

# Motivational Factors as a Driver for Success for First-Year Students at a Selected Public University in South Africa

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## Abstract

Remaining motivated is vital to enable continued focus and success for university students. This study examined motivational factors as a driver for success for first-year students at a selected public university in South Africa. The study adopted a phenomenological qualitative research design and participants included 312 first-year students from the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg who were purposively selected from the 2020 first year Bachelor of Education cohort. Data were collected by means of open-ended survey questions in the first and sixth week of lectures. Alderfer's Existence, Relatedness and Growth (ERG) theory (1969) and Vroom's (1964) theories of motivations were used as the analytic framework. The qualitative findings indicated significant reliance by students on external motivating factors as compared to internal motivating factors. In practice, university structures could strengthen orientation programmes for first-year students at the university as these programmes would be an external motivator to enable student success.

**Keywords:** Motivational factors; drivers for success; first-year students; public university; South Africa.

## Introduction

Universities and their graduates are an important part of the education in a knowledge society (Safranková & Sikyr, 2016). The transition from secondary education to university is often experienced as a challenging and difficult time by students particularly the first year due to the challenges of adapting to a new learning environment, alongside major changes in their lives (Gale & Parker, 2014; Kahu et al. 2017). Thus, there are lower retention rates among students in their first year in comparison to the subsequent years (Tinto, 2012). The traditional image of a first-year student at university is one of excitement, intellectual and personal discovery, independence in thought and behaviour, widening horizons and growth in confidence (Leibowitz et al., 2009). However, this is often not the reality for most students as some still drop out of university with low self-esteem and disillusionment thereby impacting the social, economic and political development of the country in terms of the scarcity of skills.

First-year students at universities strive to succeed despite the adjustment challenges that they encounter. Romanville (2002) considers that students are aware of the importance of working independently and can discover the implicit rules and implicit didactic contracts to increase their chance of success first year and are motivated to succeed in their academic life at university. Scientists clarify motivation as psychological processes that energize and lead human behavior (Luthans & Sommers, 2005). From the behaviourists' perspective, motivation refers to a set of biological and psychological processes that allow the "triggering of action in its orientation, intensity and persistence" (Osmaa et al., 2015, p. 288). From a learning context, motivation refers to a "dynamic state based on the perception that a learner can have of himself and his environment that



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pushes him to a choice of activity, to engage in it and persevere in accomplishing in order to arrive to the goals” (Viau, 1994, p. 21). From a psycho-educational perspective, “motivation to learn has been described as a student’s energy and drive to learn, work effectively to achieve their potential, in addition to the behaviours associated with this energy and drive” (Martin, 2004, p.137). Motivation is considered as one of the most important conditions for learning for students in universities (Osmaa et al., 2015, p.289). Survival at university takes more than just academic and logistical understanding of how things are done at university. Motivation is affected by the strength of one’s belief that the amount of effort a person puts in can affect one’s motivation. Blerkom (2006) adds that if one attributes their successes and their failures to their level of effort, they are more likely to be motivated to work harder to complete a task.

Student motivation to succeed is derived from two sources namely, the internal (intrinsic) and the external (extrinsic). According to Ryan and Deci, (2000), to be intrinsically motivated involves doing something inherent and doing something for external outcomes is referred to as extrinsic motivation. Kinicki and Kreitner (2003,) mentions that “intrinsic motivation is linked with inherent needs and accomplishment and this is related to internal tendencies and can affect behaviour without need for using any external rewards” (p.42). Intrinsic motivation occurs when students’ complete tasks which focus on their inner attributes and has been linked to possession of autonomy, a desired and expected outcome of university (Cunningham, 2013). Autonomous students have high intrinsic motivation, personal control of their own decisions, and accountability for their own actions. Lynch (2006) and Petersen et al., (2009) reported a positive link between intrinsic motivation and adjustment. Moreover, Baker (2004) showed that low levels of motivation among students is related to poorer adjustment to university. Extrinsic motivation can be defined as when “an activity is done in order to attain some separable outcome” (p.190). According to Amabile (1993) extrinsic motivation is “related to attaining or meeting some exterior goals. It is realized that from a micro-level perspective on participation in education, a person’s motivation is crucial for choosing from the potential range of learning opportunities” (p. 185). Vanthournout et al. (2012) add that “students who are autonomously motivated for learning engage in learning behaviour out of feelings of choice or volition. Underlying motives range from personal interest or perceptions of value or relevance” (p. 2). Alternately, Willcoxson et al., (2011) indicated that “the opposite of academic self-efficacy, lack of academic confidence, caused students to give up their studies” (p. 32).

