

# **RISK, RESILIENCE AND RETENTION - A MULTI-PRONGED STUDENT DEVELOPMENT MODEL**

**MEGAN DU PLESSIS - THE INDEPENDENT INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION,  
SOUTH AFRICA**

**RENE BENECKE - UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA**

## **ABSTRACT**

The notion of resilience amongst first year students in higher education is of increasing interest as the number of at-risk students is growing and educators are seeking ways of strengthening the whole teaching and learning package. This study investigated a group of 51 first year Public Relations and Communication students at the University of Johannesburg who were identified by the faculty as at-risk students and who had been given provisional passes into the second semester of study. The study was conducted through the use of a questionnaire which related to several internal risk factors but more specifically to the students' use of the support services offered by the university. These support services are considered by the university to be strategic interventions which, if utilised by the students, may assist in realising their academic success. The study concluded that it is the responsibility of those who structure the learning environment to nurture students specifically through ensuring that the services offered by the university are well utilised by them and thus promote the vision of the university to widen access and improve retention and throughput.

## **INTRODUCTION**

It is an urban legend that there are lecturers who, on their first day of class with first year students, say 'Look at the person on your left. Now look at the person on your right. Do not expect to see them next year'. It is difficult to believe that this had the desired effect of making students work harder. It is certainly no longer appropriate, if indeed it ever was. Many of our first year students did not grow up expecting to attend university and cannot have known what to expect when they walked into these corridors of learning. For some, the open doors to higher education become revolving doors, and they leave almost as quickly as they came. This is unacceptable and we urgently need to establish:

- the extent to which it is the student's responsibility to overcome the difficulties

they face in their first year of study

- the extent it is the lecturer's and university's responsibility to assist students overcome their difficulties and develop the resilience and ability to cope with challenges hitherto unknown to them.

We know very well that to be at university is to be in an unfamiliar culture for an increasing number of students - especially given the increased diversity of those who now access higher education. For many, the university experience is completely unknown. They are usually first-generation students. Their parents are unfamiliar with the experience and while they might well admire their children for being at university, they are able to offer little support in terms of financial, practical and emotional needs. Furthermore, they still expect the young person to play an active role in the duties assigned to him/her as a family member and there is little understanding of the work involved in attaining a qualification.

From an institutional perspective, research in the higher education sector (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005; Krause, McInnis & Welle, 2002; Lawrence, 2000a) points to the fact that early student engagement with the culture of the university has a positive impact on shaping the academic and social development of new students. Furthermore, a positive first-year experience that supports students as they attempt to deal with academic, administrative and social processes is more likely to encourage academic application and success at the individual level and to reduce attrition rates at the institutional level. Thus, social transition is acknowledged as being a vital contributor to successful academic transition (Kantanis, 2002).

Under such circumstances there is clearly a responsibility amongst lecturers and staff to ask what they have to do: to assist students in familiarising themselves with this new culture to make smoother the transition from a troubled school system and a disadvantaged background to help students engage with, and master, the new culture's multiple discourses to motivate them to succeed.

The questions that have been posed and deliberation of the responsibilities as mentioned above may best be addressed within the framework of sociocultural theory.

Sociocultural theory (Wertsch, 1991) explains how individual mental functioning is related to cultural, institutional, and historical contexts. Hence, the focus of the sociocultural perspective is on the roles that participation in social interactions and culturally organised activities play in influencing development. From a Vygotskian perspective (cited in Cole, John-Steiner, Scribner & Souberman, 1978) effective learning is more likely to take place when individuals are afforded opportunities to grow into the culture that surrounds them.

In contrast to prevailing views of his time, namely those of Piaget, in which learning was regarded as an external process and development an internal process, Vygotsky (1978) was concerned with the unity and interdependence of learning and development.

