



## **Student Academic Performance in the South African Institution of Higher Learning: Issues and Challenges**

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### **Abstract**

The study investigated student performance at the police practice department in the college of law at the university of South Africa in order to develop improvement strategies and to address high failure rate as well as prevent student drop-out rate. Research indicates lack of support, socio-economic factors, adaptation from classroom environment to open-distance learning as contributing factors to high failure and drop-out rates. A sample of 350 undergraduate students, representative from various backgrounds were selected using stratified random sampling. A structured questionnaire that employed a 4-point Likert scale was used for data collection. Focus groups interviews as well as individual interviews with students were also conducted. Data was collected through document analysis and semi-structured individual interviews. Data was analysed using Atlas-ti and SPSS. MyUnisa system was also used as a source for statistical analysis. The results indicate a high failure rate among young students from previously disadvantaged background compared to old and working students. Results further showed that there is a link between student performance and drop-out patterns by first-time students at higher institutions of learning. This paper seeks to explore student [pass, failure and dropout rate] at the police practice department at the Unisa.

**Key words:** Student performance, Assessment, Portfolio of Evidence, Distance education, Academic performance, Comprehensive Open Distance Learning

### **Introduction**

Radical Unisa has been an ODL primarily a long-distance learning institution from its establishment more than 140 years ago (Heydenrych and Prinsloo, 2010). However, this tradition is slowly changing to accommodate what is regarded as ‘first generation distance education’, accompanied by new technologies. This paradigm shift has implications for both staff and students, as it also affects the teaching and learning environment. ODL refers to learning system which takes place without learners and teachers encountering each other. This requires support from all involved (Anderson, 2003). Learning in such an environment is made easy using technology (Kahu, 2013). However, a majority of previously disadvantaged communities are still having difficulties which the University is striving to address by accommodating rural students while moving to blended learning mode (Gall and Borg, 2003). Research shows that technology has a way to improve the way distance education is provided (Shepherd, 2009; Wangenge-Ouma and Kupe, 2020). Students in distance learning institutions experiences various challenges, for instance, economic, as well as other challenges. These challenges often have a negative impact on students, resulting in poor performance and eventually, in some cases, total drop-out (Carliner, 2004; Blackmun, and Thibodeau. 2004). Research shows that, strong institutional and learner support can assist to reduce the impact of such challenges on

students (Summer, 2000; Abarashi, 2011). Furthermore, the use of technology has addressed the geographic and communication factor which also have a negative impact on student performance.

However, students in remote areas of South Africa are still having problems since some have no access to computers or must travel long distances to access technology (Ayoo, 2009; Beggaley, 2008). Consequently, these learners find it difficult to communicate with lecturers (Toquero, 2020; Ndlovu, 2011). Some cannot afford to travel distances to reach facilities equipped with computers. Moreover, young students often feel that there is a change from the face-to-face learning environment as they enroll at a distance learning institution. According to Cole, and Todd (2003), most students registering in distance learning institutions are not necessarily able to perform well, as they still require constant guidance. In support of these authors, Moore (2003:108) indicates that, such students do not necessarily have prior experience in distance learning environments or independent learning skills. As a result, they do not immediately qualify as independent learners. Moreover, they are often not ready to face challenges that come with distance learning (Kelly and Stevens 2009:1). This paper investigates whether these paradigm shift have a contribution about student performance and drop-out rate at Unisa.

### **Research Objectives**

This study is guided by the following research objectives:

1. To establish the extent of failure and drop-out rates of undergraduate students.
2. To investigate factors that affect student performance in the department.
3. To identify barriers to effective online learning and teaching.
4. To develop improvement strategies that can be used to enhance student performance in the department.

### **Research Questions**

Based on the above objectives, the following questions formulated:

1. What are the reasons behind the high failure rate among first year students?
2. What can be done to improve performance of first year students?
3. What improvement strategies can be employed by lecturers to challenges faced by students?
4. Which improvement plans are appropriate to address student performance?