In South Africa, there are 11 traditional public universities, of which five are universities of technology, and the remaining six comprise of comprehensive universities. MacGregor, (2007) reported that in the year 2007, 40% of South African students drop-out of university in their first year. Moodley and Singh (2015), add that more than 30% of first-year students risk dropping out of universities in South Africa in their first semester without passing any course. Most recently, Bladergroen (2021), reiterate that most first-year students from previously disadvantaged groups are likely to drop out of universities in South Africa. Another recent study by Bayaga, et al. (2022) confirm that there are high attrition rates among first-year students in South African universities due to the varied challenges and responsibilities in the new learning environment. Moreover, in terms of distribution of university students on the bases of socio-economic status, the Black Africans comprised the largest proportion of students with low socio-economic status. The research further indicates that while 73% of Black students were from low-income families, only 12% of white students were and, conversely, only 9% of Black but 47% of white students were from families with high incomes. At the University of the Witwatersrand, the 2018 Annual Report (University of the Witwatersrand, 2018) indicates that there were 39 953, Black students - which includes African, Chinese, Indians and Coloureds<sup>1</sup> – making up 82.94% of the student community. In terms of gender distribution of students at the selected public university, the female students make up proportion of 54.64%.

In the South Africa the introduction of Outcomes-Based Education (OBE), as well as policy and curricular changes at the South African Further Education and Training (FET) level, have further changed the higher education landscape (Wilmot, 2005). South African universities have reported that first-year students face numerous adjustment challenges which impact negatively on their completion rates (Subotzky, 2003). Cleyle and Philpott (2012) add that factors such as institutional support structures could be instrumental in supporting student engagement and success. Straus and Volkwein (2002) and Lourens and Smit (2003) suggest that it remains critical for researchers to understand the unique combination of factors contributing to student performance so that the lecturers could utilize these identified motivational contributors to learn. Most studies in South Africa have focused on challenges facing first-year students at universities, but very little has been done to analyse motivational factors influencing first-year students to succeed. This is the research gap that the present study filled.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that this research centres on is motivation theories. There are two different types of motivation theories, namely content and process theories. Content theories of motivation are also called needs theories and are the initial theories of motivation which focus on what motivates human behaviour. Content theories of motivation focus on internal

<sup>1</sup> In South Africa “Coloured” refers to a person of mixed European (“white”) and African (“black”) or Asian ancestry.

factors that energise and direct individuals working behaviour (Lynne, 2012). These theories attempt to identify what the needs of individuals are and make a link between those needs and the motivation to fulfil those needs. Process theories on the other hand are concerned with *how* motivation occurs and focus on the cognitive process (Parijat & Bagga, 2014) that influence individuals' motivation. This study will include Existence, Relatedness and Growth (ERG) theory that was proposed by Alderfer in 1969 as the content theory and Vroom's expectancy theory proposed in 1964 as the process theory to elaborate on which motivational factors have driven first-year students to remain focused and succeed during the first six weeks at university. We have opted to use both content and process theories as content theories alone are not able to entirely explain what motivates and demotivates first-year students to succeed at university.

The ERG theory is based on the work of Maslow (Chang & Yuan, 2008). Alderfer's ERG theory focuses on the need for existence, relatedness and growth and can be regarded as an extension of Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs (Mangi et al., 2015). The ERG theory focuses on individual needs motivation (Snow, 2019) and is concerned with factors that contribute to individuals' behaviour (Caulton, 2012). In addition, the ERG theory differs from Maslow's theory in three other ways:

- (1) it allows different levels to be pursued simultaneously; (2) it allows the order of needs to be different for different people; and, (3) when the highest level of needs remain unfulfilled, a person may regress to a lower level of needs that are relatively easier to satisfy. (Chang & Yuan, 2008, p. 46)

The three needs of the ERG theory, namely existence, relatedness and growth needs will be explained further.

