

# Understanding students: A key to systemic success

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**UNIVERSITIES  
SOUTH AFRICA**

### **The Context**

This publication represents a first communication on the findings that have emerged from a set of surveys of students at our institutions of higher learning. It is aimed at improving our understanding of the kind of students we are enrolling at our institutions and what it is that they bring into the higher education environment -- thereby helping us to design that environment better to match their needs. Other publications on the area of student engagement arising out of this partnership between Universities SA (USAf) and the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) at the University of Free State will follow. The CTL conducts the Beginning University Survey of Student Engagement (BUSSE) and the South African Survey of Student Engagement (SASSE), amongst others.

The initiative is a direct response to a concern raised in 2017 by the Teaching and Learning Strategy Group (TLSG) of USAf, to the effect that enhancing students' learning experiences is not receiving adequate attention. Even though 88% of USAf's members institutions were found (in a survey conducted by the TLSG) to be assessing undergraduate students' learning experiences, it is not necessarily for one common purpose. Whereas most of the surveys are aimed at improving the quality of teaching and learning or, more broadly, the curriculum, some are carried out to achieve a variety of other purposes, including encouraging lecturers to 'reflect critically' and to 'celebrate best practice', but also for institutions to understand the holistic student experience so that they are designed to enhance the quality of learning and teaching on the one hand, and the quality of student experience and engagement on the other.

### **Acknowledgement**

Universities SA wishes to acknowledge this collaboration with the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) at the University of the Free State, who supplied the BUSSE content and were thus instrumental to the production of this publication. We specifically extend our gratitude to Professor Francois Strydom, Director and Head of the CTL and the Centre's Principal Researcher in student engagement, Dr Sonja Loots.

**Cover photo:** Courtesy of the University of the Western Cape.

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# 1. Understanding students: A key to systemic success?

*South African students, particularly in the wake of #FeesMustFall are widely perceived to be arrogant and entitled, underprepared, and even lazy. According to data emerging from a survey of university students at the start of their academic journey, the reality couldn't be more different. It's time for universities and the public to focus on meeting students 'where they are,' making optimal use of their existing attitudes, aspirations and skills, rather than trying to squeeze them into a traditional and possibly redundant university mould.*

This is the first of a set of communications relating to the kinds of information emerging from student engagement surveys carried out by the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) at the University of the Free State. These surveys involve a significant number of students across university-types and the information emerging from them has important lessons for our basic and primary schools, our universities and other tertiary institutions, for parents and for society in general. Universities SA and the South African Surveys of Student Engagement team are genuinely excited about this project which we think will contribute to the emergence of an educating society.



*Student diversity brings new challenges to institutions – but also heralds great promise and opportunity.*

**Photos (clockwise from top left):** Courtesy of the University of Pretoria; the University of Limpopo; the Cape Peninsula University of Technology; the Vaal University of Technology and the University of the Western Cape.

All over the world, student populations are becoming more diverse, representing vastly different backgrounds. The race and gender diversity has never been more substantial. Many are poor. Many are first-generation students – the first in their families to embark on higher education. Many are older, signalling a shift away from the conventional idea of students as fresh out of high school, unencumbered with responsibility. All are tech-savvy, manifesting different approaches, modes of communication and forms of engagement. Such diversity brings new challenges to institutions of higher learning – but also heralds great promise and opportunity.



In South Africa many students carry the added burden of inadequate basic education systems, adding fuel to complaints about their lack of preparedness, their unresponsiveness to traditional teaching methods, the erosion of critical thinking skills and basic literacy.

All of these complaints carry explicit and implicit blame which is often unfairly directed towards the students themselves. Recent research emerging from an on-the-ground survey of first-year students confirms that it's time for South Africans within the academy and beyond to acknowledge a collective responsibility.

Data emerging from the Beginning University Survey of Student Engagement (BUSSE) based at the University of the Free State, which targets students entering their first year of study at about a third of the universities around the country, points to a basic failure, both within the academy and beyond, to understand who our South African students are and what qualities they bring with them when they arrive in first year. This has serious implications for how well our students are taught, how they are engaged and, ultimately, whether they pass or fail.

"We need to meet our students where they are, rather than where we assume they should be," says Professor Francois Strydom, Director of the CTL at the University of the Free State which serves as the central hub for the national BUSSE project.

*"As universities, we are not able to take away the problems relating to the schooling system or problems of financial stresses suffered by our students. But universities can still do something: they can change how teaching and learning happens, how students are orientated to the first-year experience, how tutorials are managed, and how students receive academic advice".*

-Professor Francois Strydom

Findings emerging from the BUSSE survey sketch a profile quite unlike the stereotypical perception of students as entitled, disinterested and woefully under-skilled. Instead, they suggest that first-year students – like most first-year student populations around the world – have positive attitudes towards their studies and are optimistic about their potential to succeed; they have high aspirations and demonstrate an intention to work hard. The findings also suggest that the majority of students entering higher education are familiar with reading or writing assignments, have made use of some learning strategies, have learnt to include diverse perspectives in their school work, and have to some extent applied evaluative skills to their own or others' perspectives. Although the academic skill levels of students entering higher education will certainly differ, the findings challenge the sweeping generalised notion that students are underprepared.

"The question we should be asking as universities is: are we making optimal use of the attitudes, aspirations, academics skills and resilience our students enter with rather than fixating on what students are lacking," says Strydom.