### **Literature Review**

In a distance learning institution, finding an effective teaching, and learning strategies is a challenge (Levine, 2001). However, the presence of communication technology assists in addressing some of these challenges by bridging the gap between students and lecturers. These technological advancements are designed to enhance teaching and learning (Lentell, 2012:24; Rashid and Yadav, 2020). While discussion forums and announcements in myUnisa may assist students, who have access to computers, students in remote rural areas do not benefit from such opportunities. While the internet is available even in rural villages, large masses of students still cannot afford these technologies. There are also many students who are not financially, physically, and geographically privileged. As a result, they either perform poorly or drop-out (Rangara, 2015:3). Unisa is moving towards blended learning approach to accommodate students from various backgrounds. This is in line with most universities worldwide who have moved from single to dual modes in addition to other various technologies (Power and Gould-Morven 2011:23). While some students can overcome these challenges, most rural students appear to be severely affected by the inaccessibility of technology. Students referred to in this study are students who had entered university directly after school, as well as working adults, mostly law enforcement agencies. Recent studies have shown that more students have registered at UNISA due to low study fees as compared to universities in South Africa, particularly, residential universities. According to (Lentell, 2012:24; Rangara, 2015:4; Carriere, & Harvey, 2001), younger students are registering at distance learning institutions since distance learning institutions provided flexibility. Such students have not experienced distance learning challenges, which may impact on their academic performance (Moore & Anderson, 2003:24). Furthermore, these

students may have underestimated the challenges associated with distance learning (Farrior and Gallagher, 2000). On the other hand, adult students often battle with time management as they must grapple with being parents and workers at the same time. Many students have overlooked numerous challenges associated with distance learning and need to have an understanding about what they put themselves in before enrolling. This paper focuses on how support structures can be effectively utilised to assist students to improve their performance and to successfully complete their studies in time.

Post -1994, in the haste of wanting to allow newly liberated students of all races immediate access to tertiary institutions from which they were formerly banned, the architects of the new educational system underestimated the many hidden challenges to transformation which were responsible for a high first-year drop-out rate (Chetty & Pather, 2015). For example: Chetty and Pather (2015) posit that Countless black students from historically disadvantaged families lacked the money and academic readiness to take up the opportunity of tertiary education. Those black students who gained admittance to previously white institutions were faced with considerable challenges in adapting to university life. Lectures were in English, and few black students had received the sort of instruction in English they needed to properly attend to lectures of a high standard and pace; or the proficiency required to write essays in a second or third language. Besides such linguistic and financial challenges, black rural students in particular had little experience of a multiracial society. Assimilation was therefore difficult in many ways not felt by their richer urban peers.

The problems of finance, socialisation or pre-entry deficit emerged more clearly once the initial priority of equal, non-racial admission had been met. Performance criteria quickly replaced primary issues of equal, non-racial admission had been met. Performance criteria quickly replaced primary issues of equity. Longitudinal surveys assessed first-year experience (FYE) in more detail and exposed the need for intense first-year support in many areas, both academic and otherwise, if the throughput rate was to be increased at all. Pather (2015) affirms the importance of understanding student diversity and its influence on academic outcomes and persistence. In this regard she argues that a more robust means of understanding profiling the first-year students will assist in shaping the institutional experience which contributes to persistence, and that this is an important consideration in the academic planning process.

The National Plan for Higher Education (DoE, 2005) expressed concern that South Africa's education throughput rates were too low and that the graduation rates of less than 22% for a three-year generic bachelor's degree was one of the lowest in the world. The Stakeholder Summit of Higher Education Transformation (DHET, 2010; Napier and Makura, 2013) highlighted the following areas that needed attention to maximise students' chances of success: The importance of, and challenges around, understanding students' first-year academic and social experience; The influence of FYE on high drop-out rates and low throughput rates; and; The importance of providing first-year students support for academic success. There is an observable need to identify pre-entry academic and non-academic factors which students consider to be influential in assisting or hindering their first-year experience.

