not just about saying thank you for good things … for me, it's about interacting with good things and the stressors with a positive attitude"* (F, 19). Thus, turning inward *with a purpose* appears to be more critical than merely turning inward. Moreover, purposeful exploration of concern from one's innermost being within a mindset of gratitude (Howells, 2012) seems vital if the goal is to enter a state of mind that could promote positivity (Fredrickson, 2004a, 2004b). This interpretation is coherent with findings that suggest positive emotions, such as gratitude, could have a beneficial effect through fostering a sense of resilience in the face of stressors (Howells, 2012). The finding further suggests that students ought to pay attention to managing their states (e.g. what and how they manage thinking, feeling and behavioural patterns in a given moment) when engaging in learning efforts. In this regard, expressing gratitude could assist students in entering a resourceful (focused, calm and centred) versus un-resourceful state (e.g. apprehensive, anxious or stressed) that could prove beneficial in promoting learning efforts (Howells, 2012; Nelson & Low, 2011). According to Emmons (2008), people can be assisted in cultivating resourceful states via reflecting on and writing down what they feel grateful for. However, students should not be forced to express gratitude but ought to be assisted in doing so through their own volition if the goal is to enhance resourceful learning (Nelson & Low, 2011; Wilson & Harris, 2015).

The benefits associated with gratitude

Through the process of theoretical sampling, the value of gratitude concerning students' learning efforts was explored further. All participants agreed that gratitude plays a vital role in terms of learning efforts. From participants' feedback, the role of gratitude was categorised according to macro-, daily living- and individual-level influences.

At a macro-level, participants indicated that a culture of gratitude could play an essential role in managing transformation and student protests, amongst other things. The notion of transformation has been a foremost factor in discourse in the recent history of South African higher education (DHET, 2013). Dissatisfaction with the rate of transformation, amongst other things, gave rise to a spate of protests, such as #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall (Booysen, 2017). Whereas some of the claims put forward by students and their respective leadership, such as a call for more significant financial investment in higher education have merit (Booysen, 2017; Scott, 2018), South African scholar Jonathan Jansen warns that debilitating cultures of ingratitude and resentment amongst South African students are areas of concern (Maphanga, 2014).

Students' qualitative perspectives echoed such sentiments. For example: *"Being grateful will allow us to find a shared connection through education. We must be thankful to lecturers, to government, our parents … to have the chance to study"* (P#13, F, 20). Another participant added that *"… being grateful is important … there is a time to be grateful … a time to disagree … there must be gratefulness for differences too…"* (P#2, M, 21). Participant 16, a 22-year-old female, agreed and added that gratitude has a role to play in addressing political challenges such as patriarchy: *"… the contributions of all must be respected … women have to be seen as well … not having equal opportunities adds more burdens … makes graduating with a degree more difficult."* Another participant added, *"Because of the struggles that our parents and grandparents had to face, we have the opportunity [to study at university] … people suffered … gratitude is not just about feeling good … it is about saying thank you for the sacrifices"* (P#17, F, 18).

Hence, consistent with the literature, the qualitative data suggest that experiencing gratitude should be viewed as a practice that can elicit social change within the education context and not merely as a blanket requirement for mastering a specific set of positive emotions (Emmons, 2008). Furthermore, gratitude ought to promote reciprocal altruism at a macro-level through fostering mutually beneficial relationships between persons across the political system (Emmons & Mishra, 2011; Maphanga, 2014). Within such a milieu, gratitude can potentially enhance students' learning efforts and promote a climate of meaningful exchange that endorses purposeful learning (Booysen, 2017; Maphanga, 2014).

At the level of daily living, the data revealed that a sense of gratitude could assist students in adopting a resilient attitude when encountering stressors. Concerning resilience, Participant 14 explained that *"Being grateful reminds me that it's not all about me. The world is not out to get me. It gives me the confidence to deal with problems positively"* (20, F). Such a proactive stance is in stark contrast to a sense of powerlessness that could emerge when facing stressors. This finding is also consistent with literature that suggests gratitude could have a buffering effect, thereby enhancing a sense of resilience when people encounter challenging life circumstances (Emmons, 2013). A second benefit was related to positive interactions between lecturers and students. In this regard, one participant explained that *"It is important to understand that lecturers often make sacrifices for students … the effort that some lecturers take in preparing slides and classes … I feel grateful and respect and it leads to stronger relationships"* (P#4, M, 18). Researchers have found that gratitude has positive effects on interpersonal relationships (Emmons & Mishra, 2011).

At an individual level, participants spoke about the potential that gratitude has to enhance their focus and resilience in their learning efforts: *"Being grateful … keeps me grounded … realize that I am here to study and make the most of the opportunity"* (P#9, F, 18). Participant 17 added: *"Being grateful gives me the motivation to expect more of myself. I am showing that I am grateful for the opportunity by putting in 100 percent effort"* (18, F). Additionally, participants suggested that entering a state of being grateful is a valuable resource in establishing cycles of increased learning efforts. For example: *"…being grateful helps me to be more motivated; it makes me concentrate for longer and to remember better"* (P#4, M, 18).

The role of gratitude in forging a learning mindset is explored further in the next section.

The learning mindset

The concept of a mindset refers to a set of assumptions, perspectives, and a philosophy of life that persons hold (Anderson, 2019). The notion of a learning mindset, therefore, points to a set of personally held assumptions and beliefs that guide students' philosophies of and approaches to learning. For participants in this study, gratitude fulfilled an essential function in their learning mindsets. Specifically, gratitude aided with volitional behaviour and better coping skills and inspired a sense of hope.

Regarding volitional behaviour, participants indicated that a sense of gratitude assisted them in establishing a motivational framework that drives their learning efforts. Amongst others, Participant 13 suggested that gratitude *"…helps me to feel energized and connected to those around me"* (F, 20). Another participant indicated that *"…my motivation is stronger when I appreciate what I have … my family who supports me, my talents, appreciate just everything that helps me to learn and study"* (P#21, F, 21). In this regard, Ryan and Deci (2017) indicate that motivation is driven by three basic psychological needs, namely autonomy, relatedness and competence. From participants' comments, it was apparent that a sense of gratitude satisfied the requirements of autonomy (*"…my family believes in me and that makes me feel confident in myself as a student…"* P#4, M, 18), relatedness (*"…feeling grateful helps me to know that people support me…"* P#18, F, 18), and competence (*"…every single day I say thank you for the skills, the opportunities I got to make it to university…"* P#5, M, 19).

Gratitude was also related to coping efforts. Expressly, participants indicated that a sense of gratitude served as an emotional scaffolding for effective coping. One participant remarked, *"Gratitude reminds me that there are people who believe in me…"* (P#6, M, 18). Other participants echoed this sentiment. For example, Participant 19 stated, *"Knowing that others count on me gives me the responsibility to cope with whatever life throws at me"* (F, 18). Participant 15 added that *"God gave me the talents and skills to be here [at university] … thankful for the gifts"* (F, 19).

The aforementioned qualitative interpretation suggests that gratitude may serve as an essential factor that regulates the reciprocal interaction between the challenges that participants encounter as part of their learning efforts and enabling factors in their environments (e.g. social support structure and religiosity). As such, an attitude of gratitude

appears not only to enhance coping (*"…being grateful makes me a better and stronger person"* P#16, F, 22), but also to promote a sense of competence (*"…as a grateful person I am more humble and believe in my abilities…"* (P#11, F, 19) and give rise to proactive responses (*"…the number one benefit … is that I am not scared to pursue my goals…"* P#7, M, 18), which could enhance students' learning efforts (Nelson & Low, 2011; Wilson, 2016).

Participants agreed that a spirit of gratitude enhances a sense of hope concerning their learning efforts and academic goals. In this regard, Participant 20 explained that gratitude serves as the basis for an *"encouraging future that keeps me believing that my life is going somewhere"* (F, 19). Another participant commented that gratitude helps him to remain resourceful when encountering challenges: *"When I think of the things that I am grateful for, it is like a reflection on good experiences, and what I have learned … this improves my problem-solving abilities, and it improves my creativity in difficult situations"* (P#2, M, 21).

The qualitative data, as indicated in the quotes presented above, reflect elements consistent with hope theory (Snyder et al., 2002). Specifically, participants reported that gratitude played an essential role in creating a meaningful future perspective (*"…grateful for what I have now, like the support from my family … also about remaining positive about the future … positive about the contributions that I can make in the future"* P#17, F, 18), encouraging pathways thinking (*"…gratitude teaches you to think deeply about things in life … helps with dealing with challenges that happen at university"* P#5, M, 19), and facilitating agency (*"I am have to take responsibility for my life … my cross to bear…"* P#1, M, 19).

Collectively, participants indicated that volitional behaviour, coping efforts and hope form the foundation of a mindset that encourages meaningful learning within a university context. Hence, turning inward with a spirit of gratitude could assist students in transmuting the stressors of university life into opportunities that inspire and motivate them to engage in academic learning.

Discussion

This qualitative study provided a grounded theory, titled *Thanks: Gratitude and learning resilience among first-year university students* on the role of gratitude in relation to a sample of first-year university students' learning efforts. The grounded theory proposes that gratitude could play an essential role in the learning efforts of first-year students. Specifically, it was indicated that gratitude could assist students in embracing the opportunity to further their academic studies by drawing on internal resources and establishing mutually beneficial and supportive relationships with others. Experiencing gratitude was presented as a process characterised by experiences of celebration (arriving at university), feeling overwhelmed (engaging with stressors) and drawing on internal resources (turning inward) to solidify a learning mindset characterised by hope that promotes well-being and resilience in learning despite stressful university experiences. Research by, amongst others, Emmons (2008) suggests that gratitude can be cultivated through practice and reflective exercise. This conceptualisation is consistent with the extant literature that regards gratitude as playing a supporting role in the promotion of well-being and learning resilience amongst university students (Howells, 2012; Wilson, 2016).

Conclusion

This qualitative study offered a unique insight into participants' lived experiences of gratitude as an avenue to enhance learning resilience within the university context. The study contributes to the existing literature by indicating that gratitude could have a positive qualitative impact on students' learning resilience, and that gratitude and learning resilience could be empowering. The processes of arriving, feeling overwhelmed and turning inward appeared to strengthen a sense of gratitude amongst the participants in the study.

The findings from the study should be viewed with some limitations in mind. Firstly, the study was cross-sectional, thereby offering a glimpse of participants' experiences at one point in time. Consequently, the research cannot account for dynamic changes across time. Secondly, data were collected from students at a single South African university. A different qualitative picture may emerge when considering the perspectives of students in diverse settings. Thirdly, because an open invitation to participate in the study was sent to participants, they may have been particularly motivated to share their perspectives. Considering the views of students who chose not to participate in the study could have offered additional insights into students' grounded realities. Fourthly, no baseline measures of gratitude were included as reference points in the study. A baseline assessment could have helped establish a better understanding of the research setting and participants' qualitative perspectives.

