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Student Perceptions on Out-of-Class Experiences that Impact Student Success in a South African Context

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Jessica Versfeld
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4597-2394
Engineering Department, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa
jessica.versfeld@up.ac.za

Curwyn Mapaling
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2731-9081
Optentia Research Unit, North-West University, Vanderbijlpark, South Africa
Curwyn.Mapaling@nwu.co.za

Sandra Maape
https://orcid.org/0009-0004-8350-6601
Academic Development Unit, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa
Sandra.Maape@wits.ac.za

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of out-of-class experiences on student success in the context of South African higher education, amidst the unique challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing socio-economic disparities. Focusing on first-year engineering students at a South African university, this research utilised root cause analysis through an online questionnaire to explore how out-of-class factors such as study groups, mentorship programmes, and extracurricular activities influence academic outcomes. Employing John Bean's model of student attrition, the study delves into the interplay between psychological, organisational, and socio-economic factors shaping student retention and success. It reveals that despite existing interventions aimed at enhancing student well-being and academic performance, there is a critical gap between the interventions provided and the actual needs of students, particularly in addressing time management, organisational skills, and mental health challenges. The research advocates for a re-evaluation of current support structures and the implementation of more tailored approaches such as structured learning communities and integrated mental health practices within the curriculum. The study contributes valuable insights into enhancing student retention and well-being by highlighting the essential role of out-of-class experiences in the holistic development of students within the challenging landscape of the Global South.

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Introduction

During the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, higher education institutions globally faced unprecedented challenges, notably in maintaining the continuity of academic instruction while adhering to safe distancing measures (Cranfield, Tick, Venter, Blignaut & Renaud, 2021). This scenario precipitated a substantial disruption in out-of-classroom activities, with many transitioning to online or hybrid formats (Mpungose, 2020). Such changes underscored a notable disparity in the emphasis on in-class versus out-of-class learning experiences, spotlighting the need for a reassessment of the latter's role in holistic student development within higher education (Soudien, Reddy & Harvey, 2021).

During the pandemic, South African universities, particularly those with limited infrastructure, were forced to rapidly migrate both classroom and out-of-classroom learning (e.g., mentorship programmes, peer study groups, student advising, co-curricular engagement) into digital or hybrid formats. While this shift was a necessary response to national lockdowns and social distancing mandates, it magnified structural inequalities. Many students lacked access to basic resources such as data, devices, or stable electricity, rendering participation in virtual support systems highly uneven (Mpungose, 2020; van Staden & Naidoo, 2022; Phiriepa, Mapaling, Matlakala & Tsabedze, 2023). The current study confirms that these constraints significantly affected students' access to psychosocial and academic supports, exacerbating the risk of academic exclusion. Tau, Mapaling and Tsabedze (2024) further show that the psychological impact of this shift, marked by fear, isolation, and a breakdown in learning continuity, undermined students' resilience and adaptability during the crisis.

The resultant impact on equitable access underscores the importance of evaluating how institutions, especially resource-constrained ones, addressed these challenges, and the lessons for future educational strategies. Notably in South Africa, the higher education sector faces additional challenges of student underpreparedness and high dropout rates, particularly among first-year and first-generation students (de Klerk, 2021; Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021). These challenges are compounded by socio-political and economic disparities, affecting students' academic performance and mental health (Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021). Addressing these issues necessitates a comprehensive support strategy that goes beyond financial aid, aiming to overcome broader social and cultural barriers to student success (Strydom & Loots, 2020; de Klerk, 2021; Versfeld & Mapaling, 2024). This study aims to elucidate the perspectives of students regarding the impact of

out-of-class factors on their academic success. The investigation specifically explores the role of out-of-class experiences, ranging from study groups and peer tutoring to mentorship programmes and extracurricular activities, as pivotal factors that can either support or impede student success. Such experiences are particularly crucial in disciplines like engineering, where students may encounter challenges related to inadequate mathematical preparation and social integration (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Nordling, 2023). The study posits that out-of-class experiences are essential in providing not only academic support but also a sense of community and Ubuntu, thereby fostering improved academic performance and mental health (Eisenberg, Downs, Golberstein & Zivin, 2009; Scott, 2018; Ngubane & Makua, 2021; Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021). Integrating the Ubuntu pedagogy, which emphasises humanity, kindness, interconnectedness, and respect, supports holistic student growth (Ngubane & Makua, 2021).

John Bean's (1982) model of student attrition within the South African context

This literature review, grounded in John Bean's (1982) model of student attrition, delves into the intricate interplay of psychological, organisational, and socio-economic factors that shape student success within the unique socio-political and educational landscape of the Global South, with a specific focus on South Africa. The review highlights the pivotal role of out-of-class experiences and the pressing need for comprehensive support structures to address the multifaceted challenges students encounter (Chetty & Pather, 2015). By providing insights into the persistent issue of low student success rates despite various interventions and funding programmes (Department of Higher Education (DHET), 2020) this review aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on enhancing student retention and well-being in the South African higher education context.

John Bean's model (1982) serves as a foundational framework for understanding the complex dynamics influencing student retention and success. The model emphasises the crucial relationship between psychological processes and organisational determinants, elucidating how individual beliefs and perceptions, significantly shaped by in-class and out-of-class experiences, play a vital role in students' educational decisions (Bean & Eaton, 2001). Furthermore, the model offers a holistic perspective on addressing the challenges prevalent in the Global South's educational sphere, considering students' background characteristics, such as gender, race, or family social status, and goal commitment, such as highest degree level expected or significance of graduating, as key factors influencing student retention (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1980; Kerby, 2015).

