What do university students understand by academic success? What factors contribute to its attainment?

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Research background

- Intellectual ability is the most recognised predictor of cognitive ability (Neisser et al., 1996).
  - Cognitive ability refers to any information processing, including attention, reading and facial recognition.
  - Intellectual ability is a measure of certain aspects of cognitive ability such as problem solving and non-verbal reasoning which correlate positively with academic success.

- A growth mind set (as opposed to a “fixed” mind set) needs to be developed, based on intrinsic motivation (Naude et al., 2016).

- Achievement motivation is also considered as an important predictor within academic settings (Dweck, 1986).

- Certain personality traits (such as emotionality and conscientiousness) correlate positively with good student grades (Mihaela, 2015).
Rationale

- Research on the topic is scarce and mostly from a quantitative approach, using survey methodology. The current study sought more in-depth insight about the students’ experiences.

- Naude et al. (2016) conducted a qualitative study with 79 1st year Psychology students in South Africa using the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008) as its theoretical framework. They concluded that students need to move from an external to an internal locus of control in order to facilitate academic success.

  - Self-Determination Theory: Three basic, intrinsic, universal drives enhance well-being, namely: competence; autonomy and psychological relatedness.
Aim

As academics, we spend time and energy trying to find ways to help our students enhance their academic performance, and looking for ways to support their learning. The outcome of this study is aimed at informing our practice when planning teaching and learning activities.

The participating students were considered as the “experts” who have the knowledge of what factors contribute to their academic success.
Research Questions

How do university students define academic success?

What factors do students perceive as facilitators of their academic success?
Method

Design:
- Qualitative study using focus groups for data collection
- Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) was applied, taking an inductive approach

Participants:
- 16 Psychology students (5 male; 11 females) in Level 5 and 6
- 19 to 53 years of age (Mean: 29; Mode 19)
- 13 Home students, 2 EU, 1 International student
- Average grade: 4 first class; 11 2:1; and 1 2:2 grade
- All students were given points for participation (Research Participation Scheme)
Method

Procedure:

- Three Focus groups of 1-1.5 hour each were conducted in a seminar room in the Psychology Department.
- The focus groups were all led by the same two researchers.
- A semi-structured interview guide was used.
- Each session was audio recorded for transcription purposes.
What is academic success?

A summary of the participants’ understanding of academic success is: gaining skills and knowledge through the university learning process, giving priority to personal development and the professional achievement of a university qualification.

...to feel happy in that environment and to feel that you are achieving and growing as an individual as well.

I think it’s getting as much information and applying it in life as much as you could, more than doing good at an exam...

...understanding yourself, knowing who you are and your place in the world and how you impact on other people...
Focus Group Exercise
Thematic Analysis

Theme 1: Intrinsic Factors
- Self-Management
- Motivation
- Personal skills

Theme 2: Extrinsic Factors
- Support
- Teaching provision
Intrinsic Factors

Self-Management

- Taking responsibility
- Dealing with setbacks
- Self-awareness

"If you don’t understand the work, you need to go back to the lecturer or use the Internet or use books. Stop blaming it on others and start being responsible for your actions."
Intrinsic Factors

Motivation
- Short and long term goals
- Interest in subject
- Willingness to learn

- “I think starting with higher education, it should be something that makes you willing to keep on going, keep on researching, keep on informing yourself. I think that that’s the success in higher education.”
Intrinsic Factors

Personal skills
- Professionalism
- Communication
- Managing workload

“Time management is... giving time to some things that you want to do, and organisation is making yourself do something, making the choice... it’s not always an easy choice to make.”
Extrinsic Factors

Support
- Family support
- Social support
- Financial stability

“Family support... It’s an emotional support because they are always behind me, they are always checking about my coursework, about my exams, if I’m doing well, that I’ve got the books I need. Do I need something else? This support is a good 50% of what keeps me going, honestly.”
Extrinsic Factors

Teaching provision
Quality of resources
Staff availability
Feedback

“Being able to contact lecturers... they’re really good at replying and they’re detailed enough so they’re not giving you the answer, you still have to think, but it points you in the right directions...”
Discussion

- *Self-management* relates to the previously identified internal locus of control as a requirement for academic success (Naude et al., 2016).
- *Motivation* and *Personal skills* are individual characteristics that can be clarified and developed.

- There is an interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic factors.

- Academic success is a complex construct with multiple facets.
Implications

- Opportunities for enhancing students’ self-awareness, such as:
  - Identifying their goals
  - Their learning style
  - How they deal with challenges

- More emphasis on personal skills development integrated within the programme, such as:
  - Communication and self-presentation
  - Organisation, time and stress management
  - Employability skills
Implications

- Acknowledging the need to support our students and finding ways to address this essential requirement, e.g. taking a more pastoral role as a personal tutor.

- Creating ways for students to seek help when they need it, such as an online discussion board, assessment feedforward sessions, staff availability and constructive feedback.
Reflexivity

• The focus groups were led by Psychology lecturers who taught and assessed the participants at the time of the study, which might have influenced the data. However, students still felt comfortable to mention negative elements on the programme.

• All participants were actively engaged on the programme, attending lectures/seminars regularly and submitting all their assessments when due. Therefore this study does not necessarily provide insight on how the weaker students can be supported, which the quantitative data could provide.

• This study is limited to the perceptions of Psychology students, therefore restricted to a particular student group and cannot be generalised. The type of language used might be more introspective.
Future Research

- A follow up with an exploration of student perceptions’ of academic success and its attainment in other subject areas is needed.

- Some insight into how to support the less engaged students would be useful, perhaps by conducting a study with new intakes, before students become disengaged.

- A quantitative study with a larger participant group to differentiate particular needs for different demographics e.g. gender, age, socioeconomic status.
How can this student-centred approach be developed and integrated within our programmes?

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References


Naude, L., Nel, L., van der Watt, R., & Tadi, F. (2016), If it's going to be, it's up to me: first-year psychology students’ experiences regarding academic success. Teaching in Higher Education, 21(1), 37 - 48.