*Existence needs* include the desire for physiological and material well-being which are similar to Maslow's physiological and safety need categories (Mangi et al., 2015). For this study, existence needs are linked to students' home backgrounds and their aspiration to change others' lives. *Relatedness needs* include the desire to satisfy interpersonal relationships and includes the need for a sense of security, belonging and respect (Yang et al., 2011). For this study, relatedness needs would include students' relationships with teachers at school, lecturers and peers at university and their academic accomplishments. *Growth needs* include the desire for continued personal growth and development. In addition, growth needs involve the need for self-esteem and self-actualization (Yang et al., 2011). For this study, growth needs will refer to aspects linked to students' personal growth and development as well as academic success. The ERG Theory was applicable in this research because it has three key aspects the existence, relatedness and growth needs which when fulfilled, would enhance success among first-year students at universities.

Vroom's expectancy theory considers motivation in a more comprehensive and realistic manner (Parijat & Bagga, 2014). This theory focuses on how people make choices from the various available actions at their disposal. There are three components of expectancy theory namely valence, expectancy and instrumentality. Vroom (1964) defined *valence* as "affective orientations toward particular outcomes" adding that "an outcome is positively valent when the person prefers attaining it to not attaining it" and "an outcome has a valence of zero when the person is indifferent to attaining or not attaining it, and it is negatively valent when he prefers not attaining it to attaining it" (p. 15). In this study valence was linked to students' responses where students value the rewards that result from success. *Expectancy* is defined as a momentary belief that is followed by a particular outcome: "Expectancy is a person's estimation of the probability that effort will lead to successful performance" (Lee, 2007, p.789). For this study expectancy will be refer to examples of students' feedback that indicate that hard work will lead to better academic results. *Instrumentality* is viewed as the perception of individuals whether they would receive what they desire, even if it has been promised by the leader (Lee, 2007). In other words, instrumentality refers to the usefulness, or value, of the outcome. In this study, instrumentality meant responses from first-year students that indicated the association between good academic results and entry into university.

## Literature Review

Previous studies on factors motivating first-year students in the South African university context has received little attention. On intrinsic factors, Lee et al. (2014) reported students' ability to succeed in academic tasks is influenced by their individual interests and self-regulation strategies. Another intrinsic factor reported by Bembenuy and Karabenick (2004) indicated that motivation to achieve in academic tasks is dependent on their ability to delay gratification and the use of self-regulation learning strategies. Lee et al. (2014) reported that students' expectancy which includes self-efficacy, such as whether students believe they are capable of successfully completing a school task, is an important motivating factor. The study reported that students' ability to succeed in handling challenging academic tasks and resilience during adverse periods is affected by their self-efficacy.

Value and expectancy components influence motivational beliefs among first-year students. For example, Schunk, (1996) argued that students' motivation is an outcome of how much they want reward, the assessment that the likelihood that the

effort leads to expected performance and the belief that the performance would lead to reward. In another study, Babyuk et al. (2019) argue that students' desire to achieve in the academic tasks in educational institutions is influenced by their exposure to real learning environments, desire for deep knowledge, individual interests and intellectual satisfaction. Kahu et al. (2017) showed that students' motivation to succeed at university is influenced by the situational interest, cognitive engagement students' emotions, self-efficacy, and their sense of belonging.

Extrinsic factors motivate students to learn. Koch, et al., (2017) showed that academic motivations of students' is dependent on their level of attainment of basic psychological needs such as needs for competence, autonomy, relatedness and academic engagement. It has also been reported that a higher degree of teacher influence and proximity corresponds to better student outcomes (Opdenakker et al. 2012). Another study by Hassel and Ridout (2018) argue that students' knowledge of career interests in the academic and vocational aspects may influence their ability to succeed in transitioning from high school to university education.

Another motivational factor that has been documented is the reward expectations. For example, Hidi (2016) indicated that the brain responds to reward expectations and deliveries, and to their withdrawal. Rewards and reward cues clearly enhance awareness, energize and improve behaviour and memory. Similarly, Murayama and Kuhbandner (2011), argue that students' memory performance of academic tasks in universities is influenced by the monetary rewards that is presented appropriately. Studies also reported that there are teacher related factors which influence students' motivations to succeed in their education. For example, Peng and Zhang (2019) indicate that students' motivation levels are dependent on orientation levels, their absorptive capacity, prior knowledge and learning outcomes teachers' effort to transfer knowledge to them.

In South Africa, Pirithiraj (2017) reported that factors such as desire for achievement, development and advancement influence students' motivation to succeed in their academic journeys in educational institutions. Hill (2013) reported that there are varied motivations for attending university across "autonomous motivation (for knowledge, accomplishment, and stimulation), controlled motivation (to demonstrate intelligence and/or later financial reward), and amotivation (are unsure or do not know)" (p. 244). Martin and Dowson (2009) reported students' desire and motivation to achieve in academic tasks in educational institutions is influenced by the connectedness of the academic, social, academic and affective dimensions of the self. Moreover, Eren (2012) argues that extrinsic factor such as teachers' efficacy influences students' motivations to become future teachers.

