

USING FIRST YEAR CURRICULUM PRINCIPLES AS AN EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH TO DESIGN AND EVALUATE A FIRST YEAR SEMINAR

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ABSTRACT

This paper expands on and contributes to work in the field of transition in higher education, specific to the First Year Seminar (FYS). Although several studies have examined the efficacy of FYS programmes in supporting students' transition into university, there is not much literature with a clear focus on the planning, execution, and evaluation of these programmes, particularly in the South African context. As such, the aim of this study is to use an evidence-based approach to design and evaluate an FYS. The research methodology draws on the constructive paradigm and makes use of a non-experimental, qualitative research design by employing a document analysis. Curriculum documents from the FYS at the University of the Free State (UFS) are analysed to answer the research question, "how can evidence-based FYS programmes be designed?" The study draws on Transition Pedagogy as the conceptual framework, specifically focusing on its First Year Curriculum Principles for design. Key findings indicate that the nature of the FYS at the UFS – a hybrid seminar integrated into the curriculum across all faculties – does meet the criteria for evaluating FYCPs. However, this investigation was also useful in determining ways to improve the design of this FYS to better support students' transition into university. The implications of these findings are promising for the development of well-designed and evidence-based FYS programmes as core contributors to supporting first-year students' transition into university.

Keywords: First Year Curriculum Principles, First Year Seminar, first-year students, evidence-based approach to design, evaluation of a First Year Seminar

INTRODUCTION

This paper investigates the design and evaluation of First Year Seminar (FYS) programmes in South Africa. These programmes fall under the umbrella of First Year Experiences (FYE) but have a specific format based on their categorisation as seminars. There are five categories of FYS programmes: extended orientation, academic seminars, preprofessional and discipline-

linked seminars, basic study skills seminars, and hybrid seminars (Barefoot, 1992; Greenfield, Keup, and Gardner, 2015). There are a number of FYS programmes that run at South African universities, such as the extended orientation at North West University (NWU), the academic seminar at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), the preprofessional and discipline-linked seminars at UJ and the University of the Free State (UFS), the basic study skills seminar at the UFS, and the hybrid seminar at the UFS (Combrink and Oosthuizen, 2020; Jacobs and Pretorius, 2016; Jama, 2018; Oosthuizen, Malan, and Combrink, 2017; NWU, n.d.; UJ, 2023). Typically, the purpose of FYS programmes is to foster connections between students and their studies, other students, staff, and the institution. Additionally, FYS programmes support student transition by requiring students to spend time and effort on educationally meaningful tasks (Kuh, 2008). Although FYS programmes exist in several South African higher education institutions, there is a lack of academic investigation into the planning, execution, and evaluation of these programmes, as evidenced by the scarcity of local literature on the subject. Some of the only South African publications on evidence-based approaches to designing and evaluating FYS programmes are Jacobs and Pretorius (2016) on the preprofessional mathematics FYS at UJ, Combrink and Oosthuizen (2020) on the hybrid FYS at the UFS, and Jama (2018) on the preprofessional health sciences FYS at the UFS.

Many studies suggest that a limited comprehension of FYS programmes results in the squandering of resources, potential, and capacity, which further results in the failure of these programmes to adequately meet students' transition needs (Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014; Scott, 2008; Thurber and Walton, 2012; van Zyl, Dampier, and Ngwenya, 2020). In a national survey on FYS programmes in the US, Padgett and Keup (2011) found that just over half (53%) of these programmes were formally evaluated. Despite the low evaluation rate, American practitioners publish prolifically, so there is a rich literature base on the efficacy of their FYS programmes. Also, they have created a strong case for the value of an evidence-based or data-informed approach to designing FYS programmes to address the outcomes of retention and persistence of first-year students (Goldberg, Zou, and Sriram, 2019; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Parsh et al., 2021; Pittendrigh et al., 2016; Peuler and Coltrain, 2020). Scholarly inputs like these enhance the calibre and efficiency of the planning, design, implementation, and evaluation of FYS programmes and thus also support students' successful transition into and through their first year of university. However, even with such scholarly contributions, there is still a lack of literature with a clear focus on the planning, execution, and evaluation of these programmes, particularly in the South African context.

This paper is thus an important contribution to the expansion of the literature base on FYS programmes in South Africa and the optimisation of FYS programmes. The paper's contribution lies in its investigation into how an evidence-based approach to design can support students' transition needs in their first year of study. This paper starts by discussing some of the key literature on the impact of designing and evaluating an FYS programme and using the First Year Curriculum Principles from Nelson (2014). Evidence of the impact of such design principles comes from a case study, the FYS at the UFS, which supports the argument for evidence-based design of FYS programmes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The first-year landscape in South Africa and the need for context-specific student support

To understand the role of intentional design, implementation, and evaluation of an FYS programme, it is necessary to first consider the characteristics of the first-year student cohort so that appropriate design decisions can be taken that speak to students' needs. It is imperative to note that taking a deficit view of students when considering the planning of support initiatives is socially unjust. The approach of this research is data-informed to address the challenges many South African students face and to mitigate the risk of student dropout in the first year.

Although South Africa has made significant strides in widening access to higher education, only 55 per cent of students who enrolled for a degree in 2014 managed to graduate by 2019 (Council on Higher Education 2021). This statistic underscores a crucial point repeatedly emphasised in recent higher education literature: access without success does not truly offer genuine opportunity (Council on Higher Education, 2013; Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020; Engstrom and Tinto, 2008; Scott, 2018, 2017; Tinto, 2014). The core argument is that simply gaining entry to higher education without achieving success in the form of a degree holds little value for both students and the economy. Without adequate support structures in place, access does not mean much more than simply getting a foot in the door. Young (2016) and Barefoot (2004) describe this as a revolving door, which occurs when students either drop out or remain in the system without completing their studies. Therefore, the low throughput rates in South Africa's higher education system are likely to persist unless there is a deliberate focus on enhancing student success and aligning with institutional strategies.

Why is it important to design and evaluate a FYS programme?

All first-year university students, regardless of their educational background, encounter various challenges upon entering university. These challenges arise because they are new to the university and unfamiliar with the increased volume, complexity, and variation of academic tasks (Cottrell, 2013; Lillis and Turner, 2001; Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014; Ramzan, Khan, and Bibi, 2018). Although these challenges are widespread globally, they are particularly notable within the South African education system and directly or indirectly stem from various factors. The first are socioeconomic factors, such as the need for financial assistance, food insecurity, or students being the first in their family to attend university (Cohen, 2019; Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2023a, 2023b; Hamshire et al., 2021; Henrichsen and Keenan, 2023; Lewin and Mawoyo, 2014; Mlambo, Masuku, and Ndebele, 2022; Pike and Kuh, 2005; Thobejane and Fatoki, 2017). Various shortcomings in the basic education system also pose challenges, including limited or no access to technology, students lacking proficiency in English and/or academic literacy, inadequate preparation for higher education, and uncertainty among students regarding the relationship between their degree and future career prospects. Lastly, the lingering effects of apartheid in South Africa, such as the need for social inclusion and adjustment to diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, still pose challenges (Chetty and Pather, 2015; Thurber and Walton, 2012). Failure to address these challenges thus amplifies the risk of students dropping out. Providing adequate support during the first year of study is essential for mitigating this risk.

While institutions may not be able to directly tackle broader systemic issues beyond the scope of higher education, they can provide FYS programmes to enhance students' access to university. For an institution to adequately support students, it is imperative that student support practitioners understand the challenges their first-year cohort faces, as well as what FYS programme(s) would best address those challenges. To further support the argument made in this article, the FYS programme must be thoughtfully designed, executed, and evaluated to determine its impact on student transition into and through students' first year.

