



Leveraging on the enabling factors for student success in support programmes at a South African university

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Background of the study

- Widening participation increased access of the historically excluded groups into universities i.e. from 500 000 in 1994 to 1 138 011 students in 2021 (CHE, 2023).
- First-generation students, that is, first in their families to enroll into tertiary education, constitute 71% of the total enrolment in South African universities and from that proportion 76% are African students (Mgqwashu, 2023).
- First-generation students underperform compared to the traditional students.
- African students underperform compared to the traditional students e.g. the success rate for the 2016 cohort was 68% for Africans, 75% Coloured, 76% Indian and 85% White in 2021 (CHE, 2023).
- For the 3-year degrees programmes, the accumulative throughput for a 2016 cohort (excluding UNISA) was 60% for African students and 67% for White students while dropout rate was 40% for African students and 33% for White students (CHE, 2023).
- First-generation students experience multiple challenges that prevent them from graduating.



Problem statement

- Although, universities have implemented programmes to address challenges students face, interventions have not yielded the expected outcomes.
- Interventions could have ignored the valuable strengths and attributes that the first-generation students have.
- Limited studies on the strengths and resources first-generation students bring into the university.
- Yet, some studies have demonstrated that the marginalised and first-generation students are resilient in their studies, can navigate the unfamiliar university spaces, and develop support social networks for their success (Kapp et. al, 2014; Wilson-Strydom 2017; Mathebula, 2019).
- By leveraging on the strengths and resources they have, universities can improve on the success first-generation students.

Aim of study: To explore the factors that enable first-generation students to succeed in South African universities

Research questions:

- *What are the enabling factors for students to succeed in universities within the context of systemic challenges they encounter?*
- *How can the universities leverage on the enabling factors to improve student success?*

