ENGAGING THE #STUDENTVOICE

Annual Report 2016

Inspiring excellence. Transforming lives.
Inspireer uitnemendheid. Verander lewens.

T:051 401 9111 | E:info@ufs.ac.za | www.ufs.ac.za
UFSUV | UFSweb | UFSweb

SASSE

UNIVERSITY OF THE
FREE STATE
UNIVERSITEIT VAN DIE
VRYSTAAT
YUNIVESITHI YA
FREISTATA

UFS·UV
CENTRE FOR TEACHING
AND LEARNING (CTL)
ONDERRIG-EN-LEERSENTRUM
(OLS)

Table of contents

Executive Summary

The past academic year has emphasised the importance of the student voice in South African higher education. The student protests have generated many strong opinions regarding the reasons, driving forces, and end-goals of the movement from different perspectives. From these various perspectives it is clear that there are four underlying challenges facing higher education. First, the cost of tertiary education. Students are frustrated with the status quo of persistent socio-economic inequalities in post-democratic South Africa, specifically when it comes to the tuition fees of higher education. This aspect received a lot of attention during the protests, as well as the spillover effect the fees have on access to higher education. Second, students feel that their voices are not heard. They feel that their concerns are not taken seriously, and they have no say in their own education. The third challenge relates to the second in that new ways need to be found to engage and integrate the student voice in the planning and development of higher education in South Africa. The last challenge is a global one where researchers have indicated that students are among the groups least informed about higher education [choices, outcomes and processes] (Mahat & Goedegebuure, 2014).

The aim of this report is to illustrate how student engagement measures can provide a data-driven student voice that can further institutions' understanding of these challenges, and due to the actionable focus of the measures, can point to ways in which these challenges could be addressed. This report also introduces a new approach to the interpretation of the South African Survey of Student Engagement (SASSE) annual reports. Thus demonstrating where student engagement data can be used to provide a more in-depth understanding of current challenges in higher education. The results used in this report draws on data from the 2016 SASSE, 2015 SASSE and the 2015 BUSSE to provide insights in challenges facing the higher education sector. A more detailed outline of the samples are provided on pp. 27-28.

The report uses data from these surveys to explore challenges and issues around:

- Understanding the #FeesMustFall campaign;
- Analysing and understanding student expectations;
- Understanding how students learn; and
- Creating a deeply contextualised, effective and efficient higher education system.

Understanding the #FeesMustFall campaign

In response to the first wave of #FeesMustFall protests in 2015, the student engagement team developed and included a Financial Stress Scale (FSS) into the 2016 SASSE administration[1]. The development of items were mainly driven by an analysis of the key trends and research around the financial needs of South African students, however, research concerning financial stress in the field of student engagement were also consulted. The aim of the FSS is to help us understand the relationship between students' anxieties over the cost of university (extending beyond class fees), and how these stresses can impact on their engagement and success. Some of the main findings from the FSS scale include:

- Students do not leave socio-economic inequalities at home when they come to university.
- Black African and Coloured students in general, as well as first-generation students are vulnerable to greater financial stress.
- A large proportion of White students fund their studies through paying for themselves, or taking out loans, or receiving NSFAS aid, thereby challenging racialised stereotypes about the affordability of higher education.
- In general, only 15% of all participating students never worry about how they are going to pay for day-to-day expenses and 18% of participating students never worry about how they are going to pay university fees.
- The vast majority of students (69%) indicated that they ran out of food without being able to buy more, with 23% indicating that this happens most days or every day.
- 29% of first-generation students ran out of food and could not afford to buy more on most days or every day, compared to 12% of non first-generation students stating the same.
- Students who experience the most financial stress, have less time to spend on their studies because they are taking care of others, travelling to and from classes, or working more than other students.

The FSS portrays a worrying picture of longstanding socio-economic inequalities. These factors have a significant impact on the educational experiences and general well-being of students. In essence, it gives some insight into the current frustrations of students and institutions about an underfunded higher education system, which impacts directly on student engagement and success. At institutional level several universities have developed feeding schemes, although the data suggest that these need to be expanded. Some institutions have also developed shuttle services to address commuter challenges. Institutional initiatives are however limited by resources and capacity which begs the question whether systemic intervention, involving public and private stakeholders, could help to create an environment that is more conducive to student success.

1 The first administration of the FSS only took place in 2016 and was included for its topical relevance. The data reported comprise of 11 752 undergraduate students from nine institutions who administered the SASSE in 2016.

Analysing and understanding student expectations

Better alignment between students' expectations and what higher education is able to provide is critical in building trust and understanding between students, staff, and other stakeholders. The main findings relevant to this report from the BUSSE completed by the 2015 cohort of entering first-year students indicate:

- While most students entering university expect to work closely with fellow students, less than 60% expect to ask another student for help.
- Less than half of the students entering university expect to have discussions with lecturers on subject topics outside of class (43%) or about career plans (39%).
- Approximately 36% of entering students expect to work with a lecturer on a project outside of class.
- While almost all entering students rate academic support and learning support services as very important, 51% of them expect it to be very difficult to get help with academic work, and 62% expect interactions with staff to be difficult.
- Diversity is valued by these students, with 76% indicating the importance of having opportunities to interact with others from different backgrounds.

These results can be used to better align the support institutions provide to first-year students with student expectations. The BUSSE data can be used for the development of sophisticated orientation programmes, early warning systems, academic advising and other transition programmes. These programmes should be intentionally communicated to create awareness among students regarding the support structures available to them within their specific institution.

Scrutinising how students learn, use support, and are taught

Understanding how students learn, make use of support services, and how they experience tertiary institutions is of vital importance to develop institutional cultures that are supportive of student success. Quality teaching is a critical component of building a contextualised higher education system that is both effective and efficient. The main findings of the 2015 SASSE include:

- A quarter of first-years and 31% of senior students attend class unprepared.
- Approximately 60% of students ask other students for help.
- 40% of students do not summarise what they have learnt in class.
- 79% of students identify important information through reading assignments.
- More than half of students prepare for exams with other students, with 57% of first-year students and 59% of senior students.
- First-year students rated a much higher quality of interaction with peer learning support than senior students.
- Approximately half of students use technology to communicate with peer learning support staff.

- A large portion of students (43%) feel they do not receive detailed and immediate feedback after assessments.
- Students do not feel that module outcomes are clearly explained (25%), that lectures are not presented in organised ways (18%), or that examples are not used to explain difficult points (19%).

These results indicate that students are engaging in some effective educational behaviours and that the majority of students experience only the basics of effective educational practices in teaching. In terms of creating campus environments that are engaging and promote student success, more intentional effort is needed from students, staff, and institutions.

Creating a deeply contextualised, effective and efficient higher education system

"*Every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets.*" The call for free, decolonised and quality education echoes the quote by Paul Batalden (2014). The student protests have clearly highlighted that the design of the current system needs to be reconsidered in order to produce different results. Drawing on international student engagement and national student data we would like to put forward the following properties of engaging institutions, namely:

1. A 'living' differentiated mission and 'lived' educational philosophy.
2. Creating learning environments that promote inclusion and educational enrichment.
3. Clarifying the pathways that maximise student success.
4. Facilitating an improvement-orientated institutional culture and ethos.
5. Making sure that the quality of learning and student success is owned by everyone in the institution.

The data from the student engagement project provides a critical, data-driven, student voice that strengthens institutional and national datasets. These datasets can be used to impact evidence-based systemic change to produce more equitable outcomes within and through higher education.

1. Understanding the #FeesMustFall campaign

The FSS (Financial Stress Scale) was developed in response to the #FeesMustFall protests in 2015. The aim of the scale is to enhance institutions' understanding of the relationship between students' anxieties over the costs of university study (extending beyond class fees), and how these stressors impact on their engagement and success.

The 2016 administration of SASSE (South African Survey of Student Engagement) took place during the lead-up to the national protests that shut down most higher education institutions. Although the FSS is a new scale, the SASSE team considered it integral to include the preliminary analysis of the FSS data to provide valuable input to debates on the financing of higher education.

1.1 Who pays for university?

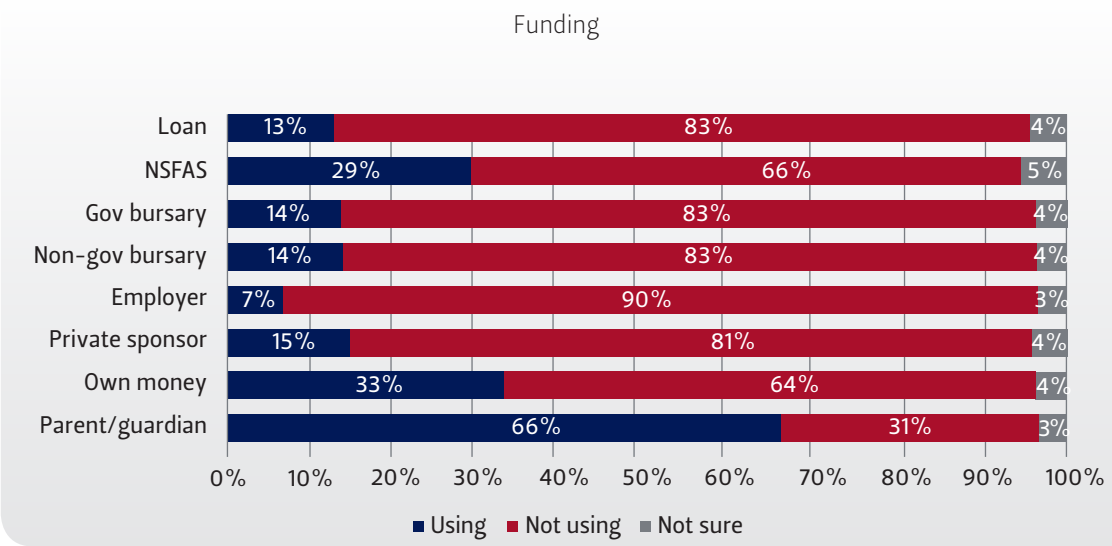


Figure 1: All students' reported means of funding their university expenses.