Notwithstanding the limitations, the study serves as a gateway for further research. Amongst other things, researchers could consider drawing on gratitude interventions and support initiatives to assist students in developing and enhancing gratitude as a resource to draw on during the first-year experience and beyond. Emmons (2008) offers guidelines on empirically based gratitude interventions that could be adapted for the university context. Furthermore, the empirical linkages between gratitude and academic success and well-being outcomes could be investigated across time, using longitudinal designs.

The most significant contribution of this study is the affirmation that an attitude of gratitude bodes well for the future of higher education and the well-being and resilience in the learning of students. Participant 12 summarised this view as follows: *"Gratitude is about more than just feeling happy … also about the way you choose to act when life does not go your way … it is an attitude of strength"* (F, 21).

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"My name is Matshepo … Mother of Hope": Examining Hope amid the First-Year Experience

Henry Mason*

Abstract

Student affairs practitioners have essential roles to play in assisting students in concretising a sense of hope. However, more research is needed to explore the role of hope amongst university students during the first-year experience. This article reports on a mixed methods study that explored hope in the context of the first-year experience. The quantitative phase of the study explored the relationships between hope, flourishing, psychological distress, and academic achievement amongst a sample of 296 first-year South African university students (mean age = 20.70, SD = 1.30, female = 63%). Statistical analyses revealed significant relationships between the constructs assessed. Students who reported high scores on hope also obtained higher academic marks compared to participants who reported lower scores on the same construct. The qualitative phase of the study explored differences in conceptions of hope between participants (N = 28, age-range 18-22) who reported high versus low scores on a quantitative measure of hope. Two qualitative themes emerged, namely the trichotomy of hope, and hope-based generalised resistance resources. The findings indicate that students who present with high levels of hope may be more inclined to pursue academic goals and experience a sense of well-being. Implications for student support are discussed, and the importance of promoting realistic hope amid the first-year experience is highlighted.

Keywords

first-year experience; hope; mixed methods; positive psychology; well-being

Introduction

Hope refers to the conviction that the future will be better than the present, and that people have the power to make it so (Anderson, Turner & Heath, 2016; Lopez, 2013). Many young people, such as first-year students, pin their hopes of a better future on completing a university degree (Cherrington, 2018). However, the road to achieving a university degree is fraught with challenges and a relatively small proportion of students eventually graduate (Habib, 2016; Wilson-Strydom, 2015). In this regard, Freire (1997, p. 106) argues that it is essential to "maintain hope even when the harshness of reality may suggest the opposite". Persons working in a university context, such as student affairs practitioners, have essential

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roles to play in motivating students to embrace, inter alia, hope as a strength in the face of challenges (De Villiers, 2014; Mason, 2019).

Hope theory emerged as a prominent focus of discourse with the introduction of positive psychology (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The discipline of positive psychology studies factors such as positive emotions and virtues that make life worth living despite challenges (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Hope refers to the expectation of a positive and meaningful future and the associated effort required to achieve such an outcome (Snyder et al., 1991).

Numerous studies have indicated that hope is positively associated with well-being and engagement and inversely related to experiences of anxiety and distress (Guse & Vermaak, 2011; Martins et al., 2018; Snyder, 2002). In the higher education context, research points to positive relationships between hope and academic achievement, problem-solving and task completion (Day et al., 2010; Khodarahimi, 2013; Morisano et al., 2010). According to Cherrington (2018), hope has the potential to humanise the educational context by empowering students and others with the awareness that they can be active agents in scripting and enacting optimistic future-oriented perspectives. In light of these arguments, hope could have particular relevance for university students, especially during the stressful first-year university experience (De Villiers, 2014; Scott, 2018).

The transition from school to university is particularly demanding and students often require assistance in establishing the skills, knowledge and abilities needed to navigate the change effectively (Mason, 2017; Wilson-Strydom, 2015). The demanding nature of the first-year experience is further exacerbated by, amongst other things, maturational challenges, socioeconomic stressors, and being first-generation students (Arnett, 2015; Booysen, 2017; Jansen & Walters, 2019).

It is against this backdrop that a number of scholars have called for the exploration of hope as a psychological strength in assisting students in coping with university-related stressors (Anderson, 2016; Cherrington, 2018; n9Guse & Vermaak, 2011). Specifically, researchers argue that hope centred around a compelling vision, problem-solving capacities and agency could assist students in managing university-related challenges and strengthening academic resilience (Day et al., 2010; Guse & Vermaak, 2011; Snyder, 2002).

To date, limited South African research has explored the role of hope as a construct within the domain of the first-year experience (Cherrington, 2018; De Villiers, 2014). Previous research has focused mostly on international contexts (Martins et al., 2018; Snyder, 2002), while national studies have considered university students' conceptions of hope (Maree & Maree, 2013) and the relationship between hope and psychological well-being amongst schoolchildren (Guse & Vermaak, 2011). It is, therefore, necessary to examine empirically the value of factors, such as hope, that could strengthen the resolve and support students in navigating the first-year experience (Cherrington, 2018; De Villiers, 2014).

Quantitative investigations could offer objective results concerning the relationships between hope and significant university-related outcomes, such as flourishing, psychological distress, and academic achievement of students (Anderson, 2016; Trochim, 2016). In contrast, qualitative analyses could offer insight into students' conceptions of hope (Brocki

& Wearden, 2006). The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods can, inter alia, enable researchers to explore qualitatively the differentiation between participants who report high and low scores on a quantitative measure of hope, thereby offering a more nuanced perspective compared to adopting mono-methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This article reports a mixed methods study that explored hope amongst a sample of first-year South African university students. The quantitative data will indicate that hope has a significant bearing on flourishing, psychological distress and academic achievement. The qualitative perspective will offer insight into students' lived experiences, with a particular emphasis on differences in the conceptions of hope between students who reported high and low scores on a hope scale.

In the next section, the theoretical perspective and variables being investigated are discussed. Then, the methodological approach that was adopted is presented. This is followed by reporting on the results of the study. The article is concluded by summarising the main findings.

Theoretical Perspective: Hope amongst University Students

At its core, hope is concerned with a person's mental perspective or vision of the future (Frankl, 2008; Marques, Gallagher & Lopez, 2017). Research indicates that an optimistic vision establishes a meaning-directed tension between where persons perceive themselves to be mentally in the present and where they long to be in the future (Bressler, Bressler & Bressler, 2010; Gallagher, Marques & Lopez, 2017). A fear-based or pessimistic orientation towards the future could be indicative of psychological distress (Frankl, 2008). Furthermore, the concept of hope comprises three interlocking processes: goals, pathways and agency (Lopez, Snyder & Pedrotti, 2003).

The first process of hope theory, namely goals, refers to an outcome that a person wishes to achieve within a specified time frame (Latham & Locke, 2002). Proponents of the goal-setting theory argue that conscious goals direct human behaviour in purposeful ways (Latham & Locke, 2002; Vincent, Boddana & MacLeod, 2004). Thus, goals establish and serve as the targets of deliberate mental action (Locke & Latham, 2002). Researchers distinguish between avoidance and approach goals (Snyder, 2002).

Avoidance goals suggest that a person moves away from a particular outcome due to fear of perceived adverse outcomes (Snyder, 2002). In contrast, approach goals indicate a move towards specific goals due to supposed positive achievements. The literature further differentiates between two types of achievement goals, namely mastery achievement and performance achievement goals (Grant Halvorson, 2012). Mastery achievement goals emphasise the development of knowledge and skills and reframe obstacles as opportunities for improvement; performance achievement goals focus on the expression of particular abilities and setbacks are considered to be the result of low talent or skill. Research suggests that hopeful persons may be more inclined to pursue approach and mastery achievement goals while also displaying a higher tolerance for ambiguity (Grant Halvorson, 2012). In contrast, persons who struggle with anxiety and depression may be more inclined to focus on avoidance and performance mastery goals (Grant Halvorson, 2012).

The second process, namely pathways thinking, refers to the perceived capacity to manage setbacks and challenges through generating workable paths to desired goals (Lopez, 2013). The broaden–and–build theory claims that high–hope persons tend to report higher levels of positivity, which in turn suggests better problem-solving capacities and higher levels of optimism (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005). Consequently, hope could serve as a meta-skill that assists in facilitating problem-solving, thereby establishing multiple pathways towards achieving goals (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005; Lopez, 2013).

The third process of hope theory, namely agency, points to a motivational component that promotes goal-directed determination (Lopez, 2013). In this regard, Duckworth (2016) refers to the capacity of grit as indicative of a person's capabilities to engage in agency thinking through the sustained and passionate pursuit of goals. Aspects such as agency and grit are critical in the pursuit of goals, especially when encountering obstacles (Snyder, 2002).

To establish and retain a sense of hope, persons require adequate resources to address the ubiquitous stressors of life (Frankl, 2008; Lopez, 2013). In this respect, Antonovsky (1979) introduced the salutogenic model, which rests on two pillars. The first pillar indicates that humans are confronted daily by a variety of stressors ranging in level of severity from traumatic events to everyday hassles. The second pillar stipulates that generalised resistance resources (GRRs) assist humans in dealing with stressors effectively. Antonovsky (1987) explains that GRRs refer to a variety of factors, such as material (e.g. money), social (e.g. family and friends) and knowledge (e.g. coping resources) that could assist people in coping effectively with the various stressful stimuli that they encounter. Moreover, GRRs could help people in establishing a sense of coherence, which refers, inter alia, to a sense of optimism and hope in the future (Antonovsky, 1979; Frankl, 2008).

Previous studies have pointed to positive associations between hope and well-being (Day et al., 2010; Martins et al., 2018). The concept of well-being is defined as experiencing more positive than negative emotions and a general sense of life satisfaction (Wissing et al., 2014). Keyes (2016) refers to the concept of flourishing as a holistic state of well-being. More precisely, flourishing encompasses emotional well-being (experiencing more positive than negative emotions), social well-being (positive relationships and contributions to the social world) and psychological well-being (the pursuit of meaning, purpose and personal growth) (Keyes, 2016). Even though studies point to positive relationships between hope and flourishing (Guse & Vermaak, 2011; Martins et al., 2018), more research is needed in the South African context (Wissing et al., 2014) specifically amongst first–year students (Cherrington, 2018; De Villiers, 2014).

Aim of the Study

This article reports on a mixed methods study that explored the relevance of hope amongst first-year university students. The quantitative phase of the study investigated the empirical linkages between hope, flourishing, psychological distress and academic achievement amongst a sample of first-year students at a South African university. The qualitative phase of the study explored differentiation in the conceptions of hope between students who reported high hope statuses versus low hope statuses on a quantitative measure of hope.

The study was guided by the following two research questions: (1) What is the relationship between hope, flourishing, psychological distress and academic achievement? (2) What are the differences in the quantitative measures, and in lived experience, of hope between students who report high scores versus low hope statuses on a quantitative measure?

