

**‘Like Playing with Fire Under a Hut’ - You Will Get Burnt If You Do Not Adjust:  
Reflections of Social Work Students on Adjusting to University Life**

**Nkosinathi Sibanyoni<sup>1</sup> and Roshini Pillay**

**Abstract**

High dropout rates in first year and the enculturation into the academic literacies essential in promoting a successful academic adjustment are some of the challenges faced by many students when entering a higher education institution. The study aimed to understand some of the factors that contribute to student adjustment as social work students negotiate the higher education landscape from first to second year. The study explored the views of twelve first-year and seven second-year students utilising a qualitative research design where purposive sampling was used to recruit two focus groups. The results revealed that what both sets of students recognised as beneficial to their academic adjustment were the familiarisation of context, the use of effective time management skills, and positive attitudes. However, university-driven interventions aiming at assisting first year social work students with their academic life, such as the First Year Experience (FYE), were identified as too generic and not able to meet the unique needs of the participants. Recommendations emanating from the study included the development of discipline-specific academic development programmes that encourage social and academic adjustment. Additionally, collaboration between students within professional disciplines and the use of technology-enhanced learning could facilitate student adjustment.

**Keywords:** academic adjustment; Information Communication Technology; First Year Experience; higher education; Social Work.

---

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author: [nkosinathi.sibanyoni@live.com](mailto:nkosinathi.sibanyoni@live.com)

## **Introduction**

Historically, the majority of the population in South Africa was denied parity in access to higher education, but since 1994 there have been dramatic changes to the higher education landscape. Concomitantly, historically white South African universities offering the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree, such as the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) where this study is based, have experienced an influx of English additional-language students from diverse and resource-scarce home and school backgrounds. Although higher education institutions had more than 120 000 first year students enrolled in different study fields in 2002, these large numbers of students entering the gates of higher learning are coupled with a high attrition rate in first year and the fact that only 22% of these students succeed in achieving university success in the regulation time (Letseka and Maile, 2008). There has been little change in this bleak picture eleven years hence as the 2013 report by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) indicates that only one out of four students completes their studies in the regulation time with only 33% of students at contact institutions enrolled for a four year degree completing their studies within a period of five years (CHE, 2013). In addition it is alarming to note that 55% of the students who are re-admitted after exclusion and re-integrated into the higher education community drop out and never finish their studies. Another revelation is that only 5% of black and coloured students achieve success at university within the prescribed period of the degree (CHE, 2013).

The low success rates and the high dropout rates of first and second year students have led to a graduate output that compromises the transformation process of higher education and the country as a whole. Therefore, there is a great need to provide assistance to undergraduate students through well-structured programmes, effective use of pedagogical methods for teaching and learning, and holistic, student-centred support initiatives that will help them in achieving university success.

Much focus has been placed on the students' perceived 'deficiencies' because of various factors, including attending resource-scarce schools, and there has not been, or very little, focus on the programmes established by the higher education institutions to assist these students. A more equal focus on both might reveal that the problem lies not merely at the feet of the students who lack the skills, conceptual background, and language proficiency necessary to succeed in higher education but also with the structures and communities within the institution who are obligated to help these students. Boughey warns that higher education needs to guard against 'hegemony', which refers to dominant ways of thinking, as this type of

thinking could be regarded as ‘common sense’ and ‘will prevent a critical examination and interrogation of the schooling and education system’ (2009: 5) and manner in which students operate within this community. Careful examination of the hegemonic views by stakeholders will allow for the constraints of the current system to be observed and better understood. Whilst individual factors that can result in academic success include intelligence, motivation and aptitude, there is a need to consider the structural factors such as the ways students are taught, assessed and the interventions created to support students in adjusting.

An example of a structural challenge is that Wits is an English medium institution which places many of the black students at a disadvantage as English is an additional language for them (McGhie, 2012). In another study with first year social work students, Collins (2011) found that the English language was recognised as an obstacle towards the adjustment and learning experiences of first year black students. A structural barrier is that, whilst Wits has adopted a Language Policy to help students who struggle to adapt to the university academic requirements due to English being the main and only language of instruction, its language policy has not yet been put into effect as the university awaits assistance and resources from the Ministry of Education (Wits Language Policy, 2003).

Thus one finds that adjusting academically to higher education is complex and a multitude of factors need to be considered beyond just study skills and language to include identity, race, gender, academic socialisation, grammatical competencies, enculturation to discipline specific discourses and types of pedagogy and academic literacies (Boughey, 2000; Lea, 2007; Palmer, Levett-Jones, Smith, and McMillan, 2014). In light of these factors the social work department has created an academic development programme that aims to provide first year students with practical training to understand, evaluate and interpret the different discourses and skills required in the profession.

### **The Journey to University Adjustment**

The adjustment process of undergraduate students within their first year of study is said to be the key to university success (Grayson, 2003). According to Kylo and Chamu (2001) and Ramsay, Barker and Jones (1999), adjustment is a dynamic and interactive process that takes place between the person and the environment and is directed toward an achievement. Although social adjustment is important for first year university students, in this article greater focus will be placed on the academic adjustment process which is associated with

higher grades and success in achieving desired goals, which contributes to the students' academic success (Grayson, 2003; Jean 2010). In achieving adjustment, first-time University students are required to transition to new literacies (Palmer, Lavert-Jones, Smith and McMillan 2014). Therefore, it can be argued that academic literacies play a significant role in the academic adjustment journey of first year students (Pineteh, 2014).

