CONFIDENT OR CONFUSED?
A report on first-year student experience in selected modules on campus

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Introduction

It has to be done, nothing can be changed, I need a new brain.
Sou ek weet, het ek lankal probeer om myself daarmee te help. Ek makeer help!
I get confused at times.

Quotes from three different first-year students in three different faculties on campus. Why all the confusion? What can lecturers do to help these students become more confident in their academic abilities?
This poster reports on a study conducted amongst first-year students in six selected first-year modules at Stellenbosch University by means of a questionnaire and focus group interviews. The study provided an insider perspective on what first-year students experience in terms of their preparedness for university study in a particular higher education environment.
The findings confirm that first-year students are a heterogeneous population with diverse academic needs. There are, however, a number of valuable insights which could help lecturers and the institution as a whole to make the higher education environment more accessible to first-year students. The paper provides a student perspective on how the transition into higher education can be made successfully by means of curricular, lecturing and institutional input.

Methodology

An interpretive study was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate first-year students' perceptions of their own preparedness to succeed in a particular module. Six modules were purposefully selected in five faculties (Faculties of Arts, Arts, and Social Sciences, Economic and Management Sciences, Engineering, Law, and Science) on the basis of the strategic position of the particular modules in the first-year programmes offered by the various faculties.
A questionnaire (in both English and Afrikaans) was developed for this purpose and pilot tested with BEd first-year students. The questionnaire was administered to all students attending class at dates pre-arranged with the lecturers of the selected modules. The quantitative data were scanned in and analysed in *Microsoft Excel*. The qualitative data were analysed using *Atlas.ti* software by means of content analysis.
The questionnaire was followed by focus group interviews that were conducted with students in each of the selected modules. The focus groups provided the opportunity to gather more in-depth data on first-year students' perceived preparedness for academic success after school.

Results and discussion

A varying response rate was obtained per module, with a minimum response rate of 34.29% of the registered students for the particular module. Figure 1 provides an overview of the response rate per module as a percentage value.
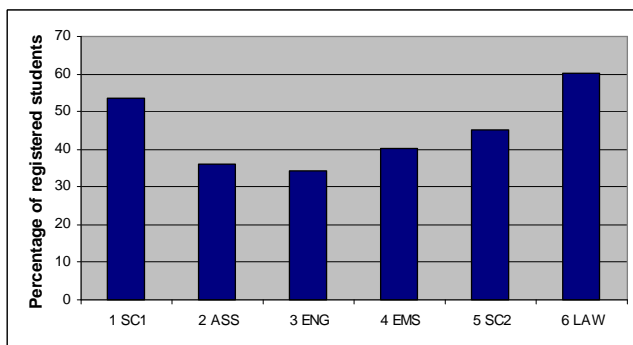

Figure 1. Response rate per module

The respondents were asked how prepared for succeeding in the particular module they perceived themselves to be. Figure 2 provides an overview of the responses per module in percentage values.
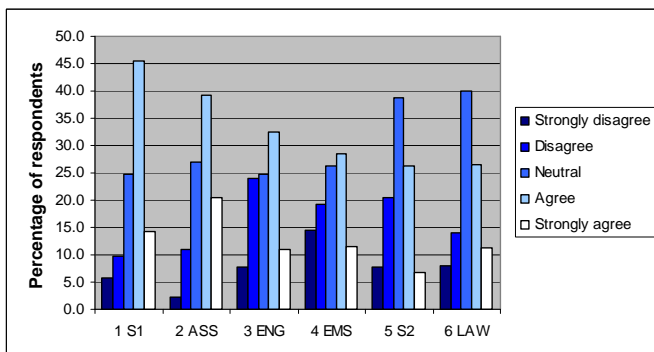

Figure 2. Respondents' perceived preparedness to succeed in the particular modules

Respondents were asked how difficult they found the specific module. Figure 3 provides an overview of first-year students' perceived degree of difficulty for the specific module for which they had enrolled.
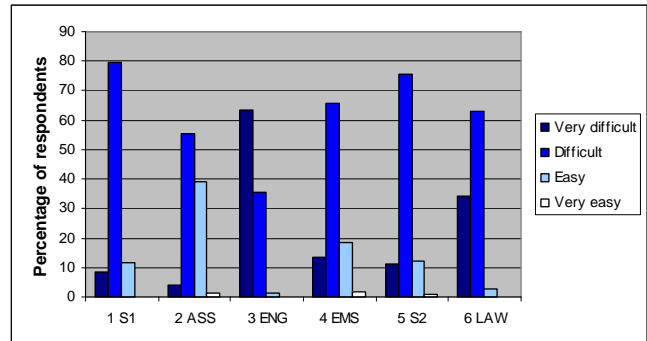

Figure 3. Respondents' perceived difficulty of modules

The open questions in the questionnaire and the focus groups that were conducted in each of the modules provided further insight into first-year students' self-perceived preparedness for university study.
Respondents referred to various school-related aspects that facilitate success in university study. These aspects related mainly to the type of school attended, the quality of teaching they had received at school, and the appropriate choice of school subjects that prepared them for their studies after school. The development of a number of skills were also noted as important contributors to success, including the skilled use of language, listening, reading, and writing. The development of critical thinking, debating, group work, time management, and study skills were also noted. The respondents indicated various aspects of their school education that they perceived as hindrances to their current success. Respondents indicated that they had received more individual attention at school, which was not possible at university. The respondents also perceived a significant difference in the pace and volume of work between the school and university environment. Spoon feeding of curricular content at school made it difficult for them to cope with higher order learning demands at university – where they perceived different expectations and little preparation in terms of assessment. The respondents also indicated that a lack of coherence between school and university curricula and changes in terminology add to the academic stress first-year students experience. Limited or wrong subject choices at school may further hamper their chances on success. Various respondents indicated that they lacked a number of necessary skills in order to succeed in their current studies, including skills in academic and essay writing, spelling and grammar, vocabulary and terminology, oral presentation, as well as study skills.
The most difficult adjustments the respondents found they had to make included the transition from dependence to independence and coping with the freedom of university life in a responsible manner. They found the academic atmosphere to differ substantially from that experienced at school. Respondents noted the absence of individual attention, the perception that nothing is compulsory, the big classes and the lack of preparation for assessment as daunting. An increased workload, long hours and the difference in study methods required were also noted as aspects that required adjustment. Some respondents indicated that they were not used to voicing their own opinion.
First-year students are a heterogeneous population. The results indicate varied levels of preparedness and therefore varied needs in terms of academic input and support.

Conclusion

How can academics help first-year students to be less confused and more confident? The respondents themselves provided valuable suggestions.
Teach with confidence: Respondents indicated that lecturers' enthusiasm, approachability and interaction with students motivates them. An introduction to a module and explicit indications of how it fits into the so-called bigger picture help students in their quest for understanding. Lecturers should also not make assumptions about their students' prior knowledge and skills. The use of appropriate examples, experiments, demonstrations and practical experiences help first-year students grasp academic concepts.
Use technology to your advantage: The current student population are accustomed to a technologically advanced environment. They welcome the use of tools such as WebStudies, email and electronic learning materials.
Student-friendly assessment: Students need to be prepared for assessment. They want to understand how they will be assessed, how marks will be awarded, and they want to receive feedback on their progress.
The first year of university studies need not be a confusing experience – lecturers can help first-year students become confident learners.

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