### **The challenge of social and academic integration**

Much of the research and literature relating to higher education students' experiences and retention has largely overlooked the influence of students' backgrounds and characteristics (Reay, 2012). Tinto, who for the last 35 years has been acknowledged as the leading expert on student retention, only mentions in passing students' backgrounds and characteristics, and places greater emphasis on students' social and academic integration *within* the campus climate (Maraschin, 2008). A significant number of studies that use Tinto's model on student integration utilise students' pre-entry characteristics such as socio-economic status, academic experience, and age as a control, as opposed to 'a variable whose effects are important to understand' (Walpole, 2007:8). In addition, Wilcox Winn, and Fyvie-Gauld, (2005) note that many studies on first-year experience that employ Tinto's concept of social and academic integration rarely discuss the concept of integration in detail and lack analysis of how social and academic integration take place. Harvey, Drew and Smith (2006) concur that there has been a large amount of data collected on students' first-year experiences at the institutional level, however, a relatively small amount of which explicitly explores

students' personal experiences in their first year of study. Pre-entry academic and non-academic factors, and the extra-university environment, are of much greater significance in determining and accounting for first-year performance at higher education level. There is an obvious lack of research into this crucial area: the need to isolate and recognise the pre-entry factors which significantly affect first-year integration.

## Methods

### Research Design

The study employed a qualitative research design that used a structured questionnaire for data collection (Creswell (2009:173). Qualitative approach was found to be an appropriate one to address the challenges at hand. The study targeted both first-year students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds and old/working students from various backgrounds in South Africa. The sample consisted of 350 students who were selected using stratified random sampling procedure. Purposive sampling was used in this research (Huysamen, 2001:44). Dudovskiy (2016:1; Kumar, 2011) posits that purposive sampling offers researchers an opportunity to reach their objectives much faster.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected through document analysis and semi-structured individual interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to achieve the objective of the study and probing information obtained on documents analysis (Yin, 2014). Braun and Clarke (2006).<sup>7</sup> thematic analysis was used to identify, analysis and report themes that emerged from data generated.

**Table 1.**

*Student performance – FOR2602 (2016-2019)*

Students	Registered	Admitted	Written	Absent	Percentage
2016/6	30 30	3030	30 30	0 0	100% 100%
2016/10	54 54	5151	47 47	0 0	87.3% 87.3%
2017/6	97 97	9090	86 86	5 5	88.6% 88.6%
2017/10	81 81	7979	76 76	3 3	93.8% 93.8%
2018/6	207207	19999	192 192	7 7	92.7% 92.7%
2018/10	271271	26264	254 254	10 10	93.7% 93.7%
2019/6	250250	24247	240 240	7 7	96% 96%
2019/10	211211	21010	197 197	13 13	93.4% 93.4%

Source: by the author

**Results**

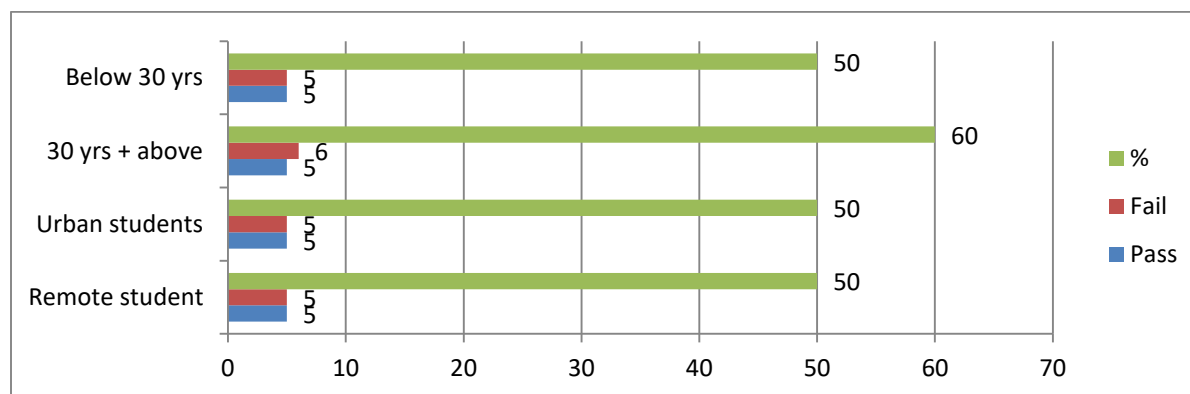
The findings of this study were organized into meaningful themes discussed below. Steps of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke were used to identify themes. Three themes were discovered and explored below: Intervention strategies, progression policy cognition and implementation and recommended model of curriculum support.

