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# UNDERSTANDING THE MULTIFACETED JOURNEY OF STUDENT SUCCESS: INSIGHTS FROM A PROGRAMME AT THE DURBAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY



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# INTRODUCTION

The transition from high school to university and ultimately graduating are pivotal moments in a person's life.

This journey is a complex one navigating a challenging path toward success and realizing one's potential.

It marks the beginning of a journey filled with academic challenges, personal growth in the pursuit of career aspirations.

"Although a sense of belonging may feel intangible, when we feel we are in the place we are meant to be, and with people we are meant to be with, it feels good" (West, 2022).



# INTRODUCTION

The journey from first year to graduation presents a series of challenges that can impede academic success and personal fulfillment.

Student engagement is one avenue to explore how the experiences within and beyond the classroom impact students' persistence behaviors (Schreiber and Yu 2016)

“The time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of university and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities” (Kuh 2009).







# RESEARCH QUESTION



This research focuses on understanding the multi-faceted journey of BIM students' as they navigate their journey to graduation.

## Research Question:

What are the enabling and constraining factors that students encounter in their journey to graduation?

# LITERATURE REVIEW

**Student success** is defined as “enhanced student learning with a view to increasing the number of graduates with attributes that are personally, professionally and socially valuable” (CHE, 2014:1)

Beyond academics and career preparation, the journey to becoming a graduate fosters personal growth (Hunter, Sandra, Laursen and Seymour 2006; Silva-Banks, 2022).

It encourages self-discovery, independence, and critical thinking (Bowering *et al.*, 2020)

Graduates often emerge with a clearer sense of their values, goals, and purpose. The support system, including family, friends, lecturers, mentors, and peers, plays a vital role in a graduate's journey (Demetriou *et al.*, 2017).

A strong support network can provide emotional sustenance during challenging times and celebrate achievements.





# LITERATURE REVIEW

The journey to becoming a graduate is multifaceted and intended to be a transformative experience (Thomas *et al.* 2023).

Research and literature on this topic highlight several key aspects of this journey, including personal growth, the development of critical thinking skills, and the importance of a strong support network.

Student success encompasses more than just academic achievement; it involves the holistic development of individuals (Weatherton and Schussler 2021).

Personal development includes aspects such as self-awareness, emotional intelligence, resilience, and goal setting (Silva-Banks 2022)

Studies have shown that effective time management and stress-coping strategies are essential for success in this phase.

# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study uses Tinto's model as a lens to analyze and understand the factors influencing student success. Tinto's model emphasizes the importance of interaction and integration as key elements in student persistence and success.

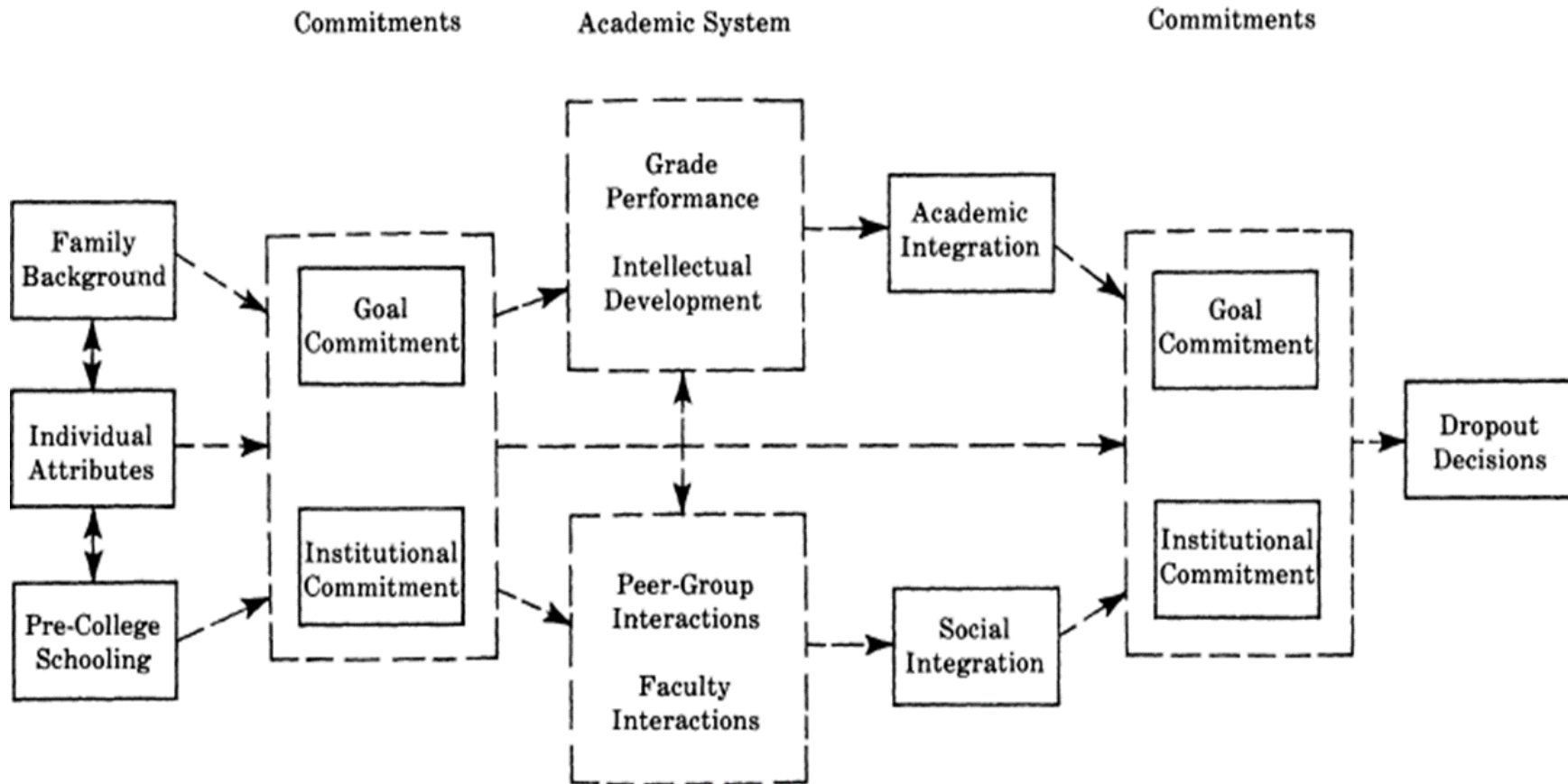
The model has also been instrumental in predicting high priority students. Chrysikos, Ahmed and Ward (2017) mentioned three main conditions, which need to be met in order to achieve student persistence.

