

## Accounting for the Academic Success of Sol Plaatje University's Ground-Breaking Student Group of 2014

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**Abstract:** The students enrolled at Sol Plaatje University (SPU) come from a wide range of social and cultural backgrounds that give them different life experiences, educational opportunities and different expectations. The purpose of this article is to establish the factors that accounted for the academic success of the first group of students who enrolled for the diploma: Retail Business Management at the newly established SPU in 2014. The students (N = 35) answered a questionnaire consisting of (45) close-ended questions and one open ended question. The data was analyzed and the findings showed certain factors that have a positive influence on the students' academic success in 2014.

**Key words:** Academic success, ground, breaking students, retail business management, factors

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### INTRODUCTION

South African universities are changing in several important ways: the entry standards are changing, the programs are focusing more specifically on the outcomes that students are required to achieve and the student populations are becoming more diverse. These changes are occurring in a climate of increased accountability (Fraser and Killen, 2003). Therefore, universities are concerned about the standards of their academic programs and the success rates of students.

The issues of success rates at universities are essential to meaningful transformation within the higher education sector. Success rates according to the DHET are calculating Fulltime Equivalent (FTE) passes in a particular category of courses as a proportion of the FTE number of enrolled students for each group of courses. The DHET publishes weighted average success rates. University success rates in South Africa are relatively low compared to similarly developed countries (DHET, 2013) Success does not necessarily mean just the straight A at the end but also refers to all that happens before achieving the strong, measurable academic success. There are many studies available that have focused on describing teaching arrangements that enhance smooth study processes in higher education (Maatta and Uusiautti, 2011; Maatta *et al.*, 2016; Samarawickrema and Stacey, 2007). Success often refers to elements that increase students' satisfaction with their study growth, academic success and smoothness of their study paths. They usually cover features of efficient study environment for example library services, ICT support, classrooms and professional teaching personnel and quality structures for example well-designed curriculum,

grading and evaluation systems (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004; Salmela *et al.*, 2015). In the literature, there is ample evidence of teaching and learning to suggest factors influencing student's success at university level. Lewin and Mawoyo (2014) prepared a detailed desktop review and interviews with university staff to identify academic and non-academic factors affecting access and success as well as a review of interventions to improve success (Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014). Other factors are: teaching strategies, the student's motivation, the student's approach to studying, the interaction between students and the academic and the social systems of the university, cultural expectations, psychosocial factors and numerous other factors (Maatta *et al.*, 2016). Class size is also one of the factors that impact upon academic performance and the general relationship is a negative one (Heinesen, 2010).

According to, student's descriptions of their positive study success were categorized into eight categories namely: experiences of success, good relationships with other students, the open atmosphere at the University, teaching and teacher's dedication and enthusiasm, studies and studying itself that were rewarding, activities in studies, flexibility in teaching arrangements and study schedules and active feedback and positive comments given by teachers (Maatta *et al.*, 2016). In the research done by Ganyaupfu (2013), he examined factors influencing academic achievement in quantitative courses among business students of private higher education institutions in South Africa. The indication was that lecture competence, teaching methods and quality of learning materials have a positive influence on undergraduate student's academic achievements (Ganyaupfu, 2013).

The use of these studies lies in the need to identify success factors and to undertake corrective measures that improve the academic performance of students (Ali *et al.*, 2013).

At the Sol Plaatje University, a discourse emerged when the supposedly under-prepared and at risk students performed exceptionally well academically. It showed that there was a positive relationship between different factors influencing student's academic success rate in the Diploma: Retail Business Management at Sol Plaatje University (SPU).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Context of the study

**Sol Plaatje University (SPU):** As a new university, Sol Plaatje University (SPU) started its academic activities at the beginning of 2014. SPU is a comprehensive university that its academic focus is meant to be a mix of general formative academic programs and technology focused professional programs with a balance towards undergraduate levels of study. In deciding on the academic programs and qualifications to be implemented, SPU make sure that the unique features of the Northern Cape are in the academic programs. At the same time developing high-level of intellectual capacity in areas of most need in the region and for the country as a whole. The three academic programs implemented firstly were designed with very generous support from academics and senior leadership at the University of the Free State and the Cape Peninsula University of Technology 13.

SPU currently (2016) has four Schools: School of Economic and Management Sciences, School of Humanities, School of Education and School of Natural Sciences. The School of Economic and Management Sciences offers a Diploma in Retail Business Management and a Bachelor of Commerce degree (BCom: Generic). The Diploma: Retail Business Management has developed a good relationship with the local business sector which gives them a three-month employment opportunity in their work-integrated learning sessions. Currently, the business community consists of Gariep Arts Festival, GWK Properties, GWK Retail, OK Grocer, Spar, Beefmaster, Wash day Angels, Kimberley Golf Club, Diamond Pavillion Mall and Foschini. The subjects for the first year Diploma: Retail Business Management students are: Retailing, Retail Operations Management, Retail Financial Management, Communication and Retail Computer Applications.