From a socio-cultural perspective (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 101), and within the context of higher education, students learn about the culture of the particular community through the interactions they have with those around them. Typically, these interactions involve dialogues between the individual and more conversant members of the community, i.e. academic and administrative staff, and more experienced students as new students learn about university life. As an example, the institutional structure includes support systems in the form of tutoring and peer buddies. However, the complexity of the environment and the speed with which learning must occur means that other tools must also be available to support effective learning. Learning itself is viewed as an activity that is situated in the social practice of the 'real world' context in which the individual operates. This argument supports the development of a range of experiences that will encourage access and participation by those to whom the university environment is foreign.

In Wilmer's view (2008: 15), a student success course for underprepared students offers a natural place to support students in understanding academic policies, communication skills, campus resources, goal-setting skills, to mention a few. This supports Tinto's (1999) interactionalist theory, which states that 'students who achieve greater social and academic integration are more likely to reach their goal of graduation'.

Thus we need to understand that first year students are grappling with a multiplicity of issues. Gee (2000) maintains that even the ways of communicating within an academic context are difficult to grasp amongst students whose backgrounds and ways of thinking are different from, or even in conflict with, the university context. Added to this are the adjustments students have to make to the new environment: the teaching styles, learning styles, policies, practices, discipline, assessment, presentation skills, interpersonal skills, communication skills, technical skills, university life, and other people, to name but a few challenges that come with this new higher education experience (Mak and Barker, cited in Lawrence, 2000b: 239). Altogether they constitute what amounts to 'resilience', a characteristic that indicates whether a student will have the ability to stay the course. Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker (2000: 543) give us a useful definition of 'resilience' for these purposes. It is 'a dynamic process of individuals exhibiting positive behavioral adaptation when they encounter significant adversity or trauma'.

This paper focuses, firstly, on the strategies that have been put into place at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) to assist its students registered for the National Diploma: Public Relations and Communication to improve their resilience and help them succeed in their first year of study. Secondly, whether, and if so, to what extent students have made use of these strategies.

The paper describes how the investigation was conducted and attempts to explain the failure rate recorded in the first semester. The students (51 in total of a first year group of 170) located on Bunting Road Campus were categorised as PP (F5) students. These are students who, after the first semester of 2009, were given permission to continue with their studies despite not passing all their subjects. This permission was granted with specific conditions. The group of students who fell into this category was identified through the records kept at the Faculty Office and in accordance with the university policy that 60% of all registered semester modules must be passed.

The Public Relations programme is offered in the Faculty of Humanities which has, over a number of years, devised and implemented policies for teaching and learning taking into account the structures of the UJ Teaching and Learning Policy Document

which recommends as follows:

Academic development implies interventions and strategies geared towards the development and enrichment of un-prepared and underprepared students at undergraduate level as a response to the need for widening access and improving retention and throughput. Consequently, academic development strategies and interventions should form an integral part of all accredited programmes and modules.

Given the issue of throughput within the faculty, the Executive Dean of the Faculty has set out three principles to keep in mind in considering throughput:

the creation and retention of high academic standards

the analysis of each throughput, whether high or low, in the search for explanations

if throughput is indeed low, the search for ways of strengthening the whole teaching and learning 'package' of the course.

If the throughput in any particular course improves without our having improved the 'package' of that course, that too should raise questions as to how this improvement occurred, and whether or not this was the result of lowered standards, which would, if true, be a contravention of our first principle (Memo from the Dean, 16-10-06).

It is the third principle that is of interest in this paper: 'If throughput is indeed low, we find ways of strengthening the whole teaching and learning package of the course', and we offer the concept of 'resilience' as useful in this context.

Resilience has already been described as a 'construct concerning the exposure to adversity and the positive adjustment outcomes of that adversity' (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000: 857). Adversity refers to any risks associated with negative life conditions that can be statistically related to adjustment difficulties. Positive adaptation is considered as a demonstration of manifested behaviour with regards to social competence or 'success at meeting any particular tasks at a specific life stage' (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000: 875). The manifestation of resilience can be described as seeing good outcomes regardless of high-risk status, and a constant competence under stress.