First Year Curriculum Principles

The FYCPs underpin Transition Pedagogy – an institution-wide conceptual framework aimed at supporting the FYE (Kift, Nelson, and Clarke, 2010). In this paper, the FYS at the UFS will be used as a case study of how the FYCPs can be applied to an FYS. The premise upon which Transition Pedagogy is based is that all students have the curriculum in common – their degree programme is the reason they came to university. Therefore, support initiatives based outside

the curriculum, such as co-curricular support initiatives run out of various student support divisions, are often not able to produce impact at scale. Additionally, if student success and the approach to attain it are not integrated into university policy and strategic objectives, then the incentive to move the needle is not visceral or part of the institutional culture. In other words, it is often an unattainable goal. Transition Pedagogy posits that the curriculum, co-curricular support initiatives, and university policy should all align to support students' transition into university, with the curriculum being the central focus of the FYE (Kift 2010). There are six FYCPs which guide the design of FYE programmes, namely transition, design, diversity, engagement, assessment, and evaluation and monitoring (Nelson et al., 2014).

The FYCPs have been used in different contexts and at different levels. Nelson et al. (2014) provide a range of practical ways to use this framework at a modular-, degree programme-, and institutional-level. Use of this framework, however, is often only applied to the curriculum of the degree programme, focusing on how academic staff use these principles in their teaching of first-year students and in their design and implementation of their courses. Academic staff are also expected to collaborate with co-curricular support programmes to provide holistic support to students in their first year and thus enhance retention. At some institutions, the FYCPs are applied in only one or two programmes and not across the first year curriculum, as evidenced by the many case studies listed on the Transition Pedagogy website (Kift, 2008). Due to the nature of the FYS at the UFS, an institution-wide hybrid seminar that is a compulsory part of the curriculum of the degree programme, exploring the application of the FYCPs and use of an evidence-based approach to designing and implementing an FYS seemed a valuable contribution to the field. Thus, the paper does not present an academic curriculum making use of the FYCPs in the conventional application of Transition Pedagogy in an FYE, but it rather presents a new take on using these principles to underpin the design of an FYS.

Table 1 provides a summary of how these FYCPs can be used to design and evaluate an FYS. The six principles are listed in the first column, the definitions of each principle are listed in the second column, and the criteria for how each principle can be applied in practice is listed in the third column.

Table 1: Definitions of the FYCPs and how they can be used to design and evaluate a First Year Seminar

FYCP	Definition	How this principle can be used to design and evaluate an FYS
Transition	The FYS should be designed and executed to support students' transition into university, and this should be a programme that takes place over time to allow for the various adjustments students go through throughout their first year.	This principle can be used to design and evaluate if: 1. students learn about university systems and processes; 2. students learn about academic processes; 3. students interact with other students and staff; and 4. engagement and interaction are considered in the execution of the FYS to ensure that students have indeed comprehended and learned the information.
Diversity	The design of the FYS must consider the diversity of the student cohort in terms of equity, changes in the cohort from year to year, students' prior knowledge and skills, and the different times at which different groups of students may start the year (this may differ by degree programme where selection courses may start earlier than other courses; in some programmes students may be able to start in the second semester instead of the first; the registration period should also be considered in terms of timing, specific to students who register late due to funding delays).	This principle can be used to design and evaluate if: 1. the design team has collected demographic data on the student cohort to assess for diversity; 2. students receive opportunities to engage with diverse others in the FYS; and 3. there are strategies in place to manage the differences in students' prior knowledge and skills.
Design	The design of the FYS should be student-centred, relevant, relatable, explicit, and visible to students in terms of its aim to support students develop the skills they need to be successful. Therefore, the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for student development should be an intentional part of the curriculum design.	This principle can be used to design and evaluate if: 1. the knowledge and skills required for student development and transition are explicit and visible in the learning outcomes; 2. a road map or syllabus of the FYS is provided to students so that they are aware of the knowledge and skills they will be gaining; and 3. the values and attitudes that a student requires to be a successful first-year student are clearly articulated.
Engagement	The curriculum design of the FYS, which includes how students will learn, be taught, and assessed, should include student engagement indicators	This principle can be used to design and evaluate if: 1. the implementation of the FYS includes opportunities for engagement with peers through informal and formal group work activities;

	in the design. These indicators are active and collaborative learning, peer interaction, and student-staff interaction.	- the assessment requires students to engage with the content (i.e., does the assessment provide evidence that students are engaging with the skills required to successfully transition into university?); - opportunities are provided (whether through teaching activities or assessments) to help students make links between their personal lives and the knowledge and skills covered in the FYS; and - opportunities are provided for students to discuss their assessment feedback with staff.
Assessment	The design of the FYS should teach students how to transition from high school-level assessments to university-level assessments. Regular and timely feedback should be provided so that assessment is used as a tool for learning (for students to comprehend the requirements and meet them, and for staff to monitor performance and accordingly adjust their teaching where necessary).	This principle can be used to design and evaluate if: - the FYS teaches students about the different types of assessments they can expect at university and how to tackle these assessments; - the FYS teaches students about the kinds of assessment feedback they can expect at university and how to respond to that feedback; - the FYS teaches students about the skills required to successfully complete assessments at university; - the FYS teaches students how to manage their time to attend to all their assessment activities; and - the FYS consistently provides clear feedback to students on assessments (within the FYS).
Evaluation and Monitoring	The design of the FYS must be evidence-based. Thus, it must be regularly evaluated and adapted to meet the needs of the students. An action-research approach can also be taken to ensure timely intervention if the students are not responsive to the curriculum design and are thus at risk of failure.	This principle can be used to design and evaluate if: - data gathered at admission (such as biographical data, AP scores, school quintile) and any other relevant sources inform the design of the FYS; and - data is collected to evaluate the FYS and inform changes in the curriculum design and execution.

Adapted from Nelson et al. (2014: 17–18)

METHODOLOGY

Research context

There are approximately 40, 000 students enrolled at the UFS across three campuses (two in Bloemfontein in the Central Free State and one in Phuthaditjhaba in the Eastern Free State). The majority of these students are undergraduate students who come from rural contexts, attended under-resourced high schools (quintile one to three), and did not receive a proficient score for the National Benchmark Test (a pre-university readiness test). Therefore, it can be concluded that the majority of first-year students entering the UFS are underprepared for university. At the UFS, as part of the social justice imperative to ensure all students receive equitable opportunities to be successful and persist through their first year, the FYS is mandatory and credit-bearing. This programme has been in place since 2012. The FYS is a hybrid seminar presented as a module that is part of the academic curriculum. The module is now titled UFSS (University of the Free State Skills) and was previously known as UFS101. More than 8, 000 students across seven faculties enrol in the FYS each year. The custodian of the FYS is the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL), and it is one of many student success initiatives driven by this student and staff support centre.

Research aim and design

To explore how evidence-based FYS programmes can be designed to optimise transitional first-year student support, a curriculum document analysis of study guides, syllabi, teaching assistant training content, lesson plans, student communication, and module evaluation reports was conducted. The research drew on the constructivist paradigm and made use of a qualitative, non-experimental design (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Mogashoa, 2014). The curriculum documents, consisting of multiple documents as sources, were explored to investigate how the FYCPs manifest in the FYS at the UFS.

Data analysis

The curriculum documents included 10 study guides, five syllabi, material from 10 teaching assistant training sessions, lesson plans for each of the units presented in the study guides, student communication spanning five years, and three module evaluation reports between the years 2017 and 2021. To evaluate the design of the FYS, the researcher thoroughly read through these documents and conducted a content analysis comparing them to each of the FYCP criteria.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Using the six FYCPs as an evaluative framework for the analysis, this paper now turns to a discussion of the extent to which each of the principles is present in the design of the FYS at UFS. Evidence will be provided through excerpts from the FYS curriculum documents. For ease of reading, the principles are numbered from one to six, and the design and evaluation criteria for each principle are italicised in the findings.

