

Growing an FYE initiative for the diverse student population at the University of Johannesburg

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National context

During the last ten years South African universities have changed a lot. Increasing student numbers and the diversification of the student body has happened at a rapid pace. The increased access of students has however not been accompanied by equal increases in levels of student success. The low graduation output of South African universities has long been a cause for concern. Not only is it inadequate to meet national needs, but it also involves considerable wastage of student potential and capacity. Following on the publication of the national cohort students by Scott et al in 2007, it became possible to assess the efficiency of the HE sector on the basis of the performance of the 2000 cohort of entrants.¹ Scott's figures raise numerous points of concern.

1. Higher education participation rates remain low, in comparison to those of other countries.
2. Approximately 30% of the (limited numbers of) students who enter the South African Higher Education system annually drop out during their first year of studies (2007:9).
3. Less than 50% of the students who enroll for diplomas or degrees ever graduate.
4. Only one in three students of the intake into three-year degrees in contact institutions graduate, even within four years.
5. Student drop-outs cause very substantial losses in subsidies to higher education institutions.²

In short, not only does the system start with a low intake, but also of this low intake, less than half ever graduate.

What are the reasons for this poor performance? Scott notes that 'a complexity of factors' (2007:36) are implicated, of which many (for instance, the unsatisfactory performance of many secondary schools) are undoubtedly outside the control of higher education. However, other factors are indeed within the control of higher education institutions, and strategies can and must be developed, to improve the overall effectiveness of the educational process in higher education:

- Improving the effectiveness of teaching and learning: performance is unsatisfactory right across the spectrum (2007:39)
- Catering for different degrees of preparedness;
- Catering effectively for student diversity, for students from different cultural contexts, and for different approaches to learning;
- Managing the affective factors which also impede learning: demotivation, demoralization, alienation;
- Creating accommodative institutional cultures.

While students across the spectrum are underperforming, in South Africa "key issues include the nature of prior educational experience as well as the level of achieved performance, and language background in relation to the medium of instruction" (Scott 2007:36-7). Scott comments as follows: "*The underpreparedness associated with disadvantaged educational backgrounds often involves a complex combination of factors such as conceptual development, academic language proficiency and approach to learning, as well as subject knowledge. This means that 'more-of-the-same' approaches, such as providing more standard tutorials within the parameters of traditional first-year courses, are seldom effective in addressing educational disadvantage. A key feature of successful approaches is that they are not 'remedial' but in various ways recognise and build on the capabilities that students bring with them into higher education, rather than being bound by traditional assumptions about what these capabilities should be*" (2007: 42).

One of the key points at which students have been found to struggle is the transition between school and university. Approaches targeting the transition from school to higher education have long been implemented in the USA and Australia, where First Year Experience approaches have been developed over many years and have proven to be of considerable value. South African universities in general and specifically the University of Johannesburg faces additional and different challenges: several campuses, the very high number of students, and in many cases the very large classes. Institution specific approaches will be crucial in addressing the issues students and institutions face.

Institutional context

The University of Johannesburg is a newly created institution that was formed by way of a process of incorporations and mergers of institutions created during the country's racially divided past. The University of Johannesburg (UJ) was officially formed on 1 January 2005 by the merger of the Rand Afrikaans University and the Technicon Witwatersrand. The merger created a four campus comprehensive institution offering a wide range of qualifications allowed for by the South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF). These include certificates (short learning programmes), diplomas (more vocational HE qualifications) and degrees (academically focused HE qualifications). UJ is a African city university housing between 45 and 50 00 students.

Table 1: UJ enrollment details

Year	Headcount	African	Female	Non SA	New undergrad
2009	49,315	80%	54%	4%	26%
2010	48,374	82%	55%	5%	21%
2011	50,028	84%	55%	5%	22%

Source: UJ HEDA downloaded from <https://mis.uj.ac.za/heda/fsmain.htm> on 9 June 2011

Academic success at UJ has also been identified as a major problem. Comparable figures for the 2001 cohort of UJ students have been produced by the UJ's Office for Institutional Effectiveness. Of the 2910 students who registered for National Diplomas for the first time in 2001, only 17% graduated in the minimum time of three years, and this percentage had increased to 36% after two additional years. The 3006 students who registered for a general Bachelor's degree for the first time in 2001 performed somewhat less poorly: 33% graduated in minimum time, rising to 59% after two additional years. Performance in professional first Bachelor's degrees was slightly more satisfactory: the 446 entrants in 2001 produced 37% graduates in minimum time, rising to 56% after one additional year. At the UJ as well, therefore, a large proportion of registered students are leaving without completing a qualification; as the UJ, too, there is enormous wastage of human potential, and of funding. In addition, the data confirm substantial ethnic differences in graduation rates.