## Methods

### *Research Design*

The present study explored the motivational factors that influence first-year students to succeed. The main research question of this study was stated as follows:

*Which motivational factors influence first-year students to succeed at university?*

This study made use of a phenomenological qualitative research design method to understand, interpret and describe the motivational factors that influence first-year students to succeed. A qualitative research design was the most suitable methodology to gather a rich description of participants' views because it does not privilege one method or discipline over another (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In addition, this method allowed for a deeper understanding of factors and underlying reasons that participants indicated would, and later did, impact on their motivation to succeed at university. We used a phenomenological approach as this allowed us to "[describe] the meaning of the lived experiences" (Fouché & Schurink, 2011, p. 316) and to "[capture] the essence of the experience as perceived by the participants" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 346). The use of a phenomenological approach allowed us to "bracket ... all prejudgements and [collect] data on how individuals make sense out of a particular experience or situation" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 24). Each participants' experience is relative in nature and a phenomenological approach assisted us in capturing the complexities of their experiences.

### *Research Participants*

Participants at the University of the Witwatersrand were purposively selected from the 2020 first year Bachelor of Education cohort. All students who were registered for the Education 1 course, which is a compulsory course for all first-year students, were invited to participate in this research study. There were 580 students registered for the course. Consent was obtained from 312 first-year students to include their responses to the survey questions in this research. Permission to conduct this research was given by the University's ethics committee. Participants were made aware that their involvement in this project was voluntary, and that withdrawal from the project would have no consequences.

### ***Instruments***

This study did not use the typical long interviews with participants that are usually associated with a phenomenological research design because the number of participants and consequently, we used an opened-ended survey. Participants were asked to submit responses (via a specially created Gmail address) to the following questions during their first week of lectures of their Education I course. There was no limit placed on the length of participants' responses. Three hundred and twelve (312) first-year students provided responses to these two questions:

1. *What motivated you to learn at school?*
2. *What will motivate you to learn at university?*

At the end of the first academic lecture block, which was six weeks long, participants were again invited to answer the following question and submit their responses. One hundred and eighty-one (181) first-year students provided responses to this question:

1. *What has kept you motivated to succeed at university?*

We claim our findings to be valid because of the number of shorter responses we received from a larger group of the population as compared to using in-depth interviews from a selected few. We gave all the research participants the same set of questions to answer at the same time (in the first week of class, and in the sixth week of class) to ensure reliability of the findings.

We acknowledge that a perceived limitation of a phenomenological approach is the lack of a theoretical or conceptual framework being presupposed in the research design (Rahman, 2017). This could lead to challenges with data analysis. We viewed this as a positive aspect and analysed the data inductively and deductively using the theoretical frameworks of this study to develop relevant and useful categories and sub-categories which adequately describe this data set.

### ***Tools and Procedures of Analysis***

We wanted to make a link between external and internal motivational factors and the criteria indicated in Alderfer's ERG theory (1969) and Vroom's (1964) theories because we were interested in both the *what* and *how* aspects of participants motivations. We regarded the *what* aspect as internal motivating criteria and the *'how'* as external motivating criteria. We found that because Vroom's (1964) theory focuses on the process dimensions of motivation it dealt more with the internal factors that drive motivation. Even though Alderfer's ERG theory (1969) is more needs-based we felt that there were some criteria of this theory that we regarded as internal motivational factors and others as external motivational factors. We considered the aspect of existence and relatedness needs in Alderfer's ERG theory (1969) as needs that are driven by external factors, whereas the aspect of growth needs in Alderfer's ERG theory (1969) was viewed as aspects that are driven by internal motivating factors.

We started by using the broader categories of internal and external motivation to categorise the data according to the focus of the response, or what the response was about. We then looked at each response and decided which specific aspects of Alderfer's ERG (1969) and Vroom's (1964) theories it deals with. At this point, we realised that our analysis was too general, and this led us to a second level of refinement which focused on specific aspects under each broader category of each theory. We looked at each response from participants under the various aspects of the theory. The various foci under each category of the theories were deduced from the data itself by noting common views and experiences expressed by participants (see Table 1). We found that because of the length and depth of the responses we were able to allocate some responses to more than one category, hence the numeric values of the findings do not add up to the number of participants and the finding are not presented in numeric form but instead in percentages.