Research from around the world shows that two of the best predictors of student success are academic preparation and motivation. In South Africa, where levels of academic preparation vary wildly and in most cases are directly related to socio-economic realities, selecting students purely on the basis of these two factors is impossible and, in fact, undesirable.

### **So what can universities do to improve student success?**

Decades of research at our universities, and at universities and colleges in the United States and elsewhere indicate that the extent to which students engage with their academic programmes and environment is also a significant predictor of success, benefiting underprepared students in particular and enhancing their chance of graduating.



## 2. What is Student Engagement?

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Basically defined, student engagement is how much time and effort students spend on academic activities and other educationally-purposeful activities. In these endeavours, students obviously carry some of the responsibility for their success and are required to demonstrate agency. However, there is an additional component to the concept which is of direct relevance to South African universities and how they respond to their students: the creation of a suitable and supportive environment that promotes academic development.

According to American George Kuh, a leading global scholar in the field and founder of the widely used National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which has been contextualised in different countries including South Africa, in addition to student effort, student engagement refers to the way that institutions allocate resources and organise learning opportunities and services to help students participate in and benefit from such activities.



*A wholesale support culture is more likely to respond appropriately to student needs than targeting only the struggling individuals.*  
**Photo:** Courtesy of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

This puts an onus on institutions to meet the needs of their students “where they are” by providing a more supportive mainstream environment for all students rather than taking the more traditional route of access programmes targeting individual students who might be struggling.

# 3. How is student engagement measured?

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Since 2007 a range of student engagement surveys – based on the NSSE – has been developed and contextualised for use in South Africa, enabling institutions to gain insights into student participation in educational activities and develop programmes in response to that information.

## **Benefits for institutions include:**

- A better understanding of contemporary students
- Actionable data for improving student retention and progress
- Identification of constraints in the teaching and learning environment
- Creation of high-impact curricula
- Evidence-based pedagogical innovation
- Systematic approaches to quality enhancement
- Desirable graduate attributes and outcomes

Among these surveys is the Beginning University Survey of Student Engagement, or BUSSE, which measures entering first-year students' pre-university academic and curricular experiences and their expectations regarding participation in educational activities during the first year.

Coordinated by the CTL at the University of the Free State, the latest BUSSE findings are based on data collected from 14,872 students who completed the survey forms from 2015-17. The students were from nine institutions – three traditional universities, two comprehensive universities and four universities of technology.

According to Strydom, the focus is on extracting actionable data that can be used by institutions to improve their levels and quality of student engagement.

*“Many universities are serious about student success and are making impressive gains”.*

– Professor Francois Strydom

“Many universities are serious about student success and are making impressive gains,” he said. “This information gives them the tools to fine-tune these efforts.”

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## 4. Managing ‘The Freshman Myth’

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The BUSSE survey shows that many South African entering students, like their global counterparts, have unrealistic expectations regarding their own academic preparation and tend to under-estimate how difficult their studies will be. In doing so, they conform to an internationally recognised phenomenon – the Freshman Myth – that has the potential to create major disillusionment in students and significantly raises the risk of students dropping out.

According to Strydom, the first round of academic assessments at university are a particularly critical time for both students and institutions that seek to support their students and keep them in the system, particularly given the well-documented incidence of anxiety disorders among today’s young people.

“The student’s self-image can take a knock when they get the results of their first assessment. As institutions, we need to be sensitive to our students’ disappointment, exploring opportunities to help students transition academically and providing the academic and non-academic support needed to keep them motivated and committed,” he says.



*Whereas a large majority of students are confident they will persevere and succeed, there is a percentage not so sure of their own resilience. It is all the more important for institutions to manage the expectations of the latter.*

**Photo:** Courtesy of the Vaal University of Technology.

### **In other words, are institutions teaching students how to be students?**

While the BUSSE survey shows high levels of confidence among students that they will be able to persevere at university, there is a sufficient proportion of students who are unsure about their resilience to make it important for universities to manage student expectations.

According to Strydom, the disconnect between reality and expectation is partly explained by the fact that most of the students are the first in their families to attend university.

Furthermore, with the vast majority emerging from dysfunctional schools and poor backgrounds, the advice they receive about choice of degree is very likely to be lacking.

“Most of our students are simply driven to study anything that might help them and their families into a better life,” he says.



## 5. Supporting students: A collaborative approach

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Under these circumstances, carefully targeted institutional support systems have become a necessity rather than an add-on and the research suggests that today's students have correctly come to expect more support from institutions.



*Students who expect to obtain high marks also expect more learning support.*  
**Photo:** Courtesy of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

“Those who expect higher marks also expect more learning support. This is not an unrealistic expectation and defines the essence of the teaching and learning relationship,” according to Dr Sonja Loots, principal researcher in student engagement based at the CTL.

The BUSSE findings show that entering students tend to perceive their academic journey as a collaboration between their own efforts and those of the institution. Encouragingly, they also show that students from all backgrounds expect to learn through structured collaboration with their peers, signalling a willingness to embrace diversity and hone their teamwork skills – qualities considered highly desirable in the modern workplace.

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## 6. Key findings – Who are our students?