The FSS asked students to indicate how they pay for their studies at university (Figure 1). The majority (66%) indicated that their parents/guardians pay for their studies, followed by 33% who pay for themselves and 29% who receives NSFAS aid.

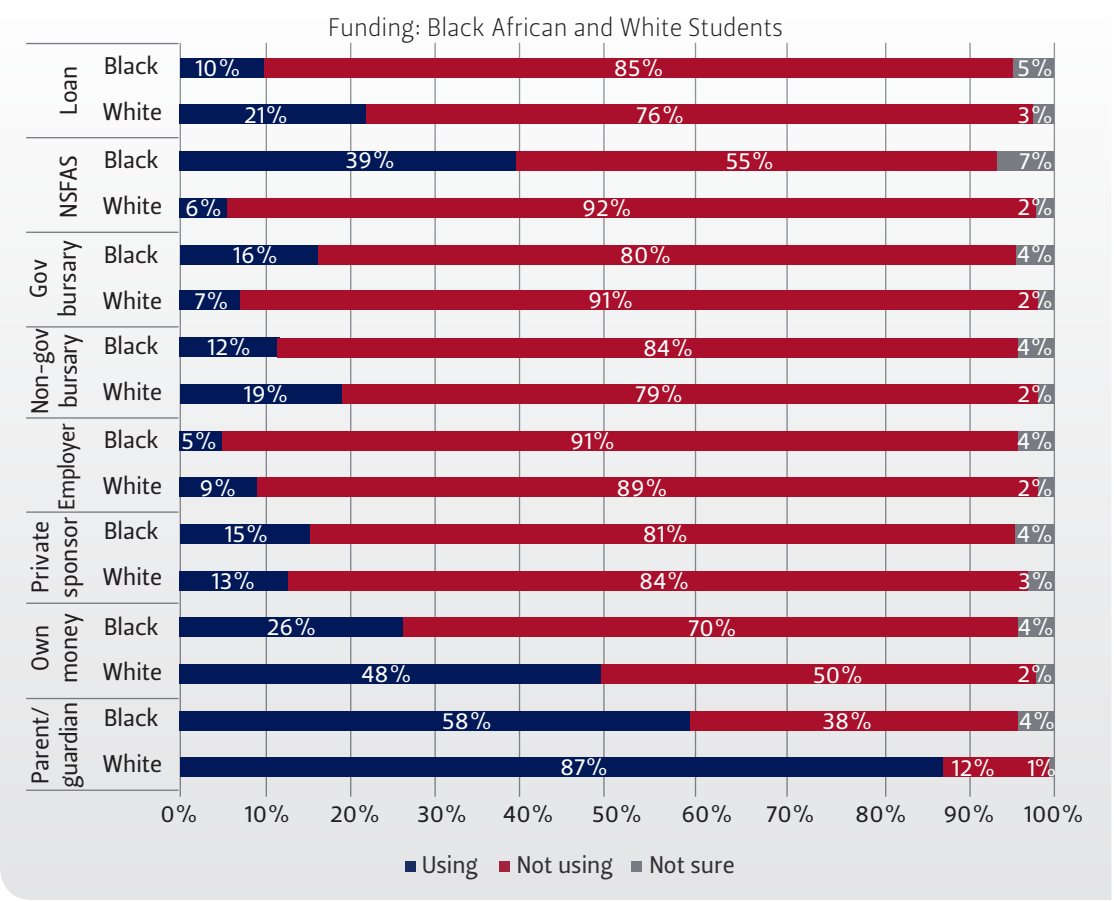


Figure 2: Black African and White students' reported means of funding their university expenses.

Figure 2 provides a comparison between racial groups, from which two very distinctive profiles emerge. Since White and Indian students' profiles, and Black African and Coloured students' profiles reflect very similar patterns, we only include White and Black African students' responses for comparison purposes. Probably the most significant findings here are the difference between students on NSFAS (39% Black African compared to 6% White), as well as the amount of students in general who either pay for themselves (26% Black African and 48% White), and those whose parents pay (58% Black African compared to 87% White). These findings make two very important statements: first, students do not leave societal inequalities at home when they come to university; and second, there is a large portion of White students contributing to their own studies, with few White students taking out loans or receiving NSFAS aid. This challenges racialised stereotypes about the affordability of higher education.

1.2 Who experiences financial stress?

To determine to what extent students experience financial stress, the FSS asked whether they worry about being able to pay day-to-day expenses; whether they worry about paying university fees; and whether they have ever ran out of food without having the means to buy more.

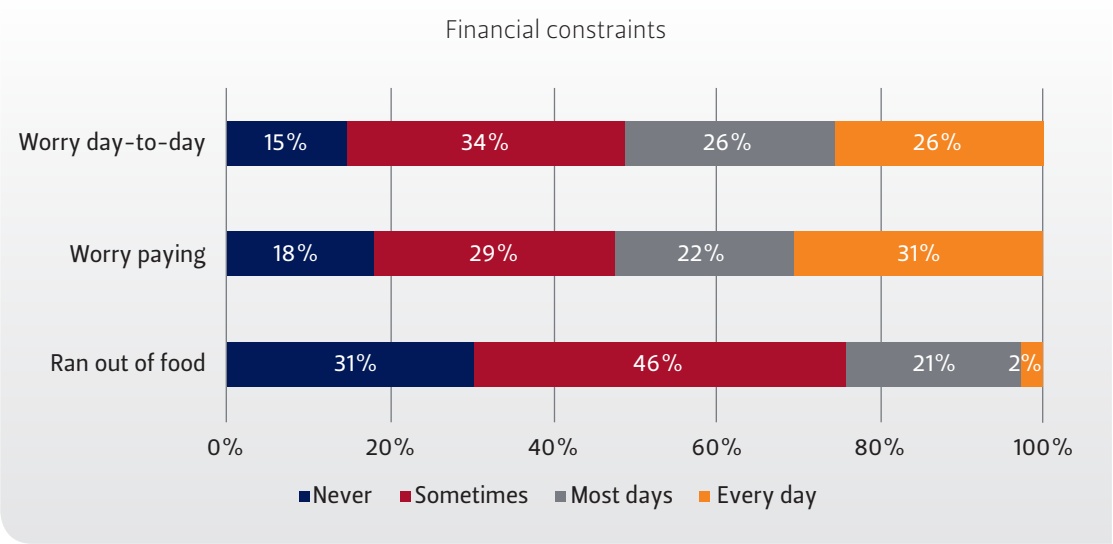


Figure 3: All students' reported financial constraints.

Figure 3 shows that in general, only 15% and 18% of all participating students never worry about how they are going to pay for day-to-day expenses or university fees respectively. The majority of students (69%) indicated that they ran out of food without being able to buy more, with a worrying 23% indicating this happened most days or every day.

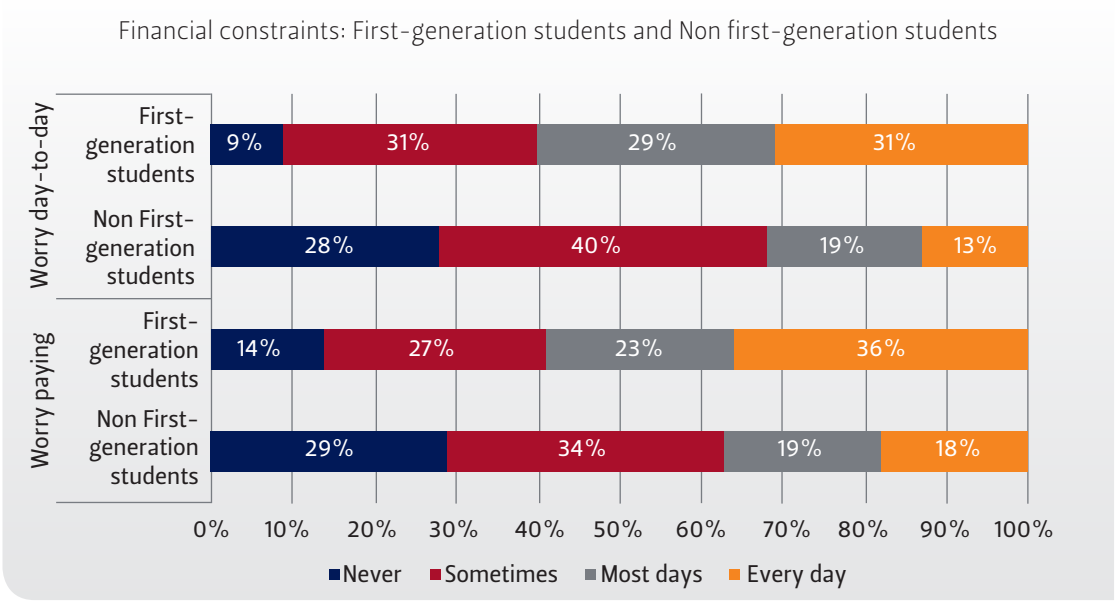


Figure 4: First-generation and non first-generation students' reported financial constraints.

Figure 4 provides a comparison of these items between first-generation students and non-first-generation students. From this comparison the vulnerable position of first-generation students is clear. As illustrated in figure 4, 60% and 59% of first-generation students indicate that they worry about day-to-day expenses and paying university fees respectively on most days or every day. This compares to 32% and 37% of non-first-generation students.

