

Navigating higher education student success: Reflective narrative lessons from a South African university¹

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ABSTRACT

Student success is vital to higher education (HE) stakeholders, regardless of how it is measured or defined, highlighting the need for efficient pedagogic practices to successfully achieve intended educational and student outcomes. This research comprises examples of sound pedagogical practices from the success stories of teaching academics in a Humanities Faculty. It explores characteristics of practices that could enhance academic performance and foster student success by analysing eight (n=8) Humanities lecturers' successes in university teaching experiences. The qualitative narrative inquiry used semi-structured interviews, narrative analysis methods, and a reflective narrative analysis lens to unpack some distinctive features of impactful higher education pedagogies from South African higher education settings. Theories of reflection frame the study, permitting reflection, narration, and sharing of instructive approaches based on critical reflection. Findings suggest that the purposeful, selective use of learning tools and integration into apt working student-centred practices positively impact undergraduate learning, academic performance and success.

Keywords: higher education, student success, learner-centred teaching and assessment, throughput and pass rate, reflective narrative inquiry

INTRODUCTION

Student success is crucial to Higher Education (HE) institutions and stakeholders, irrespective of definition or measurement frameworks (academic success, grade performance, students retained, completion rates, cultivating citizens that will contribute towards economic activity to benefit society or achieving readiness for careers beyond graduation). Universities worry about status and ranking in the global education market, but undergraduate success rates are equally crucial for individual students' upward mobility and broader societal benefits.

All facets of student success are crucial. For Kuh et al. (2006), the multifacetedness of student success integrated from pertinent scholarship involves academic attainment, educational engagement, fulfilment, achievement of wanted expertise and proficiencies or knowledge, perseverance, the accomplishment of educational results, and performance after university. York et al. (2015) highlight the achievement of learning goals, contentment, acquiring

¹ Date submitted: 21 January 2025
Date reviewed: 25 July 2025
Date accepted: 25 June 2025

abilities and aptitudes, academic attainment, determination, and professional success. Most higher education scholars measure student success as academic success and educational achievement based on universities' grading systems (Alyahyan & Düşteğör, 2020). Others conceptualise it in terms of throughput rates, students' persistence, or academic resilience, resulting in graded student achievement, advancement, programme completion, and graduation (Finn & Rock, 1997). This study narrowly focuses more on pass rates, grades, and academic achievement, as they are springboards to programme completion and graduation, ultimately producing economically active citizens that benefit society in the public interest – arguably a more critical measure of student success.

Academic achievement and programme completion, as student success, play a critical role in HE institutes, as they are often used to measure the institute's achievement and are considered essential criteria for assessing the quality of educational institutions. Dube and Mlotshwa (2018) assert that the accomplishment of every learning institute is gauged by the extent to which students meet expected benchmarks. Academic success affects the availability of future qualified and degreed professionals in work systems. The Council of Higher Education (CHE) (2013) tasks South African universities with progressively developing pathways to success for enrolled students, involving passing, successful study continuation, completion, and quality, which are part of the challenges for HE today.

McKenna et al. (2022: 1005) highlight the 'problem ... of poor student retention... and throughput rate' as a persistent worry, and Essop (2020) points out that in South Africa, graduation rate benchmarks are yet to be met. Universities and students equally do not want failure, high dropout or low graduation rates. Successful or efficient pedagogic practices - techniques and methods - could avoid failure and dropouts and facilitate more effective learning, achieving educational goals and planned student outcomes. This research collected examples of promising sound practices from lecturers' success stories of teaching academics in the Faculty of Humanities. The study explores practices that enhance learners' academic performance to prepare them for qualification and competent graduation so that they can contribute to societal development. It also examines the characteristics of higher education practices that could cultivate student success continuously by analysing eight HE humanities lecturers' teaching knowledge, encounters and practices at a South African university. This research hypothesises that pedagogical knowledge from successful practitioners can be replicated for student academic success in HE to help other teachers become more effective educators.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - FLUCTUATING SIZE AND SHAPE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

HE in South Africa has been changing since independence in 1994, when new beginnings introduced what Lockett and Sutherland (2000) and Msiza et al. (2020) label the '*massification*' of universities and the '*diversification*' of the lecture room. According to Essop (2020), between 2005 and 2017, public higher education institutions experienced rapid growth, characterised by diverse student populations whose preparedness for university education remains problematic. Many predominantly previously disadvantaged, culturally diverse, and non-traditional students now have access to higher education, raising concerns about poor outcomes. Essop (2020: 13) and Lewin and Mawoyo (2014) acknowledge that despite the growth in headcounts and participation, successes in academic performance 'throughput'

remain elusive, posing an 'intractable challenge'. Essop (2020) points out that poor retention and graduation rates and high dropout rates are problematic and unacceptable, representing massive wastage of financial and human resources. Highlighted is the need for consistently improving pedagogical efficiencies. This paper navigates this feat via reflective narrative data of sampled representatives of top-performing departments.