Method

Research design and approach

A sequential explanatory mixed methods research approach was adopted as the overarching design for the study being reported on (Creswell, 2014). During the first phase of this two-phase approach, quantitative data were collected and analysed from June to November 2016. Based on the quantitative results, qualitative data were collected from participants who reported high and low scores on a measure of hope. The qualitative phase of the study took place from January to August 2017. The Research Ethics Committee of the university where the study was conducted approved the research project (Ref.#: SCRE/2014/07/004). In the sections that follow, the particular methodological aspects of the quantitative and qualitative phases are discussed.

Quantitative Phase

Research design and sample

A descriptive and correlational quantitative research design was adopted to investigate the empirical linkages between hope, well-being, psychological distress and academic performance (Trochim, 2016). Purposive sampling was used to collect data from 296 first-year university students (mean age = 20.70, SD = 1.30, female = 63%) who were registered for formal academic studies at a South African university. All participants were first-year university students, 18 years of age or older, and registered for a student development and support programme.

Data collection and instruments

Quantitative data were collected using the Adult Hope Scale (AHS) (Snyder et al., 1991), the Flourishing Scale (FS) (Diener, 2013), the Short Depression-Happiness Scale (SDHS), (Joseph et al., 2004) and a cumulative mark for academic achievement. These instruments are discussed in the sections that follow.

The AHS is a 12-item measure that empirically assesses the concept of hope in terms of two dimensions, namely pathways thinking and agency (Snyder et al., 1991). Examples of items include: "I energetically pursue the goals that I set for myself" (agency) and "There are lots of ways around any problem" (pathways). Participants respond to items on an 8-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (definitely false) to 8 (definitely true). Higher scores represent a more significant presence of hope in a respondent's life. The AHS presents with good to excellent psychometric properties (Daugherty et al., 2018).

The FS is an 8-item measure of flourishing (Diener, 2013). Examples of items include: "People respect me" and "I lead a purposeful and meaningful life". Participants indicate responses on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, and 7 = strongly agree) and a high score indicates that a person embodies numerous psychological resources and strengths. Diener (2013) reports excellent internal consistency in the FS.

The SDHS is a 6-item, statistically bipolar self-report scale that reports scores on depression and happiness (Joseph et al., 2004). Three items inquire about positive thoughts, feelings and kinaesthetic experiences (happiness). Three items ask about negative thoughts, feelings and kinaesthetic bodily experiences (depression). Respondents are asked to think about how they have felt in the past seven days and to rate the frequency of each item on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (never) to 3 (often). For this study, only items that assess depression (e.g. "I felt dissatisfied with my life") were used. The SDHS is a highly reliable and valid measure of depression and happiness (Joseph et al., 2004).

All participants were registered for five academic subjects within a management science course and their academic achievement reports were obtained from university records. Academic grades were calculated by summing the numerical values of each subject's scores. Next, a mean score was calculated based on semester marks, which were all evenly weighted. The specific course and subjects are not named here to protect the anonymity of participants.

Data analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 was used to manage the data analysis procedure. Hope was set as the independent variable (IV) and flourishing, psychological distress and academic achievement served as the dependent variables (DVs). Descriptive statistics were calculated for the constructs and reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Pearson product moment correlations (Pearson's r) were used to calculate the strength and direction of the relationships between the independent and dependent variables, and the statistical significance was set at 0.05. Simple linear regression analysis was used to investigate whether hope (IV) predicts flourishing, psychological distress and academic achievement (DVs) (Cohen, 1992; Field, 2013). The independent sample t-test was used to compare participants' scores on the AHS, FS, SDHS and academic achievement performance between high (10% of N = 296, thus n = 30) and low (10% of N = 296, thus n = 30) status hope groups.

Qualitative Phase

Research design and sample

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was adopted as the qualitative research design (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). IPA focuses on exploring participants' lived experiences of a phenomenon within a specific context. This study focused on exploring and differentiating between the lived experience of hope as experienced by first-year students in a university context based on high versus low self-report ratings on the AHS. Therefore,

IPA was regarded as an appropriate qualitative approach to guide the study (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants for the qualitative phase of the study. Participants who reported the highest (n = 30) and lowest (n = 30) scores on the AHS were identified and contacted. A subset of 16 participants who reported high scores (female = 10, male = 6, age-range = 18-22) and 12 who indicated low scores (female = 7, male = 5, age-range 18-20) responded and provided qualitative data.

Data collection

The participants were requested to express their conceptions on the role of hope within the first-year experience via narrative sketches. A narrative sketch refers to a qualitative-based document written by participants based on a specific topic (Giorgi, 1985). The instruction on the narrative sketch was:

> *What does hope mean for you? What role does hope play for you in the context of the university experience? Use the space provided and share your perspective of hope concerning your university experiences. There are no wrong answers and no limit on the length of the essay. If you wish, you can use the following prompts to guide your writing: What does hope mean to you? Is hope important for first-year students? Motivate your response. Can you share specific examples where you drew on hope to enhance the first-year experiences?*

Participants' narrative sketches ranged from one to five pages. The majority of narrative sketches were submitted via a typed format (n = 22), whereas some documents were handwritten (n = 6).

Participants were also requested to indicate their willingness to participate in qualitative interviews. A total of seven students from the high-hope status group and six from the low-hope status group agreed to participate in the qualitative interviews. The interviews were unstructured and guided by the following thematic question: *Tell me what hope means for you in the context of the first-year experience?* Follow-up questions were based on participants' responses and the focus was on understanding the role that hope plays in participants' experiences as first-year students. The interviews, which were 30-45 minutes in duration, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Data were analysed following four broad interwoven and iterative steps (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2011). First, as qualitative researcher, I immersed myself in the data by reading the narrative sketches multiple times. During this initial phase, I made a deliberate attempt to bracket subjective thoughts and personal opinions using qualitative memo writing. Second, the coding process started at a granular level by selecting a unit of meaning (e.g. words, phrases, and sentences) and allocating a specific code to it. Third, associated codes were grouped as relevant themes and subthemes. Fourth, the qualitative interpretation was formulated through constant

comparison and relating the data to pertinent theory (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Henning et al., 2011). Throughout the qualitative analysis, I remained cognisant of the guiding aim of the qualitative phase of the study, namely to identify differences concerning the lived experience of hope between students who reported high versus low scores on the AHS.

Trustworthiness and credibility of the interpretation were ensured by cross-checking the findings against a literature control and participant verification. Verbatim quotes are included to substantiate the qualitative interpretation and reflexive qualitative memos were kept (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Henning et al., 2011).

Results and Discussion

Quantitative results

The descriptive statistics (mean scores, standard deviations, internal reliability) and relevant correlational values for the dependent and independent variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

Variables/ Statistical values	Mean	SD	Alpha	2	3	4	5	6
AHS (Total)	35.86	6.62	0.87	0.89★★	0.90★★	0.62★★	–0.37★★	0.22★★
AHS (Agency)	18.25	3.43	0.85		0.61★★	0.53★★	–0.32★★	0.13★
AHS (Pathways)	17.61	4.02	0.86			0.58★★	–0.35★★	0.25★★
FS	37.57	8.80	0.82					
SDHS (Depression)	3.87	1.35	0.74					
AA	56.02	9.57	NA					

Note: AHS = Adult Hope Scale; FS = Flourishing Scale; SDHS = Short Depression Happiness Scale; AA = Academic achievement; ★p < 0.05 = Statistically significant; ★★p < 0.01 = Statistically significant

The mean scores reported on the measures of hope (AHS Total, AHS Agency and SDS Pathways), flourishing (FS) and psychological distress (SDHS (Depression)) are consistent with internationally reported research (Daugherty et al., 2018; Dixson et al., 2018; Khodarahimi, 2013). All the scales presented with satisfactory to good internal coherence of 0.7 and higher (Field, 2013).

Concerning the correlations, the hope scores (AHS Total, AHS Agency and AHS Pathways) shared significant positive associations with the construct of flourishing and academic achievement. These results echo previous studies and suggest that persons who report higher scores on a measure of hope are also more inclined to report higher scores on assessments of holistic well-being and tend to perform better academically when compared to persons reporting lower scores (Daugherty et al., 2018; Day et al., 2010; Dixson et al., 2018; Khodarahimi, 2013; Morisano et al., 2010). Correspondingly, hope was inversely related to the measure of psychological distress (SDHS), indicating that hope is associated with enhanced flourishing versus ill-being (Day et al., 2010; Lopez, 2013).

To investigate the premise that hope (IV) is a unique predictor of flourishing, psychological distress and academic achievement (DVs), regression analyses were conducted. Table 2 presents the respective results from the regression analyses.

Table 2: Summary of standard multiple regression analyses

Model 1. DV: FS IV: AHS (Total)	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p	R^2	Adjusted R^2
Regression	9509.60	1.0	9509.60	209.76	0.01★★	0.42	0.41
Residual	133328.76	294	45.34				
Total	22838.36	295	–				
Model 2. DV: FS IV: AHS (Agency)	**Sum of squares**	**df**	**Mean square**	**F**	**p**	**R^2**	**Adjusted R^2**
Regression	6374.71	1.0	6374.71	113.84	0.01★★	0.28	0.28
Residual	16463.65	294	56.00				
Total	22838.36	295	–				
Model 3. DV: FS IV: AHS (Pathways)	**Sum of squares**	**df**	**Mean square**	**F**	**p**	**R^2**	**Adjusted R^2**
Regression	8558.32	1.0	8558.32	176.20	0.01★★	0.37	0.37
Residual	14280.05	294	48.57				
Total	22838.36	295	–				
Model 4. DV: SDHS IV: AHS (Total)	**Sum of squares**	**df**	**Mean square**	**F**	**p**	**R^2**	**Adjusted R^2**
Regression	86.80	1.0	86.80	56.67	0.01★★	0.16	0.16
Residual	450.33	294	1.53				
Total	537.12	295	–				
Model 5. DV: SDHS IV: AHS (Agency)	**Sum of squares**	**df**	**Mean square**	**F**	**p**	**R^2**	**Adjusted R^2**
Regression	57.61	1.0	57.61	35.32	0.01★★	0.11	0.10
Residual	479.51	294	1.63				
Total	537.12	295	–				
Model 6. DV: SDHS IV: AHS (Pathways)	**Sum of squares**	**df**	**Mean square**	**F**	**p**	**R^2**	**Adjusted R^2**
Regression	78.68	1.0	78.68	50.46	0.01★★	0.15	0.14
Residual	458.44	294	1.56				
Total	537.12	295	–				
Model 7. DV: AA IV: AHS (Total)	**Sum of squares**	**df**	**Mean square**	**F**	**p**	**R^2**	**Adjusted R^2**
Regression	1374.68	1.0	1374.68	15.76	0.01★★	0.05	0.05
Residual	25637.00	294	87.20				
Total	27011.68	295	–				

Model 8. DV: AA IV: AHS (Agency)	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p	R^2	Adjusted R^2
Regression	479.51	1.0	479.51	5.31	0.02★	0.02	0.01
Residual	26532.17	294	90.25				
Total	27011.68	295	–				
Model 9. DV: AA IV: AHS (Pathways)	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p	R^2	Adjusted R^2
Regression	1797.82	1.0	1797.82	20.96	0.01★★	0.07	0.06
Residual	25213.86	294	85.76				
Total	27011.68	295	–				

Note: AHS = Adult Hope Scale; FS = Flourishing Scale; SDHS = Short Depression Happiness Scale; AA = Academic achievement; ★$p < 0.05$ = Statistically significant; ★★$p < 0.01$ = Statistically significant

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict flourishing, psychological distress and academic achievement based on participants' reported hope scores. Significant regression equations were found between the quantitative measure of flourishing (FS) and the AHS (Total) ($F(1,294) = 209.76$, $p < 0.01$), AHS (Agency) ($F(1,294) = 113.84$, $p < 0.01$), and AHS (Pathways) scores ($F(1,294) = 176.20$, $p < 0.01$). A noteworthy regression equation was also found between the total ($F(1,294) = 56.67$, $p < 0.01$), agency ($F(1,294) = 35.32$, $p < 0.01$), and pathways scores ($F(1,294) = 50.46$, $p < 0.01$) on the AHS and the SDHS. Medium practical effect sizes emerged, suggesting that hope plays a role in students' experiences of flourishing and depression, but is not the overall determining factor.

