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Factors that kept first-year students motivated at a university in Johannesburg during lockdown

Abstract

The academic achievement of first-year university students continues to be a concern and priority for higher education institutions in South Africa. The mandated lockdown in 2020, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, compelled first-year students to adapt from face-to-face lecturers to emergency remote teaching. This study explored what has kept first-year students motivated to succeed at a university in Johannesburg during the lockdown period. Self-determination theory was used as the theoretical lens and analytical tool in this research. One hundred and seventy-five first-year students were selected using a purposeful sampling method to participate in this study. Data were collected using open-ended questionnaires. Responses were categorised by means of an emergent and a priori thematic analysis. The findings indicated that first-year students were internally motivated to succeed at university on the basis of attitude, competence and achievement-based motivations. The findings also reported that reward, fear, power-based and affiliation motivations were important external motivators in making first-year students succeed. We recommend that universities continue to provide the various forms of additional support students have received during the lockdown period in order to enable students to remain motivated to succeed.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, external factors, first-year university students, internal factors, motivation

1. Introduction

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic globally caused education institutions to shift from a face-to-face mode of learning to an online mode. The online learning has made it possible for students to continue with learning without the need to travel to distant physical locations in order to acquire such knowledge (Harandi, 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic affected the educational field, which led to adjustments so that continuity could be maintained by instructors and students at institutions of learning (Hasan & Bao, 2020). Universities put in place measures which were meant to manage, plan, deliver and track the educational process during emergency remote teaching and learning (Almaiah, Al-Khasawneh & Althunibat, 2020). Due to this

new shift, the students and instructors had to adapt to restricted social interactions causing a notable effect on the sector of education. There exists a motivational sphere in terms of its stability, structure, subordination of motives, their hierarchy which, in turn, affects the manifestation of educational activity, subject position in educational activities and students' career development (Ilyin, 2006). Therefore, many students find it difficult today to deal with these changes because of a new mode of learning in the current educational environment (Bovermann & Bastiaens, 2020).

2. Context of the study

While online learning is an emerging field in education, with a number of universities offering blended or fully online learning before the onset of the pandemic, for many institutions, face-to-face learning was the main mode of delivery. This was the case for this institution, a public university in Johannesburg at which this study took place. The university calendar at this institution comprises two semesters, February to June and July to November, with two teaching terms in each semester consisting of six or seven weeks per term. This cohort of students were inimitable in that they began their university journey in a face-to-face mode of learning, on campus, with many of whom living in university residences or communal spaces; and then suddenly moved to an online mode of delivery under stressful emergency circumstances. The need for an online mode of learning was brought about by the significant change our world had to undergo as a result of the coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19), which was brought on by the SARS-CoV-2 virus (Le Grange, 2020). The pandemic has significantly impacted the educational system on a national and international level (Daniel, 2020). The South African government attempted to stem the spread of COVID-19 by imposing a mandated lockdown, from 26 March 2020, and prohibiting public gatherings, as well as enforcing social distancing and closing schools and universities (Dube, 2020).

The sudden move from face-to-face pedagogies to online learning forced the 2020 cohort of student to develop two endurance mechanisms within the first few weeks of being at university, the first being to mediate the expectation and challenge of transitioning from high school to university, and the second, adjusting from face-to-face modes of pedagogies to emergency remote learning before they were fully familiar with the expectations of being at university. Literature on what has kept students motivated to learn during the mandated lockdown period is scarce. It is against this background that this research aimed to gain an understanding of the factors that kept students motivated to learn during this period.

3. Theoretical framework

Self-determination theory (SDT) is the theoretical lens and analytical tool used in this research. SDT is an empirically based theory that provides an understanding of human motivation, development and wellness (Deci & Ryan, 2008). The cornerstone of SDT is the distinction made between autonomous motivation and controlled motivation (Gagné & Deci, 2005). This distinction is linked to intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors, which are both viewed as intentional motivators, as opposed to amotivation which lack intention (Gagné & Deci, 2005). This broad framework enables an understanding of the factors that facilitate or undermine intrinsic motivation and autonomous extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). This links to the stance that SDT "is concerned with the particular social contexts that support or undermine humans' tendency toward assimilation" (Darner, 2009: 42). Social situations can aid individuals' need to assimilate and as such plays a role to stimulate curiosity and desire

to be drawn to ideal challenges (Deci & Ryan, 1990). A person's tenancy to assimilate is not fixed and as such can be revealed in different ways and be embodied by various motivational processes (Ryan, 1995). Based on this we were interested to see how working from home impacted on first-year students' ability to assimilate into the university context by specifically focusing what motivated them to learn during the lockdown period.