Academic literacy is an intricate and multi-dimensional construct rather than a singular entity; hence it is often called academic literacies (plural) so as to reflect various facets such as practices, contexts, genres, identities and meanings (Lea and Street, 1998). First year students are required to master the literacies expected in the university discourse and be equipped with different cognitive abilities in order to negotiate the power relations, authority and identities in the environment (Pineteh, 2014). Therefore Palmer et al. (2014) suggest a shift from the 'study skills' model to that of academic literacies which comprises three main aspects. (1) An operational focus considering language and grammar competence, (2) the enculturation of students into discipline specific discourses and genres, and (3) An approach called New Literacy Studies (NLS) which focuses on the critical examination of institutional practices, rules and mores and the dominant discourses of the academy. The first two aspects are developed from systemic functional linguistics (SFL) and analysis and critique of text. Successful academic adjustment requires a combination of the SFL and NLS (Palmer et al., 2014) and this highlights the challenges faced within higher education. Nevertheless the shift from the traditional 'study skills' model to a new understanding of academic literacies should not completely conceal the valuable knowledge obtained from understanding how study skills are perceived by students.

Furthermore, consideration should be given to the language and cognitive skills required in higher education which are described by Boughey (2013) drawing on (Cummins, 1980) as Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). BICS is the use of language as it occurs in a context which helps to create or support the meanings being made to communicate about straightforward topics in everyday language whereas CALP requires the use of language in regard to intellectually challenging and 'often abstract subject matter in situations with little or no support for meaning-making other than the linguistic sign system' (Boughey 2013: 2). An example of CALP is reading an academic text to produce an assignment requiring the use of background knowledge to be integrated into the text.

When students enter higher education they struggle with CALP and even BICS as many students are additional language English speakers and first generation university students. Therefore the practice of BICS in English and CALP within their home environment is likely to be missing. Internationally first-generation university students face many similar issues that impede their progress within academia: they graduate at rates much lower than their counterparts and many dropout after the first year (Daniel, 2010). Thus first generation university students are at an additional disadvantage as their family system lacks first-hand knowledge of the university experience, the literacies required and of the system (Dennis, Phinney and Chuateco, 2005). However, in a study by Kylo and Chuma (2011) on Kenyan first generation university students, it was found that students with access to family support characterised by some kind of insight and help based on university experience such as guidance, academic advice and academic talk, were less pressured by the need to succeed at university which allowed them to seek assistance from both the family setting and the university setting. The relevance of these ideas to the University of the Witwatersrand First Year Experience is discussed below.

### **The Wits First Year Experience (FYE)**

The acknowledgement of challenges in academic literacies and transitioning as a barrier to the academic adjustment process has seen a number of universities, such as the University of Johannesburg and Wits, designing First Year Experience (FYE) programmes to assist students with the adjustment process. At Wits the FYE programme began as a pilot in 2009 to improve the academic and social adjustment of students transitioning to higher education. The FYE programme consists of workshops and activities such as mentoring and study skills that are run throughout the year to enhance the knowledge, and skills and provides support for first year students. Some of the programmes offered in 2011 as part of the FYE was a mentoring programme called Junction One, that paired first year students with senior students and the life skills component was called Learn for Life and focused on generic learning and study skills, time management skills, management of examination stress and coping with failure. Another programme, that excluded social work students, was called Starting Smart and was designed to impart skills to students in subjects such as mathematics, chemistry and accounting. The Starting Smart programme included general writing and computer skills vital for students to have in order to complete university work and assignments across faculties. These courses provided general approaches to study and there was no credit for, or

certification of, these courses (First year experience and First year early warning system - Progress, Planning and Evaluative Report, 2011).

One of the challenges experienced by this programme was that attendance at the programme activities decreased as the year progressed which might be attributed to credit bearing subjects taking priority over these workshops (Coopoo, 2012; Wits FYE report, 2011). In addition, the FYE programme at Wits has been fraught with low student attendance as a result of the programme being conducted outside the normal university hours i.e. Saturday sessions (Coopoo, 2012), which can be considered to exclude students who do not reside within the university premises and who require money for transport to attend the programme. Furthermore, the FYE programme has been criticised by first year social work students for hosting general programmes that are not discipline specific. The provision of generic training such as the Learn for Life programme and the Starting Smart programme for subjects like mathematics, accounting and chemistry results in the exclusion of courses like social work that are perceived as not as challenging when compared to courses in engineering and accounting. It can be argued that highly-structured, discipline-specific programmes aiming to assist first year social work students in areas such as casework, group work and community work for social work will have greater relevance. However, contrary findings from the Undergraduate Students Experience Survey (2012) conducted at Wits; suggest that the students sampled self-reported satisfaction with their university experience and the support provided by the university, with only 2% of students who participated in the survey suggesting that the university does nothing to assist struggling students. Nevertheless more needs to be done to assist all students who enter higher education, irrespective of race, as the 2013 CHE report reveals that white students in higher education institutions are also performing poorly with 33% of them dropping out in their first year of study as a result of a lack of academic literacies (CHE, 2013).

