

**OPTIMISING THE DESIGN, IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION OF FIRST
YEAR SEMINARS IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION: IMPLICATIONS
FOR EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES**

by
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Dissertation (Masters)

Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of
Masters in Higher Education Studies

In the
Faculty of Education

UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE

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July 2024

DECLARATION

I, Lauren Lisa Oosthuizen, declare that the Master's Degree research dissertation or interrelated, publishable manuscripts/published articles, or coursework Master's Degree mini-dissertation that I herewith submit for the Master's Degree qualification Masters in Higher Education Studies at the University of the Free State is my independent work, and that I have not previously submitted it for a qualification at another institution of higher education.



29 July 2024

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I can hardly believe this day has finally arrived. It has been a dream of mine, for over a decade, to complete my Masters degree, but life happened. And I am so grateful it did, because I am now in the right place at the right time in my career to fully appreciate the value of this journey. I was sure for a long time that this was not attainable but I have had special people in my life that have never doubted me, and that always pushed me to keep this dream alive. I would like to thank those people and acknowledge them for the unbelievable contribution that they have made to not only make this dissertation a reality, but I am so very grateful that they also contribute, on a personal level, to making my life a fulfilling one.

- Before I can acknowledge people, I must acknowledge our Heavenly Father, for without His grace, this certainly would not have been achievable.
- My parents, Peter and Lorna Hing, for your devotion to instilling in me the value of an education, and the value of life-long learning. Thank you for always supporting me, whether through your daily prayers, our regular phone-calls, our visits to the coast and your visits to the Free State, and especially these last few months for helping out with the kids and always providing a word of encouragement.
- My husband, Nicolaas Oosthuizen. You are a God-send. I can never thank you enough for your unwavering support and belief in me, and for all the heavy lifting during this last stretch. Thank you for being the sort of partner that stepped up to all the household tasks, sorting lunch packs, running all the errands, taking the kids out on outings so I could have some time to write – the list goes on. Thank you for always knowing what to say, and what to do. I am truly blessed to have you as my better half.
- My supervisor, Dr. Sonja Loots. I have not heard of many supervisors who are always available and provide immediate feedback – you are a rare gem. You challenged me and I have grown for it. Thank you for your kindness and patience and for our laughs, even if it meant you teasing me about my work being ‘fluff’ and needing to be more focused.
- My line manager for most of my working career, Prof. Francois Strydom. Thank you for helping me on my career path, coaching and mentoring me from a student assistant to where I am now. Thank you for always asking about the Masters and for giving me the space to work on it, even in the times when there wasn’t a lot of tangible progress. I appreciate the support and encouragement that you have provided.

- My language editor, Dr. Michelle Joubert. Thank you for the thorough job you did. Thank you for your patience with me. And thank you for always being available to chat, give me advice, and go the extra mile. I appreciate you.
- The Verster family – Illona, Bobby, and Robynne. You have been such an incredible support system. Thank you for your sincere friendship. Thank you for loving my children and always being willing to spoil them on a weekend so that I could have time to write. Thank you for everything that you have done for us. I appreciate you more than you know.
- My colleagues at CTL and at the UFS – thank you for being friends and not just colleagues. You are too many to name. Thank you for your interest in my studies, your kind words, your doodles on my board, your advice, and for always making me smile. If one works a 40 hour week then you spend most of your time with colleagues – I am grateful I get to spend my time with you, and be encouraged by you to go home and work on my studies.
- My friends and family that have been a dear part of my life for this decade of dreaming – thank you for cheering me on, thank you for your voice notes and messages and check-ins and visits. Thank you for praying for me. I am so proud to be able to tell you that I did it, and you were such a big part of that. So often, I would sit down to write and just when I needed it, a message would pop up on my phone. Thank you for everything.
- Last but not least, my children, Amorey and Abigail Oosthuizen. The last few months have been tough because I have had to spend so much time after hours on this dissertation. I am blown away by how mature and understanding and kind and funny you two are, at the tender ages of 7 and 5 years old. Thank you for giving me time to work and for all the loving notes, artwork, entertaining dances, songs, and jokes to keep me going.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

AP	Admission Point
AUSSE	Australian Survey of Student Engagement
BFN	Bloemfontein
CTL	Centre for Teaching and Learning
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DUT	Durban University of Technology
FAQs	Frequently Asked Questions
FYCP	First Year Curriculum Principles
FYEs	First Year Experience Programmes
FYS	First Year Seminar
GER	Gross Enrolment Rate
HIP	High-Impact Practice
NBT	National Benchmark Test
NRC	National Resource Centre for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition
NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
NSSE	National Survey of Student Engagement
NWU	North-West University
QQ	QwaQwa
SA	South Africa
SANRC	South African National Resource Centre for First Year Experience and Students in Transition
SASSE	South African Survey of Student Engagement
SU	Stellenbosch University
TAs	Teaching Assistants
UFS	University of the Free State
UJ	University of Johannesburg
US	United States
Wits	University of the Witwatersrand

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ABSTRACT

Globally, first-year students face many challenges as they transition into university. This is mainly because they need to adapt to a new environment, and because there is a steep increase in the volume, complexity, and variation in an undergraduate degree workload compared to high school. In addition, many South African students are underprepared for university due to inequalities in the basic education system. The variation in school quintile and access to resources means that students entering tertiary education do not all enter on an equal footing. In response, most higher education institutions have support initiatives in place for students, in the form of First Year Experience programmes. In this study, I focus on one of these programmes – the First Year Seminar (FYS). The purpose of an FYS is to support students in their transition into university. To do so, however, it must be well-designed, well-executed, and evaluated to measure if it has achieved what it set out to do. There is limited literature in the South African space on the design and evaluation of FYS programmes. Because these programmes are often operationally focused, there is also limited research on the use of theoretical underpinnings or conceptual frameworks in contributing to the knowledge base of FYS programmes. To address this gap, this study makes use of Transition Pedagogy and its First Year Curriculum Principles (FYCPs) as a conceptual framework to argue for the optimisation of FYS programmes by interrogating how the planning, implementation, and evaluation of such programmes can support the transition and success of first-year students. The primary research question guiding this work is: *How can First Year Seminars be optimised by implementing an evidence-based approach to design and evaluation?* There are two secondary research questions, each answered in the form of a publishable article: *How can evidence-based First Year Seminars be designed?* *And how can the evaluation of First Year Seminars inform successful student transitions?*

The first article analyses the use of an evidence-based approach to design and evaluate an FYS. To do so, curriculum documents from the FYS at the University of the Free State (UFS) are analysed and mapped against the FYCPs for design. Key findings indicate that the nature of the FYS at the UFS – a hybrid seminar that is delivered institution-wide through its integration into the curriculum of all faculties – does meet the criteria for evaluating FYCPs. However, this investigation was also useful in determining ways to improve the design of this FYS to better support students' transition into university. The implications of these findings are

promising for the development of well-designed and evidence-based FYS programmes as core contributors to supporting first-year students' transition into university.

The second article uses data from students' evaluations of the FYS at the UFS over a five-year period to reflect how the evaluation of an FYS can inform successful student transitions. The FYCPs for design of a transition programme are used as a conceptual framework to map against the student-informed design of the institutional FYS, and the article draws on the pragmatic paradigm to integrate quantitative and qualitative data in this goal-oriented, applied social research study. Although previous studies have examined student evaluations of transition programmes, there has not been a strong focus on using student evaluation data to inform the design of transition programmes. As such, this study focuses on the types of questions asked in student evaluations and how that data informs the design of a transition-focused FYS. The FYCPs are used to map how the FYS addressed these principles for supporting transition. Key findings show that the design and implementation of the FYS improved each year as a result of the student evaluations and that the majority of the FYCPs were addressed. However, there is room for improvement in the consistency of the questions asked in the student evaluations, as well as the frequency at which these were conducted. These findings contribute to the literature base of case studies in which student evaluations are used to inform the design of an evidence-based transition programme.

Ultimately, this dissertation contributes to the field by exploring the value of using data-informed approaches to the design, implementation, and evaluation of FYS programmes in South Africa, thereby impacting the transition of first-year students into higher education. Additionally, this study will add value by contributing to the literature base on transition and student success in South Africa.

Keywords: First Year Curriculum Principles, First Year Seminar, first-year students, evidence-based approach to design, evaluation of a First Year Seminar, transition programme, student evaluation

1 CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on optimising the design and evaluation of first-year support, specifically the provision of support through a First Year Seminar (FYS). This is important because of the many challenges students face when transitioning into and through their first year of university. Therefore, this study proposes a structured, evidence-based approach to providing support that appropriate meets the students where they are. In this chapter, I will discuss the history of access to higher education in South Africa and stress the imperative that access is widened but that it is done so with the intention of enabling students to succeed. I will elucidate on the systemic issues in basic education that leave the majority of students underprepared to cope with the volume, complexity, and variation in workload at university, regardless of Admission Point (AP) score or school quintile.¹ Underprepared students also struggle to assimilate into a new learning experience (Lillis and Turner, 2001; Cottrell, 2013; Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014; Ramzan, Khan, and Bibi, 2018). I will detail the challenges that students face when transitioning into and through their first year of university and how intentional support interventions are required to address these challenges timeously to optimally support students in their first year.

In this study, student support is best captured in a well-designed and evidence-based FYS. Therefore, in the rest of this chapter, I will differentiate between and provide an overview of the range of first-year support interventions that have been put in place to support students' transition into and through university. These interventions are First Year Experience Programmes (FYE) and FYS programmes. I will focus specifically on the FYS at the University of the Free State (UFS). This will be followed by the problem statement stressing the need for evidence-based design of an FYS. Thereafter, I will share the research methodology used in this study, specific to the two research questions addressed in articles 1 and 2. The structure of the dissertation is in line with the UFS Faculty of Education requirements for a Masters in Higher Education and consists of two introductory chapters, two stand-alone articles (one of which has been submitted to a journal for publication), and a

¹ Quintiles one to three are non-fee-paying schools, which are completely government-subsidised; quintiles four and five are fee-paying schools, which are partially government-subsidised. Lower quintile schools are, therefore, also lower-resourced.

concluding chapter that ties together the learnings from the two articles into a knowledge contribution. To support the format of the dissertation in article format, the references for each chapter can be found at the end of that chapter.

1.1 Being a first-year student in higher education

Public higher education institutions in South Africa (SA) enrol over a million students each year (Council on Higher Education, 2021). This is a substantial enrolment increase of 50% since 1994, the year in which the first democratic elections took place in SA (Southall, 1994; Tjønneland, 2017). Prior to 1994, during the apartheid era, access to higher education was demarcated along racial and ethnic lines (Schoole and Adeyemo, 2016; Council on Higher Education, 2022). The end of apartheid brought with it many initiatives to address the inequalities of the past, specifically driving access to university for all students. There have been significant investments in infrastructure, such as student housing (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2019). Another initiative was a new funding model for higher education institutions, resulting in block grants and earmarked grants (Council on Higher Education, 2022). Block grants were given to higher education institutions to improve the quality of teaching and research with the expectation that there would be an increase in retention, progression, and graduation rates. Earmarked grants were put in place for foundation programmes, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS; funding for students in households earning below a certain income per year), and the payment of student loans.

The introduction of foundation/extended programmes² that allow students with lower AP (admission point) scores to register at higher education institutions has widened access and thus increased the number of students who are afforded the opportunity to participate in higher education in South Africa. In 1994, South Africa had a Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) of 15% (Schoole and Adeyemo, 2016). Now, South Africa has a much higher annual enrolment rate than it did during the apartheid era, with a GER of 23.9% in 2019 (Khuluvhe and Ganyaupfu, 2022). Having only recently become a democratic country, these numbers and interventions

² These programmes extend the duration of the degree programme by a year, to allow for foundational support provision and additional time to help students transition into university (Boughey, 2010, 2013).

are evidence of major strides that have been made in terms of equipping the higher education system to widen access.

This, then, begs the question: Why is access to higher education such an important issue to address? South Africa is not only a developing country but also a country that has to address equity to redress past wrongs. Enabling equitable access to higher education and graduating with a degree mean equitable distribution of opportunities for employment and an increased quality of life (Jones *et al.*, 2008; Council on Higher Education, 2010; National Planning Commission, 2011; Quinn, Lee, and Valdés, 2012; Smit and Dafouz, 2012; Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014; Brown and Mayisela, 2015; Chetty and Pather, 2015; Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2016; Schoole and Adeyemo, 2016; Sánchez-Caballé, Gisbert-Cervera, and Esteve-Mon, 2020; Tiroyabone and Strydom, 2021; Bernhofer and Tonin, 2022; Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2023a). South Africa is one of the most unequal societies in the world, with 55.5% of South Africans living in poverty (World Bank Group, 2020). Furthermore, the National Income Dynamics Study found that obtaining a degree in South Africa increases one's chances of employability by 20% compared to people who have only obtained a matriculation certificate (matric). Additionally, a degree can mean a monthly salary six times that of people who have only obtained a matric (Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit, 2017). Therefore, equitable access to higher education institutions becomes a social justice issue. A focus on widening access continues as per the National Development Plan 2030 (National Planning Commission, 2011), which includes a GER target of more than 30% by 2030.

In the next section, access for success, the challenges that first-year students experience at university, and the different types of support available to address those challenges are explored.

1.2 Access for success

While significant progress to widen access has been made in South Africa, the percentage of students who enrolled for a degree in 2014 and who successfully graduated by 2019 was only 55% (Council on Higher Education, 2021). If success is defined as obtaining a degree, then this statistic reveals that *access without success is not opportunity*. This phrase has appeared multiple times in recent higher education literature and posits that access to higher education

alone, without success, has very little value for students and the economy (Engstrom and Tinto, 2008; Council on Higher Education, 2013; Tinto, 2014; Scott, 2017, 2018; Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020a). The 55% who completed their degree between 2014 and 2019 took six years to do so. After 10 years at university, around 66% of students graduate (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2019). Approximately 30% of students complete their undergraduate degree in minimum time (Council on Higher Education, 2021). This causes a bottleneck at institutions, as students who stay at university for longer occupy the space of potential incoming students; the implications are increasing enrolment numbers and the ensuing limits as to what institutions can fiscally and physically accommodate in terms of enrolment numbers. Additionally, the longer a student stays in university, the more likely they are to drop out, as a result of their motivation decreasing over time (Young, 2016). It is safe to assume that delayed graduation also equates to a delay in employment and its resultant earnings.

Young (2016) posits that education, instead of being a tool to resolve social and economic problems, becomes a means to maintain socioeconomic inequalities. Leibbrandt, Branson, and Whitelaw (2023) illustrate how higher education can support students' upward mobility (their earning potential), listing inclusive access, student support while studying, and graduate outcomes as key factors to success. South Africa has been working hard at inclusive access, and it is clear through the initiatives noted earlier that this strategy is being achieved. However, without adequate support, once students have access to higher education, that access means nothing more than a foot in the door. Young (2016) and Barefoot (2004) refer to this as a revolving door: if students drop out or stay in the system without graduating. Thus, unless there is an intentional focus on student success, which is aligned with institutional strategies, the current status quo of low throughput rates will continue in the South African higher education system.

1.2.1 Why are South African students underprepared for university?

In the context of this study, the term “underprepared” is in no way meant to describe student deficit. Rather, it refers to students lacking the skills required to navigate higher education because of the many challenges they face during their time in the basic education system and living in a country that is known for socioeconomic inequality. There are particular concerns about matric pass rates, which are translated into AP scores, and the impact of school resources, as reflected in the school quintile system, which are both discussed next.

There have been significant gains in matric pass rates from 58% in 1994 to 76% in 2021 (Ndebele, 2022). However, according to the National Senior Certificate Examination report by the Department of Basic Education (Department of Basic Education, 2022), the percentage of students who pass with a bachelor's pass rate (i.e., those who gain entry to higher education) was 38.4% in 2022. That means that just over a third of students who pass matric can gain access to higher education. To obtain a bachelor's pass rate, students must pass six of seven subjects, achieve 50% in four subjects, achieve 40% in their home language, and achieve 30% in their language of teaching and learning (Department of Basic Education, 2022). This minimum requirement would equate to an AP score of 21. At the UFS, the AP score requirement for entry to a mainstream programme ranges from 28 upwards, depending on the degree programme and selection criteria. The AP score requirement for entry to an extended programme ranges from 21 to 27, and the AP score requirement for entry to higher certificate programmes ranges from 18 to 20. For access to mainstream programmes, students are required to achieve 50% in English. To gain access to an extended programme, students are required to achieve 40% in English (Student Recruitment Services, 2023).

However, the matric criteria for a bachelor's pass as stipulated by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) disadvantages students from the outset since the entry requirements (in terms of a student's AP score and English mark) at many higher education institutions (including the UFS) are higher than what students are required to achieve for a bachelor's pass by DBE's standards. This fuels concerns about the quality of basic education in South Africa and its ability to prepare students for university (Modisaotsile, 2012; Council on Higher Education, 2013; Chetty and Pather, 2015).

In the DBE report (2022), academic performance is also differentiated by school quintile and the status of schools as public or independent. Schools in the quintile range of one to three are completely government-subsidised, while schools classified as quintiles four or five are partially government-subsidised; independent schools are not subsidised by the government at all. The number of students who attend independent schools is in the minority, however. Only 3.5% of the national matric cohort represent students who attended independent schools (Department of Basic Education, 2022). Quintile four and five schools are much better resourced than quintile one to three schools and are also often located in more affluent residential areas. This disparity is the result of the apartheid-era demarcation of residential areas and schools along racial lines. Quintile four and five schools far exceed the matric pass

rate and the number of bachelors passes compared to quintile one to three schools. Indeed, in 2022, the difference in bachelors passes between quintile one and five schools was 26.2% (Department of Basic Education, 2022).

At the UFS, 66% of first-year students are from quintile one to three schools. It is interesting to note that at the UFS, the number of students entering with an AP score of 30-36 increased by 19% between 2018 and 2022. However, the number of students entering from quintile one to three schools also increased. Students entering the UFS from quintile one schools increased by 18% in 2018 to 21% in 2022; the number of students entering the UFS from quintile two schools increased by 13% in 2018 to 19% in 2022; and the number of students from quintile three schools increased by 24% in 2018 to 26% in 2022 (Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2023a). Therefore, it can be deduced that although students are entering university with higher AP scores, they are also coming from lower-resourced schools, thus implying the need for support programmes, not only for those students enrolled in extended degree programmes but also for those enrolled in a mainstream degree programme. It is also thus important for the institution to acknowledge the change in its student cohort. While the data shows that UFS students are more resilient than ever before (as evidenced by students' increased AP scores despite having access to limited resources), staff should not assume that the AP score indicates preparedness for university. The lack of access to devices and technology, libraries, and a wealth of other experiences indicates that support must be put in place to ensure student retention in the first year.

1.2.2 The challenges that first-year students face at university

While foundation/extended programmes are imperative for supporting students who enter university with low AP scores, many students who are ill-prepared for university are still admitted to mainstream programmes³ (Sehoole and Adeyemo, 2016). Nonetheless, there are challenges that *all* first-year students face upon entering university, whether they are admitted to mainstream or extended programmes and whether they come from well-resourced schools or not, simply because they are new to the environment and because of the increase in the volume, complexity, and variation of the workload (Lillis and Turner, 2001; Cottrell, 2013;

³ Mainstream programmes are programmes that are set up for the normal duration of three or four years, as per its accreditation (Boughey, 2010). They typically do not include developmental courses, which are rather included in extended programmes.

Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014; Ramzan *et al.*, 2018). While many of these challenges are global and not unique to South Africa, they are very prominent in the South African system.

For the majority of students at the UFS (87%), and the majority of students nationally (82%), English is not their first language (Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2023d). For some students, English is their third or fourth language, and even second-language English speakers report needing to code-switch or translate during lectures to make sense of the content (Jones *et al.*, 2008; Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014). Yet, at the UFS (and several other South African institutions), English is the medium of instruction. Many studies show that when English is the medium of instruction, proficiency in English is essential for success in higher education studies (Quinn *et al.*, 2012; Smit and Dafouz, 2012; Bernhofer and Tonin, 2022).

The academic literacy component of the National Benchmark Test (NBT) measures a student's academic preparedness for higher education by testing their academic literacy proficiency. The NBT is administered before students start university. Test scores indicate that universities must be prepared to provide students with considerable support, given that 80% do not test at a proficient level (Centre for Educational Assessments, 2023a). Proficiency means that students are ready for mainstream study at university (Myburgh, 2019). At the UFS, 79% of the students who wrote the academic literacy portion of the NBT in 2022 achieved either a basic- or intermediate-level score (Centre for Educational Assessments, 2023b). These scores mean that extensive academic literacy support is required for students to be successful at university.

While the need to support students' epistemological access has been indicated in this introduction, it is important to note that students also experience challenges with understanding institutional systems and practices, given the differences in systems and practices from high school to university (Chetty and Pather, 2015). A misunderstanding or lack of knowledge of institutional systems, practices, and rules can also result in students not making the desired progress in their first year. Additional challenges faced by many students include social inclusion and the ability to assimilate into and interact with a diverse student body (Thurber and Walton, 2012; Chetty and Pather, 2015). As a result of certain apartheid policies, particularly the division of residential areas by race, basic education opportunities and resources are still demarcated along racial lines, which will likely continue for some time. For many students, there is also incongruity between what they expect from their degree programmes, what their degree programmes actually constitute, and what career paths they actually enable (Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014). These mismatched expectations often result in

students making course choices with a limited understanding of its content (Council on Higher Education, 2010). Such challenges have an impact on higher education because students come to university with very specific experiences that translate into how they interact with others and their courses at university.

Further challenges include a student's familiarity with technology, their access to funding, and food insecurity. In terms of technology, many students need to acclimate to engaging with technologies, especially those technologies they may not have had access to before university (Brown and Mayisela, 2015; Sánchez-Caballé *et al.*, 2020). The Parliamentary Monitoring Group (2016) noted that less than half (46%) of South African schools had computers that were being used for teaching and learning. The parliamentary group did acknowledge, however, that the majority of these schools were located in urban areas. At the UFS, 80% of first-year students receive loans from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) (Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2023d). Students who receive NSFAS loans are often uncertain about how to manage large sums of money, and for some students, this money is spent on other items instead of university expenses (Thobejane and Fatoki, 2017; Cohen, 2019; Mlambo, Masuku, and Ndebele, 2022). Many South African students are also food insecure. Nationally, 29% of students report running out of food most days or every day (Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2023c). At the UFS, 31% of students report running out of food most days or every day (Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2023d). Moreover, the majority of students attending university in SA (84% at UFS; 77% nationally) are first-generation students (Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2023d). Their status as first-generation students means that they are the first in their family to attend university and therefore need additional support as they do not have someone at home to help them navigate university (Pike and Kuh, 2005; Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014; Hamshire *et al.*, 2021; Henrichsen and Keenan, 2023).

The majority of the challenges mentioned above stem directly or indirectly from the following: a student's socioeconomic circumstances (the need for financial aid, food insecurity, being first-generation); failures in the basic education system (lack of access to technology, students' English language and academic literacy proficiency, underpreparedness for higher education, and students' uncertainty regarding the link between their degree programme and future career); and the lingering effects of SA's apartheid past (the need for social inclusion and acclimation to diverse races and cultures). If these challenges are not addressed, it makes sense that a student's risk of dropping out is much higher. If, however, students feel supported

through their first year of study, the risk of their dropping out is likely to be less. Although institutions are unable to address systemic issues that fall outside the jurisdiction of higher education, there are support programmes that students can be exposed to during their time at university that help them make the most of their access to university.

1.2.3 First-year support programmes to address challenges

In their review of the literature on policy transformation regarding access to higher education institutions, Schoole and Adeyemo (2016) indicated that *both* physical and epistemological access is necessary to ensure that students have a chance at being successful. Epistemological access refers to “the extent to which students are able to and enabled to access the academic workings and expectations of university study” (Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014, p. 56). To facilitate epistemological access, programmes have to be put in place to support students in acquiring this form of access. In the year 2000, the cumulative national dropout rate of first-year students was 31.5%; by 2010, it was 20%; and by 2017, it was 13.7% (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020a). This decline in dropout rate can be attributed to intentional support programmes that have been put in place to help first-year students address some of the challenges noted earlier (Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014; van Zyl, Dampier, and Ngwenya, 2020). There are two main ways in which retention can be addressed: by identifying the challenges first-year students face and by responding with initiatives, services or programmes designed to address these challenges. The support initiatives below are related to the challenges discussed in Section 1.2.2.

I now turn to describing and providing examples of support programmes that have been implemented to address the challenges related to socioeconomic circumstances, namely food insecurity, the need for financial aid, and being a first-generation student.

Food security can be addressed through access to campus resources and teaching students how to draw up weekly meal plans and share resources in groups (van den Berg and Raubenheimer, 2015; Steinberg and Chodur, 2018). At the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), for example, food security solutions include a food bank to which students, families, corporations, and religious groups donate, a food garden which is maintained by students and small-scale farmers, and a meal project which serves daily hot meals and a monthly food pack to 1000 students (University of the Witwatersrand, 2019). Similar solutions exist at the UFS, and students are also provided with information through the Eat&Succeed Programme on how to

prepare and eat nutritious meals on a budget (University of the Free State, 2023a). At Durban University of Technology (DUT), a food science student started a community engagement project as a result of his research into the food security challenges that students face. This project spurred the launch of the institution's food security programmes, such as vegetable gardens at on-campus residences and a food education programme, which teaches students and vendors how to prepare healthy meals in safe ways (Mbuqe, 2022).

While student loans such as NSFAS, and bursaries and scholarships are in place to help students in need of financial aid, students are often unsure of how to work with large sums of money. Despite governmental efforts, such as the Baseline Survey on Financial Literacy conducted every few years, which informs the National Consumer Financial Education Strategy, the financial literacy of South Africans is on the decline (Roberts *et al.*, 2018; Department of National Treasury, 2020; Hesse, 2022). There is much literature on the low levels of students' financial literacy, and strategies have been documented to address these financial literacy challenges. Yet, very few examples have been recorded of at-scale solutions (Thobejane and Fatoki, 2017; Obagbuwa and Kwenda, 2020; OECD, 2022). There are, however, some examples of programmes run at higher education institutions that aim to address this challenge. The same DUT programme that addresses food security also includes financial literacy, as one cannot teach students how to eat healthy food on a budget without teaching them how to budget (Mbuqe, 2022). At the UFS, financial literacy is one of the units taught in the FYS. The focus of this unit is on understanding a tuition fee account and setting up a budget (Combrink and Oosthuizen, 2020).

Because first-generation students are the first in their families to go to university, their family members are unable to tell them what to expect at university or how to navigate university systems. Therefore, most South African institutions have some form of orientation programme in place, where the key focus is understanding institutional systems and practices (Bora, Keshavamurthy, and Savkar, 2016; Nyar, 2020; Moloi *et al.*, 2023). Many students are often unable to attend such orientation sessions, however, as they need to, for example, find suitable housing, and sort out financial aid issues. Such challenges can result in students registering late for their courses. Thus, extended orientation programmes have been suggested and are followed through at many institutions (Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014; Nyar, 2020). Examples of these programmes are provided in Section 1.4.3.1.

The following solutions have been implemented at many higher education institutions in response to challenges related to failures in the basic education system. These challenges include a lack of access to technology, students' lack of proficiency in English and/or academic literacy, students being underprepared for higher education, and students not understanding the links between their degree programme and future careers.:

Engaging with new technologies can be facilitated through computer literacy or digital skills programmes (Brown and Mayisela, 2015; Johnston, 2020; Sánchez-Caballé *et al.*, 2020; Tomažević, Ravšelj, and Aristovnik, 2021). An example of such a programme is at the UFS, where an asynchronous digital skills and competencies pathway has been scaffolded across the undergraduate degree programme. The aim of the pathway is to teach students the digital skills they require to be successful in their studies and in the workplace. The pathway has competency-based assessments at different levels, and students are awarded certificates upon successful completion of each level, which they can add to their curriculum vitae and LinkedIn Profiles (Centre for Teaching and Learning, no date). Another example of such support is at Wits, where the Gateway to Success orientation programme includes a course called “Digital Abilities”, which teaches students how to navigate the learning management system and empowers students with computer literacy skills (Wits University, 2024).

Multilingualism and translanguaging have been proven to support students in understanding concepts in their home language first before translating these into English (Macaro *et al.*, 2018; Curle *et al.*, 2020; Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020b; Petersen, 2023). Examples of these practices can be found at the UFS and at Stellenbosch University (SU). At the UFS, more than 500 tutors have been trained in multilingual tutorials, and the practice of translanguaging has been in place since 2023 (Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2023e). At SU, interpreting services are available for students which help them access lecture content in different languages. The language services division has even created an online trilingual terminology portal to help students grasp discipline-specific jargon in their home language (SU Language Centre, no date).

Epistemological access or access to disciplinary knowledge can also be facilitated through academic literacy programmes and through discipline-specific tutorials, where students learn how to make sense of academic texts, search for academic resources, and validate the credibility of sources (Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014; Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020a). Examples of such programmes can be found at the UFS and North-West

University (NWU). At the UFS, first-year academic literacy developmental modules are compulsory for students in the extended programme, as well as for students who did not test at the proficient level of the NBT. Thus, the majority of first-year students are required to enrol in the module. More than 90% of these students believe the module has helped them to be successful, and the data from a correlation study confirmed this, with a 15% correlation between completion of the module and students' average final marks upon graduation (Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2023b). A similar model is run at NWU, with placement tests determining which version of the compulsory academic literacy module students will enrol for. At NWU, the stance is that academic writing is no one's native language, and therefore, all students require support to develop this skill (North West University, no date b).

The incongruity between the degree a student is enrolled for and their desired future career path can be addressed through academic advising, which provides students with multiple touch points throughout their undergraduate studies for direction and assistance (Tiroyabone and Strydom, 2021; De Klerk, 2022; Bilquise, Ibrahim, and Salhie, 2023). In SA, the professionalisation of academic advising is expanding due to the academic advising short-learning programme offered by the UFS. Seventeen institutions participated in this short-learning programme between 2018 and 2023, with a range of 18-30 staff attending per sitting per year (Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2023a).

To address the challenges of social inclusion and difficulty in acclimating to diverse races and cultures, there are a few solutions that can be put into place. Firstly, social inclusion can be facilitated through social engagement initiatives run through residential and commuter programmes (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020a). More details on the value of social engagement and the role it plays in the retention of first-year students will be provided in Chapter 2. Social inclusion can also be fostered through inclusive teaching practices, which further support the fourth Sustainable Development Goal of ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education (United Nations, 2022). Given that South African higher education institutions consist of diverse students from across and outside the country, it would make sense that institutional policies and strategic objectives include initiatives that focus on addressing social inclusion and diversity as part of transformation. The practice of translanguaging and multilingualism in classrooms, as indicated earlier in this section, is an example of social inclusion. Some institutions have dedicated a position in top management to address these issues or have even created a unit focused solely on this issue, such as the Transformation Unit

of Institutional Culture, Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) (University of Johannesburg, no date).

This type of support would typically feature in FYEs worldwide and is not necessarily bound to the South African context. As explained in the next section, FYEs have tried to coordinate first-year support into formal programmes to help students transition into and through their first year of university.

1.3 First Year Experience Programmes

Though the focus of this study is on the optimisation of FYS programmes, it is important to first elaborate on FYEs as the FYS is a type of FYE. In this section, the concept of an FYE is defined, a brief overview of the history of the FYE is provided, the different types and formats of FYE are described, and the FYE as a High-Impact Educational Practice is clarified.

1.3.1 What are FYEs?

FYE s have been identified as key to supporting students in their transition from high school to university and helping them be successful students (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020a). It stands to reason, then, that the experiences students have in their first year are a foundation for the rest of their university experience and, therefore, have a notable impact on their success. In the United States (US), where the concept and implementation of the FYE have existed since the 1970s, there is a clear understanding of its definition and much work has been shared on the variety of approaches taken to implement FYEs across the country. In the South African context, Nyar (2019) notes that the South African FYE has been born out of support interventions responsive to poor retention and academic performance needs. Thus, it has been a reactive process that has resulted in much more dialogue about moving towards a national understanding of FYEs and towards the development of a common definition, framework, design, and assessment.

For the purposes of this study, three definitions were sourced: Barefoot *et al.* (1999) and Koch and Gardner (2006) have been used to illustrate the US understanding of the FYE, where it has existed for some time, and Nyar (2019) has been used to underpin this study's understanding of the FYE in SA, where the implementation of FYEs is relatively new. Barefoot *et al.* (1999,

p. 78) define the FYE as “an intentional and comprehensive programme that consists of different components working together to increase academic performance, provide a cohesive learning experience, increase student persistence, assist in the transition to college, facilitate a sense of commitment and community to the university and increase personal development”. Koch and Gardner (2006, p. 2) argue that the FYE “is not a single program or initiative, but rather an intentional combination of curricula and co-curricular efforts within and across postsecondary institutions that represents a purposeful set of initiatives designed and implemented to strengthen the quality of student learning during and satisfaction with the first year of college.” Nyar (2019) posits that, essentially, the FYE is the extent of experiences a first-year student has at university, which can be coincidental or intentional, depending on the institution’s ambit. However, Nyar (2019) further states that:

The FYE is primarily defined by an institutional intentionality to create a supportive environment for its first-year student population as well as by the organised and integrated nature of the institutional effort. A starting point for a conceptualisation of the FYE would be the acknowledgement of the first year of study as a critical phase in the academic, psychosocial and intellectual development of students, the recognition of the multi-faceted needs of first-year students, and the intentional effort thereafter to craft an experience which is supportive and empowering of first-year students (Nyar, 2019, p. 3).