Principle 1: Transition

The curriculum documents were analysed against the four FYCP design and evaluation criteria for transition, as indicated in Table 1. In the FYS at the UFS, “students learn about university systems and processes in the first class”, as can be seen in the excerpts from the study guide (Figures 1), as well as the excerpt from the lesson plan (Figure 2). The circled text in Figures 1 and 2 provide examples of how students are guided through accessing the university systems, such as Blackboard (the Learning Management System), the UFS website, and student email. This information is provided to students in writing in the study guide (Figures 1). In class, Teaching Assistants (TAs – senior students who are appointed as contract staff) demonstrate where to find information (Figure 2) and check in with students through polls and discussions to see if students understand the university processes.

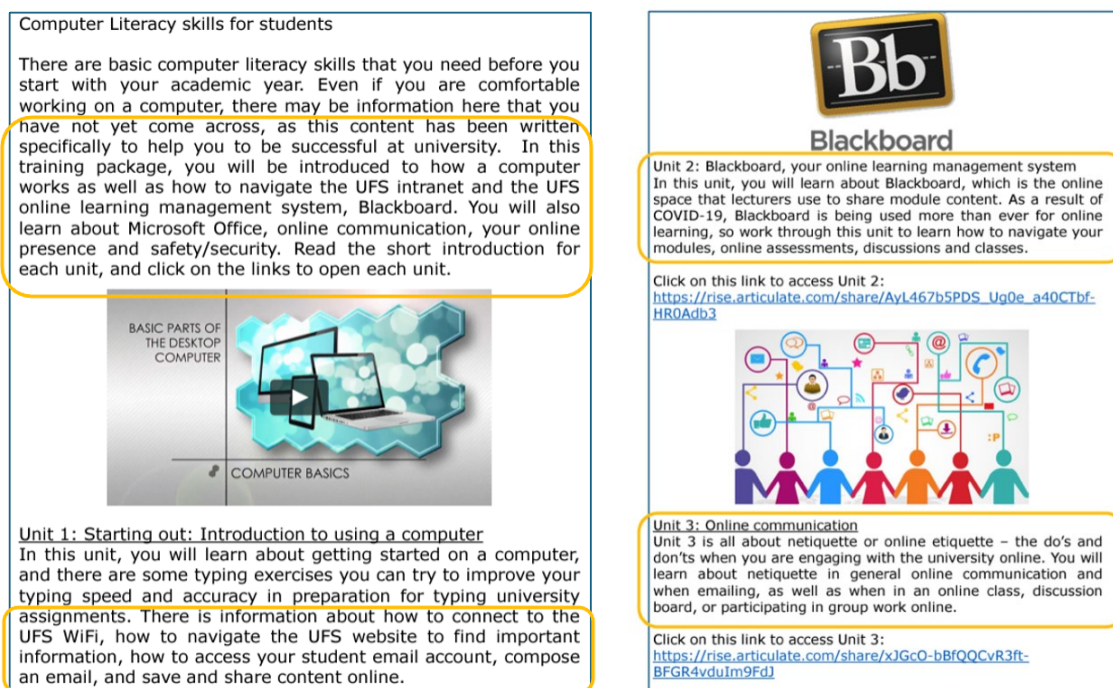


Figure 1: Learning about university systems from the study guide.

Flow of class

1. Introduce yourself and move straight into poll 1.

Poll question: Do you know where to begin? (1 min)

2. Syllabus and rules – go through each section of the syllabus. (15 min)

Breakout. (5 min)

Ice breaker poll

Hi, who are you?

Are you excited to study at the UFS?

Are we going too fast for you?

Do you have any questions?

*Once everyone is back in the main room, each breakout group can post the “**bottomline**” of their discussion in the main group chat (evidence of breakout discussion)

If no one speaks up, the TA should respond on behalf of their group.

Possibly ask for a spokesperson – who will post feedback for our group?

Poll question: Do you know how to pass?

Do you know who to contact with your UFSS-related questions? (1 min)

3. *UFSS Bb navigation

- Log in with credentials
- Access UFSS module on Bb
- Downloading the UFSS guide

- Navigate to the UFSS guide tab and download the guide. (5 min)

- Download the Syllabus and rules. (5 min)

- Check out the computer literacy skills units on www.ufs.ac.za/ctl/cl - just a visual referral. (5 min)

- Login to your student email account. (5 min)

Figure 2: Demonstration of teaching university systems and processes from the lesson plan

It is important to note the focus on computer literacy skills in this FYS. Due to the systemic challenges and range of socio-economic disparities in the basic education space (mentioned earlier), many students are unprepared for the level of computer literacy required to be a successful student at university. Thus, in the UFS context, the FYS content must first address the computer literacy needs of the students before it can address university systems and processes.

The excerpt from the syllabus (Figure 3), provides an example of how “students learn about academic processes”. The text in Figure 3 shows that students learn about various academic processes, including modular-level communication expectations, the requirements to pass the module, assessment submission expectations (including the format of submissions), the consequences of late submissions, the consequences of plagiarism, and the query period and appeals process. The syllabus in Figure 3 is explained in detail to students, as indicated in the

lesson plan in Figure 2, where TAs work through the syllabus. Students are also introduced to the notion that similar rules apply to the rest of their degree programmes/curricula.