¹ Scott, I., Yeld, N. & Hendry, J. (2007). A case for improving teaching and learning in South African higher education. *Higher education monitor*, 6, p 1-86.

² Minister Pandor estimated a loss of 4.5 billion rand in subsidies to higher education institutions through student drop-outs between 2000 and 2003. (2005:1)

Within the context of the roll-out of the UJ Teaching and Learning Strategy, it was decided that UJ would implement a holistic approach to incoming students, which includes all aspects of the First Year Experience, with the overall goal of improving the quality of the student experience at UJ, and of enhancing the retention and ultimate graduation rate of school-leavers who commence their studies at UJ.

UJ Student data

A research project was launched to investigate the pre-entry profile of UJ students. The student profile questionnaire (SPQ) resulted in a database consisting of more than 20 000 records. Figures 1 – 6 show the trends from the SPQ research.

Figure 1: UJ First generation trends 2006 - 2011

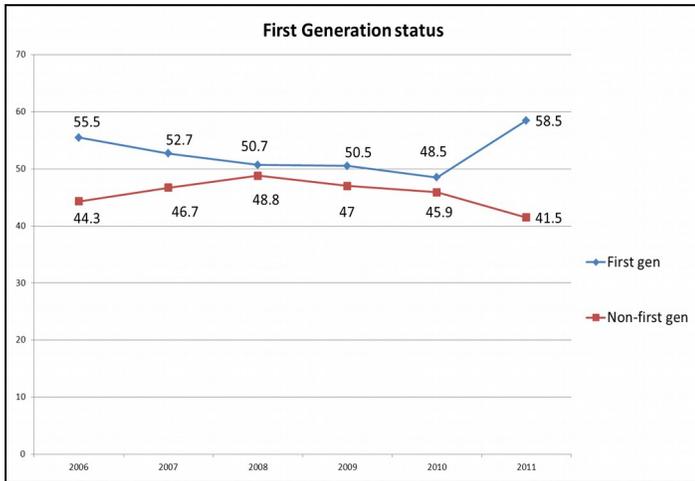


Figure 3: UJ English rating trends 2006 - 2011

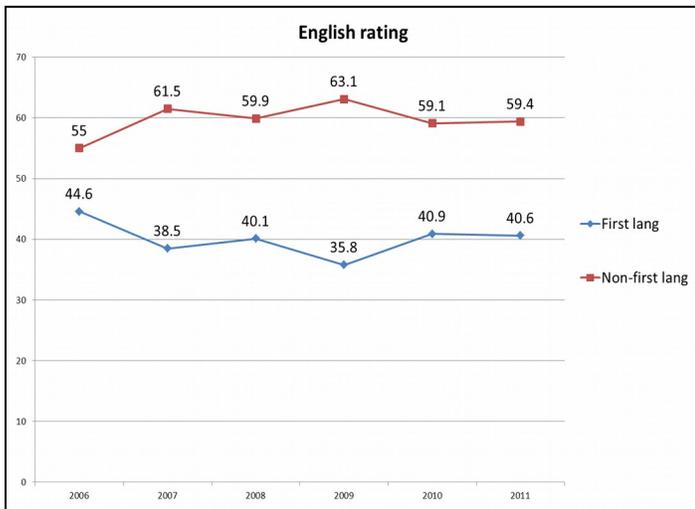


Figure 5: UJ school study hour trends 2006 - 2010

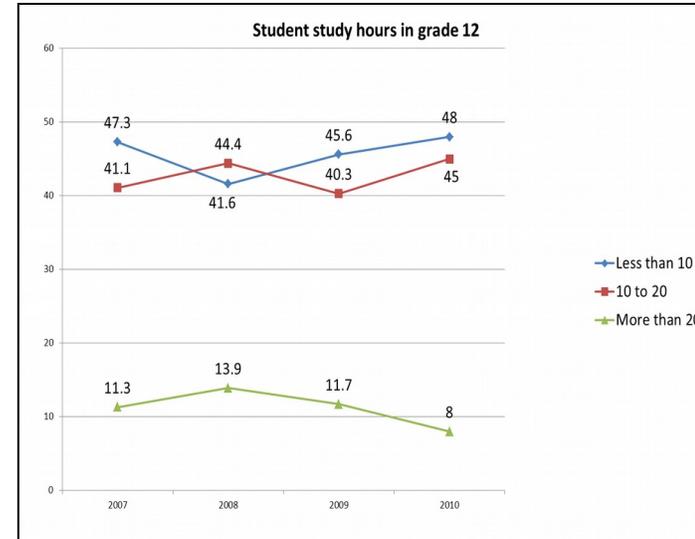


Figure 2: UJ Parental education trends 2006 - 2010

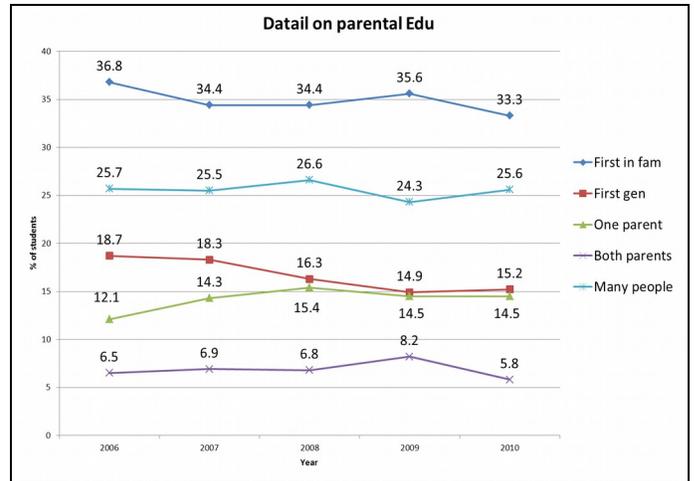


Figure 4: UJ Study motivation trends 2006 - 2010

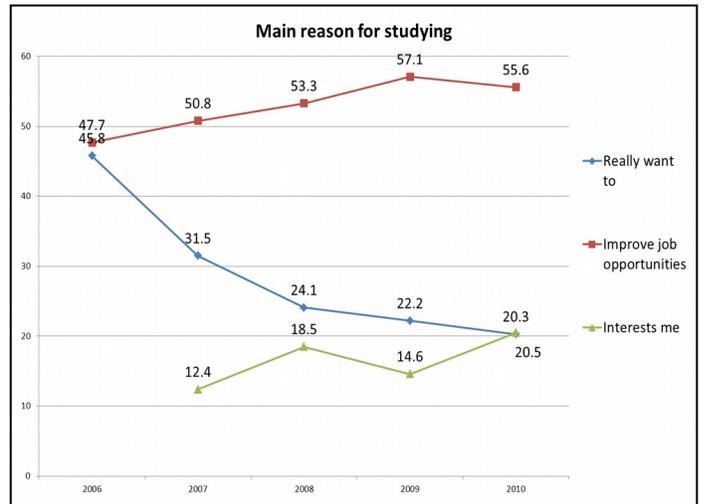
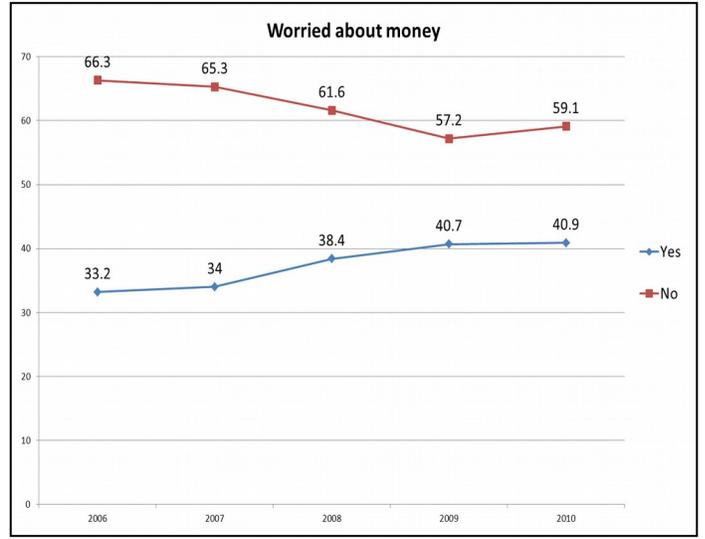


Figure 6: UJ Money worry trends 2006 - 2010



Process followed

As can be seen from the results of the SPQ presented above, the UJ student population is not only diverse but in many ways under-prepared for the challenges they will face at university level. A student population with very high levels of first generation students who are not first language speakers of whom the majority commute to campus makes for a very complex challenge when trying to improve student success.