Similar to previous studies, the data for this sample strongly indicated that hope is associated positively with a measure of well–being, in this case, flourishing (FS) and inversely related to a measure of psychological distress (SDHS) (Daugherty et al., 2018; Day et al., 2010; Dixson et al., 2018; Khodarahimi, 2013). Thus, the regression analyses indicate that hope could have an essential influence on students' success at university through promoting flourishing behaviour and possibly protecting against psychological distress (Anderson, 2016).

The AHS (Total) significantly predicted academic achievement amongst the participants ($F(1,294) = 15.76$, $p < 0.01$). Likewise, the AHS (Agency) ($F(1,294) = 5.31$, $p < 0.05$) and the AHS (Pathways) ($F(1,294) = 20.96$, $p < 0.01$). However, small practical effect sizes emerged on the AHS (Total) ($R^2 = 0.05$), the AHS (Agency) ($R^2 = 0.02$) and the AHS (Pathways) ($R^2 = 0.07$) (Cohen, 1992; Field, 2013). Thus, the AHS only accounted for a small percentage of variance regarding participants' academic achievement (AHS (Total) = 5%, AHS (Agency) = 2%, AHS (Pathways = 7%)).

Table 3 represents the variance in participants' reported scores on the quantitative measures between the subsections of the sample that reported high hope (n = 30) and low hope (n = 30) statuses.

Table 3: Independent samples *t*-test

Variables	N	Mean	SD	t-value	df
Low hope group	**30**				
AHS (Total)	30	23.73	3.43		
AHS (Agency)	30	12.67	2.67		
AHS (Pathways)	30	11.07	2.42		
FS	30	24.67	8.34		
SDHS (Depression)	30	5.10	1.60		
AA	30	49.63	12.82		
High hope group	**30**				
AHS (Total)	30	45.00	2.39	24.64★	58
AHS (Agency)	30	22.83	0.96	19.32★	58
AHS (Pathways)	30	22.17	1.13	22.38★	58
FS	30	45.47	4.82	9.81★	58
SDHS (Depression)	30	3.67	1.55	–3.39★	58
AA	30	57.92	11.76	2.57★	58

Note: AHS = Adult Hope Scale; FS = Flourishing Scale; SDHS = Short Depression Happiness Scale; AA = Academic achievement; ★p < 0.05 = Statistically significant; ★★p < 0.01 = Statistically significant

The differences between the two groups' reported AHS (Total) ($t_{(58)} = 24.64$; $p < 0.01$), AHS (Agency) ($t_{(58)} = 19.32$; $p < 0.01$) and AHS (Pathways) ($t_{(58)} = 22.38$; $p < 0.05$) scores were statistically significant. Additionally, the differences between the high- and low-hope status groups were significant on the FS ($t_{(58)} = 9.81$; $p < 0.01$), the SDHS ($t_{(11)} = -3.39$; $p < 0.01$)) and in terms of academic achievement ($t_{(58)} = 2.57$; $p < 0.01$)).

The comparison between high- and low-hope status groups indicates that there are significant differences in terms of students' flourishing, reported levels of psychological distress, and academic achievement. Thus, the data suggest that students who report high-hope statuses function better in terms of the presence of positive experiences (flourishing), the absence of negative emotions (psychological distress), and academic achievement during the first-year experience. However, this study did not control for external variables that could influence students' experiences of hope, such as socioeconomic status, social support, or coping resources. Therefore, the findings should not be considered in a deterministic manner, but ought to be regarded as trends that emerged from a single data set. Nonetheless, the quantitative data support the existing literature by indicating that hope may serve as a relevant psychological strength in enhancing students' experiences (Cherrington, 2018; Gallagher et al., 2017; Lopez, 2013).

The beneficial effects of hope as a psychological strength would likely be realised when students are motivated by an optimistic vision of the future, engage in agency thinking and have multiple pathways available to achieve goals (Lopez, 2013). However, the conditions

that could assist in strengthening a sense of hope were not investigated. Based on the challenges within the South African higher education context, such as the stressful nature of the first-year experience, socioeconomic pressure, and epistemic access, the conditions that facilitate the development of hope might not be readily available to the entire first-year student cohort (Anderson et al., 2016; Cherrington, 2018; Scott, 2018). It was with these thoughts in mind that the qualitative phase of the study was initiated.

Qualitative findings

The qualitative phase of the study explored the different conceptions of hope, as expressed by students who reported high-hope statuses (n = 16) versus those who reported low-hope statuses (n = 12). Two themes emerged from the qualitative analysis: (1) the trichotomy of hope, and (2) hope-based GRRs. In the sections that follow, the qualitative themes are presented. Then, the quantitative results and qualitative findings are summarised and discussed.

The referencing system in parenthesis denotes participant number (e.g. P#1 for Participant 1), group (H = high reported hope group, L = low reported hope group), data collection method (NS = narrative sketch, I = interview), gender (M = male, F = female), and age. For example, 'P#1, H, NS, F, 18' refers to participant number one, who reported a high hope status, provided data via the narrative sketch, is female and 18 years of age.

The trichotomy of hope

The major set of qualitative differences between students who reported high-hope statuses versus those who reported low-hope statuses related to how they described three essential facets of hope, namely their visions for their future, goal-directedness, and pathways thinking. Concerning their vision of the future, the high-hope group sketched much clearer images of the directions of their lives. For example, one participant from the high-hope group explained that she had *"big plans for my future … I want to complete my degree … register for postgrad studies and pursue an academic career … I wish to become a university lecturer. I want to uplift other young female students"* (P#3, H, NS, F, 19). Another student from the high-hope group shared that his future perspective: *"is optimistic … there are many opportunities in the world … all over the world … it may sound silly, but my dream is to be the MD of an international motor company"* (P#13, H, I, M,20).

In contrast, participants from the low-hope status group made fewer references to their future visions and were more likely to sketch pessimistic visions. Participant 4, an 18-year-old female, exclaimed during the interview: *"I don't feel very optimistic about the future. I have little hope in living a life filled with joy … when I think of where I want to be in 10 years' time, I don't see much happiness."* This sentiment was echoed by participant nine, a nineteen-year-old male from the low-hope status group who reported the following in the narrative sketch: *"There is not much positiveness in the future … circumstances have given me a bad deal, poverty and no role models … there's no escaping it."*

Empirical research indicates that persons who establish compelling personal visions are more likely to set specific and personally relevant goals (Masuda et al., 2010).

Correspondingly, persons who set specific and meaningful goals are more likely to achieve their stated outcomes when compared to persons who set vague goals (Locke & Latham, 2002; Vincent et al., 2004). Consequently, a personal vision appears to play an integral role in motivation and the achievement of meaningful life goals (Masuda et al., 2010).

Concerning goals, students in the high hope status group were more likely to make references to meaningful mastery-orientated goals (*"I have learning goals that I want to achieve … for example, I aim to get a 75% average this year to apply for a bursary and get accepted at company X to do an internship after I graduate"* P#7, H, I, F, 18) and made greater reference to multiple pathways to achieve their goals (*"I had a teacher in school who used to say 'there's more than one way to crack an egg'. I thought about it for long and I began to understand it … many ways to get to a solution … get to an answer. You must explore different options to get what you want"* P#12, H, I, M, 22). To the contrary, participants in the low-hope status groups made limited reference to approach-based objectives, but instead appeared to adopt avoidance-based orientations (*"… often feel that I do not belong here and will fail at university"* P#9, L, NS, M, 19).

These findings are consistent with the literature (Cherrington & De Lange, 2016; Grant Halvorson, 2012) and suggest that students who report higher hope statuses exhibit better goal-directedness in real-life settings. The knock-on effect is that students could experience higher levels of positivity (*"I would describe myself as a very happy person … satisfied with my life …"* P#5, H, I, F, 19) versus *"my life is not very pleasant …"* (P#2, L, NS, F, 18) that could broaden and build skill sets, which is tantamount to enhanced pathways thinking (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005; Lopez, 2013).

Hope-based generalised resistance resources

Students who reported high scores on the AHS were more vocal about the presence of GRRs in their lives. More specifically, students who reported high-hope statuses referred to three specific GRRs, namely emotional support (*"many people care deeply for me … people who love me"* P#8, H, I, F, 18), social support (*"my grandmother is my rock …"* P#5, H, NS, F, 19) and greater financial security (*"being poor is hard … NSFAS support with studies helps me to relax … financial stability is important when you think about developing a plan for life"* P#15, H, I, M, 18). In contrast, students who reported low-hope statuses were more likely to describe experiences of emotional distress (*"there's so many things that worry me … not coping well …"* P#11, L, NS, M, 18) and point to financial challenges (*"I hate that everything is about money. If you don't have money it is like you don't matter … inequality means that many people will never be a success"* P#9, L, I, M, 19).

As one of the most unequal countries in the world, South Africa is characterised by an imbalanced distribution of resources (Booysen, 2017; Wilson-Strydom, 2015). It is against this backdrop of inequality that deliberate attempts were made by the government to widen access to university (Jansen & Walters, 2019; Scott, 2018). However, access without the necessary resources required to achieve success at university does little more than expose the existing societal fault lines that plague success in the higher education context (Habib, 2016; Scott, 2018). As reported elsewhere, access to university ought to be augmented with the required resources to ensure, inter alia, emotional support, social support and financial security to students (Habib, 2016; Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014).

However, what has not necessarily been reported elsewhere is the importance of GRRs in establishing a context where hope could be instilled as a psychological protective factor in the lives of first-year students.