In Section 1.1.3, I highlighted various support initiatives that have been implemented to address the challenges that first-year students face during their transition into higher education. If these initiatives are executed in isolation, however, they can be experienced as add-ons to the university experience and not as an integral part of the university experience. This piecemeal approach often means that these initiatives, though well-intended, do not have the desired impact and are not successful at scale (Tinto, 2014; Greenfield, Keup, and Gardner, 2015). The FYE route, in contrast to a piecemeal approach to providing support, ensures an integrated and organised institutional effort to address student needs. Therefore, for this study, the definitions of the FYE from Barefoot *et al.* (1999), Koch and Gardner (2006), and Nyar (2019) will be used. These three definitions have been collated into the following definition:

The FYE is not a single programme or initiative but rather an intentional combination of curricula and co-curricular efforts resulting in an intentional and comprehensive programme designed to increase academic performance, provide a cohesive learning

experience, increase student persistence, assist in the transition to college, facilitate a sense of commitment and community to the university, increase personal development, and craft an experience which is supportive and empowering of first-year students.

1.3.2 The history of the FYE

In 1972, the University of South Carolina introduced the University 101 course. This course led to the establishment of the National Resource Centre for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition (NRC) in 1986 (National Resource Center, n.d.). The NRC leads the annual international FYE conference, is a clearinghouse for scholarship in this field, and is internationally recognised as the leader and expert in FYE as well as transition into and through higher education.

In contrast, the FYE movement is relatively new in SA. It came to people's attention in 2008 at the first Southern African Conference on the First Year Experience at Stellenbosch University (Scott, 2008). Since then, many South African higher education institutions have introduced FYEs to support first-year students' transition into and through university, thereby contributing to retention. Indeed, the establishment of the South African National Resource Centre for First Year Experience and Students in Transition (SANRC) in 2015 is evidence of the intention of higher education practitioners to optimally support students (Loots, Kinzie, and Oosthuysen, 2017; Nyar, 2018). The SANRC is funded by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and, similar to its sister organisation in the US, also hosts an annual conference, acts as a clearinghouse, and has become a place for networking opportunities for FYE practitioners across SA (South African National Resource Centre, n.d.).

Approximately 13 of the 26 higher education institutions actively participate in the SANRC annual conference, which indicates the uptake of the FYE in SA. Another important role player in the South African landscape is the Siyaphumelela Network, which is an initiative funded by the US-based Kresge Foundation. The network was born out of the need to advance South African higher education institutions' data analytic capacity to support student success. In 2021, the Siyaphumelela FYE Workstream was established to support the national need to share experiences of how FYE practitioners across SA are using data to inform their practice. The workstream consists of several South African institutions (this number increases each year) and hosts webinars, records podcasts, and presents workshops and papers at conferences (Oosthuizen *et al.*, 2021). Thus, despite the FYE movement being relatively new in South

Africa, and while it is unclear how many structured FYEs are in place in higher education institutions, there has been intentionality in the creation of networks across the country for FYE practitioners to learn from each other and thus better support their first-year students in succeeding.

1.3.3 The different types and formats of FYEs

The format of FYEs is different at each institution. It is largely dependent on institutional needs and strategic objectives, the vision of the institution, and funding models. This lack of uniformity is a common practice across the world. Rather, networks should be established, and literature should be published so the FYE practitioners can learn from each other and grow and improve the FYE at their institutions (Harvey, Drew, and Smith, 2006; Nyar, 2019). FYEs include all support interventions offered in a student's first year, such as FYS programmes, orientation and extended orientation, academic advising, writing support, peer mentoring, tutorials, learning communities, residential learning programmes, summer bridging programmes, developmental education, and probation initiatives (Greenfield *et al.*, 2015; Combrink and Oosthuizen, 2020). At some institutions, the FYE is one consolidated curricular or co-curricular programme; at others, there are faculty-specific approaches, where FYEs may be integrated into the curriculum or co-curriculum; yet at others, FYEs are run as multiple support services in the co-curriculum (Combrink and Oosthuizen, 2020; Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020a). While format and implementation may differ, what is important is the intentionality behind the organisation and design of the FYE to create a supportive learning environment and ensure students thrive and succeed. Indeed, Greenfield *et al.* (2015, p. xxvii) posit that "first year success...is the result of institutional commitment to creating and supporting effective educational processes". While intentionality has its value, unless the organisation, design, and impact of the FYE are informed by evaluation (and ensuing publication), gaps in knowledge of FYEs in SA and in the broader literature will continue. This gap is further explored in Section 1.3.4 and in the problem statement in Section 1.5.

In response to this knowledge gap, the current study posits an approach to FYEs that integrates such support into the curriculum (and not only in addition to the curriculum) so that students do not see the intervention as disparate and detached from their studies. Although FYEs are key to student success, the DHET (2020a) emphasises the importance of evidence-based approaches to programme design, which include monitoring and evaluation, to ensure the impact of these interventions. Furthermore, DHET recommends strengthening data analytics

to predict risk and intentionally respond to risk through planning and designing sound interventions. Therefore, this study argues for a support intervention that is intentionally designed to respond to student needs with outcomes, assessments, and evaluation data to monitor its efficacy. Furthermore, the approach and content of such support interventions should continuously be adapted to respond to the evaluation data. In this study, I explore how a curricular FYE can include many support interventions and can be a one-stop shop for students if its design is evidence-based and if it assesses whether its outcomes have been met.

1.3.4 The FYE as a High-Impact Practice

The FYE is considered a High-Impact Practice (HIP) – a collective term for interventions that have been proven to improve student retention and student engagement (Kuh, 2008). According to Barkley (2009), student engagement comprises two elements: motivation and active learning – students are motivated to participate in and complete tasks and students actively participate in their learning. Because HIPs enhance student engagement and student retention, these practices positively impact student success. HIPs are impactful because they require:

- a) time and effort that are channelled into educationally purposeful exercises,
- b) interaction with peers, mentors, and staff members who are interested in seeing students succeed,
- c) interaction with diverse others, which enables students to learn to think in new ways,
- d) frequent and continuous feedback, which helps students to grow, and
- e) integration of learning experiences and instruction in how to transfer skills from one setting to another (Kuh, 2008).

The impact of HIPs means that even though students may come to university underprepared they will still receive the support they require to optimally transition into university and have an equitable chance at succeeding. Essentially, HIPs provide a chance for which their AP score and school quintile do not count against them.

There are different types of HIPs, and Kuh (2008) has found that engaging in at least one HIP in a student's first year and in another later on that is related to a student's field of study improves academic achievement and increases student success. Kuh (2008, p. 20) argues that the curriculum should be structured so that "one high-impact activity is available to every student every year" to have a noteworthy impact on student success. Kuh (2008) further makes

the point that one of the more obvious choices for a first-year HIP is the FYS (a type of FYE). High quality FYS programmes are those that develop students' intellectual and practical competencies. Thus, for the purpose of this study, I will concentrate on the FYS. In the next section, I outline the purpose of FYS programmes and the different types of FYS programmes that exist in the South African context.

1.4 First Year Seminar programmes

FYS programmes are instrumental in helping students transition from high school to university. In the first year, students often feel lost and overwhelmed as they transition into university and are more at risk of dropping out than in any other year. Thus, many universities have introduced FYS programmes to help students adapt to university (Ulriksen, Madsen, and Holmegaard, 2016; Yan and Sendall, 2016; Stoller, 2017). In this section, FYS programmes are explained, the purpose of FYS programmes is clarified, and the different types of FYS programmes are described.

1.4.1 What are FYS programmes?

FYS courses often provide an introduction to the university campus and how university systems work, teach students the academic skills that they need to be successful at university, and help students acclimate to a new experience (Buyarski and Landis, 2014; Greenfield *et al.*, 2015; Combrink and Oosthuizen, 2020). Other than most FYEs, FYS programmes are often structured as a curricular or co-curricular course, with regular contact with students throughout the semester or year in small groups or classes to support student transition into and through their first year of university (Buyarski and Landis, 2014; Yan and Sendall, 2016; Combrink and Oosthuizen, 2020). In their book *Developing and Sustaining Successful First Year Programmes: A Guide for Practitioners*, Greenfield *et al.* (2015) reference many studies that have found that the FYS contributes to students' persistence in their second year, academic achievement, the use of campus services (which students perhaps would not otherwise be aware of), interaction with staff, satisfaction with the institution, and the development of a variety of skills required for success. Therefore, the FYE that this study will focus on is the FYS and the optimisation of such programmes to positively impact student transition and success.

1.4.2 The purpose of FYS programmes

The core aim of an FYS is to help students connect with the university, with each other, with their lecturers, and with their studies. Therein lies the key to retaining students. In pursuit of this aim, the main objectives of an FYS are typically to contribute to retention through fostering the following in students: spending time and effort on educationally meaningful tasks, developing a growth mindset, developing increased motivation to be successful, engaging in collaboration with other students and staff to develop purposeful relationships, receiving feedback on their growth, and developing realistic expectations about university. As indicated earlier, Kuh (2008) found in his research that the FYS is high-impact and effective at helping students transition because students are required to spend substantial time and effort on educationally meaningful tasks. Carol Dweck (2014, 2017) has shown in her research that time and effort help students develop a growth mindset. In other words, they develop the understanding that they can achieve their goals by putting in time and effort, and in so doing, they can become more resilient and achieve higher rates of success.

Kuh (2008) further reveals that the impact of the FYS lies in students interacting closely with a member of staff and a small group of students over an extended period of time. This fosters social cohesion, the development of purposeful relationships, and feedback in face-to-face settings, ensuring very little anonymity. There are several key theorists who argue for collaborative learning. In constructing sociocultural theory, for example, Vygotsky researched the benefits of collaborative learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Weiten, 2010; Esteban-Guitart and Moll, 2014). Latino and Ashcraft (2012), too, as part of a five-volume series on the FYS, argue that using peers in the classroom is an integral piece in the design of an FYS. Furthermore, Kuh (2008, p. 17) indicates that the integration of the HIP into a coherent curriculum will give students the best chance to “just connect”. Furthermore, Permzadian and Credé (2016), in their review of FYS programmes and student success, found that FYS programmes help to lower students’ stress levels by providing realistic expectations about university and resources to support students. FYS programmes also increase student motivation through instruction on how to be a successful university student. The delivery of the FYS is dependent on an institution’s stance on support and resources available. The different modes of delivery are detailed in the next section.

1.4.3 The different types of FYS programmes

In Barefoot's (1992) seminal work, she creates a typology to classify FYS programmes into the following categories:

- extended orientation,
- academic seminars,
- preprofessional and discipline-linked seminars, and
- basic study skills seminars.

Barefoot's typology is still relevant today, with authors such as Greenfield *et al.* (2015) using it in their book. However, based on recent developments in the field, they added another category of FYS: the hybrid seminar (Greenfield *et al.*, 2015). In this section, I will elaborate on these types of FYS programmes and provide international and national examples.

1.4.3.1 Extended orientation

The transition into university is challenging, and for many students, the novelty of it all is overwhelming (Tinto, 1998, 2012; Mntuyedwa, 2023). Orientation should not overload students with information in a short space of time. Rather, orientation or induction programmes should be extended so that there is a gradual process of adaptation to university (Harvey *et al.*, 2006). Extended orientation courses offer just that – a gradual induction focused on “an introduction to campus resources, time management, academic and career planning, learning strategies, and an introduction to student development issues” (Padgett and Keup, 2011, p. 70). Internationally, these courses may be credit-bearing, but they require very little time from students compared to the rest of their courses. But, extended orientation programmes are often taught by student affairs professionals and not academic staff, and they do not require much in terms of assessment – all of which may marginalise the effort and impact of the programme (Harvey *et al.*, 2006). Nationally, in SA, extended orientation is offered in the co-curricular space and is not credit-bearing or even required, which means that students may choose not to attend as they would rather attend their credit-bearing courses instead.

At the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the US, students can choose the type of extended orientation seminar they engage in – first-year interest groups that explore a common theme, residential learning communities, or a seminar to orient them to their school, college, major or programme. These seminars are run as discussion-driven small classes across 15 weeks and are

taught by a faculty or staff member. The aim is to help students acclimate to the university, connect with faculty and each other, and learn about the resources available at the university (University of Wisconsin-Madison, no date). Nationally, at NWU, students are provided with the First-Year Navigator, an online extended orientation space that provides students with key information when they need it during their first-year journey. This information includes referrals to support services such as peer mentoring, academic advising, tutoring, math and stats support, reading development and support, and faculty support. Monthly videos on academic skills are also shared. This programme is run out of the Centre of Teaching and Learning (North West University, n.d.). While not the norm, there are some examples where the orientation programme is integrated into or aligned with a student's field of study, which may have more impact than generic orientation programmes. A national example of such an approach is at UJ, where the First-Year Orientation programme is faculty or discipline-specific for the first week of the year, is compulsory, and is then followed by self-paced online support which students can access throughout the year (University of Johannesburg, 2023).

1.4.3.2 Academic seminars

Academic seminars are typically offered as a semester-long course and are either topic-based or discipline-specific, with the intention of helping students acclimate to university and learn about the types of academic skills that will be required of them to be successful students. This type of FYS often includes the teaching of critical thinking and writing skills and is taught by academic staff. Some academic seminars also include service learning (Greenfield *et al.*, 2015). At the University of Iowa in the US, the FYS programmes are run as small-class, topic-based, one-credit programmes that are categorised by discipline and foster academic inquiry, active learning, community and connectedness, and the exploration of identity. Students can sign up for a topic they are interested in, and topics vary from true crime podcasts, the language of math, undergraduate research, and how to develop a sense of community in college. At the American University of Central Asia in Kyrgyzstan, students participate in an FYS to engage in reading and critical analysis, with themes such as science and society or ideas of human nature. Students then work through readings that are meant to be thought-provoking, participate in discussions, and write essays to prepare them for writing in their specific field of study (American University of Central Asia, n.d.).

In SA, this type of seminar has been phased out. The UFS course, UFS101, was such an example. Its aim was to teach students critical thinking skills by asking existential questions

across different disciplines (Oosthuizen, Malan, and Combrink, 2017). The reason this type of seminar was phased out was that its underlying assumption – that students come to university with some baseline critical thinking and writing skills upon which an academic staff member can build – was incorrect. Based on evidence from the national statistics of the National Benchmark Test (as mentioned earlier), the lack of instruction in critical thinking and writing skills at high school means students are severely underprepared for this type of seminar at university. Critical thinking and writing skills are developed through the discipline and not through an FYS. Rather, such skills development is supported by specialist teams at writing centres at most universities.

1.4.3.3 Preprofessional and discipline-linked seminars

Preprofessional and discipline-linked seminars are unique in that they are often targeted at a specific group of students and are not for the broader first-year cohort. This type of FYS is also usually not the primary FYS at an institution. Preprofessional and discipline-linked seminars aim to teach students skills specific to a profession such as health care, engineering, business education, etc. Such seminars include academic and career advising, planning and exploration, and discipline-specific topics. Teaching assistants, service-learning, and team-teaching approaches are often used to facilitate preprofessional and discipline-linked seminars (Greenfield *et al.*, 2015). An international example of such a seminar is at the University of Melbourne in Australia, where there is a First-Year Centre for students enrolled in Computing and Information Systems. The FYS is run as a hub for students to receive support in their chosen field of study. Daily tutoring, snacks, and opportunities to connect with other students are provided to students interested in software development, cybersecurity, data analytics and more; students are also introduced to clubs and societies in their field (University of Melbourne, 2023).

Nationally, at the UFS, in addition to the FYS for all first-year students, there is the FYS for medical students, which is positioned as a credit-bearing generic skills seminar, but also includes discipline-specific topics such as medical terminology, professional and ethical behaviour, an introduction to different languages necessary for practice, and clinic reflection. The aim of this seminar is to support students in successfully passing their first year, given the pressure often experienced by students in this degree programme. This discipline-specific FYS thus introduces students to discipline-specific and generic skills, such as an introduction to technology, stress management, study methods, and time management (Jama, 2018). At UJ,

there is a two-week, credit-bearing FYS for science students to enhance their performance in mathematics. The FYS takes place before the start of the academic year. The aim of this seminar is to address the gap between high school-level and first-year-level mathematical proficiency. Students are taught academic literacy for science, mathematical problem-solving, laboratory skills, time management, and study skills (Jacobs and Pretorius, 2016).

1.4.3.4 Basic study skills seminars

Basic study skills seminars focus on skills such as note-taking, time management, and academic literacy, and in many cases internationally, are targeted at academically underprepared students. They are taught by academic support staff or student affairs staff and are often online offerings that help students acquire the information and skills they have not yet learned (Greenfield *et al.*, 2015). International examples include Northern Illinois University and California State University. UNIV 101 at Northern Illinois University is a 16-week, one-credit elective course to help students transition into university. It includes instruction in learning strategies, where to find resources, how to use learning management tools, writing, communication, and critical thinking (Northern Illinois University, 2023). At Cal State San Marcos, GEL 101 helps students to develop motivation, college-level academic skills, an academic plan based on graduation requirements, self-understanding to commit to a major and career path, and a connection with fellow students and staff (Cal State University San Marcos, n.d.). Nationally, however, such support is built into extended programmes through study skills, personal development and self-management, and academic literacy courses. The focus on these kinds of skills in extended programmes is primarily based on the case made earlier in the section about first-year students in SA; the basic education system leaves the majority of students underprepared for university. Therefore, in many national institutions, basic study skills are included in extended programmes. However, at the UFS, the institution that this study is based on, basic study skills are also part of the FYS (Combrink and Oosthuizen, 2020) because of the premise that all students (and not only students in the extended programme) need this type of support for retention and success.

1.4.3.5 Hybrid seminars

Hybrid seminars integrate different aspects of all the FYS programmes discussed above. Barefoot *et al.* (2005) shared the work of 13 institutions in their book *Achieving and Sustaining Institutional Excellence for the First Year of College*. They found that there are three things

that first-year students need, namely academic success skills, life skills, and knowledge about the university and how higher education works. Hybrid seminars, when developed against the backdrop of a student-centred institutional strategy, often centre around these three factors to promote student success. At the University of Mary Washington in the US, FSEM 100Q3 is a hybrid FYS that combines aspects of extended orientation, basic study skills and the academic seminar. Students learn about college and classroom life; they are required to journal their experiences to practice their writing, communication skills, and research; and they learn about leadership and social justice through a decolonised approach to teaching (Jones and Raucci, 2023). Nationally, at the UFS, the UFSS course is a year-long hybrid FYS that combines aspects of extended orientation, basic study skills, and the academic seminar. Students learn about how the university and higher education work; they learn academic success skills such as study skills, time management, and referencing; they learn life skills such as developing a growth mindset and financial literacy; and they learn about career planning and career development, with a specific focus on digital skills, entrepreneurial mindset, graduate attributes, and career psychology (Combrink and Oosthuizen, 2020).

While the FYS typology, as illustrated in this section, testifies to the growth of such programmes in recent years, there are still some gaps in the literature that require attention.

1.4.3.6 The gap in the FYS literature

A national survey on FYS programmes in the US found that only 53% of FYS programmes were formally evaluated or assessed (Padgett and Keup, 2011; Keup, 2012, *Keup et al.*, 2022). Despite the less-than-optimal evaluation rate, however, FYS practitioners are prolific in their publications. Internationally, literature on FYS programmes has created a strong case for the effectiveness of these programmes in increasing the persistence and retention of first-year students (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Pittendrigh *et al.*, 2016). In addition, authors have shared good practices on the design and assessment of FYS programmes (Goldberg, Zou, and Sriram, 2019; Peuler and Coltrain, 2020; Parsh *et al.*, 2021). However, there is limited literature from the South African context on the design and effectiveness of such programmes. Though the majority of South African institutions do implement support initiatives for their first-year students, as evidenced by the presentations at the annual SANRC conference, very few institutions implement an FYS.

Although there are existing FYS programmes in SA, such as at the institutions listed in the examples in this section, very few FYE practitioners publish on the design, implementation and evaluation of the FYS. Even the repository of FYS publications in SA on the SANRC website yields few results (South African National Resource Centre, no date b). Some of the only sources include that of Jacobs and Pretorius (2016), who reported on how the design and implementation of a preprofessional FYS at UJ aimed at advancing the mathematical competencies of first-year students successfully supported students. At the UFS, Combrink and Oosthuizen (2020) shared the successes and challenges of how the hybrid FYS programme (for all first-year students) was adapted to serve students during the COVID-19 pandemic, and Jama (2018) used student feedback to reflect on the relevance of the curriculum content, design, and assessment of the preprofessional FYS for medical students. Academic publications such as these contribute to the quality and effectiveness of FYS programme design, implementation, and evaluation. These elements, in turn, support students' transition into higher education and ultimately contribute to their success. Because of this gap in knowledge, this study thus provides an in-depth exploration into an established FYS to see what can be learnt from it in terms of programme design, implementation, and evaluation. In the next section, I look at how the FYS programme at the UFS is designed, implemented, and evaluated.

1.5 The First Year Seminar at the University of the Free State

This study provides an in-depth look at the FYS at the UFS. To this end, this section explores the format of the FYS, its evolution, its organisational structure, and its evaluation.

1.5.1 Format of the FYS

In the US, an FYS is often a one- to three-credit bearing course. A one-credit course means students must engage with course content for one hour per week in class and double that (two hours) per week outside of class; a three-credit course means students must engage with course content for three hours per week in class and six hours per week outside of class. Most university courses in the US count for three credits. In SA, one credit equals ten notional hours, which is the number of hours spent on the course, whether it be in class or outside of class. The number of notional hours is dependent on the degree programme and the time required for the course. South African courses are, therefore, often four, eight, 12, 16 or 32 credits. In SA, the

word “course” often refers to a full degree programme, and the subjects that comprise the degree programme are referred to as modules. At the UFS, the FYS is a 16-credit module and is thus 160 notional hours. Additionally, the FYS is run as a module. It is a hybrid seminar that is curricular, compulsory, and a pre-requisite for degree completion, which has been the case since it was instituted in 2012 (Oosthuizen *et al.*, 2017).

Kuh (2008) makes the case that students who are academically underprepared benefit more from HIPs than students who are not, but that they are often also the group of students who do not choose to participate in HIPs. Culver and Bowman (2020) further indicate that students who do choose to participate in FYS programmes are more academically motivated than those who do not. Culver and Bowman (2020) add that just over half of the universities in their study ran a compulsory FYS. These studies serve to strengthen the argument for making FYS programmes a requirement for degree completion, as is the case at the UFS. The compulsory nature of the FYS ensures that all students are supported. The FYS thus levels the playing field regarding academic preparedness and academic motivation.

The name of the FYS at the UFS is UFSS, which stands for University of the Free State Skills module. The UFS was founded in 1904 and is a medium- to large-sized contact institution with approximately 40,000 enrolled students across seven faculties and three campuses. The university is situated in the middle of SA, in the Free State province. The majority of the students (approximately 33,000) are undergraduate students. Most students come from rural areas, and two-thirds come from quintile one to three schools. There are approximately 3,000 permanent staff members who serve students, spread across academic and support services (Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2023b; University of the Free State, 2023b). As a result of the compulsory nature of the FYS, all first-year students across all faculties enrol for the FYS. This means that there are an average of 8,200 students who enrol for UFSS each year. The programme is rolled out across two campuses – the Bloemfontein (BFN) campus and the QwaQwa (QQ) campus. There is approximately a 70%/30% split in enrolment between the two campuses respectively. The BFN campus is situated in the middle of the country, in Bloemfontein, which is classified as a city. The QQ campus is situated in Phuthaditjhaba, in the rural Eastern Free State. This distinction is important to make since, in many parts of SA, a multi-campus model is the norm. This does have implications for how programmes are designed and implemented across campuses to ensure an equitable experience for students at different campuses. The UFS FYS is not housed in Student Affairs or in the faculties. Instead,

it is run out of the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL). The CTL is primarily a support division that runs several projects geared towards student and staff/faculty support.

1.5.2 Evolution of the FYS from 2017 to 2021

Though the FYS at the UFS started in 2012, significant changes were made to the FYS between 2017 and 2021; hence, this study's focus on this time frame to demonstrate the role of evaluation in the adaptations made to the programme. Because of its large footprint in terms of student enrolment, the content of the FYS at the UFS is a collaboration across the institution, with faculty members and support staff members helping to write and teach in this module. This means that content is always up-to-date, and students are continuously referred to a variety of available support services (i.e., other FYEs or any other campus support).

In 2017, UFSS was both an FYS focused on skills development (in the first semester) and a common intellectual experience focused on developing critical thinking and answering critical multi-disciplinary questions (in the second semester). As part of the institution's internal quality assurance requirements, the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) was externally reviewed in 2017, and the feedback from the review panel suggested that the common intellectual experience be delivered separately from the skills development. Additionally, the majority of the classes were run as large classes (or mega classes, given that the size of the class was 2000+ on the BFN campus and 800+ on the QQ campus).

While the reviewers commended the value of the experience gained in teaching large classes, there was a shift in 2018 to a more regular small class teaching of 30 to 60 students per class, as is the case with most FYS programmes. The content covered in the second semester was also adapted to be more relevant to students, moving from big questions covered in astrophysics, chemistry, and law to community and mental health, entrepreneurship, and social justice and leadership.

In 2019, the academic skills development (study skills, time management, goal setting, financial literacy, referencing and plagiarism, etc.) continued in the first semester, and the focus in the second semester changed to how students can make the most of their undergraduate studies to prepare for the world of work. Up to this point, the FYS had run as weekly classes conducted over a year. In 2019, a summer school version (much like summer bridging programmes) of the first semester content of the FYS was piloted and approved for full roll-out in 2020. The reasoning behind proposing a summer school was the need to address skills

at different points in time in the first semester for different faculties. Logistically, however, this was not possible. The summer school was therefore proposed as a way to fast-track students learning the skills they require for academic success and address the venue and timetable clashes that had become increasingly apparent as a result of the ever-growing number of enrolments in this module.

In 2020, three versions of the summer school were run: one that ran before the start of the semester, one that ran in the first week of the semester (faculties allotted 10 hours in their timetable for this), and a third that ran during the March break. Students were allocated to one of these three groups based on when they registered. The national lockdown and ensuing remote teaching and learning affected the third group; students who registered late or attended some classes with the first or second groups and had to catch up on the rest of the content. Thus, the first two groups had face-to-face classes at the start of the year, and the third group had either some face-to-face classes or none at all. In the second semester, all classes were conducted online. By 2020, the first semester content focusing on academic success skills had stabilised. However, the second semester content had morphed into a recap on strategies for success at university, entrepreneurship and employability, information technology skills for a changing workforce, and career psychology.

As a result of the success of the summer school in 2020, a winter school was created for the second semester classes of UFSS in 2021. These were then rolled out for all students in the second semester. With remote teaching and learning still in place at the UFS in 2021, the mode of delivery thus included online synchronous classes in the week before the start of the semester, a repeat of this content through asynchronous classes throughout the semester, learning materials and continuous assessment on Blackboard, and regular responses to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) posted on Blackboard.

1.5.3 Organisational structure for the FYS

Due to the number of students enrolled for the FYS, a team of people is required to ensure the successful running of the programme each year. The figure below (Figure 1.1) is an organogram of the team working on the FYS. Because the FYS is run as part of the curriculum and is credit-bearing, students pay for the module (for the majority of students, this is covered by NSFAS or other loans, bursaries or scholarships). This allows for its self-sustaining nature

and, therefore, the ability to allocate adequate resources to invest appropriately in the programme.

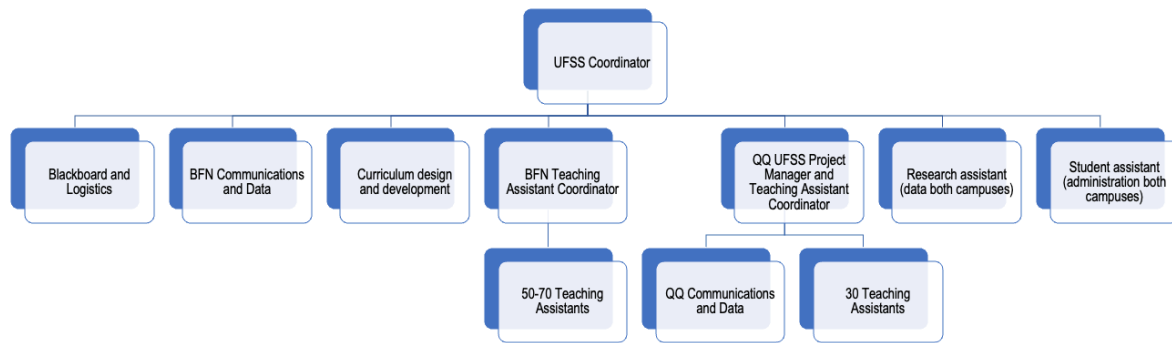


Figure 1.1: UFSS Team Organogram

The UFSS Coordinator is responsible for the programme coordination of the FYS across both campuses. This person contributes to the institutional FYE Committee and to the national Siyaphumelela FYE workstream. The coordinator is also responsible for managing the staff in the row directly below them in the organogram. The Blackboard and Logistics Officer is responsible for the development and maintenance of the FYS on the learning management system, Blackboard, as well as the coordination of logistics, such as venues and timetabling, and the finances of UFSS. The Communications and Data Officers – one for BFN and one for QQ – are responsible for communicating with students and processing their assessment and attendance data. The Curriculum Design and Development Officer is responsible for the coordination, development, and design of content in UFSS. The Teaching Assistant Coordinators manage a large number of Teaching Assistants, which includes recruiting and training the Teaching Assistants and quality assurance of their work. The Teaching Assistants facilitate small classes and mark assessments in UFSS. The UFSS Coordinator, Blackboard and Logistics Officer, and Curriculum Development and Design Officer are located on the BFN campus, but they are responsible for tasks across both campuses. The QQ Coordinator manages the implementation of the FYS and manages the Teaching Assistants on the QQ campus – this is because an in-person presence is required for the management of the FYS for almost 2000 students on the QQ campus. The Research Assistant and Student Assistant assist with the data and administrative work, respectively.

1.5.4 Evaluation of the FYS

An Action Learning and Action Research cycle is followed to evaluate the FYS and allow for a pragmatic approach to identifying problems and needs, generating solutions, implementing solutions, reflecting on the use of evidence, and modifying planning and practices (Zuber-Skerritt and Wood, 2019). The FYS is evaluated each semester through quantitative and qualitative questionnaires designed as end-of-semester module evaluations as well as through student focus groups each year. The student voice is further included in the evaluation of the programme since the Teaching Assistants, who are students themselves, review content, co-create content, and report on their experiences in the classroom.

In the next section, the problem statement of this study is clarified.

1.6 Problem statement

There are many FYS programmes in SA, but there is a lack of academic scrutiny pertaining to the planning, implementation, and evaluation of such programmes. Studies show that when these programmes are not fully understood, the results are a waste of resources and capacity and, ultimately, the inadequacy of the programme in addressing students' needs (Scott, 2008; Thurber and Walton, 2012; Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014; Lekena and Bayaga, 2018; van Zyl *et al.*, 2020). Internationally, there is a strong case for how the design and assessment of FYS programmes influence the effectiveness of these programmes, but there is limited national literature on this matter. For transition programmes to be optimally effective in equipping first-year students with the necessary skills to be successful in their studies, these programmes need a stronger, contextual evidence base.

The aim of this study, thus, is to optimise FYS programmes by interrogating how the planning, implementation, and evaluation of such programmes can support the transition and success of first-year students. To do this, the question "How can evidence-based First Year Seminars be designed?" will be explored in the first article, and the question "How can the evaluation of First Year Seminars inform successful student transitions?" will be explored in the second article.

The implementation of the FYS at South African higher education institutions is fairly recent. Therefore, there is still much to be shared by way of examples, success stories, and challenges. This study will contribute to the field by exploring the value of using data-informed approaches to the design, implementation, and evaluation of FYS programmes in SA, thereby impacting the transition of first-year students into higher education. Additionally, this study will add value by contributing to the literature base on transition and student success in SA.

In the next section, the research methodology of this study is described.

1.7 Research Methodology

In this section, I will detail the research aim, research design, research question, data collection, sampling, data analysis, and ethical considerations applicable to this study.

1.7.1 Research aim

The aim of this research is to optimise FYS programmes by interrogating how the planning, implementation, and evaluation of such programmes can support the transition and success of first-year students.

1.7.2 Research design

The research will be conducted in two phases, each with a publishable article as an output. In the first article, the research will draw on the constructivist paradigm and make use of qualitative data in a non-experimental design. The constructivist paradigm in qualitative research is useful when the researcher is required to engage with the materials to generate meaning from them (Mogashoa, 2014). In the second article, the research will draw on the pragmatic paradigm and will make use of a non-experimental design and a mixed-methods approach (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Feilzer (2010) explains that the pragmatic paradigm is ideal for a) the integration of quantitative and qualitative data and b) goal-oriented, applied social research.

1.7.3 Research question

Primary research question:

- How can First Year Seminars be optimised by implementing an evidence-based approach to design and evaluation?

Secondary research questions:

- How can evidence-based First Year Seminars be designed?
- How can the evaluation of First Year Seminars inform successful student transitions?

1.7.4 Data collection

No primary data will be collected for this research; only secondary data in the form of documentation (curriculum guides, syllabi, etc.) and student evaluation data will be used. This data was collected under the ethical clearance of a previous institutional research project, which monitored and evaluated UFSS. The clearance number is UFS-HSD2017/0206, and the data is in the form of questionnaires and focus groups. The units of analysis are first-year students across the seven faculties at the UFS who were enrolled in the FYS from 2017 to 2021.

1.7.5 Sampling

The study will not use sampling for primary data collection but will use the UFS FYS programme as a population from which to draw secondary data.

