

Adjustment issues for first year students in a diverse, multi-professional Health Sciences Faculty

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Introduction

Research highlights significance of FYE at SA HE Institutions, as SA HE has low participation and high attrition¹.

FY success vital in the context of scarcity of skills.

Background for FYE Study

Faculty has introduced radical curricular changes in all U/G programmes.

Biggest impact is on the first year cohort, mostly school leavers.

2009: first cohort of students from revised outcomes based school curriculum entered university.

Questions:

- preparedness of this group for university life
- suitability of the measures put in place by Faculty to ensure a good quality FYE

Forms part of overall effort to:

- Improve quality of student learning
- Improve general student experience
- Create an enabling institutional environment
- Improve student retention
- Improve the quality and profile of graduates



Objectives of study

- to document the current experience of first year students
- to identify aspects that require improvement
- to suggest ways of improving the FYE

Methodology

Ethical approval received

Data gathered via online questionnaire: quantitative and qualitative

Sample – all 1st Year students in the Faculty: medical, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech and language pathology and audiology programmes.

Administered during 2nd semester

Data included:

1. Demographics

2. Quality of experience, degree of satisfaction, and perceptions of institutional support wrt:

- adjustment to university environment
- social adjustment
- academic adjustment
- personal growth and development



Results: 1. Demographics

Response rate: 56% (188/337)

- School leavers 78%
- Home setting - area:
 - Urban 83%
 - Rural 17%



Home setting - type:

- Suburb 76%
- Township 12%
- Village 7%
- Farm 3%

Language: English First language 62%

Estimated monthly income for family 51% < R20 000 (£1 800)

Fees covered by Family 63%, Scholarships 31%, Loans 23%

Parents' education:

- Tertiary – 66%
- Secondary – 29%
- Primary – 4%



School resourcing:

- Well-resourced 63%
- Adequately resourced 25%
- Poorly-resourced 12%

Living in: UCT residences 46%, Home 29%, Digs 12%

Appropriate accommodation 78%

Easy to travel to Campus each day 78%

Difficult incident that affected academic performance 52%



Results: 2. Adjustment

University / faculty environment:

- Adjusting well: 95% agree
- Prefer another academic programme: 15% agree



Use of infrastructural support:

- Course convenors re: administration 49%
- Faculty Undergraduate Office re: administration 46%
- U/G Funding Office re: financial support 37%
- Satisfied with UCT's efforts to provide safe environment on campus 77%

Availability of social support

- Satisfied with extracurricular activities at university: 94% agree
- Satisfied with variety of student societies at university: 97% agree
- Good friends at university: 95% agree
- Satisfied with social life at university: 87% agree

"The workload is a lot and there is not much time for going out and socialising"

"There are many opportunities to socialise; UCT is renowned for offering a complete student experience."



Personal growth & development

- Pleased with decision to attend UCT: 95% agree
- Thinking about dropping out of university: 8% agree
- Learning to take responsibility has not been easy: 49% agree
- Homesickness causing difficulty: 35% agree
- Having difficulty coping with stresses: 34% agree
- Will deal with what the future holds at university: 92% agree

Use of non-academic support

- Academic staff 22%
- Faculty Undergraduate Office 18%
- Student/ Peer Mentor 23%
- Student Wellness Centre 13%
- Staff & student officials in residence 12%



"The wellness center is extremely difficult to access when you are healthy let alone when you are feeling ill!"

Adjustment to academic demands

- Keeping up to date with work: 87% agree
- Volume of work is manageable: 79% agree
- Difficulty of course content is manageable: 88% agree
- Satisfied with academic performance: 50% agree [MBChB 38%; H&RSc 63%]
- Not working as hard as they should: 42% agree
- Not doing well enough for amount of work put in: 34% agree
- Manage study time well: 46% agree
- Enjoying academic work: 88% agree



Academic support available

- Satisfied with quality of lecturers: 91% agree
- Satisfied with quality of courses: 98% agree
- Approached instructors outside of classes 43%



"Yes, tutors and lecturers are incredibly helpful, especially one-on-one!"

- Approached fellow students 77%



Discussion

Summary

- University environment & social adjustment is fine for most students
- Significant proportion find adjusting to level of independence required at university challenging (personal growth & development)
- Significant proportion find adjusting to the academic demands at university challenging

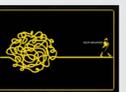


Current UCT Support

- Orientation Programme includes academic orientation
- Mentor Programme throughout the year
- Monitoring student progress via Test Boards with follow up for struggling students (Early Warning System)
- Dedicated Student Support Office in the Faculty
- Individual support for students with non-academic problems, including applications for funding & accommodation
- UCT Student Wellness Services – clinical psychologist available on FHS Campus
- Safety Improvement District established
- FYE task team formed

Way Forward:

- More financial support for school-leavers and mature students
- Address problems with accommodation



References

- Scott I. First-Year Experience as Terrain of Failure or Platform for Development? Critical Choices for Higher Education. In: Leibowitz B, van der Merwe A and van Schalkwyk S, editors. Focus on First-Year Success: Perspectives Emerging from South Africa and Beyond Stellenbosch: African SUN Media, 2009: 17-36.

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