**Table 1**

*Table Showing Differing Levels of Motivational Theories*

Overall focus criteria	Focus of response linked to theoretical framework	Indicator	Example
<b>External motivating factors</b>	Existence needs (Alderfer – ERG Theory)	Response concerned with meeting basic material needs in order to achieve physiological and material well-being	My background motivated me: I do not want to live in poverty for the rest of my life and I believe education is the pathway that leads out of poverty.
	Relatedness needs (Alderfer – ERG Theory)	Response concerned with personal experience and opinion that emphasised or downplayed the influence of significant relationships (be with family, peers or superiors) and the desire to satisfy the desires these interpersonal relationships.	I do not want to disappoint the people who are expecting me to get the qualification so that will be my motivation to learn and study very hard for my teaching course.
<b>Internal motivating factors</b>	Expectancy (Vroom’s theory)	Responses concerned with the belief that more effort will result in success. If they work harder, it will result in better performance.	Seeing that I am a step closer to reaching my goal and getting my degree will motivate me to study hard and to always aim for the best.
	Growth needs (Alderfer – ERG Theory)	Responses concerned with the possession of, or lacking knowledge for self-development, personal growth and advancement.	I always motivated myself to learn at school because I knew exactly where I wanted to be in life. I also knew what it would take for me to get there.
	Instrumentality (Vroom’s theory)	Responses concerned with the belief that there is a connection between activity and goal. If you get good results in grade 12 you will be able to go to university.	I wanted to pass my Matric with good results, so that I can be able to go to the university of my choice

## Results

The results are tabulated and presented thematically as indicated below (Table 2).

**Table 2***Results from the Data Analysis*

Focus of participant responses			Motivation at high school	Motivation at university	
				During week 1 at university	After six weeks at university
External motivating factors <sup>2</sup>			70%	59%	70%
Internal motivating factors <sup>3</sup>			30%	41%	30%
External motivating factors <sup>4</sup>	Existence Needs	Underprivileged family backgrounds	29%	20%	18%
		The aspiration to change lives and help others	-	7%	9%
	Relatedness needs	Support and encouragement	42%	43%	36%
		Making others proud by setting a good example	30%	12%	16%
		Accomplishments	10%	6%	7%
Internal motivating factors <sup>5</sup>	Growth needs	Personal growth and development	45%	44%	16%
		Academic success	-	25%	41%
	Expectancy	Hard work will result in better academic results	6%	4%	-
	Instrumentality	Good academic results will ensure university entry	19%	-	-

Overall, with regards to factors that have motivated success, this cohort of first-year students were more motivated by external factors than internal factors at all three points of the data collection. The percentage split between internal and external motivating factors saw external factors as dominating the motivation of participants. At high school, participants reported external motivating factors as being more than twice (70%) as influential as compared to internal factors (30%). In week 1 of university participants showed a level of agency, even though external motivating factors (59%) remained dominant, more participants were optimistic that they would be internally motivated (41%). Interestingly, at week 6 that optimism had diminished, and participants reverted to the motivation drivers when in high school. What this indicated to us is that during the first week at university participants had gone through various adaptations to acclimatise to their new learning context. After six weeks at university, once they had become more familiar with their new learning context, they resorted back to relying on the same overarching motivators that they placed value on at high school. We were interested in noting the changes in overall data percentage at different points of the data collection process. As such we opted to group the variances in percentages into categories as this allowed us to focus on accounting for the shifts without over focusing on the numeric changes. Shifts in the data which accounted for 5-10% of the findings were considered significant, 11-15% were considered remarkable, 16-19% were considered substantial, 20-24% were considered extraordinary, and over 25% were considered conspicuous.

We will discuss the findings under existence needs, relatedness needs, growth needs, expectancy and instrumentality. From the data, participants had not indicated any motivational factors that were linked to valence.

### ***Theme 1: Existence Needs***

Participants indicated that coming from underprivileged family backgrounds and the aspiration to change lives and help others were basic external motivating factors that fortified their progress towards success at school and at university.

#### ***Underprivileged family backgrounds***

We noted a significant shift in the importance first-students placed on their family background from high school to when they were at university. This aspect was stated by a third of students as a motivating factor at high school as compared to one fifth of students regarding this aspect as a motivator when they were at university. They had placed much more focus on being motivated to succeed at high school because of their underprivileged background as compared to when they were at university.