In developed countries like Australia, the success of the FYE programmes can be drawn from the early assessments conducted preceding the FYE programmes. Palmer et al. (2014: 67) found that large-scale academic literacy diagnostic assessment when 'embedded and contextualised within a course of study, was an effective means of providing the early feedback and targeted support that many commencing university students need'. Such assessment tools are required in the designing of FYE programmes in order to assess academic literacies that first year students need to be equipped with to address their specific needs, especially undergraduate social work students who are expected to understand

counselling, communication skills, ethics and values when working with individuals, group and communities (Sheafor and Horejsi, 2008). Next, focus will be placed on locating social work training within the South African context.

### **The Theoretical Sculpturing of the Social Work Profession**

The aim of higher education and specifically, social work education, both internationally and within South Africa, is to prepare and support students from diverse backgrounds to achieve academic success and prepare them as global citizens who can take their place in the world of work (Strydom, Basson, and Mentz, 2012). As part of the university adjustment process, students need to adjust to the training programmes that they are exposed to, which will see them successfully passing their studies as student social workers.

However, many social work students experience difficulty in higher education due to factors such as poor schooling resulting in an 'underpreparedness' for higher education, an overreliance on rote learning, a lack of skills and fluency in academic language and the limited use of critical thinking or deep learning which results in plagiarism and descriptive writing instead of critical analysis (CHE, 2010). There has been a continuing and worrying trend, evident since 2000, with studies highlighting the high attrition rates. A study that compared the number of social work students that registered in 2000 and 2001 with students in their fourth year of study in 2004 found only 32% and 23% completed their studies (South Africa Department of Social Development, 2006). While graduation rates in the prescribed period (which is four years for a social work degree) may not be the best indicator of success, it should be noted that of the 60 students who were registered for social work in 2009 at Wits, only 22 students were in the fourth-year class in 2012 (University of the Witwatersrand, 2013). Therefore, it is crucial to look at the university training programme to see the practices, meanings, power relations and social relationships (Palmer, et al., 2014; Pineteh, 2014) presented as a way of assisting social work students with the academic adjustment process.

It is impossible to ignore the context of social problems and challenges, which provide the backdrop of the social work profession. Such connections between the profession and social problems have led to the redesigning of the training and education of social workers so as to be relevant to the history, culture, politics, economy and social circumstances of their country (Wilson and Campbell, 2012). The reflection on social problems and social work training allows university teaching and learning to equip

undergraduate students with necessary academic literacies and professional skills and knowledge, to specifically respond to the social problems (Wilson and Campbell, 2012). The discourses and professional skills relevant to social work include an understanding of the roles of the social worker the values and ethics of professional practice and an understanding of frameworks and theories that shape the planned change process (Sheafor and Horejsi, 2008).

Situated learning can be helpful in assisting social work students develop the literacies required at university. Situated learning can be defined as a co-production of the mind, the social and the physical world in negotiating meanings and constructing understanding through the transformation of knowledge that is context specific (Brown, Collins and Duguid, 1989). As argued in Brown et al., (1989), learning should be embedded in the social and physical space within which it will be used. Furthermore, knowledge and skills should reflect the way the knowledge will be used in real life and includes collaboration and observation. Social work is seen as a practicing profession (Teater, 2011) and students engage in field instruction which is a type of apprenticeship as they spend time at a social work agency and may observe how services are rendered.

Situated Learning theory (Brown, et al., 1989) sees the first year student as a novice seeking apprenticeship (membership) within the wider university community. The first year student needs to obtain membership to more than one community and assimilate into the tribe of tertiary scholars who participate in higher education as well as into professional communities. To gain entrance into the academic community the student needs to acquire general and discipline specific literacy skills in writing and communication. Situated learning can be witnessed in the social work education programme at Wits, during which students are assigned practical work where they are placed at a social service agencies and are expected to counsel clients and render services. The involvement of students in practical work as witnessed in the University of the Witwatersrand's social work training, like any other contact institutions, allows them to learn counselling skills and interventions, knowledge of social phenomena, social conditions and problems and guiding practices and codes of conduct relevant to their profession. As argued in Boughey (2000), for students to become familiar with the university discourse and fit into the required academic roles, they need to observe the university practices and interact with the lecturer, the field instruction supervisor, social workers in practice and other students. Such interaction allows students to transform

their existing knowledge and change their beliefs, meanings and values to correspond to those of the social work profession.

Furthermore, it is argued that through active learning, students gain membership to the academic discourse as they familiarise themselves with academic roles, practices, power relations and become academically knowledgeable about their profession (Boughey, 2000; Lave and Wenger, 1991). This allows undergraduate students to assess and discover their identity since their individuality is not excluded from the process of adjusting to the academic discourse. Such involvement of the 'individual aspect' of the student in the gaining of membership in the discourse can be witnessed in the use of academic literacies.

To lend support to the argument that learning is successfully achieved by doing, (Lave and Wenger, 1991), social constructivist theory states that people learn through being active participants in the construction of new knowledge, by building upon the foundation of previous experience and their own version of reality (Hoover, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). This continuation of knowledge, as explained in Hoover and Vygostky, supports the argument discussed earlier on how the home environment where academic literacies are supported and encouraged, assists students to better assimilate these literacies in higher education institutions (Palmer et al., 2014).

The social constructivist views the construction of knowledge as the process of actively building a mental model of the system learned through values, culture and contextual knowledge to create an understanding of the world (Chi, 2009). The use of social constructivist pedagogy (Vygotsky, 1978) encourages students to be active participants in knowledge creation within the social environment they inhabit. Moreover, educators are responsible for constructing a learning environment that enables students to make meanings (Teater, 2011).

