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Learning to Lead Themselves: Factors that Shape First-Year Students' Self-Directed Learning

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Abstract

First-year students are often unprepared to shift from structured teacher-centred learning within the school environment to independent university learning. Self-directed learning (SDL) is a significant factor that can contribute to a positive transition to higher education. This study explores the factors influencing first-year students' academic achievements and setbacks as they navigate self-directed learning during their first six weeks at university. Tinto's (1988) Model of Transitioning is the theoretical lens and analytical tool used. One hundred and fifty-eight first-year students were purposively selected. Data were collected using open ended questionnaires. Responses were categorised by means of an emergent and a priori thematic analysis. The overall findings indicate that participants identified social, psychological and academic factors that positively influenced their ability to self-direct their learning. Participants highlighted determination as the primary positive factor and fear as the primary barrier that impacted their ability to self-direct their learning during their transition to university. The study recommends that university management and academic staff should prioritise psychological support and social connections in the development of first-year teaching and learning activities to enhance students' ability to self-direct their learning.

***Keywords**:* Self-directed learning; psychological factors; social factors; academic factors; first-year students.

Introduction

For first-year students, the transition to university involves moving from a highly structured teacher-centred schooling context to a university context that requires relatively independent learning. This often requires students to adopt learning practices for which they may be underprepared. We know that first-year students encounter numerous challenges that are multi-causal in nature as they transition to higher education. These challenges can be associated to personal circumstances and problems, funding concerns, inappropriate course selection, inadequate pre-university education, time management and workload (Brooker et al., 2017; Letseka et al., 2010; Ramrathan, 2013). In addition, higher education institutions are increasingly requiring students to function independently and be able to take responsibility for planning, monitoring and evaluating their own learning (Broadbent & de Barba, 2023). University students are expected to manage learning tasks beyond formal contact time, independently navigate ever-changing digital learning environments and engage meaningfully with complex academic content. These expectations are particularly salient in the first year of study. Higher education institutions expect that first-year students can take ownership of their own learning, based on their school results, yet many students are still developing the confidence, skills and dispositions associated with self-directing their own learning (Morris-Eyton & Pretorius, 2023).

The greater reliance on learning management systems, reduced face-to-face contact and increased use of asynchronous learning materials place greater demand on students to self-direct their learning (Eluemuno et al., 2025). For first-year students, these demands intersect with the broader challenges of social integration (Townsend & Wilson, 2009), academic adjustment

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(Hepworth et al., 2018) and emotional well-being (Yıldız, et al., 2021). As such, SDL cannot be understood solely as an individual cognitive skill but instead as a skill that is situated within the broader learning context.

According to Olivier (2021), SDL is a key component through which higher education can contribute to social transformation due to its emphasis on encouraging transformative education. However, framing SDL primarily as an individual responsibility, an assumption embedded in dominant self-regulated learning discourse, risks reproducing a deficit narrative. This perspective overlooks the psychological, social and academic factors that shape the ability to learn independently, despite growing efforts within some higher education contexts to scaffold these abilities (Zimmerman, 2000; Boud & Molloy, 2013).While research on self-directed learning has established the importance of cognitive, motivational and metacognitive processes, there remains limited insight into how contextually situated psychological factors influence students' capacity to self-direct their learning during the transition to university. There is therefore a need for contextually grounded research that investigates the psychological factors that enable or impede students' ability to self-direct their learning.

This paper addresses that need by exploring and discussing the factors that shape first-year students' self-directed learning in higher education institutions. Drawing on first-year student accounts, in a South African university, the study examines factors that influence students' capacity for independent learning. This paper contributes to higher institutional understandings of self-directed learning in the first year, as the transition to university is often accompanied by psychological, social and academic challenges. The study emphasises the need for curriculum designs and teaching practices that attend concurrently to academic rigour, psychological support and social connections, not only to contribute towards first-year students' success, but also to prepare students for lifelong learning beyond university, both in South Africa and internationally.

Literature Review

Defining SDL

SDL is simply defined as "an approach to education where learners take responsibility for their own learning" (Mentz et al., 2019, p. 2). This entails a student-centred approach in which students are active participants in the learning process, taking charge of their own learning rather than relying heavily on instruction from lecturers. At its core, SDL supports the development of students into independent thinkers who can exercise agency and display innovative strategies that can benefit their learning even beyond the educational setting. Elhabashy and Moawad (2024) argue that SDL gives students practical skills to enable them to become problem solvers in different areas of expertise. One can therefore argue that SDL should not be viewed as merely an alternative in response to crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, but as a practice that should be regularly embedded in higher education under normal conditions. du Toit-Brits and van Zyl (2017b) corroborate this understanding, arguing that "boosting the skill of SDL is a vital objective of higher education" (p. 123). By empowering students through SDL, they can be better prepared for life beyond the university, which will require more competencies that involve individual independence and initiative (Charokar & Dulloo, 2022).