We found this framework useful for our research as SDT is linked to human motivation and includes a description of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Deci, Olafsen & Ryan, 2017). This study views intrinsic motivation as activities that people participate in because they find it attention grabbing and derive spontaneous satisfaction from the activity itself, whereas extrinsic motivation is linked to various external rewards or consequence that encourage participation.

4. Literature review

Previous research on internal motivational factors among students for online learning exists in varied contexts. Recent studies suggest that internal motivational factors for online learning in the first place links with personal needs and traits such as self-determination, the need for socialisation, competence, satisfaction of basic psychological need, self-regulated motivation, interest, and learning strategies (Chiu, Lin & Lonka, 2021; Gustiani, Ardiansyah & Simanjuntak, 2021; Hsu, 2019; Luo, Lin & Yang, 2021; Meşe & Sevilen, 2021; Randi & Corno, 2022). In the second place, internal motivation relates to how the student perceives and experiences the course design such as situational interest intensity of engagement with course material, perceived relatedness, perceived knowledge transfer and the increased achievement of course objective (Çebi & Güyer, 2020; Chiu *et al.*, 2021; Hsu, Wang & Levesque-Bristol, 2019; Luo *et al.*, 2021; Meşe & Sevilen, 2021; Randi & Corno, 2022). Intrinsic motivation is not static, as a study by Van Roy and Zaman (2018) shows. They found that intrinsic motivation fluctuated and decreased at the start of the course, but increased over time. The fluctuation of intrinsic motivation is important in this study because the first-year students face adjustment challenges in online learning at university and this is likely to cause decrease in their levels of motivations, but this later stabilises as they develop better coping mechanisms. Thus, the levels of intrinsic motivation among first-year students would later increase as they adopt better academic, social, emotional and psychological adjustment to the challenges experienced in online learning at university.

In addition, other current research indicates that the external motivational factors which affect online learning among students are learning from more knowledgeable others at the institutions, namely teachers, classmates, their distant learning situation and organisation (Chiu *et al.*, 2021). In another study, institutional support from instructors, technical support and sufficient communication affects remote learning among students (Berestova *et al.*, 2022). Another extrinsic factor which affects remote learning among students is existing institution rewards which boosts students' motivation (Kyewski & Krämer, 2018). In addition, external regulation factors, including identified regulation, integrated regulation, introjected regulation and external regulation, play crucial roles in enhancing online learning among students (Dhingra *et al.*, 2021; Gustiani *et al.*, 2021).

From the above it is clear that most previous research focused on either intrinsic or extrinsic motivator factors influencing online learning among students, which would leave out one of the two aspects. However, the present study combined both intrinsic and extrinsic

motivator factors to fill address this gap in literature. In addition, most studies focused on motivator factors in face-to-face learning environments. Also there is scant research, in this regard, about the online learning classroom environments, which is the focus of the present study. This paper thus examines first-year students' motivation to succeed in more detail, with particular reference to the emergency shift to online learning.

5. Research question of the study

The key research question which guided this study was stated as follows:

What has kept first-year students motivated to succeed at university during the lockdown period?

In order to fully answer the key research question, the objective of the study was to establish which internal and external factors motivated first-year students to succeed during the lockdown period.

6. Methods

A constructivist research approach was adopted. This design sought to rely on "the participants' views of the situation being studied" (Creswell, 2014: 37). This design was relevant because it enabled us to capture how first-year students "construct meaning" (Creswell, 2014: 38) about the factors that kept them motivated at university during lockdown.

Participants were 175 first-year students registered to do a Bachelor of Education at an urban South African university in 2020. The study adopted a purposive sampling method to obtain the 175 students. The criteria used to select participants were that they were required to be registered for Education I, which is a compulsory course that all first-year students need to complete for their degree.

Permission to conduct this research was given by the University of the ANON's ethics committee. Participants were made aware that their involvement in this project was voluntary, and that they could withdraw at any given point if they chose to do so. All identifying participant information were kept confidential. Data were collected by means of an open-ended questionnaire, where participants were asked to email their short paragraph responses on the key research question to a specially created Gmail address. All participants were given the same question to answer at the same time (in October 2020) to ensure reliability. Participants' emailed responses were copied into an MS Excel spreadsheet.