1. To be successful in this module, you must do the following: 1.1 Familiarise yourself with the module outcomes; this information is available on Blackboard. 1.2 Check your University of the Free State email account regularly for communication from the UFS Skills Module office. We track the progress of each student frequently and will communicate with you on a regular basis. 1.3 Check announcements, communication and calendars on Blackboard in order to take note of assessment completion dates, online class dates, and other important information. 1.4 Email and consult with the UFS Skills Module office. You are expected to monitor your progress in UFSS1504 and consult with the UFS Skills Module office via email to address any questions that you might have. Please email ufs101@ufs.ac.za (BFN) / ufs101qq@ufs.ac.za (QQ) with the UFS Skills Module office timeously to avoid missing information regarding: attendance, assessments, or query period(s).	3.9 Assessment marks will be accessible on Blackboard under "My Grades" in accordance with the release dates communicated on Blackboard. 3.10 Plagiarism will not be tolerated. In addition to the plagiarism warning, the objective of these assessments is to submit your own work. In cases where students hand in work that is a copy of another student's assessment, students may be subject to a zero mark on the assessment, as well as such steps (including disciplinary action) as the University of the Free State may deem necessary in terms of its rules, policies, and regulations. 3.11 The process you engage in when completing a UFSS1504 assessment online is just as valid and important as the completion of an examination in an examination venue. Therefore, during the completion of an assessment, you may not lend assistance to or receive assistance from any person other than a UFS Skills module staff member. Steps will be taken if you contravene this rule; contraventions will be dealt with in terms of the University of the Free State's procedures, regulations and rules.
2. Requirements to pass UFSS1504 2.1 You are required to obtain an average of 50% or higher to pass UFSS1504. 2.2 Assessments will be submitted online, via Blackboard. These submissions will be in the form of quizzes and written assignments, and counts 40% of your first semester mark and 40% of your second semester mark. 2.3 Attendance will be monitored in this module, and counts 10% of your first semester mark and 10% of your second semester mark. For learning to take place, you are required to show up to class AND participate, thus a mark will be awarded for both showing up and participating. This mark makes up your attendance mark. 2.4 To qualify for a re-assessment, you must obtain an average between 45% and 49% for this module. 3. Assessment submission 3.1 In UFSS1504, you will be assessed by means of continuous assessment. Continuous assessment is a series of assessments that occur throughout the learning process, not only at the end of the learning process. You will thus be examined continuously during the year, and the marks for various activities will be calculated using a weighting system to produce a final result. 3.2 There is no exam sitting for this module. 3.3 Assessments must be completed/submitted on Blackboard in order to be marked. 3.4 The assessments must be completed/submitted on Blackboard before/by the dates and times specified in your assessment deadline document on Blackboard. 3.5 Assessment submission deadlines must be taken seriously. 3.6 A screenshot of every submission must be taken of the full screen and should include: your name, as well as the date and time on the computer/laptop screen. 3.7 Assessments submitted after the stated due date and time will be regarded as late, and a penalisation for late assessments will apply. 3.8 If the guidelines are not adhered to as stated in the assessment instructions and rubric provided on Blackboard, marks cannot be allocated.	3.12 You are advised to make sure you have a stable internet connection and a reliable source of power when submitting your assessments on Blackboard. 3.13 If you experience difficulties with Blackboard, kindly contact the E-Learning helpdesk on Ehelpdesk@ufs.ac.za, or call 051 401 9452 (BFN)/ 058 718 5137 (QQ) in order to resolve the problem. 3.14 Any misrepresentation of information will be dealt with in accordance with the policies, rules and regulations of the University of the Free State and may lead to disciplinary steps being taken against you. 3.15 Disciplinary matters will be dealt with by the Directorate for Student Discipline and Mediation. 4. UFSS1504 Query Period and Appeals Process 4.1 The UFSS1504 Query Period takes place twice a year. During the UFSS1504 Query Period, you can query your attendance and/or assessment marks via email or request a telephonic consultation. 4.2 Communication from UFS Skills Module Office will be sent out in April 2021 for the Semester 1 Query Period, and in September 2021 for the Semester 2 Query Period to notify you of the exact dates and times for the Query Period. 4.3 You will have an opportunity to lodge an appeal with the UFS Skills Module office, should you be dissatisfied with the outcome of your query (which will require the submission of accompanying documentation to substantiate your appeal). 4.4 After lodging your appeal with the Student Communication Coordinator, you may follow the process of lodging your appeal with the UFS Skills Module Programme Coordinator, and finally with the Senior Director of the Centre for Teaching and Learning. The decision of the Senior Director: Teaching and Learning is final. 4.5 Incomplete appeals, or appeals without substantiating documentation, will not be considered or entertained by the University of the Free State. 4.6 Late appeals (after the UFSS1504 Query Period) will not be considered or entertained by the University of the Free State.

Figure 3: Learning about academic processes from the syllabus

The third criterion of transition is that “students should interact with other students and staff”. In the excerpt from the syllabus in Figure 4, students are expected to engage in classes through active participation. Students are also required to focus in class and help their classmates do the same. This implies that students should interact with other students.

WHAT IS EXPECTED OF YOU?

We want to make sure that you are learning through this module, **and that you can apply the skills you learn in UFSS1504 to the rest of your degree programme.** To make this happen, there are certain expectations that we have of you:

1. Familiarise yourself with your new online learning environment. Online learning requires discipline, a growth mindset, and the ability to self-study.
2. Keep an eye on the announcements on Blackboard. We will post everything you need to do there.
3. Engage in online classes, videos, questionnaires, polls, activities and discussions. We know that this might not be easy in the beginning, but meaningful learning (the kind of learning that lasts beyond the assessment) requires engagement. Engagement means you have to attend classes and participate actively so that you get the most out of this experience.
4. Be open to learning new ideas – ideas that may be different to your own. Aristotle said that “it is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it”
5. Focus in your online class, and help your classmates to do the same. You are at university to learn, so make the most of every class you are in.
6. Think about the value of what you are learning. What does it mean to you, how is it relevant to your current situation or future plans? You should internalise what you are learning. Many senior students tell us they wish they had paid more attention and practiced the skills taught in UFSS1504 more because they continue to need these skills well beyond graduation.
7. If you are unable to attend a class synchronously (that means live, in real time) during the 3-day summer school, make sure to catch up asynchronously (in your own time) on Blackboard. Attendance will be monitored in this module – more about that below.

Figure 4: Expectations of active participation from the syllabus

In the excerpt from Class 5 of the lesson plan (Figure 5), students are given a group activity (breakout room) to discuss the topic with other students.

5 Referencing and plagiarism and searching for academic resources

Flow of class

Opening: Comment on the side with what you think plagiarism is? (3 min)

1. Defining plagiarism. (5 min)

Poll question: Do you know what the DSDM is responsible for at the UFS? (1 min)

2. Plagiarism consequences at the UFS – mention TurnItIn and SafeAssign – refer back to the Comp Lit unit online assessments. (5 min)

3. How to avoid plagiarism (referencing and paraphrasing) – practical section of class – use the “Khan” reference example in the guide – reference editing activity. (15 min)

Breakout (5 min)

Why do you think that it is important that as university students, we know what plagiarism is and how to avoid it?

Figure 5: Group activity from the lesson plan

“Engagement and interaction should be considered in the execution of the FYs to ensure that students have indeed comprehended and learned the information”. The expectations of engagement are made clear to students in the syllabus, as seen in Figure 6. The circled text highlight key learning expectations: that students apply the skills they learn in the FYs, that

they understand its value and relevance to their student experience, and that the learning is meaningful and lasts beyond the assessment.

WHAT IS EXPECTED OF YOU?

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1. Familiarise yourself with your new online learning environment. Online learning requires discipline, a growth mindset, and the ability to self-study.
2. Keep an eye on the announcements on Blackboard. We will ~~post everything you need to do there.~~
3. Engage in online classes, videos, questionnaires, polls, activities and discussions. We know that this might not be easy in the beginning, but meaningful learning (the kind of learning that lasts beyond the assessment) requires engagement. Engagement means you have to attend classes and participate actively so that you get the most out of this experience.
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5. Focus in your online class, and help your classmates to do the same. You are at university to learn, so make the most ~~of every class you are in.~~
6. Think about the value of what you are learning. What does it mean to you, how is it relevant to your current situation or future plans? You should internalise what you are learning. Many senior students tell us they wish they had paid more attention and practiced the skills taught in UFSS1504 more because they continue to need these skills well beyond graduation.
7. ~~If you are unable to attend a class synchronously (that means live, in real time) during the 3-day summer school, make sure to catch up asynchronously (in your own time) on Blackboard. Attendance will be monitored in this module – more about that below.~~

Figure 6: Expectations of engagement from the syllabus

This is only possible if students engage with the learning management system and the classes and online activities, as well as actively participate in class. Additionally, at the end of each class, students are asked to reflect on what they have learned to ensure that they have comprehended the content (Figure 7).

Reflection

Take 3 minutes to think back on the content you have worked through, and write down three things that you learned. It is important that you do this as preparation for the assessments. You will be asked how you applied the content, so think through what you learned and how you can apply it, and note that down now while the information is fresh in your mind.

Figure 7: Reflection on learning from the study guide

It is important to be flexible with the format of the FYS to support students' transition. TAs were assigned the role of success coaches who would reach out to students who had been flagged as requiring additional support. The TA/success coaches would also respond to students who asked for help. This support was specific to the period of emergency remote teaching during COVID. Thereafter, once the university moved back to in-person contact, the TA role reverted to its previous focus on class facilitation and marking. Success coaches were provided with scripts that they would use to communicate with students via Blackboard, as seen in Figure 8. This is evidence of how students were encouraged to engage with staff, with specific attention being paid to their comprehension and application of the skills learned in the FYS, supporting their transition into their first year.