SDL Strategies Employed by First-Year Students

Global studies recognise several general strategies for facilitating SDL among first-year students, such as structured goal setting, time management and continuous ongoing metacognitive reflection (Elderson-Van Duin et al., 2023). Hence, the need for SDL empowerment transcends international boundaries; students in every context can benefit from self-directed learning. Due to the availability of modern technological resources in the Global North, it can be expected that SDL is common in developed countries. While this is a reasonable assumption, Douglass and Morris (2014), in their study at a university in the United States, found that students who implemented SDL did so through strategies such as "taking good notes, forming study groups and good time management" (p. 16). These relatively low-cost strategies challenge the assumption that limited resources are a primary barrier to the implementation of SDL. Nonetheless, there is little evidence of SDL in developing countries; for example, Nottidge and Louw (2017) assert that SDL is not well established in West Africa, which they argue is attributable to high costs of implementation, a finding that contrasts with Douglass and Morris's (2014) study. Both perspectives are worth considering because while SDL can be practised without sophisticated technology, there is also an argument that it is better executed in the current, global higher education environment with the use of the latest technology (Curran et al., 2019). In this regard, Mulube and Jooste (2014) argue that SDL assists students to continually adapt to technological development.

Cultural contexts also critically influence SDL adoption; for example, collective learning environments in Asia, often favour collaboration among peers as a route to learning independently rather than as a substitute (Dontham et al., 2025). Comparative examples illustrate that strategies such as goal setting and reflection are universally relevant, but their application and success

depend on design contexts and cultural fit. Thus, SDL strategies at the global level are best understood not as static techniques but as flexible practices shaped by the contexts in which they are implemented.

Meanwhile, in South Africa, first-year SDL support strategies tend to be associated with the larger national imperatives of equity, digital access and higher education transformation. The Council on Higher Education (2022) and the Department of Communications and Digital Technologies (2020) both endorse the view that SDL should be embedded in curricula to promote independent learning, digital literacy and student resilience. South African teacher education programs, for instance, have been experimenting with open educational resources to encourage student learning independently and open access to various learning resources (van den Berg & du Toit-Brits, 2023). Further national research stresses the importance of structured first-year support schemes that provide foundation or extended curriculum programs through which students are given targeted opportunities to develop their SDL skills alongside academic content (Mahlaba, 2020). Most importantly, such programs and initiatives are developed to address systemic inequities that constrain some students' ability to engage in SDL while encouraging students to operate autonomously. Therefore, on the national level, SDL initiatives are associated with both empowerment and redress, thus mirroring the peculiarities of South African higher education. A deficit in these discussions is an engagement with the various factors that impact on first-year students' academic achievements and setbacks to self direct their learning, particularly during the first six weeks at university (Kift & Nelson, 2005).

SDL Challenges Faced by First-Year Students

SDL can be a significant challenge for many students entering higher education given that, ideologically, school environments tend to favour teacher-centred methods of teaching and learning (Sosibo, 2019). These methods position students as largely depending on the educator's expertise and direction in determining what to learn and how to learn it. While increased independence in the long run benefits the student, the adjustment period can be a difficult one.

In relation to the student's learning background, Botha and Potgieter (2024) note that many township schools in South Africa face systemic challenges that lower the quality of education their learners receive. This can have a lasting impact on learners, leading to difficulties excelling and learning independently when they enter the university context. The lack of resources, particularly digital ones, is a major hindrance to SDL advancement in South Africa; thus, Maphalala et al. (2021) argued that for SDL in South African higher education "to be successful it requires internet connectivity and digital facilities to achieve expected goals" (p. 235).

Given that this study is positioned historically within the digital age, and as previously mentioned, that digital technology plays a key role in SDL in this age, it is also crucial to discuss how digital technology can create challenges to students' development of self-directed learning skills. For example, while AI may offer some benefits as an emerging technology, such as assisting students in locating academic sources and paraphrasing their work, excessive reliance on AI tools may limit students' engagement in deeper learning and critical thinking processes (Tian & Zhang, 2026). In this regard, Parsakia (2023) argues that the impact of AI on critical thinking is not entirely negative, as it depends on context and indeed, on how individual students utilise it.