The strong correlation between psychosocial factors and student outcomes underscores the critical role of psychological processes in shaping students' educational pathways (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1980; Kerby, 2015). Research has shown that higher education students experience their first year in tertiary institutions differently, which is often influenced by their maturity level, with negative experiences potentially leading to temporary or permanent dropout due to personal issues or financial constraints (Kerby, 2015). Alarmingly, only 15% out of the 60% of first-year students are likely to complete their studies and graduate (Knaus & Chetty, 2016). This relationship calls for comprehensive interventions that cater to students' academic, psychological, and social well-being, addressing mental health challenges and the broader socio-political context that influences student success (Martikainen, Bartley & Lahlema, 2003; Patel, Flisher, Hetrick & McGorry, 2007; D'Andrea & Heckman, 2008). Recent studies propose a holistic concept of student success that encompasses academic prosperity, engagement in educational activities, and non-cognitive factors such as self-efficacy, resilience, intrinsic motivation, social-emotional skills, and behaviours (Mason, 2019).
In the Global South, particularly in South Africa, organisational determinants such as institutional policies, practices, and support systems play a fundamental role in influencing student success (Tewari & Ilesanmi, 2020). This region faces unique challenges, including high enrolment rates and low graduation rates, necessitating supportive policies and systems to aid and maintain students' educational trajectories (Chetty & Pather, 2015; Council on Higher Education (CHE), 2020). Research findings reveal additional challenges affecting tertiary institutions' ability to produce higher numbers of graduate outputs, such as students' unpreparedness for entering higher education environments, fewer student support services on campus, insufficient resource availability, large undergraduate classes, lack of qualified staff, and declining funding support from government and private institutions (Tewari & Ilesanmi, 2020). These determinants underscore the importance of creating supportive institutional environments tailored to the distinct challenges students face within the Global South (Peterson, Louw & Dumont, 2009; DHET, 2020).

Out-of-class experiences play an indispensable role in fostering holistic student development by providing learning and engagement opportunities beyond traditional classroom settings (Mason, 2019). The transition towards digital learning platforms and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic have significantly altered the landscape of out-of-class experiences, introducing both opportunities and challenges within the South African context (van Staden & Naidoo, 2022). While online learning has provided students with increased access to learning content and opportunities to refine their digital skills, challenges such as poor network connectivity and delayed data and laptop rollout have hindered some students' access to online education (van Staden & Naidoo, 2022). Addressing the

digital divide is crucial to ensuring equitable access to these essential resources for all students (Kuh, Douglas, Lund & Ramin-Gyurnek, 1994; Snellman, Silva, Frederick & Putnam, 2015; Mpungose, 2020; Zhang, Bonk, Reeves & Reynolds, 2020; Cranfield et al., 2021).

There is a correlation between out-of-class experiences and educational benefits among tertiary students, such as critical thinking, increased knowledge acquisition and application, and intellectual flexibility (Guo, 2011). Acknowledging the critical role of out-of-class learning experiences necessitates strategic resource allocation, professional development, and policy formulation to enhance these experiences (Marwala & Mpedi, 2022). Global studies emphasise the importance of merging conceptual frameworks with practical applications to develop effective support mechanisms for out-of-class learning (Johnson, 2019). The gap between theoretical ideals and practical implementation underlines the need for educational institutions to harness social and decision-making capabilities, fostering enriching out-of-class learning environments (Medora, Brown & Taylor, 2021). The variability in conditions affecting the success of out-of-class learning highlights the need for institutional support and recognition of these educational initiatives, pointing to a pressing demand for a holistic and supportive approach to augmenting out-of-class learning experiences in higher education, especially in the Global South (Patel, 2003; Williams, Conyers & Garcia, 2018).

In this context, out-of-classroom curricula and activities serve as key platforms for nurturing multi-dimensional relationships in both formal and informal spaces (Mpungose, 2020). These relationships extend beyond peer-to-peer interactions to include student-faculty mentorship, collaborative learning communities, and even connections with alumni or external stakeholders through outreach, innovation hubs, or industry-linked projects (Van Staden & Naidoo, 2022). Such interactions help build a sense of academic belonging and foster knowledge sharing across diverse generational and professional perspectives. However, challenges persist in achieving meaningful engagement across these relationship tiers, particularly in under-resourced institutions where faculty workloads, limited co-ordination structures, and unequal student access to networking opportunities hinder sustained relationship-building efforts (van der Merwe, 2021). Where successful, approaches such as embedded mentorship programmes, peer-assisted learning, and faculty-led communities of practice have shown potential in strengthening social and academic integration. These initiatives provide insights into how structured, yet flexible frameworks can cultivate a culture of inclusivity and shared accountability for student development across multiple stakeholder levels.

The socio-political and educational backdrop of South Africa introduces specific challenges to student success, including historical inequalities, language barriers, and cultural differences. Van der Merwe (2021) acknowledges several factors contributing to a decrease in student success, such as unpaid student debts, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS)'s limited funding budget capacity, campus violence linked to gender-based violence and student protests, load shedding, fewer affordable student accommodations, and the long-lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, Chandra (2022) asserts that lack of funding, insufficient learning materials, and the marginalisation of students with disabilities are major challenges in the Global South. Students with disabilities often face negative attitudes and inadequate support services and facilities (Chiramba & Ndofirepi, 2023). Tjønneland (2017) argues that a significant challenge in South African higher education is not related to fees but rather the continued poor access to quality education and high dropout rates for students already enrolled in tertiary institutions. These factors create a complex environment, underscoring the need for interventions that are sensitive to the diverse backgrounds and needs of students within the context of South Africa (Bangeni & Kapp, 2017; Vandeyar & Mohale, 2017).