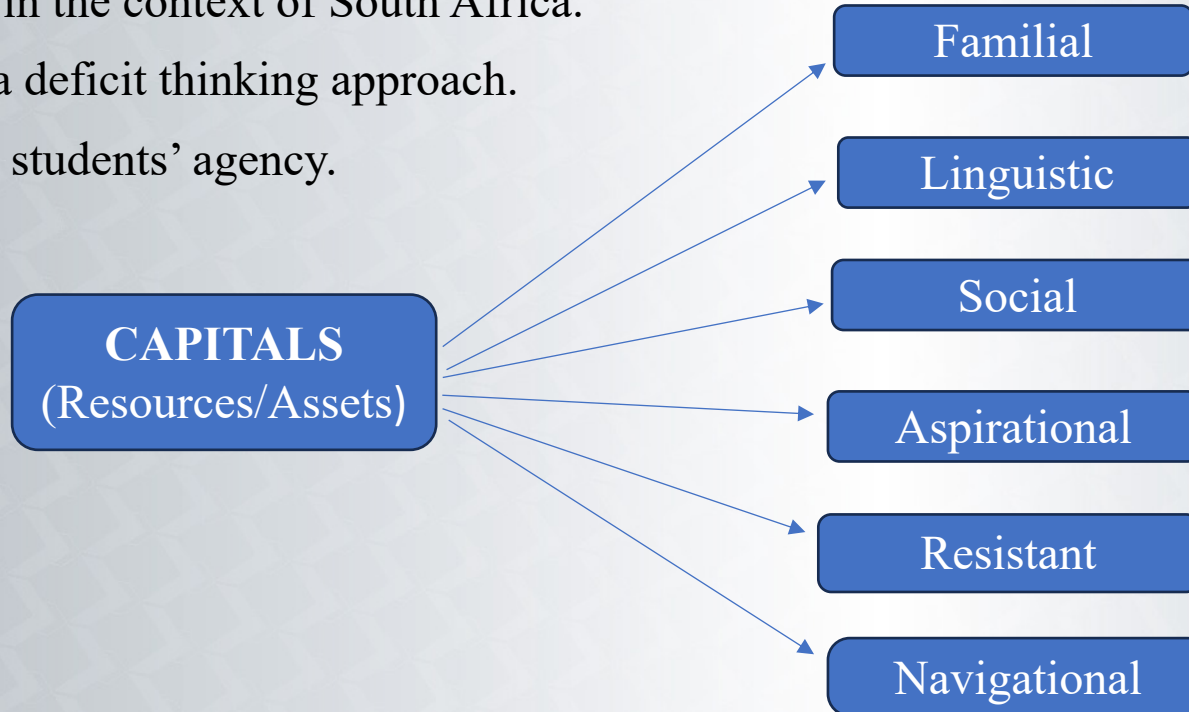


Literature review

- Most studies concentrate on factors that contribute to failure of first-generation students.
 - External factors: underpreparedness due to poor schooling and inadequate information about universities and careers (Wilson-Strydom, 2015; Rogan & Reynolds, 2016; Taylor & Yu, 2017).
 - Internal factors: failure to adjust to the university environment, lack of conducive accommodation, failure to understand the language of instruction, inability to use technology, inadequate finances for transport and living expenses (Lewin & Mawoyo 2014; Wilson-Strydom, Strydom & Hen-Boisen, 2016; Gore, 2021; 2022).
 - Underpreparedness of universities to accommodate first-generation students i.e. call to decolonise the teaching methods, curricular and university spaces (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2015; Mbembe, 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020).
 - **Intersectionality of factors:** Black first-generation students living far away of the campus experience multiple vulnerabilities, which has a cumulative effect in diminishing their wellbeing and opportunities to succeed (Wilson-Strydom, Strydom & Hen-Boisen, 2016; Gore & Walker, 2020).
- Through focusing only on these factors, support programmes might have unintendedly viewed the first-generation students as **lacking** (Smit, 2012; Mathebula, 2019).
- **Deficit approach:** framed as “*cultural deprivation or inadequate socialization... and at-risk students*” (Smit, 2012, 370).
- **Deficiency:** failing students have inadequacies e.g. cognitive, motivational, cultural or familial background. (Valencia 1997).
- Perpetuation of disadvantage through blaming the victims, continuation of stereotypes, normalises status-quo, and results in inadequate support from university (Valencia, 1997; Smit, 2012; Mathebula, 2019).

Yosso (1995) Cultural Capital Theory

- First-generation students have a wealth of resources that they bring into the university.
- When universities recognise these resources and assets (attributes) through student support programmes, first-generation students are likely to succeed (Yosso 1995)
- Benefits of employing Yosso (1995) Cultural Capital Theory include:
 - Applicable in the context of South Africa.
 - Shift from a deficit thinking approach.
 - Recognises students' agency.



Methodology

METHODOLOGY

(Qualitative)

RESEARCH METHODS

**(5 Focus Group Discussions + 15
In-depth Interviews)**

TARGET GROUP

(Final-year students)

PURPOSIVE SAMPLING

**(8 Modules from all university's
faculties-Based on module
performance)**

ALL INCLUSIVE SAMPLING

**(Invited all first-generation
students)**

- Data descriptively and conceptually coded.
- Data thematically analysed with the aid of NVivo 14, a qualitative software.
- Study ethically approved
- Strict adherence to ethics e.g. voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality



Social Capital- *Belonging to groups*

- Social and religious groups helped students to improve their wellbeing.

I think having positive relationship with our peers might help if we are depressed because if we talk with someone who is it at our age group, we are more open to them than we when we talk to lecturers. [...] I think also the environment being able to share space with peers who have done this thing before, who have completed the academic year before, being able to have an interaction with them having to be guided by them and giving you basically motivation and tips on how to tackle certain issues (FGD 3, Participant 2, Male, Faculty of Theology).

- Belonging to social groups fostered academic support

Because sometimes you do not understand things, if you have your peers or classmates or people who know about what you are doing or the course that you are doing, it is important to keep such connections because it helps you grow. If you know something you have to share information with others, you should not be selfish or shy because after all that degree will also be shy to be finished on time (FGD 1, Participant 3, Female, Faculty of Economic & Management Sciences).



Aspirational capital

- Career goals: Securing high paying jobs and improving their own socio-economic status and that of their families (social mobility).

Aspect that helps us to succeed as students is the bigger picture. The reason why we started with everything, I believe that there's a reason why each of us started with the course and we have a vision that we see for ourselves. So, if I give up now. So, what was the reason for starting? The factor that keeps me going is where I see myself in the future despite things that are happening around me. It's just that one goal that I want to reach. (FGD 5, Participant 5, female, Faculty of Humanities)

Contributing to their communities: working with development programmes in their communities and giving information about career paths in schools.