The individual use of study skills within the learning process promotes students' self-learning through the interaction of ideas, tools, language, and other artefacts generated and valued by others (Spear and Ellinwood, 2009). Some of the tools that are used for learning are described by Vygotsky as including 'language; various systems of counting; mnemonic techniques; algebraic symbol systems; works of art; writing schemes, diagrams, maps, and mechanical drawings; all sorts of conventional signs' (Daniels, 2005: 8).

According to social constructivist theory, the learning process involves more than one person: it involves the students and the lecturers. This collaborative-partnership witnesses

students engaging with, practising, demonstrating and observing other students and lecturers as they interact with one another within the university community (Boughey, 2000; Lave and Wenger, 1991). According to Nyiko and Hashimoto (1997), social interactions influence the individual's cognitive development and this is done through the internalisation of ideas encountered in the sociocultural realm. Furthermore, social interaction leads to self-regulation whereby the students find their authentic voice by using the mediational tools of language. Daniel (2010) views these mediational tools as cultural artefacts such as talk and representatives (ideas, beliefs, signs and symbols), that emerge through social experiences and shape the human engagement with the world. During the learning process, students utilise these tools to transform their individual relationship between speaking and thinking. It can be argued that this developmental change contributes to the realisation of self-identity by the student (Daniel, 2010).

Scaffolded learning is important within the collaborative-partnership. Scaffolding sees students being supported and motivated to have control over their learning process. The students' confidence is developed by being assisted by a more knowledgeable other until the students are within the zone of proximal development that allows them to take responsibility for their learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Such responsibility requires the use of skills and strategies, including cognitive reasoning, the students' initiative and inquiry skills (Maybin, Mercer and Stierer, 1992; Sengupta, Mukherjee and Bhattacharya, 2012; Teater, 2011).

### *Technology Enhanced Learning*

The Social Constructivist and Situated Learning theories discussed in the preceding section are relevant when using technology for teaching. The potential for TEL to achieve quality learning outcomes is realised through ensuring the course design process is informed by learning theories (Herrington and Oliver, 2000). While the use of technology has been described by researchers (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004) as potentially transformative, explosive and disruptive, this is a highly contested view as technology is no magic panacea that can of itself radically change education as was anticipated in the 1980s (Herrington, Reeves, and Oliver, 2010; Ng'ambi, Bozalek and Gachago, 2013). Educators should understand that although educational technology provides unique benefits, it is not just another medium for presenting the same content (Laurillard, 1993; 1998).

Aspects of learning that are encouraged by TEL are cooperation, teamwork and collaboration both in the classroom and beyond so that opportunities are created for students to share their ideas and understanding and articulate their views. In addition both Social Constructivist and Cultural Historical Activity Theory argue that learning occurs through an activity, which can be in a face-to-face situation or an online forum as ‘cognition is distributed and accomplished or performed through a combination of artifacts and people working together’ (Johri, 2011: 211). The use of TEL might support the creation of knowledge and improve students’ professional competence in social work through the use of discussion forums where students in this interactive environment can construct knowledge, develop their ideas, give opinions and share knowledge (Kanuka and Anderson, 1998). Another advantage of discussion forums is that it allows for asynchronous communication that encourages deeper cognitive complexity than face-to-face discussion, fosters better communication between the educator and student (Chickering and Gamson, 1999) and assists additional language English students in their studies (Bozalek and Biersteker, 2010).

## **Methodology**

The study was guided by a qualitative research approach to explore the perceptions of the first and second year social work students regarding study skills associated with a positive academic adjustment. All participants were registered for the social work degree at Wits in 2012 with their ages ranging from eighteen to twenty-two years and had participated in the Wits FYE programme. The purposively chosen sample consisted of nineteen black participants, twelve of whom were in their first year and seven in their second year of study.

The sample consisted of more women compared to men participants and was consistent with the gender distribution of the profession and the student population in social work (Khunou, Pillay and Nethononda, 2012). According to the Wits Academic Information System Unit 2012 report, there were one hundred and eighty three women and only thirty-three men students who registered for a degree in social work in 2012. In the sample there were eleven women and one man from the first year group and six women and one man from the second year group. The use of first and second year students assisted the research to explore changes that might occur in the study skills associated with a positive academic adjustment as students progress from first to second year. It can be argued that using only first and second year social work students limited the study in the exploration of these study

skills as students' progress within the different levels of study and since first and second year students might still be familiarising themselves with the practices, the context of the university and still be creating meanings and identities, as compared to third and fourth year students who have already achieved some degree of adjustment.

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Wits Non-Medical Ethics Committee and participation in the study was voluntary. All participants provided written informed consent. Two focus groups were conducted which were voice-recorded. The main questions asked in the two focus groups were on the study skills used, and on the changes witnessed as students progress from the first to second year of study. Verbatim transcripts were developed from the focus groups which were analysed using thematic content analysis to code the data according to themes (Rubin and Babbie, 2007). Trustworthiness was considered during the study to ensure credibility, including the use of audio-recording to collect data and the data was analysed independently by two people.

### **Factors Contributing to a Positive Academic Adjustment**

The students' mediational tools, such as beliefs, feelings and ideas that emerge through social experiences, continue to shape the students' engagement with and response to the context of the learning process, including how they allocate time to their academic tasks and how they strengthen the meanings created towards the learning process.