Integration

This mixed methods study had two overarching aims. First, the study sought to investigate quantitatively the empirical linkages between hope, flourishing, psychological distress and academic achievement amongst a sample comprising first-year students at a South African university. Second, the study explored qualitatively the distinctions in the conceptions of hope between students who reported high-hope statuses versus low-hope statuses.

The quantitative data indicated positive correlations between hope and measures of flourishing and academic achievement. Additionally, an inverse relationship emerged between hope and a measure of psychological distress. Furthermore, regression analyses echoed the findings from the extant literature by indicating that persons who report high-hope scores are more likely to experience flourishing, perform better academically, and tend to be less prone to depression (Daugherty et al., 2018; Dixson et al., 2018; Khodarahimi, 2013; Snyder et al., 1991). Comparisons between participants who reported high-hope statuses and low-hope statuses suggest that hope may be a significant protective factor that promotes holistic well-being and academic achievement while serving as a possible buffer against psychological distress.

The qualitative findings supported the quantitative data by pointing out that participants who reported high-hope statuses were more likely to have well-established and optimistic visions, set and pursue mastery and achievement-orientated goals and engage in more significant pathways thinking. Thus, the qualitative analysis augmented the quantitative argument that hope is a vital psychological attribute that could promote holistic student success by fostering flourishing and academic achievement.

However, the qualitative findings also indicated that high-hope participants had access to three specific GRRs, namely emotional support, social sustenance and greater financial security. This qualitative finding demonstrates that the availability of foundational support plays an essential role in promoting a sense of hope amongst students. Thus, while the quantitative data pointed to the significance of hope in terms of well-being and academic achievement during the first-year experience, the qualitative data highlighted the contextual factors that assist in making hope possible.

The findings from this mixed methods study, therefore, confirm that while hope is a vital feature of promoting holistic student success, attention should also be paid to the GRRs that support an optimistic vision of the future, goal-directedness and pathways thinking. Hence, student affairs practitioners would do well to focus on strengthening hope by solidifying the GRRs and contextual factors that might be hidden below the metaphorical surface of student achievement.

Conclusion

This mixed methods study explored the concept of hope within the context of the first-year experience. The quantitative results supported the existing literature by indicating that hope was positively associated with flourishing and academic achievement and inversely related to psychological distress. The qualitative findings indicated that high-hope students were more likely to report positive and optimistic vision statements, be goal-directed and adopt multiple pathways in pursuing meaningful goals. Furthermore, the qualitative data drew much-needed attention to the relevance of GRRs in actualising the potentiality of hope.

Taken altogether, the study provides convincing evidence for the significance of hope as a psychological strength within the context of the first-year experience. Moreover, this article highlights the importance of three specific GRRs, namely emotional support, social support and financial means as critical drivers that promote a sense of hope.

This study was limited in the following ways: first, given that the study was conducted in a cross-sectional manner at a single South African university, the results should not be over-interpreted. Hence, while the findings are consistent for the specific quantitative and qualitative data sets, over-generalisations should be avoided. Second, while the language of regression may appear causal, it should be kept in mind that a correlational research design was adopted during the quantitative phase of the study. Therefore, the strong relationships between hope and the dependent variables should not be considered indicators of causality; only true experimental designs would allow for causal inferences. Third, limited qualitative data were collected from a subset of the sample based on self-report scores on the AHS. Self-report measures are fraught with social desirability. Thus, an assumption was made that the assessment of hope via the AHS was reflective of real-world differences. Even though the AHS presented with valid and reliable psychometric properties, a different qualitative narrative could have emerged if more diverse voices had been included in the study.

Despite the limitations of the study, the findings point to promising avenues for further research. Amongst other things, researchers should be encouraged to examine the concept of hope from an Afrocentric perspective. Studies that consider hope and other positive psychology-based constructs from Afrocentric perspectives could offer greater insight and potentially contribute to the advancement of African psychology. Moreover, such studies could provide theoretical lenses to explore the local realities that students struggle with from indigenous perspectives. Additionally, it appears relevant to develop support programmes and establish contextual frameworks that promote a sense of hope. In this regard, researchers should consider first-order (vison, goals, pathways and agency) and second-order (GRRs) factors that promote a sense of hope.

This study affirms that a vision of a hopeful future could serve as a beacon of light during the stressful first-year student experience. One participant captured this affirmation as follows: *"My name is Matshepo … it means 'mother of hope'. In my life, hope is like a protector, the inspiration for my future … hope helps me to keep believing"* (P#7, H, I, F, 18). The roles that student affairs professionals can play in assisting students in concretising hope should not

be underestimated. Student affairs staff ought to champion the cause of helping students to develop optimistic future perspectives, along with the belief systems and contextual requirements to make hope happen.

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How to Improve University Orientation: Seven Good Practice Strategies for South Africa

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Abstract

There is a great deal of variability in the practice of orientation across the country at South Africa's universities, and there is limited knowledge of what exactly constitutes good practice in orientation. Many areas of enquiry remain unexplored, and remain blind spots for South Africa's higher education sector. The article addresses this central question: What constitutes good practice for orientation programmes in South Africa? The article argues that a structured and informed orientation strategy is critical in terms of matters of student retention and, in fact, may serve as the key linchpin of students' decision to stay or exit the higher education system. Accordingly, seven strategies to improve national orientation practice are proposed in this article.

Keywords

Introduction

South Africa lacks a national framework for orientation, one which ensures standards and quality for orientation at universities. What is generally known about orientation as it is practised at universities across the country, tends to be largely anecdotal and not based on sound empirical evidence. There appears to be little uniformity in terms of orientation practice across the national higher education sector. As such, this article raises the central question: What constitutes good practice for orientation programmes in South Africa?

It is useful to note at the outset that the term 'orientation' is the one with which South African students are most familiar. It is the term principally used herein. It is commonplace to encounter other terms such as 'induction' or 'Freshers' Week' (often in a European context), 'student welcome,' and 'transition support' as being typically used interchangeably to describe the process by which new students are introduced to the new academic environment and all the services and support structures available at the university necessary to fulfil their educational goals.

Orientation can be broadly described as a formal structure or programme of events put in place by institutions of higher education to support the positive first-year experiences of

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students. Shobrook (2003, p. 2) describes orientation as a "buffer zone between preparation for university and immersion into higher education culture". Mullendore and Banahan (2005, p. 393) emphasise the principles of intentionality and collaboration which undergird the concept of orientation; they define orientation as "a collaborative institutional effort to enhance student success by assisting students and their families in the transition to the new college environment".

Mack similarly focuses on the issue of intentionality on the part of institutions. Mack describes orientation as

> an intentional experience which demonstrates to a new student the interrelationship among the college's various departments and how he or she fits in. College orientation programmes encapsulate the essence of their institutions by introducing students to the academic life, culture, traditions, history, people, and surrounding communities. The goal is to provide individuals with a holistic view of the new college experience. At the same time, it sets expectations for students' responsibilities in their academic career. (Mack, 2010, p. 4)

According to Jacobs (2010, p. 29), orientation has several purposes:
(a) disseminating information;
(b) reducing costly errors, such as the avoidance of missing important deadlines, registering incorrectly or registering for unnecessary classes etc.;
(c) building a framework for academic success; and
(d) building community and (e) defining campus culture.

Although orientation is standard practice for higher education institutions, the scope and content of orientation programmes varies considerably across the global institutional landscape and between faculties, schools, and departments. Most institutions of higher education provide a generic introduction to library and computer facilities and student support services. Typical elements of an orientation programme include: the provision of information and guidance about academic requirements and support services of the institution by academics and student services staff; the involvement of peer leaders, mentors, and student volunteers; and, more recently, department-based activities with new students often involving 'ice-breakers' and team-based tasks and challenges.

However, it can be said that in recent decades there is no longer a 'generic' or 'typical' approach to orientation in different parts of the world. Even a cursory scan of international literature about orientation shows that the traditional scope of orientation programmes has now widened considerably (in relation to different factors such as country contexts, student populations, receptiveness of higher education institutions, etc.), and in ways from which South Africa can certainly draw for the purpose of improving the country's orientation practice.

Understanding the Importance of Orientation

Despite the well-understood importance of issues of student retention and success as well as compelling evidence about the key role that orientation plays in building a foundation for academic success (Kuh et al., 2005) orientation has historically been poorly understood and

hence under-estimated in terms of its long-term academic importance to both students and universities. Orientation tends to be low on institutional priorities because it does not easily lend itself to quantifiable evidence about efficacy. In a context of ever-increasing demands for the availability and use of university resources, it is acknowledged that "orientation programmes may receive less than impressive facility assignments, be forced to compete for resources and receive little recognition" (Jacobs, 2010, p. 29). In the past there has been generally little incentive for institutions of higher education to invest substantially in the content and practice of orientation.

As noted earlier, institutional attitudes towards the importance and content of orientation have undergone a notable change in the past two decades. Expectations for orientation have expanded accordingly in line with the increasing complexity of the demands made upon institutions and the higher education sector. Prevailing trends in the higher education sector such as massification, increased consumerism, new technologies, and the growing diversity of student populations have sharpened the need for educational quality and effectiveness and refocused attention on matters of attrition, retention, pedagogical quality, and teaching and learning processes. As a result, institutions of higher education have increasingly looked to orientation to do a number of important things for the institution such as redefining the relationship with students and promoting a sense of belonging amongst students – ultimately helping to retain students in the higher education system.

As awareness has grown of the impact of student diversity in a mass higher education system, orientation has had to address diverse student characteristics and needs in line with the increased complexity of different student populations (Cubarrubia & Schoen, 2010). Orientation programmes have had to respond accordingly and tailor content and offerings to a highly diverse student body in order to integrate them academically and socially into the institution. Consequently, a greater investment of time and resources has been made by institutions towards the goal of ensuring that orientation meets the needs of first-year students in ways which are strongly student-centred and rely less on didactic styles and teacher-centred approaches (Schofield & Sackville, 2010; Mayhew et al., 2010).

It has been possible to see an increase in literature supporting the role of orientation and situating orientation as part of a broader theoretical framework of student development. Research shows that orientation activities are linked to a variety of positive outcomes for first-year students, such as improving preparedness, empowering students with the relevant knowledge and information, and easing academic and social integration issues – which in turn, has a beneficial impact on student persistence and retention and graduation rates for institutions (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1986; Fidler & Hunter, 1989; Jones, 2008; Yorke & Longden, 2008). There is also a growing body of student-centred literature about orientation from various institutions in different parts of the world, often case-study based, which attempts to understand the student experience from the needs and perspectives of students. This body of literature is often detail-oriented, including recommendations for good practice, and offers a great deal of scope for institutions of higher education to learn about and from each other. It is not possible to cite key sources from this body of literature on account of

the size of the pool of the literature. However, it is possible to say that some institutions of higher education, such as Nottingham Trent University and Ulster University in the United Kingdom, have accomplished a large amount of work in the field of good practice in orientation.