Implication of SDL on First-Year Students

According to Stywayi et al. (2021, p. 196), "people who love to learn do not depend on the classroom, they seek answers for every question they have". This suggests that students who are more motivated are more likely to be self-directed in their learning; therefore, maintaining the interest of students in what they learn is important in encouraging SDL. Likewise, Douglass and Morris (2014) state that SDL involves motivated students being proactive by taking charge of their learning and not overly depending on guidance from instructors. However, this does not negate the fact that many students will encounter challenges in developing their independent learning skills and will therefore need additional support, even while being responsible for their own learning (Wittmann & Olivier, 2021). This may be from their lecturers and peers, and not only about academic difficulties but also other personal issues that may require psychological support. In terms of self-efficacy, students may be hindered by feelings of self-doubt due to a lack of experience with SDL, particularly in their first year of study. Thus, Stywayi et al. (2021) argue that support and collaboration among students should be encouraged to facilitate the sharing of ideas and for students to motivate one another.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that underpins this study is drawn from Tinto's (1988) model of transitioning. Tinto's framework has been extensively used to explore first-year students' expectations and experiences at university. The early stages of higher education can be challenging for students due to a variety of factors. In discussing the complexities of integration into higher education, Tinto (1975) states that students are faced with the challenge of adapting to social and academic spheres. Tinto (1988) notes that students go through various stages as they adapt to the university environment, which include separation, transition, and incorporation.

Separation Phase

Tinto (1988) notes that in going to university, the first stage of the transition is separation from previous social support groups, such as former school peers and, if leaving home, also families. For instance, in the South African context, many students go to universities that are far from their homes and this may cause anxiety as they separate from their families for the first time (Mgqwashu et al., 2020). For some students, this phase will require them to make new friends, develop new peer and social support systems, as well as adapt to their new physical surroundings. It is during this stage that students may encounter various psychosocial factors that can impact their academic achievements and result in setbacks in adjusting to more self-directed learning.

Transition Phase

During the transition phase, school-leaver students may feel torn between the past (high school) and the present (university). This phase requires students to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to interact with members of a new group (Tinto, 1988). In addition, during this phase, students need to learn ways to follow the university's norms, values, and beliefs (Kuh & Love, 2000). The transition stage is not the same for all students, including in the South African context, because of the diversity of lived experiences (Tinto, 1988) and the varying degrees of social capital of first-year students. First-year students therefore face various affordances and challenges that can impact their transition to university. The shift to the transition phase is not clearly sequenced, and every student navigates this stage at their own pace based on their different goals and objectives (Tinto, 1988).

Incorporation Phase

The final stage leads to students' adjustment to and involvement in the university's social and academic communities. New relations with peers, lecturers, and administrative staff are established during this stage, resulting in students feeling more involved at university.

In the context of the current study, it is important to point out that while SDL relates more to their academic life, social aspects still play a part in the students' abilities to self-direct their learning. Each of Tinto's (1988) phases provides an understanding of the factors that impact on first-year students' academic achievements and challenges in developing skills in self-directed learning. The model provides a useful lens for understanding how students' experiences of SDL evolve during the stages of university entry. In this study, Tinto's framework is used not only as an interpretive tool but also as an organising structure for examining how psychological and contextual factors influence SDL across distinct phases of transition.

Research Methods

This study employed a phenomenological qualitative research design to describe first-year students' lived experiences of SDL during the transition into university in the first six weeks of study. Phenomenological research is commonly associated with small, purposively selected samples and in-depth interviews. However, methodological scholarship also recognises that phenomenological principles can be applied more flexibly, particularly when the analytic focus remains on lived experience and meaning-making rather than statistical generalisation (Sundler et al., 2019). In this study, although the broader project included a larger cohort and questionnaire-based components, the phenomenological framing specifically guided the qualitative strand of analysis, which focused on students' narrative accounts of their experiences of SDL.

The central phenomenon under investigation was school-leaver students' experiences of engaging in SDL during the early transition to higher education, with particular focus on the psychological and contextual factors that enable or constrain this process. A qualitative research design was the appropriate methodology to gather a rich description of participants' beliefs as it does not tend to privilege one method or discipline over another (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This method also permits a deeper understanding of the underlying factors that influenced participants' academic success as well as setbacks. In addition, a

phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to "[capture] the essence of the experience as perceived by the participants" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 316). Each participant's experience is relative in nature and a phenomenological approach assisted in capturing the complexities of their experiences. Such complexities were evident in the identification of both shared patterns and individual variations as well as the tensions, contradictions and emotional inconsistencies embedded in participants' narratives.