1.7.6 Data analysis

The question that will be addressed in the first article is, “How can evidence-based First Year Seminars be designed?” To answer this question, a curriculum document analysis will be conducted to map the UFSS curriculum design against the First Year Curriculum Principles proposed by Nelson, *et al.* (2014). The study guides, syllabi, lesson plans, evaluation reports, teaching assistant training material, and communication with students will form part of the curriculum document analysis. This will allow for reflection in the first article on what good FYS programme design should or could look like in practice.

The second article will address the question, “How can the evaluation of First Year Seminars inform successful student transitions?” This article will draw on the quantitative and qualitative student evaluations from 2017 to 2021, which were collected at different points in each year. The article explores how students’ experiences of the programme contributed to their transition into and through their first year of university. This will be done by mapping the student evaluation results against the relevant First Year Curriculum Principles (FYCPs). The success

of the FYS will also be determined through inductive reporting on students' experiences of the FYS related to their perceived value of the programme and if it addressed challenges that might impede their transition into higher education. In addition, the process of data collection and how the data were used to inform changes made to the UFSS curriculum design will be scrutinised to reflect on how evaluation data could be best used to improve transitional programmes.

1.7.7 Ethical considerations

This study will only make use of document analysis and institutional data that were collected with ethical clearance between 2017-2021 (UFS-HSD2017/0206). At the time, participants were made aware that their data would be used for reporting and academic purposes. All transcribed data from the focus groups and quantitative and qualitative data from the evaluations, which have been de-identified, will be used. Thus, there is no direct or indirect threat of harm or breach of confidentiality. The processing of this secondary data thus aligns with the requirements of the Protection of Personal Information Act of 2013, as no identifiable data will be used, and the integrity of the original agreement with participants is held in place. Although the data that will be used has received ethical clearance, this particular study has also been subjected to ethical approval (UFS-HSD2022/0326/22).

1.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described the experiences of first-year students in higher education; how FYEs can support students in addressing the challenges they face at university; the FYS as the focal support programme of this study; and the design, implementation, and evaluation of the FYS at the UFS. I have made the case for data-informed and evidence-based design, implementation, and evaluation of the FYS to ensure impact and resultant student success. This argument is evident throughout the chapter and is further accentuated in the problem statement. I have also discussed the research methodology used in this study to ensure that the argument made in this study is soundly supported. In the next chapter, I will detail the conceptual frameworks used in this study, namely Transition Pedagogy and the First Year Curriculum Principles.

1.9 Chapter outline

In this section, I will present an overview of the content of each of the five chapters that this dissertation consists of.

Chapter 1: Introduction and background to the study

Chapter 1 sets the scene for the dissertation. It provides background on what first-year students experience when they enter higher education, and it discusses the different types of support that universities put in place to help students transition into and through their first year of study. The distinction between FYEs, FYS programmes, and the different types of FYS programmes is also clarified. This chapter includes the problem statement and value of the study, as well as the research methodology.

Chapter 2: Conceptual framework: Transition Pedagogy and First Year Curriculum Principles

Chapter 2 continues with a deeper dive into the FYS by describing the conceptualisation of FYS programmes, as well as the transition theories that often inform that conceptualisation. The conceptual framework, namely Transition Pedagogy, is described in detail, and the role of the First Year Curriculum Principles is clarified as a part of the Transition Pedagogy framework.

Chapter 3: (Article 1) Using First Year Curriculum Principles as an evidence-based approach to design and evaluate a First Year Seminar

Chapter 3 is the first journal article in this dissertation by article, and will make a knowledge contribution by investigating the use of FYCPs as an evidence-based approach to designing and evaluating an FYS.

Chapter 4: (Article 2) Using student evaluations as evidence to inform the design of a transition-focused First Year Seminar

Chapter 4 is the second journal article in this dissertation by article and will make a knowledge contribution by investigating the use of the student voice through student evaluations as evidence to inform the design of a transition-focused FYS.

Chapter 5: Discussion and conclusion

Chapter 5 is the final chapter of this dissertation and will therefore close with a synthesis of findings, contributions, and limitations of the study, as well as recommendations for future research.

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2 CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: TRANSITION PEDAGOGY AND FIRST YEAR CURRICULUM PRINCIPLES

In Chapter 1, the challenges students experience in their first year and the role that the FYE, specifically FYS programmes, play in addressing those challenges were described. In this chapter, the conceptual frameworks used in this study, namely Transition Pedagogy and First Year Curriculum Principles (FYCPs) (Kift, Nelson, and Clarke, 2010), will be described. It is important, however, to first understand students' transition needs and how FYS programmes are conceptualised to address those needs. Next, to provide background as to why these conceptual frameworks have been chosen for this study, the broader context of transition theories that inform the conceptualisation of FYS programmes will be explored. Finally, Transition Pedagogy and FYCPs, as well as examples of their use in FYE design, will be detailed.

2.1 Conceptualising FYS programmes

In Chapter 1, different types of FYS programmes were described, and international and national examples of each were provided. In Figure 2.1, these different types of FYS programmes are recapped so that this section (Section 2.1) can further explore how these programmes are conceptualised and why higher education institutions implement the specific FYS programme they do.

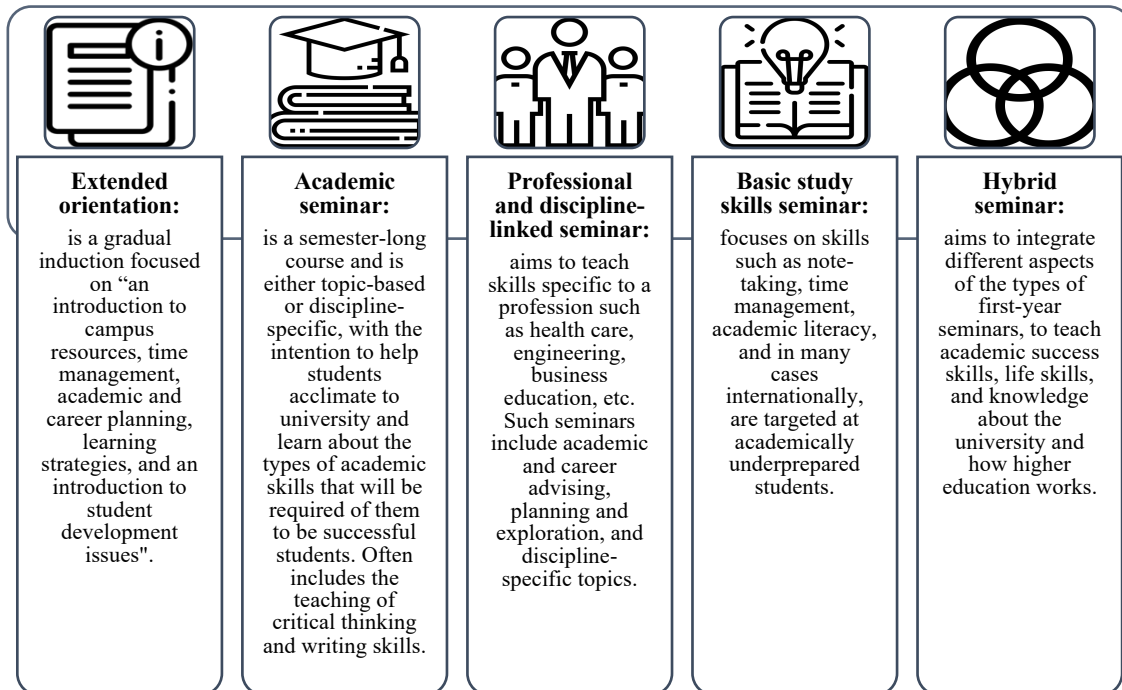


Figure 2.1: Summary of different types of FYS Programmes (Barefoot *et al.*, 2005; Padgett and Keup, 2011, p. 70; Greenfield *et al.*, 2015)

The aims of an FYS programme are to address student transition into university (Buyarski and Landis, 2014; Yan and Sendall, 2016; Combrink and Oosthuizen, 2020) and the retention of first-years, as this is the year that students are most likely to drop out (Bernardo *et al.*, 2016; Henn, Hen-Boisen, and Posthumus, 2017; Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020; van Zyl *et al.*, 2020). Given these aims, it is important to delve into the factors involved in the conceptualisation of an FYS programme – factors such as student data, assessment, institutional culture, strategy, leadership, funding, and multi-campus stakeholders (Greenfield *et al.*, 2015).

2.1 Student data

The conceptualisation of an FYS programme requires a student-centred approach. To this end, many institutions conduct surveys to understand their students and their students' needs. Such surveys include biographical surveys to determine which biographical factors impact student transition, such as school quintile and generational status. Other data points, such as AP scores and NBT results, are also used to place students in foundation programmes and/or academic literacy or writing programmes to address the development of language and literacy proficiency and provide students with additional support. George Kuh's work on student engagement

resulted in a series of surveys on student engagement that have become internationally recognised and implemented across the world – with examples including the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in America, the South African Survey of Student Engagement (SASSE) in South Africa, and the Australian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) in Australia (Kuh, 2008; Barkley, 2009; Kift *et al.* 2010; Strydom, Basson, and Mentz, 2010; Strydom, Kuh, and Loots, 2017). The purpose of these surveys is to understand how students engage academically and socially with the institution, specific to students' experiences of academic challenge, learning with peers, experiences with staff, and the campus environment. In the national survey of FYS programmes in the US, where 94% of institutions offered an FYS in 2009, it is clear that the NSSE was involved in the conceptualisation of these FYS programmes (Padgett and Keup, 2011; Keup, 2012). In Australia, the understanding of student transition and the creation and implementation of an institution-wide approach to FYE programmes relied on the data provided by the AUSSE (Kift *et al.*, 2010).

In South Africa, the majority of higher education institutions employ the South African student engagement surveys with their students, and this project is run nationally out of the CTL at the UFS (Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2023). The data from the student engagement surveys (both the SASSE and BUSSE) have played an important role in the conceptualisation of the FYS at the University of the Free State (Combrink and Oosthuizen, 2020). In addition to the student engagement surveys, Nyar's (2019) report on data about the FYE collected from 22 higher education institutions in SA indicates that some institutions have developed specific surveys for first-year students to understand their experiences. Thus, a key factor in the conceptualisation of an FYS programme is student data. In many cases, several data points are used to provide a clearer picture of the student. This data includes biographical data, academic performance and preparedness data, data on student expectations of university life, and data on the student experience of the university.

2.2 Assessment of FYS programmes

In addition to gathering data on the student cohort, gathering data on existing student success initiatives is crucial to assess how student needs can be addressed through an FYS programme. Such assessment would determine what potential gaps can be addressed by an FYS programme. In many cases, instead of positioning the FYS programme as yet another student success initiative, it can instead be a way to align existing initiatives into one consolidated programme. Once the FYS programme is in place, it is also important to assess if it is meeting the learning outcomes and goals it has set. Greenfield *et al.* (2015) posit that this assessment can take place

in the form of programme evaluation, pre- and post-tests, comparisons with peer groups inside and outside the institution, and longitudinal tracking of students to determine impact over time.

2.3 Institutional culture, strategy, leadership, and funding

Institutional or organisational factors are pivotal to the conceptualisation of an FYS programme. Such factors include institutional culture and strategies, leadership, and funding (Greenfield *et al.*, 2015). Harvey *et al.* (2006) note that many institutions employ an ad hoc approach to first-year support – the introduction of support in response to students’ needs based on a deficit narrative about students. Harvey *et al.* (2006) suggest that, instead, an institution-wide, systemic and holistic approach to first-year support should be taken. This suggestion is also the theoretical approach taken in this study. Institution-wide, systemic, and holistic support, however, requires a culture change for some institutions to become more student-centred or student-focused and adopt an asset-based narrative about students. Taking an asset-based narrative means that an institution’s focus should shift to the strengths and capabilities that students possess and how to best support them in the transition into and through their first year (Wilson-Strydom, 2015).

Institutional strategies that are centred around students and their success will determine the type of FYS that is fit for purpose. An institution’s senior management plays an important leadership role in the allocation of resources and funding and in the approach taken to implement institutional strategies related to student support programmes. Funding often determines the scale at which an FYS programme can be implemented, as the operations of the programme and the human resources allotted to it are dependent on funding. Funding for FYS programmes varies from institution to institution. Curricular FYS programmes, such as academic seminars and preprofessional and discipline-linked seminars, can be funded from student tuition fees which is then supplemented by government/state grants or external grant funding. Co-curricular FYS programmes are more likely to be funded by external sources, government/state grants, or the institution’s central operating budget (Greenfield *et al.*, 2015; Nyar, 2019).

2.4 Multi-campus stakeholders

Multi-campus stakeholders are also key role players in the conceptualisation and implementation of an FYS programme. A successful FYS programme is dependent upon where the FYS programme is housed – Teaching and Learning Centres or Student Affairs – and its conceptualisation involves faculty members in the academic space, support staff in the co-

curricular space, and administrative staff (Greenfield *et al.*, 2015). These role players may be involved in the implementation of the FYS as well. The role of senior students as tutors, teaching assistants or peer mentors in an FYS programme is an important investment for first-year students' buy-in and engagement because of the relationship first-years form with peers and senior students whom they often look to for guidance and advice (Kuh, 2008; Latino and Ashcraft, 2012). The first-year students enrolled in an FYS programme should also be considered during the conceptualisation phase. This involvement includes their data, which informs an institution's understanding of their experience, as well as their participation as co-creators of the curriculum in a constructivist manner (Macfarlane, 2016).

2.5 Types of FYS programmes most frequently conducted

Given all the factors involved in conceptualising an FYS programme, it is interesting to note the types of FYS programmes that are most frequently run at higher education institutions. Internationally, the types of FYS programmes that are implemented at most institutions are extended orientation and academic seminars (Padgett and Keup, 2011; Keup, 2012; Keup *et al.*, 2022). This makes sense, given that one of the students' main transition needs is to be orientated to the university. Many institutions run orientation programmes at the beginning of a student's journey, but some have realised the need to continue to orientate students as they have new university experiences during their student journeys. Hence, the implementation of extended orientation. Extended orientation, when run as an FYS programme, is more sustainable than a single orientation day or week at the beginning of the academic year. Extended orientation allows for access to and retention of information at key points along a student's journey. Extended orientation also addresses social needs, as peer interaction and connecting with the university are often incorporated into the design of this kind of FYS programme.

The conceptualisation of academic seminars comes from the need to encourage students to start thinking like university students and to acquire the skills university students need to be successful, such as critical thinking and academic literacy. Nationally, very few institutions conduct formalised FYS programmes (there are many FYE initiatives instead). When FYS programmes are formalised, they are usually extended orientation or preprofessional and discipline-linked seminars (Jacobs and Pretorius, 2016; Jama, 2018; Nyar, 2019, 2020, 2023). Preprofessional and discipline-linked seminars aim to bridge the gap between high school and university, specific to the discipline-related and academic skills that students need to develop to be successful in that particular field. While preprofessional and discipline-linked seminars

are beneficial for the students enrolled in these seminars, unless the approach is institution-wide (i.e., every degree programme includes this type of FYS), its benefit is limited to only a small group of students. The least common types of FYS programmes internationally are preprofessional and discipline-based seminars, basic study skills seminars, and hybrid seminars. The least common types of FYS programmes nationally are academic seminars, basic study skills seminars, and hybrid seminars.

In the next section, I provide an overview of the transition theories that inform the conceptualisation of FYS programmes.

2.2 Transition theories

In addition to the factors mentioned in Section 2.1, the conceptualisation of FYS programmes is also informed by theory. In this section, the work of the theorists that are pivotal in understanding student transition is explored. The section ends with a discussion of the conceptual frameworks used in this study. Gale and Parker (2014, p. 16) define transition in the most straightforward and succinct manner. They say that transition is “the capacity to navigate change”. Change takes place throughout a person’s life. Common examples are moving from primary school to high school, moving from high school to university, moving into a new city, getting married, having children, and moving from one job to the next. How well a person is able to navigate that change will determine the success of their transition. This section explores the theories that frame our understanding of transition, specific to students’ transition into and through their first year of university.

For the purpose of this study, I am going to use the three theoretical fields listed by Schreiber, Luescher, and Moja (2016) as contributing to the conceptualisation of the FYE. These theoretical fields are adjustment frameworks, stage theories, and theories about epistemological access and engagement. The adjustment frameworks that are explored in this study are Tinto’s Student Integration Model and Astin’s Student Involvement Theory. The stage theories that are described are Burnett’s Student Experience Model, Bridges’ Transition Model, and Schlossberg’s Transition Theory. For frameworks about epistemological access, I explain Quaye and Harper’s views on equitable student engagement. In addition to these three theoretical fields, I have added explicit transition frameworks, namely Lizzio’s Five Senses Model and Kift *et al.*’s Transition Pedagogy. The breakdown of these theories is depicted in Figure 2.2.

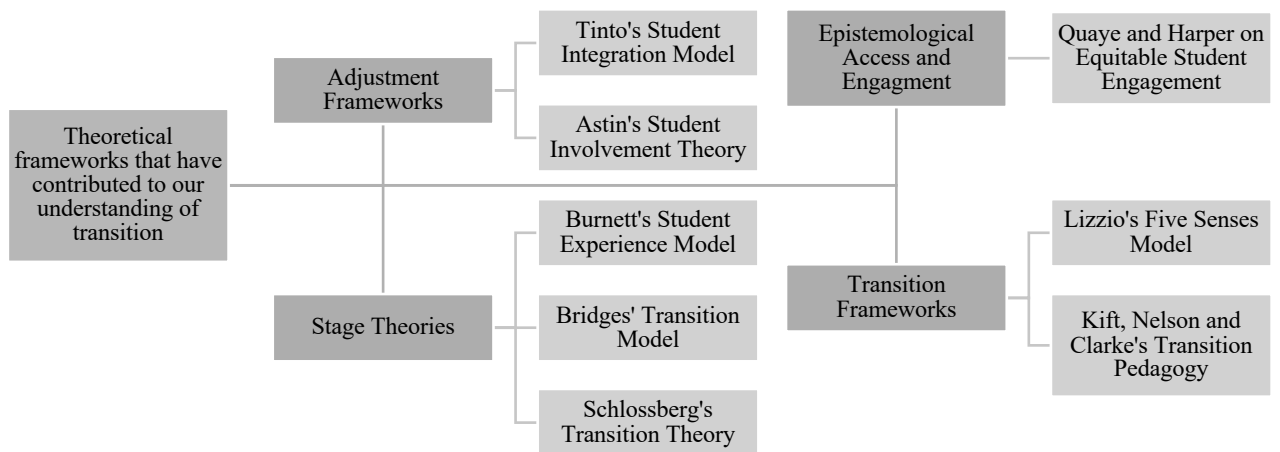


Figure 2.2: Theoretical frameworks that have contributed to our understanding of transition theories

2.2.1 Adjustment frameworks

Tinto's Student Integration Model (Tinto, 1975) and Astin's Student Involvement Theory (Astin, 1999) both sought to explain why students drop out in the first year. Both Tinto and Astin found that the characteristics that impact retention are related to how well students adjust to their new university environment. If sufficient support is provided to assist students during their adjustment period, then their chance of persisting through their first year is higher. These two adjustment frameworks are summarised in Sections 2.2.1.1 and 2.2.1.2.

2.2.1.1 Tinto's Student Integration Model

Tinto's Student Integration Model stems from his 1975 article in which he theorises about student dropout (Tinto, 1975). He synthesises different theories from research on student dropout to develop an explanation for dropout, rather than just a description of it. Tinto's model explains the interaction between students' individual characteristics, their commitments, academic and social integration, and the result of this interaction on dropout.

Individual characteristics include family background, individual attributes, and pre-college schooling. There is variety present in these individual characteristics, and these variables impact commitments (Tinto, 1975). Commitments that would affect a student's integration into university are goal commitment and institutional commitment. Goal commitment refers to the degree to which the student is motivated and expects to succeed. Institutional commitment has to do with the student's mindset about the institution and the financial and time commitments the student makes to engage with their studies. It makes sense that goal commitment would

affect the student's academic or grade performance and intellectual development and, therefore, also impact their academic integration. Institutional commitment would affect how the student interacts with peers and staff and, therefore, also impact their social integration (Tinto, 1975).

The lack of social and academic integration into university affects a student's ability to adjust to the university environment, and therefore, they drop out. There has to be a balance between social integration and academic integration because a lack or excess of one of these could also lead to dropout. As with academic integration and its effect on educational goal commitment, social integration would, in turn, have an impact on institutional commitment. Therefore, student retention is more a function of what happens to a student within the university environment post-entry than it is related to the individual characteristics that students enter the university with. This means that institutions play a role in creating an environment, through the academic and social systems, that encourages academic and social integration in order to positively impact goal and institutional commitment (Tinto, 1975).

It is challenging for students to navigate their transition to university on their own. Therefore, formal programmes designed to foster social and academic integration are pivotal in supporting students in their transition (Tinto, 1993). An FYE programme is an example of such a programme. In later work, Tinto suggests the need for a new mode of institutional action that reflects multiple levels of understanding and connects institutional policies, programmes, and practices geared towards improving retention (Engstrom and Tinto, 2008; Pather and Chetty, 2016; French, 2017). More recently, in a conference keynote, Tinto (2017) indicated that everyone at the university should be involved in student success as an intentional, strategic goal to ensure retention through early and timeous support.

2.2.1.2 Astin's Student Involvement Theory

Like Tinto, Astin's Student Involvement Theory also stemmed from studying student dropout patterns (Astin, 1975). Astin was interested in the relationship between institutional policies, programmes, and student success, with a focus on pedagogical theories that could be tested to provide empirical data showing impact (Astin, 1999). He found that the more time and effort students spent on a certain endeavour, the more likely they were to succeed at it. Many theories centred around motivation have the same core theme, but Astin was interested in measuring observable behaviour versus intangible thinking, emotions or desires. He, therefore, postulated that measuring how involved students are in institutional activities would provide information

about the institutional processes that facilitate *how* students develop, as opposed to focusing on pedagogical theories that are more concerned with what student development is. Thus, the learning environment can be structured to enhance how students engage with their learning. Institutional policies, both administrative, such as advising and class schedules, and non-academic activities, such as extra-curricular activities and financial aid policies, can affect how students direct their time and energy (Astin, 1999).

Astin found significant environmental factors such as living on campus, joining social associations, participating in extra-curricular activities and sports, being involved in honours programmes or undergraduate research, and working part-time on campus all positively impact students' persistence and retention. This positive impact is the result of students spending more time on campus, thus directing their energy and involvement towards campus-related activities. These factors lead to an increased sense of belonging and attachment to the institution (Astin, 1999).

The practical application of Astin's Student Involvement Theory is that academic staff members should focus less on fine-tuning their teaching techniques and more on the impact of that technique on the student. Evaluating the impact of a technique on students can be done by monitoring student behaviour and assessing the outcome of learning and student involvement in the course work. Student support staff, such as counsellors and academic advisors, can monitor how a student spends their time to determine if the academic challenges they may be experiencing are related to the number of activities they are involved in, lack of study skills, lack of motivation or a combination of the aforementioned. Furthermore, the effectiveness of institutional policies and practices can be measured by whether or not they positively impact student involvement (Astin, 1999).

While students' individual characteristics upon entering university must still be considered, Astin's longitudinal study found that the role the institution plays is pivotal in whether or not students are involved and engaged in university life (Astin, 1975). Astin's Student Involvement Theory influences how we think about the contribution of programmes aimed at increasing student retention and success. Thus, FYE programmes that are in place to support students' transition into university can positively affect student involvement, persistence, and retention.

2.2.2 Stage theories

Stage theories about transition help us understand the various phases that students move through as they transition into and through university. Burnett's Student Experience Model, Bridges' Transition Model, and Schlossberg's Transition Theory all represent the stages that

students move through in order to transition successfully into higher education. The aims of their theories are to help practitioners understand the stages students move through when transitioning and how to best assist them through each stage.

2.2.1.1 Burnett's Student Experience Model

Burnett's Student Experience Model consists of six phases, as depicted in Figure 3 below:



Figure 2.3: Burnett's Student Experience Model (Burnett, 2007)

The aim of this model is to enhance our understanding of students and their experiences. For the purpose of this study on first-year students, I will focus on the first four phases.

In the 'pre-transition or beginning to think about university' phase, high school students should be exposed to relevant information regarding subject choices that will impact their future careers (Burnett, 2007). In Wilson-Strydom's study on the transition between high school and university, she refers to the metaphor of a humpback bridge to explain the gap between high school and university, where one environment does not have a clear view of the other. In many instances, even when school learners are provided with enough support and guidance to make informed choices about their future, the unfamiliarity of the university environment on the other side of the bridge means that the pre-transition phase is one of insecurity and learners are often unprepared to cope with the university environment (Wilson-Strydom, 2012).

In the 'transition or preparing for university' phase, students will have received an offer of acceptance to study at from a university. However, without further engagement before formal university activities start, students are not able to start forming support networks with other students or ask questions about university life. This is a phase during which the university can provide students with much-needed support in the form of information sessions and networking events (Burnett, 2007). This pre-orientation support can take place face-to-face, but since some of the student population may not reside in the same location as the university, online sessions are also an option.

In Australia, where Burnett's Student Experience Model originated, most universities provide their students with orientation as a suite of activities completed over the course of a week. Orientation is designed to help students become familiar with the university environment and

may include social networking, academic skills development, and specific degree or co-curricular programme information (Burnett, 2007). At other Australian universities, orientation may vary from a day to two weeks, but it is in place at most higher education institutions as part of the FYE.

First Year Student Induction Programmes can be faculty-specific in order to provide information and support that is most relatable and relevant to the student. These programmes can run for the duration of the first semester or the entire first year, with the aim of supporting students with the specific needs they may have at a particular point in time, such as information about tuition fees, tutorials and peer mentoring, and examination preparation (Burnett, 2006, 2007).

The success of Burnett's phases depends on the ability of different entities within the institution to collaborate and work towards the common goal of supporting students in their transition from high school to university and providing clear expectations and pathways for student success (Burnett, 2007).

2.2.1.2 Bridges' Transition Model

Bridges' Transition Model was first developed in 1980 to explain how leaders can best navigate organisational change, namely by shifting their focus from the change happening in the organisation to the transition that employees and teams need to go through (Bridges and Bridges, 2017). The model has since been cited in student transition research, as the three phases of this model also resemble the phases that students move through when transitioning from high school to university, namely 'The Ending', 'The Neutral Zone', and 'The New Beginning' (Cheng, 2023).

The first phase of Bridges' Transition Model is 'The Ending'. According to Bridges, transition starts with an ending because one has to let go of one's previous situation and even previous identity in order to accept the change taking place. In the case of first-year students, at the start of their transition to university, they need to deal with losing friends from high school, the loss of their identity as adolescents, and perhaps even the loss of comfort from living at home. Dealing with this loss is often the most challenging phase of transition, and letting go of the past is required in order to move through this first phase (Bridges and Bridges, 2017).

The second phase of this model is 'The Neutral Zone'. The neutral zone is where the student has let go of their previous sense of identity and ways of doing things but is not yet quite comfortable with their new situation. It is a space of learning and discomfort and a space which

can feel like limbo. However, this may also be a space of discovery and innovation – a space which might be either opportune or distressing. Students need to learn new habits and ways of doing things. This is the core of Bridges' Transition Model, in which repatterning takes place (Bridges and Bridges, 2017). The third and final phase of this model is 'The New Beginning'. In this phase, students feel orientated and understand their new identity as university students. This phase is marked by new attitudes and motivation to direct energy into making the best of the new situation (Bridges and Bridges, 2017).

Though there are three phases in this model, students may simultaneously go through each phase but in different aspects of their lives. Therefore, these phases can be considered a process through which students go; their transition is complete when they have gone through all three processes (Bridges and Bridges, 2017). The role of the university and transition programmes is to recognise that students need support to let go of their pre-university experiences, adapt to the new environment, and move towards a new beginning.

2.2.1.3 Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Schlossberg started theorising about transition in her seminal work in 1981. She focused on helping adults cope with the process of living. Her work centred around counselling adults going through life transitions and has since been applied to other fields, including higher education studies. Over time, she incorporated the theories of others and critiques of her theory to develop a theory that is more inclusive, better understands people's diversity, considers the evolution of technology, and considers the pragmatic nature of the theory in terms of its application to various scenarios (DeVilbiss, 2014).

According to Schlossberg, there are three types of transition, namely anticipated events, unanticipated events, and non-events. Anticipated events are those that are expected, such as the move from high school to university. Unanticipated events are those that are unplanned, such as the loss of a loved one. Non-events are events that one expects to happen but do not, such as completing a degree, getting married or having a child (Anderson, Goodman and Schlossberg, 2011). Whatever the event, like Bridges' Transition Model, Schlossberg's transition consists of three phases, namely moving in, moving through, and moving out. In the first phase, moving in, the person must become familiar with their new situation. In moving through, the person must learn to balance their new situation with the rest of their life. In moving out, the person must move out of the transition and begin to think about what happens next (Anderson *et al.*, 2011)

Schlossberg also argues that how well a person copes with a transition will determine the success of the transition. She puts forth the 4S system, which helps to determine how well a person is coping. These 4 S's are situation, self, support, and strategies (Anderson *et al.*, 2011). The situation refers to the position that a person finds themselves in; for example, a student not concerned with finances during their transition to university will be in a better position to cope with the transition than a student who is concerned about their tuition fee payments, accommodation, and food. Any additional stressors to the transition process may compromise the situation. The second S, self, has to do with the individual's usual ways of responding to a situation. If they are optimistic and have a growth mindset, they are more likely to experience a successful transition into and through the first year of university than a student who has a negative outlook on life or who generally has a fixed mindset. The third S, support, may be lacking in a higher education environment where the majority of students are first-generation students whose families most likely do not understand or have knowledge of what a university experience is. Therefore, the presence of a good support system at university through initiatives such as FYS programmes, peer mentors, academic advisors, tutors, and learning communities acts as a safety net and is a vital part of a student's coping resources. Finally, the fourth S, strategies, refers to the different plans or issues students may have to consider as they transition into and through university. Typically, these plans or issues require them to think about how a situation can be changed, reframe situations by thinking differently about them (by, for example, employing a growth mindset), or find ways to reduce stress (Schlossberg, 2011). All of these coping mechanisms can be addressed through an FYS programme if it is designed to consider the different resources a student would need to successfully transition into and through university.

2.2.3 Epistemological access and engagement

As indicated in Chapter 1, formal access to university has widened over the past 25 years. This widened access allows a diverse range of students in terms of ethnicity, AP score, and school quintile to enter university. Once students have access to the university, they also require epistemological access to the discipline in which they have enrolled. This means they need the tools to be able to comprehend, converse, and fully participate in disciplinary knowledge in order to successfully transition into and through their first year of university. While there are academic literacy programmes to support students in their ability to read and write at a university level, it is also the responsibility of the lecturer to create a space in which there is equitable epistemological access in the classroom so that all students may engage with the

content and with each other. Quay and Harper (2014) delve into ways that diverse students can be supported to equitably engage in university. For the purpose of this study, I have focused on Quay and Harper's (2014) research on equitable epistemological access.

2.2.3.1 Quay and Harper on equitable student engagement in higher education

As indicated in the previous chapter, student engagement refers to the degree to which students are motivated to actively participate in university activities and in their learning (Barkley, 2009). In addition to this role of the student, Kuh, Kinzie, and Buckley (2007) present cogent evidence of the institution's role in designing the curriculum and utilising its resources to encourage students to participate in educationally effective practices.

Furthermore, engagement literature strongly links to Tinto's work on academic and social integration, Astin's work on student involvement, and the correlation both authors make between the aforementioned variables and persistence (Tinto, 1975; Astin, 1999). Engagement includes a student's ability to access disciplinary content and actively participate in classroom conversations (an example of academic integration and student involvement). Thus, one can argue that helping students gain access to disciplinary content and knowledge would play a large role in continuous engagement and, therefore also, persistence (Quay and Harper, 2014). Here, the student voice is pertinent in gauging where students might be unable to connect with disciplinary content. The student voice is also key to comprehending how to better support students through, for example, curriculum redesign, academic literacy programmes, and tutorials that address the knowledge needs.

In their second edition of *Student Engagement in Higher Education*, Quay and Harper (2014) draw on a wide range of student engagement literature to show how the institution's role in student engagement has become increasingly complex as student populations become more and more diverse. They also emphasise the institution's responsibility to intentionally create experiences, both inside and outside the classroom, that are relevant to students and that enable them to learn about differences in order to prepare them for a diverse work environment. These experiences do not occur simply because a university campus is diverse; rather, they occur because of the intentional creation of structured, facilitated opportunities for diverse students to learn from one another. One of the positive correlations stemming from the student engagement work run in many countries through, for example, the NSSE, AUSSE, and SASSE surveys, is that interactions with diverse others are positively related to university satisfaction – a known factor in a student's decision to persist at university (Quay and Harper, 2014).

Therefore, equitable student engagement is concerned with supporting a diverse group of students to engage with educationally effective practices. Equitable student engagement also includes appropriate support for equitable epistemic access in order to ensure university satisfaction and persistence. Here, the role of the institution is clear: to optimally support students in their transition into and through university.

2.2.4 Frameworks for transition

While the previously discussed theories focus on various types of transitions students go through and how best to support them, Lizzio's Five Senses Model (Lizzio, 2006) includes a framework that institutions can use to design and evaluate their FYEs. This framework details goals for each of the senses and provides examples of good practice that can be used to determine if students are sufficiently supported. FYE practitioners can then determine the extent to which they are meeting those goals and if those goals are relevant to their institution.

2.2.4.1 Lizzio's Five Senses Model

Lizzio (2006) proposed a framework for orientation and other transition strategies that help students with the five most typical needs students have to effectively transition – he describes these needs as the five senses of success. These senses are a sense of capability, connectedness, purpose, resourcefulness, and academic culture. For each of the senses, there are specific goals that can be addressed through the effective design of a transition programme. This framework consists of a list of questions under each goal that can be used to guide the evaluation and adaptation of an existing programme, as well as the design of a new programme. I will briefly summarise the senses and their goals in this section.