Good Practice Strategies for South Africa

How can South Africa move towards good and improved orientation practice? Seven good practice 'strategies' are proposed herein, with an eye to being seen as 'gaps' in terms of how orientation practice currently operates as well as being solution-oriented and therefore relatively easy to implement. The aforementioned seven strategies are outlined below in relative order of importance. However, they can be considered to be interlocking and mutually reliant on each other. While each of the following good practices strategies can individually make a great difference to the practice of orientation, their effects are greatly expanded when interacting synergistically with each other.

Good Practice Strategy #1: Create and commit to a vision for orientation

A sound vision for orientation is the starting point, and indeed the veritable 'core' of the strategic foundation of good orientation practice. Orientation programmes should be based upon the solid foundation of a guiding vision and value system, one which is coherent, well-understood, and which can be easily articulated by stakeholders. Such a vision and value system cannot be generic. It should be aligned to that of the institution of higher education in question. However, there should be certain guiding principles upon which a successful orientation programme is built. An example is proposed in Table 1 below:

Table 1: A vision for orientation

Broad (Long-Term) Goals for Orientation	
• Holistic student development • Academic achievement	• Student persistence • Overall student success
Key Objectives	
Value: Orientation should show students that they are valued and welcomed by the institution and all its relevant stakeholders in line with the 'invitational' theoretical framework proposed by Purkey and Novak (1996).	
Self-empowerment: Orientation should show students that they are capable of exercising their own agency and influence over their own educational performance and achievements, in ways that encourage positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem.	
Effective delivery of relevant information: Orientation should aim to prepare students for academic life by: (a) showing them what is expected of them academically; (b) familiarising them with the various on-campus services and programmes that are designed to support students; and (c) providing information about courses, timetabling, and other administrative matters related to the requirements of the course as well as the institution.	
Creation of supportive relationships and networks: Orientation should allow socialisation opportunities such that students are enabled to develop different forms of social capital at the institution and make the relevant connections and relationships which can support their higher education journey.	

Good Practice Strategy #2: Adopt a staged view of orientation

Studies on student transition suggest that orientation should be viewed in the context of a developmental process, beginning with an elucidation of the transitional processes involved in the student life-cycle and a critical assessment of where and how orientation is needed at different stages in the student life-cycle (Haselgrove, 1994; Cook & Rushton, 2008; Morgan, 2012). Cook and Rushton (2008) usefully build upon Haselgrove's (1994, p. 3) succinct description of the student life-cycle of "getting in, being there and moving on" by suggesting that different phases of the student experience be incorporated into a traditional orientation programme. Particular attention is paid to the earliest stages of the student life-cycle, such as that of the initial contact made with the institution of higher education in question. In line with the contention by Tresman (2002) that "the student's learning journey starts with the initial enquiry to the university", orientation should, in fact, begin before students commence their studies.

This early stage can be referred to as the 'first contact and pre-arrival' stage or simply as 'pre-entry'. It can be defined as the earliest contact made with the institution of higher education in question, and specifically, the point between application and enrolment at the university. This particular early stage of the student life-cycle is seen as a discrete one and one which has been hitherto overlooked in terms of its important relationship to retention. It is argued that positive first impressions of the university are associated with student persistence and significantly influence the extent to which students are motivated to persist throughout their studies (Allen, 1999; Kealy and Rockel, 1987). Accordingly, Yorke and Thomas (2003, p. 68) advise that this particular stage of the student life-cycle be accorded special attention by institutions of higher education; notably, they recommend diverse strategies such as "sending newsletters, emails and text messages and having teams of students in high visibility t-shirts to welcome students at enrolment" in order to make a strong impression upon new students.

Tresman (2002) suggests that institutions of higher education have to support students at the pre-entry stage by affording them the relevant information to make informed choices about their studies. Noting that "higher education institutions must ensure that students are not pitched into a level of study in which they cannot possibly cope," Tresman (2002) recommends that institutions provide detailed pre-entry material, even meetings and face-to-face interviews with students wherever possible, so as to try to avoid the wrong choice of field of studies or a possible mismatch between expectations and the realities of the course of study for students.

It is recommended that some aspects of university study should be made familiar to students before they first arrive at university such that they may know where they have to be and what they should be doing when they first get there. Wherever possible, students should be provided with timetables (academic timetables as well as that for orientation events). Even at this early stage, an effort should be made to provide students with reading lists for prescribed textbooks, and maps showing venues for scheduled classes (wherever possible). Personalised letters inviting students to orientation are also seen as a useful and distinctive way of reaching out to students (Clack, 2009; Shobrook, 2003).

Trotter and Roberts (2006) make a case for accurate, up-to-date prospectus, website, and publicity material about the institution as ways to give students as much information as possible at the earliest stages of their contact with the institution of higher education in question. It is certainly possible to see that a dedicated orientation website, i.e. an integrated web page which shares information about a number of different aspects of university – such as enrolment, finance, and accommodation – would help to prepare students for the realities of academic life and serve as a useful reference guide at different points along the student life-cycle. Tours of the student residences on YouTube or Snapchat could, for example, help to familiarise students with the institution and the realities of their new existence as students before they actually arrive on campus.

It appears to be a commonplace practice for some internationally-based institutions to use 'pre-arrival activities and tasks' in order to familiarise students with the requirements and expectations of their course. Such pre-arrival tasks are often linked to the orientation activities taking place at the institution (Foster & Lawther, 2012) and provide an initial sense of what academic life will require of students. They are often discipline-specific, being set by the programme or course within which students are based and help students to understand their subject matter and the kind of thinking they will be required to do.

In line with the idea of a 'staged' view of orientation, 'extended orientation' is now a common practice. Extended orientation refers to orientation activities being spread out over a longer period of time during the academic year. It is argued that extending the length of the orientation period allows students to "assimilate and make sense of the information provided, to socialise with the staff and existing students through a range of activities and to feel that they belong in the higher education community at their institution" (Crosling et al., 2009, p. 12). Extended induction can therefore be seen as a longer-term assimilation into the ways and practices of institutions of higher education.

It is noted, however, that extended orientation may not attract a large number of students throughout the course of the academic year as students have less time to spend on orientation on account of the commencement of their studies and being fully engaged by then in their studies. However, it can be argued that in spite of possible reduced attendance, extended orientation still serves a useful function for those students who may have missed the early part of the orientation programme or who are experiencing difficulties adjusting to the curriculum or, more broadly, to university life.

Good Practice Strategy #3: Balance the academic and non-components of orientation

Orientation activities are typically composed of academic and non-academic components, in order that students are guided towards integration into the institution in both academic and social aspects. It is recognised that the social aspect of orientation is very important, and that it should allow students the opportunity to form the relevant friendships and networks which can support them throughout their higher education journey. Therefore, orientation has had to incorporate social activities with an emphasis on 'fun' (such as welcome parties

at student residences or other social events aimed at first-year students) into the structure of orientation programmes and activities.

It is, however, often challenging to achieve a proportionate balance between academic preparation and 'fun' activities for students. Social activities linked to orientation may inadvertently promote a disinclination towards the academic aspects of university. Fun activities such as 'beer' or 'keg parties' can often introduce students to a different student lifestyle and hence a mindset which is less oriented towards studies. McKenzie and Schweitzer (2010, p. 31) contend that "university orientation weeks with their often heavy emphasis on social activities, having fun and alcohol consumption may in fact be promoting the disinclination toward academic achievement", and they conclude that, "it may be necessary to rethink the activities promoted in orientation week and put an increased emphasis on study skills and academic achievement as integral parts of university life".

Furthermore, Mayhew et al. (2010, p. 340) argue that "orientation programmes are often the first (and sometimes only) structured opportunities administrators have for communicating institutional priorities to students: what messages are we sending if these contexts continue primarily to be positioned for social purposes?"

Good Practice Strategy #4: Give students the information they need at the right time

It is axiomatic that orientation must equip students with knowledge and information about academic life, and how best to settle successfully into their institution of higher education of choice. The kind of information given to students at orientation should include both general and specific kinds of information. While students are typically appraised about matters such as public transport, parking, housing, student employment, careers office, disability support, campus security, and so on, it is also important to include much more detailed information about issues such as safety, ethics, grievances and complaints procedures, or other discipline-specific issues related to dealing with, amongst others, hazardous equipment or working in laboratories.

The transmission of information at the right time, i.e. when it can be most usefully absorbed by students, is of key importance to orientation programmes. The question 'What do students need to know?' is rarely considered in fine-grained detail and in relation to the related question of when students should be receiving particular pieces of information. Too much detail can be counterproductive and lead to 'information overload'. Studies derived from student questionnaire data often report that students experience being overwhelmed by the volume of information received during orientation and may subsequently forget all the information received therein (Trotter & Roberts, 2006; Clack, 2009). A case can be made here, then, for the aforementioned dedicated webpage on orientation on institutional websites.

In order to combat problems of 'information overload', it is also important to consider that orientation may not always have to be offered in a face-to-face format, or solely as a face-to-face format. Online orientation programmes can allow students to self-manage

their orientation experiences while being able to control the volume of information offered and without having to wait until the commencement of orientation programmes in order to do so (Wilson, 2008). Students would then be able to 'self-pace' themselves and work systematically through structured content.

Online orientation programmes could be offered online to the extent that they could be seen as an alternative process of orientation, and one which may be complementary to face-to-face orientation programmes. Although many institutions of higher education have invested in one way or the other in online programmes, it is rare to find comprehensive orientation programmes which are offered online to a similar extent that they are done in a face-to-face context. The design, development and implementation of online orientation programmes are generally labour-intensive and require buy-in and support from many different stakeholders at the institution of higher education in question. It is certainly possible, however, that the benefits of a comprehensive online orientation programme may well outweigh the costs of developing and setting it up.

Good Practice Strategy #5: Allow students to develop healthy forms of social capital at the institution

Studies have shown that the principal source of anxiety for first-year students relates to that of fitting-in and belonging (O'Keefe, 2013; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Hoffman, Richmond & Morrow, 2002). It is therefore important that institutions create specific opportunities for socialising and set up social events – described by Worrall (2007) as "forced networking" – which allow students comfortable ways to meet and engage with other staff and students with whom they will be interacting over the course of their studies. These events are encouraged to be as inclusive as possible and to consider matters of race, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, and religion when planning and organising such events.

The underlying ethos of social inclusivity and engagement behind orientation is contrary to that of another institutional practice which is often argued to be part of orientation: initiation or 'hazing' ceremonies and rituals. Orientation is often understood to be associated with initiation. Initiation practices are argued to be an expanded form of orientation for new students and a crucial rite of passage for new students entering the situation. (South African Human Rights Commission, 2001; Dias & Sa, 2014). According to Dias and Sa (2014, p. 1), initiation is regarded by first-year students as "a necessary and inevitable price to 'pay' for their entrance into the academic world".