Taking into consideration the fact that students who come to study at the university have many challenges besides the academic challenge, a questionnaire was designed specifically to gain information about the support students receive from the department and from the people at their place of residence. We asked questions relating to expectations of the students and their performance; their involvement in social and other activities, and their understanding and utilisation of the support services offered by the university. Thus, the questionnaire was designed with a number of factors in mind:

- to establish the extent of support the students believe they receive
- to establish the amount of involvement the students have within the university and in outside activities
- to establish the level of expectations the students perceive others have of them. Questions were also designed to measure the existing resilience of students in the areas of:
  - seeking help
  - holding the belief that there is something one can do to manage one's feelings and cope with challenges
  - having social support
  - being connected with others, such as family or friends, and being involved with others through group activities.

Thus, for the purposes of this study, support services at university for first year students were considered to be: the language centre; the learning support centre; tutor facilities; psychological services; the academic support centre; orientation assistance; and trauma counselling services. Our questionnaire focused specifically on these, attempting to find out whether students knew of these services and which of the services they had in fact used. We further asked for their comments on how helpful these services had been to them in the event they had been used.

Strategies that are in place in the Public Relations and Communication Department to assist students' success in their first year of study are reliant on the strategies put into place by the University. There is also a Safenet programme being implemented, which

is designed to track students who fail their first term test and inform them of their situation and advise them to consult their tutors.

Currently the Public Relations and Communication department appoints tutors annually to assist with the academic needs of students. During 2009 four senior students were trained and allocated weekly periods to consult with students on an individual basis. Although this support service was implemented in line with faculty and university policies the Public Relations Department is in the process of restructuring their approach to tutoring to ensure that at-risk students make better use of this service.

There were 31 students' responses to the questionnaire. And the findings were singular in their similarity. The main points were as follows:

27 students agreed that there was someone in the department who cared about them, listened to what they had to say, told them that they had done a good job, wanted them to do their best and see them succeed. The students went so far as to name the lecturers that gave them this support. However, they noted that rarely did a lecturer notice when they were not in class.

11 students in residence and 20 students who live at home noted that there was someone that was interested in them, listened to them, noticed when they were upset and wanted them to do their best. All the students indicated that they have a friend who offers them similar support.

In terms of participation in departmental activities, sport activities, church activities or belonging to some type of club, 25 students indicated that they do not participate in any kind of activity.

More striking were the responses to the questions regarding the university's facilities and support services. 24 students did not know about the learning centre, and of those who did, only one had made use of its facilities. Five students said that they had heard of the career services and one student had made use of it. Two students knew of, and had used, the Psychological Support Services Centre (Psycad), while the academic services offered to people with disabilities and work integrated learning was known by three students. This is despite the fact that a message is included in the results posted

to students informing them of, and urging them to, visit the learning centre.

30 students were aware of the tutoring services offered by the Department of Public Relations and Communication, with 15 students having made use of this service as a once off visit. No students made use of the service on a regular basis.

When it came to orientation, 27 students were aware of and attended the orientation programme, but indicated that they could not remember much of what occurred. 27 students also indicated that their transition to university life has not been successful.

The findings lead to several conclusions:

There seems to be a lack of motivation on the part of the student to act with initiative and to think independently about success, engagement, and what constitutes authentic learning. There seems to be a lack of motivation on the part of the student to find ways to make educational activities a true priority. It is interesting to note Wilmer's (2008: 11) view that what is required is a more intrusive approach to providing the services necessary for their success.

In view of the point made above, there seems to be a need for academic staff to start driving the process with more energy and determination, and rather than rely on the students to find out about the services and support available, to monitor more rigorously the students' use of the services that this department and the university have put in place. For real effectiveness, there needs to be structured, rigorous and controlled implementation.