**First-Year Experience (FYE) Challenges**

Firstly, students from previously disadvantages backgrounds enrol at Unisa as they are often not accepted by other Universities in South Africa. In addition, their state of readiness for higher education and are often faced with various challenges which affect them to adapt to university situation. Moreover, these students lack English proficiency which is required as academic writing skill. This study found that, first-year students require support in many areas, particularly in academic areas if the throughput rate is to increase and the drop-out rate decrease. According to Pather (2015; Mlambo, 2011; Gumede, 2020), it is important to understand student diversity, as well as its influence on academic outcomes. This means that, academics should ensure that there is a robust initiative to profile first-year students and to assist them to adapt as quick as possible. According to the Department of Higher Education (DHET, 2010), the following areas need attention to maximise student’s chances of success:

- understanding student’s first-year academic and social experience;
- the influence of First Year-Experience on high drop-out rates and low throughput rates; and
- the importance of providing first-year students support for academic success.

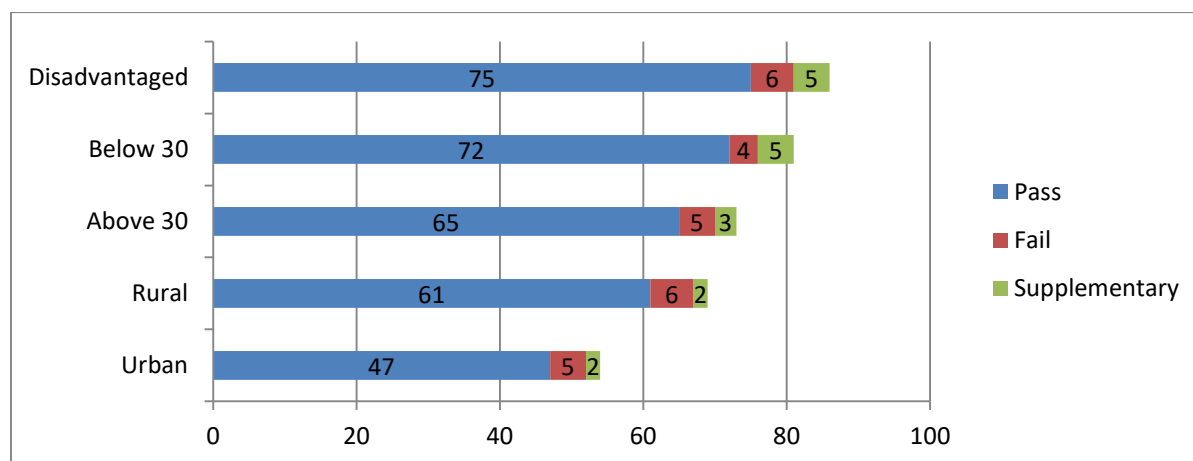
Therefore, there is a need to identify both academic and social factors which have a potential to hinder first-year students from academic performance, and eventual drop-out. Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld, 2005 note that student’s first year experience may determine their performance and success. There is a need for further research for factors which may affect first year students’ performance. Coupled with this is good quality/enthusiastic and committed lectures as well as quality learning programmes. Student performance is illustrated in Table 1, while students’ demographics in terms of age, rural and urban students are illustrated in Figure 1. These statistics were obtained in the university system (MyUnisa), spanning the period between 2016 to 2019. Lecturers are expected to explain to the Chair of Department reasons behind the increases or decline of student performance before signing off and subsequent release of results. Lecturers are also required to outline their turn-around strategies for the upcoming semesters. Appointments of new external markers/examiners is one of the reasons of the decline in student performances as they require time to understand the processes and sometimes, they tend to be a little bit strict when assessing students’ assignments and marking of examination scripts.