A weakness of the phenomenological approach is that data processing can be challenging because the design does not assume the existence of any theoretical or conceptual framework (Rahman 2017). However, in the current study, this was deemed a strength rather than a weakness since it allowed the researcher to gain insight by listening to the voices of the very students who are transitioning to university from high school, into what has aided and hindered their ability to self-direct their learning. To ensure reliability, all participants were given the same questions to answer at the same time. As such, the data collection tool was consistent, which is essential for reliability.

The key research question which guided this study was: which factors impact first-year school-leaver students' academic achievements and, also, which factors may result in academic setbacks during self-directed learning?

The population was first-year Bachelor of Education students at an urban South African university. This population was selected out of convenience because the researcher is associated with the university's initial teacher education programme. With permission from the university's ethics committee, 158 students gave consent to participate in the study. Seventy per cent of the participants were female and thirty per cent males. The participants were from various high school contexts. This included forty eight per cent from rural schools, ten per cent from urban schools, six per cent from private schools, two per cent from religious schools, thirty-eight per cent from township schools, and two per cent were home schooled. The researcher ensured that participants were aware that their involvement in this study was entirely voluntary. Furthermore, they could withdraw at any time without any consequences whatsoever, and any identifying information would always be kept confidential.

This study forms part of a broader longitudinal investigation into first-year university students' experiences of SDL and academic adjustment within a teacher education programme. Data were collected through two open-ended questionnaires administered at the beginning of the academic year and again six weeks later. First-year students were asked to email their responses to a specially created Gmail address, to which only the researcher had access. Participants' emailed responses were copied into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. 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 approaches (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Initially, responses were read iteratively to identify recurring psychological, academic and contextual factors influencing students' SDL during their transition to university. Codes were developed inductively from the data to capture these factors. Thereafter, a deductive coding frame was applied using Tinto's (1988) model of transition and established categories of psychological and academic influences, which allowed for structured comparison across transition-related dimensions. Data were then organised into themes representing factors enabling and constraining SDL during transition.

To minimise the influence of personal prejudices and a priori assumptions, the researcher engaged in reflexive bracketing throughout the study. This involved maintaining reflexive notes and analytic memos during data collection and analysis to critically examine prior assumptions and ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' descriptions of their experiences. Themes were derived inductively through repeated engagement with the data to preserve participants' voices and meanings.

This article focusses on data from the second questionnaire which included multiple open-ended questions designed to capture students' reflections after initial exposure to university learning demands. This article examines in depth the data from two of these questions in order to specifically explore students' challenges and strategies related to SDL. The remaining data generated through the other questions (across both questionnaires) are being explored through other studies and articles, allowing for a more focussed and in-depth exploration of each analytic strand.

The two questions within the second questionnaire that are the focus of this study are:

1. Which factors have influenced your ability to self-direct your learning at university during Block 1?
2. Which factors do you believe caused academic setbacks when self-directing your learning during Block 1 at university?

Findings and Discussion

Various factors were named by participants as positive and negative influences on their self-directed learning during the first six weeks of the academic year. Each of the positive and negative factors, as depicted in Table 1, will be discussed in relation to the three stages indicated in Tinto's (1988) Model of Transitioning. Factors that included fewer than five responses were regarded as insignificant.

These include positive factors such as academic flexibility (n = 2), which was relevant to the transition phase, and university support (n = 4), which could be linked to the incorporation phase. Negative factors that were named in fewer than five responses included psychological factors such as emotional issues (n = 4), depression (n = 3) and lack of determination (n = 2), are also situated within the transition phase because they reflect immediate psychological and affective responses to entering an unfamiliar academic environment, rather than longer-term integration or persistence-related issues associated with the incorporation phase.

Table 1

Positive and negative factors indicated by first-year students in relation to Tinto's model of transitioning

Stages of Tinto's (1988) Model of Transitioning	**Psychological, social and academic factors**	**Factors that *positively* influenced first-year students' ability to self-direct their learning**	**Number of responses**	**Psychological, social and academic factors**	**Factors that *negatively* influenced first-year students' ability to self-direct their learning**	**Number of responses**
Separation Phase	Social	Family support	34	Social	Social isolation	7
	Psychological	Fear	7			
Transition Phase	Psychological	Determination	59	Social	Academic setbacks	22
				Psychological	Fear	30
					Anxiety	18
					Avoidance	12
		Self-esteem	10	Social	Time management	12
				Psychological	Low self-esteem	7
					Mental health	6
				Social	Lack of productive social environment	5
Incorporation Phase	Social	Peer support	19	Social	Struggling to adjust to university	19
	Academic	Academic support	14		Lack of resources	6

Separation Phase

In Tinto's (1988) Model of Transitioning, the separation phase is a period in which students detach from their previous environments as they begin to adapt to their new educational context. When asked about factors that impacted their ability to self-direct their learning, this cohort of first-year students noted that family support (n = 34) was a positive factor and that feeling socially isolated (n = 7) and fear (n = 7) were both negative factors that hindered their ability to self-direct their learning.