The sense of capability has to do with understanding the following: what they are expected to be able to achieve at a university level; how well they are able to master academic content and academic skills; what support they might need to upskill, if necessary; and how committed they are to engaging with the university community. To design for this sense, an institution can ensure its transition programme includes clear expectations of students and staff, support for how students might have to adapt their study methods to be successful at university, explanations of the university jargon, information about how to self-study, manage assessment and learning workload, and where to seek help when necessary, and information about how to effectively participate and contribute to the university community. If this need is met, students are more likely to experience academic success early on and are, therefore, more likely to persist through their first year (Lizzio, 2006).

The sense of connectedness is the degree to which students feel connected to the university community through connections with peers, with staff, and with how they identify with the university. To design for this sense, an institution can ensure its transition programme helps students foster meaningful connections with other students through group work, study groups, tutorials, and peer mentoring where they can learn from senior students. The transition programme can also incorporate lessons on valuing diversity, where students learn about others in terms of their cultures, languages, genders, age groups, backgrounds, and so forth to appreciate the power of difference in group settings. To build connections with staff, the transition programme can be designed to share information about staff backgrounds, interests, and duties outside of teaching (so that students see them in a more holistic way than merely as their title or job role). The transition team staff can also encourage other staff to be approachable and make time to get to know students. To build connections with the institution, the history and story of the institution, and students' affiliation with it, can be shared so that they feel a sense of belonging and can aspire to connect with the institution's values (Lizzio, 2006).

The sense of purpose is related to students' having a clear vision of where they would like their career path to go and how their degree relates to that. Students who have a sense of purpose are more motivated to succeed because they know why they are at university, can set goals, and develop skills and strengths related to their vision of the future. To design for this sense, a transition programme can make the value of the degree programme clear to students – its relevance to their future, why it is structured the way it is, posing questions and topics that intrigue and challenge students, checking in if they understand the subject matter, and personalising the value of the programme through staff sharing their own enthusiasm about the subject matter. Furthermore, the transition programme can put students in touch with role models in their fields so that they can envision how their career paths might pan out. Finally, the transition programme can motivate students to focus on their personal and professional development and make use of the time and opportunities at university to do so (Lizzio, 2006). Similar to Schlossberg's strategies as a coping resource, Lizzio's sense of resourcefulness has to do with students' ability to navigate the university, manage challenges by seeking help, be aware of available resources, and maintain a work-life balance. To design for this sense, an institution's transition programme can refer students to university support services and can teach students how to navigate the university system in terms of how processes work, where to find information, and how to access academic advising. The transition programme can also help students become familiar with the physical university environment in terms of orientating

them to the campus, explaining safety and security measures, and helping them identify with the physical space by making it personally relatable. Furthermore, in terms of how students balance their time between university and the rest of the priorities in their lives, the transition programme can provide guidance on time management, financial literacy, setting realistic expectations, and making these expectations clear to family and friends who may not be aware of them (Lizzio, 2006).

The sense of academic culture is a student's appreciation of the university's norms and value system and an understanding of how processes work. This appreciation informs their behaviour, their attitude towards their studies, and their relationship with peers and staff. To design for a sense of academic culture, the institution's transition programme can help students understand academic integrity, independence, self-management, critical thinking, being curious and open to new ideas, collegial collaboration, and respect for fellow students and staff (Lizzio, 2006).

This section did not include an exhaustive list of transition theories but a reflection on the transition work that has been done relating to this study and influencing the most common ways of thinking about transition into and through university. The common denominator amongst all these theories is that students need to be supported in order to cope with the changes that come with entering their first year at university. An institutional, as opposed to a piecemeal approach, is the best route to take. Therefore, a holistic, multi-faceted, integrated approach to transition is required for an optimal approach to student support (Young & Bunting, 2024). For that reason, I have gone the route of selecting a conceptual framework that is comprehensive and best represents all the themes that emerged from this literature review of transition theories. For the purpose of this study, Transition Pedagogy and its accompanying FYCPs (Kift *et al.*, 2010) for design will be used as the conceptual framework. This framework is detailed in the next section.

2.3 Transition Pedagogy and First Year Curriculum Principles

Transition Pedagogy stems from Australia, where Kift *et al.*(2010) identified many boutique or piecemeal approaches to FYEs. Though these programmes focussed on supporting students and helping them transition into university, they mainly operated in silos and thus did not result in the desired impact of student success at scale. Studies have found that student support that is integrated or aligned with the degree programme is experienced as more credible and has

greater impact because students can make the links between what they are studying (i.e., their primary aim at university) and the support offered to help them succeed in their studies (Harvey *et al.*, 2006; Young, 2016). In this section, I will delve into the details of Transition Pedagogy and its six FYCPs.

2.3.1 Transition Pedagogy

Kift *et al.* (2010, p. 11) posited a Transition Pedagogy for FYEs to “carefully scaffold, mediate and support first year learning” and to do so with an institution-wide approach for impact at scale. Transition Pedagogy is an approach that addresses the call for intentional curriculum design in FYEs, as well as the need for integrated and holistic institution-wide policies and the implementation thereof. This implementation must include all departments involved in FYEs, both in the curricular and co-curricular space, in order to effect student success at scale (Nelson and Kift, 2005; Kift *et al.*, 2010). The focus of this framework is student learning, thus the apt title ‘Transition **Pedagogy**’ (O’Donnell *et al.*, 2015).

FYE programmes can be broken down into generations, each with different approaches to design and to which stakeholders are involved. First-generation approaches to FYE focus on first-year support positioned in the co-curricular space, such as orientation, peer mentoring, and academic advising. Second-generation approaches to FYE focus on the curriculum; foci include strategies to help students with learning through improved curriculum and assessment design, the incorporation of student engagement theory into teaching activities, and the construction of learning communities. There are FYS programmes mentioned earlier in this chapter that are classified as second-generation approaches, namely academic seminars, professional and discipline-linked seminars, and basic study skills seminars. Transition Pedagogy falls into the category of the third-generation approach – an approach that includes both the curricular and the co-curricular to provide the student with a holistic experience of university and support at university (Kift, 2009; Wilson, 2009; Kift *et al.*, 2010). Penn-Edwards and Donnison (2014) even went on to suggest a fourth-generation approach that would entail university-community partnerships to support first-years in their transition into university.

Transition Pedagogy is a fairly new theory, only becoming part of the first-year transition support lexicon in 2005 (Kift, 2015). Kift *et al.* (2010) reflect on their journey of attempting to bring siloed and discrete FYE initiatives together as a whole-of-institution approach at Queensland University in Australia. After creating an FYE committee at their institution and re-looking at their orientation and peer mentoring programmes, they realised that the missing

link to their approach to first-year support was the consideration of the first-year curriculum. The curriculum could be used as the organising device that drives co-curricular first-year support. Instead of first-year support being on the periphery of students' experience of university, it could be harnessed and mediated in the core of the student experience – the learning experiences that take place within the curriculum. This, of course, would require much planning as well as an understanding of the pedagogy to successfully integrate first-year support into the curriculum.

The curriculum is what students have in common, is within our institutional control, and is where time-poor students are entitled to expect academic and social support and engagement. To do otherwise is to leave student success to chance, because our responses would be bolted-on, piecemeal and de-contextualised and, from the student perspective, appear to be irrelevant to the core business of learning. (Kift *et al.*, 2010, p. 8)

In her review of the impact of Transition Pedagogy on the FYE, Kift (2015) goes further to indicate that there are three main features of this framework: a) a focus on the curriculum – to mediate first-year support – as the common experience that all first-years have; b) an institution-wide emphasis and holistic view of the student that provides just-in-time support and helps students develop a sense of belonging; and c) empowering academic and professional/support staff to collaborate in order to best support first-year students. This intentional integrated approach allows for long-term solutions to student retention and success. Kift *et al.* (2010) argue that the uptake of Transition Pedagogy, the third-generation approach to FYE, is a social justice imperative that addresses equity and provides diverse students with an equal chance at being successful. Their reasoning is that students who are time-poor – first-generation students who do not have support at home, students who work part-time or even full-time to sustain themselves, students who spend much time travelling to and from campus, students who are on sports scholarships –will not have the time to engage in first-year support positioned on the periphery. However, if first-year support is delivered through the curriculum, then such students have an equitable chance at success.

As mentioned earlier, to successfully deliver first-year support through the curriculum, it is important to have an understanding of the pedagogy. Therefore, in the next section, the FYCPs for designing a third-generation approach to FYEs are presented.

2.3.2 First Year Curriculum Principles

Core to Transition Pedagogy are six FYCPs for the intentional and organised design of FYEs. These principles are transition, diversity, design, engagement, assessment, and evaluation and monitoring (Kift *et al.*, 2010). These six FYCPs serve as the framework to organise the development, integration, and evaluation of student engagement, disciplinary knowledge, academic skills, and learning support in the student curriculum (Kift *et al.*, 2010; Nelson *et al.*, 2014).

For the purpose of this study, however, the FYCPs will be used to evaluate the design of a specific FYE programme – the FYS at the UFS – and not the entire FYE at the UFS. The FYCPs have been used in many contexts and at different levels, mainly for design and evaluation within the curriculum or degree programme. The FYS at the UFS is not a co-curricular support initiative. Instead, it is a hybrid seminar that is integrated as a compulsory part of the curriculum for all first-year students enrolled in all undergraduate degree programmes at the UFS. Thus, it presents a new and interesting case to which the FYCPs can be applied. The FYCPs are detailed in Chapter 3 (Article 1) and Chapter 4 (Article 2).

2.3.3 Examples of implementation of Transition Pedagogy and First Year Curriculum Principles

Transition Pedagogy has been implemented at a number of universities. In this section, I will explore the different ways that Transition Pedagogy and the FYCPs have been used to support first-year students.

2.3.1.1 Examples of implementation of Transition Pedagogy

At the University of Technology in Australia, the embedding of Transition Pedagogy started in 2011 (McKenzie & Egea, 2016). The primary focus was on supporting students from low socio-economic backgrounds as part of the university's widening participation project. To do so, the organogram consisted of a central FYE coordinator and coordinators in each faculty, with the intention of embedding good transition practices into the curriculum for all students and, in so doing, benefitting the students from low socio-economic backgrounds. In addition to this group, they created an institution-wide FYE community consisting of academic staff (the majority group), professional staff, students, and external stakeholders with whom transition pedagogy resources were shared. The activities of the FYE consisted of forums to

showcase good first-year practices, share ideas, and collaborate and network across the university and at a faculty level.

The FYE was funded through grant funding to meet the strategic goals of the university. Each year, they would focus on a particular goal, and the following year, they would add another goal and adapt the grant agreements accordingly. Small grants to develop and embed transition practice into the curriculum went to the FYE – this included funding for recognition, incentives for academics to participate, and funding for practical resourcing. By the third year of the programme, they could see the improved pass rates in the subjects that were supported by FYE grants. It is important to note the evidence-based approach taken at this institution. Much emphasis was placed on student success data to understand each cohort and use that data to identify and address needs. They thus found that, other than providing integrated, holistic support to students, this approach also led to improved teaching and learning practices among the staff that were part of the FYE community. In this example, the role of Transition Pedagogy is clear from the structured coordination of curricular and co-curricular activities that inform each other to best support students. There was some mention of the FYCPs in the resources provided to staff as part of good first-year practices, but the main focus of this example was the use of a third-generation approach to support students in their transition into university.

A similar example of the implementation of Transition Pedagogy at the University of Technology is from the University of Western Sydney in Australia. The example is shared in Gill, Lombardo, and Short's (2013) practice report about their approach to first-year transition. An interesting finding when mapping the range of student support initiatives in place was that a student could be contacted up to 90 times within the first semester and potentially attend seven different transition initiatives before their first class. It was clear that students were being overwhelmed with support and that university officials were not aware of the range, timing or repetition of the information, nor students' comprehension of the support. Further investigation through an analysis of three years of their Commencing Student Survey data showed that an institution-wide approach to the design of assessment, communication, and scheduling was necessary for students to have clear expectations of university and experience a successful transition into university.

They, therefore, established academic FYE and professional/support champion roles within each school at the institution. The purpose of these roles was to strengthen communication strategies across the institution and formulate a Student Planning Network and a First Year Champions Community of Practice. The aim of the network was to strengthen collaboration

between key stakeholders involved in supporting first-year students; the aim of the community of practice was for staff to share ideas and lessons learned. Furthermore, there were FYE champions as representatives of university policy-making bodies who presented the work that was being implemented in the FYE space. In terms of FYE activities, the planning network standardised the orientation programme across the institution, normalised help-seeking behaviours in students by creating First Year School Contact Officer roles, and integrated FYE messages within a core module in each degree programme within the first few weeks of the year to provide just-in-time support. Though the FYCPs were not mentioned in Gill *et al.*'s (2013) report, the third-generation approach of Transition Pedagogy was cited as being key to the new approach to transition support at this institution.

A last example is from the University of Wollongong in Australia. The institution underwent a curriculum transformation from 2015-2018, and they based their adaptations to their curricula on Transition Pedagogy and Lizzio's Five Senses of Success (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2015). Their transformational practices included the FYE, the integration of ePortfolios into all degree programmes, hybrid learning, subjects that focus on connections between different disciplines and across different cultural experiences, and a capstone experience enabling the students at the end of their degrees to prepare for the world of work. Therefore, Transition Pedagogy for curriculum transformation was integrated across the entire degree programme and did not only focus on the first year. In the FYE, the focus was on six critical moments that students experience in their first year and on improving the narratives, relevance, assessment literacy, and staff capacity in supporting students, particularly in critical moments. Mention is made of the FYCPs in O'Donnell *et al.*'s (2015) literature review, though the paper is more focused on the University of Wollongong's holistic approach to helping students transition into, through, and out of university.

2.3.1.2 Examples of implementation of the FYCPs

The examples below illustrate how some universities have focused on the design, implementation and evaluation of specific degree programmes to support their first-year students by making use of the FYCPs as their framework.

At Simon Fraser University in Canada, the FYCPs were used in the first year of the Arts and Social Sciences programme (Marchbank and Fee, 2008). In this example, **transition** consisted

of orientation to the course and helping students successfully transfer to other universities after the course. **Diversity** was addressed through frequent and constructive feedback on assessments to acknowledge the diverse range of students' disciplinary backgrounds. **Engagement** was addressed through active learning in class, encouraging students to participate in campus-wide activities, and seeking help by clarifying all of the available support options. **Assessments** were designed to help students develop and grow and to do so frequently through continuous assessment. Additionally, the academic staff met regularly to ensure the even distribution of assessments across the semester. In terms of **design**, this programme focused on skills development, reflection, the process of learning, and the integration and transfer of knowledge between subjects within the course. In terms of **evaluation and monitoring**, a subject evaluation was administered for each subject, disengagement was monitored by teaching staff, and the academic staff worked with support service units to refer students when the monitoring indicated it was necessary to do so.

Other examples where the FYCPs were implemented in discrete programmes are in the Applied Sciences programme at Simon Fraser University (Fee and McCracken, 2008), the Writing and Communication programme at Deakin University (Radbourne and LeRossignol, 2008), the Faculty of Education (Healy, 2008) and the Faculty of Science and Technology at Queensland University (Nelson, 2008), the Law Programme at James Cook University (Westcott, 2008), and the Bachelor of Science Degree at the University of Melbourne (Gleeson, 2008).

The universities/programmes presented in Section 2.3.3 designed and evaluated their transition strategies in line with the third-generation approach to Transition Pedagogy, but they did so either without including the FYCPs at all or only including the FYCPs in certain degree programmes (and therefore not across the institution). In this study, however, the institution-wide transition programme will be evaluated against all of the FYCPs.

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have summarised the types of FYS programmes, explored the factors that should be considered when conceptualising FYS programmes, and delved into the theories that have influenced the design, implementation, and evaluation of transition programmes. The final section of this chapter was a detailed explanation of the conceptual framework of this study, namely Transition Pedagogy and its FYCPs, as well as examples of how this framework

has been implemented. In the next chapter, Chapter 3, Article 1, I will address the question: “How can evidence-based First Year Seminars be designed?”. In Chapter 4, Article 2, I will address the following research objective: “Using student evaluations as evidence to inform the design of a transition-focused First Year Seminar”. Thereafter, in Chapter 5, the concluding chapter, I will summarise the findings of this study.

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3 CHAPTER 3: (ARTICLE 1) USING FIRST YEAR CURRICULUM PRINCIPLES AS AN EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH TO DESIGN AND EVALUATE A FIRST YEAR SEMINAR

3.1 Abstract

This paper expands on and contributes to work in the field of transition in higher education, specific to the First Year Seminar (FYS). Although several studies have examined the efficacy of FYS programmes in supporting students' transition into university, there is not much literature with a clear focus on the planning, execution, and evaluation of these programmes, particularly in the South African context. As such, the aim of this study is to use an evidence-based approach to design and evaluate an FYS. This study analyses curriculum documents from the FYS at the University of the Free State (UFS) to answer the question, "how can evidence-based FYS programmes be designed?" The study draws on Transition Pedagogy as the conceptual framework, specifically focusing on its First Year Curriculum Principles (FYCPs) for design. Key findings indicate that the nature of the FYS at the UFS – a hybrid seminar integrated into the curriculum across all faculties – does meet the criteria for evaluating FYCPs. However, this investigation was also useful in determining ways to improve the design of this FYS to better support students' transition into university. The implications of these findings are promising for the development of well-designed and evidence-based FYS programmes as core contributors to supporting first-year students' transition into university.

Keywords: First Year Curriculum Principles, First Year Seminar, first-year students, evidence-based approach to design, evaluation of a First Year Seminar

3.2 Introduction

This paper investigates the design and evaluation of First Year Seminar (FYS) programmes in South Africa. These programmes fall under the umbrella of First Year Experiences (FYE) but have a specific format based on their categorisation as seminars. There are five categories of FYS programmes: extended orientation, academic seminars, preprofessional and discipline-linked seminars, basic study skills seminars, and hybrid seminars (Barefoot, 1992; Greenfield *et al.*, 2015). There are a number of FYS programmes that run at South African universities,

such as the extended orientation at North West University (NWU), the academic seminar at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), the preprofessional and discipline-linked seminars at UJ and the University of the Free State (UFS), the basic study skills seminar at the UFS, and the hybrid seminar at the UFS (NWU, no date; Jacobs and Pretorius, 2016; Oosthuizen *et al.*, 2017; Jama, 2018; Combrink and Oosthuizen, 2020; UJ, 2023). Typically, the purpose of FYS programmes is to foster connections between students and their studies, other students, staff, and the institution. Additionally, FYS programmes support student transition by requiring students to spend time and effort on educationally meaningful tasks (Kuh, 2008). Although FYS programmes exist in several South African higher education institutions, there is a lack of academic investigation into the planning, execution, and evaluation of these programmes, as evidenced by the scarcity of local literature on the subject. Some of the only South African publications on evidence-based approaches to designing and evaluating FYS programmes are Jacobs and Pretorius (2016) on the preprofessional mathematics FYS at UJ, Combrink and Oosthuizen (2020) on the hybrid FYS at the UFS, and Jama (2018) on the preprofessional health sciences FYS at the UFS.

Many studies suggest that a limited comprehension of FYS programmes results in the squandering of resources, potential, and capacity, which further results in the failure of these programmes to adequately meet students' transition needs (Scott, 2008; Thurber and Walton, 2012; Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014; van Zyl *et al.*, 2020). In a national survey on FYS programmes in the US, Padgett and Keup (2011) found that just over half (53%) of these programmes were formally evaluated. Despite the low evaluation rate, American practitioners publish prolifically, so there is a rich literature base on the efficacy of their FYS programmes. Also, they have created a strong case for the value of an evidence-based or data-informed approach to designing FYS programmes to address the outcomes of retention and persistence of first-year students (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Pittendrigh *et al.*, 2016; Goldberg *et al.*, 2019; Peuler and Coltrain, 2020; Parsh *et al.*, 2021). Scholarly inputs like these enhance the calibre and efficiency of the planning, design, implementation, and evaluation of FYS programmes and thus also support students' successful transition into and through their first year of university.

This paper is thus an important contribution to the expansion of the literature base on FYS programmes in South Africa and the optimisation of FYS programmes. The paper's contribution lies in its investigation into how an evidence-based approach to design can support

students' transition needs in their first year of study. This paper starts by discussing some of the key literature on the impact of designing and evaluating an FYS programme and using the First Year Curriculum Principles from Nelson (2014). Evidence of the impact of such design principles comes from a case study, the FYS at the UFS, which supports the argument for evidence-based design of FYS programmes.

3.3 Literature review

3.3.1 The first-year landscape in South Africa and the need for context-specific student support

To understand the role of intentional design, implementation, and evaluation of an FYS programme, it is necessary to first consider the characteristics of the first-year student cohort so that appropriate design decisions can be taken that speak to students' needs. It is imperative to note that taking a deficit view of students when considering the planning of support initiatives is socially unjust. The approach of this research is data-informed to address the challenges many South African students face and to mitigate the risk of student dropout in the first year.

Although South Africa has made significant strides in widening access to higher education, only 55% of students who enrolled for a degree in 2014 managed to graduate by 2019 (Council on Higher Education 2021). This statistic underscores a crucial point repeatedly emphasised in recent higher education literature: access without success does not truly offer genuine opportunity (Engstrom and Tinto, 2008; Council on Higher Education, 2013; Tinto, 2014; Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020; Scott, 2017, 2018). The core argument is that simply gaining entry to higher education without achieving success in the form of a degree holds little value for both students and the economy. Without adequate support structures in place, access does not mean much more than simply getting a foot in the door. Young (2016) and Barefoot (2004) describe this as a revolving door, which occurs when students either drop out or remain in the system without completing their studies. Therefore, the low throughput rates in South Africa's higher education system are likely to persist unless there is a deliberate focus on enhancing student success and aligning with institutional strategies.

3.3.2 Why is it important to design and evaluate a FYS programme?

All first-year university students, regardless of their educational background, encounter various challenges upon entering university. These challenges arise because they are new to the university and unfamiliar with the increased volume, complexity, and variation of academic tasks (Lillis and Turner, 2001; Cottrell, 2013; Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014; Ramzan *et al.*, 2018). Although these challenges are widespread globally, they are particularly notable within the South African education system and directly or indirectly stem from various factors. The first are socioeconomic factors, such as the need for financial assistance, food insecurity, or students being the first in their family to attend university (Pike and Kuh, 2005; Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014; Thobejane and Fatoki, 2017; Cohen, 2019; Hamshire *et al.*, 2021; Mlambo *et al.*, 2022; Henrichsen and Keenan, 2023; Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2023b, 2023c). Various shortcomings in the basic education system also pose challenges, including limited or no access to technology, students lacking proficiency in English and/or academic literacy, inadequate preparation for higher education, and uncertainty among students regarding the relationship between their degree and future career prospects. Lastly, the lingering effects of apartheid in South Africa, such as the need for social inclusion and adjustment to diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, still pose challenges (Thurber and Walton, 2012; Chetty and Pather, 2015). Failure to address these challenges thus amplifies the risk of students dropping out. Providing adequate support during the first year of study is essential for mitigating this risk.

While institutions may not be able to directly tackle broader systemic issues beyond the scope of higher education, they can provide FYS programmes to enhance students' access to university. For an institution to adequately support students, it is imperative that student support practitioners understand the challenges their first-year cohort faces, as well as what FYS programme(s) would best address those challenges. To further support the argument made in this article, the FYS programme must be thoughtfully designed, executed, and evaluated to determine its impact on student transition into and through students' first year.

3.3.3 First Year Curriculum Principles

The FYCPs underpin Transition Pedagogy – an institution-wide conceptual framework aimed at supporting the FYE (Kift *et al.*, 2010). In this paper, the FYS at the UFS will be used as a case study of how the FYCPs can be applied to an FYS. The premise upon which Transition Pedagogy is based is that all students have the curriculum in common – their degree programme is the reason they came to university. Therefore, support initiatives based outside the

curriculum, such as co-curricular support initiatives run out of various student support divisions, are often not able to produce impact at scale. Additionally, if student success and the approach to attain it are not integrated into university policy and strategic objectives, then the incentive to move the needle is not visceral or part of the institutional culture. In other words, it is often an unattainable goal. Transition Pedagogy posits that the curriculum, co-curricular support initiatives, and university policy should all align to support students' transition into university, with the curriculum being the central focus of the FYE (Kift *et al.*, 2010). There are six FYCPs which guide the design of FYE programmes, namely transition, design, diversity, engagement, assessment, and evaluation and monitoring (Nelson *et al.*, 2014).

The FYCPs have been used in different contexts and at different levels. Nelson *et al.* (2014) provide a range of practical ways to use this framework at a modular-, degree programme-, and institutional-level. Use of this framework, however, is often only applied to the curriculum of the degree programme, focusing on how academic staff use these principles in their teaching of first-year students and in their design and implementation of their courses. Academic staff are also expected to collaborate with co-curricular support programmes to provide holistic support to students in their first year and thus enhance retention. At some institutions, the FYCPs are applied in only one or two programmes and not across the first-year curriculum (Marchbank and Fee, 2008; Fee and McCracken, 2008; Radbourne and LeRossignol, 2008; Healy, 2008; Nelson, 2008; Westcott, 2008; Gleeson, 2008). Due to the nature of the FYS at the UFS, an institution-wide hybrid seminar that is a compulsory part of the curriculum of all undergraduate degree programmes, exploring the application of the FYCPs and use of an evidence-based approach to designing and implementing an FYS seemed a valuable contribution to the field. Thus, the paper does not present an academic curriculum making use of the FYCPs in the conventional application of Transition Pedagogy in an FYE, but it rather presents a new take on using these principles to underpin the design of an FYS.

Table 3.1 provides a summary of how these FYCPs can be used to design and evaluate an FYS. The six principles are listed in the first column, the definitions of each principle are listed in the second column, and the criteria for how each principle can be applied in practice are listed in the third column.

Table 3.1: Definitions of the FYCPs and how they can be used to design and evaluate a First Year Seminar

FYCP	Definition	How this principle can be used to design and evaluate an FYS
Transition	The FYS should be designed and executed to support students' transition into university, and this should be a programme that takes place over time to allow for the various adjustments students go through throughout their first year.	This principle can be used to design and evaluate if: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. students learn about university systems and processes; 2. students learn about academic processes; 3. students interact with other students and staff; and 4. engagement and interaction are considered in the execution of the FYS to ensure that students have indeed comprehended and learned the information.
Diversity	The design of the FYS must consider the diversity of the student cohort in terms of equity, changes in the cohort from year to year, students' prior knowledge and skills, and the different times at which different groups of students may start the year (this may differ by degree programme where selection courses may start earlier than other courses; in some programmes students may be able to start in the second semester instead of the first; the registration period should also be considered in terms of timing, specific to students who register late due to funding delays).	This principle can be used to design and evaluate if: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. the design team has collected demographic data on the student cohort to assess for diversity; 2. students receive opportunities to engage with diverse others in the FYS; and 3. there are strategies in place to manage the differences in students' prior knowledge and skills.
Design	The design of the FYS should be student-centred, relevant, relatable, explicit, and visible to students in terms of its aim to	This principle can be used to design and evaluate if:

	<p>support students to develop the skills they need to be successful. Therefore, the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for student development should be an intentional part of the curriculum design.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. the knowledge and skills required for student development and transition are explicit and visible in the learning outcomes; 2. a road map or syllabus of the FYS is provided to students so that they are aware of the knowledge and skills they will be gaining; and 3. the values and attitudes that a student requires to be a successful first-year student are clearly articulated.
Engagement	<p>The curriculum design of the FYS, which includes how students will learn, be taught, and assessed, should include student engagement indicators in the design. These indicators are active and collaborative learning, peer interaction, and student-staff interaction.</p>	<p>This principle can be used to design and evaluate if:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. the implementation of the FYS includes opportunities for engagement with peers through informal and formal group work activities; 2. the assessment requires students to engage with the content (i.e., does the assessment provide evidence that students are engaging with the skills required to successfully transition into university?); 3. opportunities are provided (whether through teaching activities or assessments) to help students make links between their personal lives and the knowledge and skills covered in the FYS; and 4. opportunities are provided for students to discuss their assessment feedback with staff.

Assessment	The design of the FYS should teach students how to transition from high school-level assessments to university-level assessments. Regular and timely feedback should be provided so that assessment is used as a tool for learning (for students to comprehend the requirements and meet them, and for staff to monitor performance and accordingly adjust their teaching where necessary).	This principle can be used to design and evaluate if: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. the FYS teaches students about the different types of assessments they can expect at university and how to tackle these assessments; 2. the FYS teaches students about the kinds of assessment feedback they can expect at university and how to respond to that feedback; 3. the FYS teaches students about the skills required to successfully complete assessments at university; 4. the FYS teaches students how to manage their time to attend to all their assessment activities; and 5. the FYS consistently provides clear feedback to students on assessments (within the FYS).
Evaluation and Monitoring	The design of the FYS must be evidence-based. Thus, it must be regularly evaluated and adapted to meet the needs of the students. An action-research approach can also be taken to ensure timely intervention if the students are not responsive to the curriculum design and are thus at risk of failure.	This principle can be used to design and evaluate if: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. data gathered at admission (such as biographical data, AP scores, school quintile) and any other relevant sources inform the design of the FYS; and 2. data is collected to evaluate the FYS and inform changes in the curriculum design and execution.

Adapted from Nelson *et al.* (2014: 17–18)

3.4 Methodology

3.4.1 Research context

There are approximately 40, 000 students enrolled at the UFS across three campuses (two in Bloemfontein in the Central Free State and one in Phuthaditjhaba in the Eastern Free State). The majority of these students are undergraduate students who come from rural contexts, attended under-resourced high schools (quintile one to three), and did not receive a proficient score for the National Benchmark Test (a pre-university readiness test). Therefore, it can be concluded that the majority of first-year students entering the UFS are underprepared for university. At the UFS, as part of the social justice imperative to ensure all students receive equitable opportunities to be successful and persist through their first year, the FYS is mandatory and credit-bearing. This programme has been in place since 2012. The FYS is a hybrid seminar presented as a module that is part of the academic curriculum. The module is now titled UFSS (University of the Free State Skills) and was previously known as UFS101. More than 8, 000 students across seven faculties enrol in the FYS each year. The custodian of the FYS is the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL), and it is one of many student success initiatives driven by this student and staff support centre.

3.4.2 Research aim and design

To explore how evidence-based FYS programmes can be designed to optimise transitional first-year student support, a curriculum document analysis of study guides, syllabi, teaching assistant training content, lesson plans, student communication, and module evaluation reports was conducted. The research drew on the constructivist paradigm and made use of a qualitative, non-experimental design (Mogashoa, 2014; Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The curriculum documents, consisting of multiple documents as sources, were explored to investigate how the FYCPs manifest in the FYS at the UFS.

3.4.3 Data analysis

The curriculum documents included 10 study guides, five syllabi, material from 10 teaching assistant training sessions, lesson plans for each of the units presented in the study guides, student communication spanning five years, and three module evaluation reports between the years 2017 and 2021. To evaluate the design of the FYS, the researcher thoroughly read through

these documents and conducted a content analysis comparing them to each of the FYCP criteria.

3.5 Findings and discussion

Using the six FYCPs as an evaluative framework for the analysis, this paper now turns to a discussion of the extent to which each of the principles is present in the design of the FYS at UFS. Evidence will be provided through excerpts from the FYS curriculum documents. For ease of reading, the principles are numbered from one to six, and the design and evaluation criteria for each principle are underlined in the findings.

3.5.1 Principle 1: Transition

The curriculum documents were analysed against the four FYCP design and evaluation criteria for transition, as indicated in Table 1. In the FYS at the UFS, students learn about university systems and processes in the first class, as can be seen in the excerpts from the study guide (Figure 3.1), as well as the excerpt from the lesson plan (Figure 3.2). The circled text in Figures 3.1 and 3.2 provides examples of how students are guided through accessing the university systems, such as Blackboard (the Learning Management System), the UFS website, and student email. This information is provided to students in writing in the study guide (Figure 3.1). In class, Teaching Assistants (TAs – senior students who are appointed as contract staff) demonstrate where to find information (Figure 3.1) and check in with students through polls and discussions to see if students understand the university processes.

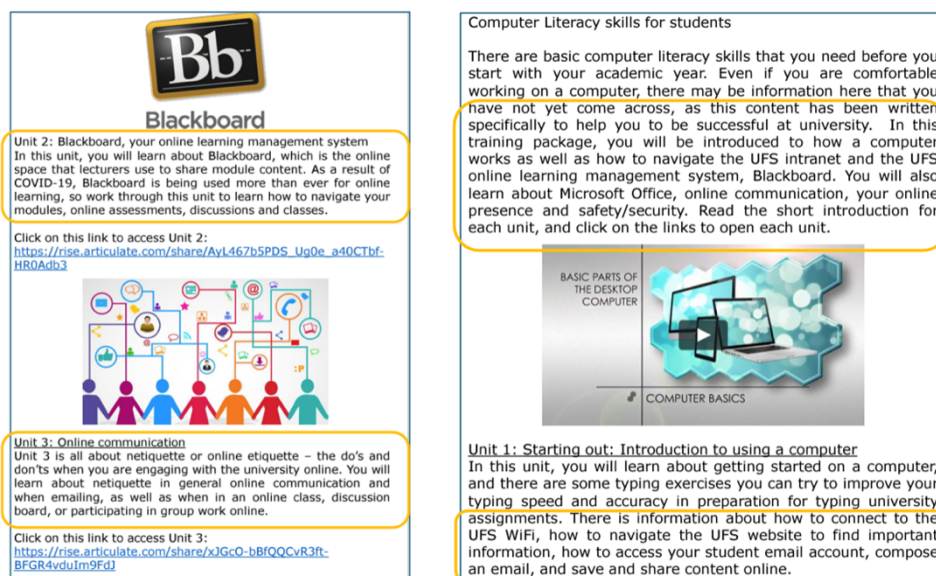


Figure 3.1: Learning about university systems from the study guide.