**Figure 1.** Demographics of the Forensic Methods and Techniques students

Source: by the author

Data collection above involved the extraction of students’ results from the Unisa student system (MyUnisa). Such reports are available at the end of each semester when results are released. Currently, lecturers have the opportunity to view student’s performance. A comparison between the pass/failure rates is then analysed. Figure 3 below show students’ performance in January/February 2017. This has been especially useful in enabling the researcher to determine in which areas the students have difficulties. The researcher was able to determine areas and students having trouble in their studies. Furthermore, this enabled primary lecturers to develop strategies to assist struggling students and to improve performance of students going forward. Using the information provided by MyUnisa, the researcher has been able to identify “problem areas” and the major gaps in the curriculum. Data presented in this research was obtained from 2016 examination period and such kind of information is continuously monitored. Once these results are released, the primary lecturer verify and have them forwarded to the Head of Department and the School Director before results are released to students. The lecturer keeps record of results to monitor students’ performance and develop intervention strategies (Geduld, 2013). The sample in the study consisted of 21 learners who submitted portfolios for Forensic Methods and Techniques (FOR2602) - final examination in term of the 2016 academic year. Of these 21 students, 15 students passed. Some were given an opportunity to write supplementary in January/February 2017. The sample was divided into three categories: the students who passed outright (*n1*), the student who obtained between 39% and 49% - permitted to sit for supplementary examination in January/February 2017 (*n2*) and the students who obtained 39% and less – failed (*n3*) as presented in Figure 2 below. As can be noticed in Figure 2, this study found that rural students are most likely to perform poorly due to challenges such as lack of data to access information such as library, lack or inadequate finance for data as well as late arrivals of study material as these students mostly rely on postal services. Moreover, the symmetrised system also has a negative impact on student performance as there is not sufficient time for study and preparation for examination. Sometimes students must submit subsequent assignments even before receiving feedback from lecturers on first submitted assignments. This means that students do not receive necessary guidance and are most likely to continue committing the same errors in the following assignments. However, there appears to be a solution in the pipeline, as the university is gradually moving from paper-based learning system to online learning. Currently, lecturers have a responsibility to ensure that all registered students receive the necessary support. As can be seen on table 1, students perform highly as the lecturer and external markers make sure that students are assisted from registration until they write examination. However, students battle with other modules, resulting in some of them dropping out.



**Figure 2.** Final average percentage obtained versus the number of tasks performed by the student. Source: by the author

Learners for B-Tech in Forensic Investigation are expected to submit two assignments and portfolio of evidence (Beaden, Kyndt, Struyven and Dochy. 2010). After submission of each assignment by the student, the assignment is marked, and detailed feedback provided to students, in preparation for the examination. The studies have shown that students who actively participate in discussion forums are in a better position to succeed at the end of term (Miller, & King, 2003). Students were at liberty to choose a topic to research at the beginning of the year. Tutorial Letter 101 contain all guidelines to assist students in compiling their assignments, that is, assignment 1 and 2. Each assignment contributed to the overall pass mark. Feedback is provided after each assignment and students are expected to improve their assignments based of comments by markers (Deb, 2012). However, some students chose to ignore comments by markers and re-submitted the following assignments. As a result, the quality of their work is negatively impacted, as they seem to continue doing bad, and committing similar errors. These students only realise the importance of all three assignments later when they are unable succeed in the examination. The topics in these assignments allow student to research real life situations in their work environments. Moreover, this affords students more opportunities for working through real life concepts and practice at solving problems (Chetwynd and Dobbyn, 2011; Carter, 1996). Student progress is monitored on a continuous basis using feedback tutorial letter 201 in preparation for final submission of assignment 3 (Portfolio). The use of MyUnisa was found to be effective for those students who chose to utilise the facility to interact with the lecturers and fellow students (Conrad, 2002). However, research indicates that few students utilise MyUnisa and discussion forum. As a result, the performance of those students who uses MyUnisa platform improved while students not using the MyUnisa show a decline. Students using available tools (MyUnisa) scores higher marks than the ones not using the tools (Filson and Wittington, 2014). The researcher is also able to monitor the amount of time students spent on MyUnisa and often, students do not bother to utilise available resources which are meant to enhance teaching and learning, thereby, improve performance (Lee, 2002). Students cite various reasons for not utilising available tools to improve performance. Reasons for not utilising available tools to improve performance ranged range from lack of data to access MyUnisa, lack of time, network problems, to mention a few.