1.3 Understanding the impact of financial stress on students' lives

Exploring the difference between students who indicated that they never worried about day-to-day expenses or paying university fees, and those who indicated that they have at least sometimes (up to every day) experienced these behaviours, the following findings came to light:

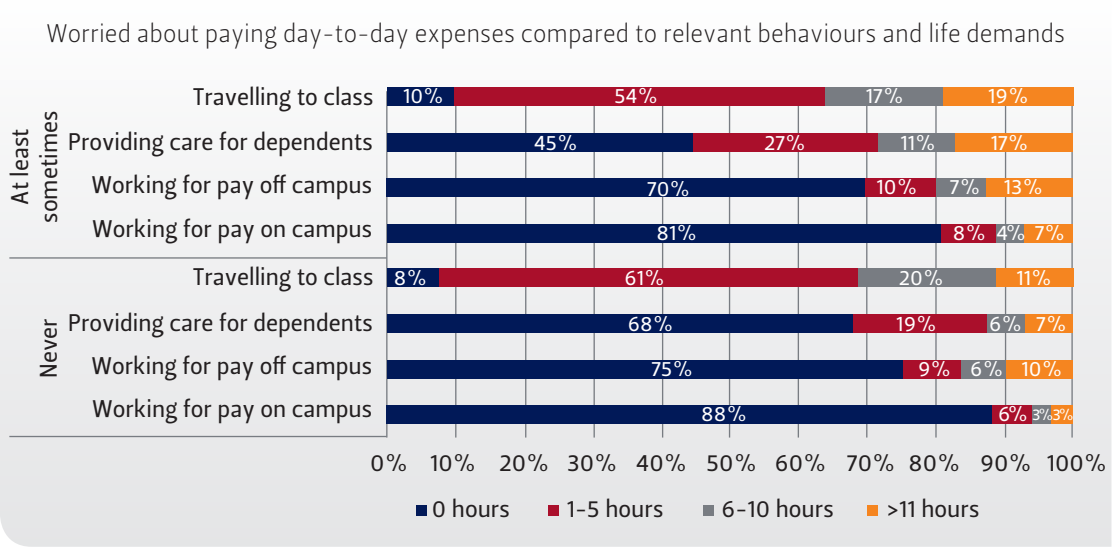


Figure 5: Students' sense of worrying to pay for day-to-day expenses compared to relevant behaviours and life demands.

Figure 5 shows a comparison between those who never worry about day-to-day expenses and those who worry at least sometimes about how they will manage to pay day-to-day expenses. From this analysis the following is clear:

- Students who worry spend more time travelling to and from classes, with 19% spending more than 11 hours per week on travel; compared to 11% of students who state that they do not worry about day-to-day expenses.
- Students who worry spend more time caring for dependants than those who never worry (17% spending 11 hours or more on this task compared to 7%).
- Students who worry spend more time working off campus (30% spending more than an hour per week working compared to 25%) as well as on campus (19% spending more than an hour per week working compared to 12%).

These results confirm the need for the creation of greater financial stability for low-income students as highlighted by the Beyond Financial Aid initiative in the USA.

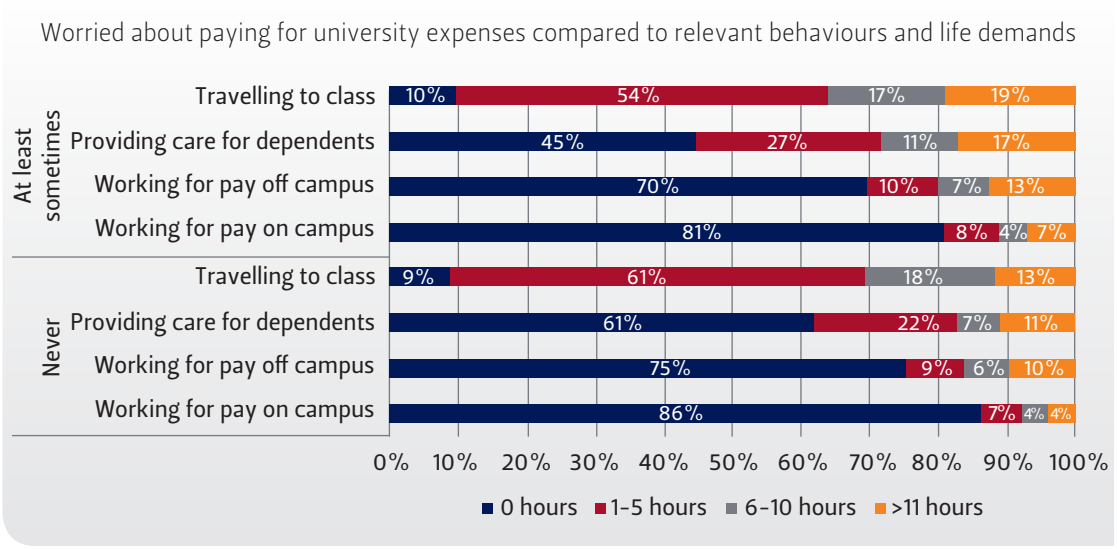


Figure 6: Students' sense of worrying to pay for university compared to relevant behaviours and life demands.

A similar comparison was done in relation to worrying about paying for university. Figure 6 shows that those who worry (at least sometimes) about paying university fees:

- Travel longer to and from classes, with 19% travelling more than 11 hours per week compared to 13% of those who never worry.
- Spend more time caring for dependants, with 17% spending more than 11 hours per week on this task compared to 11% of those who never worry.
- Spend more time working off campus than those who do not worry (30% working more than one hour a week compared to 25%).
- Spend more time working on campus than those who do not worry (19% working more than one hour a week compared to 14%).

These results highlight the need for more innovative solutions around non-academic support for low-income students and the possible prioritisation of on-campus work opportunities for these students along the line of work-study programmes that have been developed internationally.

1.4 What is the impact of food insecurity?

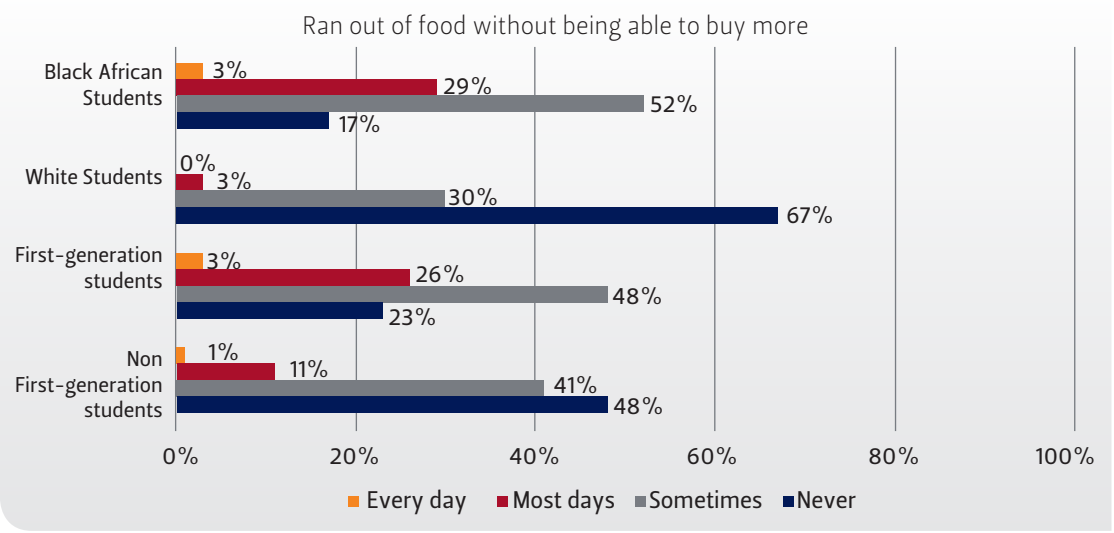


Figure 7: The amount of times students reported that they ran out of food and could not afford to buy more compared by race and generational status.

The FSS asked students how often they ran out of food and could not afford to buy more. Figure 7 shows that only 17% of Black African students answered that they never ran out of food and could not afford to buy more, compared to 67% of White students. What is extremely worrying is that 32% of Black African students reported that they ran out of food and could not afford to buy more on most days or every day. Similarly, a significant difference in responses is seen between first- and non first-generation students, with 77% of first-generation students indicating that they ran out of food without being able to buy more, compared to 53% of non first-generation students. Overall, 69% of students who completed the FSS ran out of food without being able to buy more (Figure 3).

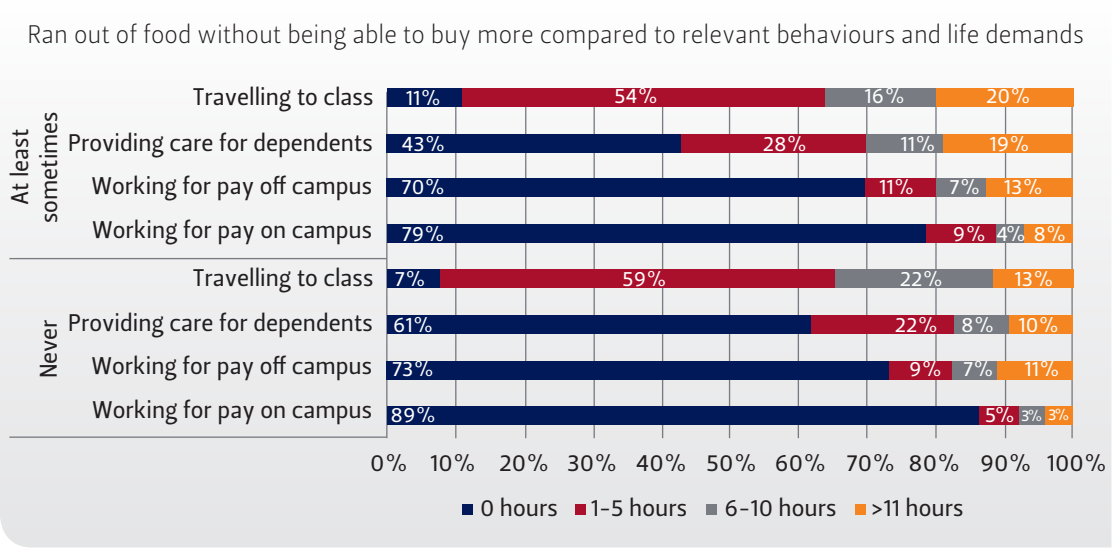


Figure 8: Students who ran out of food without being able to buy more compared to relevant behaviours and life demands.