Despite numerous interventions such as bridging courses and remedial programmes, their effectiveness remains limited due to a lack of alignment with students' lived realities and an inadequate understanding of their diverse socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds (Scott, 2018; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2020; Marwala & Mpedi, 2022). These interventions often follow a "one-size-fits-all" model that overlooks key contextual challenges such as underpreparedness, language barriers, and digital exclusion. Scott (2018) argues that student success must become the core mission of higher education, supported by systemic and realistic plans for transformation. Central to this transformation is the need to critically re-evaluate the continued influence of Eurocentric models, which marginalise non-dominant cultural perspectives and perpetuate exclusionary practices (Ngubane & Makua, 2021). In contrast, humanising pedagogies grounded in Ubuntu offer a more inclusive and decolonial approach, promoting empathy, respect, and belonging (Zembylas, 2018). Embedding such principles into out-of-classroom initiatives enables institutions to co-create support systems that are both contextually relevant and affirming, allowing students to be recognised and supported as whole individuals. The COVID-19 pandemic further catalysed a shift in the conceptualisation of inclusion, moving beyond mere access and physical integration towards a deeper emphasis on contextual relevance, cultural affirmation, and psychosocial well-being. This study positions Ubuntu pedagogy as a critical lens for this transformation, one that promotes interconnectedness, care, and student dignity across

academic and non-academic spaces. Mapaling and Hoelson (2022) contend that humanising pedagogies, which centre lived experience and relational engagement, are essential for meaningful inclusion, particularly in the post-pandemic era. In the Global South, inclusive education now entails designing environments that account for disparities in digital access, language, socio-economic status, and emotional vulnerability, while actively challenging Eurocentric models that have historically marginalised underrepresented learners (Zembylas, 2018; Ngubane & Makua, 2021).

Determining the impact of out-of-classroom initiatives requires a multidimensional evaluation strategy that goes beyond academic outcomes to include psychosocial and behavioural indicators of student development. While conventional metrics such as progression rates, graduation rates, and academic performance (e.g., Grade Point Average (GPA) provide a baseline, they do not fully capture the value these programmes offer, particularly to students from underrepresented or historically disadvantaged backgrounds (Medora et al., 2021). More nuanced indicators, such as increased levels of engagement, self-efficacy, motivation, and sense of belonging, have emerged as essential markers of success in out-of-classroom learning environments (Scott, 2018; Mason, 2019). For example, mentorship and peer-led learning programmes have been shown to benefit first-generation and academically at-risk students by providing access to informal support networks, fostering resilience, and enhancing students' ability to navigate complex institutional systems (Medora et al., 2021). The outcomes of these initiatives are not always immediately quantifiable but often manifest through improved persistence, better coping strategies, and more positive academic identities over time.

This review therefore advocates for a holistic and contextually grounded approach to enhancing student retention and success in the South African higher education system. Integrating John Bean's (1982) model of student attrition with a deep understanding of the socio-political landscape allows for a more accurate diagnosis of the barriers to student success and the formulation of nuanced, evidence-based responses (van der Merwe, 2021). These responses should be embedded in inclusive institutional practices that promote access, belonging, and equity, not only in the classroom but also in the broader university environment. As Marwala and Mpedi (2022) point out, achieving higher graduation rates is not merely a matter of academic support but requires system-wide alignment with the realities faced by students. Initiatives must therefore be designed to accommodate the diverse experiences of marginalised learners, including those with disabilities, from rural areas, or from historically disadvantaged schools (Chiramba & Ndofirepi, 2023). In this regard, restructuring curricula to promote resilience, critical thinking, and socially relevant knowledge, as suggested by Chandra (2022), can support positive educational outcomes. More importantly, reframing student

success through an Ubuntu lens can ensure that South Africa's higher education institutions meet their ethical obligation to provide equitable, humanising, and transformative learning environments (Zembylas, 2018). Building on this, Mapaling and Hoelson (2022) provide a decade-long review showing how humanising pedagogies can bridge institutional alienation and foster belonging in marginalised student communities. Their analysis underscores the importance of shifting from transactional educational models to relational, student-centred frameworks that recognise learners as whole beings shaped by context and culture.

Methodology

This study underscores the necessity for targeted interventions that address the complex nature of student attrition within the Global South, particularly in South Africa. Promoting student well-being requires a deep understanding of the various dimensions of diverse student experiences. Theoretical frameworks like John Bean's (1982) model, enriched by insights into the specific challenges faced by students, provide guidance for improving graduation rates and enhancing student well-being. Acknowledging the critical role of out-of-class experiences, the need for institutional support, and recognition of these educational initiatives emphasises the demand for a holistic and supportive approach (Patel, 2003). This holistic approach is essential for augmenting out-of-class learning experiences in higher education, particularly within the context of the Global South.

This research utilised a qualitative approach, incorporating Root Cause Analysis (RCA) to investigate the out-of-class factors affecting the academic resilience of first-year engineering students. The efficacy of RCA in identifying underlying problems in complex situations is supported by Wilson, Dell and Anderson (1996) and Ammerman (1998), who emphasise its adaptability in various contexts, including education. Coupled with the socio-ecological models of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Ungar (2012), this study explores the dynamic interaction of individual, relational, and environmental factors outside the classroom. The online questionnaire designed for the study comprised a series of open-ended questions aimed at uncovering detailed insights into the students' perceptions of the factors that influence their academic resilience.