Family support included "motivation from [their] family" and contact with family, such as through receiving "text" messages, and "parents calling daily". These were regarded as positive factors that enabled them cope with the separation from high school. Regarding social isolation and fear, examples from participants of how these factors impacted negatively included: "not having friends to study with", "lack of social interaction", struggling to make "social connections with other students", fear of "failing" at university, and "the constant fear of not wanting to be excluded" from the university programme.

Transition Phase

Participants noted that determination (n = 59) and self-esteem (n = 10) were positive factors that aided their ability to self-direct their learning during the first six weeks of university. There were also numerous factors cited as ones which negatively impacted their ability to self-direct their learning during this early period at university. These factors included academic setbacks (n = 22 responses), fear (n = 30 responses), anxiety (n = 18), avoidance (n = 12), time management issues (n = 12), low self-esteem (n = 7), mental health (n = 6) and a lack of productive social environment (n = 5).

Participants noted that their strong sense of "determination and focus" which included "persistence", their "desire to do well", and their "will to study" were some of the factors that positively impacted their ability to self-direct their learning as they transitioned to the university context. Participants cited that "setting goals", "seeking help where needed" and "the fact that this is [their] dreams and [they] cannot give up" assisted them in remaining "self-motivated". Determination was associated with "reading constantly", "preparing before attending a lecture" and showing "dedication" to succeed at self-directing their learning during the first six weeks of university. Having "self-confidence", "ambition", "good mental health" and having a "positive self-esteem and confidence" were factors that impacted positively on their self-esteem.

Academic setbacks (n = 22) were cited as a negative factor in which students noted that they received "lots of readings most of which [they] still don't fully understand". Some noted that they had "academic pressures" because there was "too much work" to complete, which forced them to "have to work under pressure" and led them to "struggle to keep up with [their] courses". Of interest is that some participants note that they "lacked study skills", which steered them to "not studying effectively". Fear (n = 30) was a negative factor cited, which included the "fear of failure" as well as "the constant fear of not wanting to be excluded" from the university. Anxiety (n = 18) was another common negative factor indicated, and students noted that "the pressure it was too much" for them to cope with which led to them "feeling overwhelmed having many things to do". Avoidance (n = 12), which included "procrastination" and "laziness", was also cited as a negative factor. Time management issues (n = 12) were also viewed as a challenge because students felt that "assignments were given within a short period of time and [they] struggled to finish" the tasks on time. Some students noted that their low self-esteem (n = 7) was a challenge because they did not "trust [themselves] that much" because they "felt like [they are] not ready for varsity". Mental health (6 responses) affected their ability to self-direct their learning mainly because of a "loss of focus". The lack of a productive social environment (n = 5) provided a challenge because students noted that they had found themselves in either "bad or unusual environment" which included "spending time with my friends going to parks to play now and then" or that they felt a "lack of social support" which made them feel "isolated".

Incorporation Phase

During this phase student indicated that peer support (n = 19) was a positive factor for their success. They valued "making new friends" as this "helped [them] to navigate … around campus and [their] studies". The "social support from friends on campus", the "motivation from friends", as well as "having class representatives and peers that are always willing to help", were cited as positive factors. This cohort of students valued the academic support (n = 14) "from lecturers", "tutors" and the "writing centre" at the university. They note that "attending tutorials and group sessions" provided them with the positive academic support they required.

Negative factors included struggling to adjust to university (n = 19) because of the "high demands" set. Students also noted that "everything being so fast paced and lecturers that speak as if they are speaking in cursive". One student noted that "being an average performing person having to face higher levels of learning" led to "struggling to understand the module and facing difficulties to keep updated". The "lack of advanced knowledge about technological hardware" also presented a challenge for students to self-direct their learning.

Discussion

The overall findings indicate that this cohort of students identified social, psychological and academic factors that positively influenced their ability to self-direct their learning during the first six weeks of the academic year.