**Population:** The target population for this study was the ground-breaking students who enrolled for the Diploma: Retail Business Management at SPU in 2014. According

to the University's records of registered students, there were 40 registered students for the 2014/2015 academic year. During the year (2014) (2) students cancelled their studies. About 38 students from the group wrote exams and thirty five passed their 1st year. Three students failed their 1st year.

These students came from a wide range of social and cultural backgrounds that give them different life experiences, educational opportunities and different expectations. Within this context, the research explored some of the issues that were most likely to contribute to the academic success of the students' academic performance. The assumption is made that student admitted to the diploma: Retail Business Management were able to complete the courses.

**The survey instrument:** The survey instrument was a questionnaire consisting of (45) close-ended questions and (1) open-ended question. This was handed out to (35) students during a lecture sessions during last semester. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymity was guaranteed. Students were not required to supply identifying information on the survey instrument thus ensuring anonymity.

The students rated themselves on their learning experiences using a (5) point Likert scale and was displayed in terms of the distribution of responses and classified as being:

- Not at all true about myself
- Not true about myself
- Unsure
- True about myself
- Very true about myself

The students had to select the number on the questionnaire that best represented their experience on a Likert scale. The quantitative data was presented using descriptive statistics, regarding the mean ( $\bar{x}$ ) which represents the sum values of each selected option and score items per category. The data was in a percentage (%) per number of the Likert scale (Sullivan and Jr. Artino, 2013). Questions in the survey were categorized as follows:

- Availability of resources
- Learning environment
- Residence
- Sol Plaatje University (SPU) environment
- Student attributes
- Self-regulated learning skills
- Feedback
- Experiences of assessment practices

The questionnaire focused on factors that could have contributed to the pass rate of the 2014 first year's students.

**Academic success:** According to the Cambridge University Reporter The definition of academic performance regards examination performance 14. In this study, academic achievement results were obtained from the student's statements of results and consisted of the student's performance in tests, course work and examinations of first-year Retail Business Management diploma.

The focus of this study was of the factors that had an interplay with the potential the students brought to produce the results achieved. The study was outlined by the research question, namely: What factors have a positive influence on the academic success of the 2014 ground-breaking student group at Sol Plaatje University?

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Studentgroup profile

**Demographic information:** The demographic characteristics of the 35 students who sat for their first year-end examinations in 2014 refer to gender, age, home language, race and province of residence. The demographic information of the students shows that in the Diploma: Retail Business Management program more than (50%) of the students were female and the rest male. The 18-20 years age group were in the majority and mainly represented the students who had matriculated the previous year (2013). The majority of the student's home language (17) is Setswana and their race is Black (29). The majority (28) of the students are residents of the Northern Cape.

**Admission points:** The admission points refer to the minimum academic requirements for admission into a study programmes at Sol Plaatje University. The Academic Performance Score (APS) score for a student in the Diploma: Retail Business Management is twenty two (22 points). The overall average of the admission points for the Diploma: Retail Business Management students was twenty eight points. It excludes the three Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) students. The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a process through which formal, non-formal and informal learning are measured, mediated for recognition across different contexts and certified against the requirements for credit, access, inclusion or advancement in the formal education and training system or workplace 15.

**Academic performance:** In this study, academic performance results were obtained from the student's statements of results and consisted of the student's performance in tests, course work and examinations.

The number of students enrolled at Sol Plaatje University (SPU) in the Diploma: Retail Business Management were forty. During the year (2014) (2) students canceled their studies. Thirty eight students from the group wrote exams and thirty five passed their 1st year. Three students failed their first year. The course percentage pass rate was 87.5%. Thus, the academic success rate was exceptionally high and therefore the factors contributing to this high pass rate were determined.

Therefore, the profile of the ground breaking group entailed 35 students with a APS score above the minimal 22 points. The majority was black female students who matriculated in 2013. Their home language is setswana and they live in the Northern Cape (Table 1-3).

**Quantitative data:** The quantitative data was presented using descriptive statistics, regarding the mean (x) which represents the sum values of each selected option and score items per category. The data was in a percentage (%) per question number. Questions in the survey were categorized as follows:

- Availability of resources
- Learning environment
- Residence
- Sol Plaatje University (SPU) environment
- Student attributes
- Self-regulated learning skills
- Feedback
- Experiences of assessment practices

(Q refers to the question number in the Questionnaire)

**Availability of resources:** Resources referred to the fact that students owned laptops and have free Wi-Fi. The majority of the respondents responded that the resources available supported their learning. The fact that students owned laptops (Q7) indicated a 71% contribution to the enhancement of their learning.

**Learning environment:** Learning environment referred to the diverse physical locations, contexts and cultures in which students learn. The students responded as follows on the learning environment for them to be successful: Technology in the classroom (Q13) scored the highest frequency of 69%. Secondly the fact that the class group was small (Q5) scored a vast majority of 83%.