Figure 8 shows a comparative analysis of students who never ran out of food or ran out at least sometimes and could not afford to buy more, which confirms the impact of socio-economic inequality. From this analysis it is clear that:

- 20% of students who could not afford to buy food sometimes, travel more than 11 hours per week to and from classes compared to 13% of students who have never ran out of food.
- Students who could not afford to buy food sometimes, also spend more time caring for dependants, with 19% spending more than 11 hours on this task compared to 10% of students who never ran out of food without being able to buy more.
- Students who could not afford to buy food sometimes, work more hours off-campus than students who never ran out of food without being able to buy more (30% and 27% respectively).
- Those who do go hungry work more hours on campus than those who do not go hungry (21% and 11% respectively).

This data supports an urgent need for institutional and systemic interventions regarding the impact of financial stress on students ability to buy more food.

1.5 Who are most vulnerable to the consequences of financial stress?

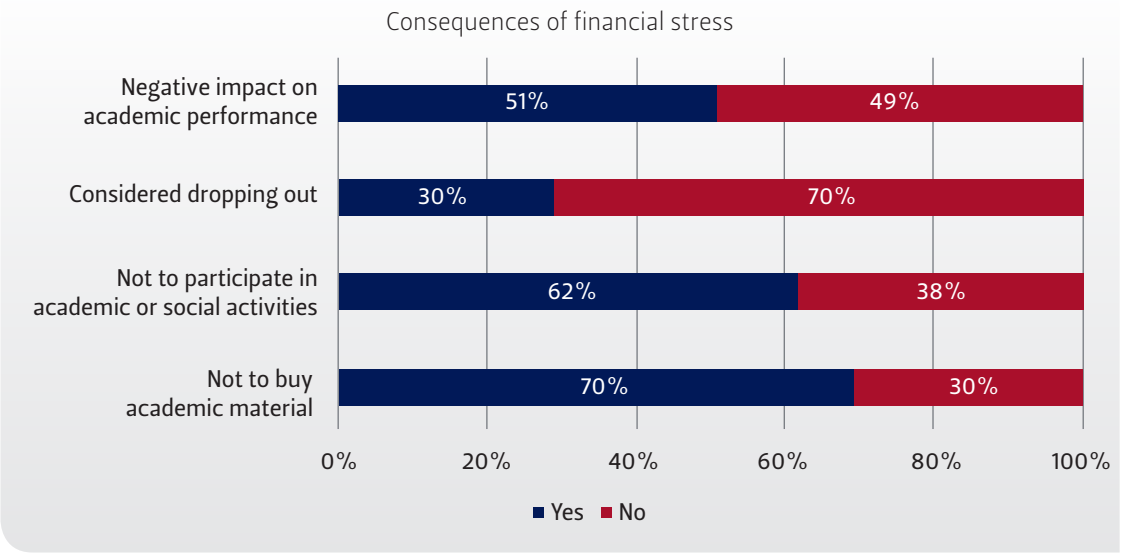


Figure 9: The impact of financial stress on students' relevant behaviours and life demands.

The direct consequences of financial stress are also clear, as Figure 9 shows. Approximately 51% of the participating students indicated that their financial concerns have had a negative impact on their studies, while some students (30%) have considered dropping out because of financial reasons. Compared to the level of stress and even not being able to buy more food as discussed in Figure 8, these financial implications are relatively low and could point to the significant role higher education is deemed to play in helping families break free from poverty and inequality. The majority of students also indicated that they have chosen not to participate in campus social events (62%) or not to purchase academic materials (70%) because of the cost.

Even from these preliminary findings it is clear that financial stress impacts on different areas of students' lives. It is also clear that the impact is magnified for those who are already vulnerable, such as Black African students who come from poor families, and first-generation students, who possibly struggle to adapt to university culture. In essence, it gives some justification to the legitimate frustrations of students and institutions about an underfunded higher education system. The data also highlight the need for new innovative systemic interventions, possibly with the involvement of public and private stakeholders, to address these concerns.

Having reflected on the financial context in which students find themselves the focus moves to analysing and understanding student expectations.

2. Analysing and understanding student expectations

The student protests have highlighted the need for better understanding and integration of the student voice in higher education to better align student expectations with what a public higher education system is able to provide. This knowledge is critical in building trust and understanding between students, staff, and other stakeholders.

2.1 First-year students' expectations when entering university

Students entering university for the first time arrive with preconceived notions of what is expected of them to successfully complete university. Their previous experiences at school strongly influence what they think university life will be like, which may either help or hinder learning (Ambrose et al., 2010). It is therefore important to understand what the expectations of the first-year entering students are to enable institutions to develop initiatives that can help moderate students' expectations (Kuh et al., 2005). The BUSSE (Beginning University Survey of Student Engagement) is a survey instrument designed to gather information from students on their arrival at university which explores their high school engagement and their first-year expectations. The BUSSE has nine sub-scales, referred to as indicators, which is grouped as follows:

High School Engagement

- Quantitative Reasoning
- Learning Strategies

First-year Expectations

- Collaborative Learning
- Student-Staff Interaction
- Interaction with Diverse Others
- Expected Academic Perseverance
- Expected Academic Difficulty
- Perceived Academic Preparation
- Importance of Campus Environment

The results from three indicators were selected to elaborate on: Collaborative Learning, Academic Difficulty, and Campus Environment.

2.2 How do students expect to learn?

Students learn more effectively when they are involved in their education and apply what they have learnt in various ways (Kuh et al., 2005). Collaborative learning opportunities have also been proven to be beneficial to improve students' problem solving skills.

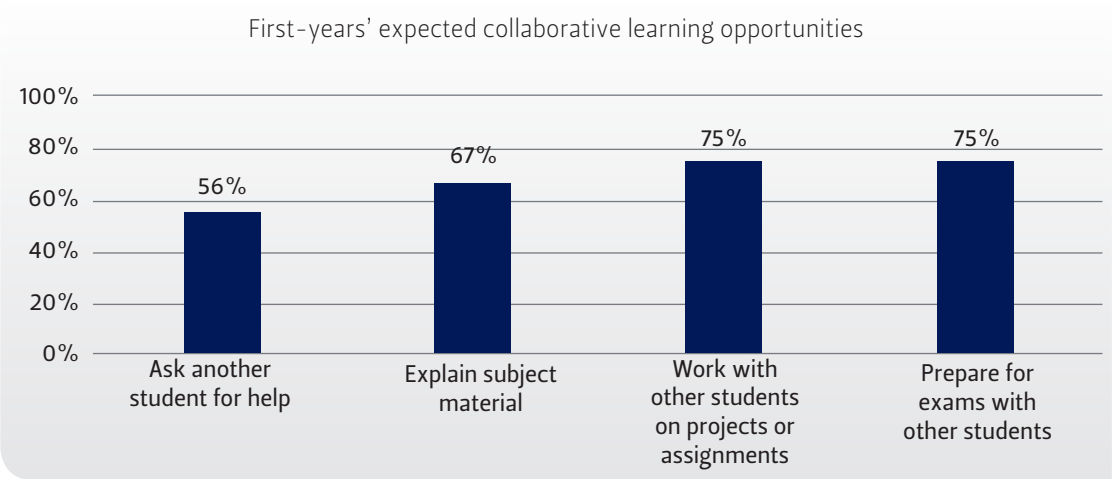


Figure 10: Students' expected collaborative learning opportunities with other students ("Often" or "Very often").

The BUSSE asks students how often they expect to do certain activities in the year ahead (Figure 10). Results indicate that in general, students anticipate regular collaborative learning opportunities with other students. While most students indicate that they expect to work with others on assignments or preparing for exams (75% respectively), less students expect to explain subject/module material to others (67%), and just over half of students expect to ask other students for help (56%).

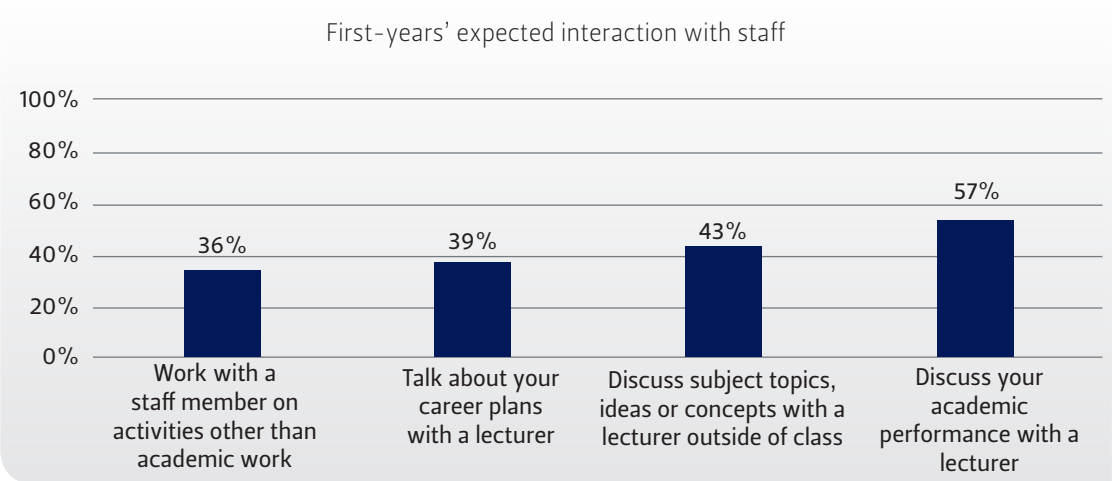


Figure 11: Students' expected interaction with staff ("Often" or "Very often").