Links to theory

A number of theoretical and practical perspectives were investigated during the planning phase of the UJ FYE and are still being investigated. Tinto's longitudinal interactionist approach to the issue was particularly useful as a broad perspective on the complex issue of student retention. The work of Astin and a number of perspectives using the thoughts of Bourdieu (cultural capital and habitus) were used as additional sources and the Journal of College student retention proved to be a very rich source of information. In the South African context, the work done at the University of Stellenbosch had the most pronounced influence on the work at UJ.

Process followed

Two workshops hosted by the Division of Academic Development and Support (ADS) during 2008, to which colleagues from across the university, from both faculties and support and service divisions, were invited. The ideas from these workshops were augmented by input from UJ staff who attended the First Year Experience conference at the University of Stellenbosch in September 2008. Following this, the First Year Experience (as a broad encompassing approach) was included as a core element of the UJ Teaching and Learning Strategy. A UJ FYE proposal was then approved by the UJ senate and top-management support was secured.

It should be noted that the University of Johannesburg has long been involved in initiatives to support student success, especially at first year level. Despite significant successes, these initiatives have generally remained isolated. The FYE was an attempt to draw the best from current practice and to develop, incrementally, an overarching and coherent transitional experience for incoming students.

Definition of the UJ FYE

The FYE has been conceptualized as *a holistic initiative which encompasses all aspects of first year student experience in the context of an invitational and equitable institution. It comprises both curricular and extra-curricular initiatives, and is far more than a single event, programme or course. It attempts to establish an ethos and a way of life, through which all first year students will experience the transition into university life.*

Principles of the First Year Experience Programme at the University of Johannesburg.

The following principles should be understood within the broad framework of the University of Johannesburg as an invitational, service-oriented university, and as encompassing all aspects of student experience. They were also informed by the UJ values of responsible citizenship, integrity and respect for diversity.

1. The FYE is a **holistic approach** to the total student experience, and is an initiative of the university.
2. The FYE is embedded within the **preferred UJ student experience**, which begins prior to an application to UJ and ends with alumni status.
3. It is incumbent on the university to ensure that students are provided with **enabling learning environments**.
4. The FYE is not envisaged as simply assisting students to pass, but as **enabling as many as possible to achieve their full potential**.
5. The FYE requires the contribution and support of **all sectors of the UJ**, of both Faculties and Support Divisions.
6. An equitable First Year Experience will be based on the participation of all Faculties in terms of **common principles; a common core combines with specific Faculty ethos and needs**.
7. The FYE is informed by and grounded in ongoing **developmental and evaluative research**.
8. The FYE requires commitment from **students** and support and development by **staff**.
9. The challenge of **first year teaching requires special expertise** from the academic staff, who must in turn be assisted in meeting these challenges.
10. All components of the FYE strive, as far as possible, to be fully **integrated**.

First Year Experience structures

The aim of the FYE structures at UJ were to try and meet a number of demands that are in tension with each other. Firstly, the structures need to support a fully integrated First Year Experience approach for students in each Faculty. At the same time, there needs to be integration across Faculties, to ensure that all are implementing the same core principles; and accommodation of UJ's four campuses. The following structures have been implemented (or are being developed):

Committee structure:

- o A *University First Year Experience Committee* (established as a Subcommittee of the Senate Teaching and Learning Committee) reporting regularly through the STLC to Senate. This committee ensures the participation of all sectors of UJ in an integrated and university-wide approach. The FYE Committee has, inter alia, the following representation: Executive Director: ADS (Chair); Operational Director (ADS); the FYE Coordinator; FYE Faculty Coordinators; representation from ADS, the UJ Library, Academic Affairs, the Enrolment Centre, Student Life and Governance, and Residences, and the SRC.
- o *Faculty FYE committees*: Faculty FYE Committees (or a comparable faculty committee). Representatives from each Department, from the Faculty Office, ADS, the UJLIC, Student Faculty Councils, and the FYE Coordinator sit on this committee. The Faculty FYE Committees report regularly to the University FYE Committee, as well as to Faculty Boards. Faculty FYE Committees ensure an integrated and coherent approach, including participation by all departments.

First phase implementation in 2010

The following seven broad initiatives were identified, as constituting a first phase of implementation.

