

**THE IDENTIFICATION OF PSYCHO-EDUCATIONAL FACTORS
THAT INHIBIT FIRST YEAR STUDENT PERFORMANCE**

by

ROSEMARY JOYCE EXNER

submitted in accordance with the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in the subject

PSYCHOLOGY OF EDUCATION

at the

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

PROMOTER: Dr I STRYDOM

JUNE 2003

Student number: **216-217-2**

I declare that

THE IDENTIFICATION OF PSYCHO-EDUCATIONAL FACTORS THAT INHIBIT FIRST YEAR STUDENT PERFORMANCE is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

.....
SIGNATURE
(Mrs R J EXNER)

.....
DATE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With gratitude to Him who has inspired and guided me, I thank the following with sincerity:

- Dr. Irene Strydom my promoter, for your guidance, unfailing encouragement and enthusiasm shown throughout this research study
- Moya, for your deft editing expertise
- Karlien, for your attentive and literary support
- Neil, for your invaluable help on the statistical side
- Anita, for having shared the research experience with me
- my colleagues who have shown such interest in the project
- my students for having provided the opportunity to make a difference
- our parents, Bill, Joyce, Herbert and Sophie for continual love and support
- our sons Ross, Justin and Nicholas for keeping my feet on the ground
- our family and friends for all the encouragement
- and my husband Vic who having walked this road before me, has supported, encouraged and helped me to keep focused on the goalpost.

SUMMARY

THE IDENTIFICATION OF PSYCHO-EDUCATIONAL FACTORS THAT INHIBIT FIRST YEAR STUDENT PERFORMANCE

BY: R.J. EXNER

DEGREE: DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

SUBJECT: PSYCHOLOGY OF EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY: UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

PROMOTER: DR. IRENE STRYDOM

Each new student arriving at the university or college brings an assortment of expectations, different types and levels of academic competency, different levels of psychological well-being, a variety of attitudes, values and divergent life experiences. Each adjusts at his or her own rate and experiences life as a student in unique ways.

The focus of this study is on the problems that are encountered by the first year student on arrival at the institution and throughout the course of his or her first year studies. Using both qualitative and quantitative research methods that include work-shopping many issues, a questionnaire and focus group interviews, this triangulation of data-collection techniques has helped to provide a rich and deep exploration of the perceived problem areas.

The study examines various factors that are perceived as limiting the potential performance and achievement of the student, specifically academic aspects and those factors and circumstances that affect psychological well-being. The psycho-educational issues found to be perceived as problematic by both students and staff members are a lack of preparation and insufficient

academic competencies that are necessary for successful tertiary education. Of critical concern with the resultant necessity of immediate intervention, are the lack of accountability and a fear of failure with concomitant anxiety.

Issues other than psycho-educational problem areas are highlighted such as economic and social variables. Although not part of the study, issues such as lack of finance and the impact of HIV/AIDS cannot be ignored as they may have a possible detrimental effect on first year student achievement.

As academic competency development and psychological well-being are but two areas of concern within the *gestalt* of student development, the study is conducted from a theoretical stance that embraces holistic student development. It is in this light of developing the student as a totality that an intervention programme is suggested, affording the new student many opportunities to develop all facets of his being.

KEY TERMS

Academic achievement; Academic failure; College freshman; Dropout; Higher education; Psycho-educational; Psycho-social; Student adjustment; Student development; Underachievement.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1	INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY	
1.1	INTRODUCTION	1
1.2	AWARENESS OF THE PROBLEM AND THE PROBLEM STATEMENT	3
1.3	DEMARICATION OF THE RESEARCH TERRAIN	6
1.4	AIM OF THE STUDY	7
1.5	METHOD OF INVESTIGATION	7
1.5.1	Literature study	8
1.5.2	Workshops	12
1.5.3	The questionnaire	12
1.5.4	Pilot testing	13
1.5.5	Questionnaire feedback	13
1.5.6	Individual therapy and / or group counselling	13
1.5.7	Focus group interviews	14
1.5.8	Analysis of data	14
1.5.8.1	<i>The workshops</i>	14
1.5.8.2	<i>The questionnaire</i>	15
1.5.8.3	<i>The focus group interview</i>	15
1.5.8.4	<i>Combined quantitative and qualitative approach</i>	15
1.5.9	Development of the therapeutic model	16
1.6	EXPLANATION OF TERMS USED	16
1.6.1	First-year student	17
1.6.2	Student development theory	17
1.6.3	Psychological	17
1.6.4	Educational	18
1.6.5	Psycho-educational	18
1.6.6	Factors	18
1.6.7	Inhibit	19
1.6.8	Performance	19
1.6.9	Therapeutic model	20
1.7	PLANNING THE STUDY	20