Navigational Capital- *Adaptability*

- Being to adjust to the university's environment and meet the expectations from the skills gained through navigating hardships and challenging situations from their background.
- Learnt to study independently contrary to their schooling experience where they depended on teachers.
- Although not exposed to technology during schooling, students were able to use technology.

And then you make sure that you also go through your eFundi [LMS]. And as now we're going to write exams, you make sure you will study upfront, you don't wait for lecturer to tell you when to start. You have to make sure that you study. [...] You need to make sure that you plan your work. Because if you jump one day without accessing it (eFundi), you will lose a lot of information.
(Indepth Interview, Participant 9, Male, Faculty of Education.)



Resistance capital- *Perseverance*

- Resilient when faced with challenges.
- Students bounced back after failing some modules.
- Enrolled again after having dropped out.

And then I had to drop out because of like I didn't have funding. [...] So right now I'm here back. Things are going well so far for me. So hopefully I'll be competing my degree this year. (In depth Interview, Participant 1, Male, Faculty of Humanities).

So, I am personally very undefeated, I try, by all means to set priorities and know why I'm here. I'm like, okay, these are the challenges, if anything, the challenges are not setting me off, they're pushing me to do better to be greater. So, I think the challenges have motivated me to be the kind of student that I am today, or to achieve great things in this university. (In depth Interview, Participant 7, Male, Faculty of Natural and Agriculture Sciences)



Motivation

- Motivated and committed to their studies.
- Motivated by role models, friends and their poor socio-economic backgrounds.

As people, we come from very unbalanced homes. Sometimes when you think, should I fail this degree or not be able to get this degree, then it won't be good at home. Or I'm the only person to go to university for the first time, or I'm going to be the breadwinner of my family. So, despite the challenges that I have, I have to repeat this module, get over it so that I can graduate and maybe go find a job to feed my family. So, I feel like socio economic challenges also play a factor in how someone is determined to do something. (In-depth Interview, Participant 1: Female, Faculty of Law)

Having a degree was perceived as crucial for one to access employment and for social mobility.



Self-Discipline

- Students' ability to control their desires, emotions and thoughts and align themselves with their life goals.
- Students were able to balance their academic work and social activities.

What we do is we have a balanced life, what we live is academic life and the social life. The academic life is from Monday to Friday so that means in cycle of 7 days I have free time to party on a Friday night. [...] Discipline now has to play a major role because if you are not disciplined you can go anywhere, stay anywhere or even transfer but if you are not disciplined you will not get the results that you need. FGD 1: Participant 2, Female, Programme, Faculty of Law)



Resourcefulness

- Ability to thrive on the limited resources they had e.g. textbooks, finances and inadequate data in their off-campus accommodation.

And then I think also the ability to be resourceful. More often than not, when it comes to things for engineering, we spend the majority of your third year doing projects whether it's assignments to do a simulation or it's an assignment to go and do lab work. So, being able to be resourceful whether you have reference documents that you can rely on, that are more or less the same, like if you have last year's practical, and the practical that you are doing this year is the same. (In depth Interview, Participant 12, Male, Faculty of Engineering)