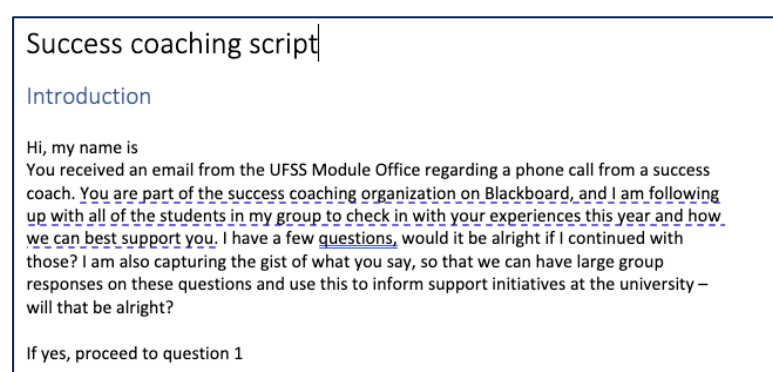


Figure 8: Excerpt from success coaching script

The document analysis shows that all the FYCP criteria are included in the design of the FYS at the UFS. Additional criteria that could be incorporated in the design and evaluation of an FYS in a similar context will be provided in the conclusion.

Principle 2: Diversity

The curriculum documents and student feedback were analysed against the three design and evaluation criteria for diversity, as indicated in Table 1.

In Figure 10, evidence of the “design team collecting demographic information to assess for diversity” is provided. Information about students’ faculty distribution and degree programmes, as well as race, gender, and whether or not they are repeating the module, is collected. This gives the design team an indication of the diversity of the cohort.

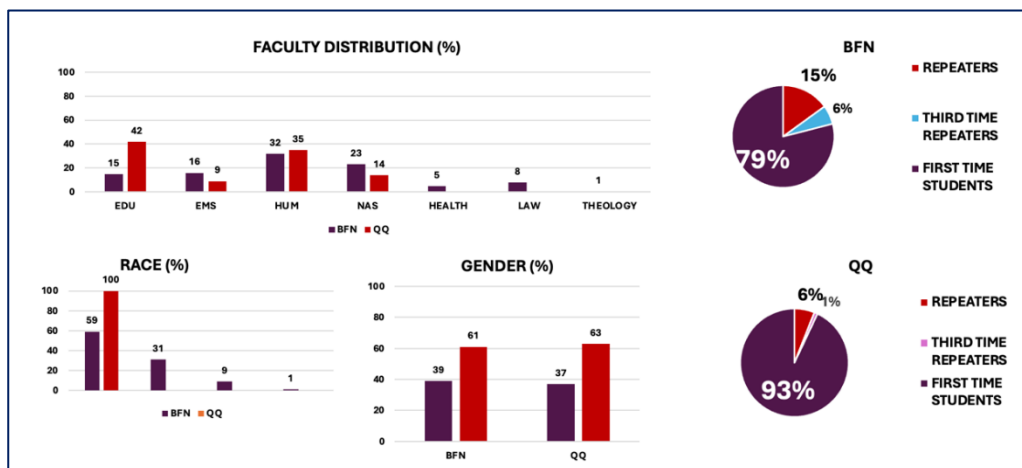


Figure 9: Demographic data from module evaluation report

In the FYS at the UFS, “students receive opportunities to engage with diverse others” by virtue of the format in which classes are scheduled. Students do not attend classes specific to the faculty in which they are enrolled but are assigned classes based on their registration data and timetable availability. This means that students engage with diverse others as they interact with students from different disciplinary backgrounds.

In Figures 10 and 11, evidence is provided of the “strategies in place to manage the differences in students’ prior knowledge and skills”. Content is scaffolded on Blackboard and in the study guide so that students who need more information have access to it, and students who are already competent in that specific content area may access additional resources to enrich their learning.

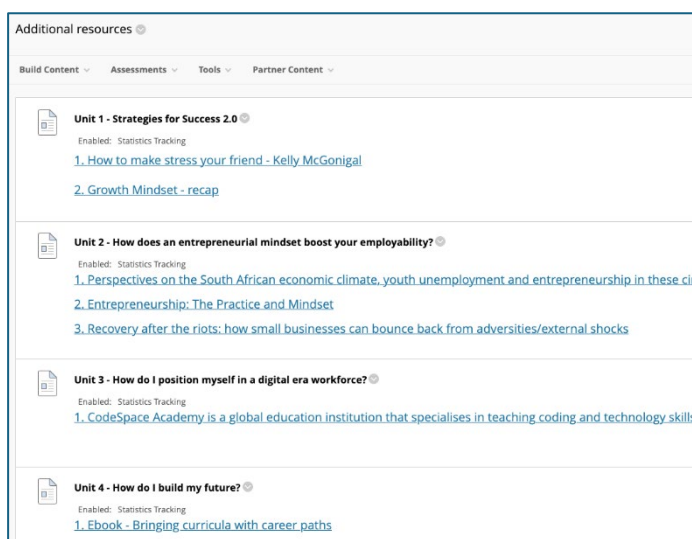


Figure 10: Additional resources for learning enrichment on Blackboard

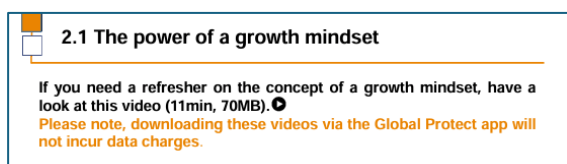


Figure 11: Example of scaffolding the materials from the study guide

While the evaluation provides evidence of designing for diversity, this principle and its value proposition can be made clearer to students. It is thus important to explicitly share key information with students in their orientation class and make this information visible in the FYS materials. Key information includes the advantages of engaging with diverse others to develop as well-rounded students and citizens, and the curriculum’s consideration of the differences in students’ prior knowledge and skill.

Principle 3: Design

The curriculum documents were also analysed against the three design and evaluation criteria for design, as indicated in Table 1.

Figure 12 shows how “the knowledge and skills required for student development and transition are explicit and visible in the learning outcomes”. As per the outcomes, students learn about the skills they need to successfully transition into university, such as computer literacy, study skills, time management, progress tracking, financial literacy, the ability to search for academic resources, written and oral communication, growth mindset, and leadership identity as part of student development.

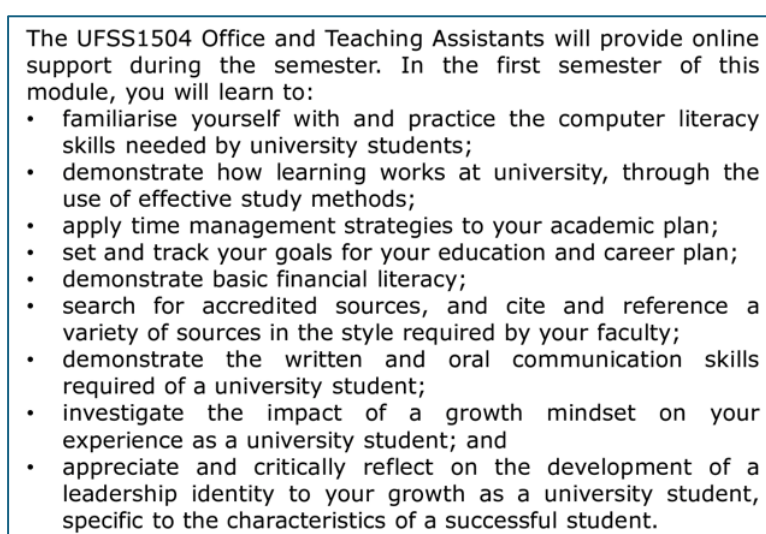


Figure 12: FYS learning outcomes

Figure 13 illustrates the "road map or syllabus of the FYS, which is provided to students so that they are aware of the knowledge and skills they will be gaining". The syllabus details the module description, what is expected of students, the course schedule, what they will learn, and how and when they will be assessed.