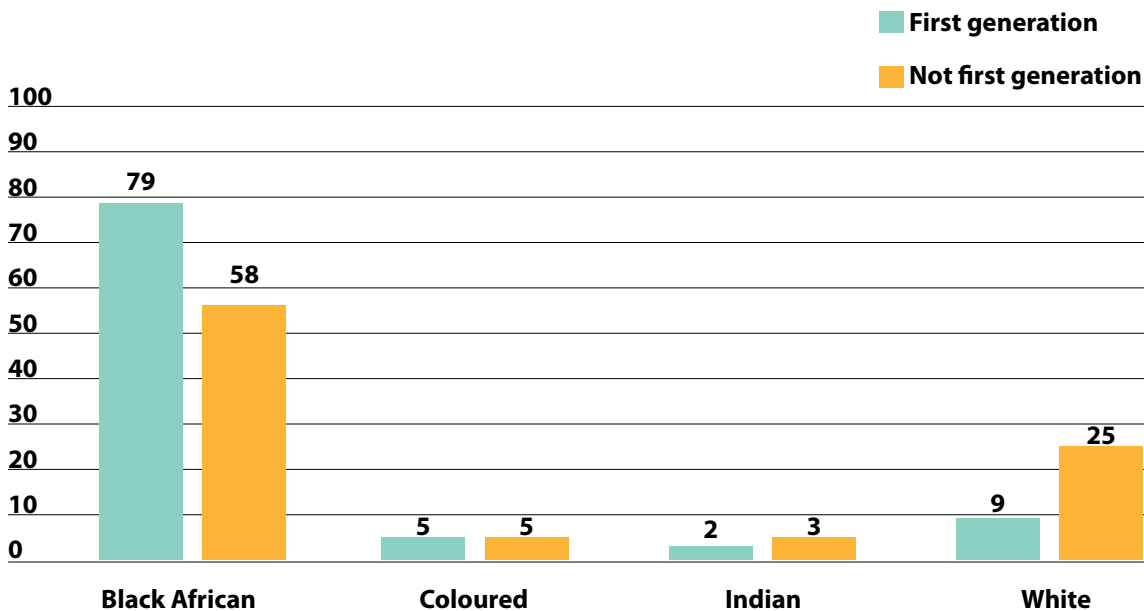
### 6.1 Most students are first-generation



**Implications:** Research shows that first-generation students are at far greater risk of failure. Universities need to think differently about how they orientate and support first generation students.

### ***Generational status and race***

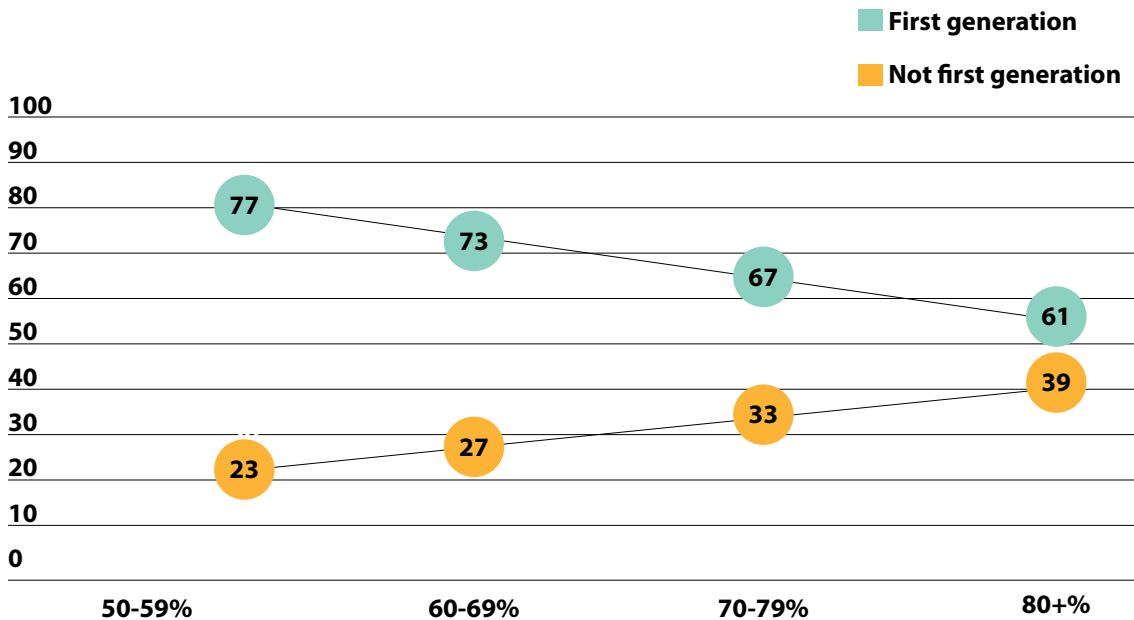
Racial representation within generation status



- 79% of first generation students are black African
- 9% of first generation students are white

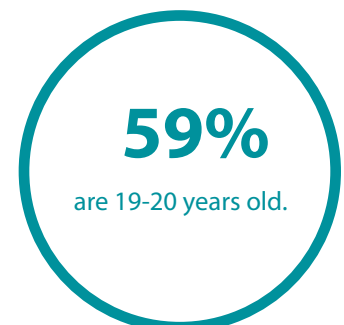
## High school marks vs. generation status

Average high school marks and generational status



- More first generation students enter higher education with lower marks ( $p=.000$ )

## 6.2 Students are getting older



**Implication:** Many of our students today are older, which implies that they might have responsibilities that go beyond their own individual success (e.g. parenting, caring for siblings). They have more experience of life and work than students straight out of school. These experiences and responsibilities need to be factored into the learning approach taken by lecturers.