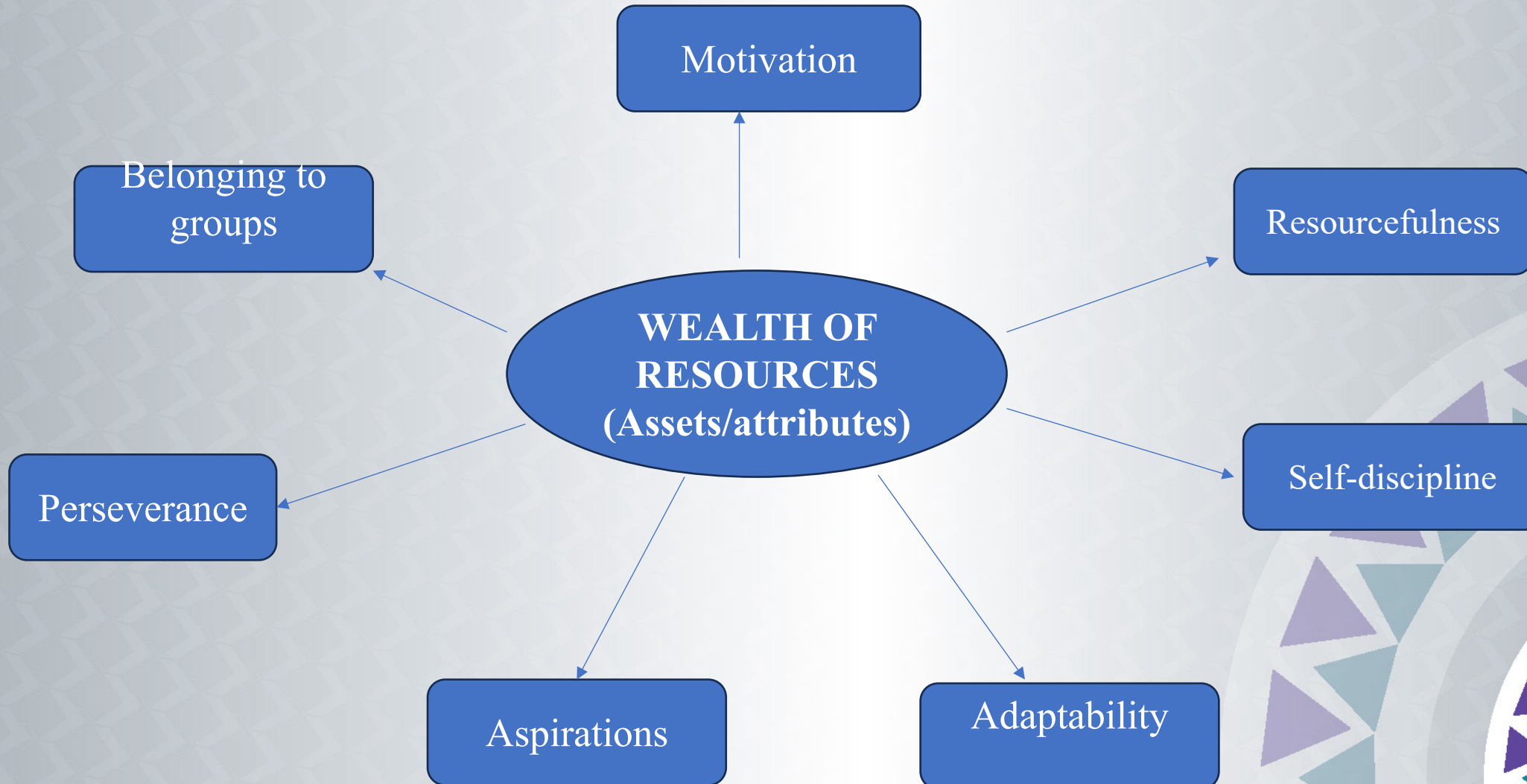


Discussion of findings

- ***Wealth of resources***: motivation, aspirations, perseverance, belongingness to social groups, resourcefulness, self-discipline, and adaptability.
- ***Agency***: Proactive and responsible for their learning, creating social networks for social and academic support, being resolute to achieve their goals, maximising on available resources, and navigating and negotiating the complex university systems.
- While helpful, Yosso's theory (2005) has some limitations in the context of South Africa:
 - Familial and linguistic capitals did not explicitly emerge from the student data.
 - Motivation, self-discipline and resourcefulness emerged strongly as additional assets.
- Study proposes the ***Expanded framework for the enabling factors to success of first-generation students***.



Expanded framework for enabling factors to the success of first-generation students



Contribution of the study and recommendations

- **Practical implications:** for university management, practioners, and researchers to consider the wealth of resources first-generation students bring to the university when designing student support interventions.
- **Theoretical contribution:** Proposed framework for enabling the first-generations student succeed that recognizes motivation, resourcefulness and self-discipline.
- **Recommendations:**
 - Encouraging and helping students to thrive within the context of available resources at the campus to promote resourcefulness.
 - Fostering self-discipline through peer mentorship programmes for students to remain resolute on their goals.
 - Implement activities that enhance student motivation.
 - Create platforms for and encouraging students to build social networks and participate in groups events.
 - Giving a platform for first-generation graduates to share their experiences with the first-year students during orientation to help them persevere.
 - Raising aspirations through programmes such as career guidance



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