	
Module Description Have you thought about your expectations of university, and do you have a plan to navigate this new exciting chapter of your life? There are many students who find the transition from high school to university challenging. The aim of UFSS1504 in the	WHAT YOU WILL LEARN? All of your materials are on Blackboard. We will teach you how to navigate your UFSS1504 module on Blackboard in Orientation, so don't worry too much about this. These are the units we will cover in the first semester:
WHAT IS EXPECTED OF YOU? We want to make sure that you are learning through this module, and that you can apply the skills you learn in UFSS1504 to the rest of your degree programme. To make this happen, there are certain expectations that we have of you:	HOW AND WHEN WILL YOU BE ASSESSED? Quizzes: You are required to complete 1 quiz for each unit, Reflections: You are required to complete 3 reflections during the first semester. The reflections weigh 5%, 10% and 15%
WHAT'S HAPPENING WHEN? There are 8 classes in the first semester that you are required to attend. You can attend synchronously, which means attending live in real time during the 3-day summer school. Once you register, we will email a personalised schedule to you for the summer school classes.	If anything is unclear, please do not hesitate to ask us. We want you to pass this module, so please submit your assessments and contact us if you are struggling. Remember, as per the General

Figure 13: Excerpts from syllabus as a road map for students

In accordance with the final design criterion, "the values and attitudes needed by first-year students to be successful are clearly articulated". Examples of what it takes to be a successful student, such as focusing in class, being open to new ideas, engaging in different modes of delivery, planning for success, reaching out for help, and developing the habits of highly effective people, are provided in the curriculum documents (as seen in Figure 14). However, this could be more clearly stated and provided as a consolidated list of core values and attitudes to be successful. Additionally, the examples are disparate pieces of advice or expectations placed throughout the materials. Their presentation could be improved by making the advice/examples available to students as an infographic that they could save on their devices or print to put up on a bedroom wall.

WHAT IS EXPECTED OF YOU?

We want to make sure that you are learning through this module, **and that you can apply the skills you learn in UFSS1504 to the rest of your degree programme.** To make this happen, there are certain expectations that we have of you:

1. Familiarise yourself with your new online learning environment. Online learning requires discipline, a growth mindset, and the ability to self-study.
2. Keep an eye on the announcements on Blackboard. We will post everything you need to do there.
3. Engage in online classes, videos, questionnaires, polls, activities and discussions. We know that this might not be easy in the beginning, but meaningful learning (the kind of learning that lasts beyond the assessment) requires engagement. Engagement means you have to attend classes and participate actively so that you get the most out of this experience.
4. Be open to learning new ideas – ideas that may be different to your own. Aristotle said that “it is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it”.
5. Focus in your online class, and help your classmates to do the same. You are at university to learn, so make the most of every class you are in.
6. Think about the value of what you are learning. What does it mean to you, how is it relevant to your current situation or future plans? You should internalise what you are learning. Many senior students tell us they wish they had paid more attention and practiced the skills taught in UFSS1504 more because they continue to need these skills well beyond graduation.
7. If you are unable to attend a class synchronously (that means live, in real time) during the 3-day summer school, make sure to catch up asynchronously (in your own time) on Blackboard. Attendance will be monitored in this module – more about that below.

What should you take away from this unit?

Keeping track of your academic progress and planning for success is vital to manage your academic workload during this period of remote learning. If you take control, responsibility and action towards the vision you have for your life and plan and reflect accordingly, you have a better chance at success. You need to reflect on your progress, prioritise your wellbeing, and plan for the future. Remember to reach out to the relevant support services, highlighted throughout this guide, should you need to.



Appendix C: A summary of Habit 3 of Highly Effective People by Stephen Covey

GLOSSARY

Categorized: Put people or things of the same feature into groups.
 Consequently: As a result.
 Consume: To use energy or time especially in large amounts.

“The challenge is not to manage time,
But to manage ourselves”
–Stephen Covey

Figure 14: Values and attitudes to be successful from the syllabus and study guide

For the principle of design, then, this paper has provided examples of how the first two criteria are met by the curriculum of the FYS at the UFS. However, there is room for improvement in the design of the materials related to the values and attitudes students require to be successful at university.

Principle 4: Engagement

After analysing the curriculum documents in light of the principle of design, they were then analysed against the four design and evaluation criteria for engagement, as indicated in Table 1. The first criterion for engagement is that “implementing the FYS includes opportunities for engagement with peers through informal and formal group work activities”. In the case of the FYS at the UFS, there are opportunities for informal group work, as seen in Figure 15. Because the cohort is so large (8, 000+ students), formal group work is challenging to manage and so does not form part of the design of this FYS. However, there is information provided to students about how to navigate formal group work (see Figure 16), albeit without providing students the opportunity to apply it within the FYS. It is, therefore, critical that this skill is reinforced within the rest of the degree programme.

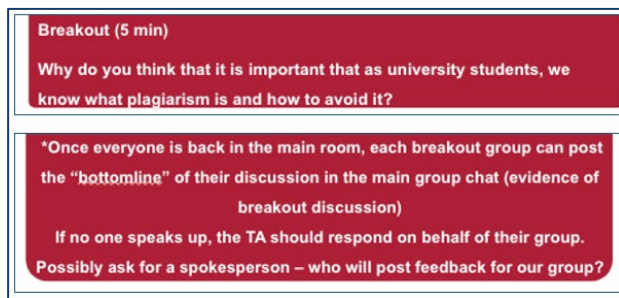


Figure 15: Informal group work illustrated in a lesson plan

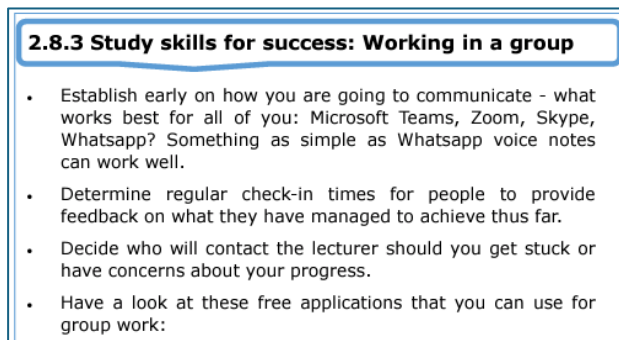


Figure 16: Information on how to work in a group

The second criterion of engagement is that “assessments require students to engage with the content, i.e., does the assessment provide the team with evidence of students’ engagement with successful transition skills?” The FYS at the UFS makes use of integrated design as its curriculum design approach (Fink, 2003, 2011). This approach requires clear alignment between outcomes (what students need to be able to do) and assessments (evidence that students have achieved the outcomes). The approach to curriculum design in the FYS at the UFS aligns well with the second criterion of engagement. In Figure 17, a few examples of assessment questions are provided to demonstrate how students provide evidence of their learning of the following transition skills: how to communicate effectively via email with a lecturer, how to manage their time, how to study effectively at university, and how to recognise the link between their academic programme and their future career. The outcomes of the FYS are aligned with students’ transition needs, and the assessments provide the design team with evidence that students are achieving the outcomes and thus also learning the skills required to transition into university.