<sup>2</sup> Students were motivated by either external or internal motives hence percentages add up to 100.

<sup>3</sup> Students were motivated by either external or internal motives hence percentages add up to 100.

<sup>4</sup> Students indicated more than one external motivating factor hence the percentages do not add up to 100.

<sup>5</sup> Students indicated more than one internal motivating factor hence the percentages do not add up to 100.

First-year students indicated that at high school their “background really motivated [them] to learn at school as [they] had to be the one[s] breaking the chain of poverty.” During their first week they continued to state that their “background will motivate” them because “remembering where [they] coming from” will assist them to focus on “why [they are] studying.” During week 6 they indicated that they “know where [they] come from and ... want to change the situation at home”. Hence, they are “studying” to “live a good life and prosper” and not be limited by “poverty”. For this cohort of students, family background is the pivotal motivating factor for them to success.

### *The aspiration to change lives and help others*

Interestingly participants were not motivated at high school by any aspirations to be effective in the lives of children. In addition, at university less than 10% of students noted this aspect as a motivator once they were at university. During the first week at university, students stated that their “goal is to at least change lives of children who went through the same experience” as them and “transform lives of our youth.” By week 6 their focus changes from just wanting to change lives to wanting to “inspire and to contribute to the success and education of the country” and “make a difference in the world”. The lack of aspiration to change the lives of children at high school could be linked to students either not opting for teaching as their first choice or their lack of understanding or misunderstanding of what teaching entails.

### **Theme 2: Relatedness Needs**

Participants relied on the external support and opinions of family members, peers, teachers, lecturers and university structures to be motivated to succeed. In addition, witnessing the accomplishments of peers and family members also acted as a motivator for first-year students.

### *Support and encouragement*

Receiving support and encouragement from various stakeholders in students’ lives continued to function as an important motivating factor for students. We noted that despite almost half of participants regarding support and encouragement by parents, peers and educators as important at high school and the first week at university, the importance of this factor dropped significantly after being at university for six weeks.

#### Teachers, family and peers

At high school, first-year students were motivated by the “support and courage [that] stemmed from fellow friends, family as well as teachers”. They noted having “inspiring teachers” who “showed true caring for their learners”. In addition, “parents’ expectations and belief in [them] motivated [them] to learn”. During week 1 at university, they were more specific about the kinds of support and encouragement they received from family members and friends. They were motivated by “having family and friends supporting [them] socially, academically and emotionally and encouraging [them] to work very hard to complete [their] degree”. By week 6 some of them remained motivated because “friends keeping [them] motivated and [their] parents support”. We started noting a shift in their responses during week 6 from being reliant on family and lecturers to that of being more motivated by “study group mates and mentors who have positive attitude towards learning”. We interpret these shifts as an indication that many first-year students no longer live at home as they move into university residences. As such, there is a need to rely more on their peer support in the absence of their families. In addition, at university students also have far more access to various peer support groups as this is encouraged at this institution.

#### University structures and lectures

During week 1 at university, first-year students felt that the “motivation and support offered by the institution will also play a very huge role in motivating [them] to learn”. They focused on being motivated because of “lecturers [who] show interest in students and their work” as well as those lecturers who are “helpful” and “support and guide” them by “simplifying the content” for them to understand. By week 6 they noted that what motivated them was “that there are enough resources around [them] and practically getting as much support as [they] can for [their] studies and workload”. As students became more accustomed to the university culture and noted the available resources that were available to them, they started to focus more on using those resources and placed less focus on being reliant on individual. We regard this as positive shift.

### *Making others proud by setting a good example*

Making parents proud was regarded as an important motivating factor by a third of students whilst they were at high school. We noted a shift in this factor as a motivator when students started university, with a slight increase (4%) after six weeks at university.

#### Making parents proud

At high school participants noted that their “main form of motivation was always making [their] parents proud. When [they] show[ed] them [their] marks, the smile on their faces was enough to make [them] want to continue working as hard as [they]



always did". During their first week at university participants' focus moved from making their parent proud to "not wanting to disappoint [their] family". By week 6 students focused on making their parents proud as "it has always been [their parents] dream to see [them] succeed in life". We note that students need to make their parents proud is strongly linked to their family backgrounds which for many are underprivileged context.