The study found that the teaching and learning practices at the university contributed to students' academic adjustment process. First year social work students perceived teaching practices used in higher education institutions to be challenging and unlike the practices used at high schools and these practices hindered their positive academic adjustment process, as Lungile shares:

In high school, they [teachers] use to give you time for notes, like this week we write notes and then the following week, she explain the notes, there was time. In varsity, they a explaining while writing down, there's no time. (First year student, age: 19 years old, woman)

The findings of the study link the students' newly developing identities in higher education to the practices (teaching and learning literacies) that suggest a need to review and adjust their old methods of learning that were used in secondary schooling. This shift from

the familiar structured and supportive schooling environment, to the more complex university environment requires that students enter into a collaborative-partnership with their lecturers to address the transition phase of the learning process. However, due to language and power dynamics in the relationship and between races there are challenges and many first year students feel overwhelmed by the changes and opt to battle in silence. This was the view shared by one of the first year students:

I just also think like, we need to go and ask for help, because like, as 1st years, we think that lectures bite, they eat students, so we don't go and ask, which is sometimes like, you can go and ask your friends, and you will be like, oh friend, I don't understand this, what is it, you found out the friend you asking is clueless... (First year student, age: 18 years old, woman)

Therefore, a nurturing and supportive environment is needed for first year students to manage their anxiety and fear of using educators to assist with transition and develop the academic literacies required in higher education practices. The management of anxiety and fears is crucial in the development of personal strategies associated to a positive academic adjustment such as time management as identified in the study.

Second year social work students perceived the importance of developing unique time management strategies to assist them to plan and conduct their academic work as illustrated in the comment by Duduzile below:

Ja, I think at this level, the majority of us would have known, but I can say, in terms of academic adjustment, adjustment is when, obviously the transition from high school, and coming to university, it means there's a different, between the way the people, the way things are conducted in high schools and the way things are conducted in universities. So the standard becomes very high, and if you adjust, it means that you will be passing all the courses, you will be doing well in terms of assignments, time management, and being able to attend long lectures. (Second year student, age: 22 years old, woman)

The use of time management as a skill associated with positive academic adjustment in the university setting requires students to be creative, exploratory and experimental in order to develop it (Cottrel, 2003). Furthermore, practice plays a major role in the attainment of time management skills and practice allows students to assess their new and existing

learning strategies and combine them in assisting with the academic adjustment process. Thus, a constructive environment that will assist students in exploring and experimenting with their skills is necessary within higher education.

In the results of the study, an identification of collaborative strategies by students to support their learning such as the formation of study groups or using the process of teaching others was noted as this quote by illustrates:

I have this one friend, who does 3 of the same subject with me, and she's never in lectures, never focus or so, so I always study in time, and she's a last minute, a day before the test, she would come to my room, and I would teach her everything. And that help me because I am saying it, while learning it as she's learning. (Second year student, age 19 years old, woman)

In this quote students indicate that they are engaged in the process of collaboration and social negotiation where information, ideas and opinions are shared as they articulate what they know by explaining it to another (Gilbert and Dabbagh, 2005). Articulation and reflection support knowledge construction of which is an important study skill (Vygotsky, 1978). A further element of networked learning is that people learn from each other in teams and communities and engage in dialogue and different communicative activities. As cited in Neo, Neo and Lim (2013), Laurillard states that this redefinition of learning as 'conversation' has led educators to new educational frameworks, based on social constructivist theory to guide the adoption of appropriate learning activities.

The study also found that students use a combination of learning strategies to develop more unique study skills relevant to them and their academic adjustment process. There was a link between time management skills and attitudes whereby students' viewed their attitudes toward the learning process as an influential factor in how they allocate their time, with Portia making the following comment:

I think [that] if you have a negative attitude toward a certain subject, you going to allocate less time, compare to the one that you like. (First year student, age: 18 years old, woman)

According to the cognitive theorists, the university adjustment process involves the interplay between the individual's cognition and emotions that results in a specific behaviour (Ramsay, Barker and Jones, 2007). For example, a student experiencing a negative feeling toward a subject (affective) like Portia, will firstly process the feeling in her thoughts (cognition), then

release a behaviour aiming to respond to the initial negative feeling i.e. allocating less responding to the situation.

The suggestion of feeling, thoughts and behaviour to the learning process and the use of strategies important for a positive academic adjustment process, allows students to utilise their own strengths in developing and reinforcing positive feelings and thoughts that demonstrate a behaviour that is vital for academic adjustment. The use of personal strengths such as independence and discipline in the learning process was illustrated in the comment by Thembelinhle:

Well, like now, you kind of don't have a choice because you kind of need to be discipline, if you don't have that disciplinary, [if] you do not discipline yourself to do work and you know that you are going to fall behind, and when you fall behind, there's more work that I added, so eventually you have to discipline yourself so that you can be on point. (First year student, age: 18, woman)

However, the perceptions of personal strengths (independence and discipline) were viewed differently by the two groups of students. While first year students related their personal strengths to the environment as stated by Thembelinhle, second year students perceived them in relation to the multiple academic demands and changes in the scaffolding process led by educators as illustrated by Thulile:

Well, I would give an example like Psychology, in the first year, she [the lecturer] was spoon feeding us, and she was giving us everything. This year you have to go all out by yourself, look for information, and do theory integration, like on your own. You have to go and decide on what you want to use and what not, because in first year, they were spoon feeding us, in everything. The essays were given in point form. Do this, do that. This year is no longer the same, they are saying you are a second year student, go all by yourself, go to the library and look for this, like maybe log in for Google and look for this, on your own. They are no longer telling you like it was in first year. They will just say, okay this is it, do whatever-whatever, define. You can see now, even with sociology, the other lecture was no longer giving us notes; you have to take them yourself. Is no longer like first year where they gave us summaries, [of] everything. This year everything has changed, you have to be independent, think for yourself, and do this for yourself. . (Second year student, age: 19, woman)

Therefore, changes in the environment influence the development of unique strengths as illustrated by both first and second year students. It can be argued that better use of more strengths (independence and discipline) are a result of improved adjustment to the environment by first year students, while second year students seem to be adjusting to the environment and focus on their academic strengths. Drawing from this argument, it can be said that the higher education environment needs to be constructed in a manner that accommodates a simultaneous academic and environmental adjustment. Furthermore, the change in the learning process, as illustrated by the second year student, suggests that lecturers are aware of the scaffolding techniques used, that too much assistance is dangerous to students and the learning process. Thus it is necessary to acknowledge the students' strengths and contributions and encourage them to learn on their own as a way of playing their role in the scaffolding process.

Furthermore, second year students appeared to be more confident and clearer about self-regulation practices such as prior reading and other preparation that contributed to their positive academic adjustment. According to Khethiwe, as illustrated below, preparation skills, where students are expected to do reading and research before attending a lecture, play a major role in the learning process:

‘...when we get there [in the classroom], you must make sure that you have [read] done all of the readings for that week, because the lecturer is going to assign you in groups, and you have to discuss the reading and make a summary of it, and then you present it to the class.’ (Second year student, age: 22 years, woman).

These quotes support the argument that at second year level, literacies are utilised in a multidimensional manner where more than one literacy is used to assist students in finding their identities and the meaning of what is learned. Furthermore, the use of many literacies such as preparation skills, working in groups, active participation and the skills of making presentations, allows the lecturer to scaffold the learning process. The educators attempt to scaffold content and activities to encourage students to engage more deeply with the content and are more demanding of both the quality and quantity of outputs required of students. According to Vygostky (1978), this scaffolding comprises the activities and tasks designed by a teacher to be appropriate to the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) of the student so

as to provide the support necessary for that student to develop the competence to function independently.

In addition as students progressed within the university community they recognised the value of developing relationships with people and using peers to help facilitate a positive academic adjustment as illustrated below by a second year student:

‘I think in university you have to work with people, because last semester I didn’t and I am planning to work with people, because it’s easier, you tend to understand that everyone has their own understanding, and we share with everyone understands’  
(Second year students, age: 20 years old, woman)

In support of the student’s perception, Lave and Wenger (1991) also view learning as a social phenomenon that results naturally from becoming part of a community where active participation becomes part of the learning experience, so that learning, thinking and knowing are relations among people engaged in activity.

Furthermore, a combination of collaboration and active participation skills were found to be associated with positive academic adjustment by first and second year students. This finding acknowledged the importance of interactive learning that allows students to share knowledge with each other and develop their own professional skills within the academic community and the profession of social work outside of the university. Dudu’s experience of active participation, as illustrated below shows the importance of knowledge-sharing that assisted her in achieving university success:

‘For me I use to be involved in a lot of study groups and we would come up with some questions and ask each other those questions...When you interact with people you also gain some knowledge’ (Second year student, age: 19 years old, woman)

According to Gatfield (1999), the value of students working in groups is observed in the development of their interpersonal skills and development of a more comprehensive output. Added advantages of collaboration were that the students gained a better understanding of group dynamics (which is essential in the social work meso practice intervention), were exposed to other points of view and they were able to rehearse for the real working world where teamwork is a requirement, especially in the field of social work. With reference to the findings of the study, it can be argued that there are two stages in the use of collaboration as a tool for academic adjustment. In the first stage, collaboration takes the form of the first years

working in groups and in the second stage second year students perceive collaboration as promoting active participation within the already formed groups.

The change in the identification of academic literacies associated to a positive academic adjustment, such as time management skills, active participation skills and language goes beyond the individual's contribution (such as their attitudes, thoughts and feelings), the availability of resources also impacts on the usage of these academic literacies.

While the context was identified as a major contributor to academic adjustment by first year students, second year students viewed the combination of technology and the context as influential in the academic adjustment process. One of the students made the following remark on the creation of audio recordings for learning:

‘For me also, sometimes I would voice record myself, like my notes, and when I come to schools [university] I would just put on my earphones and listen to them, when I’m in the bus.’ (Second year student, age 19 years old, woman)

The quote illustrates how the use ICT makes the learning space more flexible. So that learning extends beyond the classroom. However the use of technology for learning needs to be carefully explored as was noted earlier in this paper. Specific skills required for higher education is an area in which students need to be supported.

For example, first year students from resource-scarce schools and backgrounds characterised by an absence of information and communication technology are limited in the use of social forums such as blogs to promote active participation outside the classroom setting. However, FYE programmes are there to address such gaps. The Wits campus has computer laboratories and the FYE provides students with computer skills training.

### **Challenges with the FYE**

Participants raised concerns regarding the inability of the FYE programme to address needs specifically in relation to social work students, as the following quote highlights.