1.7.1	Chapter two	20
1.7.2	Chapter three	20
1.7.3	Chapter four	20
1.7.4	Chapter five	20
1.7.5	Chapter six	21
1.7.6	Chapter seven	21
1.8	CONCLUSION	21

CHAPTER TWO THE THEORY OF STUDENT DEVELOPMENT

2.1	INTRODUCTION	22
2.2	THE TERM “STUDENT DEVELOPMENT”	22
2.3	A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE MAIN STUDENT DEVELOPMENT THEORIES	24
2.4	THE PURPOSE OF USING A SPECIFIC BASIS FOR THE STUDY	28
2.5	CHICKERING’S SEVEN VECTOR THEORY OF STUDENT DEVELOPMENT	28
2.5.1	Vector One Developing competence	30
2.5.1.1	<i>Intellectual competence</i>	31
2.5.1.2	<i>Physical and manual competence</i>	31
2.5.1.3	<i>Interpersonal competence</i>	31
2.5.2	Vector Two Managing emotions	32
2.5.2.1	<i>Recognition and acceptance of emotions</i>	32
2.5.2.2	<i>Becoming more aware of and expressing emotions</i>	34
2.5.2.3	<i>The exercising of flexible emotional control</i>	35
2.5.3	Vector Three Moving through autonomy towards interdependence	36
2.5.3.1	<i>Emotional independence</i>	36
2.5.3.2	<i>Instrumental independence</i>	36
2.5.3.3	<i>Interdependence</i>	37
2.5.4	Vector Four Developing mature interpersonal relationships	38
2.5.4.1	<i>Tolerance of difference appreciation</i>	38
2.5.4.2	<i>Establishing intimacy</i>	39
2.5.5	Vector Five Establishing identity	40
2.5.5.1	<i>Comfort with body and appearance</i>	42
2.5.5.2	<i>Comfort with gender and sexual orientation</i>	42

2.5.5.3	<i>Sense of self in social, historical and cultural context</i>	43
2.5.5.4	<i>Clarification of self-concept through roles and lifestyles</i>	43
2.5.5.5	<i>Sense of self in response to feedback from valued others</i>	43
2.5.5.6	<i>Self-acceptance and self-esteem</i>	43
2.5.5.7	<i>Personal stability and integration</i>	44
2.5.6	Vector Six Developing purpose	44
2.5.6.1	<i>Vocational plans and dreams</i>	45
2.5.6.2	<i>Personal interests</i>	46
2.5.6.3	<i>Interpersonal and family commitments</i>	46
2.5.6.4	<i>Intentionality</i>	47
2.5.7	Vector Seven Developing integrity	47
2.5.7.1	<i>Humanising values</i>	48
2.5.7.2	<i>Personalising values</i>	49
2.5.7.3	<i>Developing congruence</i>	50
2.6	CONCLUSION	52

CHAPTER THREE FIRST YEAR STUDENT ADJUSTMENT AND PERFORMANCE ISSUES

3.1	INTRODUCTION	53
3.2	FIRST YEAR STUDENT ADJUSTMENT ISSUES	54
3.2.1	Introduction	54
3.2.2	Competency issues	54
3.2.2.1	<i>Time management</i>	55
3.2.2.2	<i>Teaching style as an aid to understanding</i>	55
3.2.2.3	<i>Language</i>	56
3.2.2.4	<i>Poor course and institution choice</i>	56
3.2.2.5	<i>Study habits</i>	57
3.2.3	Emotional issues	57
3.2.4	Independence issues	57
3.2.5	Interpersonal and relationship issues	58
3.2.6	Identity issues	59
3.2.7	Goal and commitment issues	60