First-year students also revealed that they intend to spend moderate amounts of time on interacting with staff in their first year at university. For instance, only 36% of students report that they expect to "Often" or "Very often" work with staff members on activities other than academic work, such as

committees, projects, and student groups. Similarly, only 39% of students intend to regularly talk to lecturers about their career plans. Slightly more students (43%) anticipated that they will discuss subject topics, ideas or concepts with a lecturer outside of a class, while slightly more than half expected to discuss their academic performance with their lecturers (57%).

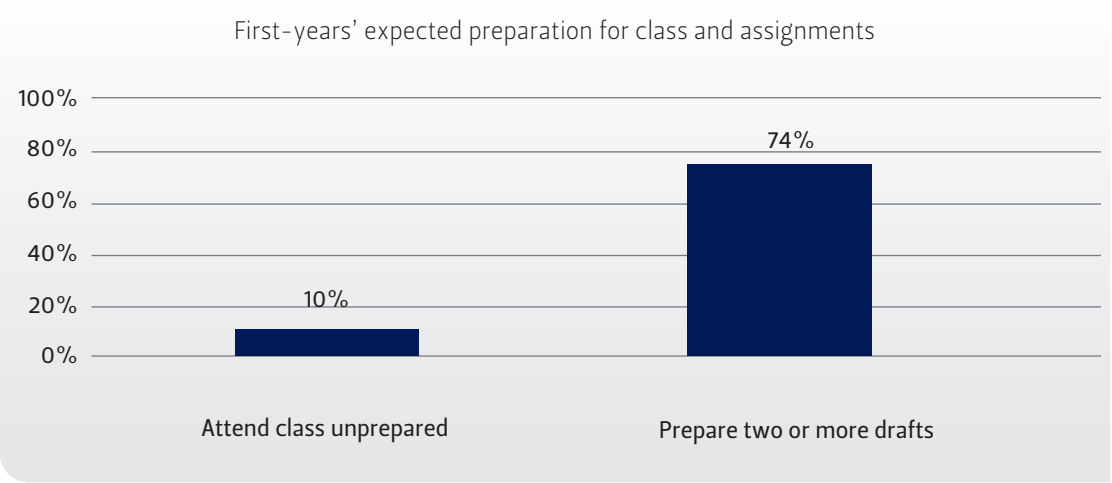


Figure 12: Students' expected preparation for class and assignments ("Often" or "Very often").

Students were asked how frequently they expect to prepare for specific activities related to their modules (Figure 12). Results indicate that the majority of students (74%) are determined to "Often" or "Very often" prepare two or more drafts of a paper or assignments before handing it in. However, 10% of students expect to attend class regularly without having completed readings or assignments.

In general, students assume they will learn by making use of regular collaborative learning opportunities with their peers, while they assume that they will be spending only moderate amounts of time interacting with staff in their first year at university. Knowing the importance of both peer learning and student-staff interaction can contribute to institutional efforts to bridge the gap between students' expectations and normalising practices, which could help them navigate higher education. Furthermore, although the majority of students are prepared to write two or more drafts of a paper or assignment before handing it in, in reality, it is logistically problematic for staff members to review two or more drafts of all their students' papers. Another cause for concern is that there are already some students who expect to attend class without being prepared. First-year initiatives should be positioned to help students succeed by implementing proven learning strategies and to help students realise the reality of what is likely to happen in their first-year, making these students more prepared.

2.3 Expectations of what university study demands

The need for the transformation of institutional has been emphasised through various calls for the decolonisation of the curriculum to changes in the composition of staff. To better understand the expectations that first-year students in 2015 have of higher education, their perceptions of study demands were analysed.

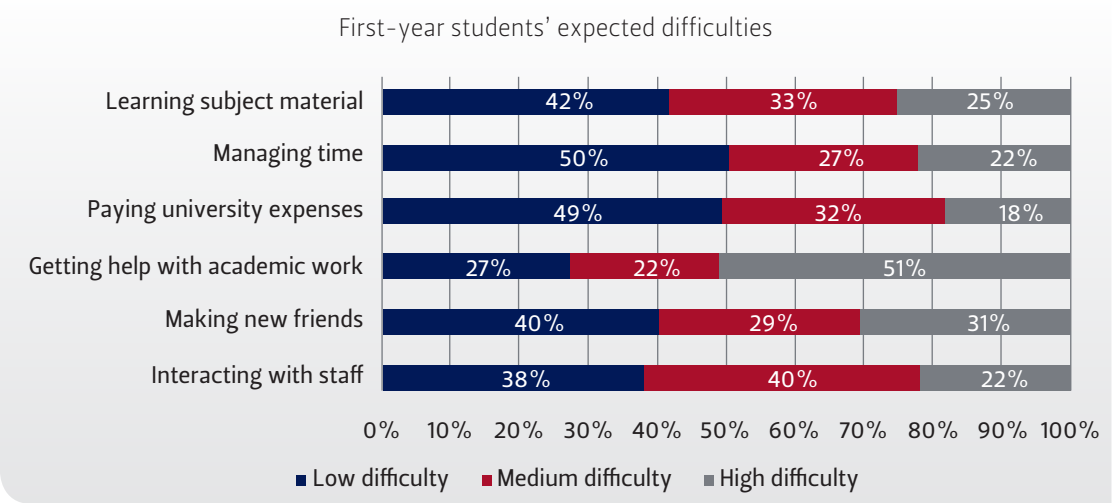


Figure 13: First-year students' expected difficulties to accomplish certain activities.

First-year students were asked how difficult they expect certain activities to be during the coming academic year (Figure 13). Response options ranged from 1= "Not at all difficult", to 6= "Very difficult". The responses were recoded and grouped to rank the level of expected difficulty as "Low difficulty" (Response options: 1 and 2), "Medium difficulty" (Response options: 3 and 4), and "High difficulty" (Response options: 5 and 6).[2] The results were as follows:

Low difficulty

Students reported a low expected difficulty (42%) in learning subject material. Half of the students (50%) presume that it will not be difficult to manage their time while at university. Remarkably, 49% of students assume that it will not be difficult to pay their university expenses, which is in strong contrast to the national crisis of student debt and financial assistance. Making new friends was also reported as a low expected difficulty, with 40%.

Medium difficulty

Many students (40%) anticipated that they would have moderate difficulty concerning interaction with staff.

High difficulty

More than half of students (51%) report that they believe it would be very difficult to get help with academic work.

These results emphasise that students might not have realistic expectations about their first year at a tertiary institution. Their expectations of how difficult certain activities will be is greatly underrated. Numerous students also rated a low expected difficulty in activities relating to transition issues, when in reality students are struggling with the transition from high school to university. Therefore, transition programs such as orientation programmes, academic advising and other support programmes should be emphasised to help students gain a realistic understanding of what is expected of them in their first year at university.

2 Some percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

2.4 What are first-year students' support needs?

Institutions should focus on the fact that first-year students expect a high level of support from their institution to succeed.

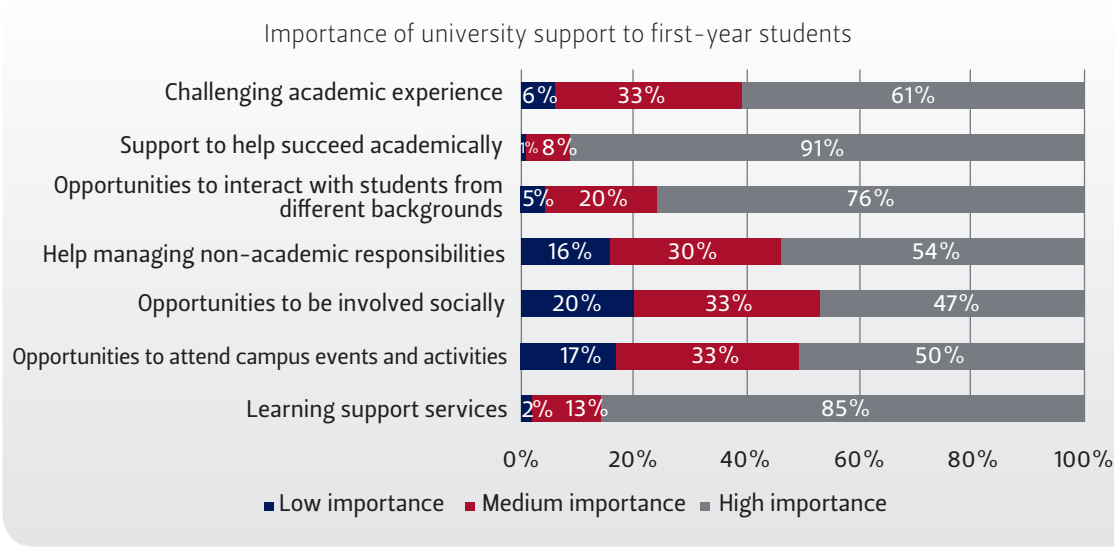


Figure 14: First-year students' reported importance of university support with certain activities.