The other problem I had is that, you know at FYE, they would give you this chart, a calendar, and when you look at it, most of the course says, now will be discussing mathematical what what, mathematics skills, now will be discussing what, it was never on Humanities, where it would say, now we are discussing Sociology. And stuff like that, or the techniques, you know when you come into a problem, and they we are

discussing mathematical what what, already they are going to discuss the methods for mathematics, not for other subjects, and those method are conveniently for mathematical students. So mina, I will be there, seating there, waiting for Sociology, it won't come obviously because it's for the mathematics, so it was useless. I'd rather just go home; I will just go there and eat those biscuits. (Second year student, age: 19 years old, woman)

The quote displays a shared view by participants' over their frustration at the FYE and reinforces the argument that discipline specific programmes on skills and content relevant to the social work discipline are preferable. This view expressed by the student suggests that many of the programmes offered by the FYE were designed for students from the Science faculty such as the Starting Smart programmes and were not suitable for students from the Humanities faculty.

## **Conclusion**

Social Work learning is not only about knowing the theoretical aspect of the discipline, but also learning to be critical about what is taught and being able to adapt to the practices whilst creating meanings that will assist in the development of an identity associated with positive academic adjustment. ICT has highly influenced our day to day functioning, and higher education institutions need to modify the use of such ICT tools within the learning process to promote a successful academic adjustment for students entering these institutions.

It is important for the learning process to encourage individual critical thinking, reflection, self-regulation and allow students to develop their academic identity through student centered-teaching and learning. This is crucial to social work learning, whereby students do not only learn the theory presented in the textbooks, but also learn to be critical professionals in the practical world. Moreover, for students to achieve a positive academic adjustment, programmes such as the FYE need to consider the collaboration between the environment and academic adjustment. Hence the students' use of study skills and other academic literacies relies on both aspects of development being fully utilised for the purpose of a successful academic adjustment process.

In addition, the students' entry-needs-assessment must be conducted for the purpose of academic assistance programmes such as the FYE programme to target the students' specific needs through the programmes they offer, and not generalise about the literacies and

study skills that students need when joining higher education institutions. Programmes designed to assist students should be of a high quality and should be credit bearing. Moreover, creative and innovative strategies such as the use of TEL should be explored in course design. The use of multidimensional methods to develop academic literacies has the potential to support students in their quest to develop and succeed in the higher education environment.

In order to sustain the contributions provided by this study, similar studies focusing on other levels of study such as the third and fourth year level, should be conducted as a means of ensuring a diverse provision of academic assistance as students develop more as they move from one level to another. Identification of the mechanisms, literacies and strategies employed by second year social work students who successfully transitioned provided suggestions for the new students entering the Bachelor of Social Work degree. These literacies, study skills and strategies can be used to induct students and assist them in achieving positive academic adjustment. Further studies should consider the perceptions of educators regarding the students' university adjustment.

### **Bionotes**

**Nkosinathi Sibanyoni** is a postgraduate social work student with a Master's degree in Occupational Social Work from the University of the Witwatersrand. His research interests include students' university adjustment and employee wellness.

**Roshini Pillay** is a social worker who teaches at the University of the Witwatersrand and is a PhD candidate. Her research interests are group work or meso practice, technology enhanced learning and occupational social work.

### **References**

- Beetham, H., & Sharpe, R. (eds.) 2007. *Rethinking Pedagogy for a Digital Age*. London: Routledge.
- Boughey, C. 2000. 'Multiple Metaphors in an Understanding of Academic Literacy'. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 6(3): 279-290.
- Bozalek, V., & Biersteker, L. 2010. 'Exploring Power and Privilege Using Participatory Learning Action Techniques'. *Social Work Education*, 29(5): 551-571.

- Chi, M. T. H. 2009. 'Active-Constructive-Interactive: A Conceptual Framework for Differentiating Learning Activities'. *Topics in Cognitive Science*, 1: 73–105.
- Chickering, A., & Gamson, Z. 1999. 'Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education'. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 80(Winter): 545-595.
- Coopoo, P. 2013. Dean of Students Affairs, University of the Witwatersrand. April 5, 2013, Personal communication.
- Cottrell, S. 2003. *The Study Skills Handbook*. 2nd ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd.
- Council on Higher Education. 2013. 'A proposal for undergraduate curriculum reform in South Africa: the case for a flexible curriculum structure'. Pretoria: CHR.
- Council on Higher Education. 2010. 'Annual Report'. Pretoria: CHR.
- Daniel, J. 2010. *The Academic and Social Adjustment of First Generation College Students*. Unpublished PhD dissertation, Seton Hall University.
- Daniels, H. 2005. 'Vygotsky and educational psychology: Some Preliminary remarks'. *Educational & Child Psychology Society*, 22(1): 6-17.
- Dennis, J. M., Phinney, J. S., & Chuateco, L. I. 2005. 'The Role of Motivation, Parental Support, and Peer Support in the Academic Success of Ethnic Minority First-Generation College Students'. *Journal of College Student Development*, 46(3): 223-236.
- Department Higher Education and Training. 2012. 'Green Paper for Post-school Education and Training'. Pretoria: Department Higher Education and Training.
- Earle, N. 2008. *Social Work as a Scarce and Critical Profession*. South Africa: Pretoria Department of Labour.
- Engestrom, Y. 1987. *Learning by expanding: An activity theoretical approach to developmental research*. Helsinki, Finland: Orienta-Konsultit Oy.
- University of the Witwatersrand. 2011. 'First year experience and First year early warning system-Progress, Planning and Evaluative Report'.
- Garrison, D., & Kanuka, H. 2004. 'Blended Learning: Uncovering its transformative potential in higher education'. *Internet and Higher Education*, 7: 95-105.