The responses were numbered as they were received from 1 to 175. Data were analysed using a two-set process. Responses were categorised by means of an emergent and a priori coding methods by using both inductive and deductive reasoning approach. We firstly read participants' responses and categorised them according to internal and external motivating factors. We then further categorised the data under internal factors according to achievement-based motivation, competence motivation and attitude motivation. The external factors were categorised according to reward-based motivation or incentive motivation, fear-based motivation, power-based motivation and affiliation motivation. In this way the data were analysed using the a priori coding method using a deductively reasoning approach.

7. Findings

The findings indicate that this cohort of students were equally motivated by internal and external factors. We noted with interest that students' attitude motivation was specified as the most significant internal driving force by participants. What this revealed is that this cohort of first-year students were mostly driven by their personal desire for change, which meant that they were focused of attaining a degree and they believed this would improve their lives. Less significant internal motivating factors were linked to competence motivation and achievement-based motivation. One fifth of participants were internally motivated by competence factors, which included their personal drive for success and achieving their full academic potential. Less than a fifth of participants were motivated by achievement-based motivation where they were driven by their need to achieve their set goals.

The most prominent external motivating factor cited by participants cited was reward-based motivation or incentive motivation. With regard to reward-based motivation or incentive motivation, more than half of the participants were driven by their family background, support and making their parents proud, while less than half were motivated by the email communications and support they received from their university, lecturers, tutors and the first-year team. Less than a fifth of participants were motivated by fear and power. We found it interesting that fear and power were equally important motivators for this cohort of students. Fear-based motivation was linked to not getting or losing financial support from funders and not acquiring a degree. With regard to power-based motivation, students were prominently motivated by having a better life, compared to being employed or finding employment. The last external motivation was their need to be affiliated to a university. Less than a tenth of participants indicated being at university as an external motivator.

The next section presents the individual emergent categories under internal and external motivators as well as the other minor forms of motivation. This will be expanded on by including direct quotes from participants.

7.1 Internal motivating factors

The internal factors that motivated half of the participants included attitude motivation, competence motivation and achievement-based motivation. Each one of these factors will be discussed below.

7.1.1 Attitude motivation

First-year students indicated that they remained motivated by acquiring a degree that would change their lives, being afraid of failing, being an excellent educator who is passionate about teaching as well as knowing that others were in same situation as they were.

7.1.1.1 *Acquiring a degree would change their lives*

Almost half of the participants believed that attaining degree would change their lives and allow them to *"build a brighter future"* for themselves and *"better [their] home situation"* as they would *"start making [their] own money"*. Below are additional examples of what participants had indicated:

I accepted that at university I will have to learn to adapt to every situation that I will face, one thing that this pandemic taught me is to make good out of every situation, from learning to assess myself and learn on my own whereas most of us were used to being

taught face to face and enjoyed the lessons, this has motivated me to strive to succeed at university so that I can be able to tell my story and live my dream.

I'm doing this for me and only me. Pushing hard and graduating is what has kept me motivated. I want to be able to make a difference and be able to provide for myself and my family, should another pandemic like this occur again in future. I do not want to remain stagnant in life.

7.1.1.2 Fear of failing

Over one quarter of participants were motivated by their “fear of failing” and believed this assisted them “to pass the academic year”. They did not “want to repeat a year at university” and “want[ed] to finish [their] degree in record time”. One participant noted that:

I constantly motivate myself to do well and succeed because failure has never been an option, I fear failing hence I constantly motivate myself to do well.

Another participant stated that:

Failing and having to repeat the year and waste the money that my parents have spent [has motivated me because] I did not want to be in the statistics of those who gave up because of lockdown.

7.1.1.3 Being an excellent educator who is passionate about teaching

“Fulfilling” their “dream [of] becom[ing] a brilliant teacher who will one day make a difference in a child’s life” was an aspect indicated by less than a quarter of the participants. In addition, they noted that it has “always been my dream to succeed in being a teacher. A constant reminder of my dreams and goals has kept me motivated to succeed during lockdown”. Participants also stated that, “having a good foundation for this BEd degree so that I can be the best educator I can offer to my future learners” is an aspect that motivated them. Participants further stated that:

The passion that I have for teaching has kept me motivated, even when I feel like giving up I remember that I've wanted this for such a long time.