These questions were structured to prompt students to reflect deeply on their experiences and challenges during the term, encouraging them to identify and analyse the underlying causes of these challenges. The questionnaire guided students through a reflective process, asking them to pinpoint specific challenges they faced, the reasons behind these challenges, the impact on their academic

performance, and the steps they took to address these issues. Additionally, it sought students' perspectives on additional support or resources that could have aided them in overcoming these challenges, as well as any planned actions or changes for future terms based on their experiences, which helped in understanding the complex interplay of out-of-class factors in shaping academic resilience by allowing students to explore and articulate their experiences in a structured yet open-ended manner.

Sample and Data Collection

On February 1, 2023, there were 1,514 first-time first-year Engineering, Built Environment, and Information Technology (EBIT) students registered at the university. This initial cohort forms the basis of our study, providing a comprehensive representation of the demographic and academic dynamics within the faculty. As of March 1, 2024, following the processing of all appeals, the status of these students was categorised as follows: 961 were active, 129 had been readmitted, 89 transferred to other institutions, 199 were dismissed, and 136 discontinued their studies. Consequently, the overall throughput rate for this cohort is calculated at 78%. This figure represents the portion of the sample population that either continued their education or successfully completed the first year of their programme, providing a baseline for our study's demographic analysis.

Data collection was executed via an online questionnaire disseminated to these first-year engineering students at the University of Pretoria. The survey targeted students who sought academic advising due to academic exclusion, defined as failing to pass 70% of their credits. Featuring open-ended queries, the survey aimed to garner detailed perspectives on out-of-class factors affecting academic resilience. Utilising a digital platform allowed for extensive participation, with 300 students approached and 137 completing the questionnaire. This method ensured a varied collection of student experiences and enhanced the study's depth and breadth of understanding, providing a representative sample of the population in question.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted through thematic analysis of the responses from the RCA questionnaire. This process involved meticulously reading the collected responses to fully grasp the data, followed by the generation of initial codes encapsulating key ideas and concepts mentioned by

participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These codes were then organised into themes reflecting the underlying factors influencing academic resilience as identified through RCA. The themes were reviewed and refined to accurately represent the collected data, facilitating a detailed examination of the interplay among individual, relational, and environmental factors outside the classroom (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, these themes were related back to the research objectives and existing literature on academic resilience in higher education, offering insights into the complex factors that enabled and constrained academic success among first-year engineering students at the University of Pretoria.

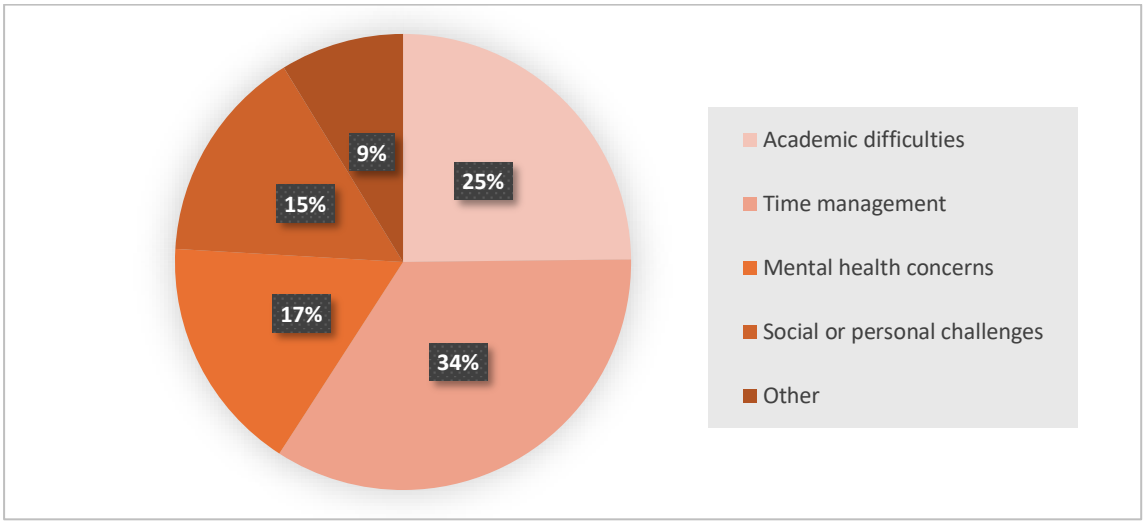
Ethical Considerations

Prior to the commencement of this study, ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional review board to ensure all procedures adhered to the required ethical standards. Participants were required to give informed consent, having been comprehensively briefed about the research objectives and their rights, encompassing assurances of confidentiality, anonymity, and the liberty to withdraw at any juncture without consequence (Bhattacherjee, 2012). Data gathered from online surveys were meticulously secured, with access restricted exclusively to the research team, thereby safeguarding participant privacy (Israel & Hay, 2006; Resnik, 2020).

Results

In the first question of the survey, participants were prompted to identify the obstacles they encountered during the third quarter of the academic year. The options provided for responses included: (1) Academic difficulties; (2) Time management; (3) Mental health concerns; (4) Social or Personal challenges; or (5) Other. Challenges related to the management of time were reported 47 times, indicating a predominant struggle among the cohort. Academic difficulties were noted 34 times. Issues stemming from social or personal circumstances were identified 21 times. Mental health concerns were highlighted on 23 occasions. The category “Other – please specify” was selected 12 times, suggesting a variety of less common, yet pertinent, issues affecting students.