Various aspects of the teaching and learning strategies need individual consideration, namely:

Effective, structured tutoring must be a priority, bearing in mind Smith and Beggs's Triple C Model of care, control and consistency (2002), and giving consideration to Dzubak's invaluable insight into the value of tutoring. She (2008) notes the value, importance and significance of tutoring and pays particular attention to the notion of scaffolding that best manifests itself in the tutoring process.

Vygotsky (cited in Dzubak, 2008: 1) first used the term 'zone of actual development' to describe 'the skills and tasks that a student is able to perform independently'. He further described the area which is 'beyond what a student can perform alone as the zone of proximal development', which includes the skills and tasks that the student has to learn which, once learned, fall into the zone of actual development. It is the aim of any educator to assist the student to acquire the skills to move from the zone of proximal development to the zone of actual development. However, with the ever-growing demand of universities on lecturers to have larger classes, resulting in the lecturers not personally interacting with the majority of their students, not getting to know the students and hence tracking students based only on their results, the need grows for departments to use tutors to assist in achieving this acquiring of skills to help students progress to the zone of actual development.

According to Vygotsky (cited in Dzubak, 2008: 2), scaffolding is the process that provides assistance to students to help them move to the point 'where they are able to perform a skill independently'. In this regard, the onus would fall on the lecturer to identify students with problems, and send these students to the tutor to give assistance so that the student can reach the point where s/he becomes independent. Scaffolding, as described by Vygotsky, is this process of giving assistance and, by using effective tutoring, is provided through one-to-one interaction which encourages student engagement and immediate feedback based on questions asked, cues given, and organised tasks that will help the student progress from what s/he actually knows and what s/he needs to know.

Tutoring is a service that a department is obliged to offer. Tutoring can benefit any student at some point in his/her academic career. Because of its social nature and the advantage of students' voices being heard, tutoring does not necessarily need to be confined to students with poor academic skills or who need remedial help. It has value to all students in that other skills can be developed: interpersonal skills, personalised interest, face-to-face interaction and thus social interaction (Dzubak, 2008: 1). However, as the focus of this paper is the retention of first year students, and strategies that can be put in place to assist them in increasing their levels of resilience, the important point to be noted here is that tutoring needs to be approached in a more

authentic way.

To use the tutoring service effectively, the academic staff in the department need to participate more rigorously in equipping the tutor to ensure that the students get the best opportunity to develop the skills and tasks to perform independently. Besides the training given to the tutors by the Tutor Training Centre, academic staff will have to become more involved in the training and development of tutors in the subjects offered to the students. There must be consistency in the times that lecturers meet with tutors; regular discussion about the course material; exercises provided to benefit students in developing their skills to enable them to transfer their knowledge; and feedback between lecturer and tutor about progress made. Lecturers need to keep track of students who use the tutoring service and record whether there is evidence of the transfer of skills to other contexts, which demonstrates that learning has taken place.

This puts more pressure on the lecturers who already have the burden of larger classes, increased administrative duties, lack of departmental support due to budgetary constraints, and the ever-looming worry of not doing enough research to satisfy the demands made on the institution.

Cooperation and willingness to track the students relies heavily on the disposition, attitudes and interest of the lecturing staff and other support services. Wilmer (2008: 11) notes that 'underprepared students are the least likely student population to seek or participate in support services'. Lecturing staff should thus ensure that they have policies and practices in place to ensure that underprepared students are 'forced' to seek assistance. For this to occur, faculty, administrators, and others must challenge students and each other to view learning as continuous.

Assistance and support to lecturing staff and students are offered by Psychological Support Services Centre. Structures, such as peer buddies, career counselling, emotional support, studying methods and a 24-hour crisis line, are available to all students and should be actively promoted during orientation.