Table 1: Demographic information

Sex	Age (years)	Home language	Race	Province
Male (11)	18-20 (23)	Setswana (17)	Black (29)	Northern Cape (28)
Female (24)	21-25 (9)	Afrikaans (8)	Coloured (6)	North West (3)
	26-30 (2)	English (0)	White (0)	Eastern Cape (0)
	31-33 (0)	Others (10)	Other (4)	
	≥34 (1)			

Table 2: Admission points

Intervals	22-25	26-30	31-35	RPL
Frequencies	10	16	6	3

Table 3: Academic performance

Programme	Students enrolled	Cancellations	Students who wrote exams	Students that passed first year	Nr of students that failed first year	Course pass rate
RBM600	40	2	38	35	3	87.5%

**Residence:** The residence in this study referred to accommodation provided by Sol Plaatje University for the students. The student's responses on staying in the residence varied from not at all true to very true. Staying in the residence (Q3) scored 37% in helping the students to study (Q9). Staying in the residence providing support regarding learning from peers, scored 29%. Nine Students (26%) were not residing in the residence.

**Sol Plaatje University (SPU) environment:** Sol Plaatje University (SPU) environment referred to the impact of the environment of SPU on the emotional well-being of the students as well as availability of spaces for studying. Question 8 (Q8) and Question 6 (Q6) focused on the emotional welfare of the students at Sol Plaatje University (SPU). (Q8) was formulated as a negative question and 48% of the respondents indicated that SPU did not hurt their emotional well-being. (Q6) was expressed as a positive question and 57% showed that it had a positive effect on their emotional well-being. Students (72%) stated that a physical space (Q14) where they could study in-between lectures was not available and 23% could not decide on this question.

**Student attributes:** Attributes referred to students setting goals for themselves and being motivated to be successful. The students responded that it was very true (80%) that they set goals for themselves regarding what they wanted to achieve (Q23). They also indicated that they were motivated (Q22) to be successful (70%). The responses for the use of the library or other sources to get more information varied between very true and not at all true.

**Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) skills:** Self-regulated learning referred to the revision of work by themselves and seeking advice to solve problems. The students

indicated very true (69%) regarding rewriting their class notes to help them remember information on their subjects (Q27). When they studied, the majority (83%) practiced by repeating important facts to themselves (Q33). The responses to (Q32), indicated that 31% of students do not work on answering questions and the end of chapters if they do not have to. Students (60%) are motivated to practice exercises and seek other ways of problem solving (Q29).

**Feedback:** Feedback referred to comments received by the students from the lecturers. Most of the students experienced the feedback they received as a positive contribution to their learning. A majority of responses varied from 74-89%.

**Experiences of Assessment practises:** Assessment referred to assignments, tests and examinations completed by the student. The majority of responses from the students on the evaluation as a contributing factor to their academic success varied from 80-86%. This indicates that the assessment had been fair, balanced and in alignment with the evaluation criteria.

**Qualitative data:** Because no single item is a perfect measure of a concept, the responses of the quantitative data were triangulated with that of the qualitative data obtained from the open-ended question and the literature. The qualitative data obtained from the open-ended question identified some patterns.

In the questionnaire completed by first-year students at Sol Plaatje University in the Retail Business Management Department, question 46 was an open-ended question. The students were asked to comment on why they think they were successful in their academic performance in 2014. The answers produced the following common themes: resources, the learning environment and

the Sol Plaatje University (SPU) environment, attributes of the student self, self-regulated learning, study methods as well as feedback, assessment and support from lecturers.

### **CONCLUSION**

The qualitative and quantitative data were compared to reach the following findings on the discourse that emerged when Sol Plaatje University's supposedly underprepared students performed well academically. The factors identified in this study to contribute to the success of the students are: availability of resources, learning environment, residence, SPU environment, student attributes, self-regulated learning skills, Feedback and experiences of assessment practises. Most of the students responded that the resources available supported their learning. The fact that students owned laptops and the free Wi-Fi indicated a 71% contribution to the enhancement of their learning. Therefore, for students to have laptops and free Wi-Fi enhanced their learning. The students responded that it was very true (80%) that they set goals for themselves about what they wanted to achieve. Therefore, students can be motivated to work in study groups. The students that indicated when they studied, they practiced by repeating important facts to themselves. They also worked in study groups which improved their learning. Responses on practicing exercises and solving problems varied between very true and not true at all. Therefore, students can be motivated to practice exercises and seek for other ways of problem solving. Most of the students experienced the feedback they received from lecturers as a positive contribution to their learning. The students stated that the lecturers were supportive and motivated them throughout the year. The responses from the students on assessment as a success factor contributing to their successful learning were overall average. "Very true" and "true" responses varied between 80-86% which indicates that the assessment had been fair and balanced. The fact that the class group was small also contributed to their learning.

The student's responses on staying in the residence varied from not at all true to very true. Staying in the residence scored 37% in helping the students to study. Staying in the residence provided support regarding learning from peers.

The responses for making use of the library or other sources to get more information varied between very true and not at all true. Library facilities and physical space where students could study in-between lectures can be improved. This multi-faceted teaching and learning

environment that was structured at Sol Plaatje University (SPU) intuitively included a variety of teaching strategies, student's motivation and student's learning approaches to their studies, the interaction between students and the academic and social systems of the university and it can be concluded that the identified factors had an interplay with the potential the students brought to produce the results achieved.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Recommendations for further research would be to increase the population and include participants from other comprehensive universities to gain deeper insight and improve the results of this study.

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