Psychological factors such as determination, self-esteem and even fear of failure functioned as enabling factors in students' self-directed learning, although their influence varied across participants. These findings indicate that students drew on internal psychological resources as they navigated the transition to university. Overall determination was viewed as the most significant positive factor that impacted on first-year students ability to self-regulate their learning as they transition to university. This finding is aligned with Douglass and Morris' (2014) view that students' ability to self-direct their learning is largely dependent on their inherent abilities, own mindset, sense of confidence and their self-efficacy (Stywayi et al., 2021). Determination is an important factor for students' success because it would enable students to complete their qualifications (Ajoodha et al., 2020). The positive social factors that influence their ability to self-direct their learning included family support during the separation phase and peer support during the incorporation phase. Family support, which was viewed as a positive factor, is consistent with Tinto's (1988) emphasis on the importance of external support in facilitating students transition to university during the separation phase. In addition, this finding supports previous research (see Wittmann & Olivier, 2021; Stywayi et al., 2021) who note that external support and collaboration benefit first-year students positively as they transition to university. As such, social connections and interactions play a crucial role in first-year students' ability to self-direct their learning during their transition to university. Positive academic factors were cited only in the incorporation phase and this included academic support received. This finding aligns with Tinto's (1988) claim that at this stage, first-year students may have already started developing new social relationships and therefore can feel more positive about the academic community.

Overall, social factors posed the greatest hindrance to participants' ability to self-regulate their own learning. Negative social factors that hindered first-year students' ability to self-direct their learning included social isolation in the separation phase; academic setbacks, time management and the lack of a productive social environment in the transition phase and their lack of resources in the incorporation phase. This finding highlights that this cohort of students needed to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to be able to interact with members in their new context (Tinto, 1988).

However, negative factors like academic setbacks, fear, anxiety, and mental health issues underscore the difficulties of adjustment. This is consistent with Tinto's (1988) view that the transition phase is laden with challenges that can hinder their ability to self-regulate their learning. However, highlighting negative factors like the lack of resources implies that integration into university will continue to be an incomplete process for these students. In the absence of students understanding SDL, which requires students to take responsibility for their own learning (Mentz et al., 2019) and not be reliant on external resources, they are likely to continue facing hurdles in this regard throughout their time at university. Participants note that negative psychological factors like fear, anxiety, avoidance, low self-esteem and mental health challenges, only indicated in the transition phase, hinder their ability to self-regulate their learning. These findings highlight that, within the first week of university, students are at an early stage in developing their capacity to monitor their learning and sustain motivation. SDL appears to be part of an ongoing transition process rather than a fully established competence, with students beginning to reflect on their learning in thoughtful but uneven ways. (du Toit-Brits & van Zyl, 2017a). Accordingly, targeted external support remains important to scaffold this process.

Limitations of the Study

A limitation of the study is that the data was obtained 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 could also focus on a comparative study between private and public universities.

Recommendations and Conclusion

This study examined the positive and negative factors that impacted on first-year students' ability to self-direct their learning during the first six weeks at university. The qualitative findings indicate that participants identified social, psychological as well as academic factors that positively influenced their ability to self-direct their learning during Tinto's (1988) phases of transitioning. Participants regarded determination as the most significant positive factor and fear as the most significant negative factor influencing their ability to self-regulate their learning as they transitioned to university.

This highlights the importance of interventions that both harness students' determination, through goal setting and independent learning supportive practices, and mitigate debilitating forms of fear by fostering psychologically safe learning environments. Overall, psychological factors were found to influence participants' self-regulation both positively and negatively. However, this influence was not uniform across the transition phases. Social support, especially from family in the initial phase and from peers and academic structures in later phases, emerged as particularly salient, whereas psychological factors were more dominant during the middle phase of adjustment.

This pattern suggests a dynamic interplay between internal and external influences, highlighting a valuable avenue for future research to examine how psychological and social factors jointly shape the development of self-regulated learning over time. These findings are significant for the academic and administrative staff members, both locally and internationally, to consider when designing first-year orientation programmes, as well as the teaching and learning programmes for first-year students.

It is therefore recommended from this study that university management and academic staff endeavour to create opportunities for first-year students to be able to engage in more social and academic activities. Given the prominence of psychological factors like determination and fear, targeted support is also necessary. Interventions should aim to strengthen students' determination through structured goal setting, regular formative feedback and opportunities for incremental achievement. Such approaches may enable students to engage more confidently in the process of self-regulated learning during the transition to university.

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