The courses that I am studying. I am very interested in what I am studying and the sections taught are always interesting and I enjoy learning about it.

Thinking about the children that need professional teachers and better education is another think that kept me motivated.

7.1.1.4 Knowing that others are in same situation

Less than a tenth of participants were “motivated by [their] fellow classmates” and indicated that “fellow peers have also played a huge roll in motivating” them. Their interactions with their peers allowed them to feel “motivated [because of] the new connection” they had made in that they were “communicating with [others] and giving each other hope and helping each other where [they] can”. One participant summarised their experiences by stating that:

I worked with my classmates through online platforms such as WhatsApp and we also updated each other and motivated each other. Some of my friends were experiencing challenges which I was also facing and by connecting to each other, we was (sic) able to help each other in some ways and this also encouraged me to continue learning.

7.1.2 Competence motivation

A quarter of participants were motivated by their desire for self-improvement and this made them “*goal driven and hungry for success*” which meant that “... *self-motivation keeps [them] going*”. Under this category the majority of participants were motivated by their personal drive for success and just over a quarter were motivated by the need to achieve their full academic potential.

7.1.2.1 Personal drive as a motivation to succeed

Students indicated that “*I motivated myself every day to get up and do the work so that I learn more and do better for myself*”. The following participants summarised the idea of self-determination best when stating that:

When you know what you want in life, when you thirst for success, when you hunger for great things, nothing can stop you from trying to prosper even when things are tough. I went to university and started this year with the energy and a goal to succeed. I promised myself that no matter how hard it may be I will strive to make my family proud and to change the situation at home. Even when we had to shift to remote learning, even when things were hard I kept on reminding myself that I made a promise and am not going to let myself down on the first obstacle.

I have been able to keep motivated during the lockdown period by visualising the positive outcomes that will be in my future if I work hard. I have also remained positive as I have celebrated the achievements (even if they are small) that I accomplish each day. Another thing that I feel has helped me stay positive is allowing myself to have a balance between work and relaxation in my life. This allowed me to avoid feeling overwhelmed. By creating a daily schedule this allowed me to reduce stress as I was able to create realistic and attainable goals.

Reminding myself of the reason why I started studying Education was the motivation during this period as this is my dream and dreams shouldn't be forgotten just because times are hard.

Some participants viewed the pandemic as “*a passing phase, and all will go back to normal in time*”. These participants indicated that:

I never allowed the pandemic that we are facing to ruin my goals, rather I was studying hard because even though the pandemic was occurring throughout (sic) the world but that was not something that was there to change my goals of achieving my degree of becoming a qualified teacher.

Being goal orientated at an academic as well as personal level kept participants motivated in that they stated:

My children. They were the main reason I embarked into the journey of teaching and they have been the greatest motivation.

Short term goals that I have created, are the ones that so far are keeping me motivated. But goals without action plan would not work, so I created a plan of action that serves as a roadmap keeping me motivated in achieving my goals.

7.1.2.2 *Achieving their academic potential*

One participant stated that *“the need to pass and finish the year with something positive in my life”* and *“make sure that [their] work was always done to [their] satisfaction and to the best of [their] abilities”* was the overarching motivator. Others wanted to make sure they *“understand the content of modules better so that [they] can be a good teacher”*.

7.1.3 Achievement-Based Motivation

Less than a quarter of participants linked their achievement-based motivation to *“the goals that [they] had set out for [themselves] and know what [they] want to achieve and when ... to achieve it”*. Their goals were linked to *“acquiring a degree after four years”* and because they *“really want to pass [the] year and move forward and achieve success in [a] BEd Degree”*.

7.1.3.1 *Graduating with a degree*

The vast majority of participants indicated that *“I want a ... degree”*; thus they needed *“excellent results”* to *“graduate”* and acquire a *‘degree in 4 years’ time*. Their desire to *“graduate after four years [of the] degree course ... this is why [they were] motivated even under the hardship encountered due to the pandemic”*. In addition participants stated:

That I wanted to finish my degree in the time I planned on. Because I felt I am still able to learn and grow even if I had to adapt to new learning environment. I just wanted to be able to succeed in what I was doing and studying during lockdown.