2.2. When communicating with your lecturer, it is important to ensure that your communication is clear and well-structured. Below is an example of an email, sent from Beyonce to the UFSS module office, about attendance. a) Based on the etiquette of sending acceptable emails, identify ONE mistake that Beyonce has made in her email to the UFSS1504 Module office. – 1 mark Greetings Can I ask about the attendance, the Friday attendance I attended... – X X UFSS101@ufs.ac.za Greetings Can I ask about the attendance, the Friday attendance I attended class from 08	6. To answer the following question, you are required to apply your knowledge of what a topic sentence is in the SQ3R study reading method. To understand the main idea or point of a paragraph, it is important to identify the topic sentence. TIP: This sentence may not always be the first sentence of a paragraph. According to the SQ3R method, once you have identified the topic sentence, you can turn it into a question to aid in comprehension. a) There is ONE paragraph below, identify the topic sentence AND implement the questioning step of the SQ3R method by turning the topic sentence of the paragraph into a question. – 2 marks <i>"Over 30 years ago, Carol Dweck and her colleagues became interested in students' attitudes about failure. They noticed that some students rebounded while other students seemed devastated by even the smallest setbacks. After studying the behavior of thousands of children, Dr. Dweck coined the terms fixed mindset and growth mindset to describe the underlying beliefs people have about learning and intelligence. When students believe they can get smarter, they understand that effort makes them stronger. Therefore, they put in extra time and effort, and that leads to higher achievement."</i> Delete this grey text and write your answer(s) here.
1.1. Consider the effective learning strategies and healthy habits for academic success in your university journey. Reflect on your current approach to managing your academic and personal life, and then answer the following question: "How does your current routine and mindset align with the strategies and habits mentioned in the unit, and how will incorporating these strategies enhance your university experience and overall success?" Answer the question using the following structure: Describe your current routine and mindset in terms of time management and goal setting. Be specific about the strengths and weaknesses you have identified in your current approach. – 4 marks Discuss 2 strategies and healthy habits in the unit you have or would like to incorporate. Provide concrete examples of how these changes can positively impact your academic performance and well-being. – 4 marks Explain how you plan to minimise potential threats and take advantage of/maximise the opportunities presented by adopting these strategies and habits. – 2 marks	b. Murphey needs assistance in creating a timetable for MODU5814. He wants to allocate 5 days a week to working on this module. Demonstrate your understanding of notional learning hours as per the UFSS module guide and calculate how many hours Murphey should allocate to MODU5814. Show all your calculations. – 4 marks Delete this grey text and write your answer(s) here. 2. Based on your knowledge of time management, identify TWO methods you can use to avoid procrastination- 2 marks Delete this grey text and write your answer(s) here.

Figure 17: Example from assessment of students being required to engage with content

Figure 18 is an example of an excerpt from an assessment, which illustrates how “opportunities are provided (whether through teaching activities or assessments) to help students make links between their personal lives and the knowledge and skills covered in the FYS”. The assessments are set up as reflections with the intention of having students apply the FYS content to their own lives.

3.2. Based on the UFSS1504 content, reflect on your personal journey as a student, using the growth mindset content. Your paragraph must include the following information/answer the following questions: - 5 marks

Figure 18: Excerpt from an assessment

The final criterion of engagement requires that “opportunities are provided for students to discuss their feedback on assessments with staff”. In Figure 19, an example of a student assessment query reminder is provided. However, while students are encouraged to visit the FYS offices during consultation hours or send emails when they have questions, the opportunity for students to discuss their feedback on assessments with staff is not explicit in any of the curriculum documents. This means students may not know that they can discuss assessments with staff, and so might not reach out to do so.

Reminder that the UFSS1504/UFSS1522 Semester 2 Query Period started on 2 November and will end 10 November 2021. The Query Period is there for you to query any of your assessment and attendance marks for the semester. To submit your query, send us an email stating your assessment or attendance query to UFSS101@ufs.ac.za and you will be assisted.

Figure 19: Excerpt from Blackboard related to assessment queries

The above analysis provides evidence of the following aspects that are clearly present in the FYS curriculum: engagement with peers through informal group work, assessments that require students to engage with content that addresses transition needs, opportunities for students to make links between the transition content and their personal lives, and opportunities for students to query assessment marks. However, formal group work is only addressed through teaching students about the principles of group work engagement rather than through active student participation in formal group work in the FYS. Furthermore, the opportunity to discuss assessment feedback with staff can be addressed more explicitly in the syllabus and via the FYS programme's communication channels.

Principle 5: Assessment

Next, the curriculum documents were analysed against the five design and evaluation criteria for assessment, as indicated in Table 1.

In the FYS at the UFS, “students are taught the skills they require to successfully complete assessments at university”. Figure 20 shows an excerpt from the materials shared in class as an example of study- and test-taking tips that are useful for all university assessments.



Figure 20: Excerpt of study- and test-taking tips to be successful at assessments from class material

Another criterion for assessment incorporated into the FYS materials is teaching students “how to manage their time in order to attend to all their assessment activities”. In the example provided (see Figure 21), time management is one of the outcomes of the FYS at the UFS, and so this is explicitly taught in class. Students are taught how to create a daily schedule, incorporating time for academic activities, time for necessary tasks such as sleeping and eating, and time for rest in the form of hobbies or socialising. Students are also taught about why they might procrastinate, as well as how to address it.

2.7.1 Managing your time: Create a daily schedule

Work out a daily schedule for yourself, and share it with your family so that they understand that you have to put time aside to work on your studies. This is an example of what could work for you, but you can edit it to fit in with the times of day that you work best and are most productive. Class A, B and C activities are explained in **Appendix B**.

2.7.2 Managing your time: Procrastination

So if you have figured out your ABC activities and even set up a daily schedule AND a task list, what could go wrong? Well, there is that little problem called procrastination...

We cannot talk about time management without talking about procrastination! This is the number one enemy of managing your time, yet for many of us, procrastination is that friend that

6 THINGS YOU CAN DO TO AVOID PROCRASTINATING

- 1. Use the Pomodoro Method**
- Get a timer and set it for 25 minutes
- 2. Prioritise**
Prioritise your most difficult tasks and

"Procrastination is attitude's natural assassin. There's nothing so fatiguing as an uncompleted task." – William James

Figure 21: Excerpt of lesson about time management from the study guide

The final criterion of the assessment FYCP is that “the FYS consistently provides clear feedback to students on their FYS assessments”. Figure 22 highlights examples of feedback that TAs provide to students on their assessments (the students’ responses are greyed out). Their feedback includes areas for improvement, as well as comments about the student’s performance. The TAs receive detailed training before each marking period to standardise their marking as much as possible. TAs are provided with assessments to mark together as a group and are also moderated during the marking period to ensure students receive well-rounded feedback. An example of feedback guidelines is provided in Figure 23.

Assign Criterion

Unfortunately, no mark was granted because the provided practical example does not relate to your studies. Therefore, refer to computer literacy to gain more insight on digital skills.

Convert to QuickMark

Assign Criterion

Well written.

Figure 22: Examples of feedback provided on assessments

Feedback Guideline:

Dear Teaching Assistants,

Below there are a few guidelines on how to construct feedback to students.

There are 3 things to keep in mind when constructing feedback to students:

1. **Feedback needs to be sufficient in terms of detail and empathy** - Simply stating to the student that they didn't answer the question accordingly doesn't provide them enough information and detail to know what exactly they did wrong. The tone of the feedback given to student needs to communicate care and guidance that you want them to succeed. Therefore, please try to be as empathetic as possible in your feedback.
2. **Feedback needs to be forward-looking** - the student needs to know based on what has been said in the feedback how they can improve in the future.
3. **Feedback needs to be correct and connected to the rubric and marking criteria.** E.g. if the student is asked to rewrite Student X's (scenario) and make it Specific-Measurable-Attainable-Relevant/Realistic-Timely but the student only draws up a SMART goal for themselves, the student cannot be awarded the marks. Additionally, the feedback needs to indicate that the answer did not meet the requirements of the question which is why marks could not be allocated.