1. **Placement testing**, aimed at assisting Faculties in selecting and placing students in the most appropriate qualifications and modules. The National Benchmark Tests are being researched to use in combination with the National Senior Certificate

(NSC) results. A weighted score is being investigated to ensure that students are placed for success. The use of tests will be informed by systematic research into associated subsequent performance at UJ.

2. The **initial two-week Orientation and Registration programme** which 'kick-starts' the FYE, by orienting students to studying at UJ and building an initial awareness of the academic expectations, activities and values associated with UJ was re-designed and re-thought. Orientation is being marketed as compulsory for all new first-year students.
3. An **'extended Orientation'** approach, which involves stranding and embedding themes from the initial Orientation throughout the first semester. 'Extended Orientation' includes strands on academic development (literacies and learning skills), Library orientation, and Edulink orientation, each of which should be integrated into core first year curricula.
4. Ongoing **tracking** of student performance and immediate identification of students who seem not be 'engaging' and therefore may be, or are 'at risk'. Such students will be referred to appropriate interventions and support (including psycho-social interventions), during the first semester and before end-of-semester examinations. The SAFENET tracking system is partly in use with the final development work currently being conducted. Students are being measured upon their arrival at university, after the first three weeks and after the first formal assessment.
5. **Senior students:** The involvement of senior students takes a number of forms such as tutorial programmes, mentoring programmes and community engagement. Senior students are seen as a key element in facilitating successful student integration.
6. **Co-curricular activities**, eg. organized sport, clubs and societies, and cultural activities, provide a wide variety of learning, and friendship building opportunities and facilitate a ready acceptance of the diversity in the UJ community. Such activities are widely promoted and form the fourth strand of 'extended Orientation.'
7. Focus on **residences as centres of academic excellence**. UJ would like to create an optimal learning experience for the relatively limited numbers of students in residences, and those associated with day-houses; this involves the establishment of guided learning communities, which have been shown to have a very positive impact on student learning.

Current developments

Good progress has been made on all the initial initiatives with a number of working groups and sub-committees having been established at UJ. Current efforts of the FYE committee are aimed at sustaining these current initiatives as well as acting on newly emerging themes. Good progress has been made in regards to establishing FYE structures within the nine academic faculties and the central UJ FYE faculty is a vibrant committee. Newly emerging themes for the FYE committee include improving student involvement in all FYE structures and activities, students who are worried about food, a UJ FYE website, international students and what does it mean to be a UJ student?

Results from the Initial student experience survey research

It was decided during 2010 to develop and implement the Initial student experience survey (ISES) at UJ. The questionnaire is being used to gauge the actual student experience of university and is completed in week 6 of their first year. The questionnaire allows the student to rate various aspects of their experience at the institution as well as to report on various aspects of their current living conditions. The questionnaire is distributed by the various FYE academic faculty representatives. The ISES was completed during 2010 (n = 2860) and 2011 (n = 5940). A number of interesting results have emerged from the analyses of the data (only 2011 results reported here): Results include that 34% of students reported experiencing transport problems, 31% were not happy at their current accommodation, 70% had to commute to campus and 25% reported being worried about food. It was also possible to determine student ratings of the institution, the orientation process, the registration process and student interaction with lecturers and tutors. The results of the ISES research have been well received and reports have been distributed to top-management and heads of academic departments.

The hearts and minds approach

Because lecturing staff have the most contact with first year students, they form an integral part of the first year experience of any particular student. Most academics are relatively uninformed about student information and the needs of the new generation of UJ students. The UJ FYE uses a successful, data rich, hearts and mind approach to influence and convince academics about the FYE and their role in student success. Both the SPQ and ISES provide valuable data that form the backbone of this approach. Good progress has been made at influencing UJ's ethos and with creating a way of life that allows student success. A lot still remains to be done, but the institutional decentralized approach is proving to be a very sustainable and effective FYE methodology in the South African context.

Concluding remarks

The small successes and the brave students taking on the challenge of university life, and succeeding at UJ, make the work at UJ worthwhile. The challenges being faced at UJ have relevance for many other institutions who are increasingly taking in students that are similar to the ones we welcome at UJ. We look forward to increasingly seeing students who gain access to university (and specifically UJ) also succeeding in attaining their qualifications.

We look forward to continuing to grow the UJ FYE into the future.

Contact details

Please contact me if you require any additional information, if you have queries and or comments or if you plan to visit Johannesburg!

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