Students should have access to retention programme, which aim to support them rather than the institution.

Retention programme need to not only focus on a particular student population, such as low-income or minority students, but instead focus on all students.

A successful retention programme must offer a degree of integration for students in both social and academic communities.

# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK



Tinto's (1975 & 1993) Model of Dropout for College Students

# METHODOLOGY

An interpretative qualitative approach is used in this research to understand the deeper meanings and complexities of human experiences.

This approach focuses on exploring how individuals interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world around them.

In this study, the approach was used to look into the multifaceted journey of becoming a graduate.

It aims to uncover the underlying factors influencing students' success, the obstacles they encounter, and the strategies they use to overcome these challenges.

Data was gathered through focus group interviews discussions with **85 students** from the BIM programme - PMB (first to third year) and **ten staff members** who lecture on the BIM programme.

The data was thematically analysed.



# RESEARCH GAP

This is the first research on student success factors within the Business and Information Management qualification at Durban University of Technology.

While there is some existing research on student success in higher education in general, there is a lack of specific studies that focus on the unique challenges and enabling factors within this specific programme at the DUT.

Additionally, most existing studies may not consider the perspectives and voices of the students themselves.

Therefore, this research aims to bridge this gap by investigating the unique challenges and opportunities that students grapple with the BIM programme, and how these factors affect their overall success.

# FINDINGS - ENABLING FACTORS

## □ STUDENT SUPPORT

Tinto (1975, 1993), asserts that effective support systems are crucial for student retention and success, as they help students integrate academically and socially into the college environment.

- ✓ The First-Year Student Experience
- ✓ Tutorial programmes and Residence Educational Programmes
- ✓ Well-being - physical and psychological
- ✓ Emotions – in good spirits - engagement enhanced
- ✓ Self-efficacy- student's background, skills and previous learning experiences were important in determining task specific
- ✓ Belonging - Friendships were central to most students' sense of belonging

# FINDINGS - ENABLING FACTORS

## Student Counselling Services

- Availability of student counselling services - critical as they assist student manage stress, anxiety and other personal issues

## Student Clubs and Societies

Students enrolled in student clubs invest students' powers and enable them to come up with:

- ✓ creative ideas,
- ✓ improves students' performance in academic areas,

## The Writing Centre

Interconnectivity of student success and community engagement including activities such as tutor-led student reading and discussion groups.

## Extra Classes

- ✓ Extra classes advocates - students must feel comfortable in the classroom - be beneficiaries to complete and effective curricula delivery.

# FINDINGS - ENABLING FACTORS

## Approachable and Supportive Lecturers

- ✓ Show positive warmth towards the student through their behavior
- ✓ Respect
- ✓ being a good listener
- ✓ having a pleasant personality and being good at dealing with people
- ✓ class preparation and responsibility, and punctuality
- ✓ encouraging the participation and involvement of the students, and employing a varied methodology adapted to the student
- ✓ establishing relationships between concepts and topics
- ✓ Clarity being provided to students, the use of practical and real examples ,

## Spirituality and Sense of Belonging

- ✓ *Matters related to spirituality and a sense of belonging were also cited as being important (Student Christian Movement, etc.) – for spiritual upliftment.*
- ✓ *Belonging to clubs and societies*



# FINDINGS: **CONSTRAINING FACTORS**

## Study Material

*"At times study guides and materials are not provided."*

## Pedagogy

*" Staff are reading from their slides and are not explaining ..."*

✓ Active learning can be enabled by a combination of PowerPoint slides, videos, 'chalk and talk' as well as practical demonstrations.