Though frowned upon and in many cases banned, initiation ceremonies remain pervasive at institutions of higher education all over the world such that educators and lawmakers continue to lobby against the practice on account of the physical and psychological harm posed to students. Orientation programmes can serve as an appropriate platform to speak out against initiation practices and to continue to remind students of the qualitative difference between orientation and initiation.

Good Practice Strategy #6: Help students experience what learning is like at university

It is often argued that orientation should be able to give students an understanding of the expectations and requirements of academic learning, and that students should be able to sample the kind of learning that they will be doing at university. Some institutions use 'pre-arrival tasks activities' to help familiarise students with the content and approach of their respective courses and give them an early opportunity to practise independent learning and study as they will encounter it during the course of their studies (Foster & Lawther, 2012).

However, this is not as easy as it would appear. Studies have shown that South Africa's first-year student cohort, like students in many other parts of the world, tends to be wholly unprepared for the academic demands of university life. According to the Council on Higher Education (2013, p. 54) the under-preparedness of students ranges from "struggling in the formal curriculum to difficulty with adjusting to independent learning and the university environment".

Throughout the first year of study, students' expectations of their studies and of academic life have to be consciously adjusted and managed. Orientation programmes cannot hope to manage the issue of under-preparedness but at the very least they should be able to introduce and initiate a discussion of the difference between students' prior experiences of learning at school and the expectations and requirements of academic life. Orientation should be able to give students the understanding that they will be encountering a new mode of learning; the knowledge of the means to be sufficiently prepared using forms of institutional academic support available; and the opportunities to 'sample' or 'practise' first-year learning activities.

Good Practice Strategy #7: Adopt formal institutional structures and processes for orientation

Good orientation practice stems not only from knowledge and research, but also from the efforts of dedicated personnel who are mandated to manage orientation as a professionalised and high-skill activity. Such dedicated orientation professionals would be able to attend to orientation as a full-time occupation, rather than something which is done at the beginning of the academic year for the duration of a week and then forgotten. There is evidence that institutions of higher education are investing resources and time in retention-related appointments such as that of student retention teams, retention officers and retention counsellors, all of which are responsible for improving the practice of orientation and ensuring that orientation is managed as a developmental priority for the respective institutions. Many such institutional strategies and appointments which are retention-related and have a direct bearing on matters of orientation, are being explored under the 'What Works? Student Retention and Success Programme' at various UK-based universities being funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Higher Education

Academy (HEA) (2017). Similar studies in the United States and Canada have been similarly conducted by Hanover Research (2010 and 2014).

Foster and Lawther (2012) recommend the use of assessment techniques which draw on current educational research (Chickering & Gamson, 1991) and focus on evidence of effectiveness and impact. Here, a useful exercise in self-assessment and reflection is provided in Table 2 (below) – which has been developed by Nottingham Trent University in the United Kingdom in the form of a 'checklist' for orientation professionals in order to assess whether their orientation practices are meeting the needs of students and are aligned with the broader goals of orientation processes.

Table 2: New student induction checklist

Does your induction…		Link to induction principles:
1.	Provide opportunities for students to develop friendship groups and support networks?	(1) To have opportunities to start making friends and building support networks.
2.	Provide opportunities to sample/ practise normal first-year learning?	(2) To understand what learning is like in university; (3) To experience authentic learning and have some reassurance that they can cope.
3.	Provide students their first tutorial during induction week?	(1) To have opportunities to start making friends and building support networks; (2) To understand what learning is like in university; (3) To experience authentic learning and have some reassurance that they can cope.
4.	Integrate the pre-arrival task into the induction programme?	(1) To have opportunities to start making friends and building support networks; (2) To understand what learning is like in university; (3) To experience authentic learning and have some reassurance that they can cope.
5.	Last as long as a normal teaching week?	(5) To have a course induction that allows time for other commitments.
6.	Use second or final year students for activities such as campus tours?	(1) To have opportunities to start making friends and building support networks; (2) To understand what learning is like in university; (3) To experience authentic learning and have some reassurance that they can cope; (4) To be reminded of how their course will benefit their future plans.
7.	Minimise the number of guest lectures (preferably integrate them into normal teaching at other appropriate times later in the year)?	(5) To have a course induction that allows time for other commitments.
8.	Treat the induction week as the first week of induction and induct students to new elements and concepts throughout the term?	(1) To have opportunities to start making friends and building support networks; (4) To be reminded of how their course will benefit their future plans; (5) To have a course induction that allows time for other commitments.

Source: Nottingham Trent University. New Student Induction: Guide for Staff (2017)

Conclusion

The seven good practice strategies outlined herein speak very broadly to the current needs and gaps in current orientation practice in South Africa. There may certainly be further issues which require targeted attention, for example how best to address the needs of specific student populations within an orientation programme. A case in point is that of international students whose needs are often unrecognised within a generic orientation programme. However, there are other categories of students who require discrete and targeted attention and resources within orientation programmes, such as that of disabled or 'differently abled' students and transgender or intersex students. It can be said that such categories of students may have specific needs that may not always be accommodated within a traditional orientation programme.

At the conclusion of this work, it must be noted that the good practice strategies for orientation are, above all, not intended to be prescriptive. They offer a starting point for a national conversation about orientation and the required further professionalisation and improvement of the field of orientation. Discussion and debate are required with South Africa's orientation professionals and other related stakeholders who work directly in the field and can offer nuanced insights into the matters raised herein. The latter will help to further refine this work and embed it in the realities of South Africa's higher education landscape.

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On campus

Experiential Education Conference at Stellenbosch University, South Africa, 10–11 November 2020

Ruth Andrews*

Experiential Education as Pedagogy for Social Justice, Praxis and Practice for Shaping 21st-Century Global Citizen Leaders

Stellenbosch University's Division Student Affairs, Centre for Student Leadership, Experiential Education and Citizenship's Co-curriculum Office, presented the Stellenbosch University Experiential Education Conference (SUEEC) from 10 to 11 November 2020. This was Stellenbosch University's first online conference and a first in South Africa and Africa focusing on experiential education and social justice. This two-day virtual higher education conference was collaboratively designed with experiential educators in civil society, university student affairs practitioners, and academics from across the world.

The conference theme of 'Experiential education as pedagogy for social justice: praxis and practice for shaping 21st century global citizen leaders' emerged even more pertinent at a time of mass global upheaval, uncertainty and humanitarian crises. The intention of the SUEEC was to spotlight emerging trends and transitions in the higher education experiential learning domain and the intersections thereof with social justice and the formation of the global citizen leader. To accomplish the above entailed inviting world renown keynote speakers and subject matter experts, and to call for abstracts, master classes and exemplars (examples of best practice in experiential education).

The conference was designed for higher education experiential educators, student affairs practitioners, university academics, researchers, social justice educators and practitioners, and all who are interested in embedding social justice frameworks within higher education experiential learning opportunities. The SUEEC offered a unique opportunity to contribute to and engage with diverse views and collective envisioning of shaping pathways for transformative teaching and learning. A total of 221 participants attended the SUEEC, representing 40 institutions from 14 countries: Germany, United Arab Emirates, Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, Ghana, Philippines, United States of America, Singapore, Spain, United Kingdom, Turkey, Hawaii and South Africa.

The SUEEC invited experiential educators to explore the notion of Experiential Education as Pedagogy for Social Justice through the lenses of the five Conference tracks: Experiential Education and Student Transformation; Emerging Social Justice Frameworks

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in Higher Education; Global Citizen Leadership; Internationalisation in Higher Education, and Research and Innovation in Experiential Education.

The SUEEC was designed as an experiential learning journey integrating participant engagement, exemplars of best practice, keynote addresses and master classes, as well as a research focus through virtual paper presentations. The SUEEC's design was theoretically grounded in the work of Dewey and David Kolb, and drew on Paulo Freire's pedagogy of social justice, which states that learning as transformation carries the potential to become a mechanism for affecting social justice.

Reflecting the understanding that experiential learning is a philosophy rather than a methodology, the SUEEC emphasis was on exploring experiential learning as lived reality in various contexts from across the world. The two-day experiential learning journey was mapped to a praxis element led by Alice Kolb and a practice element led by George Kuh. Therefore, Day 1 focused on the Praxis of experiential learning and the various discourses surrounding experiential learning as a philosophy, as well as on how this finds expression in various contexts. Day 2 focused on the Practice of experiential learning and what is being done and needs to be done to realise the transformative power of experiential education towards creating a more equitable society. The SUEEC offered two online modalities: video-streaming of pre-recorded content, and live-streaming of live-recorded engagement.

Participants had the following to say about the design:

> I appreciated the distinction between day 1 and day 2 in terms of the reflecting/reconnecting on day 1 and on day 2 revisioning/repositioning and recalibrating. Having had some time to reflect on the 2 days, I can truly say my experience resonates with these descriptors.

The following highlights made SUEEC an extraordinary event in extraordinary times as expressed by participant feedback below.

The themes for SUEEC Day 1 was Reflecting and Reconnecting and the opening conference sequence featured the world renowned Stellenbosch University Choir and a warm welcome by the rector, Prof. Wim de Villiers.

Keynote 1: Alice Kolb in Panel Conversation, together with an inter-generational panel of experiential educators, unpacked the six principles of experiential learning. This session was foundational to the understanding of experiential learning as a philosophy and set the tone for the day in terms of exploring the praxis of experiential education.

> I found Keynote #1 Experiential Education and Transformative Learning: Principles and Practices - Prof. Kolb in Panel Conversation to be exceptionally thought-provoking as it included students, staff and experts. Was really engaging and enlightening.

The SUEEC showcased experiential education exemplars that demonstrated the SUEEC conference tracks. The exemplars presented an opportunity to experiential educators to share examples of experiential learning best practice that have led to transformative learning in institutions.

> The exemplars were an informative experience. I never heard about the name of such a method. So I learned how to call them and also the examples were so relevant to give the participants a deeper insight.

Keynote 2: Thuli Madonsela and Choice Makhetha in Conversation addressed the issue of social justice frameworks in higher education. The keynote speakers focused on student activism and how this finds expression in higher education such as gender-based violence, racism and issues of access and redress.

> *The most helpful are Experiential Education and Transformative Learning, as well as Emerging Social Justice Frameworks in Higher Education. The first two rendered me an opportunity to learn new things.*

Conference participants had the opportunity to attend two master classes to develop skills and capabilities towards designing transformative experiential learning opportunities. The master classes provided interactive engagement, deep learning and reflexivity.

Master Class 1 led by Mustafa Erdogan focused on the praxis of experiential learning as pedagogy for social justice. Erdogan drew on case studies to illustrate how the experiential educator's world view influences the praxis and practice of experiential learning. The work of Paulo Freire formed the framework of integrating experiential learning and social justice in the design and development of experiential learning processes.