#### **Addressing the high failure rate**

In order to address challenges faced by students, academics are required to teach students at least one lesson per week for 30 minutes so that there is teaching presence online. It is noteworthy that lecturers arrange their teaching plans in a way that avoids and to also provide students with an opportunity to identify preferred time slots and to ensure flexibility. Extension to assignments submissions opportunities is provided to students upon request, based on a variety of circumstances.

#### **Pre-entry challenges for prospective students**

One of South Africa's greatest challenges is providing quality education to sustain the country's human resources. In this regard, teacher education plays a pivotal role: as Wolhuter states: "*any education system stands or falls by the quality of its teacher education programmes*" (2006:124). Good quality teachers infer the need for good quality teaching programmes. Recruitment of passionate, committed and enthusiastic teachers is therefore of paramount importance for the country.

After 20 years of democracy, the secondary education system should be providing suitable students, who are fully literate and inspired, to embark on a career in education. However, international evaluation of literacy in South African schools has placed the country at the bottom. This weakness creates a substantial pre-entry challenge for prospective students of education (Wolhuter et al., 2012). This is a cause for grave concern because education is looked upon as key affecting an economic, social, moral, and political reconstruction of society (Wolhuter, 2010:6). The Council for Higher Education (2013) emphasises that South Africa's social stability greatly depends on this reconstruction.

### Student Support

To improve student performance, the lecturer uses discussion forum in MyUnisa and encourage students to communicate on a continuous basis (Blackmun and Thibodeau, 2004). Moreover, students are invited to provide feedback on their experience through the forum in MyUnisa. It was found that students who make use of the support system perform much better than those students who do not make use of MyUnisa. In general, the number of students making use of the available support mechanisms has improved over the past two years. In addition, there appears to be a steady increase and positive response from urban students. Drake (2011) is of the opinion that there is a relationship between learner performance and learner support. Emails that are received from students were analysed with the objective to develop improvement strategy and adjust the curriculum (Kasworm, 2003). Hannum (2009) argues that lectures must always be available to support students, particularly first-time students. A variety of services and facilities are at the disposal of learners, largely free of charge. For instance, Unisa make use of e-tutors to ensure that learners have someone to assist them in case primary lecturers are unavailable for various reasons. Unisa employs subject matter experts (SMEs) as e-tutors' lecturers are unavailable for various reasons. Unisa employs subject matter experts (SMEs) as e-tutors times. E-tutors give guidance, advice and explain difficult issues that students are faced with during their learning. Being isolated from lecturers is one of the major obstacle's students are faced with at distance learning institutions. While E-tutors are available to assist students at Unisa, it appears that some more support mechanisms are required (Khoza, 2011), as tutors assists lecturers to focus on other priorities such as research activities. Moreover, all registered learners are linked to myUnisa portal upon registration. This portal is used as a communication tool to send important messages which makes studying at Unisa enjoyable. Furthermore, learners may make use of Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube as platforms for communication with E-Tutors and lecturers Khunou, Phaswana, Khoza-Shangase and Canham, H. 2019.