Another opportunity to assist students with especially the resilience component is to

involve them in a variety of academic activities that will not only enhance their independent learning but will also result in actual learning. Participation in community projects, designing public relations and communication plans and implementing them for a variety of community organisations can have a reciprocal result for student and lecturer. Proper learning outcomes and assessments of these activities will ensure that they do not become just an add-on but that they form an integral part of the learning process. Research done by Astin (1993); Chickering & Reisser (1993) and Pascarella & Terenzini (1991) points out that any institution can enhance student learning by using its existing resources more effectively. They maintain that the key tasks of the institution are to minimise the boundaries between the in-class and out-of-class experiences, to create more integrated approaches among and between, for example, the academic departments, administrative services and student affairs, which will in turn create opportunities for students to develop an understanding of the connections between their studies and their lives outside the classroom and perhaps in this way develop ways in which to apply their learning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Key steps are for institutions to address the importance of out-of-class experiences explicitly in the institution's mission, develop a common understanding of the desired outcomes of undergraduate education and the combination of institutional conditions and student experiences most likely to produce these outcomes, assess regularly the impact of out-of-class environments on students, and shape student cultures in ways that foster responsible behaviour. The conditions that foster student learning outside the classroom cannot be created by any one individual.

Orientation needs to be planned and implemented in a more considered way. From the readings that informed the writing of this paper, the department is approaching orientation more from the point of view of what the new students can assimilate during the limited time available, rather than from the amount of information that is considered necessary to be provided. Thus, for future orientation, the department has decided to compile a booklet of information to which students can refer during the first weeks of the academic year. The orientation time will be used more effectively by devising activities that will practically exemplify the material in the booklet. While these activities will be good ice-breakers, they will also serve the purpose of sensitising the students to the need for academic engagement and act as a stepping stone to authentic learning. Furthermore, a decision has been taken at an institutional level to extend the

orientation period by having shorter orientation sessions spread over four weeks of the first term with specific focus on the personal and academic topics necessary to succeed in the university environment. This planned programme is in line with the proposed extended orientation suggested by Wilmer (2008: 15).

Attendance and the monitoring of attendance fall into two parts of Smith & Beggs' Triple C model - care and control (2002). Smith & Beggs maintain that the manner in which first year students are managed needs to be changed if there is to be a change in retention rates. Relying on attendance registers taken in class by the lecturers, they worked out an absence data system, for which data on absence of students from class was collated on a regular basis. Students were then categorised according to their levels of absenteeism and given letters on different coloured paper, the colour of the paper depicting the extent of the absenteeism. Thus, if a student's attendance was below 85% (which was considered an unacceptable level) the student was given a letter on red paper. Red = STOP WHAT YOU ARE DOING! COME TO CLASS. If a student's attendance was between 75% and 85%, s/he was given a letter on yellow paper. Yellow = PROCEED WITH CAUTION ON THE PRESENT ROUTE. A green piece of paper reflected over 85% attendance meaning 'continue and keep going'.

This may not be a sufficient incentive for students to come to class. Further monitoring would help the lecturer assess whether the student may need other assistance, such as counselling or career guidance.

This system of monitoring indicates to the students that the department knows who they are, cares whether they are in class or not, and also shows that effective recording systems are in place which gives credence to the idea of control; control being exercised in the right place and for the right reasons. This strengthens the notion that where there is control, there is care. This system may also help to identify students who may be on the brink of dropping out but could be helped if the early monitoring strategy is implemented.

The objectives of this exploratory study were to ask what the responsibility of the at-risk (underprepared) student is to ensure that he/she copes with the changing

environment and its demands and what the responsibilities of the lecturers and the institution are to assist students during this transition stage. To achieve these objectives we looked at some of the most prominent influences and found that these at-risk or underprepared students believe that they do have the support they need but that they do not necessarily belong to any organised group on or off campus and neither do they make use of the existing support services offered by the institution. As mentioned earlier, underprepared students need to be 'forced' to become part of a group and interact with their fellow students. Interaction in and out of the classroom may contribute to the ability of students to cope with the demands of the changing environment and assist them in understanding the new language and practices of this new culture.

It was also established that the lecturers and the institution play a significant role in ensuring that the students interact, know where to ask for assistance and make use of support services. These students may not have the social skills or the confidence to initiate interaction with fellow students or ask for assistance from institutional support services.