Figure 1: *Breakdown of Question 1's responses.*



The inquiry further delved into the nuances of these challenges through a RCA, encompassing a series of questions aimed at unpacking the students' perceptions regarding the origins, contributing factors, and repercussions of these obstacles on their academic performance.

Table 1: *Overview of themes and subthemes from the RCA.*

Themes	Subthemes	Key insights
1. Mastering Time Management in Higher Education	1.1. Organisational Skills for Advanced Time Management	Focuses on the need for students to improve organisational skills, crucial in managing the autonomous learning environment of university.
	1.2. Self-regulation Skills for Advanced Time Management	Highlights issues like procrastination and the need for self-regulation to handle academic responsibilities effectively.
	1.3. External Factors Impacting Advanced Time Management	Discusses external challenges like power outages and distractions from roommates affecting study schedules.
2. Unpreparedness for University Workload Adjustments	2.1. Essential Academic and Social Skills for University Adjustment	Covers challenges of academic and social integration critical for successful university transition.
	2.2. Discipline and Self-Regulation Needed for University Adjustment	Emphasises the need for discipline and self-regulation in balancing academic and social life.
3. Escalating Mental Health Challenges Among University Students	3.1. Interplay between Academic Performance and Mental Health	Discusses how mental health directly affects academic performance and the cyclical impact of stress and anxiety.
	3.2. Seeking Help and Student Support Systems	Addresses the reluctance to seek help due to stigma and the importance of supportive campus culture.

Theme 1: Mastering Time Management in Higher Education

A significant proportion of the cohort, 34.31% (47 students), pinpointed time management as their primary obstacle, emphasising its crucial role in academic success. The literature robustly supports this observation, with seminal work by Macan, Shahani, Dipboye and Phillips (1990) establishing a positive association between adept time management practices, encompassing goal setting, task prioritisation, and activity organisation, and enhanced GPA scores and student well-being. Claessens, Van Eerde, Rutte and Roe (2007) further posit that proficient time management skills are essential for effectively engaging with academic demands, which can lead to improved performance and reduced stress levels.

Adjustment to university life is intricately linked to the ability to manage workload and time effectively. Macan et al. (1990) underscore this by highlighting the positive correlation between time management practices and academic performance. Students often struggle to effectively prioritise and allocate sufficient time to their studies, a challenge exacerbated by the transition to an environment where they must navigate greater autonomy over their learning schedules (Macan et al., 1990; Guo, 2011). For instance, one student expressed, “I consistently found myself underestimating the time needed for assignments, leading to last-minute rushes and incomplete understanding”. Such experiences underscore the critical nature of time management in managing the increased workload at university.

Moreover, the findings are particularly relevant for engineering students who must balance demanding coursework with laboratory work and group projects. Students report difficulties due to their inexperience with the university landscape and inadequate time management strategies, often struggling to gauge the amount of time needed to complete tasks on time. This is echoed in Mapaling, Du Plooy and Webb (2024), who found that both engineering students and academic staff identify the transitional gap into engineering education as a major source of academic pressure. Their study highlighted how inadequate psychosocial scaffolding, such as mentoring, workload orientation, and early academic integration, contributes to student stress and attrition risk. This lack of structured support often results in students falling behind on class content and having inadequate time to practise or prepare for tests. One engineering student described their experience as a “constant game of catch-up”, which significantly hindered their understanding of key concepts. In the realm of higher education, effective time management emerges as a critical skill that significantly influences student success and well-being. This overarching theme is dissected into three

subthemes, each addressing different aspects of time management challenges faced by university students. These subthemes not only highlight common issues but also frame potential interventions that can assist students in navigating their academic journey more effectively.

Subtheme 1.1: Organisational Skills for Advanced Time Management

Improving organisational skills is vital for effective time management, which is often highlighted by students struggling with the transition to the autonomous learning environment of university (Guo, 2011). One student mentioned, “I consistently found myself underestimating the time needed for assignments, leading to last-minute rushes and incomplete understanding”. Another indicated the need for more structured scheduling, “I need to spend more time on my elective module”, suggesting a gap in planning and executing academic tasks. These reflections underline the need for students to develop robust organisational skills, such as creating and adhering to timetables and prioritising tasks. This could further reflect an issue with the rigid secondary schooling system within South Africa. This system imposes a sense of conformity and places a strong emphasis on guided learning. In contrast, the campus environment introduces a new sense of autonomy in every sense of the students’ identity, in encouraging critical thinking, autonomous learning, and flexibility. Thus, it can be argued that this difficulty in transition from high school to university life is indicative of inadequate preparation by the basic education system in South Africa.

Subtheme 1.2: Self-regulation Skills for Advanced Time Management

Many students highlighted procrastination and lack of motivation as significant barriers to effective time management. For instance, one student expressed, “I could have prepared better for class”, which reflects delays in managing academic responsibilities. Another candidly shared, “The freedom was overwhelming; I didn't manage my time well, leading to rushed assignments and skipped lectures”. Such admissions suggest that self-regulation is a crucial skill that students need to cultivate to navigate the demands of higher education effectively (Zimmerman, 2002). Self-regulation is an important skill needed to navigate adult life; however, more research is needed to explore the possibility of burnout within engineering students. Given the rigorous competitive nature of getting into an engineering programme and maintaining enrolment, procrastination and lack of motivation could point to symptoms of burnout.