### Discussion

The aim of this research/paper was to explore student performance and other factors which result in students pass rate and subsequent drop out and to devise means to assist and support these students (Calonge, Aguerrebere, Hultberg and Connor, 2021). It emerged that student background and other socio-economic factors have a direct impact on their performance as most students are younger and need support from registration throughout their writing of examination. The objective was to explore various factors that influence their performance and how these students can be assisted to perform better regardless of these students' background. To provide an answer to the research question, the researcher obtained data from the system (MyUnisa), analysed emails received from students as well as information received from interviews conducted with some B-Tech students. All this information was analysed to design student-assistance strategies to improve students' performance and address challenges leading to high student dropout rate. The platform to orientate first-year students appears to be bearing positive results as students are encouraged to seek help, not only from peers but from available support structures in the university. As is commonly known, students enter institutions of higher learning from a contact-based environment, which is a paradigm shift and they often feel isolated and require assurance that lecturers are available to support them.

Chetty and Pather (2015:16) are of the opinion that factors such as student background, race, ethnicity have a bearing regarding first-time students in an institution of higher learning (Bryce, Ring, Ashby and Wardman, 2020). In addition, such students find themselves in an environment where they need to be self-sufficient, a shift from a contact (class) situation where teachers were always available to guide these students. In contrast, a large percentage of these students are unable to adapt to a 'distance learning institution' environment and end up dropping out due to challenges such as poor programme choice and other challenges. These students require support from lecturers who are often not readily available daily as Unisa is in transition. Results of the study indicate various factors which contributes to high failure rate in the identified institution of higher learning (Unisa). It is important to note that the university have taken steps to address most of the challenges faced by students, particularly first year undergraduate students to



ensure improved performance. Results also show that, in subjects where clear improvement strategies have been developed, student performance has equally improved. As a result, other lecturers within the department use improvement plans in their respective subjects. The result confirms the notion that implementing improvement plans and strategies contribute to improved student performance.

Results of the study also indicates that lecturers are not necessarily assisting first year students who in the main struggle with adaptation or migration from face-to-face learning environment to distance learning. This poses a risk to students as there is often no immediate response to their needs as lecturers are distant and often unresponsive to various channels of communication. These developments were confirmed by one student during interview and said: *“All my attempts to get hold of my lecturers were unsuccessful and I had to give up”*. Another student said: *“I sent emails, called several times and no answer, and when I went to the campus, I found no one and had to return home very frustrated”*.

The study further showed that online teaching and learning appears to favour students who can afford the right gadgets while students from previously disadvantaged environments battle to access resources which would make online learning possible. Schuck (2016) emphasized the significance of using technology in teaching and learning. It is my view that institutions of higher learning have a responsibility to ensure that all students have the right tools become learning can commence. Schuck (2016) emphasized the significance of using technology to enhance curriculum implementation. Studies by other researchers (Burden & Kearney, 2016; Kearney, Buren & Kay, 2015; Norris & Soloway, 2013) also echoes Schuck's sentiments.

In order to monitor student's performance, it became important to develop a dashboard. Every module has a Master Site (to prepare study material) as well as a Main Module Site (Landing Site for the module) and a Group Site on which students are divided into manageable groups for them to submit assignments and receive student support from e-Tutors or Teaching Assistants. It was found that, students who submit more than 50% of the formative assessments, perform better in the summative assessments. It is evident that the administration related to online examinations is putting a strain on academics and they are not able to do other tasks.

Academics also report doing less teaching and more administrative work. *“Online presence is a challenge as most of the students do not attend while we try our best to be present”*. This was the sentiment of many of the academic staff members that students are seemingly not taking responsibility for their own learning or lack agency. For example: *“I've been doing online classes since 2020. Less than 2% of the class attends the live classes. I always post recordings of these classes for those who could not attend; the majority of students don't watch the recordings.”* Another example: *“...in a class of 500, less than 12 show up for online support classes... Less than 10% show up for examination preparation discussion sessions”*. These issues can be addressed through a compulsory induction programme or the FYEMOOCs.