Using a variety of pedagogic devices could also encourage a deep approach to learning.

The Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) reports that "access to high-quality study materials significantly enhances students' ability to understand course content and perform well academically" (HEPI, 2019).

# FINDINGS... **CONSTRAINING FACTORS**

## Poor Planning

*"The semester started with some modules not having lecturers..."*

- Adamu (2021) and Sarkinfada (2016) as cited by Ogunode et al. (2024) noted - major role of academic staff in the universities is curriculum implementation.

## Inadequate Lab Space

*"There is a total of 130 first-year students and yet the computer lab can only accommodate 30 students."*

Yunita et al. (2024) - infrastructure plays very important role in effective learning.

Infrastructure - crucial element of learning and the attainment of students' academic goals..

"...overcrowded lab facilities can hinder the learning process, reduce the quality of education, and limit students' ability to gain practical skills" (Brooks, 2011).

# FINDINGS... **CONSTRAINING FACTORS**

## Assessment

*“I struggled to transition from multiple choice questions to long-form questions”*

- MCQ assessments - encourage surface learning strategies, versus essay questions
- Challenges to online learning - academic dishonesty, - lack of infrastructure, achievement of the learning outcomes, and students’ commitment to submitting assessments.

## Assessment Schedule

*“Too many assessments are due on the same date, creating confusion and high stress levels among students.”*

# FINDINGS... **CONSTRAINING FACTORS**

## High Pressure and Expectations

*“High pressure from assignments, tests, and social expectations creates significant stress.”*

- Students - competing responsibilities such as work, children, and family responsibilities often struggle with academic expectations (Brownson et al. 2016; Moore and Greenland 2017; Xuereb 2014).

## Challenges with Group Work

*“Working in groups can be difficult due to differing personalities and levels of cooperation.”*

- Stanley and Zhang 2020 - Collaborative group work (CGW) - recognised as a powerful tool in education to enhance student engagement and learning
- Group work in assessment - does not allow for students to be graded at the individual level (Sridharan, Tai, and Boud 2019)
- Expressed dissatisfaction that group tasks are not designed in such a way that each student’s individual contributions are ‘fairly’ graded (Glenn 2009).



# FINDINGS...**CONSTRAINING FACTORS**

## Institutional Challenges

### Transport and Logistics

*"Bus times are not in line with their timetable. Insourced and outsourced residences have different bus times."*

### Library Hours

*"The library hours are not aligned to the needs of the students."*

### Cafeteria

*"No provision made for students."*

### Data Provision

*"There is no Data provision."*

### Safety

*"Safety on campus and at residence." (Uyinene's murder case – 2019)*

# FINDINGS... **CONSTRAINING FACTORS**

## Personal challenges

### **Adapting to Campus Life**

*"Students come from different backgrounds and are now getting exposed to a new environment and some struggle to adapt."*

### **Spirituality and Sense of Belonging**

*Matters related to spirituality and a sense of belonging were also cited as being important (Student Christian Movement, etc.) – for spiritual upliftment.*

### **Depression and Loneliness**

*“Some were missing home which resulted in depression and not attaining the required grades”.*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## **Review Institutional Policies and Support Structures**

Evaluate the university's existing policies and support systems to identify areas where improvements can be made. Ensure that the institution is creating an environment that enables student success.

## **Address Financial Constraints**

Since financial constraints are a significant issue, the faculty should consider creating more scholarships, grants, or work-study programmes/internships to assist students with their financial burdens.

## **Enhance Student Support Services**

Enhance academic advising, counselling, and mentorship programmes to provide students with the guidance and support they need to excel in their studies.

## **Staff Development**

Invest in professional development for staff to ensure they are using effective teaching methods and providing students with the support they need.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## **Promote a Growth Mindset**

Promote a growth mindset among students, encouraging them to embrace challenges, persevere through difficulties, and see failures as opportunities for learning.

## **Foster a Sense of Belonging**

Create a sense of community and belonging among students, as this can have a positive impact on motivation and success.

## **Enhance Access to Technological Resources**

Ensure that students have access to the latest technology and online resources to support their learning, especially in a field like Information Management.

## **Peer Support Programmes**

Establish peer mentorship programmes where more experienced students can guide and support newer students.



# HIGH IMPACT PRACTICES

**First -year student experience (FYSE)** - has assisted first year students to transition to university life;

**Technology for Learning (TFL)** - provide just- in time training for students in using technology;

**Student engagement strategies** (blended learning and face-face engagement strategies)

**A mentorship programme** is being finalised to be rolled out to BIM students.

**Innovative teaching and learning** using project-based learning and design thinking – to help students make the connection between disciplinary knowledge and the world of work; and

**Engagement with staff** generated key implications for practice centered around transforming pedagogies, student development, curriculum design and infrastructure;

# CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the journey to becoming a graduate is a profound and impactful experience that shapes individuals and societies alike.

By understanding the and recognising the significance of this journey, we can better appreciate the complexities and opportunities it presents.

As students navigate the path to success and beyond, we must continue to prioritise the provision of support systems that empower students to achieve their full potential.

It is envisaged that the findings from this study will assist the university in being better prepared to enable student success.

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