The BUSSE asked students how important they think it is that their university provides particular university support services/initiatives during their studies (Figure 14). Response options ranged from 1="Not at all important", to 6="Very important". The responses were recoded and grouped to rank the level of expected importance as "Low importance" (Response options: 1 and 2), "Medium importance" (Response options: 3 and 4), and "High importance" (Response options: 5 and 6). The results were as follows:

The majority of students ranked the following support opportunities as very important:

1. Support to help them succeed academically (91%);
2. Learning support services (tutoring services, peer mentoring, writing centre, and library) (85%);
3. Opportunities to interact with students from different backgrounds (social, racial/ethnic and religious backgrounds) (76%);
4. Challenging academic experience (61%); and
5. Help managing your non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.) (54%).

Half of the sample also reported that it will be very important that the university provides them with occasions to attend campus events and activities (not related to academic work), while less than half of the sample (47%) regarded it as extremely important for institutions to provide opportunities for them to be involved socially.

First-year responses were also arranged into on-campus and off-campus students to determine if on-campus students rate institutional support more important than off-campus students. Interestingly, on-campus students reported a significant difference in the importance of support managing non-academic responsibilities and help with opportunities to attend campus events and activities, compared to off-campus students. Evidence suggests that on-campus students are generally more engaged, thereby emphasising the importance of academic support opportunities from the institution targeting off-campus students as well.

It is important to note that first-year students rank support from their institution as very important. From the results it is clear that first-year entering students expect that there will be various support programmes available to them. However, in reality, although most institutions have support programmes available, it is not compulsory for all students. Students are also not always aware of the programmes that are available to them, causing many not to attend these beneficial programmes. The high importance of institutional support attributed by first-year students may emphasise the importance of reconsidering sophisticated orientation programmes, early warning systems, academic advising and other transition programmes. These programmes should be positioned to inform students and make them more aware of what support structures are available to them at their institution.

3. Understanding how students learn

Understanding how students learn, make use of support services, and how they experience the educational setup at tertiary institutions is of vital importance to develop institutional cultures that are supportive of student success. Quality teaching is a critical component of building a contextualised higher education system that is both effective and efficient.

The SASSE results provide the opportunity for universities to establish how their students report on their current learning. There is a clear difference between how students expect to learn and how students actually report learning. It is of vital importance for institutions to understand why students expect to learn in one way, when they report learning by completing certain activities much more or less than expected. Research indicated that university students improve their learning and retention when they actively engage with their subject material by analysing information as opposed to only memorising information. Collaborating with others to master difficult material and developing interpersonal and social competence prepares students to deal with complex, unscripted problems they will encounter during and after university. Students learn through peer learning, applying learning strategies, and critical thinking practices (Ambrose et al., 2010). The following results describe how students report learning and communicating with support structures.

3.1 How do students report learning?

The SASSE asked students to report how often during the academic year they have done certain activities (Figure 15).

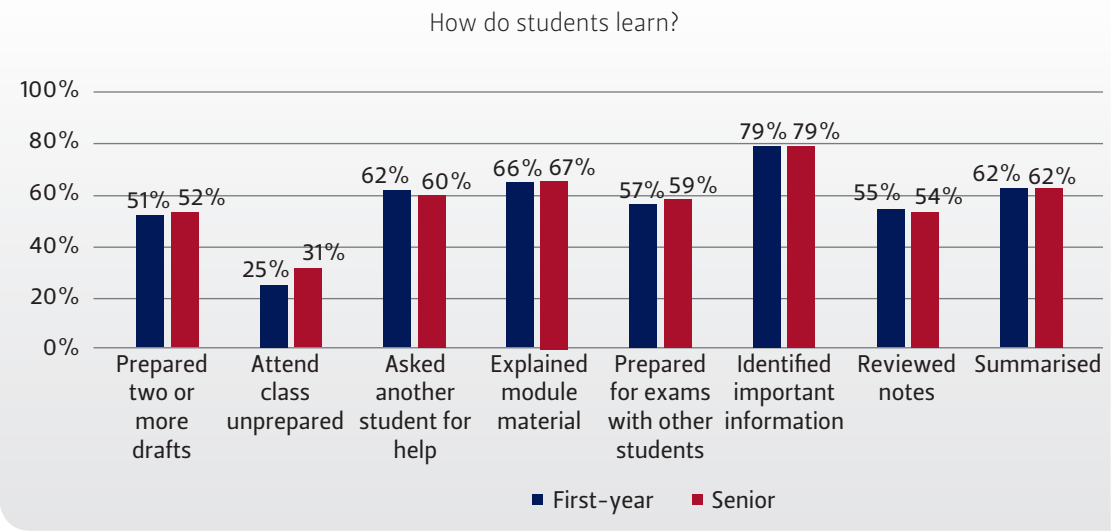


Figure 15: First-year and Senior students' reported frequency of learning activities ("Very often" or "Often").

Results indicate that first-year students are generally more prepared for class, with 25% of first-year students and 31% of senior students admitting that they "Often" or "Very often" attend class without having completed readings or assignments. There was also a significant difference between first-year and senior students' preparation of two or more drafts of a paper or assignment before handing it in, with more senior students specifying this.

First-year students were more willing to ask other students to help them understand their module/subject material than senior students (62% and 60% respectively) which is statistically significant. While the majority of senior students (67%) were more likely to explain module/subject material to other students than first-year students (66%). More senior students (59%) than first-year students (57%) reported that they "Very often" or "Often" prepared for exams by discussing or working through module/subject material, with a significant difference between them.

First-year and senior students indicated very similar frequencies when it comes to using learning strategies. For example, both groups of students "Often" or "Very often" identified important information from reading assignments (79%). Similarly, 62% of first-year and senior students respectively report regularly summarising what they have learned in class or from module/subject materials. However, there was a significant difference between the first-year students' (55%) and senior students' (54%) reported rate of reviewing notes after class, which nevertheless remains a low reported frequency for both groups. First-year and senior students report relatively low patterns of applying learning activities and should be encouraged to use these basic learning strategies more frequently in their studies.

3.2 How do students communicate with support structures?

Students learn first-hand how experts think about and solve problems by interacting with staff members inside and outside of instructional settings. As a result, staff become role models, mentors, and guides for lifelong learning (Kuh et al., 2005). In addition, effective teaching requires that staff deliver course material and provide feedback in student-centred ways. University staff have informal and formal roles as mentors, advisors and teachers, which models intellectual work, the effective use of knowledge and skills, and assist students to make conclusions regarding their studies and their future plans.

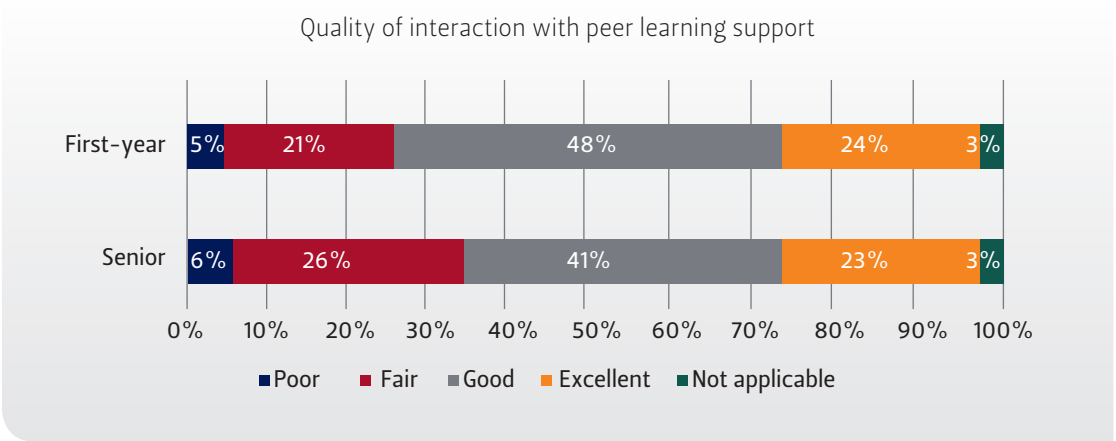


Figure 16: Reported quality of interaction with peer learning support by students.

The majority of first-year students (72%) and senior students (64%) who completed the SASSE in 2015 reported that the quality of interaction with peer learning support, such as tutors, mentors and facilitators were "Excellent" or "Good" (Figure 16). This may indicate that the vigorous efforts by universities relating to peer learning support programmes are starting to prosper. However, results also indicate that first-year students rated a much higher quality of interaction with peer learning support than the senior students. This could serve as a diagnostic indicator that the recent emphasis on first-years' transition and success overshadows the additional support needed by senior students.

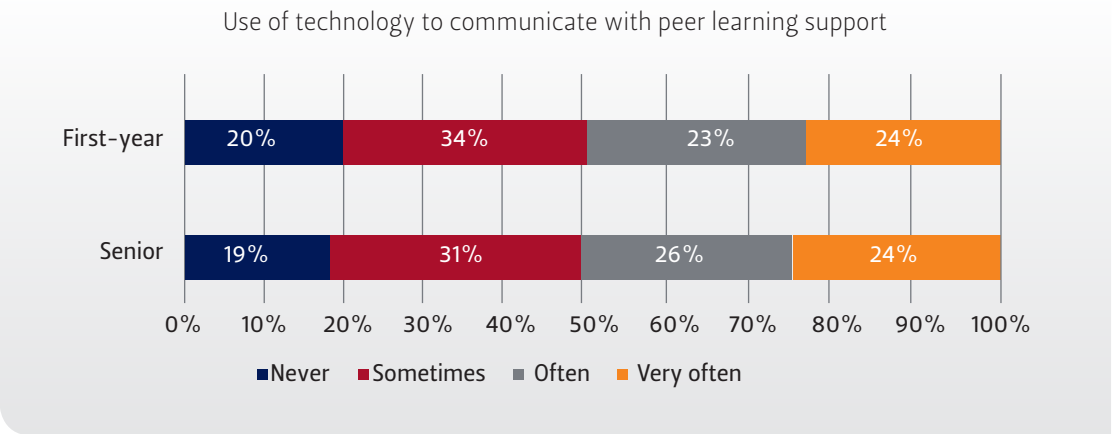


Figure 17: Students' reported use of technology to communicate with peer learning support.