> *Mr Mustafa Erdogan's Master class really gave a grounded approach to experiential learning.*

The conference themes for Day 2 were Revisioning, Repositioning and Recalibrating. The highlights of SUEEC Day 2 were as follows:

Keynotes 3 & 4: Jonathan Jansen and Hester Klopper approached the topic of Internationalisation in higher education from two distinct vantage points of social justice and transformation, with Klopper viewing the topic from the SU institutional perspective. The participants' views of their experiential learning are reflected below:

> *Prof Jansen's session on 'Internationalisation in Higher Education: A view through the social justice lens'. This session was meaningful to me as Prof Jansen covered pertinent societal challenges that speak to the African and South African context.*

> *Prof Hester Klopper's session outlined the challenges we face and what higher education and our students could gain from incorporating experiential training within higher education.*

SUEEC Day 2 provided participants an opportunity to attend virtual paper presentations that focused on the five conference tracks. Selected abstracts were double-blind peer reviewed by an abstract review panel. Authors were granted the opportunity to amend their virtual submissions based on feedback before final submission of a video-streamed paper presentation. A total of 20 presenters with 11 virtual papers covering the five conference tracks showcased their research efforts in the area of experiential education. For many researchers, it was a 'first' in terms of presenting a virtual paper and engaging in a live-streamed Q&A session.

Keynote 5: George Kuh and Arnold Schoonwinkel were undoubtedly the highlight for many of the participants as they presented synthesis of the experiential learning journey. This is what participants had to say about the session:

> *Schoonwinkel and Kuh – seasoned teachers – excellent presentation, insightful, detailed, relevant, learnt a lot.*

> *This session made me aware that if we the curriculum designers and developers are on the same page and have the same shared understanding, it would be smoother to change the curricula in every field to consider the required experiential exposure for each field or career.*

SUEEC Master Class 2 led by Kuh demonstrated the power and efficacy of impact practices and precisely how and why these work. Kuh presented participants with valuable evidenced-based learnings and techniques that could be applied in various learning contexts. The research and innovation track was demonstrated when Kuh shared new research on peer-to-peer learning.

> *Last Master class, I learnt a lot of relevant information; the session from Prof. Kuh was excellent.*

> *Both masterclasses were superb!! They encouraged critical thinking and offered so many useful practical strategies.*

Keynotes 3 & 4 shared a joint moderated Q&A session, while Keynote 5 and Master Class 2 shared a Q&A session. Both sessions were well received with high levels of engagement, and the diversity of thinking and experience was appreciated by the participants.

The primary focus of the final session, led by Kay Peterson from the Institute for Experiential Learning (USA), was to begin the conversation on starting an intercontinental community of practice. The date for the first conversation is set for 10 December 2020.

The conference proceedings drew to a close on Day 2, beginning a new experiential learning journey, continuing the work in the form of an experiential learning community of practice. We look forward to reporting on this new experiential learning chapter in the near future. Participant feedback in the form of appreciation and reflections of experiential learning are clear indicators of a conference that achieved its purpose and objectives.

> *I will integrate the Master Class materials in my daily practices and I will review my praxis of experiential learning.*

> *I will add some of the tips to my facilitation toolkit.*

> *I have been challenged to think differently about my role as an educator and the power dynamics at play.*

> *First, I am in charge of Faculty Affairs and responsible of Lecturer Professional Development in my University and hence I will consider ways to train more lecturers to be able to incorporate experiential learning practices in their courses.*

> *I am going to integrate my SUEEC experiential journey in my professional journey through the review of program units and more specifically, the learning outcomes, mode of delivery and student activities.*

> *I will think more critically about Kolb's Learning Styles and Experiential Learning Cycle and Kuh's High Impact Activities.*

Book review

Engaging Students: Using Evidence to Promote Student Success by F. Strydom, G. Kuh & S. Loots (Eds.) (2017). Bloemfontein, South Africa: Sun Media.

Reviewed by Birgit Schreiber*

This book has been one of my favourites since it was published in 2017, and I have recently taken it out of the shelf again when I was reminded by Prof. George Kuh as keynote speaker during the Stellenbosch University Experiential Education Conference that indeed we should engage our students at every turn in their academic career at university. George Kuh has inspired a generation of Student Affairs practitioners with what now seems intuitive, common sense and obvious: engaged students do better.

The book *Engaging Students: Using Evidence to Promote Student Success*, edited by Francois Strydom, George Kuh and Sonia Loots, uses evidence powerfully to support the notion that we should rely on evidence to support student success. As a whole, it offers a comprehensive view on student engagement in South Africa and elsewhere, and argues cogently that evidence-based decision-making yields good results, reliably. Each chapter brings a unique argument, context and lens to the engagement discourse. I will highlight some of the gems the book offers, but want to assert that each chapter makes an actionable, valuable and insightful contribution to our knowledge on student engagement in South Africa and beyond.

Strydom and Foxcroft argue in Chapter 2 that, together with institutional data, student engagement – the focus on what *students* do – can illuminate some of the questions around social cohesion that the higher education sector has been grappling with. In Chapter 5, Loots, Kinzie and Oosthuysen examine the notion of high impact practices (HIPs) and unpack the conceptualisations underpinning these. They raise some concerns around equitable participation in these, which is also an issue raised by others, including Carolissen (2014) who emphasises the importance of access, participation and inclusion of all groups of students in HIPs if we are to achieve equitable outcome and a context that enables all students an equal opportunity to flourish.

Coates and Radloff, Chapter 6, discuss the value of using engagement data to shift institutional practices and to leverage change. Their chapter concludes with emphasising that "engagement is an inherently contextualised phenomenon" (p. 145), prophetically heralding the shift to open online education, as we have seen recently due to the corona

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crisis, and suggest that engagement discourse needs to be continuously reconceptualised, attuned to local institutional cultures and practices. Torres and Madiba in Chapter 7 place Student Affairs in the central role in advancing engagement opportunities and propose a model that positions Student Affairs as active roleplayer in shifting student success by intentional promotion of student engagement spaces. Kinzie, Strydom and Loots in Chapter 9 discuss the pedagogical shifts required to consider how students experience the learning process and, like Strydom, Hen-Boisen, Kuh and Loots in the following two chapters, call for the re-examination of classroom pedagogies to put the student learning *experience* at the centre.

Each chapter offers actionable, relevant and locally embedded data that underpin the argument that student engagement promotes student success. What is missing, in my view, is a more critical examination of the implicit assumptions that engagement is driven by institutional processes in institution-centric ways. Moreover, I would have liked a discussion of the critiques that are often raised, including arguments that engagement favours those students who have capacity to engage in institutionally designed opportunities (Trowler & Schreiber, 2020). These critiques aside, the book is a comprehensive status report on what student engagement research can offer universities when re-imagining themselves as communities of learning that offer opportunities for equitable participation in the learning process.

It is a must-read for Student Affairs practitioners, not only in Africa, but in all contexts that seek to offer teaching and learning opportunities that advance equitable participation in the learning process.

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Dr Soraya Motsabi is a qualified teacher, who completed her BA degree, Higher Education Diploma (HED) and B Ed at the University of South Africa (Unisa). She then enrolled for a master's degree in Educational Management, which she completed at the then Rand Afrikaans University (RAU), now the University of Johannesburg (UJ). She developed a passion for Psychology and completed her Honours in Psychology at Vista University, after which she pursued a Master of Arts (Counselling Psychology) at RAU. She has been in the education sector for 42 years as a Teacher, a Student Counsellor, an Academic Development practitioner, and later as the First-Year Experience (FYE) Coordinator at UJ. She is presently retired and runs a small private practice in Alberton, South Africa.

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Dr Birgit Schreiber is a member of the Africa Centre for Transregional Research at Alberts-Ludwig-Universität Freiburg, Germany, and the Vice-President of IASAS, the Executive Editorial for the Journal of Student Affairs in Africa, a consultant for Higher Education Leadership and Management, and for Stellenbosch University, where she is leading the Secretariat for the International Network for Town and Gown Universities. Prior to this, she was the Senior Director of Student Affairs at Stellenbosch University and the Director of the Centre for Student Support Services at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in Cape Town. She holds a PhD from UWC. Birgit has published in national and international academic journals and books on student support and development, has presented research papers and keynotes in national and international conferences, and has given lectures at UC Berkley, the University of Leuven, and the University of Oslo. She was a visiting scholar at the UC Berkeley, where she was involved in their Student Affairs department. She has been a member of the national executive of various professional organisations, including the South African Association of Senior Student Affairs Professionals (SAASSAP), and the Southern African Federation of Student Affairs and Services (SAFSAS).

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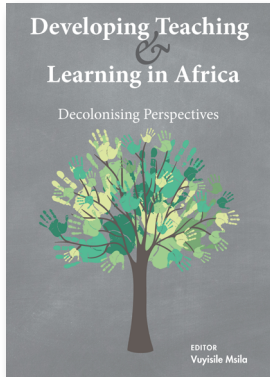
Developing Teaching and Learning in Africa: Decolonising Perspectives by Vuyisile Msila (Ed.) (2020)

African societies still aspire towards knowledge that is liberatory, enhances critical thinking and decentres Eurocentrism. This collection of essays is a timely and focused contribution to the ongoing conversations about indigenous knowledges and Western epistemologies, and decolonisation in higher education. The arguments about the role of language in decolonising curricula and the need for transformed epistemologies are invaluable. In an emotive conversation that is often characterised by popular platitudes, this book offers well-reasoned and critical arguments that need to be considered by all participating in this conversation, regardless of their own perspective. The contributors explore these decolonial debates as they navigate ways of moving towards epistemic freedom and cognitive justice.
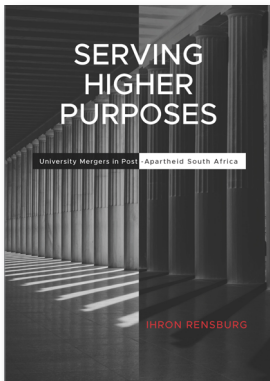
Serving Higher Purposes: University Mergers in Post-Apartheid South Africa by Ihron Rensburg (2020)

Universities of the 21st century and beyond must be about teaching, learning, research excellence, creativity and innovation as much as they must be about enabling the destiny of students, communities and nations to realise their potential. The University of Johannesburg (UJ) succeeded in transforming the divisions, prejudices and limitations that often restrain the advancement of society. UJ's transition to an inclusive, diverse, dynamic, bold and purposeful institution of learning is a story of how to be an object rather than the subject of history, while dynamically shaping our shared futures, laying a solid foundation for future generations to be advocates and architects for social change and cohesion. The book offers profound lessons in leadership that demand to be read by everyone: South African, African and beyond.

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Please register as an author and read the Author Guidelines at https://www.journals.ac.za/index.php/jsaa/about. Submissions must be made by email to the Journal Manager, Ms Maretha Joyce, at mjoyce@sun.ac.za. Submissions in response to special calls for papers must also be made directly to the guest editors concerned (see Call for Papers).

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Journal of Student Affairs in Africa