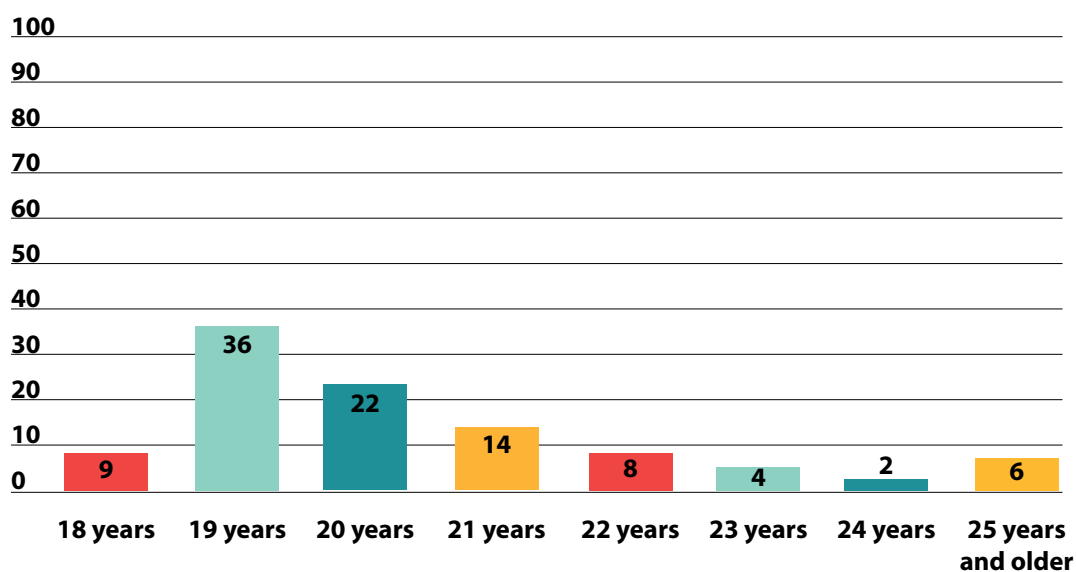




Older students' reality needs to be taken into account in deciding teaching and learning approaches.  
 Photo: Courtesy of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

## Age of students entering higher education

Age



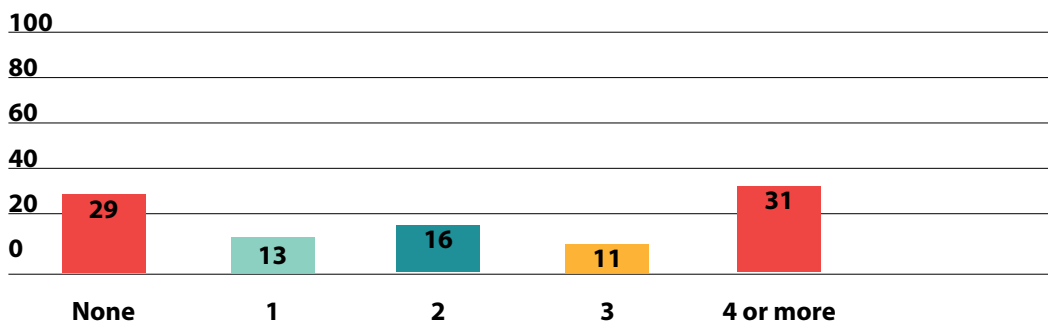
- Majority of students (58%) entering HE are 19/20 years old
- Only 9% are 18
- 12% are 23 years and older

## 6.3 Choice of university and study may not be guided by formal information

- Two-thirds of students have close friends attending the same institution
- Two-thirds of students attend their first choice of institution while 25% enter their second choice and 13% settle for their third, fourth or even fifth choice
- Just over half of students enter into their programme of choice, with a third settling for their second choice and 17% for their third

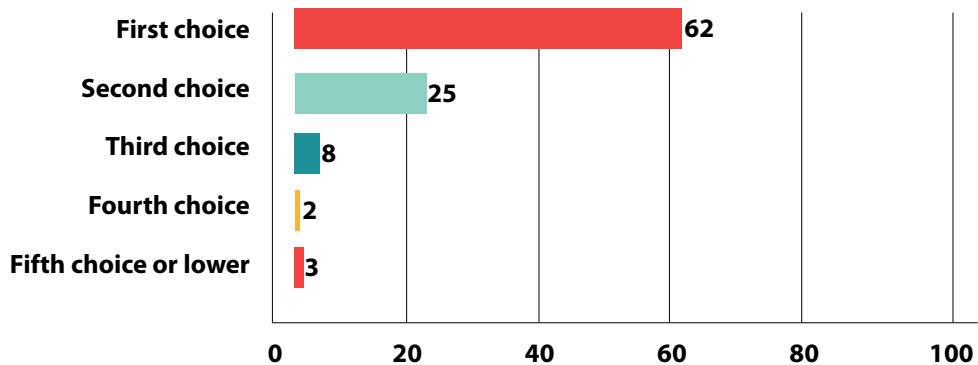
**Implications:** Students may be basing their choice of institution on their friends' choices rather than formal information from institutions about courses and academic requirements. Because research shows that social support systems are important for student success the above findings point to the importance of helping students develop these systems as soon as possible. They also point to the need for better academic advice and guidance at school and within the higher education system to ensure better alignment with student choices and institutional offerings.