3.2.8	Institutional issues	61
3.2.8.1	<i>Institutional policy</i>	61
3.2.8.2	<i>Bureaucratic red tape</i>	62
3.3	PERFORMANCE AND ACHIEVEMENT	62
3.3.1	Introduction	62
3.3.2	Academic variables in performance and achievement	63
3.3.2.1	<i>Previous performance and selection tests</i>	63
3.3.2.2	<i>Study habits and cognitive abilities</i>	64
3.3.2.3	<i>Reading ability</i>	65
3.3.2.4	<i>Time management</i>	66
3.3.2.5	<i>Learning and teaching style</i>	67
3.3.2.6	<i>Student-faculty interaction</i>	68
3.3.2.7	<i>Academic climate, setting and ethic</i>	69
3.3.3	Psychosocial variables that affect performance and achievement.	70
3.3.3.1	<i>Motivation</i>	70
3.3.3.2	<i>Goal-setting</i>	72
3.3.3.3	<i>Self-efficacy</i>	73
3.3.3.4	<i>Wellness</i>	74
3.4	UNDER ACHIEVEMENT, FAILURE AND WITHDRAWAL	76
3.4.1	Introduction	76
3.4.2	Variables associated with underperformance and withdrawal	78
3.4.2.1	<i>Individual dispositions</i>	80
3.4.2.2	<i>Institutional experiences</i>	82
3.4.2.3	<i>External forces</i>	84
3.5	CONCLUSION	86
CHAPTER FOUR THE RESEARCH DESIGN		
4.1	INTRODUCTION	87
4.2	EXPLANATION OF CONCEPTS IN RESEARCH DESIGN	88
4.2.1	Research project	88
4.2.2	Literature study	88
4.2.3	Qualitative research methodology	89
4.2.3.1	<i>Qualitative research validity</i>	91

4.2.3.2	<i>Qualitative research reliability</i>	92
4.2.3.3	<i>Specific techniques in the qualitative research study</i>	93
	a The workshop technique	93
	b The focus group interview technique	95
4.2.4	Quantitative research methodology	98
4.2.4.1	<i>Quantitative research validity</i>	99
4.2.4.2	<i>Quantitative research reliability</i>	100
4.2.4.3	<i>Specific technique used in the quantitative method</i>	101
4.2.4.4	<i>Validity and reliability of the questionnaire</i>	102
4.2.5	Triangulation methodology	102
4.2.5.1	<i>Advantages of using triangulation</i>	103
4.2.5.2	<i>Disadvantages of using triangulation</i>	103
4.3	RESEARCH METHODS	105
4.3.1	The problem statement and aims of the research study	105
4.3.2	Preparation and literature study	107
4.3.3	Empirical investigation	107
4.3.3.1	<i>The workshops</i>	108
	a The role of the workshop in qualitative research	108
	b The selection of participants	108
	c The participant observation technique in the workshops	109
	d Validity and reliability of the workshops	109
	e Analysis of raw data	110
4.3.3.2	<i>The questionnaire in quantitative research</i>	110
	a Compilation of the questionnaire	110
	b Validity and reliability in this phase	114
	c The administration of the questionnaire	115
	d Analysis of the questionnaire data	116
4.3.3.3	<i>The focus group in qualitative research</i>	116
	a The technique of using the focus group interview	116
	b Selection of the focus group	117
	c Designing the interview guide	117
	d Administration of the focus group	118
	e Advantages and disadvantages of using the focus group	119

f	Media used to collect the data	119
g	Analysis of the focus group data	120
4.4	CONCLUSION	120

CHAPTER FIVE THE EMPIRICAL STUDY

5.1	INTRODUCTION	121
5.2	PHASE ONE THE WORKSHOPS	121
5.2.1	Data obtained from workshop 1	123
5.2.1.1	<i>Student issues</i>	124
5.2.1.2	<i>Staff issues</i>	125
5.2.1.3	<i>Institutional issues</i>	127
5.2.1.4	<i>Social issues</i>	127
5.2.2	Data obtained from workshop 2	128
5.2.2.1	<i>Student issues</i>	129
5.2.2.2	<i>Staff issues</i>	130
5.2.2.3	<i>Institutional issues</i>	131
5.2.2.4	<i>Social issues</i>	131
5.2.3	Data obtained from workshop 3	132
5.2.3.1	<i>Student issues</i>	132
5.2.3.2	<i>Staff issues</i>	134
5.2.3.3	<i>Institutional issues</i>	135
5.2.3.4	<i>Social issues</i>	136
5.2.4	Data obtained from workshop 4	137
5.2.4.1	<i>Student issues</i>	137
5.2.4.2	<i>Staff issues</i>	140
5.2.4.3	<i>Institutional issues</i>	141
5.2.4.4	<i>Social issues</i>	141
5.2.5	Data obtained from workshop 5	143
5.2.5.1	<i>Student issues</i>	143
5.2.5.2	<i>Staff issues</i>	145
5.2.5.3	<i>Institutional issues</i>	146
5.2.5.4	<i>Social issues</i>	146