- Gettinger, M., & Seibert, J. K. 2002. 'Contributions of Study Skills to Academic Competence'. *National Association of School Psychologists*, University of Wisconsin-Madison & University of South Carolina, 31 (3): 350-365.
- Gilbert, P.K., & Dabbagh, N. 2005. 'How to structure online discussions for meaningful discourse: A case study'. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 36(1): 5-18.
- Grayson, J. P. 2003. 'The Consequences of Early Adjustment to University'. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 46(4): 411-429.
- Hare, I. 2004. 'Defining Social Work for the 21st Century: The International Federation of Social Workers' Revised Definition of Social Work'. *International Social Work*, 47(3): 407-424.
- HEFCE. 2009. 'Enhancing learning and teaching through the use of technology. A revised approach to HEFCE's strategy for e-learning'. Online at: [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09\\_12/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_12/).
- Herrington, J., & Oliver, R. 2000. 'An instructional design framework for authentic learning environments'. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 48(3): 23-48.
- Herrington, J., Reeves, T., & Oliver, R. 2010. *A guide to authentic e-learning*. New York: Routledge
- Khunou, G., Pillay, R., & Nethononda, A. 2012. 'Social Work is "women's work": An Analysis of Social Work Students' Perceptions of Gender as a Career Choice Determinant'. *The Social Work Practitioner-Researcher*, 24 (1): 120-135.
- Kyalo, P. M., & Chuma, R. J. 2011. 'Selected Factors Influencing Social and Academic Adjustment of Undergraduate Students of Egerton University, Njoro Campus'. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 2(18): 274-290.
- Jean, D. 2010. *The Academic and Social Adjustment of First Generation College Students*. Unpublished PhD dissertation, Seton Hall College.
- Jonassen, D. 2000. 'Learning as Activity: The Meaning of Learning Project'. Paper presented at the AECT: Presidential Session, Denver.
- Jonassen, D. H. and Rohrer-Murphy, L. 1999. 'Activity Theory as a Framework for Designing Constructivist Learning Environments'. *ETR&D*, 47(1): 61-79.

- Kaseke, E. 1996. 'Trends and Issues in Social Work Education in Africa', in Healy, L. *Realities of Global Inter-Dependence: Challenges to Social Work Education. Plenary papers and abstracts from 1992 International Congress of Schools of Social Work*. Alexandria, VA: Council on Social Work Education.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. 1991. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lea, M., & B. Street 1998. 'Student Writing in Higher Education: An academic Literacies approach'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 23(2): 157- 173.
- Letseka, M., & Maile, S. 2008. 'High university drop-out rates: a threat to South Africa's future'. South Africa: HSRC Policy Brief.
- Maybin, J., Mercer, N., & Steirer, B. 1992. '*Scaffolding*': *Learning in the classroom, in Norman, K. Thinking Voices: The work of the National Oracy Project*. London: Hodder Arnold H&S.
- Neo, M., Neo, K. T., & Lim, T. 2013. 'Designing a web-based multimedia learning environment with Laurillard's conversational framework: an investigation on instructional relationships'. *The Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology*, 12(3): 39-50.
- Ng'ambi, D., Bozalek, V., & Gachago, D. 2013. 'Empowering educators to teach using emerging technologies in higher education – A case of facilitating a course across institutional boundaries'. Paper presented at the ICEL, Peru.
- Nyikos, M., & Hashimoto, R. 1997. 'Constructivist Theory Applied to Collaborative Learning in Teacher Education: In Search of ZPD'. *The Modern Language Journal*, 81(4): 506-517.
- Pear, J. J., & Crone-Todd, D. E. 2002. 'A social constructivist approach to computer mediated instruction'. *Computers & Education*, 38: 221-231.
- Ramsay, S., Jones, E., & Barker, M. 2007. 'Relationship Between Adjustment and Support Types: Young and Mature-Aged Local and International First Year University Students'. *Higher Education*, 54(2): 247-265.
- Rubin, A., & Babbie, R. E. 2007. *Essential Research Methods for Social Work Practice*. 2nd ed. United States of America: Thomson Brooks/ Cole.

Sengepta, S., Mukherjee, B., & Bhattacharya, S. 2012. 'Designing a Scaffolding for Supporting Personalised Synchronous e-Learning'. Department of Computer Science & Information Technology, Bengal Institute of Technology, Kolkata-150, India.

Sheafor, B., & Horejsi, C. 2008. *Techniques and Guidelines for Social Work Practice*. Boston: Pearson Education.

Smythe, C. 2009. 'Social work declared a "scarce skill"'. Online at: <http://www.skillsportal.co.za/page/jobs/careers/158900-Social-work-declared-a-scarce-skill>.

Teater, B. 2011. 'Maximizing Student Learning: A Case Example of applying Learning and Teaching in Social Work Education'. *Social Work Education*, 1: 1-15.

Wilson, G., & Campbell, A. 2012. 'Developing Social Work Education: Academic Perspectives'. *British Journal of Social Work*, 2012: 1–19.

Vygotsky, L. S. 1978. *Mind in Society*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.