Subtheme 1.3: External Factors Impacting Advanced Time Management

External factors also play a significant role in shaping students' ability to manage their time (Claessens et al., 2007). Several students reported disruptions to their study schedules due to unexpected events. One noted, "Power outages disrupted my study plans", and another mentioned, "Roommates were a constant source of distraction". These external challenges highlight the need for students to develop flexible time management strategies that can accommodate unforeseen circumstances. The basic education system in South Africa assimilates to a type of dependent learning. In the event of unforeseen circumstances disrupting time management, students are not accustomed to autodidacticism. Thus, a strong sense of self-actualisation is an important commodity in managing academic performance.

Theme 2: Unpreparedness for University Workload Adjustments

In the current study of the context of factors influencing academic exclusion, academic challenges emerge as the second most significant determinant, following concerns related to time management (Smith, 2020). A substantial proportion of students, constituting 44%, attribute their academic difficulties to the transitional phase experienced upon entering university, underscoring its pivotal role in shaping academic performance and overall adaptation (Thompson, Pawson & Evans, 2021). John Bean's (1982) conceptualisation of student attrition emphasises the critical importance of both academic achievement and social integration for a successful transition to university life. It is frequently observed that students commonly express a lack of preparedness for the heightened academic demands inherent in tertiary education. For example, one participant stated, "I found myself unprepared for the level of academic rigour expected at university; the methods that were effective in secondary school were insufficient here". Similarly, another respondent articulated, "Transitioning from secondary school, I was ill-equipped for the academic pace and standards of university. It was a stark realisation of the depth of understanding required in this academic environment". These narratives highlight a significant expectation disparity between secondary and tertiary education, resulting in challenges related to grasping new concepts and adequately preparing for significant assessments (Petersen et al., 2009).

The process of adjustment in university encompasses a multifaceted journey, requiring students to navigate not only the academic terrain but also the social landscape (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). Essential to this adjustment is the development of academic skills such as motivation and

responsiveness to academic demands, as well as fostering of a sense of commitment and affiliation with the institution (Bean & Eaton, 2001). Within this framework, two critical subthemes emerge: (2.1) Essential Academic and Social Skills for University Adjustment and (2.2) Discipline and Self-Regulation Needed for University Adjustment. These subthemes shed light on the challenges students face in adapting to the rigours of university life and underscore the importance of developing key personal management skills to navigate this transition successfully.

Subtheme 2.1: Essential Academic and Social Skills for University Adjustment

The transition to university encompasses a broad spectrum of challenges that extend beyond academic rigour to include crucial aspects of social integration. Tinto (1993) emphasises that this adjustment period is critical for both academic performance and social integration, which are pivotal for student retention and success. Within our surveyed cohort of 137 students, a considerable number identified academic challenges as their primary obstacle, encompassing factors like adjustment to university, time management, discipline/self-regulation, mental health, and social support. Notably, 15 out of the 34 students who selected academic challenges pinpointed the adjustment to university as the major hurdle. This adjustment involves not only adapting to new academic standards but also integrating into a new social environment, which many students find daunting (Tinto, 1993). The lack of familiarity with university expectations and academic rigour emerged prominently, with students voicing concerns over their preparedness and ability to meet the heightened demands of their courses (Petersen et al., 2009). For instance, a student remarked, “Coming from high school, I was unprepared for the university’s academic pace and standards. It was a rude awakening to the depth of understanding required here”. This theme highlights the steep learning curve faced by first-year students and underscores the need for enhanced orientation programmes that bridge the gap between high school and university expectations.

Subtheme 2.2: Discipline and Self-Regulation Needed for University Adjustment

Navigating university life requires a disciplined approach and the ability to effectively regulate one’s studies. Zimmerman (2002) discusses the role of self-regulation in learning and academic achievement, highlighting how self-disciplinary practices significantly influence students’ ability to manage their studies effectively. Challenges with self-regulation and discipline are evident as students mention difficulties in balancing their academic and social lives (Zimmerman, 2002). For instance, one student mentioned, “I spent more time socialising than studying, thinking I could

handle the coursework on my own. It was a mistake not to seek help earlier". These narratives reveal issues like procrastination, a poor attitude towards coursework, and lack of motivation, which are common among students adjusting to the freedoms of university life. Zimmerman's (2002) framework suggests that self-regulated learning strategies, such as goal setting, self-monitoring, and self-reflection, are crucial for students to take control of their learning processes, thereby improving their academic outcomes and ensuring a more fulfilling educational experience. The ability to self-regulate is not only about managing time but also about maintaining a consistent focus and avoiding distractions that can lead to poor academic performance (Zimmerman, 2002).

Reflecting on the role of out-of-class experiences, students highlighted both challenges and opportunities presented by online learning and other out-of-class activities. While some found new ways to engage with material and collaborate with peers, others felt overwhelmed by the self-directed nature of these experiences, as noted by one student, "Online study groups and virtual labs were innovative, but the self-directed learning required was a significant adjustment". This speaks to the digital divide within South Africa. While some students are accustomed to utilising technology in learning, a large number of students are not (van Staden & Naidoo, 2022). Thus, there needs to be strategies to counteract these inequalities.

Theme 3: Escalating Mental Health Challenges Among University Students

In the evolving landscape of higher education, mental health issues among university students have gained significant prominence, exerting profound impacts on their academic performance and overall well-being (Patel et al., 2007). This theme explores the intricate complexities of mental health struggles encountered by students, with a particular focus on the repercussions of academic pressures on mental health and the indispensable role of supportive systems in addressing these challenges.