### Friends attending the same university



- About a third of students have none of their friends attending the same institution and more than four friends attending the same institution respectively
- In general, about two thirds of students have close friends also attending the same institution

### Choice of institution



- Two thirds of the sample entered into their first choice of university
- 25% entered into their second choice; and
- 13% had to settle for third, fourth, fifth or even lower choice of university

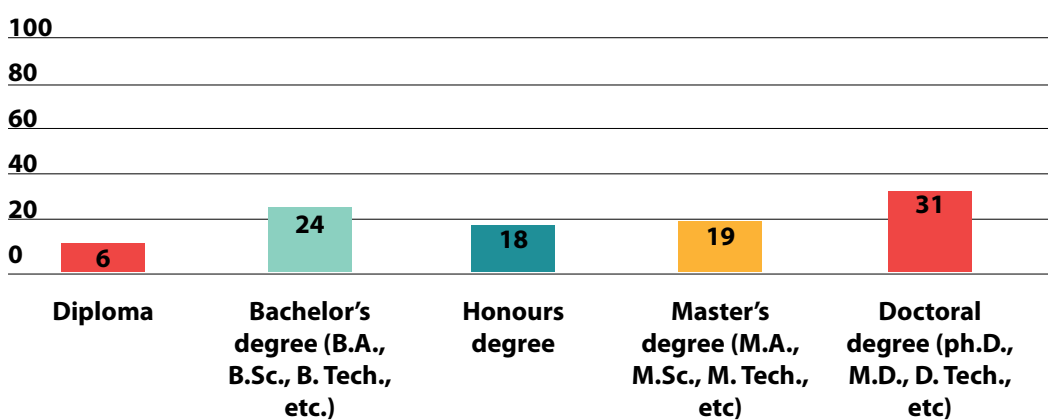


## 6.4 Students have high aspirations and expectations

- 31% of students say they would like to pursue a PhD
- Just under 20% want to pursue an honours or master’s degree respectively
- 77% of students expect to achieve average marks of over 70% in the first year

**Implications:** Students have an unrealistic expectation of the academic demands of higher education. This could be a strength and a risk and institutions have a responsibility to manage these expectations in a way that does not demotivate the student or encourage dropouts but at the same time capture the impetus of the passion and desire to study.

### Highest qualification aiming to complete



- 31% of the sample say they would like to pursue a PhD
- Almost a quarter (24%) are aiming for a B degree; followed by just under 20% aiming for Master’s and Honours degrees respectively



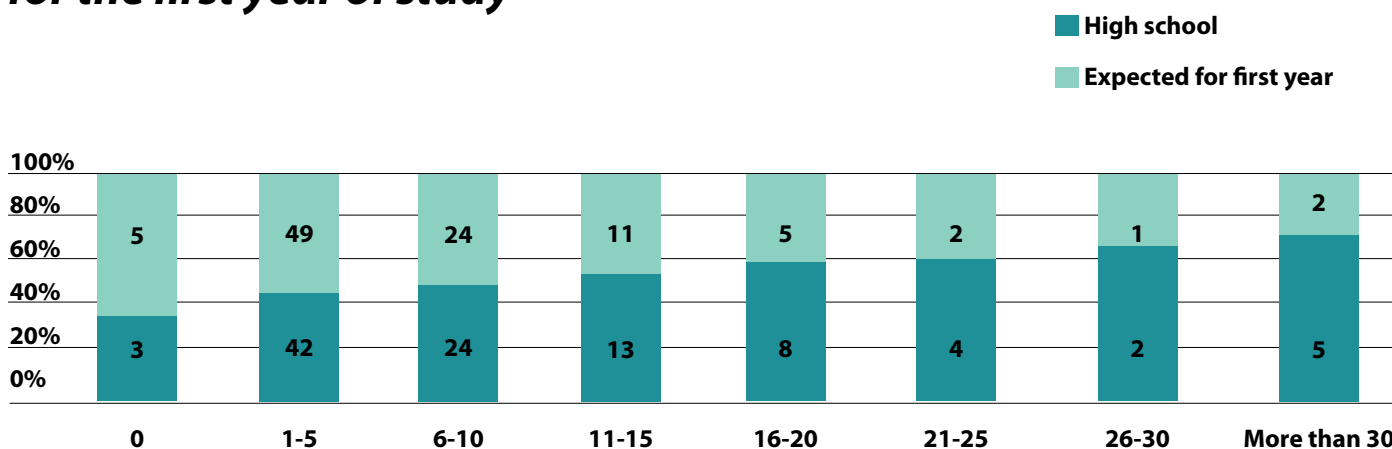
Students acknowledge the need to spend more time on their studies than they did at high school and to do less socialising and relaxing.  
 Photo: Courtesy of the University of Limpopo.

## 6.5 Students are committed to working harder

Generally, students say they realise they need to spend more time on their studies than they did at high school and will spend less time socialising and relaxing. They are confident of their ability to do so.