#### Being a role model

Setting "an example for my younger siblings" is what motivated first years to succeed at high school. During week 1 at university their focus moved to changing the "lives of children who went through the same experiences" as they did. By week 6 at university, students once more focused on "being a good role model to younger brothers and younger sisters". The backgrounds of this cohort of students played a role in their desire to act as role models to those around them.

#### *Accomplishments*

A tenth of the participants viewed their accomplishments as a motivating factor. Participants viewed this factor as less important after being at university for six weeks. At high school participants were motivated by acquiring a "matric certificate." In week 1 at university, they were focused simply on "succeeding" at university. By week 6 they became more focused on getting "a degree so that [they] can be good teachers". Interestingly participants were not just focused on their own achievements but were also motivated by seeing others close to them succeed.

#### Seeing peers and family members graduate and succeed

At high school participants were motivated by having "siblings at universities" as they believed it would also be possible for them to attend university. During week 1 at university participants stated that "seniors motivate [them] because [they] also want to graduate like them ... and go to the world of work". By week 6 participants noted that "hearing stories of postgraduates who have failed but never gave up and seeing other students doing exceptionally in their studies" motivated them to succeed. Interestingly, being at university has allowed participants to broaden their scope of what is possible as they became exposed to students from similar or different background.

### ***Theme 3: Growth Needs***

Participants were internally motivated at school and university by their need for personal growth and development as well as academic success.

#### *Personal growth and development*

We noted a conspicuous shift in the importance of personal growth and development as a motivating factor. At high school and during the first week at university this factor was considered important by almost half of the participants. After six weeks at university, we noted a conspicuous drop in the importance of this factor for motivating students. At high school participants noted that they were motivated by "success" as that would enable them to "have a bright future" and "do whatever [they] wanted to." During the first week they were motivated by their ability to have made it "through the hard road." By week 6 personal growth and development was equated to "getting the best marks".

#### The aspiration to pass grade 12 and get a degree

At high school participants "wanted to obtain the National Senior Certificate (Matric Certificate)" as this allow them to "get to varsity then get a degree and be employable". During week 1 and 6 at university they focused on "getting a degree". We view this as a natural shift in priorities and a sequential way of approaching their academic journey.

#### Becoming a competent and inspirational teacher

At high school participants were motivated to become a "better teacher compared to the ones [they] had" at school. Their focus shifted in week one at university to becoming "visionary teacher[s]". By week six they noted a "deep desire to become a teacher has kept [them] motivated". These accounts indicate that students are starting to see their chosen profession in a holistic manner as they become exposed to academic texts on teaching.

#### *Academic success*

Academic growth was not viewed as a factor that motivated students in high school. Interestingly we noted a substantial increase in the importance placed on this factor from week 1 to week 6 at university. Academic success was linked to participants' "yearning and urge to do well" academically.

#### Fear of failure

At high school their “biggest fear was failing”. During week 1 at university, they noted that they “don’t want to fail because [they] never experienced a fail before”. By week 6 their “fear of failing and the hunger to succeed” increased. Fear of failure is a natural response especially for students who link success to making a difference to the background that they come from.

#### Being goal orientated and self-motivated

At high school participants were motivated to attend “one of the best universities in the country”. In week 1 they noted that being at university meant that they were “a step closer to reaching my goal and getting a degree”. By week 6 participants noted that they “have gotten rid of the idea that [they] will never get the hang of things around the university both academically and socially” as they are “capable of achieving [their] goal” of getting a degree and becoming a teacher. As students became more immersed in the university culture we noted an increased sense of confidence in them.

#### **Theme 4: Expectancy**

Participants were internally driven by their desire to achieve good academic results both at school and university. They believed that hard work and dedication will yield better academic results.

#### *Hard work will result in better academic results*

Participants placed the least amount of value on the relationship between hard work and academic success. Interestingly this factor was not mentioned at all after participants were at university for six weeks. At high school participants noted that they “had a vision of everything [they] wanted to be and [they] knew that [they] can only achieve that through hard work and dedication.” In addition, participants noted that “failing to meet [their] own target broke [them] but also gave [them] the reason to burn the midnight oil”. During week 1 participants were motivated by “seeing that [they are] a step closer to reaching [their] goal and getting a degree will motivate [them] to study hard and to always aim for the best”. These participants view getting a degree as the ultimate recognition of success.

#### **Theme 5: Instrumentality**

At school level participants were motivated by their need to get into university and believed that attaining good academic results will ensure them entry into university. Participants have not stated any aspects that relate to the usefulness of attaining a teaching degree in week one or week six. Their responses focused more on their need for growth and personal improvement, as stated in theme 3.