The correlation between mental health and academic performance is deeply intertwined, with stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms frequently cited as direct impediments to students' academic success (Eisenberg et al., 2009). The pressure to excel academically often exacerbates underlying mental health issues, perpetuating a cycle where poor mental health further compromises academic performance, leading to escalating stress and anxiety levels. South African students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, face heightened vulnerability to mental illness within the university environment due to neglect of their emotional needs prior to

university entry (Swart, Engelbrecht, Eloff, & Pettipher, 2002). This is supported by Tau et al. (2024), who found that students' psychological well-being and academic adjustment were profoundly affected during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their study highlights that fear, prolonged isolation, and disruption to learning structures significantly undermined students' resilience and coping capacity, particularly for those already experiencing socioeconomic strain.

Predisposing factors such as genetic vulnerabilities, socioeconomic disadvantages, and childhood adversities contribute to the risk of developing mental illness, exacerbated by the stressors inherent in the university context (Mall, Mortier, Taljaard, Roos, Stein & Lochner, 2018). While the university setting offers opportunities for personal growth, it also presents cognitive and emotional challenges that, without adequate support, can precipitate mental illness. The advent of technology and social media has introduced new challenges, exposing students to a barrage of information that can be both stimulating and anxiety-provoking, thus increasing the risk of mental health challenges (Sidner & Jones, 2021).

Subtheme 3.1: Interplay between Academic Performance and Mental Health

The relationship between academic performance and mental health is intricate, with stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms frequently cited as direct impediments to students' academic success (Eisenberg et al., 2009). Students have reported that "The better your mental health the better your performance", underscoring the critical impact of psychological well-being on educational outcomes. The pressure to excel academically often aggravates underlying mental health issues, perpetuating a cycle where poor mental health further compromises academic performance, leading to escalating stress and anxiety levels. One student reflected, "Some days can be stressful and other days can be smooth, but it all depends on how one manages their time and stress", illustrating the daily challenges faced.

This cycle, once in motion, can be self-reinforcing, especially in the absence of timely mental health support and effective coping strategies. Research by Eisenberg et al. (2009) highlights the prevalent mental health issues among college students and their negative correlation with academic outcomes. Additionally, a student commented, "This semester, I have been preparing better for practicals. The stress from last semester taught me to be more organised", which shows personal growth and adaptation strategies in response to academic pressures. The escalation of mental health challenges among university students reflects broader societal trends, with mental illness

accounting for a significant proportion of the illnesses affecting young people (Auerbach, Mortier, Bruffaerts, Alonso, Benjet, Cuijpers et al., 2018). Factors such as genetic predispositions, socioeconomic vulnerabilities, and childhood adversities predispose individuals to mental illness, with the university context serving as a potential catalyst for its manifestation (Mall et al., 2018).

Subtheme 3.2: Seeking Help and Student Support Systems

Despite the clear need for mental health support, there is often reluctance among students to seek help, driven by stigma, fear of judgement, or lack of awareness about available resources (Ryan, Toumbourou & Jorm, 2014). One student poignantly expressed, "I am sad that I did not pay more attention to my mental health in the beginning, and how it affected my performance". Creating a supportive campus culture that encourages openness and Ubuntu is crucial for destigmatizing mental health issues and promoting help-seeking behaviour among students (Eisenberg et al., 2009; Scott, 2018; Ngubane & Makua, 2021; Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021). A notable barrier to academic success is students' reluctance to seek help, often due to a misplaced sense of self-reliance that deters them from seeking much-needed assistance from fellow students and lecturers (Ryan et al., 2001). This barrier is highlighted by the students' narratives, where one reflects, "Feeling disconnected from my peers and professors made it difficult to stay motivated and engaged with my studies", illustrating the impact of social isolation on academic engagement.

Discussion and Recommendations

In the current landscape of higher education, a plethora of student interventions aimed at bolstering academic success and well-being are available. However, despite these efforts, a gap persists between the provision of these interventions and the actual needs and experiences of students (Scott, 2018; Mapaling, 2024). A deeper exploration into the root causes of academic struggles, through methods such as RCA, reveals that interventions may often miss the mark by not sufficiently addressing the nuanced dynamics of student experiences, particularly those outside the classroom.

For instance, while time management workshops are frequently implemented as a blanket solution for academic support, they tend to overlook the more intricate aspects of time management challenges that students face, such as the need for enhanced organisational skills and self-regulation capabilities (Zimmerman, 2002). These elements are crucial in a university setting where students are expected to autonomously navigate their academic responsibilities (Macan et al., 1990;

Zimmerman, 2002; Claessens et al., 2007). A student's comment on consistently underestimating time for assignments highlights the need for interventions that do more than just preach generic time management rhetoric; they should offer strategies that cater to building detailed organisational skills and improving self-regulation in academic tasks.

Moreover, the feeling of isolation from the institution noted under Theme 2 suggests that while interventions like mentor programmes and day houses are in place, they may not effectively connect with every student, especially students who are not in a university residence. This signals a potential area for improvement where universities, such as the University of Pretoria, could consider implementing structured learning communities. Advising must be contextually grounded, as highlighted by Versfeld and Mapaling (2024), who found that institutional constraints, such as limited advising capacity and high staff workloads, often undermine the effectiveness of otherwise well-intentioned frameworks. Without addressing these systemic barriers, students, particularly those outside residence systems or with limited peer support, remain underserved by existing academic advising practices. In response to these gaps, this study proposes the development of structured learning communities that embed advising into inclusive, student-centred support ecosystems. These communities offer more accessible and less intimidating platforms for academic and social interaction, helping to bridge the divide between students and the institution and fostering a stronger sense of belonging and integration (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994).