Knowing that the situation will change and I still needed my degree to follow my passions in the future is what motivated me to succeed...

7.1.3.2 *Passing at the end of the year*

A tenth of participants were motivated by their desire to *“want to pass [their] first year of study and move forward”*. In addition, they indicated that they *“wanted to save the academic year and still be eligible to get [their] degree in record time”*. Overall, they were motivated to *“pass”* and achieve *“good grades”*.

7.2 External motivating factors

Half of the participants cited external motivating factors that were important, which included reward-based motivation or incentive motivation, fear-based motivation, power-based motivation and affiliation motivation. Next, we will elaborate on each one of the emergent categories found under the minor forms of motivation.

7.2.1 Reward-based motivation or incentive motivation

The majority of this cohort were motivated by their need to be recognised either by their family members, the *“assistance and motivation [they] have been getting from [their] family”* or the support from the greater university, as this is what motivated them to continue to succeed.

7.2.1.1 *Family background, support and making parents proud*

More than half of participants noted that *“my ... family has kept me motivated to succeed at university, they kept reminding me of my purpose in life and gave me reasons to focus, [and] do what is required in terms of my coursework”*. In addition participants stated that, *“my family that always encourage me to study even under difficult circumstances like this”*. Participants further noted that:

I have a good support network such as my parents, so they motivate me to do my best and because of this it pushed me to work hard.

The constant motivation by my family.

My family were the ones who kept on pushing me to do good and they supported me throughout

I didn't want to disappoint my family

7.2.1.2 Communication and support from university, lecturers, tutors and first-year team

For less than half of the participants “the support [they] have been getting from the university, [their] lectures and tutors” and the “first-year experience team” kept them motivated. They were reliant on the “emails [they] received from the university and lecturers [as this] served a great deal [to] encouraging [them] to work hard towards [their] studies despite the circumstances [they] faced”. They noted that “my mentor from the university has also kept me motivated as he continuously checks up on me and provide assistance whenever I need it”. Participants specifically noted the “heart-warming motivation emails” from the university as an aspect that allowed them to be “able to succeed with course work during lockdown”. In addition, participants stated that:

I was motivated by the fact that the university was doing, by all means, to help us succeed 2020 academic year, therefore, I had to use that opportunity as no excuses would not assist at all, rather impact my academic progress.

During this period of lockdown I felt like giving up for a moment but then due to the support materials and the help I received from my WURU1 tutor and lectures who always respond to emails when I need help, I then started getting motivated that I can still make it with this support structure.

The constant emails from the institution have been encouraging as well.

7.2.2 Fear-based motivation

For less than a quarter of participants fear-based motivation was a driving force. Their fear was linked to “losing” or not getting funding as well getting a “degree”.

7.2.2.1 Not getting or losing funding

More than half of the participants were motivated to succeed because they wanted to “get good marks so that [they] can get a bursary”. The greatest motivator for these participants was “fear of losing my bursary ... keeps me going”.

7.2.2.2 Not attaining a degree

Slightly less than half of the participants in this category were driven by the notion that they were “nothing without [a] degree”. Their general views are best captured below:

I was motivated to succeed because I want to get my degree and do my best. It would be such a waste to just not do the work, or if I were to fall behind because I cannot go to university in person.

1 WURU is an abbreviation for Read Up Write Up, which is a programme specially to provide students with academic support.

7.2.3 Power-based motivation

For less than a quarter of participants, being motivated was linked to their desire to find employment, as they believed that this would enable them to have a better quality of life.

7.2.3.1 *Having a better life*

The greater majority of participants in this category were driven by a need “to be able to change the situation of [their] community when it comes to the education side, people are not motivated to get to university or change their lives I want the next generation to see things different”. Furthermore, participants stated that “I am the only hope in my home to change the poverty situation all people are looking from me”. Apart from making changes to those in their community and immediate family, participants also stated that they were motivated at a personal level to have a better life in that they indicated:

... my desire for success has been greater than my fear of failure, hence I motivate myself daily by wanting to achieve great things and realise my dreams. So above all, I have used my current situation and contexts to motivate myself to do better and become better.

What has kept me going during the lockdown was the fact that I want to have money so that I can take care of my family, more especially my strong mother, siblings and myself ... so I want to be independent and pay my own bills (food bills and other bills).