#### *Good academic results will ensure university entry*

The only factor under the category of instrumentality noted by participants, as a factor at high school, was that of the correlation between good academic results and acceptance into university. No other factors under this category were noted when students were at university.

### **Discussion**

The findings indicated that there are existence needs among students which motivated them to succeed at university, as some of them were from underprivileged family backgrounds while others were motivated to learn by the aspiration to change lives and help others. This finding supports Bembenutty and Karabenick (2004) who indicated learners’ motivations levels is positively related to their capability in delaying gratifications. Similarly, Lee et al. (2014) agree that self-related beliefs and internal motivation levels of learners are leading factors in the motivation of first-year students. Moreover, they argue that individual interest is “not directly related to achievement, but through the reported use of self-regulation strategies” (p. 87).

Relatedness needs are a motivating factor for success among first-year students. Thus, some students got support and encouragement from teachers, family and peers, while others were motivated as the result of supportive university structures and lectures. The findings indicated that some students reported to be motivated to be role models to other siblings in the family and setting best examples to parents. Other students reported that they are motivated by seeing others close to them succeed. This finding supports Koch, et al. (2017) which showed that academic motivations of students is strongly affected by their attainment of basic psychological needs. Moreover, Martin and Dowson (2009) argue that the motivation of students to succeed is determined by their interconnectedness of the social, affective and academic dimensions of the self. In addition, Eren (2012) argues that students’ motivations of becoming future teachers is greatly influenced by their previous achievement in high schools as an extrinsic factor. The studies by Hill (2013) and Pirthiraj, (2017), both agree that the desire for advancement, achievement, and development are the crucial factors which motivate students to succeed to reach their fulfilment levels.

The findings also indicated that growth needs were a motivating factor for success. First-year students reported motivation to learn at university as a need for personal growth and development, such as becoming a competent and inspirational teacher and for academic success due to fear of failure. Similarly, Kahu et al. (2017) showed the students' successful academic engagement, learning and academic outcomes in universities is influenced their situational interests. Moreover, the motivations of students to succeed in their academic journeys is also influenced by their perceived relevance of the learning task, students' emotions, self-efficacy, and their sense of belonging, interests, teaching environment, and student engagement. Hassel and Ridout (2018) indicated that students at universities are motivated in their academic and vocational prospects by their internal and independent beliefs. Furthermore, this study reported that students' successful transition to university from high school is dependent on their knowledge of future career goals.

Additionally, students believed that hard work and dedication will yield better academic results and that students were motivated by their need to get into university. This finding concurs with Schunk (1996) who reported that the motivations of students to perform academic tasks is determined by expectancy and value components of their internal beliefs. Similarly, Babyuk et al. (2019) argue that motivations to acquire knowledge in schools and colleges is dependent on the students' exposure to real learning motives initiatives, the desire for good grades and finally intellectual satisfaction. Moreover, Hidi (2016) indicated that student motivations to learn, memory of learnt tasks, attention, cognitive behaviour and energized behaviour to learn is greatly affected by the level of rewards available to them. Murayama and Kuhbandner (2011) also opined that memory performance of students in educational institutions is dependent on the monetary rewards that is available to them. On the contrary, Peng and Zhang, (2019) argued that the students' learning outcomes and retention capacity of learnt material is dependent on the extent to which the teacher scaffolds the knowledge taught.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The study had some limitations in that the data obtained were from one public university in South Africa, which is not indicative of all South African institutions. Further investigations could be carried out in other public universities and on institution-related factors influencing success among first-year students. Future studies could also focus on comparative study between private and public universities.

### **Recommendations and Conclusion**

The study examined motivational factors for success for first-year students pursuing Bachelor of Education degree at a selected public university in South Africa. The qualitative findings indicated both internal and external motivator factors for success among students. The findings of this study are significant and would be useful for senior managers and university management as it will assist to inform policy for the development of future orientation programmes for first-year students. By implication, a dean of students, for example, could develop guidance and counselling services aimed at enhancing the internal motivation of students. Moreover, management should encourage staff to provide activities for motivation for first-year students. University management could provide orientation programmes to students which are designed to inspire and lift internal motivation levels. These research findings indicated that some students were internally motivated to succeed at university despite being from underprivileged family backgrounds. The study also recommends that university management should develop reward systems for first-year students including promoting students' success to lift external motivation and providing academic rewards for success to lift external motivation.

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