Flow of class

1. Introduce yourself and move straight into poll 1.

Poll question: Do you know where to begin? (1 min)

2. Syllabus and rules – go through each section of the syllabus. (15 min)

Breakout. (5 min)

Ice breaker poll

- Hi, who are you?
- Are you excited to study at the UFS?
- Are we going too fast for you?
- Do you have any questions?

*Once everyone is back in the main room, each breakout group can post the “**bottomline**” of their discussion in the main group chat (evidence of breakout discussion)

If no one speaks up, the TA should respond on behalf of their group.
Possibly ask for a spokesperson – who will post feedback for our group?

Poll question: Do you know how to pass?
Do you know who to contact with your UFSS-related questions? (1 min)

3. *UFSS Bb navigation
 - Log in with credentials
 - Access UFSS module on Bb
 - Downloading the UFSS guide

- Navigate to the UFSS guide tab and download the guide. (5 min)
- Download the Syllabus and rules. (5 min)
- Check out the computer literacy skills units on www.ufs.ac.za/cti/cl - just a visual referral. (5 min)
- Login to your student email account. (5 min)

Figure 3.2: Demonstration of teaching university systems and processes from the lesson plan

It is important to note the focus on computer literacy skills in this FYS. Due to the systemic challenges and range of socio-economic disparities in the basic education space (mentioned earlier), many students are unprepared for the level of computer literacy required to be a successful student at university. Thus, in the UFS context, the FYS content must first address the computer literacy needs of the students before it can address university systems and processes.

The excerpt from the syllabus (Figure 3.3) provides an example of how students learn about academic processes. The text in Figure 3.3 shows that students learn about various academic processes, including modular-level communication expectations, the requirements to pass the module, assessment submission expectations (including the format of submissions), the

consequences of late submissions, the consequences of plagiarism, and the query period and appeals process. The syllabus in Figure 3.3 is explained in detail to students, as indicated in the lesson plan in Figure 3.2, where TAs work through the syllabus. Students are also introduced to the notion that similar rules apply to the rest of their degree programmes/curricula.

<p>1. To be successful in this module, you must do the following:</p> <p>1.1 Familiarise yourself with the module outcomes; this information is available on Blackboard.</p> <p>1.2 Check your University of the Free State email account regularly for communication from the UFS Skills Module office. We track the progress of each student frequently and will communicate with you on a regular basis.</p> <p>1.3 Check announcements, communication and calendars on Blackboard in order to take note of assessment completion dates, online class dates, and other important information.</p> <p>1.4 Email and consult with the UFS Skills Module office. You are expected to monitor your progress in UFSS1504 and consult with the UFS Skills Module office via email to address any questions that you might have. Please email ufs101@ufs.ac.za (BFN) / ufs101qq@ufs.ac.za (QQ) with the UFS Skills Module office timeously to avoid missing information regarding: attendance, assessments, or query period(s).</p>	<p>3.9 Assessment marks will be accessible on Blackboard under "My Grades" in accordance with the release dates communicated on Blackboard.</p> <p>3.10 Plagiarism will not be tolerated. In addition to the plagiarism warning, the objective of these assessments is to submit your own work. In cases where students hand in work that is a copy of another student's assessment, students may be subject to a zero mark on the assessment, as well as such steps (including disciplinary action) as the University of the Free State may deem necessary in terms of its rules, policies, and regulations.</p> <p>3.11 The process you engage in when completing a UFSS1504 assessment online is just as valid and important as the completion of an examination in an examination venue. Therefore, during the completion of an assessment, you may not lend assistance to or receive assistance from any person other than a UFS Skills module staff member. Steps will be taken if you contravene this rule; contraventions will be dealt with in terms of the University of the Free State's procedures, regulations and rules.</p> <p>3.12 You are advised to make sure you have a stable internet connection and a reliable source of power when submitting your assessments on Blackboard.</p> <p>3.13 If you experience difficulties with Blackboard, kindly contact the E-Learning helpdesk on Ehelpdesk@ufs.ac.za, or call 051 401 9452 (BFN)/ 058 718 5137 (QQ) in order to resolve the problem.</p> <p>3.14 Any misrepresentation of information will be dealt with in accordance with the policies, rules and regulations of the University of the Free State and may lead to disciplinary steps being taken against you.</p> <p>3.15 Disciplinary matters will be dealt with by the Directorate for Student Discipline and Mediation.</p>
<p>2. Requirements to pass UFSS1504</p> <p>2.1 You are required to obtain an average of 50% or higher to pass UFSS1504.</p> <p>2.2 Assessments will be submitted online, via Blackboard. These submissions will be in the form of quizzes and written assignments, and counts 40% of your first semester mark and 40% of your second semester mark.</p> <p>2.3 Attendance will be monitored in this module, and counts 10% of your first semester mark and 10% of your second semester mark. For learning to take place, you are required to show up to class AND participate, thus a mark will be awarded for both showing up and participating. This mark makes up your attendance mark.</p> <p>2.4 To qualify for a re-assessment, you must obtain an average between 45% and 49% for this module.</p> <p>3. Assessment submission</p> <p>3.1 In UFSS1504, you will be assessed by means of continuous assessment. Continuous assessment is a series of assessments that occur throughout the learning process, not only at the end of the learning process. You will thus be examined continuously during the year, and the marks for various activities will be calculated using a weighting system to produce a final result.</p>	<p>4. UFSS1504 Query Period and Appeals Process</p> <p>4.1 The UFSS1504 Query Period takes place twice a year. During the UFSS1504 Query Period, you can query your attendance and/or assessment marks via email or request a telephonic consultation.</p> <p>4.2 Communication from UFS Skills Module Office will be sent out in April 2021 for the Semester 1 Query Period, and in September 2021 for the Semester 2 Query Period to notify you of the exact dates and times for the Query Period.</p>
<p>3.2 There is no exam sitting for this module.</p> <p>3.3 Assessments must be completed/submitted on Blackboard in order to be marked.</p> <p>3.4 The assessments must be completed/submitted on Blackboard before/by the dates and times specified in your assessment deadline document on Blackboard.</p> <p>3.5 Assessment submission deadlines must be taken seriously.</p> <p>3.6 A screenshot of every submission must be taken of the full screen and should include: your name, as well as the date and time on the computer/laptop screen.</p> <p>3.7 Assessments submitted after the stated due date and time will be regarded as late, and a penalisation for late assessments will apply.</p> <p>3.8 If the guidelines are not adhered to as stated in the assessment instructions and rubric provided on Blackboard, marks cannot be allocated.</p>	<p>4.5 You will have an opportunity to lodge an appeal with the UFS Skills Module office, should you be dissatisfied with the outcome of your query (which will require the submission of accompanying documentation to substantiate your appeal).</p> <p>4.6 After lodging your appeal with the Student Communication Coordinator, you may follow the process of lodging your appeal with the UFS Skills Module Programme Coordinator, and finally with the Senior Director of the Centre for Teaching and Learning. The decision of the Senior Director: Teaching and Learning is final.</p> <p>4.7 Incomplete appeals, or appeals without substantiating documentation, will not be considered or entertained by the University of the Free State.</p> <p>4.8 Late appeals (after the UFSS1504 Query Period) will not be considered or entertained by the University of the Free State.</p>

Figure 3.3: Learning about academic processes from the syllabus

The third criterion of transition is that students should interact with other students and staff. In the excerpt from the syllabus in Figure 3.4, students are expected to engage in classes through active participation. Students are also required to focus in class and help their classmates do the same. This implies that students should interact with other students.

WHAT IS EXPECTED OF YOU?

We want to make sure that you are learning through this module, **and that you can apply the skills you learn in UFSS1504 to the rest of your degree programme.** To make this happen, there are certain expectations that we have of you:

1. Familiarise yourself with your new online learning environment. Online learning requires discipline, a growth mindset, and the ability to self-study.
2. Keep an eye on the announcements on Blackboard. We will post everything you need to do there.
3. Engage in online classes, videos, questionnaires, polls, activities and discussions. We know that this might not be easy in the beginning, but meaningful learning (the kind of learning that lasts beyond the assessment) requires engagement. Engagement means you have to attend classes and participate actively so that you get the most out of this experience.
4. Be open to learning new ideas – ideas that may be different to your own. Aristotle said that “it is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it”
5. Focus in your online class, and help your classmates to do the same. You are at university to learn, so make the most of every class you are in.
6. Think about the value of what you are learning. What does it mean to you, how is it relevant to your current situation or future plans? You should internalise what you are learning. Many senior students tell us they wish they had paid more attention and practiced the skills taught in UFSS1504 more because they continue to need these skills well beyond graduation.
7. If you are unable to attend a class synchronously (that means live, in real time) during the 3-day summer school, make sure to catch up asynchronously (in your own time) on Blackboard. Attendance will be monitored in this module – more about that below.

Figure 3.4: Expectations of active participation from the syllabus

In the excerpt from Class 5 of the lesson plan (Figure 3.5), students are given a group activity (breakout room) to discuss the topic with other students.

5 Referencing and plagiarism and searching for academic resources

Flow of class

Opening: Comment on the side with what you think plagiarism is? (3 min)

1. Defining plagiarism. (5 min)

Poll question: Do you know what the DSDM is responsible for at the UFS? (1 min)

2. Plagiarism consequences at the UFS – mention TurnItIn and SafeAssign – refer back to the Comp Lit unit online assessments. (5 min)
3. How to avoid plagiarism (referencing and paraphrasing) – practical section of class – use the “Khan” reference example in the guide – reference editing activity. (15 min)

Breakout (5 min)

Why do you think that it is important that as university students, we know what plagiarism is and how to avoid it?

Figure 3.5: Group activity from the lesson plan

Engagement and interaction should be considered in the execution of the FYS to ensure that students have indeed comprehended and learned the information. The expectations of engagement are made clear to students in the syllabus, as seen in Figure 3.6. The circled text highlights key learning expectations: that students apply the skills they learn in the FYS, that

they understand its value and relevance to their student experience, and that the learning is meaningful and lasts beyond the assessment.

WHAT IS EXPECTED OF YOU?

We want to make sure that you are learning through this module, **and that you can apply the skills you learn in UFSS1504 to the rest of your degree programme.** To make this happen, there are certain expectations that we have of you:

1. Familiarise yourself with your new online learning environment. Online learning requires discipline, a growth mindset, and the ability to self-study.
2. Keep an eye on the announcements on Blackboard. We will ~~post everything you need to do there.~~
3. Engage in online classes, videos, questionnaires, polls, activities and discussions. We know that this might not be easy in the beginning, but meaningful learning (the kind of learning that lasts beyond the assessment) requires engagement. Engagement means you have to attend classes and participate actively so that you get the most out of this experience.
4. Be open to learning new ideas – ideas that may be different to your own. Aristotle said that “it is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it”.
5. Focus in your online class, and help your classmates to do the same. You are at university to learn, so make the most of ~~every class you are in.~~
6. Think about the value of what you are learning. What does it mean to you, how is it relevant to your current situation or future plans? You should internalise what you are learning. Many senior students tell us they wish they had paid more attention and practiced the skills taught in UFSS1504 more because they continue to need these skills well beyond graduation.
7. ~~If you are unable to attend a class synchronously (that means live, in real time) during the 3-day summer school, make sure to catch up asynchronously (in your own time) on Blackboard. Attendance will be monitored in this module – more about that below.~~

Figure 3.6: Expectations of engagement from the syllabus

This is only possible if students engage with the learning management system and the classes and online activities, as well as actively participate in class. Additionally, at the end of each class, students are asked to reflect on what they have learned to ensure that they have comprehended the content (Figure 3.7).

Reflection

Take 3 minutes to think back on the content you have worked through, and write down three things that you learned. It is important that you do this as preparation for the assessments. You will be asked how you applied the content, so think through what you learned and how you can apply it, and note that down now while the information is fresh in your mind.

Figure 3.7: Reflection on learning from the study guide

It is important to be flexible with the format of the FYS to support students' transition. TAs were assigned the role of success coaches who would reach out to students who had been flagged as requiring additional support. The TA/success coaches would also respond to students who asked for help. This support was specific to the period of emergency remote teaching during COVID-19. Thereafter, once the university moved back to in-person contact, the TA role reverted to its previous focus on class facilitation and marking. Success coaches were provided with scripts that they would use to communicate with students via Blackboard, as seen in Figure 3.8. This is evidence of how students were encouraged to engage with staff, with specific attention being paid to their comprehension and application of the skills learned in the FYS, supporting their transition into their first year.

Success coaching script

Introduction

Hi, my name is
You received an email from the UFSS Module Office regarding a phone call from a success coach. You are part of the success coaching organization on Blackboard, and I am following up with all of the students in my group to check in with your experiences this year and how we can best support you. I have a few questions, would it be alright if I continued with those? I am also capturing the gist of what you say, so that we can have large group responses on these questions and use this to inform support initiatives at the university – will that be alright?

If yes, proceed to question 1

Figure 3.8: Excerpt from success coaching script

The document analysis shows that all the FYCP criteria are included in the design of the FYS at the UFS. Additional criteria that could be incorporated in the design and evaluation of an FYS in a similar context will be provided in the conclusion.

3.5.2 Principle 2: Diversity

The curriculum documents and student feedback were analysed against the three design and evaluation criteria for diversity, as indicated in Table 3.1.

In Figure 3.9, evidence of the design team collecting demographic information to assess for diversity is provided. Information about students' faculty distribution and degree programmes, as well as race, gender, and whether or not they are repeating the module, is collected. This gives the design team an indication of the diversity of the cohort.

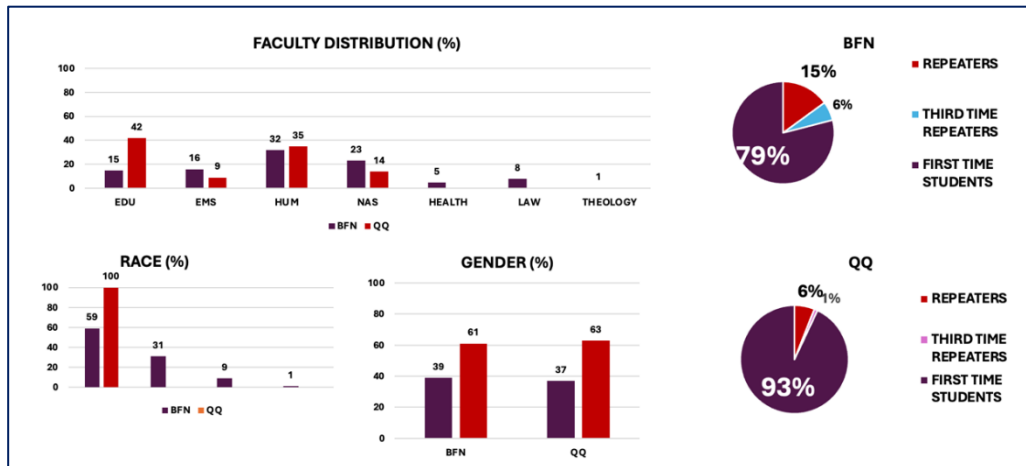


Figure 3.9: Demographic data from module evaluation report

In the FYS at the UFS, students receive opportunities to engage with diverse others by virtue of the format in which classes are scheduled. Students do not attend classes specific to the faculty in which they are enrolled but are assigned classes based on their registration data and timetable availability. This means that students engage with diverse others as they interact with students from different disciplinary backgrounds.

In Figures 3.10 and 3.11, evidence is provided of the strategies in place to manage the differences in students' prior knowledge and skills. Content is scaffolded on Blackboard and in the study guide so that students who need more information have access to it, and students who are already competent in that specific content area may access additional resources to enrich their learning.

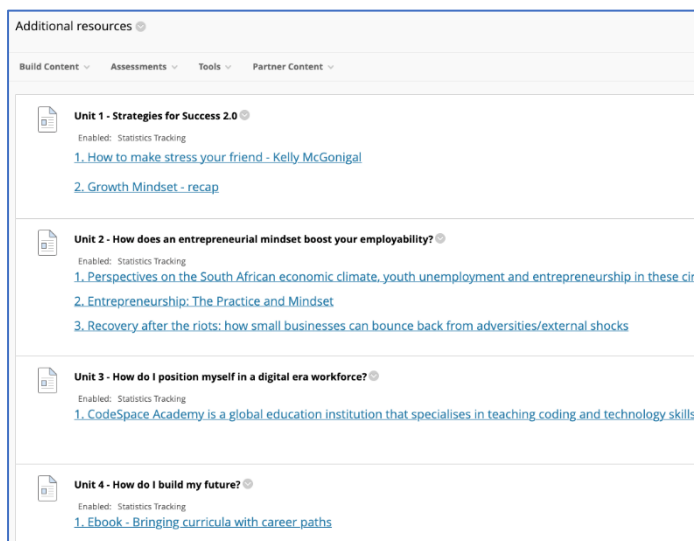


Figure 3.10: Additional resources for learning enrichment on Blackboard

2.1 The power of a growth mindset


If you need a refresher on the concept of a growth mindset, have a look at this video (11min, 70MB).  Please note, downloading these videos via the Global Protect app will not incur data charges.

Figure 3.11: Example of scaffolding the materials from the study guide

While the evaluation provides evidence of designing for diversity, this principle and its value proposition can be made clearer to students. It is thus important to explicitly share key information with students in their orientation class and make this information visible in the FYS materials. Key information includes the advantages of engaging with diverse others to develop as well-rounded students and citizens, and the curriculum's consideration of the differences in students' prior knowledge and skill.

3.5.3 Principle 3: Design

The curriculum documents were also analysed against the three design and evaluation criteria for design, as indicated in Table 3.1.

Figure 3.12 shows how the knowledge and skills required for student development and transition are explicit and visible in the learning outcomes. As per the outcomes, students learn about the skills they need to successfully transition into university, such as computer literacy, study skills, time management, progress tracking, financial literacy, the ability to search for academic resources, written and oral communication, growth mindset, and leadership identity as part of student development.

The UFSS1504 Office and Teaching Assistants will provide online support during the semester. In the first semester of this module, you will learn to:

- familiarise yourself with and practice the computer literacy skills needed by university students;
- demonstrate how learning works at university, through the use of effective study methods;
- apply time management strategies to your academic plan;
- set and track your goals for your education and career plan;
- demonstrate basic financial literacy;
- search for accredited sources, and cite and reference a variety of sources in the style required by your faculty;
- demonstrate the written and oral communication skills required of a university student;
- investigate the impact of a growth mindset on your experience as a university student; and
- appreciate and critically reflect on the development of a leadership identity to your growth as a university student, specific to the characteristics of a successful student.

Figure 3.12: FYS learning outcomes

Figure 3.13 illustrates the road map or syllabus of the FYS, which is provided to students so that they are aware of the knowledge and skills they will be gaining. The syllabus details the module description, what is expected of students, the course schedule, what they will learn, and how and when they will be assessed.

UFSS1504 SYLLABUS AND RULES
FIRST SEMESTER 2021

<p>Module Description</p> <p>Have you thought about your expectations of university, and do you have a plan to navigate this new exciting chapter of your life? There are many students who find the transition from high school to university challenging. The aim of UFSS1504 in the</p>	<p>WHAT YOU WILL LEARN?</p> <p>All of your materials are on Blackboard. We will teach you how to navigate your UFSS1504 module on Blackboard in Orientation, so don't worry too much about this. These are the units we will cover in the first semester:</p>
<p>WHAT IS EXPECTED OF YOU?</p> <p>We want to make sure that you are learning through this module, and that you can apply the skills you learn in UFSS1504 to the rest of your degree programme. To make this happen, there are certain expectations that we have of you:</p>	<p>HOW AND WHEN WILL YOU BE ASSESSED?</p> <p>Quizzes: You are required to complete 1 quiz for each unit,</p> <p>Reflections: You are required to complete 3 reflections during the first semester. The reflections weigh 5%, 10% and 15%</p> <p>If anything is unclear, please do not hesitate to ask us. We want you to pass this module, so please submit your assessments and contact us if you are struggling. Remember, as per the General</p>
<p>WHAT'S HAPPENING WHEN?</p> <p>There are 8 classes in the first semester that you are required to attend. You can attend synchronously, which means attending live in real time during the 3-day summer school. Once you register, we will email a personalised schedule to you for the summer school classes.</p>	

Figure 3.13: Excerpts from syllabus as a road map for students

In accordance with the final design criterion, the values and attitudes needed by first-year students to be successful are clearly articulated. Examples of what it takes to be a successful student, such as focusing in class, being open to new ideas, engaging in different modes of delivery, planning for success, reaching out for help, and developing the habits of highly effective people, are provided in the curriculum documents (as seen in Figure 3.14). However, this could be more clearly stated and provided as a consolidated list of core values and attitudes to be successful. Additionally, the examples are disparate pieces of advice or expectations placed throughout the materials. Their presentation could be improved by making the advice/examples available to students as an infographic that they could save on their devices or print to put up on a bedroom wall.

WHAT IS EXPECTED OF YOU?


We want to make sure that you are learning through this module, **and that you can apply the skills you learn in UFSS1504 to the rest of your degree programme.** To make this happen, there are certain expectations that we have of you:

1. Familiarise yourself with your new online learning environment. Online learning requires discipline, a growth mindset, and the ability to self-study.
2. Keep an eye on the announcements on Blackboard. We will post everything you need to do there.
3. Engage in online classes, videos, questionnaires, polls, activities and discussions. We know that this might not be easy in the beginning, but meaningful learning (the kind of learning that lasts beyond the assessment) requires engagement. Engagement means you have to attend classes and participate actively so that you get the most out of this experience.
4. Be open to learning new ideas – ideas that may be different to your own. Aristotle said that "it is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it".
5. Focus in your online class, and help your classmates to do the same. You are at university to learn, so make the most of every class you are in.
6. Think about the value of what you are learning. What does it mean to you, how is it relevant to your current situation or future plans? You should internalise what you are learning. Many senior students tell us they wish they had paid more attention and practiced the skills taught in UFSS1504 more because they continue to need these skills well beyond graduation.
7. If you are unable to attend a class synchronously (that means live, in real time) during the 3-day summer school, make sure to catch up asynchronously (in your own time) on Blackboard. Attendance will be monitored in this module – more about that below.

What should you take away from this unit?

Keeping track of your academic progress and planning for success is vital to manage your academic workload during this period of remote learning. If you take control, responsibility and action towards the vision you have for your life and plan and reflect accordingly, you have a better chance at success. You need to reflect on your progress, prioritise your wellbeing, and plan for the future. Remember to reach out to the relevant support services, highlighted throughout this guide, should you need to.

Appendix C: A summary of Habit 3 of Highly Effective People by Stephan Covey



"The challenge is not to manage time,
But to manage ourselves"
—Stephen Covey

GLOSSARY

Categorised: Put people or things of the same feature into groups.

Consequently: As a result.

Consume: To use energy or time especially in large amounts.

Figure 3.14: Values and attitudes to be successful from the syllabus and study guide

For the principle of design, then, this paper has provided examples of how the first two criteria are met by the curriculum of the FYS at the UFS. However, there is room for improvement in the design of the materials related to the values and attitudes students require to be successful at university.

3.5.4 Principle 4: Engagement

After analysing the curriculum documents in light of the principle of design, they were then analysed against the four design and evaluation criteria for engagement, as indicated in Table 3.1. The first criterion for engagement is that implementing the FYS includes opportunities for engagement with peers through informal and formal group work activities. In the case of the FYS at the UFS, there are opportunities for informal group work, as seen in Figure 3.15. Because the cohort is so large (8, 000+ students), formal group work is challenging to manage and so does not form part of the design of this FYS. However, there is information provided to students about how to navigate formal group work (see Figure 3.16), albeit without providing students the opportunity to apply it within the FYS. It is, therefore, critical that this skill is reinforced within the rest of the degree programme.

Breakout (5 min)

Why do you think that it is important that as university students, we know what plagiarism is and how to avoid it?

*Once everyone is back in the main room, each breakout group can post the "bottomline" of their discussion in the main group chat (evidence of breakout discussion)

If no one speaks up, the TA should respond on behalf of their group.

Possibly ask for a spokesperson – who will post feedback for our group?

Figure 3.15: Informal group work illustrated in a lesson plan

2.8.3 Study skills for success: Working in a group

- Establish early on how you are going to communicate - what works best for all of you: Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Skype, Whatsapp? Something as simple as Whatsapp voice notes can work well.
- Determine regular check-in times for people to provide feedback on what they have managed to achieve thus far.
- Decide who will contact the lecturer should you get stuck or have concerns about your progress.
- Have a look at these free applications that you can use for group work:

Figure 3.16: Information on how to work in a group

The second criterion of engagement is that assessments require students to engage with the content, i.e., does the assessment provide the team with evidence of students' engagement with successful transition skills? The FYS at the UFS makes use of integrated design as its curriculum design approach (Fink, 2003, 2011). This approach requires clear alignment between outcomes (what students need to be able to do) and assessments (evidence that students have achieved the outcomes). The approach to curriculum design in the FYS at the UFS aligns well with the second criterion of engagement. In Figure 3.17, a few examples of assessment questions are provided to demonstrate how students provide evidence of their learning of the following transition skills: how to communicate effectively via email with a lecturer, how to manage their time, how to study effectively at university, and how to recognise the link between their academic programme and their future career. The outcomes of the FYS are aligned with students' transition needs, and the assessments provide the design team with evidence that students are achieving the outcomes and thus also learning the skills required to transition into university.

2.2. When communicating with your lecturer, it is important to ensure that your communication is clear and well-structured. Below is an example of an email, sent from Beyonce to the UFSS module office, about attendance.

a) Based on the etiquette of sending acceptable emails, identify ONE mistake that Beyonce has made in her email to the UFSS1504 Module office. – 1 mark

Greetings Can I ask about the attendance, the Friday attendance I attended... – X

UFSS101@ufs.ac.za

Greetings Can I ask about the attendance, the Friday attendance I attended class from 08

6. To answer the following question, you are required to apply your knowledge of what a topic sentence is in the SQ3R study reading method.

To understand the main idea or point of a paragraph, it is important to identify the topic sentence. TIP: This sentence may not always be the first sentence of a paragraph. According to the SQ3R method, once you have identified the topic sentence, you can turn it into a question to aid in comprehension.

a) There is ONE paragraph below, identify the topic sentence AND implement the questioning step of the SQ3R method by turning the topic sentence of the paragraph into a question. – 2 marks

"Over 30 years ago, Carol Dweck and her colleagues became interested in students' attitudes about failure. They noticed that some students rebounded while other students seemed devastated by even the smallest setbacks. After studying the behavior of thousands of children, Dr. Dweck coined the terms fixed mindset and growth mindset to describe the underlying beliefs people have about learning and intelligence. When students believe they can get smarter, they understand that effort makes them stronger. Therefore, they put in extra time and effort, and that leads to higher achievement.

Delete this grey text and write your answer(s) here.

b. Murphey needs assistance in creating a timetable for MODU5814. He wants to allocate 5 days a week to working on this module. Demonstrate your understanding of notional learning hours as per the UFSS module guide and calculate how many hours Murphey should allocate to MODU5814. Show all your calculations. – 4 marks

Delete this grey text and write your answer(s) here.

2. Based on your knowledge of time management, identify TWO methods you can use to avoid procrastination- 2 marks

Delete this grey text and write your answer(s) here.

1.1. Consider the effective learning strategies and healthy habits for academic success in your university journey. Reflect on your current approach to managing your academic and personal life, and then answer the following question:
 "How does your current routine and mindset align with the strategies and habits mentioned in the unit, and how will incorporating these strategies enhance your university experience and overall success?"
 Answer the question using the following structure:
 a. Describe your current routine and mindset in terms of time management and goal setting. Be specific about the strengths and weaknesses you have identified in your current approach. – 4 marks
 b. Discuss 2 strategies and healthy habits in the unit you have or would like to incorporate. Provide concrete examples of how these changes can positively impact your academic performance and well-being. – 4 marks
 c. Explain how you plan to minimise potential threats and take advantage of/maximise the opportunities presented by adopting these strategies and habits. – 2 marks

Figure 3.17: Example from assessment of students being required to engage with content

Figure 3.18 is an example of an excerpt from an assessment, which illustrates how opportunities are provided (whether through teaching activities or assessments) to help students make links between their personal lives and the knowledge and skills covered in the FYS. The assessments are set up as reflections with the intention of having students apply the FYS content to their own lives.

3.2. Based on the UFSS1504 content, reflect on your personal journey as a student, using the growth mindset content. Your paragraph must include the following information/answer the following questions: - 5 marks

Figure 3.18: Excerpt from an assessment

The final criterion of engagement requires that opportunities are provided for students to discuss their feedback on assessments with staff. In Figure 3.19, an example of a student assessment query reminder is provided. However, while students are encouraged to visit the FYS offices during consultation hours or send emails when they have questions, the opportunity for students to discuss their feedback on assessments with staff is not explicit in any of the curriculum documents. This means students may not know that they can discuss assessments with staff, and so might not reach out to do so.

Reminder that the UFSS1504/UFSS1522 Semester 2 Query Period started on 2 November and will end 10 November 2021. The Query Period is there for you to query any of your assessment and attendance marks for the semester. To submit your query, send us an email stating your assessment or attendance query to UFSS101@ufs.ac.za and you will be assisted.

Figure 3.19: Excerpt from Blackboard related to assessment queries

The above analysis provides evidence of the following aspects that are clearly present in the FYS curriculum: engagement with peers through informal group work, assessments that require students to engage with content that addresses transition needs, opportunities for students to make links between the transition content and their personal lives, and opportunities for students to query assessment marks. However, formal group work is only addressed through teaching students about the principles of group work engagement rather than through active student participation in formal group work in the FYS. Furthermore, the opportunity to discuss assessment feedback with staff can be addressed more explicitly in the syllabus and via the FYS programme’s communication channels.

3.5.5 Principle 5: Assessment

Next, the curriculum documents were analysed against the five design and evaluation criteria for assessment, as indicated in Table 3.1.

In the FYS at the UFS, students are taught the skills they require to successfully complete assessments at university. Figure 3.20 shows an excerpt from the materials shared in class as an example of study- and test-taking tips that are useful for all university assessments.



Figure 3.20: Excerpt of study- and test-taking tips to be successful at assessments from class material

Another criterion for assessment incorporated into the FYS materials is teaching students how to manage their time in order to attend to all their assessment activities. In the example provided (see Figure 3.21), time management is one of the outcomes of the FYS at the UFS, and so this is explicitly taught in class. Students are taught how to create a daily schedule, incorporating time for academic activities, time for necessary tasks such as sleeping and eating, and time for rest in the form of hobbies or socialising. Students are also taught about why they might procrastinate, as well as how to address it.

2.7.1 Managing your time: Create a daily schedule

Work out a daily schedule for yourself, and share it with your family so that they understand that you have to put time aside to work on your studies. This is an example of what could work for you, but you can edit it to fit in with the times of day that you work best and are most productive. Class A, B and C activities are explained in **Appendix B**.

2.7.2 Managing your time: Procrastination

So if you have figured out your ABC activities and even set up a daily schedule AND a task list, what could go wrong? Well, there is that little problem called procrastination...

We cannot talk about time management without talking about procrastination! This is the number one enemy of managing your time, yet for many of us, procrastination is that friend that

6 THINGS YOU CAN DO TO AVOID PROCRASTINATING

1. Use the Pomodoro Method
- Get a timer and set it for 25 minutes

2. Prioritise
Prioritise your most difficult tasks and

"Procrastination is attitude's natural assassin. There's nothing so fatiguing as an uncompleted task." – William James

Figure 3.21: Excerpt of lesson about time management from the study guide

The final criterion of the assessment FYCP is that the FYS consistently provides clear feedback to students on their FYS assessments. Figure 3.22 highlights examples of feedback that TAs provide to students on their assessments (the students' responses are greyed out). Their feedback includes areas for improvement, as well as comments about the student's performance. The TAs receive detailed training before each marking period to standardise their marking as much as possible. TAs are provided with assessments to mark together as a group and are also moderated during the marking period to ensure students receive well-rounded feedback. An example of feedback guidelines is provided in Figure 3.23.

Assign Criterion

Unfortunately, no mark was granted because the provided practical example does not relate to your studies. Therefore, refer to computer literacy to gain more insight on digital skills.

Convert to QuickMark

1.2 Identify ONE Digital skill that you want to develop and provide an example of how this skill will assist you in your university studies. - 2 marks

Digital Creation
This might help me to be more confident in university and I might get friends to help with my studies if I am more of content creator.

Assign Criterion

Well written.

Figure 3.22: Examples of feedback provided on assessments

Feedback Guideline:

Dear Teaching Assistants,

Below there are a few guidelines on how to construct feedback to students.

There are 3 things to keep in mind when constructing feedback to students:

1. **Feedback needs to be sufficient in terms of detail and empathy** - Simply stating to the student that they didn't answer the question accordingly doesn't provide them enough information and detail to know what exactly they did wrong. The tone of the feedback given to student needs to communicate care and guidance that you want them to succeed. Therefore, please try to be as empathetic as possible in your feedback.
2. **Feedback needs to be forward-looking** - the student needs to know based on what has been said in the feedback how they can improve in the future.
3. **Feedback needs to be correct and connected to the rubric and marking criteria**. E.g. if the student is asked to rewrite Student X's (scenario) and make it Specific-Measurable-Attainable-Relevant/Realistic-Timely but the student only draws up a SMART goal for themselves, the student cannot be awarded the marks. Additionally, the feedback needs to indicate that the answer did not meet the requirements of the question which is why marks could not be allocated.