Less than half (47%) of first-year students and half of the senior students indicated that they regularly used technology to communicate with peer learning support such as tutors, mentors, and facilitators (Figure 17). This raises the questions: Why are a larger number of students not using technology to communicate with peer learning support considering that the majority of higher education institutions make use of learning management systems? Is there a reason why less first-year students prefer to use technology to communicate with peer learning support than senior students?

3.3 How effective do students think staff teach?

Effective teaching practices play an important role in facilitating student learning. These practices promote student learning and skills and may include the following activities: clear explanations, organised teaching, illustrative examples, and quick feedback regarding tests and assignments. The SASSE asked students how often they experienced certain practices in their lecturers' teaching.

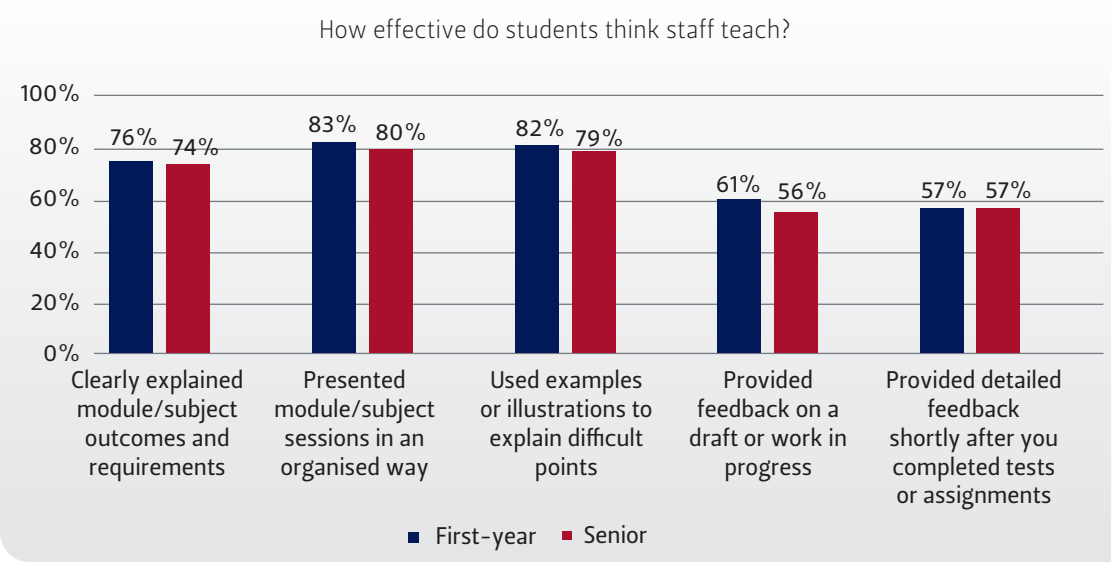


Figure 18: Students' stated frequency of experiencing effective teaching practices from staff ("Very much" or "Quite a bit").

More first-year students than senior students stated that their lecturers frequently implemented effective teaching practices (Figure 18). The majority of students stated that their lecturers often clearly explained subject/module outcomes and requirements (76% of first-years and 74% of seniors). Similarly, there was a significant difference between first-year students (83%) and senior students (80%) who reported that their lecturers regularly presented subject/module sessions in an organised way. The majority of first-year students (82%) and senior students (79%) also described a significant difference between the rate that their lecturers used examples or illustrations to explain difficult points.

Moderate levels of feedback on draft/work in progress were reported by students, with a significant difference between first-year students (61%) and senior students (56%). In addition, only 57% of first-year and senior students stated that detailed feedback was given in a timeous manner.

The results indicate that the majority of students regularly experienced effective teaching practices from their lecturers. However, if one takes into account that this engagement indicator measures the very basics of effective teaching practices, it can be argued that the reported frequencies should be much higher. Some questions institutions should ask are: Do students have unrealistic expectations? Why do students report such low rates of feedback from their lecturers? Is it perhaps the big class sizes that limit the lecturers from giving timely feedback? Perhaps the feedback process should be reconsidered to make it more engaging?

It is important to mention that when staff are asked to evaluate their teaching in the Lecturer Survey of Student Engagement (LSSE) they have a different view to students. In light of the focus of this report on the student voice however, the LSSE results are not included here but will be explored in future reports.

4. Creating a deeply contextualised, effective and efficient higher education system

"*Every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets.*" - Paul Batalden (2014). The call for free, decolonised and quality education echoes the quote by Batalden. The student protest has clearly highlighted that the design of the current system needs to be reconsidered so that it produces different results. Using international student engagement research[3] and national student data, we propose the following properties of engaging institutions:

4.1 A 'living' differentiated mission and 'lived' educational philosophy

For South African higher education to produce different results, the types of institutions and their missions need to be differentiated, and should provide insight and direction to staff. A focus on student learning and success should be 'alive' or lived out by institutions, staff and students. The educational philosophy should also include curricular and pedagogical innovation relevant to the South African context. The deeper understanding of who the students at our institutions are and how they need to be supported has to inform contextualised missions and educational philosophies.

4.2 Creating learning environments that promote inclusion and educational enrichment

Physical and psychological environments within an institution should support learning and must reinforce the institution's educational mission and values. Designing university structures and initiatives for student success will require a reconceptualisation of learning spaces, pedagogical approaches, transformation of curricular content, the use of technology as well as the role of student affairs in fostering co-curricular environments that promote inclusion, cohesion and student success. For example learning spaces need to be designed to ensure that they facilitate collaborative learning.

4.3 Clarifying the pathways that maximise student success

South African higher education has made some strides in developing first year experience models which have been shown to provide students with clearer communication regarding what it means to be successful. The SASSE 2016 report highlighted that more needs to be done to provide support to senior students in the form of transition programmes. New developments in the field of predictive analytics and

3 Adapted from the conditions proposed by Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt (2005).

academic advising offer innovative solutions to the challenges facing students. BUSSE data can inform more sophisticated design in orientation programmes that are based on the voice of first-year students.

4.4 Facilitating an improvement-orientated institutional culture and ethos

Institutions that are effective at engaging and nurturing success are characterised by 'positive relentlessness'. The Quality Enhancement Project of the Council on Higher Education with its appreciative inquiry approach provided a systemic example of how institutions can build on and develop confidence in their initiatives through the use of evidence to continuously improve and contextualise interventions to be effective and efficient. By integrating student engagement data into monitoring and evaluation frameworks, institutions can monitor the improvement in the student experience.

4.5 Making sure that the quality of learning and student success is owned by everyone in the institution

Everyone is an educator and everyone accepts responsibility for students' learning to create a culture that nurtures and promotes student success. The importance of student success has to be endorsed by the university council, driven and championed by top and middle management, facilitated by academic staff, and complemented by support staff. This institutional network is essential to impact on success and throughput rates. A network approach not only enables an institution to do many different things better and more frequently; but it also helps to make more effective use of institutional resources. By sharing the SASSE results institutions can better identify in which areas to deploy resources.

We believe that student engagement measures provide a critical, data-driven, student voice that can be used to effect evidence-based systemic change to produce more equitable results.

5. Quick Facts and Participating Universities

Objectives

The objectives of the BUSSE, SASSE and LSSE surveys are to provide institutions with actionable data about issues that they can focus on changing. The theoretical and empirical research that informed the construction of the surveys are specifically focused on providing data on factors that institutions have a direct influence over. For example, pedagogy in classes and how student support is structured within an institution.

Furthermore, the surveys provide student engagement data to universities to assess the level of student engagement in institutions and assist in empowering them to improve undergraduate education. This is enabled by informing quality assurance through the encouragement of national benchmarking and furthering accreditation efforts. Among the greatest benefits of student engagement surveys is that they promote critical, internal self-reflection and reflective accountability.

Administration

The BUSSE survey was administered online from February to March 2015. Both the SASSE and LSSE surveys were completed between August and September 2015. The surveys take approximately 20 minutes to complete. The online survey and feedback management software programme, *Questback* was used, which made it simple for students to click on the link and complete the survey anywhere, on or off campus.

Participant Agreement

Participating universities agree that the SASSE administrative team can use the data in the aggregate for reporting purposes and other undergraduate research and improvement initiatives. By contractual agreement, specific institutional results may not be disclosed without permission. Universities are free to use their own data for institutional purposes, including public reporting.

Data Sources

Data was sourced through randomly sampled undergraduate first-year students and senior students from tertiary institutions in South Africa who volunteered to participate in the 2015 survey. The SASSE data may be supplemented by other institutional data available such as Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS) data, Learning Management System (LMS) data and Student Information System (SIS) data to reveal more detailed results.

Validity and Reliability

An extensive SASSE review process from 2011-2012 included inputs from institutional representatives who participated in the national study as well as analysis of data from both national administrations of the survey. It incorporated experiences of the research team that worked on the project, the inputs of eight South African higher education experts, and an international expert. To facilitate deep contextualisation, qualitative research was conducted at five institutions involving 148 students in four provinces. In addition, psychometric analyses have been regularly conducted to continuously monitor and improve the robustness of the measures.