5.2.6	Summary of the findings from all the workshops	147
5.3	PHASE TWO THE QUESTIONNAIRE	149
5.3.1	Background information	149
5.3.2	Overall comparison of academic and psychological problem areas	152
5.3.3	Perceived academic factors of all respondents	153
5.3.4	Perceived psychological problems of all respondents	155
5.3.5	Factors affecting gender	156
5.3.6	Differences in perceived factors of students following different courses	158
5.3.6.1	<i>Group 1 Business science access course</i>	158
a	Academic factors that inhibit student performance in course 1	158
b	Psychological factors that inhibit student performance in course 1	159
c	Comparison of academic and psychological factors in course 1	160
5.3.6.2	<i>Course 2 Credit management</i>	161
a	Academic factors that inhibit student performance in course 2	161
b	Psychological factors that inhibit student performance in course 2	161
c	Comparison of academic and psychological factors in course 2	162
5.3.6.3	<i>Course 3 Human resources management</i>	163
a	Academic factors that inhibit student performance in course 3	163
b	Psychological factors that inhibit student performance in course 3	164
c	Comparison of academic and psychological factors in course 3	165
5.3.6.4	<i>Course 4 Management</i>	165
a	Academic factors that inhibit student performance in course 4	165
b	Psychological factors that inhibit student performance in course 4	166
c	Comparison of academic and psychological factors in course 4	167
5.3.6.5	<i>Course 5 Management services</i>	168
a	Academic factors that inhibit student performance in course 5	168
b	Psychological factors that inhibit student performance in course 5	168
c	Comparison of academic and psychological factors in course 5	169
5.3.6.6	<i>Course 6 Public relations management</i>	170
a	Academic factors that inhibit student performance in course 6	170
b	Psychological factors that inhibit student performance in course 6	170
c	Comparison of academic and psychological factors in course 6	171
5.3.6.7	<i>Course 7 Marketing management</i>	172

a	Academic factors that inhibit student performance in course 7	172
b	Psychological factors that inhibit student performance in course 7	173
c	Comparison of academic and psychological factors in course 7	174
5.3.6.8	<i>Course 8 Hotel school</i>	174
a	Academic factors that inhibit student performance in course 8	175
b	Psychological factors that inhibit student performance in course 8	175
c	Comparison of academic and psychological factors in course 8	176
5.3.7	Problem areas experienced by students in the eight courses	177
5.3.8	Summary of phase 2	178
5.4	PHASE 3 THE FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS	179
5.4.1	Focus group 1	180
5.4.2	Focus group 2	186
5.4.3	Focus group 3	195
5.4.4	Focus group 4	203
5.4.5	Composite findings from the four focus group interviews	211
5.4.6	Problem areas addressed by the triangulation process	213
5.5	CONCLUSION	215

CHAPTER SIX SUMMARY AND FINDINGS

6.1	INTRODUCTION	217
6.2	FINDINGS FROM THE LITERATURE STUDY	218
6.2.1	Findings concerned with student development	218
6.2.1.1	Developing competencies	218
6.2.1.2	Managing emotions	218
6.2.1.3	Moving through autonomy towards interdependence	219
6.2.1.4	Developing mature interpersonal relationships	219
6.2.1.5	Establishing identity	220
6.2.1.6	Developing purpose	220
6.2.1.7	Developing integrity	221
6.2.2	Findings concerned with new student adjustment issues	221
6.2.2.1	Competency issues	221
6.2.2.2	Emotional issues	222

6.2.2.3	Independence issues	222
6.2.2.4	Adjustment issues	222
6.2.2.5	Identity issues	222
6.2.2.6	Goals and commitment	223
6.2.2.7	Living arrangements	223
6.2.2.8	Institutional issues	223
6.2.3	Findings concerned with student performance and achievement	223
6.2.3.1	Academic variables	223
6.2.3.2	Psychosocial variables	224
6.2.4	Findings concerned with underachievement, failure and withdrawal	225
6.3	FINDINGS FROM THE EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION	226
6.3.1	Academic and psychological inhibitors of performance	226
6.3.2	The most common academic factors	227
6.3.3	The most common psychological issues	229
6.3.4	The factors important to both genders	230
6.3.5	Comparison of the eight study course findings	232
6.3.6	The impact of underperformance upon the student	233
6.4	CONCLUSION	234

CHAPTER SEVEN LIMITATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

7.1	INTRODUCTION	236
7.2	LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY	237
7.3	RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INTERVENTION PROGRAMMES	239
7.3.1	General programmes	239
7.3.2	Specific programmes	241
7.3.2.1	<i>Study skills</i>	242
7.3.2.2	<i>Learning centre</i>	242
7.3.2.3	<i>Experiential learning</i>	243
7.3.2.4	<i>Leadership training</i>	243
7.3.2.5	<i>Adjustment and orientation</i>	243
7.3.2.6	<i>Financial aid</i>	243