You can use the 'formula' below to construct your feedback.

Complete and meaningful feedback has 3 main points:

- it reiterates what the question required.
- It points out where the student went wrong.
- It gives direction on how to improve for the future.

Here is an example: 'Dear student, the question requires that you state the errors made in the example given. Your attempt was good, however, the errors you identified are not in line with the good email etiquette. Which is why I could only award marks for your answer on formal language. You can improve in future by referring to the UFSS Semester 1 guide on page 28.'

The example provided is merely a guideline, the intention of the example is not to suggest that all feedback from TAs should be worded in the same way.

Figure 3.23: Feedback guidelines provided to TAs as part of their training

The first two criteria, which require the FYS to teach students about how to tackle different types of assessments and how to respond to different kinds of assessment feedback, are not addressed in the FYS at the UFS. That is certainly a gap in the design of the FYS, and clear expectations from different disciplines with regard to discipline-specific assessments and feedback would need to be investigated before it can be adequately covered in the FYS. A thorough investigation is necessary since the FYS is centralised and run as one seminar for all first-year students. The evidence above shows that the other FYCP assessment criteria are sufficiently addressed through the FYS outcomes of time management and study skills, as well as through the processes in place to ensure clear feedback is provided on assessments.

3.5.6 Principle 6: Evaluation and Monitoring

Finally, the curriculum documents were analysed against the two design and evaluation criteria for evaluation and monitoring, as indicated in Table 3.1.

The first criterion of this FYCP requires that data gathered at admission (such as biographical data, AP scores, and school quintile) and any other relevant sources inform the design of the FYS. As the FYS at the UFS is but one of many initiatives run out of the CTL to support student success, its design is informed by data gathered at admission and through the student

engagement surveys conducted by CTL. In Figure 3.24, some examples of this data, such as first-generation status, AP score, and school quintile, are depicted.

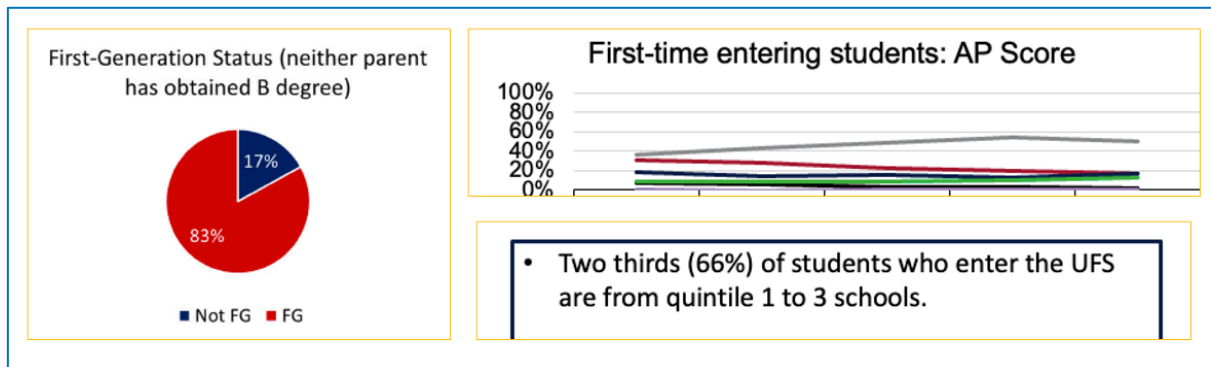


Figure 3.24: Biographical and cohort data that informs the design of the FYS

The second criterion of evaluation and monitoring looks at how data is collected to evaluate the FYS and inform changes in the curriculum design and execution. In the FYS at the UFS, students are encouraged to complete a module evaluation at the end of each semester, and they are also invited to participate in focus groups. In Figure 3.25, an example is provided of such an invitation posted as an announcement on Blackboard. In addition, TAs provide feedback on their experience of facilitating classes, and they, too, are evaluated on their facilitation of the content and receive reports. Furthermore, the moderation of assessments provides valuable data on how students are engaging with the skills taught in the FYS. Finally, trends in queries and students' communicated experiences via email and consultations result in quick responses and edits to the materials if necessary. This data is collected as part of an action learning and action research cycle (ALAR) to continuously inform and improve the design of the FYS (Zuber-Skerritt and Wood, 2019). The ALAR cycle allows for a pragmatic approach to evaluation and monitoring to attend to project needs, i.e., problems are identified, solutions are generated and implemented, and this is followed by evidence-based reflection and the modification of planning and/or practices.

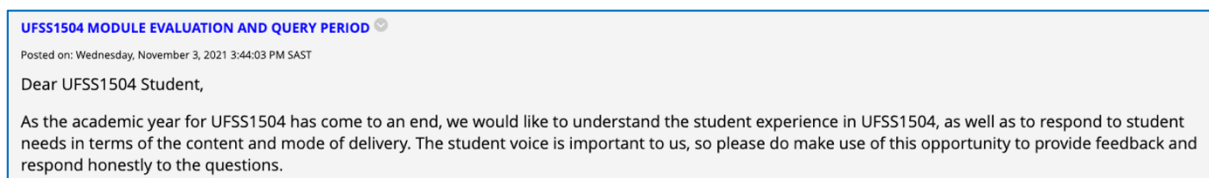


Figure 3.25: Blackboard announcement inviting students to participate in the module evaluation

The FYCP of evaluation and monitoring is an intentional part of the design of this FYS and is well-implemented. Both evaluation and monitoring criteria, i.e., the type of data collected and how it is used to inform the design of the FYS, are therefore met.

3.6 Conclusion

This paper considered the impact of designing and evaluating a student transition FYS programme. If students are optimally supported in their first year to cope with the changes they experience at university, then their chances of retention are higher. Thus, the role that student support plays is important, and ultimately, retention in the first year has a domino effect on graduation and students' future social mobility. The impetus, then, to design student success support programmes and to do so from an evidence-based approach cannot be further emphasised. In this paper, the FYS at the UFS was a case study of how the FYCPs could be used to evaluate the design of an FYS. However, the principles used here and the overarching narrative of optimising design to pro-actively support student transition and success are also valid when looking at an institutional-level design of first-year support. In addition to making the case for using the FYCPs as a framework to inform the design and evaluation of FYS programmes, this paper also contributes to the FYE literature base and to first-year student support in South Africa and in other institutions with similar contexts.

The findings of this study suggest that there are additional design and evaluation criteria for the FYCPs that may be considered in the South African context and in contexts with similar challenges. These additional design and evaluation criteria are:

- students must acquire the digital skills necessary to successfully engage with materials, staff, and peers (under the transition principle);
- the design of content about academic processes should be responsive to students' prior knowledge (under the transition principle); and
- students should learn about the advantages of diverse perspectives, backgrounds, worldviews, and skills by engaging in group work (under the diversity principle).

Furthermore, while this study investigated all the FYCPs in one FYS programme, based on its hybrid nature, its integration into the curriculum of degree programmes, as well as its impact at scale, it is possible that these principles could be mapped across all first-year support

initiatives in an institution. The intention of such an approach would be to remove duplication, strengthen reinforcement, and identify gaps that could be addressed. Such an approach could also be used to identify which spaces are best-suited to address any gaps in the student support curriculum. The critical success factors of this approach would be institution-wide collaboration, consultation, and engagement, with a focus on the students' experience of first-year support and its resulting impact on retention and success.

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4 CHAPTER 4 (ARTICLE 2): USING STUDENT EVALUATIONS AS EVIDENCE TO INFORM THE DESIGN OF A TRANSITION-FOCUSED FIRST YEAR SEMINAR

4.1 Abstract

The paper builds on and contributes to work in the field of student evaluation and first-year transition. Although previous studies have examined student evaluations of transition programmes, there has not been a strong focus on using student evaluation data to inform the design of transition programmes. As such, this study focuses on the types of questions asked in student evaluations and how that data informs the design of transition-focused First Year Seminars (FYS). The study uses data from mixed method questionnaires and focus groups obtained from students' evaluations of the FYS at the University of the Free State over a five-year period to reflect on how the evaluation of FYS programmes can inform successful student transitions. The First Year Curriculum Principles (FYCPs) for designing a transition programme are used as a conceptual framework to map against a student-informed design of the institutional FYS. Key findings show that the design and implementation of the FYS improved each year as a result of the student evaluations and that the majority of the FYCPs were addressed. However, there is room for improvement in the consistency of the questions asked in the student evaluation and in the frequency at which these were conducted. These findings contribute to the literature base of case studies in which student evaluations are used to inform the design of an evidence-based transition programme.

Keywords: Student voice, student evaluation, First Year Seminar, First Year Curriculum Principles, transition programme, evidence-based approach to design

4.2 Introduction

At many higher education institutions, transition programmes are in place to help students navigate the changes they go through in their first year (Greenfield *et al.*, 2015). Literature shows that this first year is a critical point in a student's undergraduate journey, as it is the year in which most students drop out (Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014; Chetty and Pather, 2015; Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020; van Zyl *et al.*, 2020). Transition

programmes are therefore tasked with supporting students to help them persist through their first year and successfully transition into university. For a transition programme to be effective, it must be evidence-based (Scott, 2008; Thurber and Walton, 2012; Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014; Lekena and Bayaga, 2018; van Zyl *et al.*, 2020; Keup *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, a transition programme that is not only effective but also strives for excellence is a programme that is constantly evolving as a result of monitoring and evaluation. Such programmes also strive for excellence because they are improvement-oriented and are in constant learning mode. An evidence-based transition programme, therefore, seeks to be relevant and ensures that it is doing right by the students (Keup *et al.*, 2022).

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the role of the student voice as heard in student evaluations of an FYS. Use of these student evaluations (representing students' voices) are highly valuable in informing the design of an evidence-based transition programme. There are many types of transition programmes. However, for the purpose of this paper, I will use the First Year Seminar (FYS) at the University of the Free State (UFS) as a case study. Although the example used is a South African one, the key takeaways in this paper are relatable to transition programmes at large, as both international and local literature are cited. In many cases, transition programmes either do not include student evaluations or do not ask informing questions of students in evaluations. Therefore, the contribution of the programme to successful transition is often skewed. In the 2009 National Survey of First Year Seminars, only 53% of the programmes reported evaluating their programmes; student evaluations mainly focused on asking students about their satisfaction with the staff and the institution (Padgett and Keup, 2011; Keup *et al.*, 2022). What these surveys did not look at was whether students were, in fact, learning and developing; did the FYS actually help them to transition? Thus, the gap that this paper addresses is the use of student evaluations to inform the design and improvement of FYS programmes that support transition.

This paper first provides an overview of how student feedback has been used to inform the design of transition programmes and is followed by an introduction to the First Year Curriculum Principles (FYCPs) that will be used as a conceptual framework to evaluate how the student voice has informed the design of the FYS at the UFS. The findings and discussion provide detailed evidence of the role of student evaluation in the evolution of the FYS at the UFS over a five-year period. The paper ends with recommendations for how student success practitioners can best use student feedback to inform the design of their transition programmes.

4.3 Literature review

4.3.1 Student evaluation

Student evaluations give students the opportunity to express their opinions about their experience of a support programme, an academic course, teaching staff, or other factors related to their tertiary studies. Ideally, this feedback should be used to improve teaching and learning, guide curriculum redesign, improve teaching administration, and obtain students' views on the quality and relevance of the content they are learning (Nair, 2011). When students participate in providing feedback on their experience, it allows them an opportunity to be heard, to feel valued and seen, and to be involved in any changes made in the programme (Nair, 2011; Borch, Sandvoll, and Risør, 2020; Mair *et al.*, 2023). This feedback may be provided in formal ways – through institutional or programme evaluations via surveys, focus groups, interviews, participatory action research – or informal ways – through continuous feedback via, for example, a suggestions box or a reflection at the end of each contact session (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Mair *et al.*, 2023). As discussed in the next section, student evaluations can also be used to inform the design of programmes.

4.3.2 The role of student evaluation in course or programme design

Most student evaluations take place at the end of a course and then it may be too late to make changes that affect the current cohort. Many studies support this notion, and one of these examples was in a study about comparing real-time feedback in counselling sessions versus classroom experiences. The findings suggested that ongoing feedback from students was more useful in shaping the course design (Krupp, 2022). Other studies have focused on the type of data collected to inform programme design and have found that these are often in the form of quantitative surveys (Borch *et al.*, 2020; Krupp, 2022). Few cases of empirical research make use of qualitative methods and are even less concerned with evaluating whether learning has taken place (Steyn, Davies, and Sambo, 2019; Borch, *et al.*, 2020; Keup *et al.*, 2022). However, there have been cases, such as a study by Schellekens *et al.* (2024), where both quantitative and qualitative measures were used to identify whether students felt they were supported in becoming self-regulated learners through their assessment programme. The approach was successful in identifying the themes in the programme that urgently needed attention. This is an excellent example of using a mixed methods research design, and focusing on the learning that took place.

Students' responses about their experiences are often limited to the questions asked in the evaluation. If students are not asked to critique the course and provide suggestions or recommendations for improvement, then the researcher is not going to get that information. If students are asked only quantitative questions and researchers do not seek to understand their responses through open-ended questions, either in the questionnaire or in follow-up focus groups, then the researcher runs the risk of making assumptions about students' experiences. The issue is that student evaluations are often used in the curricular space to support faculty promotions and professional development; evaluations are used in the co-curricular space to make the case for continued funding (Borch *et al.*, 2020). While those are necessary processes that require evidence from student feedback, the feedback should also be used as evidence to inform the design and improvement of programmes. In the example shared earlier, Krupp (2022) also posited that feedback must be used to make meaningful changes that will benefit the whole cohort and make sense given the context of the course.

Not only should student data be used to inform the design of a programme, it should also be used to evaluate the impact of the programme and if it is achieving its goals. An example of a study in which this was the case is Newman, Mills, and Soderstrom (2023), who decided to obtain feedback from course alumni to find out if the course had an impact on their ability to apply the skills learned, as well as from their current cohort. The combined data was used to inform their course design. They made use of semi-structured qualitative interviews with the alumni in order to get a full understanding of the impact of the course, and a mixed method survey with their current cohort due to the time available to these students to participate in evaluations. The evaluations helped to confirm that the changes they made to their course design – to move to real-world applications – was effective and students felt prepared for their future work. Thus, they received feedback that informed both the design of their course and confirmed whether it was making the desired impact or not.

Finally, for an evidence-based approach to ensure a meaningful evaluation of a programme, a framework or measurement in line with the goal of the programme should be used to analyse the student evaluation data. One of the examples from literature is that of Samuel and Conceição (2022), who wanted to use a formative mid-semester qualitative measure or framework to ensure that their design strategies were effective. They used the Critical Incident Questionnaire and found that it did respond to their need of real-time feedback; the student voice was used to highlight areas of importance to them. Their findings strengthen the

argument for using a framework that aligns with the goals of the programme against which the student evaluation data can be mapped.

In this paper, therefore, I am going to focus on the role the student voice played in the evolution of the FYS at the UFS in terms of its design and implementation over a period of five years. I will also map this evolution against the First Year Curriculum Principles (FYCPs), which are explained in the next section.

4.3.3 First Year Curriculum Principles for the design of an FYS

The framework that I am using to map the student voice is the FYCPs. The FYCPs are part of Transition Pedagogy – a whole-of-institution approach to using the curriculum as the mechanism through which students are introduced to first-year support (Kift *et al.*, 2010). The FYCPs are a framework that can be used to design and evaluate the curriculum to ensure that it is providing appropriate support for students. What differentiates this framework from others is, firstly, that the focus is on student learning (hence the term **pedagogy** in Transition Pedagogy) and, secondly, that the focus on first-year support (including co-curricular support) is mediated through the curriculum (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2015). There are six FYCPs, namely transition, design, diversity, engagement, assessment, and evaluation and monitoring (Nelson *et al.*, 2014). The definitions of these principles are as follows:

Transition

The FYS should be designed and implemented to help students adjust to university. This programme should be an ongoing support system that helps students navigate the changes and challenges they encounter throughout their first year.

Diversity

When developing an FYS, it is crucial to account for diversity within the student body. This includes considering equity, changes in student groups each year, students' prior knowledge and skills, and the varying start times for different groups of students (e.g., degree programmes with selection courses starting earlier, students beginning in the second semester, and late registration due to funding delays).

Design

The design of the FYS should be student-centred, focusing on that which is important and relatable. It should be clear and well-structured for students to easily understand. The objective is to equip them with the necessary skills for success by focusing on the specific knowledge, abilities, and attitudes required for student development.

Engagement

The curriculum design of the FYS should include active learning in the content, teaching and learning activities, and assessment. This involves including activities that foster collaboration, student interaction, and engagement between students and staff.

Assessment

The FYS should aid students in transitioning from high school assessments to university-level assessments. Students should receive regular and prompt feedback, with assessments being used as a learning tool to help them understand and meet expectations. Assessments should also be used by teaching staff to track students' progress and adjust their teaching methods accordingly.

Evaluation and monitoring

The FYS design must be evidence-based and regularly evaluated to meet the evolving needs of students. An action-research approach can also be employed to ensure timely intervention for students who may struggle with the curriculum and are at risk of failure.

The literature discussed above shows that, in order to use student evaluations to inform the design of an evidence-based transition programme, the following should be present:

- a) Meaningful questions about what works and what does not work (moving away from only asking about satisfaction);
- b) Qualitative data to gain a deeper understanding of students' experiences;
- c) Student evaluation data to inform changes or improvements to the transition programme (and not only to confirm its excellence or quality); and
- d) A transition framework against which the programme can be measured, and which informs the questions asked in the evaluation.

4.4 Methodology

4.4.1 Research context

The FYS at the UFS started in 2012 as a compulsory academic module for all first-year students. It now averages an enrolment of 8500 students per year. In order to discuss the research context, I will start by providing some information about the history of the module before investigating the student experience from 2017 to 2021. This historical background is important for further discussion about the constant evolution that has taken place in this space at the UFS.

UFS101 (the original name of the FYS) was first presented as a core curriculum of “big questions” in 2012-2014. The “big questions” approach was similar to programmes of the same nature presented at Stanford University, the London School of Economics, and the Chinese University of Hong Kong. In 2015, the module was re-curriculated, and the focus shifted from the core curriculum to include academic success skills. This shift was necessary to better align with the needs of the student body – needs that were articulated in many faculty meetings. The aim of the first semester was to teach the students academic success skills – those skills necessary to be successful at university. In the second semester, the focus was on teaching the students how to look at problems from a multi-disciplinary perspective to cultivate the critical thinking abilities and cognitive development expected of a university student. In 2016, the content in the second semester was further refined to include case studies and examples that were relevant to students so that they were able to better engage with the content (Oosthuizen *et al.*, 2017). The name of the FYS changed in 2020 to UFSS1504 (a year-long module for students enrolled in the mainstream programme where the duration of the degree is the required three to five years, based on the course) and UFSS1522 (a second semester module for students enrolled in the extended programme where the duration of the degree is longer due to the first year being a bridging year). The evolution of the module from 2017 to 2021 will be elaborated on in the findings and discussion section. I have decided to look at the design and implementation of the FYS during this period because this is when its focus really shifted to supporting students in their transition into and through their first year.

4.4.2 Research aim and design

This paper used a mixed methods design drawing on the quantitative and qualitative student evaluations from 2017 to 2021 to reflect on how students’ evaluation of an FYS can inform

successful student transitions. The data were collected at different points in each year. To achieve the aim of the research, I mapped the results of the data collected between 2017 and 2021 against the relevant FYCPs. The success of the FYS was also determined through inductive reporting on students' experiences of the FYS related to their perceived value of the programme and if it addressed challenges that might impede their transition into higher education. In addition, the process of data collection and how the data were used to inform changes made to the curriculum design of the FYS at the UFS was scrutinised to reflect on how evaluation data could be best used to improve transitional programmes.

4.4.3 Data analysis

In Table 4.1, the student evaluation data collected from the years 2017 to 2021 is detailed. The year of collection is indicated in the first column, the type of data collected is listed in the second column, and the population (number of students enrolled in the FYS) and sample size (response rate on questionnaires and focus group size) are recorded in the third and fourth columns, respectively.

Table 4.1: Data collection in the FYS at the UFS from 2017 to 2021

Year	Type of data	Population	Sample / Response rate
2017	Mixed methods questionnaire (Semester 2)	7569	6327 (84%)
2018	Mixed methods questionnaire (Semester 1)	9253	7113 (77%)
	Mixed methods questionnaire (Semester 2)	9253	6330 (68%)
2019	Mixed methods questionnaire (Semester 2)	8092	4068 (50%)
	Mixed methods questionnaire (Semester 2 pilot group)	706	277 (39%)
	Focus groups (UFS101 cohort)	8092	68 (14 groups)
	Focus groups (pilot cohort)	706	13 (4 groups)
2020	Mixed methods questionnaire (Semester 1)	4954 (number of students enrolled in UFSS1504 in the first semester, 3354 students enrolled for UFSS1522 in the second semester)	2113 (43%)
2021	Mixed methods questionnaire (end of year, based on the version of the FYS students were registered for)	5850 (UFSS1504)	3092 (53%) (UFSS1504)

		2620 (UFSS1522)	1844 (70%) (UFSS1522)
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4.5 Findings and discussion

Drawing from all the sources listed in Section 4.3, I want to acknowledge the vastness of the data but maintain its integrity by focusing on the main objective of this study. Therefore, I will be using high-level takeaways from the data to focus the research on how the student voice informed changes made to the FYS, and whether or not these changes had the desired impact of helping students transition into university. The student evaluation data specific to transition challenges and recommendations, the changes implemented in the FYS as a result of the students' contributions, and the relevant FYCPs that are involved, are detailed for each year. This is followed by a discussion of how the changes made addressed the transition needs raised in the student evaluation data. Students were also asked about the value of the FYS and if it addressed the transition challenges they experienced. A reflection on the student voice is included for each year group. This section concludes with a synthesis of the evolution of the FYS from 2017 to 2021 and a mapping of that evolution against the FYCPs.

4.5.1 How student evaluation data informed the evolution of the FYS

4.5.1.1 2017

In the first semester of 2017, students learned basic computer literacy, how to search for and reference academic resources, the characteristics of a successful student in an undergraduate experience, how to analyse their priorities and achieve goals, and skills such as creative thinking, problem-solving, decision-making. In the second semester, with its focus on multi-disciplinary problem-solving and critical thinking, students could choose if they wanted to participate in Combo A – Anthropology, History, Social Psychology and Law – or Combo B – Community Health, Agriculture, Economics and Law. In 2017, there was a shift to include more African sources in the content, and the History unit was the first unit to move in the direction of a decolonised curriculum.

The student evaluation data of 2017 focused heavily on the value of this content for students. Examples of students' responses include:

UFS helps you to set your goals and then to [sic] introduces you to the University and how it operates.

Blackboard. Because if you are not taught how to use blackboard then you are lost. Because everything is on blackboard. So blackboard definitely was the most important one for me.

I learned about the importance of referencing and how to use the different research forms when conducting research instead of just going to google it, which isn't helpful and I also learned about google scholar [sic].

How to prioritize, which was very important because I couldn't prioritise very well.

In the second semester, students were asked if they could transfer the information learned in the FYS to the rest of their degree programme or student experience. They were also asked to reflect on their personal experiences. The data was quite positive with quotes such as:

More knowledge and awareness made me feel more responsible and accountable for the choices I make. As a student I need to be aware of life around me and how my choices and way of living influence everything. It is important not just for my future, but for the future of our planet and all living things (Agriculture).

Learned [sic] to differentiate between morals and the law and see where these pillars of ethics can help me better my personal ways of doing things (Community Health).

The arguments that rose [sic] during class discussions. How much transferred memory affects future generations. How some people carry so much anger in their hearts for experiences they never experienced in person but experienced through transmission of memory from parents and grandparents. How unforgiving some people are. How important forgiveness is for one's well-being (History Learning Experience with Candice Mama).

The only negative experiences relayed in the data had to do with students not finding value in the information because they already knew it, or they could not see how it related to them or their studies.

As indicated by the above quotes, there was evidence that the first semester content helped students transition into university, which informed the continuation of the same content in the

FYS the following year. However, there were no questions posed to students about the challenges they faced transitioning into university, so the student voice was not used to inform changes made to the FYS in 2018. Instead, recommendations for improvement came from the five-year external review of the FYS. The review suggested that UFS101 revisit its alignment with the intended outcomes of an FYS, which included building a sense of community among first-year students, connecting students to the university, and improving retention. Further recommendations came from the strategic objectives of the university to align this FYS with the Institutional Transformation Plan (ITP), due to its large footprint as a compulsory module for all first-year students. These recommendations were to bring in themes of social justice and leadership so that UFS101 would become a platform for all students at the university to become aware of social inclusion issues and understand what it means to be a good leader.

4.5.1.2 2018

To respond to the recommendations of the external reviewers and the strategic objectives of the university, changes were made in 2018 onwards to align better with the outcomes of a transition-based FYS. Topics and skills such as skills development, connecting students to support at the university, and how to navigate being a university student were made explicit in the first semester content. New skills content such as time management, goal setting, and communication skills were included in the first semester. A list of various support services available at the university was also made available to students to explicitly connect them to support rather than relying only on individual referrals. The topic, “how to navigate being a university student”, was enhanced through the integration of growth mindset content and content on how learning works. Leadership was brought into the first semester with the goal of aligning it to content related to the characteristics of successful students.

Furthermore, social inclusion was introduced, not only through explicit teaching, but also by helping first-year students build a sense of community. This was done by shifting from large-class teaching to small-class teaching so as to focus on discussion and the application of skills. The large classes, lectures or large-scale learning experiences were facilitated by excellent speakers who understood how to engage students in a large class setup. In 2018, changes in the second semester included topics on mental health, which were integrated into the Community Health content, and topics on social justice, which were integrated into the Law unit. Additionally, units on Entrepreneurship and Information Technology were also included.

Figure 4.1 below shows students' rankings of the value of the first semester content. It is interesting to note that the data depicted here echo the main aim of a transition programme. Students cited the following units as more valuable in their transition to university: success skills development (time management, goal setting, how learning works at university, referencing and plagiarism), lists of available support services (included in growth mindset), and information on how to navigate university (growth mindset and characteristics of a successful student). These topics were all new content that was included in 2018 as a result of the recommendations made by students in the previous year – recommendations indicating that this programme should better align with supporting student transition.

The leadership content, which aligned with the goals of the ITP, did not fare badly, but students did not find it as valuable to their transition into university as the content relayed in the previous paragraph. The difference between what the students on the satellite campus versus the main campus found most valuable could be related to the differences between the cohorts – at the time, the majority of the satellite campus students were first generation students (first in their family to go to university and therefore less likely to know what to expect from university, and less likely to have support at home or an understanding of how universities work). The majority of the satellite students were also from less-resourced schools and were enrolled in the extended programme, which means they entered university with lower Admission Point (AP) scores. Thus, the satellite campus students found the content related to navigating university more valuable than the main students, who found the academic skills content more valuable.

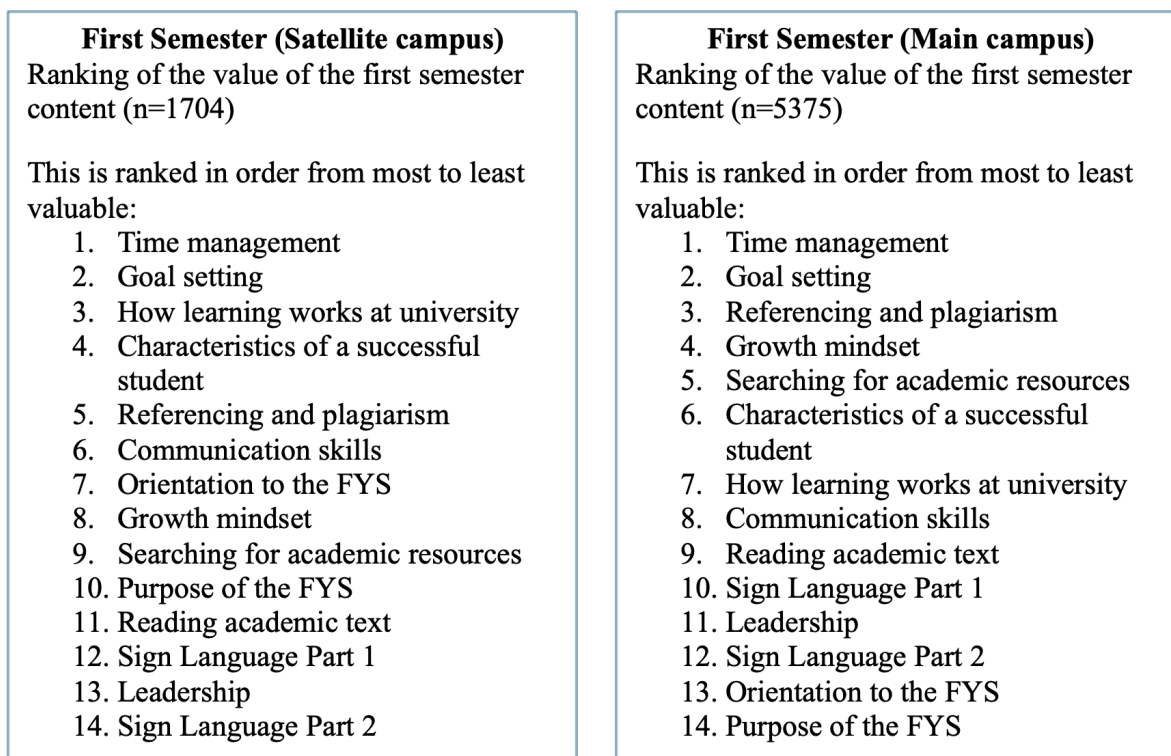


Figure 4.1: The extent to which various units helped students transition into university

The analysis and interpretation of this data led to confirmation of the fact that academic success skills and navigating university were the main transition topics that needed to be addressed in the first semester. What was difficult to attend to was the order of the content, which students had also indicated was not ideal. Based on the campus the students were on, the degree programme they were registered for and its scheduling, some students would have preferred content on developing a growth mindset earlier, while others would have preferred content related to referencing and plagiarism earlier. Thus, the FYS practitioners had to think of delivering content in a way that could address the students' academic success skills needs more timeously. This was the first recommendation.

Students were asked what their preference was between the large-class learning experiences (averaging an attendance of between 1000-2500 students) and the smaller discussion classes (averaging about 50 students per class). Figure 4.2 shows how just over half of the respondents preferred the large class learning experiences.

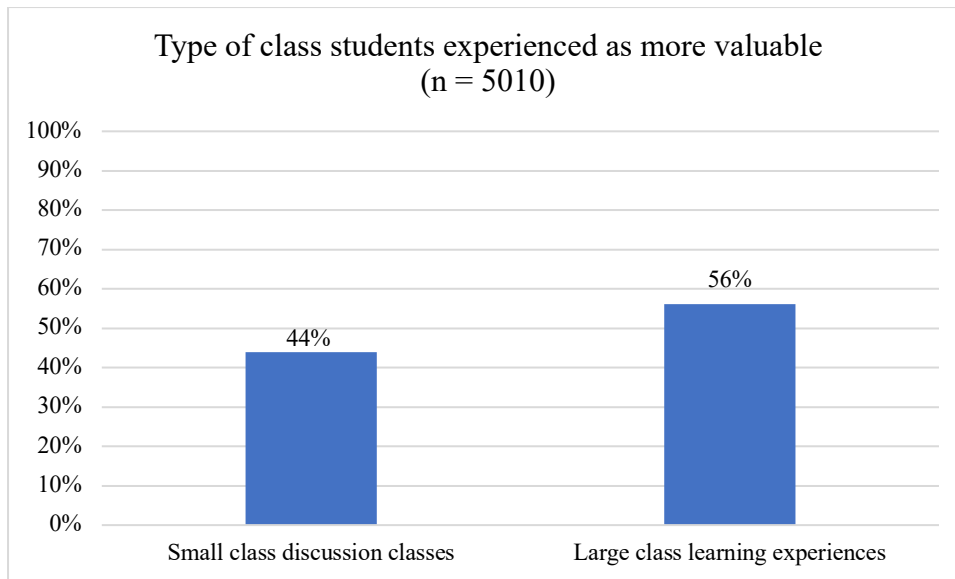


Figure 4.2: Type of class students experienced as more valuable

This was an unexpected finding. One would assume that a class of 1000+ attendees would be intimidating for many first-year students, and a small class of 50 students would be their preference. The questionnaire included a follow-up qualitative question asking students to elaborate on their response to this preference. The main reason more students found the large-class learning experience valuable was because it was presented by an expert in the field. Students thus felt inspired listening to presenters sharing their real-life experiences from the world of work. The students who preferred the small-class discussions enjoyed the engagement with other students, and the chance to share their points of view. Additionally, the environment was more intimate and less intimidating. There was value in both types of class presentation, but to ensure students had a chance to engage with the content and each other, the small-class discussions had to continue. However, the load on the academic timetable and venue system (this FYS had over 8000 students attending classes each week) presented a logistical challenge at the institution. The second recommendation was to find a workaround in order to continue presenting both discussion classes and learning experiences.