Weighting

Adjusting data to reflect differences in the number of population units that each respondent represents is known as the process of weighting (NSSE, 2015). Weighting is necessary when the proportion of respondents within a particular demographic variable (for example, in the gender category) differs substantially from their population percentages. Analysis of these conditions compels SASSE to weigh by gender within an institution, and institutional size in order to create comparable groups.

Response Rates

The average institutional response rate for both BUSSE and SASSE in 2015 was 5.7%. The highest response rate was among senior students (6.2%), while the first-year students' response rate was 5.1%. The average institutional response rate for LSSE in 2015 was 5.7%. The highest response rate was among senior student lecturers (6.2%), while the response rate for lecturers teaching first-year students was 5.1%.

Participating Universities 2009 – 2015

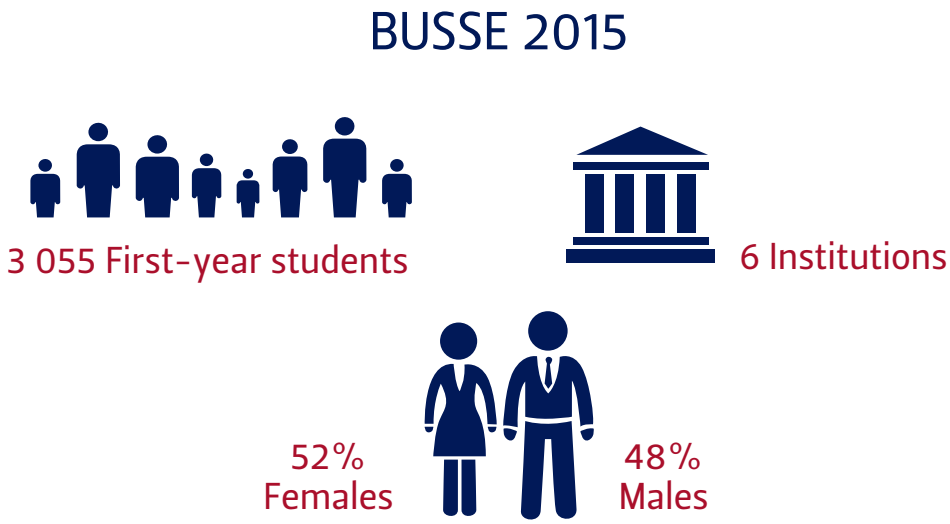
Since the launch of SASSE in 2009, fifteen institutions have participated in the SASSE, including seven Traditional Universities, three Comprehensive Universities and five Universities of Technology within South Africa, as seen in Table 1.

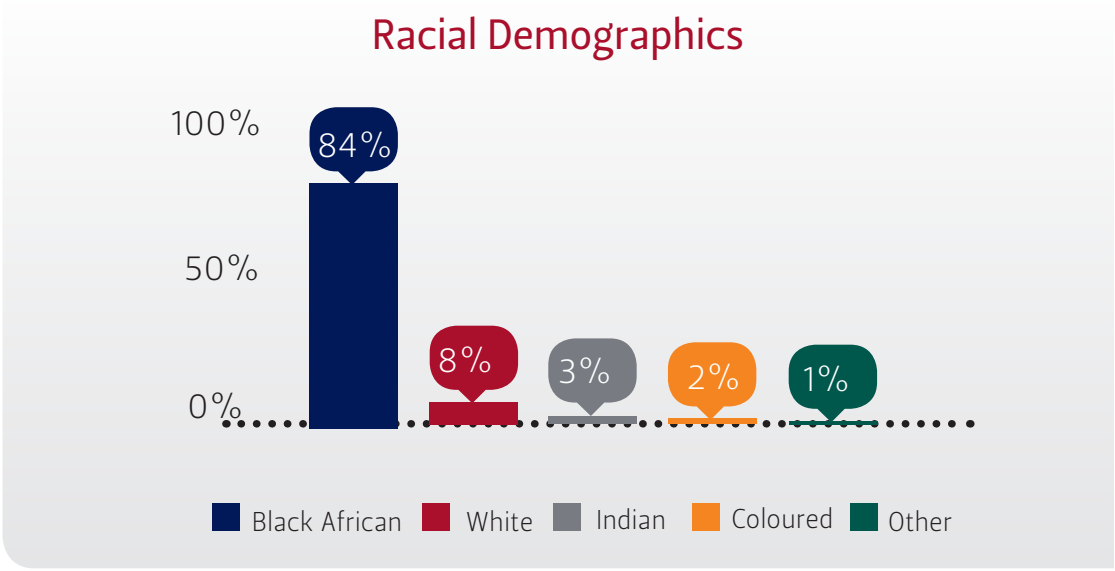
Table 1: Participating Universities in SASSE (2009-2015).

Traditional Universities	Comprehensive Universities	Universities of Technology
Rhodes University	Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University	Cape Peninsula University of Technology
University of Fort Hare	University of Johannesburg	Central University of Technology
University of the Free State	University of Venda	Durban University of Technology
University of KwaZulu-Natal		Tshwane University of Technology
University of Pretoria		Vaal University of Technology
University of Western Cape		
University of the Witwatersrand		

The survey sample: BUSSE & SASSE 2015

The administration cycle of the surveys take place every second year. In 2015, six universities participated in the BUSSE, while three universities participated in the SASSE and the LSSE. The participating universities in BUSSE consisted of three traditional universities, one comprehensive university, and two universities of technology.





The majority (38%) of the students who completed the BUSSE were enrolled for a degree in the Sciences, Engineering and Technology, while 27% were enrolled for a degree in Human and Social Sciences. A total of 18% of students were part of the Business, Economics and Management faculty, whereas 16% were enrolled for an Education degree. Regarding racial classifications, for the purpose of the survey and due to the small sample size of these groups, the term "Other" is used to group students who do not identify

as either Black African, Coloured, Indian or White. By using these terms, no negative connotation or prejudice is implied towards people grouped in this way.

SASSE 2015

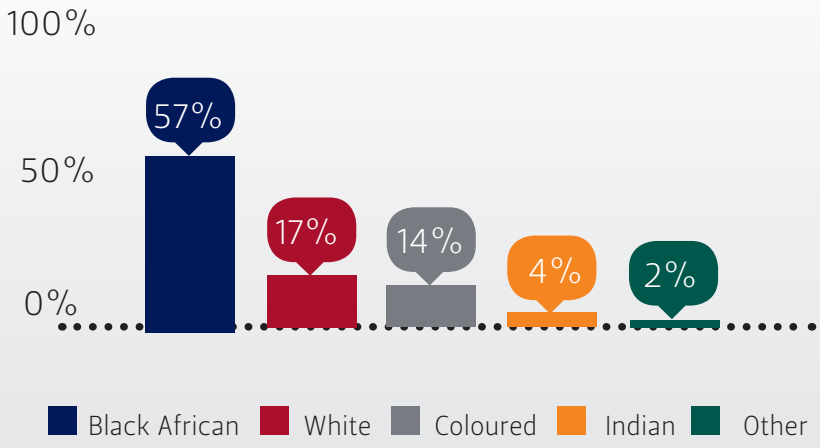
703 First-year students
1 887 Senior students

3 Institutions

61% Females

39% Males

Racial Demographics



The SASSE 2015 was completed by 2 590 respondents. A total of 32% of the students who completed the survey were enrolled for a degree in Human and Social Sciences, while 31% were enrolled for a degree in Sciences, Engineering and Technology. A total of 26% of students were part of the Business, Economics and Management faculty and 12% were enrolled in the faculty of Education.

List of References

Ambrose, S.A., Bridges, M.W., DiPietro, M., Lovett, M.C., & Norman, M.K. (2010). *How learning works: Seven research-based principles for smart teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Batalden, P. (2014). Every System is Perfectly Designed to get the results it gets – Paul Batalden. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v =doQOKmrptDU>.

Kuh, G.D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J.H., & Whitt, E.J. (2005). *Student success in college: creating conditions that matter*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Mahat, M., & Goedegebuure, L. (2014). Transparent reporting of learning outcomes. In H. Coates (Ed.), *Higher education learning outcomes assessment: international perspectives, 263–278. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH.*

National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (2015). *An explanation of weighting in the NSSE Institutional Report*. Retrieved from: http://nsse.indiana.edu/html/weighting.cfm.

SASSE Staff

This report was compiled by the SASSE team at the Centre for Teaching and Learning, University of the Free State:

Prof Francois Strydom
Project Leader

Mrs Lana Hen-Boisen
Lead Researcher

Dr Sonja Loots
Senior Researcher

Mr. Michael Henn
Project Manager

Ms. Annél Oosthuysen
Researcher

Mrs Hanlé Posthumus
Research analyst

Contact details:

Centre for Teaching and Learning
University of the Free State
PO Box 339
Bloemfontein
9300
Republic of South Africa

T: +27 (051) 401 9306
E: strydomjf@ufs.ac.za

We would like to express our sincere appreciation to students who responded to the survey, colleagues from participating institutions who help us to continuously improve our work and The Kresge Foundation for its generous support.

Inspiring excellence. Transforming lives.
Inspireer uitnemendheid. Verander lewens.

T:051 401 9111 | E:info@ufs.ac.za | www.ufs.ac.za
UFSUV | UFSweb | UFSweb

UNIVERSITY OF THE
FREE STATE
UNIVERSITEIT VAN DIE
VRYSTAAT
YUNIVESITHI YA
FREISTATA

UFS·UV
CENTRE FOR TEACHING
AND LEARNING (CTL)
ONDERRIG-EN-LEERSENTRUM
(OLS)