The key takeaway from the pandemic is that access is not only a function of enrolment or tuition waivers, but also of institutional responsiveness to students' socio-technical realities. Universities must now move beyond digital inclusion as a temporary fix to embrace it as a core infrastructure of equity. Versfeld and Mapaling (2024) show that while academic advising frameworks exist, systemic constraints, like high advising loads and under-resourcing, often undermine their effectiveness, especially for off-campus students. The current study recommends structured learning communities as one solution, offering more accessible platforms for students to receive academic and peer-based support outside formal lectures. Such communities help bridge digital divides while humanising support structures.

Beyond fostering belonging and resilience within the university, these models also hold relevance for preparing students to meet evolving expectations in the world of work. While these institutional strategies mark an important step forward, they must also be complemented by culturally affirming approaches to student support. Afrocentric models, such as those explored by Mapaling and Plaatjes

(2019), further reinforce this by emphasising culturally grounded, peer-driven learning communities that affirm student identity and promote Ubuntu principles. Their work situates these interventions within the post-#FeesMustFall discourse, underscoring the urgency of decolonising retention strategies to reflect the lived realities of marginalised students. This model further aligns with findings by Mapaling (2024), who highlights that multi-layered, integrated support systems, comprising peers, mentors, academic staff, and advisors, are critical in promoting academic resilience, particularly among engineering students navigating high-pressure, high-stakes environments. Together, these frameworks present a compelling case for redesigning student support to be not only holistic and scalable but also responsive to sociocultural context. Transformations in the workplace, such as increased automation, hybrid work models, and demand for transversal skills, have redefined the relevance of out-of-classroom learning. Employers now place greater emphasis on soft skills such as adaptability, collaboration, and emotional intelligence, which are frequently cultivated in mentorship, advising, leadership, and community engagement programmes. As a result, universities must reimagine out-of-classroom curricula not as ancillary, but as integral components of employability preparation (Mapaling, Webb & Du Plooy , 2023). The findings of this study suggest that structured support systems can mirror workplace dynamics and help students develop practical skills in communication, resilience, and teamwork - traits that enhance transition into the labour market.

To reflect the full breadth of student development, institutions should consider adopting third transcripts or co-curricular records that formally document students' out-of-classroom learning. These records can capture involvement in peer mentoring, leadership roles, community service, or support groups, experiences that often go unrecognised yet signal readiness for the workplace. Employers increasingly value such accomplishments, viewing them as indicators of initiative, emotional maturity, and real-world competence. By formally acknowledging these experiences, universities can not only validate student engagement but also enhance graduates' employability profiles.

Based on the discussions and findings, several tailored recommendations are proposed. Firstly, time management workshops could be refined to focus specifically on organisational skills, helping students develop precise strategies like the effective use of planners and digital tools that align with academic demands (Macan et al., 1990; Claessens et al., 2007). Additionally, these workshops should integrate cognitive and behavioural strategies to enhance self-regulation techniques, aiding students in managing their study habits and academic commitments more effectively (Zimmerman, 2002).

The resultant impact on equitable access underscores the importance of evaluating how institutions, especially resource-constrained ones, address these challenges and the lessons for future educational strategies. The results from the current study suggest a need to develop structured learning communities within faculties. These communities would provide regular, structured opportunities for academic collaboration and social engagement, designed to be inclusive and accommodating, especially for students who might feel overwhelmed by large social settings (Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021).

Expanding mental health support in higher education is an urgent priority given the prevalent stress, anxiety, and other mental health issues among students (Patel et al., 2007). It is imperative not only to offer a broader range of services but also to ensure that these services are accessible and effectively utilised by the student body. However, a significant challenge remains as students often do not take advantage of these resources due to various barriers, including stigma, lack of awareness, and perceived inadequacies in the services provided (Eisenberg et al., 2009). Campaigns that promote mental health awareness and education can play a critical role. These should involve peer-led initiatives and the participation of respected figures within the university community, such as faculty members and senior students, who can openly discuss the importance of mental health, share personal stories, and debunk myths about mental health issues (Ryan et al., 2014). Delivery of mental health services could be offered as structured, less threatening activities, such as free guided meditations or yoga classes that provide students with practical tools to manage stress and anxiety. Making these activities a regular part of university life can help students see mental wellness as a normal and essential part of their academic and social experience (Ryan et al., 2014). Fostering a sense of community and Ubuntu within the campus environment is in the best interests of student success.

Conclusion

The research presented in this paper explored student perceptions on out-of-class experiences that impact student success in a South African context. Amidst the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing challenges faced by educational institutions, this study highlights the necessity for a nuanced understanding of the myriad factors that impact academic outcomes beyond traditional classroom settings. The current study findings reveal that while numerous interventions exist to support student academic performance and well-being, there remains a gap between the design of these interventions and the actual needs of the students. This disconnect underscores the

importance of adopting a more targeted approach that addresses the specific, real-world challenges faced by students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The adoption of methodologies such as RCA has proven useful in uncovering the underlying issues that hinder student success. The RCA approach facilitated a deeper understanding of the critical role played by time management, organisational skills, and mental health in shaping academic outcomes. By integrating these findings into the development of tailored interventions, educational institutions can better support their students in navigating the complexities of higher education. Furthermore, our discussion on the implementation of structured learning communities and the integration of mental health practices into the curriculum offers a forward-thinking approach to enhancing the student experience. These initiatives are not just about improving academic performance but are crucial in building a supportive, inclusive, and resilient student community within the South African context.

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