Being an exploratory study there are a number of other areas of further interest which are:

What constitutes an at-risk student? Only marks?

How does one find out other aspects of the students' lives that may contribute to lack of resilience? An example of this would be their sociocultural background which they bring with them into this new and unfamiliar environment.

How does one integrate this information to offer the student a higher education experience that makes them more rounded, educated people and not just a graduate of a programme?

We look forward to continuing tracking these students through to their graduation and strongly believe that the more interaction the students have, 'forced' initially but later more naturally, the more they will learn to support one another, share information and develop more authentic learning communities.

## REFERENCES

Astin, A.W. (1993) *What Matters in College: Four Critical Years Revisited*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Chickering, A.W. & Reisser, L. (1993) *Education and Identity*. (2nd ed.) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Cole, M., John-Steiner, V., Scribner, S. & Souberman, E. (Eds. and Trans.) (1978) *Mind in Society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Dzubak, C. (2008) 'Why Tutoring Matters: The interaction of a peer tutor and a tutee during scaffolding' The Association for the Tutoring Profession at [http://www.myatp.org/Synergy\\_1/Syn\\_a10.htm](http://www.myatp.org/Synergy_1/Syn_a10.htm) (Accessed 15 January 2010).

Gee, J.P. (2000) *Social linguistics and literacies: ideology in discourses*. New York: Routledge.

Kantanis, T. (2002) 'Same or different: Issues that affect mature age undergraduate students' transition to university' The Sixth Pacific Rim - First Year in Higher Education Conference: 'Changing Agendas "TeAoHurihuri"' The University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand in conjunction with Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia.

Krause, K., Hartley, R., James, R. & McInnis, C. (2005) *The first year experience in Australian universities: Findings from a decade of national studies*. Canberra: Australian Department of Education, Science and Training.

Krause, K., McInnis, C. & Welle, C. (2002) 'Student engagement: The role of peers in undergraduate student experience'. Paper presented at the Society for Research into Higher Education: Students and Learning - What is Changing? 10-12 December, Glasgow, UK.

Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lawrence, J. (2000a) 'Rethinking diversity: Re-theorising transition as a process of engaging, negotiating and mastering the discourses and multiliteracies of an unfamiliar culture rather than as a problem of deficit'. Paper presented at the 4th Pacific Rim, First Year in Higher Education Conference 2000: Creating Futures for a New Millennium, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia.

Lawrence, J. (2000b) 'Re-theorising the university as an unfamiliar culture: Consequences and responses for the increasing diversity of the student body' In M. Sheehan, S. Ramsay & J. Patrick, (Eds.) *Transcending Boundaries: Integrating People, Processes and Systems*. Brisbane: Griffith University.

Luthar, S.S. & Cicchetti, D. (2000) 'The construct of resilience: Implications for interventions and social policies' *Development and Psychopathology* 12 pp.857-885.

Luthar, S.S., Cicchetti, D., & Becker, B. (2000). 'The construct of resilience: A critical evaluation and guidelines for future work' *Child Development*, 71(3) pp.543-562.

McInnis, C., James, R. & Hartley, R. (2000) *Trends in the first year experience in Australian universities*. Canberra: AGPS Press.

Pascarella, E. & P. Terenzini. (1991) *How College Affects Students: Findings and Insights From Twenty Years of Research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

UJ Teaching and Learning Policy Document. (2006) University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Smith, E.M. & Beggs, B.J. (2002) 'Optimally maximising student retention in higher education' *Society for Research into Higher Education Annual Conference*, December. Glasgow, UK.

Tinto, V. (1999) 'Taking retention seriously: Rethinking the first year of college' The Journal of the National Academic Advisory Association (NACADA) 19(2) pp.5-9.

Wertsch J. (1991) Voices of the mind: A Sociocultural approach to mediated action. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wilmer, E. (2008) 'Student Support Services for the Underprepared Student' Inquiry 13(1) pp.5-19.