**Implication:** Students want to make the best of their opportunities, but may need support to achieve this.

### Hours spent relaxing and socialising: High school vs. expectations for the first year of study



- In general, students expect to spend less time relaxing and socialising during their first year of study than they spent during high school

## 6.6 Students come to university with some academic and critical thinking skills

**83%**

of students in their final year at school wrote at least one assignment of between 6-10 pages.

**81%**

say they have often or very often identified important information from reading assignments.

**66%**

say they often or very often summarised what they learned in class.

**88%**

say they have included diverse perspectives in their school work to some extent.

**57%**

often or very often examined the strengths and weaknesses of their own views.

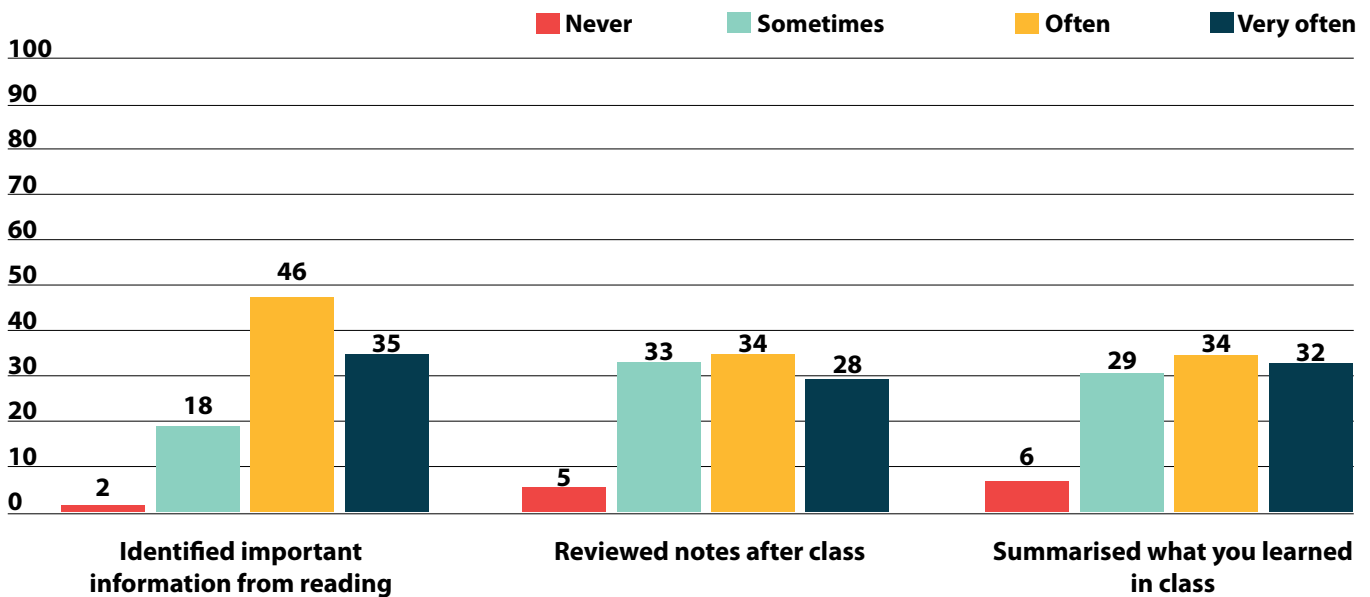
**66%**

often or very often tried to understand someone else's views.

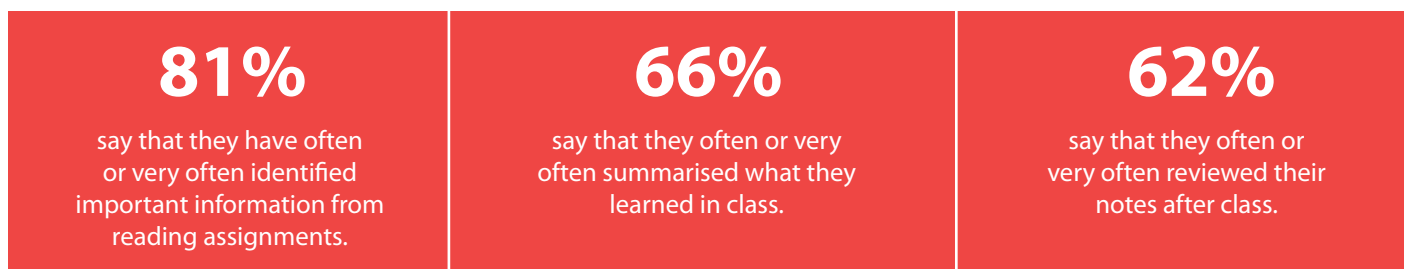
**Implications:** Students come to university with some academic skills which can be used as a foundation, but a large proportion are aware that they need to develop summarisation, self-awareness and the ability to see someone else's point of view. Identifying where students are academically is a crucial first step in order to scaffold their learning and to create learning pathways to adapt to students' differing levels of academic preparedness.