7.2.3.2 *Being employed or finding employment*

Less than a fifth of participants were motivated by being employed once they qualify. One participant stated that:

What kept me motivated is seeing qualified employed teachers who were still receiving stable income despite the drastic deterioration of the economy. Many people were retrenched due to the economic conditions but teachers still remained employed and received stable income.

7.2.4 Affiliation motivation

A sixth of participants were motivated by the fact they have been accepted to study at “university”.

7.2.4.1 *Being a university student*

For those participants that were motivated being accepted to university, all stated that:

... to think that I have been given an opportunity of a lifetime, the thought of ruining this chance I have been given it will be a waste.

... I am at university

From the results, it can be concluded that some first-year students were motivated to succeed at university due to their affiliations to the university and this was considered to be a golden opportunity.

8. Discussion

The findings indicated that the internal motivating factors making first-year students succeed at university included attitude motivation, competence motivation, and achievement-based motivation. The above-mentioned intrinsic factors determine the extent to which first-year students would manage themselves in online learning environments leading to effective learning. Meşe and Sevilen (2021) argues that internal motivation factors that determine the effectiveness of online learning include students' interest in the course material, perceived relatedness, knowledge transfer of learnt content. Similarly, Çebi and Güyer (2020) reiterate that students' self-regulation ability in online learning environments would determine the extent of effectiveness of learning that takes place. In addition, Luo *et al.* (2021) opine that students' engagement on remote learning depends on internal factors such as perceived relatedness of content and their competence in managing themselves individually. Moreover, Hsu (2019) argues that intrinsic factors that affect learning in online courses include self-regulated motivation, increased achievement, satisfaction of basic psychological need, and perceived knowledge transfer of learnt content. Randi and Corno (2022) argue their motivation, learning strategies, and the course environment influence student learning in online courses. Gustiani *et al.* (2021) also affirm that intrinsic factors such as perceived enjoyment, interest, motivating and satisfaction play an important role in making online learning effective among students.

The study also indicated that the external environment is crucial in supporting online learning. Thus, in this study, external motivating factors namely rewards, incentive-based motivation, power-based, fear-based and affiliation-based motivations play an important role in enhancing the effectiveness of online learning among first-year students making them to succeed. This finding agrees with Chiu *et al.*'s (2021) study, which reports that external factors such as teachers' effort, support from peers, distant learning situation and organisation of courses are important in making first-year students succeed in online learning environments. In addition, Berestova *et al.* (2022) argue that external factors such technical support, sufficient communication, relevant, adequate training and support from instructors affect remote learning. Similarly, research by Kyewski and Krämer (2018); Dhingra *et al.* (2021) and Gustiani *et al.* (2021) all confirm that extrinsic factors which contribute to effective online learning among students include rewards, external and introjected regulations. The findings also support the Self-determination theoretical assertions which reiterate that there exists both autonomous and controlled motivations (Gagné & Deci, 2005), and these are linked to intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors which determine or affect a particular outcome.

9. Conclusion and recommendation

This study examined factors that kept first-year students motivated at a university in Johannesburg, South Africa during lockdown. On the basis of the findings, the study concludes that there were both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators for first-year students to succeed at university. Therefore, the study concludes that attitude motivation remained the key intrinsic factor that motivated first-year students at the university. Thus, students remained motivated to succeed because of the belief that acquisition of the degree would change their lives and families by raising their socio-economic status. Moreover, the first-year students had an internal drive for self-improvement, resulting in setting goals for success at the university. The study also concludes that the most prominent external motivating factor among first-year students is reward-based motivation or incentive-based motivation. In this regard, the first-year students were motivated to succeed on the basis of rewards from family, support and making

their parents proud. Therefore, it can be argued that both internal and external mechanisms are crucial for first-year students in adjusting to online learning environments. The findings could imply that first-year students remained motivated to succeed because of their internal drive to do so as well as various forms of external support they received. We recommend that universities should continue providing the various forms of instructional and other technical support to students to enable students to remain motivated to succeed. Moreover, parents should continue to provide psycho-social support to the students at universities in an effort to enhance success in their education.

10. Limitation of the study

One limitation of this study is that our data were collected from a single cohort of first-year students at one urban university in Johannesburg, South Africa. Therefore, we cannot claim that our findings are generalisable to all first-year students. We recommend that more research be conducted at other universities on first-year students' expectations and experiences at university that lead to feelings of inclusion and exclusion.

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