However, it must be noted that, there is a growing number of the use of social media platforms for teaching and learning, as well as for the provision of student support, such as WhatsApp and Telegram. Even though there are indications of a positive impact on the use of these platforms, there is uncertainty about the university's position on their use. Guidelines are therefore required to 'regulate' the implementation and use of social media to support efforts to improve students' experiences of teaching, learning, and support in the university.

### Conclusion

The conclusion that emerged from this study is that student performance may be enhanced when lecturers communicate with students on an ongoing basis, using various means of communication. Furthermore, it was found that students who make use of technology in their study happen to perform better than those learners that students who make use of technology in their study happen to perform better than those learners available support systems are more likely to perform much better (Fowler and Boylan, 2010). In this study, it emerged that, students who submit assignments via JRouter are likely to receive feedback quicker than students who send their assignments via the post office (Van Rooy and Madioppe, 2012). As a result, such students are guided appropriately before submitting subsequent assignments. Using MyUnisa

tools as a student support mechanism, have been found to have been instrumental in decreasing the distance between students and lecturers (Evans, 2009; Bates, 2000). This study therefore found that factors such as socio-economic, educational/historical background, lack of student support and students' readiness contributes to academic performance and subsequent decline in student success/failure rate at institutions of higher learning in South Africa, particularly at historical distance learning institutions such as Unisa. Moreover, it was found that most students have difficulties in adapting from class-based (student-teacher environment) to distance learning environment where lecturers are often not available when required. This due to other obligations such as research attendance and other obligations which lecturers must attend. In addition, semester registration also has an impact as students must master their subjects and be prepared for examination in a very short time. This often leaves students vulnerable. Other factors, such strikes, late receipt of study material and technological challenges (ICT) also result in students battling to understand their subjects. This study therefore concludes that, while there is some measure of student assistance offered to first year students by some lecturers at the university, lecturers need to take student assistance seriously by always being available, particularly to assist first-year students as they seem to be the most affected regarding poor performance and subsequent drop-out. It is therefore recommended that student performance be linked to performance rating of all lecturers at Unisa. This will ensure that lecturers are held accountable as and when required, and this will increase student pass rate.

It can be concluded that student support for first year students will enhance student performance and reduce failure and drop-out rates in institutions of higher learning. Furthermore, based on the results of the study, lecturers should be available at all material times and if that is not possible, they must respond to students' communications within twenty-four hours in support of their students. In addition, improvements plans and strategies should be implemented, and lecturers be always held accountable. Effective implementation of improvement plans will improve student performance.

#### **Research implications and future research directions**

This research points to the fact that there a multiplicity of challenges and issues surrounding student academic performance in South African higher education institutions. These could include socio-economic factors, access to resources, the impact of cultural diversity, and even the influence of historical contexts (Gumede, 2020). The development of more nuanced theories to address complexities of South African higher education is the contributory factor of this research. Findings could inform educational policies or interventions to address these challenges. Moreover, this research will assist lecturers to adapt their methods to better meet the diverse needs of students (Buitendijk, Ward, Shimshon, Sam, Sharma and Harris, 2020). Based on the findings of this research, policy changes could positively impact academic performance in institutions of higher learning in South Africa. Future research directions could involve investigating how technology can be leveraged to address findings in this research, such as online learning platforms, educational Apps and other digital tools to address unique and diverse needs of South African students from various backgrounds (Du Plessis et al., 2022). delving deeper into specific aspects, perhaps longitudinal studies to track changes over time or comparative studies with institutions of higher learning in other regions.

#### **Recommendations**

For improvement of student performance, improvement plans must be implemented. Lecturers must be held accountable and be available at all material times to attend to student needs. Lecturers must be properly skilled to operate in an online environment. This will ensure that they remain relevant to the continuous changing learning environments and to enhance their expertise in their subjects. Integration of technology with traditional teaching methodologies will only serve enhance student performance and quality of learning.

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