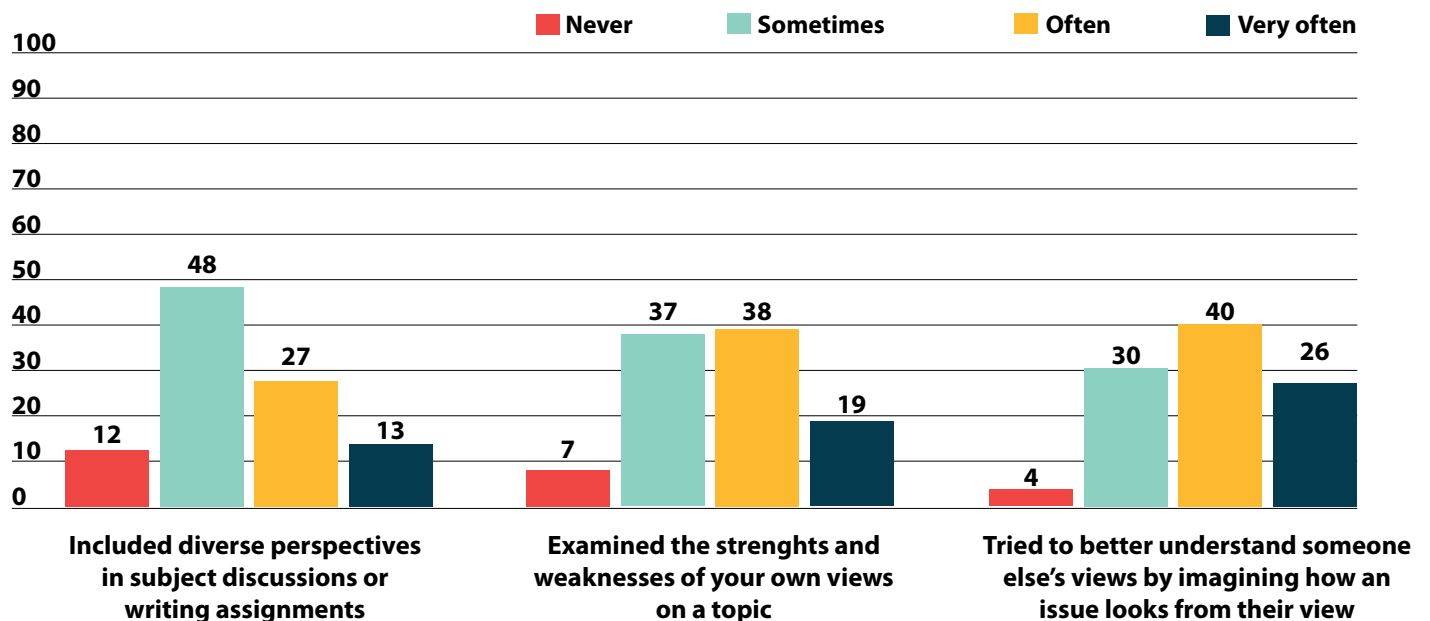
## Learning strategies used in high school



- Students enter with some experience of using certain learning strategies



## Students' high school engagement with deep learning



- 88% of students indicate that they have included diverse perspectives in their school work to some extent
- 57% often or very often examined the strengths and weaknesses of their own views during high school
- 66% often or very often tried to understand someone else's views







*Undergraduates do expect to interact with others at university, who differ from them.*  
**Photo:** Courtesy of the University of Pretoria.

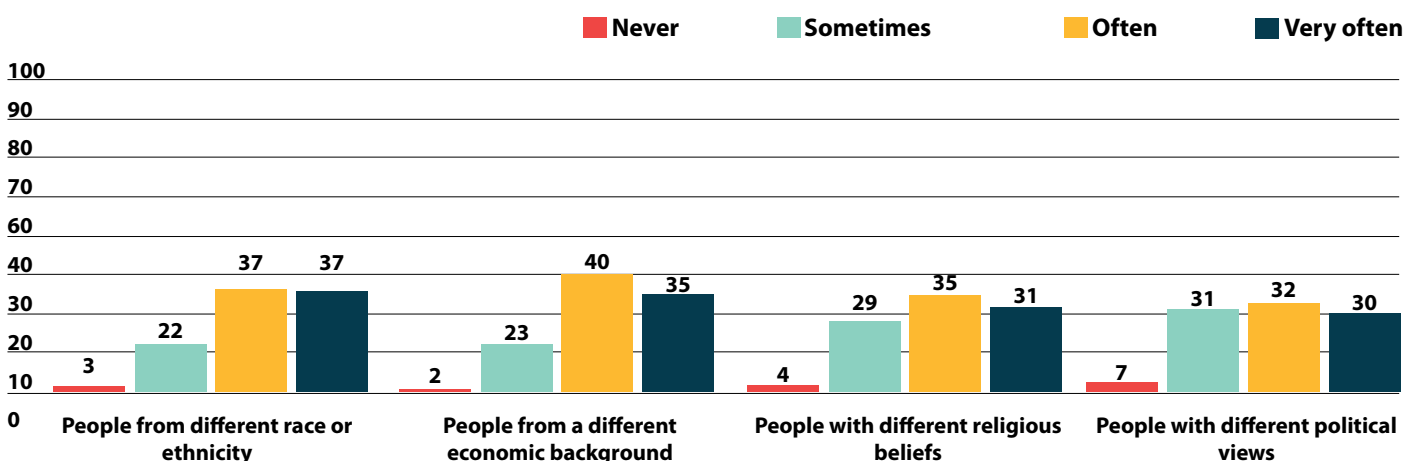


## 6.7 Students are open to diverse and collaborative learning environments

- Students expect to interact often or very often with others who differ from them in terms of race (74%), socio-economic background (75%), religious beliefs (66%) and political views (62%)
- 70% expect to work often or very often with others on projects
- 69% expect to work often or very often with fellow students to prepare for exams
- 63% expect to often or very often take on a tutorial role with other students
- 57% would be willing to ask another student for help with a subject