Students were also asked to reflect on their experiences of the Community and Mental Health, Entrepreneurship, Information Technology, and Law and Social Justice content. For the Community and Mental Health content, students appreciated how informative it was, specifically regarding the role their health plays in being a successful student. They found it relevant to apply in future. What students disliked about the Community and Mental Health unit was that the information about mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, was

not discussed in much detail. Students quite enjoyed the Entrepreneurship unit. They found it eye-opening, informative, and relevant to the way they think about their future careers. The students who did not find the unit valuable indicated that it was not aligned with their interests. The students also found the Information Technology content valuable, making specific reference to content about coding, creating a CV and LinkedIn profile online, their digital footprint, and positioning themselves for a future in which everyone needs to make use of technology in the workplace. What students did not like was that there was not sufficient time to practice and apply the information they had learned. In response to the Law and Social Justice content, students reported learning about the role of law in society. There were fewer responses related to the value of learning about social justice. Similar to the Entrepreneurship unit, there were some students who did not see the content as relevant because it was not related to their field of study. There were also students who experienced the content as controversial. Examples of their responses can be seen in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2: Students' experience of the second semester units in 2018

Second semester units	What students liked	What students disliked
Community and Mental Health	<i>"I learned how to start making healthy habits and interact more positively in my community."</i>	<i>"It should have went [sic] deeper into the conditions of the mind. As students we need to know symptoms of mental health because lately there is a rise of suicides due to depression."</i>
Entrepreneurship	<i>"i [sic] enjoyed the idea off [sic] being apart of and [sic] economy or driving it through finding my passions and starting a business"</i>	<i>"Im [sic] not an economist so the part of [sic] economics was not interesting because its not even related to my course"</i>
Information Technology	<i>"I was introduced to new things like programming, creating websites and how one can market themselves online."</i>	<i>"There [sic] should be given direct steps in creating and compiling your CV,, in class they should have physically helped the students start there [sic] CV and LinkedIn profile"</i>
Law and Social Justice	<i>"I liked the fact that we had a class where all parties of a</i>	<i>"Content like this can create differentiation between different</i>

	<i>protest were included so that we can see how it influence [sic] everyone around us.”</i>	<i>cultures which can turn to an ugly fight”</i>
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Upon analysing this data, it was apparent that not all content is appropriate for teaching first-year students at scale. If they do not find it relatable and relevant, then they are not motivated to engage. It was becoming clear that the multi-disciplinary “big questions” course was not a good fit for the UFS cohort. This mismatch was most likely due to the size of the group, as well as the level at which the content was pitched. A final-year undergraduate or postgraduate student would be in a better position in terms of their maturity and experience of university to make sense of why these issues were important for all students to be aware of. Also, the issues raised with the Mental and Community Health content were not issues that could be dealt with at scale in a large class learning experience, nor could they be facilitated by staff who were not qualified medical professionals in small discussion classes. Thus, the third recommendation presented by the students was to re-look at only teaching content that would be most impactful for first-year students who are not just transitioning into their first year but must also transition through their first year and into their second year.

4.5.1.3 2019

A pilot of the first semester academic success skills content in a three-day summer school before the start of the semester was implemented to address the first and second recommendations that had come out of the 2018 student evaluation data. The only logical way forward to respond to the students’ voices was to consider a different way of delivering the FYS. A condensed version, presented before the start of the academic year, would allow students to receive instruction on all of the skills development content just in time. This means that they would not only learn study skills the week after tests had taken place in their faculty, for example. They would now learn those skills before the start of the semester. Skills development takes time, though, so they would receive the content at the beginning of the year and be expected to apply it and reflect on it in FYS assessments that took place throughout the semester. The logistical challenge of booking venues for 8000 students per week would be alleviated by booking venues before the start of the academic semester, therefore freeing up those venues for other academic activities throughout the semester.

Of the enrolled students, 706 students (approximately 10% of the cohort) from two faculties, participated in the pilot. The rest of the cohort continued with weekly classes throughout the first semester. In the second semester, the Mental Health and Community Health unit was retained, with the aim of focusing on strategies for success and making any student mental health support more explicit. Entrepreneurship was edited to remove some of the heavier economic terminology, and more emphasis was placed on content such as how students could become entrepreneurs in South Africa. The Information Technology unit was also edited, and more focus was placed on the career development theme, which showed students how to position themselves in a 21st-century workforce. The feedback about how students could use the various content in their futures resulted in a new unit which replaced the Law and Social Justice unit, Career Psychology. This new unit focused on getting students to think about how to build their futures. The purpose of this content in the second semester was to reinforce the value of a university degree and support students in their transition through the rest of their first year and into their second year.

When students in the pilot group were asked to comment on the difference between their experience and the experience of their friends who attended weekly FYS classes, their feedback helped to strengthen the proposal that the first semester of the FYS be delivered as a summer school to provide much-needed skills to students earlier. One of the quotes from the focus groups captured it best: *“Yes, it prepares you for the journey rather than learning it while you’re in [sic] the journey.”* Students in the pilot felt better prepared for their transition into university, as indicated in this quote:

When you start with the academics [sic] week, just after attending the [FYS], it gives you a clear mind of what to do, how to handle this, how to do this things [sic], how to like, manage your time through the content that you’ve learnt.

The students in the pilot reported that although the condensed version of the first semester of the FYS contained much information presented in a short space of time, they did experience a lightening in their workload throughout the semester compared to the students who attended FYS classes every week. The earlier presentation of content thus helped students with their time management. They also felt they had more time to work on their FYS assignments than the students who attended the weekly classes, as seen in this quote:

Most of us have eights [sic] modules I think, imagine you’ve got a hectic schedule and then you just have to squeeze in that assignment time and I think they gave them a week

to complete the assignment in UFS101 while we have, than [sic], the [FYS pilot] people, we were given a privilege [sic] to space your our time and take our assignments in chunk [sic], so yes, it really helped to have [FYS pilot] in the beginning rather than have it spread out throughout the whole semester.

When asked in the second semester questionnaire if the skills taught in the first semester of the FYS helped them to transition into university, the majority of the students on the satellite campus said that it did (Figure 4.3).

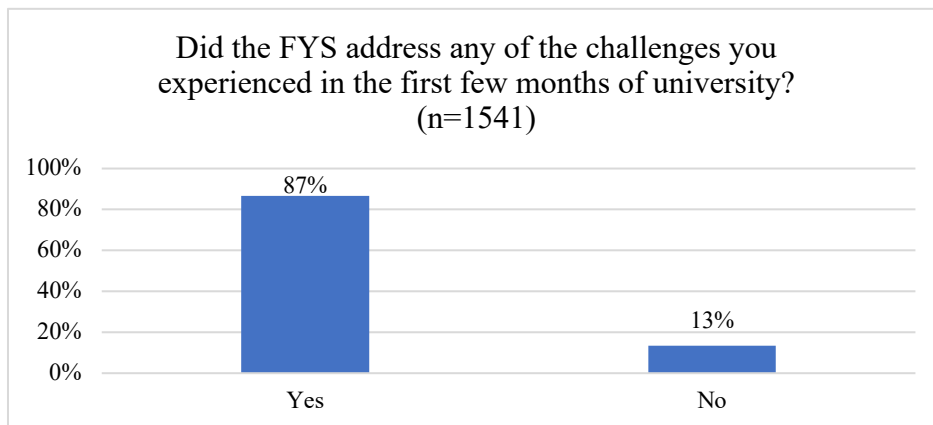


Figure 4.3: Students' responses to the FYS addressing the transition challenges they experienced

This question was not posed to the students on the main campus. Instead, they were asked about the value of the content presented in the first semester. The majority of students found the content helped them develop the skills they needed to transition, as can be seen in this quote: *“Helping student to settle in from the transition of high school to university and giving the skill to survive university workload.”*

The overall recommendation from the first semester student evaluations was that the summer school version of the content should be rolled out for all students enrolled in the FYS the following year.

For the second semester, students were asked the same questions as the previous year. The questions related to what they liked and disliked about each unit and how they would be able to apply the content in future. For the Community and Mental Health, Entrepreneurship, and Information Technology units, the same themes as the previous year came to the fore. The Career Psychology unit was well received, with many students learning about how to make career decisions based on their interests, values, and abilities, and how to explore the career

options available to them. This unit was the last unit presented in the second semester, and many students would have preferred access to the information earlier. For all of the units, the majority of students said that they would be able to apply what they had learned to the future. Because the purpose of the second semester content was to have students think about their future careers, receive the skills they would need to use in the future, and be motivated to continue studying, this was a positive response. Students, in essence, felt that the second semester content did help them transition into their first year. Examples of student responses about the value of the second semester content can be found in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3: Student experience of the second semester units in 2019

Second semester units	What students liked	What students disliked	Will you be able to apply this content in future?
Community and Mental Health: Strategies for Success	<i>“Helped me to have a growth mindset and make me be calm of all of the things that are happening: helped not to panic about my life and live a healthy life”</i>	<i>We didn't go in depth [sic] about mental illnesses that are leading causes of suicide, like depression or anxiety. which are the two mental illnesses that ALOT [sic] of students suffer from, and they lack the knowledge about their symptoms. Being taught about them would make subconsciously [sic] aware of our habits that may be "symptoms"</i>	Yes = 94% No = 6%
Entrepreneurship: How do I become an Entrepreneur in South Africa	<i>“it provided us with depth [sic] knowledge about different types of entrepreneurs”</i>	<i>“It isn't really applicable to my career choice.”</i>	Yes = 90% No = 10%
Information Technology: How do I Position Myself in a 21 st -Century Workforce?	<i>“how practical technology can be in assisting you build your online presence and how effective it is in helping you better your career options.”</i>	<i>“It was quite an experience but I'm not that into technology”</i>	Yes = 89% No = 12%

Career Psychology: Building My Future	<i>"I liked the pyramid and illustration of how to approach the choices that you need to make in your career path."</i>	<i>"I disliked that it was offered so late in the year".</i>	Yes = 88% No = 12%
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Considering the aim of the FYS to support students in their transition, the FYS practitioners grappled with which parts of the units would be most useful to continue teaching at scale, and which parts of the units could be converted into content that referred students to the relevant support services on campus. This was the first challenge posed in the second semester. Furthermore, a recommendation was to re-look at the design of the information so that it was experienced as relevant by all students, regardless of their field of study.

4.5.1.4 2020

The pilot of the summer school version of the FYS proved successful and resulted in a change in the format of the first semester to a summer school in 2020. A mapping exercise focused on the academic skills that students learned in the first year of the extended programme showed more than a 50% overlap with the skills students learned in the FYS. Thus, it was approved that from 2020 onwards, extended programme students only needed to register for the second semester of the FYS in their second year of study. The name of the FYS, therefore, changed in 2020 to UFSS1504 (a year-long module for mainstream students) and UFSS1522 (a second semester module for extended programme students). The plan for the second semester was to keep the same units but refine the content covered in each so that it was relevant to students and encouraged active participation through learning activities and relatable examples. Additionally, content that was more appropriate for a one-on-one setting, such as some of the mental health content, was converted into referral content that pointed students to relevant support services.

Due to COVID-19, emergency remote teaching took place from April 2020 until the end of the academic year. Due to the sudden switch from face-to-face teaching to online learning, some students were able to attend the full summer school (those who attended before April 2020), some students could attend some of the summer school as well as some of the catch-up classes presented in the first few weeks of the semester (those who started the summer school just before April 2020), and some students, due to late registration and financial delays, were unable to attend any of the face-to-face classes. Therefore, an online version of the content was made

available to students, for those who had not had an opportunity to attend the summer school and for those who needed an opportunity to work through content more than once (Combrink and Oosthuizen, 2020). Despite the many challenges with moving content online, the majority of students (89%) indicated that the FYS, in whatever format, did help them with their transition into university. This was largely due to the fact that the FYS was always (from 2012) presented in a blended learning format, and the study guide was written to be read as if the facilitator were sitting next to the student. When asked which content helped them the most with their transition into university, the majority of students indicated time management, goal setting, referencing, and developing a growth mindset (see Figure 4.4).

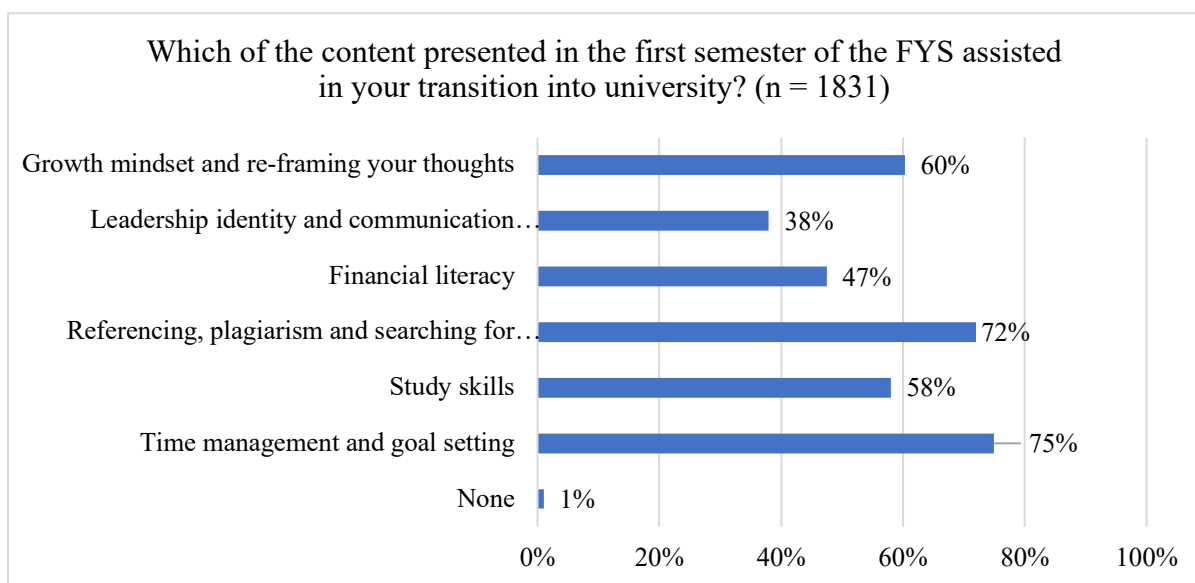


Figure 4.4: Content that assisted first-years in their transition into university

As Figure 4.5 shows, the majority of students (56%) reported that they learned about what was expected of them as university students by learning the basic skills that successful university students need (61%) and by learning the content taught in the FYS (66%). This data, which affirms that students were being supported in their transition, even when engaging with the FYS in different ways, presented an opportunity to re-imagine the mode of delivery of the FYS.

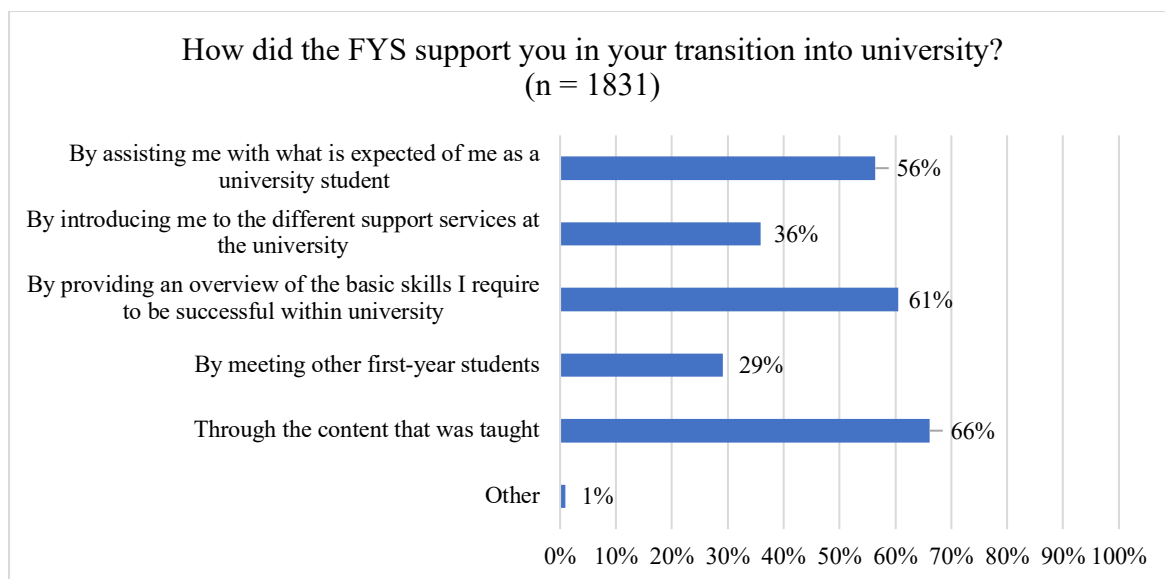


Figure 4.5: How the FYS supported students in their transition into university

There had been so much change in the FYS content each year that most of the effort and time of the FYS practitioners was spent on curriculum development, the implementation of that curriculum across two campuses with differing contexts and realities, and dealing with the growing number of students each year. Time spent on these aspects of the FYS meant that the FYS practitioners were not left with much time and room for reflection on the mode of delivery, save some tweaks each year. Since its inception in 2012, classes had been face-to-face, attendance was compulsory, and assessments were submitted online. With online learning and the lack of devices and connectivity that some students faced in 2020, however, attendance was not a passing requirement in the 2020 rollout of the FYS. This was the same institutional concession that was made for other modules for which attendance was compulsory. The positive student feedback on the rollout of the summer school, even the online version, resulted in the decision to run a 3-day winter school version of the second semester content. However, because of the precarious circumstances in the higher education sector in 2020, and the fact that the FYS team's time was pulled in several directions due to the many other support roles that the Centre for Teaching and Learning (where the FYS is housed) staff were involved in at the time, the second semester evaluation did not take place.

4.5.1.5 2021

As a result of the success of the summer school in 2020, a winter school was created for the second semester classes of UFSS in 2021, which rolled out for all students in the second

semester (Oosthuizen *et al.*, 2017; Combrink and Oosthuizen, 2020, 2022). With remote teaching and learning still in place at the UFS in 2021, the mode of delivery thus included a winter school delivered as online synchronous classes before the start of the second semester, a repeat of the content as asynchronous classes (video recordings) throughout the semester, the presentation of learning materials and continuous assessment on Blackboard, and regular responses to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) posted on Blackboard.

The 2021 data echoed the 2020 data related to the biggest challenges students experienced in their first year, namely time management, difficulty adjusting to university, and difficulty studying online. These student-identified challenges were followed closely by challenges with knowing how to effectively study, financial pressure, and how to find out where to get academic support (see Figure 4.6).

First Semester	Second Semester
<p>Ranking of the biggest challenges students experienced in their first semester (n=2640)</p> <p>This is ranked in order from most to least challenging:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Time management 2. Difficulty adjusting to university 3. Difficulty studying online 4. How to effectively study 5. Financial pressure 6. Where to get academic support 7. Social pressure 8. Accommodation 9. Lack of support from family members when studying remotely, at home 10. Food security 	<p>Ranking of the biggest challenges students experienced in their first semester (n=2215)</p> <p>This is ranked in order from most to least challenging:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Time management 2. How to effectively study 3. Financial pressure 4. Difficulty studying online 5. Social pressure 6. Where to get academic support 7. Difficulty adjusting to university 8. Food security 9. Lack of support from family members when studying remotely, at home 10. Accommodation

Figure 4.6: Ranking of the biggest challenges students experienced in their first year

Students were asked in the second semester if their ranking of the challenges they faced in the first semester had changed at all. Considering the ranking of challenges as presented in Figure 4.6, “difficulty adjusting to university” had moved down 5 places, and “difficulty studying online” had moved down 1 place. However, “time management” was still in the lead, and “how to effectively study” had moved 2 places up in the rankings. This shift in rankings showed that students had adjusted to being university students; they had a better understanding of how to

navigate university and a better understanding of the expectations of being a university student, but this did not take away from the challenge of time management and how to study. Yet, it makes sense that these challenges would have become more difficult as the workload of the second semester in most courses generally becomes more condensed. Additionally, it was to be expected that, as a result of the effects the pandemic had on the economy and on social well-being generally, students' experiences of financial pressure and social pressure would also move up in the rankings.

When asked whether (and how) the FYS helped address these challenges, students said that this transition programme helped them because of its relevant content, its referrals of students to support services, and its success coaching (Figure 4.7).

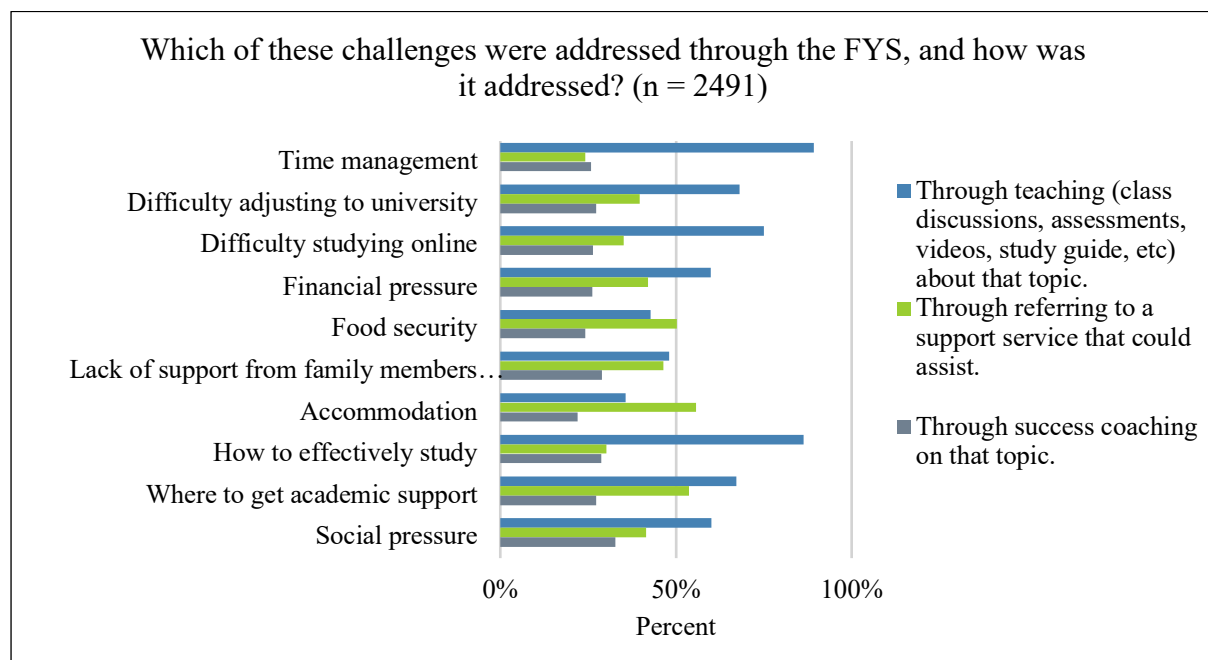


Figure 4.7: Challenges that were addressed through the FYS and how the FYS addressed these challenges

In the second semester, students were asked if the content taught in the FYS helped them to be intentional about their employability during their undergraduate studies. As shown in Figure 4.7, the majority of students agreed that it did; the content on “building my future” received the highest rating since the majority of students indicated “always” to positively respond to this question. In the previous year, students had indicated that they would have liked this content to be presented sooner. Since the 2021 winter school was the response to this need, students had access to all of the career development, employability, and entrepreneurship content before the start of the second semester. The data in Figure 4.8 prove that this was a successful move,

as students were supported in the FYS programme’s second semester transition aim – for students to see the value of their degree and to become intentional about their future employability in order to ensure retention through to the second year.

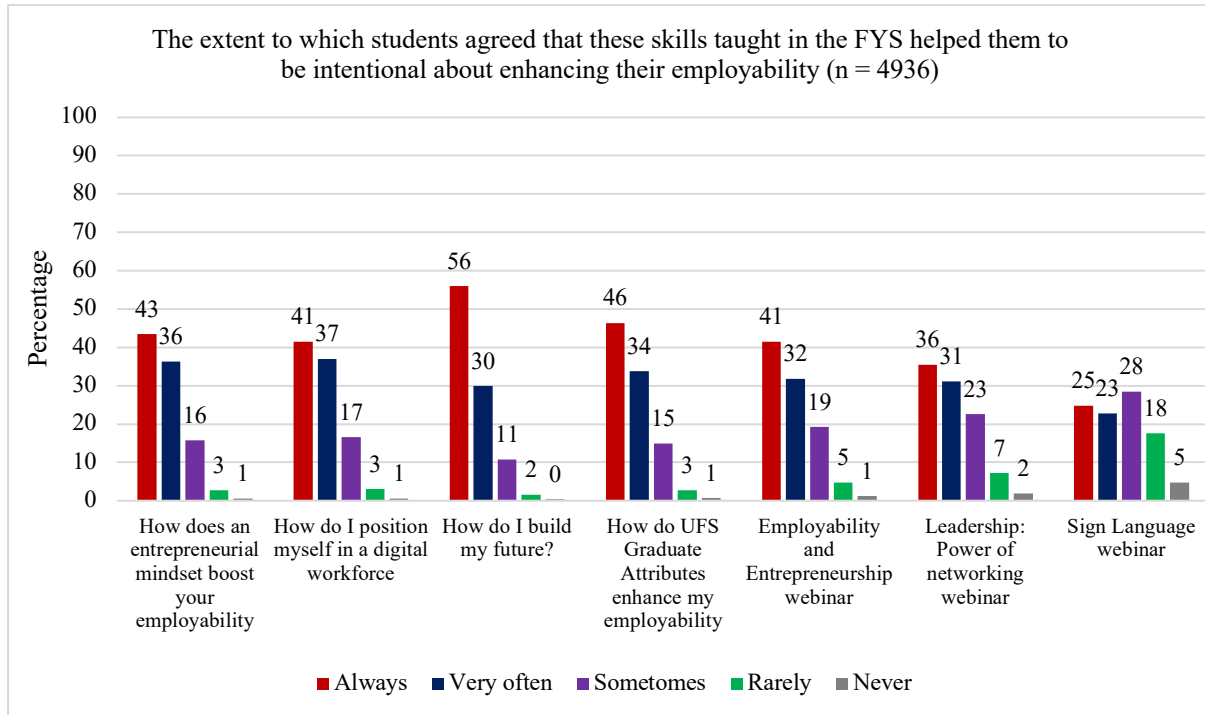


Figure 4.8: The extent to which students agreed that these skills taught in the FYS helped them to be intentional about enhancing their employability

The waiving of compulsory attendance continued in 2021. This allowed the FYS team to monitor student participation without compulsory class attendance. Students’ attendance of online synchronous classes and their access to class video recordings could be tracked through the Learning Management System, Blackboard. Students were asked about their class attendance preferences, and it was interesting to note that students’ responses were relatively evenly distributed between online synchronous, online asynchronous, face-to-face, and a blend of online and face-to-face (Figure 4.9).

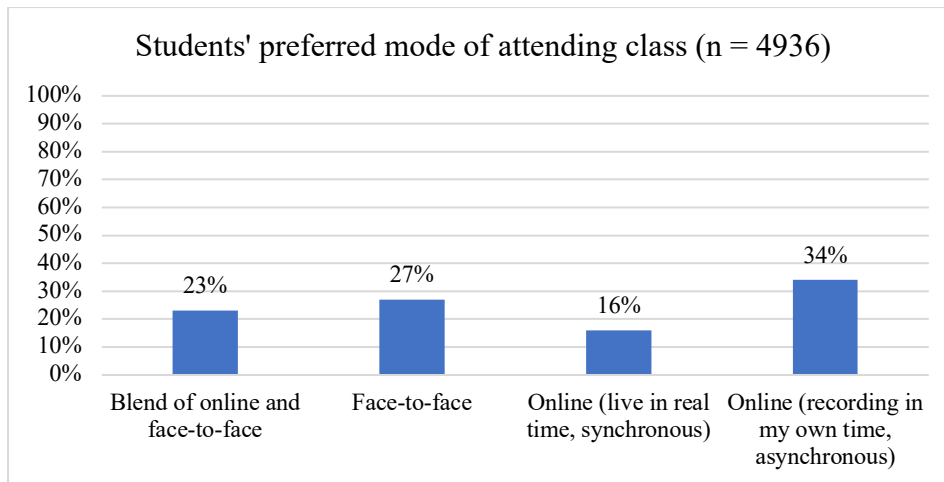


Figure 4.9: Students' preferred mode of attending class

This led to the decision to present the FYS in a hyflex mode in the following year. The hyflex mode meant that all of these options would be available to students, who could choose which mode of learning would suit them best. A further decision was to waive the compulsory nature of attendance and rather integrate attendance as a minor weighting of the overall assessment mark.

4.5.2 Using the FYCPs to reflect on the changes in the FYS design and implementation

In this section, I use the FYCPs to retrospectively analyse whether the changes implemented in the FYS as a result of student evaluation feedback align with this conceptual transition framework. There was evidence that the student evaluation feedback was used to improve the design of the FYS specific to the FYCPs of transition, diversity, design, engagement, and evaluation and monitoring. However, the FYCP of assessment should be included in the design of the FYS in future.

Transition as an FYCP was addressed through the clear shift in the focus of the FYS from 2017 onwards. Each year, the team became more intentional about using student evaluation to support students in their transition. Evidence of this intentionality can be seen through the way in which students were regularly asked about the challenges they experienced and if (and how) the FYS helped them with these challenges. This echoes the work of Newman *et al.* (2023), who found that being intentional about using student evaluation to inform the design of the course improved the efficacy of the course over time, thereby addressing the goals of the course.

Diversity was addressed by changing the mode of delivery of the FYS to a summer and winter school. This enabled the FYS to address the range of student preparedness for university by timeously supporting students in developing the skills they need to be successful. Furthermore, allowing students to attend class in the format best suited to them, enabled **diversity** (in terms of the preferences students have for learning) but also enabled the team to address **design** issues by being student-centred and teaching in the way students want to be taught. A key component of **design** that featured throughout the five-year reflection of the FYS was a focus on relatability and ensuring students found the content relevant and useful to address their transition challenges.

Engagement was evident when small-class discussions were integrated into the curriculum to enhance active learning and students' interaction with each other. The large class learning experiences, however, were retained to allow for learning experiences that students appreciated due to the expertise of the speaker. In her study of how student evaluations are typically used, Krupp (2022) made a proposal for changing evaluation practices into meaningful evaluations that benefit the student body through changes made to the course. Krupp also found that when re-designing a course based on feedback or going as far as changing the format or mode of delivery (in this case, an FYS), it is important to consider that feedback within context. The example of the FYS at the UFS did just that – it considered the different responses to how students want to experience class interactions and did so against the backdrop of the institutional context and the feasibility of the changes. It also appropriately considered the benefits of providing multiple ways of engagement.

Evaluation and monitoring were always in place in this FYS. However, the student evaluation questions improved over time until the team was able to ask the right questions to ascertain whether there was evidence of the student experience related to transition, and which of the FYS content worked and did not work. The use of both quantitative and qualitative data in this FYS has been proven to be the best practice by other studies that have made use of student evaluation to inform their design (Steyn *et al.*, 2019; Borch, *et al.*, 2020; Keup *et al.*, 2022; Samuel and Conceição, 2022; Newman *et al.*, 2023; Schellekens *et al.*, 2024). A recommendation for future practice, as in the example shared by Newman *et al.* (2023), would be to also follow up with senior students to find out if the FYS prepared them for success throughout their undergraduate experience and, looking back, what could be improved. There are learning outcomes of the FYS that will not be achieved in the short term since the focus is

on developing skills for success. Thus, it would be useful to follow up with senior students as part of the evaluation and monitoring of the FYS.

The FYCP of **assessment** requires the FYS to teach students how to be successful in university-level assessments. That is not one of the foci of the FYS at the UFS. Currently, teaching students how to be successful in university-level assessments is covered in academic staff development at the UFS. However, dovetailing information provided to academic staff and to students will allow for a multi-faceted approach to ensure reinforcement of the importance of this skill. Therefore, it is recommended that the FYCP of **assessment** be included in the future design of this programme. In the example of using student evaluation data to improve their students' self-regulation, Schellekens *et al.* (2024) found that assessment design, assessment as a source of information, and assessment as a dialogue were key to helping their students develop the outcomes of their programme. In the case of this FYS, assessment design can be used to teach students to carefully read and respond to instructions, become self-directed learners, and learn how to apply theory.

4.6 Conclusion

This paper explored the use of student evaluations in informing the design of an evidence-based transition programme. It did so by using a case study – the FYS at the UFS over a period of five years, from 2017 to 2021. At the beginning of this period, it was clear that the questions being asked in the evaluation could be improved by asking students more about the challenges they face while transitioning into university. The findings of this study confirmed that meaningful questions lead to data that can be used to make meaningful improvements in the programme. FYS practitioners must move away from surface-level questions about student satisfaction to questions about the outcomes of the programme. In other words, the focus of evaluations should rather be on ascertaining whether, according to the student feedback, the programme achieved what it set out to.

Another useful takeaway from this case study was that the use of qualitative questions in the questionnaires and the use of focus groups were helpful in gaining a deeper understanding of students' experiences. This deeper understanding was a critical part of the review of the FYS each year. It is imperative to note that an excellent transition programme is one that welcomes

critique in order to enhance the quality of the programme and meet the students' needs. Thus, FYS practitioners should be in a state of continuous learning and improvement.

Finally, a transition framework, such as the FYCPs from Transition Pedagogy (Nelson *et al.*, 2014), provides the FYS practitioner with an objective lens through which to measure whether or not the programme meets the requirements of supporting transition. Such a framework is useful in informing the design of the FYS and in informing the design of the student evaluation. The learnings from this study can be used to inform the design of any student-centred programme, be it curricular or co-curricular, and these learnings are applicable in most contexts, whether local or international. Additionally, this paper contributes to the literature on first-year support by encouraging an evidence-based approach to the design of transition programmes.

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5 CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

I conclude this dissertation with an overview of the aim of the study and research questions. I will also provide a summary of the key takeaways from each chapter while also reflecting on the conceptual framework, research methodology, findings, the value and knowledge contribution of this study, and the limitations and recommendations. I end this study with a self-reflection focusing on what this research journey has meant to me.