You can use the 'formula' below to construct your feedback.

Complete and meaningful feedback has 3 main points:

- it reiterates what the question required.
- It points out where the student went wrong.
- It gives direction on how to improve for the future.

Here is an example: 'Dear student, the question requires that you state the errors made in the example given. Your attempt was good, however, the errors you identified are not in line with the good email etiquette. Which is why I could only award marks for your answer on formal language. You can improve in future by referring to the UFSS Semester 1 guide on page 28.'

The example provided is merely a guideline, the intention of the example is not to suggest that all feedback from TAs should be worded in the same way.

Figure 23: Feedback guidelines provided to TAs as part of their training

The first two criteria, which require the FYS to teach students about how to tackle different types of assessments and how to respond to different kinds of assessment feedback, are not addressed in the FYS at the UFS. That is certainly a gap in the design of the FYS, and clear expectations from different disciplines with regard to discipline-specific assessments and feedback would need to be investigated before it can be adequately covered in the FYS. A thorough investigation is necessary since the FYS is centralised and run as one seminar for all first-year students. The evidence above shows that the other FYCP assessment criteria are sufficiently addressed through the FYS outcomes of time management and study skills, as well as through the processes in place to ensure clear feedback is provided on assessments.

Principle 6: Evaluation and Monitoring

Finally, the curriculum documents were analysed against the two design and evaluation criteria for evaluation and monitoring, as indicated in Table 1.

The first criterion of this FYCP requires that “data gathered at admission (such as biographical data, AP scores, and school quintile) and any other relevant sources inform the design of the FYS”. As the FYS at the UFS is but one of many initiatives run out of the CTL to support student success, its design is informed by data gathered at admission and through the student engagement surveys conducted by CTL. In Figure 24, some examples of this data, such as first-generation status, AP score, and school quintile, are depicted.

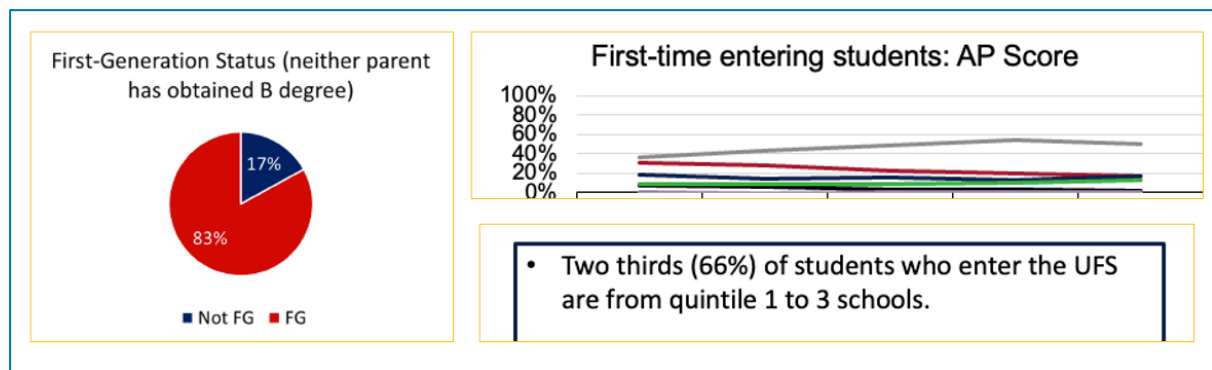


Figure 24: Biographical and cohort data that informs the design of the FYS

The second criterion of evaluation and monitoring looks at “how data is collected to evaluate the FYS and inform changes in the curriculum design and execution”. In the FYS at the UFS, students are encouraged to complete a module evaluation at the end of each semester, and they are also invited to participate in focus groups. In Figure 25, an example is provided of such an invitation posted as an announcement on Blackboard. In addition, TAs provide feedback on their experience of facilitating classes, and they, too, are evaluated on their facilitation of the content and receive reports. Furthermore, the moderation of assessments provides valuable data on how students are engaging with the skills taught in the FYS. Finally, trends in queries and students’ communicated experiences via email and consultations result in quick responses and edits to the materials if necessary. This data is collected as part of an action learning and action research cycle (ALAR) to continuously inform and improve the design of the FYS (Zuber-Skerritt and Wood, 2019). The ALAR cycle allows for a pragmatic approach to evaluation and monitoring to attend to project needs, i.e., problems are identified, solutions are generated and implemented, and this is followed by evidence-based reflection and the modification of planning and/or practices.

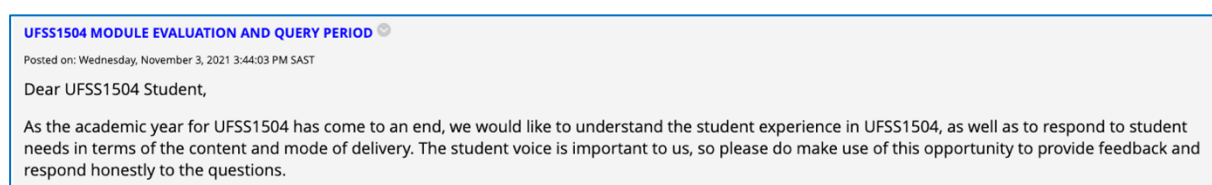


Figure 25: Blackboard announcement inviting students to participate in the module evaluation

The FYCP of evaluation and monitoring is an intentional part of the design of this FYS and is well-implemented. Both evaluation and monitoring criteria, i.e., the type of data collected and how it is used to inform the design of the FYS, are therefore met.

CONCLUSION

This paper considered the impact of designing and evaluating a student transition FYS programme. If students are optimally supported in their first year to cope with the changes they experience at university, then their chances of retention are higher. Thus, the role that student support plays is important, and ultimately, retention in the first year has a domino effect on graduation and students' future social mobility. The impetus, then, to design student success support programmes and to do so from an evidence-based approach cannot be further emphasised. In this paper, the FYS at the UFS was a case study of how the FYCPs could be used to evaluate the design of an FYS. However, the principles used here and the overarching narrative of optimising design to pro-actively support student transition and success are also valid when looking at an institutional-level design of first-year support. In addition to making the case for using the FYCPs as a framework to inform the design and evaluation of FYS programmes, this paper also contributes to the FYE literature base and to first-year student support in South Africa and in other institutions with similar contexts.

The findings of this study suggest that there are additional design and evaluation criteria for the FYCPs that may be considered in the South African context and in contexts with similar challenges. These additional design and evaluation criteria are:

- students must acquire the digital skills necessary to successfully engage with materials, staff, and peers (under the transition principle);
- the design of content about academic processes should be responsive to students' prior knowledge (under the transition principle); and
- students should learn about the advantages of diverse perspectives, backgrounds, worldviews, and skills by engaging in group work (under the diversity principle).

Furthermore, while this study investigated all the FYCPs in one FYS programme, based on its hybrid nature, its integration into the curriculum of degree programmes, as well as its impact at scale, it is possible that these principles could be mapped across all first-year support initiatives in an institution. The intention of such an approach would be to remove duplication, strengthen reinforcement, and identify gaps that could be addressed. Such an approach could also be used to identify which spaces are best-suited to address any gaps in the student support curriculum. Additionally, publications of such work would allow for comparisons of different implementation approaches. The critical success factors of this approach would be institution-wide collaboration, consultation, and engagement, with a focus on the students' experience of first-year support and its resulting impact on retention and success.

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