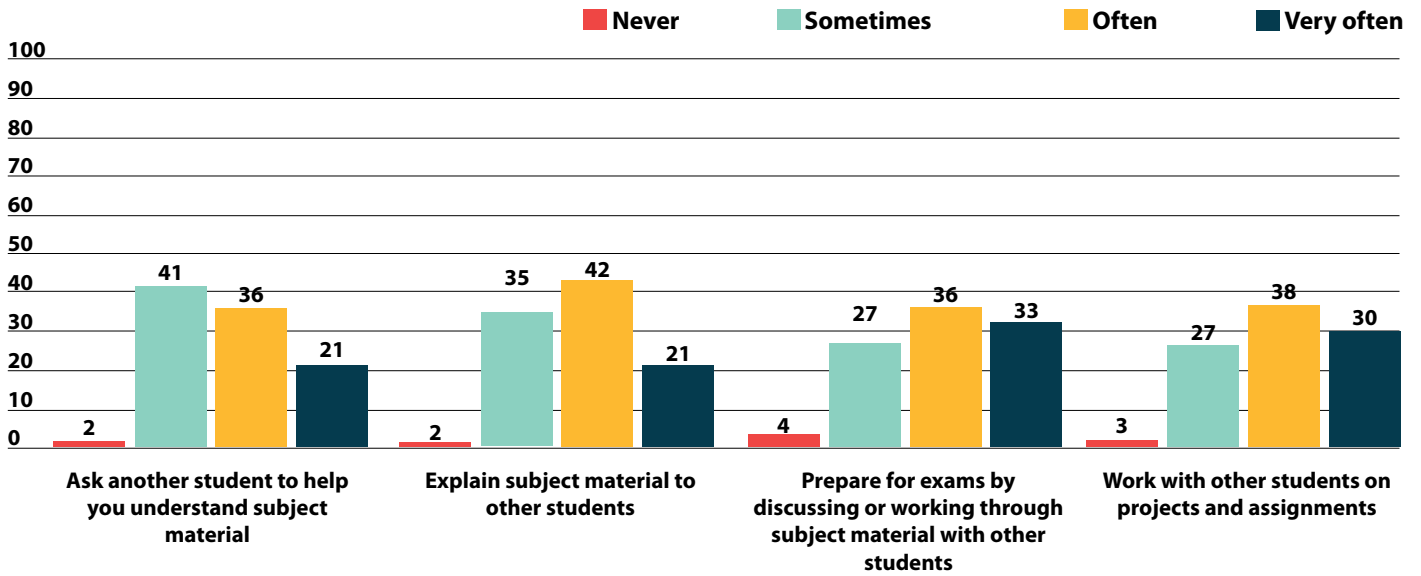
**Implications:** Engagement with diverse views is important for critical and analytical thinking. This information should support the development of collaborative learning programmes and peer support systems which are shown to help develop teamwork and help to create support networks geared towards student success.

### *Expected frequency of discussions with diverse others during first year of study*



- In general, students expect to interact often or very often with others who differ in terms of race (74%), socio-economic background (75%), and a slightly less often and very often with those who differ from religious beliefs (66%) and political views (62%)

## Expectations regarding collaborative learning



- Very few students do not expect to engage in any form of collaborative learning during their first year of study
- 70% believe that they will often or very often work with others on projects; 69% believe that they would often or very often make use of fellow students to prepare for exams; 63% think they would often or very often take on a tutorial role with other students; and 57% will be willing to often or very often ask another student for help if they don't understand subject material



## 7. Concluding comments

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The findings that emerge in this survey of first-time entering students are both hugely exciting and sobering. They indicate the passion that students bring with them into the university environment and anybody who has worked with students will recognise this. They provide firm evidence that students do come with certain skills and capacities that favour their engagement with high-level learning but also demonstrate very limited counselling in their selection of university and their selection of study area. These findings also demonstrate the willingness of these young South Africans to engage with the rich diversity of fellow students and ideas that characterise our universities.

There are lessons to be learned by our universities. The architecture of our universities, the way in which they are organised and connected must be honed according to what we learn about our students. They must mesh with what students bring with them and create the conditions for their integration into that architecture. The data identifies potential areas requiring increased or more targeted support. For example, are there adequate support systems in place to identify and help the 12% of entering students who do not feel adequately prepared in terms of writing, speaking, using technology, working in a team and those who need help with quantitative reasoning (19%) or those needing support with self-study skills. Are universities able to change the expectations of the 35% of students who believe that finding academic help will be difficult?

Loots and Strydom indicate that it is crucial to develop *equitable* university environments, rather than simply an *equal* university environment. This means designing the physical, social and intellectual architecture of our universities to provide students with an environment in which they feel at home and able to reach their potential.

“We want to maximise the chances of success for all students who put in the work,” says Loots.

A focus on student engagement enables universities to create the equitable environments needed for this to happen.

\* More information about the South African Surveys of Student engagement can be found at <https://www.ufs.ac.za/sasse>