5.1 Aim of the study and research questions

This study aimed to contribute to the body of knowledge on how student support services in universities design and evaluate first-year transition programmes, particularly through FYS programmes. This focus is crucial due to the numerous challenges students encounter when transitioning into their first year of university, both internationally and in South Africa. Consequently, the study implemented a structured, evidence-based method for delivering support that aligns with the transition needs of first-year students. Although there are South African publications on FYEs, there are fewer publications on FYS programmes. Those publications that do present information about FYS programmes mainly focus on the practical application of those programmes. Thus, the gap identified for this study was the limited literature in the South African space on evidence-based approaches to the design and evaluation of FYS programmes and the limited literature on the use of conceptual or theoretical frameworks to design and evaluate FYS programmes. As such, the primary research question was: *how can First Year Seminars be optimised by implementing an evidence-based approach to design and evaluation?* There were also two secondary research questions. The first was *how can evidence-based First Year Seminars be designed?* The second question was *how can the evaluation of First Year Seminars inform successful student transitions?* Each of the secondary questions was answered in the form of an article, which I will elaborate on when discussing Chapters 3 and 4 in Section 5.2.

5.2 Chapter summaries

5.2.1 Chapter 1

As a rationale for the study, Chapter 1 focused on exploring the history of access to higher education in South Africa and the urgent need to widen access. The widening of access is supposed to equip students for success and transform the narrative of South Africa's oppressive past. However, systemic issues in the basic education system have left many students underprepared for university. I further delved into the challenges and experiences of first-year students in higher education and explored the different kinds of support interventions that can help address these challenges. Using previous literature, I positioned the study within the broader knowledge base of designing first-year transitioning programmes and identified the gaps in the literature mentioned earlier. I provided this context to introduce FYEs, which are relatively new in South African higher education, having only started in 2008, and introduced the FYS at the UFS as the case study on which this study focused.

5.2.2 Chapter 2

In Chapter 2, I wanted the reader to understand how FYS programmes should be conceptualised to address student transition needs while providing a clear picture of the various theories that have informed the design and implementation of FYS programmes. For that reason, I summarised the types of FYS programmes, explored the factors to consider when conceptualising FYS programmes, and delved into the theories that have influenced the design, implementation, and evaluation of transition programmes. Some of these theories focused on student dropout and adjustment to university, while others focused on the different stages students go through when they transition into and through their first year. One theory focused on epistemological access and engagement. I also included conceptual frameworks for transition as part of exploring the various theoretical underpinnings of student transition. The final section of this chapter was a detailed explanation of the conceptual framework of this study, namely Transition Pedagogy and its FYCPs (Kift *et al.*, 2010; Nelson *et al.*, 2014), as well as examples of how this framework has been implemented.

5.2.3 Chapter 3 (Article 1)

Article 1 aimed to answer the research question: how can evidence-based First Year Seminars be designed? The purpose of this article was to demonstrate how the FYCPs could be used to

evaluate the design of an FYS, using the example of the FYS at the UFS. To do this, curriculum documents from the FYS at UFS were analysed and mapped against the FYCPs for design. The findings from this article suggested that there are additional design and evaluation criteria for the FYCPs that may be considered in the South African context and in environments with similar challenges. Three main criteria were identified to expand the scope of the FYCP framework for the purpose of being contextually relevant. The first is to include the development of the digital skills required to successfully engage with materials, staff, and peers. The second is that the design of content related to academic processes requires FYS practitioners to understand students' prior knowledge so that content is pitched correctly. The third criterion is that the FYS should be designed for students to realise the benefits of engaging with diverse perspectives, backgrounds, worldviews, and skills through group work. The first two criteria relate to the transition FYCP, and the third criterion relates to the diversity FYCP. When considering the application of these findings to other first-year support initiatives, it is important to note that the FYS used as an example in this article is integrated into the curriculum of all degree programmes and, therefore, has a large-scale impact due to the fact that all first-year students enrol in the programme. Also, the type of FYS used as an example allows for all of the FYCPs to be included in its design.

However, that does not limit the application of the FYCPs. It is possible to design for some of the principles, and not all of them, based on the goals of the institution's first-year support. Because the FYCPs are part of Transition Pedagogy (Kift *et al.*, 2010), which encourages an institution-wide approach to first-year support. The intention would be to eliminate duplication, enhance reinforcement, and identify areas needing improvement. Such an approach could help pinpoint which resources are best suited to address any gaps in the student support curriculum. An example of what such an approach could look like is provided in Section 5.3.1. The critical success factors of this approach would include collaboration, consultation, and engagement across the institution, with a focus on the students' experience of first-year support and its effects on retention and success.

5.2.4 Chapter 4 (Article 2)

Article 2 aimed to answer the research question: how can the evaluation of first-year seminars inform successful student transitions? The purpose of this paper was to examine how student evaluations can guide the design of an evidence-based transition programme. I was particularly interested in understanding the students' experience of first-year support and how that affected

the design of the FYS. The FYS at the UFS served as a case study, focusing on student evaluation data over a period of five years from 2017 to 2021, while utilising the FYCPs as the conceptual framework for transition programme design (Nelson *et al.*, 2014). The article employed the pragmatic paradigm, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data, and mapped the student evaluation data against the transition principles in the FYCPs.

The findings of this article confirmed that meaningful questions generate data that can facilitate meaningful improvements in the programme. FYS practitioners should shift from merely asking surface-level questions about student satisfaction in student evaluations to aligning the questions with the programme's intended outcomes. A critical insight from this case study was the inclusion of qualitative questions in the questionnaires and the implementation of focus groups to gain a deeper understanding of students' experiences, which proved essential to the annual review of the FYS. It is imperative to note that a high-quality transition programme embraces critique to improve and meet the students' needs. Thus, FYS practitioners should be in a state of continuous learning and improvement. Finally, a transition framework, such as the FYCPs from Transition Pedagogy (Nelson *et al.*, 2014), provides FYS practitioners with an unbiased perspective to evaluate if the programme meets the requirements of supporting transition or not.

Thus, it is beneficial to use such a framework not only for the design of an FYS but also for the design of the student evaluation process. The insights gained from this study can be used to inform the design of any student-centred programme, whether curricular or co-curricular and are applicable in most contexts, whether local or international.

5.3 Value of the study/ Knowledge contribution

In this study, I explored how a curricular FYE can include many support interventions and can be a one-stop shop for students if its design is evidence-based and assesses whether its outcomes have been met. Proving that FYS programmes are successful is crucial for their continuation in higher education institutions. However, understanding the reasons behind their success and identifying ways to enhance them are essential for the successful transition, and academic and personal growth of the first-year students who participate in them (Keup *et al.*, 2022). What this study has done is not only confirm the benefit of transition support but also

contribute to the literature base by providing an evidence-based approach that is grounded in theory, has clear implementation strategies, and can change the narrative of FYE in this country from siloed curricular or co-curricular interventions to whole-of-institution interventions. A successful FYS benefits students and benefits the institution by positively contributing to retention and success. This study further shows how to use student evaluations to inform the design of an FYS and how to map the transition outcomes of an FYS against a sound conceptual framework.

5.3.1 What does this mean for FYS programmes?

The FYCPs framework (Nelson *et al.*, 2014) is incredibly useful for evaluating existing first-year support and designing an FYS best suited to the context of each university. These best practices can be used despite the fact that each university is likely to deliver something slightly different, dependent on the student cohort, their needs, and the feasibility of the programme. The FYCPs framework is an excellent tool for making the case for optimising transition support at institutions.

If student evaluations focus solely on superficial evaluations of facilitator efficacy and student satisfaction, practitioners will not receive meaningful feedback to inform the design of the FYS. Student evaluations should give students a voice, where they feel that they are heard and are contributing to the enhancement of the FYS programme for future cohorts. These evaluations need to be part of the review process of the FYS programme.

Transition Pedagogy (Kift *et al.*, 2010; Kift, 2015) makes a compelling case for institution-wide approaches to first-year support. This would mean that stakeholders involved in providing first-year support would need to work together to:

- a. Map the various available support initiatives,
- b. Compare the attendance and impact of each initiative on student retention and success, and where student evaluations are involved, critically analyse those to look at what works and what does not,
- c. Consider combining and integrating existing initiatives to work smarter, not harder,
- d. Use a transition framework to design a revised version of an FYE or FYS programme and pilot it, and
- e. Use the transition framework to design quantitative and qualitative student evaluation measures to receive meaningful feedback on the pilot to inform the way forward.

Such an approach would also lighten the load on students and provide them with a clear understanding of the support available to them at the institution, as opposed to overwhelming them in their first year with multiple support initiatives. The findings from Chapter 3 (Article 1) suggest additional questions should be added to the FYCPs to ensure that the principles work for the context. Therefore, regular checks should be built into the evaluation process to determine if the framework being used is appropriate for meeting the needs of the students.

5.3.2 What do this study's findings mean for the body of knowledge in SA?

Though the focus of this study was on the FYS, the points made in this section are applicable to all FYE or first-year support initiatives. As explained in Chapter 1, currently, the FYE literature base mainly consists of sharing case study examples of various FYE programmes and practitioner reflections on the challenges faced when implementing FYE programmes in curricular or co-curricular spaces. This is understandable, given that the FYE movement in South Africa has not been around for very long. However, the FYE field must move from publishing solely about operational implementations of FYS programmes to publishing articles about the challenges of using transition frameworks to inform the design and evaluation of FYS programmes and about using student evaluation data to inform the design of FYS programmes.

Currently, knowledge contributions on FYS programmes grounded in theory and conceptual frameworks are scarce in South Africa. This study will pave the way for more examples of how those in the field can use student evaluation data that critiques FYE practices, and provides examples of how practitioners can use transition frameworks to design and evaluate their programmes. This study contributes to the field by providing theoretical underpinnings that are clear, and solutions rather than just challenges. As a country, South Africa is incredibly resilient and able to support students despite financial constraints, the lack of electricity and water, and inadequate infrastructure because being a South African means we care deeply for one another and we do not allow our environment or challenges to stand in the way of helping students. However, because of the load these challenges create, we are often so operationally focused that we do not make the time to reflect, to read, and to contribute new knowledge to the literature base. I am hoping that this study facilitates collaborations across universities to share the load and contribute to the literature base together.

5.4 Limitations

In the UFS FYS case example used in this study, there was a lack of consistency in the student evaluation questions from year to year and in the frequency of student evaluations. Given the rate at which this FYS was evolving, it makes sense that the questions would change to reflect the new developments. That said, the questions asked of students did align with the outcomes of the programme and the overarching outcomes of supporting students in their transition into and through university. The lack of consistency in the frequency of the student evaluations was also influenced by the rate at which the FYS was evolving, as the team managing the programme had to balance operational demands with constant development. However, sufficient data was collected each year to inform the design of this study.

5.5 Recommendations for future research

There are numerous examples of FYS programmes and FYE initiatives in South Africa. The main recommendation is for more institutions to publish their work to grow the literature base in the country. It is crucial that this work is grounded in theoretical and conceptual frameworks and uses student evaluation data to inform the design of first-year support programmes. In Chapter 3 (Article 1), I expanded the scope of the FYCPs framework based on contextual considerations. Future research could include other institutions also doing so to account for contextual differences and add to the literature on this topic.

The students who were enrolled each year were the students who participated in evaluating the FYS in Chapter 4 (Article 2). Future research could include following up with senior students, as the aims of many FYS programmes are often realised later. For example, senior students inevitably use skills such as time management, goal setting or referencing and plagiarism in their senior years. Gathering data from senior students would provide a different perspective on how the FYS impacted their transition, what worked, and what could be improved.

5.6 Final thoughts – self-reflection

I would like to conclude with a self-reflection. Being closely involved with the implementation of the FYS at the UFS, writing this dissertation has been a significant journey of self-

development for me. The research rigour required when completing a Masters degree forced me to be objective and critical, leading to a wealth of ideas for enhancing this specific FYS. Having worked closely with the students since the inception of the FYS, and with teaching assistants and learning experience presenters, stepping back to explore these research questions and analyse the data through the lens of a researcher made me realise the progress we have made in supporting student transitions. However, delving deeply into the theories that inform transition and the conceptual frameworks for designing and evaluating it has transformed me from an FYS practitioner into both a researcher and practitioner.

I would pour over literature and learn something new with each article, broadening my understanding of transition. Moving forward, I plan to use this approach of critically examining our design and analysing student evaluation data to create the sweet spot where theory and practice meet, with the affirmation of doing right by the students. This has been an empowering and enlightening experience, for which I am deeply grateful.

5.7 References (specific to Chapter 5)

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APPENDICES

Ethical clearance letter

GENERAL/HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (GHREC)

04-Oct-2022

Dear Mrs Lauren Oosthuizen

Application Approved

Research Project Title:

Optimising the design, implementation and evaluation of First Year Seminars in South African higher education: Implications for evidence-based practices.

Ethical Clearance number:

UFS-HSD2022/0326/22

We are pleased to inform you that your application for ethical clearance has been approved. Your ethical clearance is valid for twelve (12) months from the date of issue. We request that any changes that may take place during the course of your study/research project be submitted to the ethics office to ensure ethical transparency. Furthermore, you are requested to submit the final report of your study/research project to the ethics office. Should you require more time to complete this research, please apply for an extension. Thank you for submitting your proposal for ethical clearance; we wish you the best of luck and success with your research.

Yours sincerely

Dr Adri Du Plessis

Chairperson: General/Human Research Ethics Committee

205 Nelson Mandela
Drive
Park West
Bloemfontein 9301
South Africa

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9337

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Letter from language editor



Editing by Michelle Joubert

Dear Sir/Madam,

RE: Editing of Masters Dissertation, Ms. Lauren Oosthuizen

This is a letter to confirm that Ms. Lauren Oosthuizen's entire MA dissertation, *Optimising the Design, Implementation and Evaluation of First-Year Seminars in South African Higher Education: Implications for Evidence-Based Practices*, has been thoroughly proofread and the language checked. I am an experienced proofreader with over 12 years of experience editing professional, commercial, and academic documents. Please see my CV below for your perusal.

I trust that you find this letter of confirmation in order.

Please feel free to contact me at michellejoubertediting@gmail.com or on 060 729 6297 should you require any more information from me.

Kind regards,

Dr Michelle Joubert

Curriculum Vitae: Michelle Anne Joubert

PERSONAL DETAILS

Name: Dr Michelle Anne Joubert
Date of Birth: 23 September 1985
Citizenship: South African
ID Number: 8509230016083
Languages: English (first language); Afrikaans (second language)
Contact Information: +2760 729 6297
joubertma@ufs.ac.za
Physical address: 21a Calais Road, Bayswater, Bloemfontein, 9301.

QUALIFICATIONS

- 2023: **PhD with specialisation in English** (University of the Free State, South Africa): *Liminal spaces, liminal identities: re-evaluating the role of academic literacies practitioners in the South African university*. Primary supervisor: Dr Sherran Clarence (Nottingham Trent University, UK); Co-supervisor: Dr Susan Brokensha (University of the Free State, SA). Examiners: Dr Alex Ding (Leeds University, UK); Dr Lynn Quinn (Rhodes University, SA); Dr Carla Els (University of the Free State, SA).
- 2017: **Postgraduate Certificate of Academic Practice** (Durham University, UK).
- 2013: **Master of Arts: English Studies** (*cum laude*) (University of Pretoria, Pretoria): *Terry Pratchett and the Johnny Maxwell Trilogy: Death, War and Laughter*. The dissertation focuses on Pratchett's satirical treatment of war, death, the destruction of the environment, and the passing of time in his *Johnny Maxwell* children's trilogy.
- 2012: **Master of Arts: TESOL [Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages]** (*cum laude*) (American University, Washington DC). I received a Fulbright Scholarship to complete this degree. This was a taught Master's degree which included modules such as the principles of linguistics, second language acquisition, language assessment, cultural issues in the classroom, reading and writing, materials and curriculum design, pronunciation, research methods, and practical teaching.
- 2010: **Cambridge Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (CELTA)**.
- 2008: **Baccalaureus Artium Honores: English Studies** (*cum laude*) (University of Pretoria).
- 2007: **Baccalaureus Artium: English Studies** (*cum laude*) (University of Pretoria).

OTHER TRAINING AND CERTIFICATES:

2022: Arbinger Outward Mindset Discussion Leader

PROFESSIONAL BODIES

2021 (current): Founder of South African Association for Academic Literacy Practitioners (SAAALP)

2021 (current): Member of South African Association for Language Teachers (SAALT)

2020 - 2023: Member of the English National Language Board (part of PanSALB – Pan South African Language Body)

2018 (current): Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (UK)

CAREER

2019 (current): **Deputy Director: Centre for Teaching and Learning (Head of Academic Language and Literacy Development)** (University of the Free State).

2017–2018: **Assistant Professor: EAP co-ordinator** (Summer Pre-sessional and Academic Writing Unit) at the Durham Centre for Academic Development (DCAD) at Durham University.

2016–2018: **Curriculum Support Teacher** at (Durham University, UK)

MA TESOL lecturer and supervisor (Durham University, UK).

2014–2018: **EAP (English for Academic Purposes) teacher** (Durham University, UK).

2013-2014: **External writer for UNISA** (The University of South Africa).

2013: **Teacher in the TESOL programme** (University of Pretoria).

Assistant lecturer in the Department of English (University of Pretoria).

2012: **Teaching assistant** (ESL) at Carlos Rosario Public Charter School (Washington DC) (September – December).

Volunteer teacher in the TESOL programme at Chevy Chase Presbyterian Church (Maryland, Washington DC) (February – August).

2011: **Volunteer teacher** at the Refugee Centre at Montgomery College (Maryland, Washington DC). (September – November).

- 2010-2011: **Assistant lecturer** in the Department of English (University of Pretoria).
- 2010: **Teacher** in the English Department's TESOL programme (University of Pretoria). (July – December).
- 2009: **Tutor** in the Department of English (University of Pretoria).
- 2009 – **Freelance editor and proofreader** (clients include UNISA, the University of Pretoria, Durham University, University of the Free State)

REVIEW WORK

- 2024 (current): Member of the Editorial Board, *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*
- 2022 (current): Peer reviewer: Reviewer and judge for the Annual UFS Teaching and Learning awards
- 2021 (current): Peer reviewer on Editorial Board: *Professional and Academic English* (IATEFL)
- 2020 (current): Peer reviewer for the *South African Journal of Higher Education*, *South African Journal of Language Teaching, Reading and Writing*, *Applied Linguistics*, *Perspectives in Education*.

EXAMINATION AND MODERATION

- 2024: MA external examiner, Faculty of Education, UFS
- 2023: PhD external examiner (curriculum design specialist), School of Nursing, UFS
- 2022: Internal moderator UFS Business School PGDip skills module
- 2022 (current): MA external examiner for the University of Pretoria, the University of Cape Town, the University of the Free State

SCHOLARSHIP

Conferences

- 2023: 'Academic literacy as a social justice imperative'. Presented at the 4th biennial conference of the SoTL in the South, *Teaching and Learning for Sustainable Futures* (November, 2023).
- 2023: 'Foreign language acquisition practice in Southern Africa'. **Keynote speaker.** Symposium at the University of the Free State (June, 2023, University of the Free State).

Submission and acceptance of publication of Chapter 3
(Article 1) to the South African Journal of Higher
Education

Subject: [SAJHE] Submission Acknowledgement

Date: Friday, 21 June 2024 at 12:50:16 South Africa Standard Time

From: Anel De Beer

To: Lauren Oosthuizen

Mrs Lauren Lisa Oosthuizen:

Thank you for submitting the manuscript, "USING FIRST YEAR CURRICULUM PRINCIPLES AS AN EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH TO DESIGN AND EVALUATE A FIRST YEAR SEMINAR " to South African Journal of Higher Education. With the online journal management system that we are using, you will be able to track its progress through the editorial process by logging in to the journal web site:

Manuscript URL: <https://www.journals.ac.za/sajhe/authorDashboard/submission/6591>

Username: hingll

***Please take note of the following:**

-That a once-off submission fee of R500 is payable when submitting your article to the journal – forward proof of payment to sajhe@sun.ac.za

-Grammar and language editing is the sole responsibility of the author.

-The journal is only responsible for layout and reference checking.

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Thank you for considering this journal as a venue for your work.

Anel De Beer

SAJHE Managing Editor

South African Journal of Higher Education <http://www.journals.ac.za/index.php/sajhe>
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Wednesday, July 31, 2024 at 01:44:22 South Africa Standard Time

Subject: [SAJHE] Editor Decision
Date: Wednesday, 17 July 2024 at 14:31:38 South Africa Standard Time
From: SAJHE Administrator
To: Lauren Oosthuizen
Attachments: B-Article_for SAJHE_20240617 _ sanitized on 21 June 2024.docx, B-SAJHE Article Review Summary.docx

Lauren Lisa Oosthuizen:

We have reached a decision regarding your submission to South African Journal of Higher Education, "USING FIRST YEAR CURRICULUM PRINCIPLES AS AN EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH TO DESIGN AND EVALUATE A FIRST YEAR SEMINAR ".

Our decision is: Revisions Required

Please login on your profile/user account on the webpage to access the comments of the review - under the review button (summary - review - editing).

SAJHE Administrator
sajhe@sun.ac.za

South African Journal of Higher Education <http://www.journals.ac.za/index.php/sajhe>
sajhe@sun.ac.za

Turnitin report

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Schillreff, Julie Renee. "The Freshman Seminar as Ceremony: The Experiences of Female Native American Persisters in a Retention-oriented Freshman Seminar Course in the Northwest United States", Texas A&M University, 2020

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Example of a questionnaire used in the FYS at the UFS

UFSS1504 Module evaluation 2021

1) * Would you like to continue with the survey?

- Yes
- No

Please note, your survey answers are anonymised and the survey responses will not be linked to your bonus mark. Your student number is only required to allocate your 5% bonus mark.

2) * Please enter your UFS student number.

0/255

The following set of questions are specific to attending UFSS classes in the first semester:

3) Did you attend the live online classes in the summer school (synchronous)?

- Yes
- No

This box is shown in preview only.

The following conditions must be fulfilled for this question to be shown

If the question "Did you attend the live online classes in the summer school (synchronous)?" contains any of these alternatives

- "Yes"

4) Please elaborate on why you attended the live online classes in the summer school? You can select all that apply .

- My faculty told me to attend.
- I received the timetable and email indicating I should attend.
- I wanted to participate in the live online classes.
- My friends were attending.

This box is shown in preview only.

The following conditions must be fulfilled for this question to be shown

If the question "Did you attend the live online classes in the summer school (synchronous)?" contains any of these alternatives

- "No"

5) Please elaborate on why you DID NOT attend the live online classes in the summer school? You can select all that apply .

- I was not aware of the live online classes.
- I did not have stable internet connectivity in the area where I live to be able to attend.
- I did not have data.
- I did not have a device.
- I registered late.
- I did not want to attend the live online classes.
- The study guide was sufficient so I did not need to attend the live online classes.

This box is shown in preview only.

The following conditions must be fulfilled for this question to be shown

If the question "Did you attend the live online classes in the summer school (synchronous)?" contains any of these alternatives

- "Yes"

6) Would you recommend that other students attend the summer school in this format?

- Yes
- No

7) Did you watch the video recordings of the classes (asynchronous)?

- Yes
- No

This box is shown in preview only.

The following conditions must be fulfilled for this question to be shown

If the question "Did you watch the video recordings of the classes (asynchronous)?" contains any of these alternatives

- "Yes"

8) Please elaborate on why you watched the video recordings of the classes? Select all that apply.

- I could not attend the live classes so I had to watch the video recordings.
- I attended the live classes but wanted to work through the content again by watching the video recordings.
- The video recordings were helpful for preparation of the assessment.
- I could attend some live classes, but not all, so I watched the video recordings to catch up.
- I watched the video recordings to make sure I received the attendance mark.
- Other

This box is shown in preview only.

The following conditions must be fulfilled for this question to be shown

If the question "Did you watch the video recordings of the classes (asynchronous)?" contains any of these alternatives

- "Yes"

9) When you watched the video recordings, how often did you watch the full video?

- Always
- Sometimes
- Never

This box is shown in preview only.

The following conditions must be fulfilled for this question to be shown

If the question "Did you watch the video recordings of the classes (asynchronous)?" contains any of these alternatives

- "No"

10) Please elaborate on why you did not watch the video recordings? Select all that apply.

- It was not necessary as I attended the live online classes.
- I did not have time to watch the video recordings.
- I did not want to watch the video recordings.
- I started watching it but did not find it helpful/useful.
- The study guide was sufficient so I did not need to watch the video recordings.

The following set of questions are specific to attending UFSS classes in the second semester:**11) Did you attend the live online classes in the winter school (synchronous)?**

- Yes
- No

This box is shown in preview only.

The following conditions must be fulfilled for this question to be shown

If the question "Did you attend the live online classes in the winter school (synchronous)?" contains any of these alternatives

- "Yes"

12) Please elaborate on why you attended the live online classes in the winter school? You can select all that apply .

- My faculty told me to attend.
- I received the timetable and email indicating I should attend.
- I wanted to participate in the live online classes.
- My friends were attending.

This box is shown in preview only.

The following conditions must be fulfilled for this question to be shown

If the question "Did you attend the live online classes in the winter school (synchronous)?" contains any of these alternatives

- "No"

13) Please elaborate on why you DID NOT attend the live online classes in the winter school? You can select all that apply .

- I was not aware of the live online classes.
- I did not have stable internet connectivity in the area where I live to be able to attend.
- I did not have data.
- I did not have a device.
- I registered late.
- I did not want to attend the live online classes.
- The study guide was sufficient so I did not need to attend the live online classes.

This box is shown in preview only.

The following conditions must be fulfilled for this question to be shown

If the question "Did you attend the live online classes in the winter school (synchronous)?" contains any of these alternatives

- "Yes"

14) Would you recommend that other students attend the winter school in this format?

- Yes
- No

15) Did you watch the video recordings of the classes (asynchronous)?

- Yes
- No

This box is shown in preview only.

The following conditions must be fulfilled for this question to be shown

If the question "Did you watch the video recordings of the classes (asynchronous)?" contains any of these alternatives

- "Yes"

16) Please elaborate on why you watched the video recordings of the classes? Select all that apply.

- I could not attend the live classes so I had to watch the video recordings.
- I attended the live classes but wanted to work through the content again by watching the video recordings.
- The video recordings were helpful for preparation of the assessment.
- I could attend some live classes, but not all, so I watched the video recordings to catch up.
- I watched the video recordings to make sure I received the attendance mark.
- Other

This box is shown in preview only.

The following conditions must be fulfilled for this question to be shown

If the question "Did you watch the video recordings of the classes (asynchronous)?" contains any of these alternatives

- "Yes"

17) When you watched the video recordings, how often did you watch the full video?

- Always
- Sometimes
- Never

This box is shown in preview only.

The following conditions must be fulfilled for this question to be shown

If the question "Did you watch the video recordings of the classes (asynchronous)?" contains any of these alternatives

- "No"

18) Please elaborate on why you did not watch the video recordings? Select all that apply.

- It was not necessary as I attended the live online classes.
- I did not have time to watch the video recordings.
- I did not want to watch the video recordings.
- I started watching it but did not find it helpful/useful.
- The study guide was sufficient so I did not need to watch the video recordings.
- Other

19) What is your preferred format of attending classes?

- Online (live in real time, synchronous)
- Online (recording in my own time, asynchronous)
- Face-to-face
- Blend of online and face-to-face

20) Please elaborate on why that is your preferred format of attending classes?

[Empty text box for response]

0/4000

The following questions are specific to challenges you have experienced this year, and your transition into university.

21) What were the biggest challenges you experienced in the first semester this year? Rank these options in order of most to least challenging for you.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Time management	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Difficulty adjusting to university	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Difficulty studying online	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Financial pressure	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Food security	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lack of support from family members when studying remotely, at home	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Accommodation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How to effectively study	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Where to get academic support	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social pressure	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

22) We are now at the end of the second semester. Did the ranking of challenges change for you as the year progressed? What were the biggest challenges you experienced in the second semester this year? Rank these options in order of most to least challenging for you.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Time management	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Difficulty adjusting to university	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Difficulty studying online	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Financial pressure	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Food security	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lack of support from family members when studying remotely, at home	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Accommodation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How to effectively study	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Where to get academic support	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social pressure	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

23) Did UFSS address any of the challenges you experienced?

- Yes
- No

This box is shown in preview only.

The following conditions must be fulfilled for this question to be shown

If the question "Did UFSS address any of the challenges you experienced?" contains any of these alternatives

- "Yes"

24) Which of these challenges were addressed through UFSS, and how was this addressed? Select all that apply .

	Through teaching (class discussions, assessments, videos, study guide, etc) about that topic.	Through referring to a support service that could assist.	Through success coaching on that topic.	Other	
Time management	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="text"/>
Difficulty adjusting to university	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="text"/>
Difficulty studying online	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="text"/>
Financial pressure	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="text"/>
Food security	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="text"/>
Lack of support from family members when studying remotely, at home	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="text"/>
Accommodation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="text"/>
How to effectively study	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="text"/>
Where to get academic support	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="text"/>
Social pressure	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="text"/>

25) To what extent would you agree that the following content taught in UFSS helped you adapt to university?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Computer literacy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Time management and goal setting	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Study skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Referencing , plagiarism and searching for academic resources	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Financial literacy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Leadership identity and communication skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Growth mindset and re-framing your thoughts	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

26) To what extent did you use these skills to be successful in the rest of your academic programme?

	Always	Very often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Computer literacy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Time management and goal setting	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Study skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Referencing , plagiarism and searching for academic resources	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Financial literacy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Leadership identity and communication skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Growth mindset and re-framing your thoughts	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

27) To what extent would you agree that the following skills taught in UFSS has helped you to be intentional about enhancing your employability during your undergraduate studies?

	Always	Very often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
How does an entrepreneurial mindset boost your employability??	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How do I position myself in a digital age workforce?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How do I build my future?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How do UFS Graduate Attributes enhances my employability?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sign Language webinar	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Leadership: Power of networking webianr	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Employability and Entrepreneurship webinar	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

28) What further support do you need to enhance your employability, while at university?

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The following questions are about communication from the UFSS Module Office.

29) To what extent do you agree that the communication regarding online classes and webinar schedules was sufficient in this module?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

This box is shown in preview only.

The following conditions must be fulfilled for this question to be shown

If the question "To what extent do you agree that the communication regarding online classes and webinar schedules was sufficient in this module?" contains any of these alternatives

- "Strongly disagree"
- "Disagree"

30) Please elaborate on why you disagree that communication regarding online classes and webinar schedules was sufficient?

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31) To what extent do you agree that the communication regarding assessment was sufficient in this module?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

This box is shown in preview only.

The following conditions must be fulfilled for this question to be shown

If the question "To what extent do you agree that the communication regarding assessment was sufficient in this module? " contains any of these alternatives

- "Strongly disagree"
- "Disagree"

32) Please elaborate on why you disagree that communication regarding assessment was sufficient?

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The following questions are about the assessments in UFSS:

33) What was your experience of the assessments in UFSS?

- Positive
- Negative

This box is shown in preview only.

The following conditions must be fulfilled for this question to be shown

If the question "What was your experience of the assessments in UFSS?" contains any of these alternatives

- "Positive"

34) Why did you have a positive experience of the assessment in UFSS? Please select all that apply.

- The instructions were clear.
- I could see the link between the content and assessment.
- We were given sufficient time to complete the assessment.
- The feedback was helpful to prepare for the next assessment.
- The assessments helped me take stock of my development of academic skills.
- The assessments helped me learn about the skills I need to be successful after university.
- Other

This box is shown in preview only.

The following conditions must be fulfilled for this question to be shown

If the question "What was your experience of the assessments in UFSS?" contains any of these alternatives

- "Negative"

35) Why did you have a negative experience of the assessment in UFSS? Please select all that apply.

- I did not understand what was expected of me.
- There were too many assessments.
- The feedback was not helpful.
- Other

The following questions are about success coaching:

36) Do you know what success coaching is?

- Yes
- No

37) Were you aware that success coaching is offered as part of your UFSS module?

- Yes
- No

This box is shown in preview only.

The following conditions must be fulfilled for this question to be shown

If the question "Do you know what success coaching is?" contains any of these alternatives

- "Yes"

38) Did you make use of success coaching opportunities?

- Yes
- No

This box is shown in preview only.

The following conditions must be fulfilled for this question to be shown

If the question "Did you make use of success coaching opportunities?" contains any of these alternatives

- "Yes"

39) How did you make use of success coaching? Select all that apply.

- Telephone
- Email
- Blackboard Collaborate

This box is shown in preview only.

The following conditions must be fulfilled for this question to be shown

If the question "Did you make use of success coaching opportunities?" contains any of these alternatives

- "Yes"

40) Do you have a preferred method of speaking to a success coach? If yes, which of the following options do you prefer?

- Telephone
- Email
- Blackboard Collaborate

This box is shown in preview only.

The following conditions must be fulfilled for this question to be shown

If the question "Do you know what success coaching is?" contains any of these alternatives

- "Yes"

41) Would you prefer to reach out to a success coach or have a success coach reach out to you?

- I would like to reach out to the success coach.
- I would like the success coach to reach out to me.
- Both options work for me.

This box is shown in preview only.

The following conditions must be fulfilled for this question to be shown

If the question "Did you make use of success coaching opportunities?" contains any of these alternatives

- "Yes"

42) Did success coaching address any of the challenges you experienced this year?

- Yes
- No

This box is shown in preview only.

The following conditions must be fulfilled for this question to be shown

If the question "Did you make use of success coaching opportunities?" contains any of these alternatives

- "Yes"

43) Do you have recommendations of topics that you would like the success coaches to address?

- Yes
- No

44) Which topics would you like success coaches to address?

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