7.3.3. Practical solutions for the institution	244
7.3.3.1 <i>The establishment of a learning centre</i>	244
7.3.3.2 <i>Life skills curricula</i>	245
7.3.3.3 <i>Establishment of a non-residential student centre</i>	245
7.3.3.4 <i>Implementation of the proposed model</i>	246
7.4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY	250
7.5 CONCLUSION	251

ANNEXURES

A Directions for completing the questionnaire	253
B The questionnaire	254
C The questionnaire answer sheet	259
D The questionnaire profile	260

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1 The investigation process	8
Figure 1.2 The triangulation process	15
Figure 1.3 Development of the therapeutic model	16
Figure 2.1 The holistic development of the student	51
Figure 3.1 Tinto's attrition causation model	80
Figure 5.1 Overall comparison of academic and psychological problem areas	153
Figure 5.2 Academic factors perceived to affect student performance	154
Figure 5.3 Psychological factors perceived to affect performance	155
Figure 5.4 Comparison between male and female answers	156
Figure 5.5 Comparison between factors affecting female and male students	157
Figure 5.6 Academic factors that inhibit student performance in course 1	159
Figure 5.7 Psychological factors that inhibit student performance in course 1	160
Figure 5.8 Comparison of academic and psychological factors in course 1	160
Figure 5.9 Academic factors that inhibit student performance in course 2	161
Figure 5.10 Psychological factors that inhibit student performance in course 2	162

Figure 5.11	Comparison of academic and psychological factors in course 2	163
Figure 5.12	Academic factors that inhibit student performance in course 3	164
Figure 5.13	Psychological factors that inhibit student performance in course 3	164
Figure 5.14	Comparison of academic and psychological factors in course 3	165
Figure 5.15	Academic factors that inhibit student performance in course 4	166
Figure 5.16	Psychological factors that inhibit student performance in course 4	167
Figure 5.17	Comparison of academic and psychological factors in course 4	168
Figure 5.18	Academic factors that inhibit student performance in course 5	168
Figure 5.19	Psychological factors that inhibit student performance in course 5	169
Figure 5.20	Comparison of academic and psychological factors in course 5	169
Figure 5.21	Academic factors that inhibit student performance in course 6	170
Figure 5.22	Psychological factors that inhibit student performance in course 6	171
Figure 5.23	Comparison of academic and psychological factors in course 6	172
Figure 5.24	Academic factors that inhibit student performance in course 7	173
Figure 5.25	Psychological factors that inhibit student performance in course 7	173
Figure 5.26	Comparison of academic and psychological factors in course 7	174
Figure 5.27	Academic factors that inhibit student performance in course 8	175
Figure 5.28	Psychological factors that inhibit student performance in course 8	176
Figure 5.29	Comparison of academic and psychological factors in course 8	176
Figure 5.30	Common factors perceived to be problematic in the courses	178
Figure 7.1	Developmental organization: actual model	240

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1	Student development theory	9
Table 1.2	Academic achievement	9
Table 1.3	Performance, failure and retention	10
Table 1.4	Psychological adjustment	11
Table 1.5	Intervention programmes	11
Table 2.1	Four taxonomies of student development	24
Table 2.2	The seven vectors: general developmental directions	29
Table 3.1	Self efficacy for achievement	74
Table 4.1	Comparison between qualitative and quantitative research	104

Table 4.2	Questions that address specific factors	112
Table 4.3	Focus group interview guide	117
Table 5.1	Data collected from workshop one	128
Table 5.2	Data collected from workshop two	132
Table 5.3	Data collected from workshop three	137
Table 5.4	Data collected from workshop four	142
Table 5.5	Data collected from workshop five	147
Table 5.6	Composite findings from the five workshop groups	147
Table 5.7	Questionnaire scores distribution table	152
Table 5.8	Summary table for focus group 1	185
Table 5.9	Summary table for focus group 2	194
Table 5.10	Summary table for focus group 3	202
Table 5.11	Summary table for focus group 4	210
Table 5.12	Composite findings from the four focus group interviews	212
Table 5.13	Problem areas addressed by the triangulation process	215
Table 6.1	The most common academic factors inhibiting performance	228
Table 6.2	The most common psychological factors inhibiting performance	230
Table 6.3	Gender factor differences inhibiting performance	231
Table 6.4	Composite factors in all courses	232
Table 7.1	Problem areas in specific vector development	246
Table 7.2	Holistic student development programme	247