Outline and focus of the study

The article explores practitioners' stories of valuable practices to tackle academic success matters in higher education. Eight lecturers and heads of departments (n=8) from top-achieving modules and departments in the humanities faculty were interviewed and asked individually and in a focus group to share accounts of their high pass and success rates in the previous academic year. The study investigates, via reflective narrative interview data, how sampled departments and staff efficaciously mentored students to a successful academic year to uncover working practices. The paper contributes to a richer understanding of practices and student experiences that promote student success, providing valuable insights into factors determining student success.

RELEVANT LITERATURE TO THE CURRENT STUDY

HE research indicates that academic achievement and advancement, throughput, completion, and qualification quality are challenges today; student success remains a concern in HE in South Africa (McKenna et al., 2022).

HE teaching and learning literature on student achievement has been abundant since the 1990s. It suggests numerous and wide-ranging student-success factors, including teaching approaches (Bartz & Miller, 1991), the motivation of students (Talbot, 1997), methods of studying (Meyer & Muller, 1990) or students' privileged home background (Smith & Naylor, 2001). Björklund and Salvanes (2011) focused on how parents' education level positively influences educational outcomes, and Dayioğlu and Türüt-Aşık (2007) confirm that gender, being female, may positively affect performance. Other factors highlighted in the literature impacting students' achievement at university include (i) Academic Engagement (Johnson and Stage, 2018), (ii) Online literacy (Chang & Fang, 2020), (iii) peer learning for student success (Gamlath, 2022), (iv) cultural and psychosocial undercurrents (Scott, 2018). Colvard et al. (2018) maintain that expenditure (per student) and a higher provision of resources and quality staff by institutions strengthen student performance. Wide-ranging dynamics influence student achievement and student performance in summative assessment (Cerdeira et al., 2018). This paper uses lecturers' stories of teaching, learning, and assessment, as told by sampled university teaching staff, to identify workable combinations of factors that positively impact student performance and achievement.

The literature shows that numerous factors can be significant in student achievement and success, and that solitary components are not strong determinants of success at university. This study taps into academic teaching personnel's various voices and stories for numerous ways to attain student success.

The gap in the literature and the study's main contribution

HE literature illustrates several issues contributing to student success. However, only some studies consider supporting student achievement using the reflective narratives of staff and

department heads who navigated students to successful academic outcomes in HE. Only a little research has been devoted to telling stories of success after the event, so we reflect and learn from a position of strength, how to achieve academically, retain, and successfully graduate students. This paper takes interventionist lessons for student achievement from stories of success. So far, scholarship has primarily focused on the determinants of success from perspectives other than reflecting on and learning from narratives of success conditions. The paper presents multiple stories voicing various HE workable practices in line with Benedicks (2018), who conceives learning as intrinsic, needing cultivation and support in numerous ways.

Research questions

This study explores pedagogic and assessment practices, elements and insights that can address academic success in HE based on lecturer-told success stories and lecturer-reflective stories for determinants of student success. It asks the following research questions:

What can narratives from 'successful' university teaching staff at a South African university tell us about valuable practices practitioners can initiate that contribute to academic achievement as part of student success?

What do the narratives tell us about the support that promotes successful academic and student outcomes?

Relevant studies and theoretical framework

The study draws upon notions and theories of Biggs et al. (2022) and Biggs (1996), mainly constructive alignment and the theory of reflective teaching (Gibbs, 1998; Schön, 2017). Biggs' theory (1996) is about constructing learning by aligning education and assessment. He argues for deep rather than surface learning approaches. Such approaches focus on understanding the meanings and principles of material, actively engaging with the content, harnessing prior knowledge, critical thinking, and more. More importantly, such pedagogy aligns teaching methods with testing and learning objectives so that all facets work harmoniously to support apt, successful education (Constructive alignment). Constructive alignment concepts are valuable when considering workable teaching practices for student success, understanding and conceptualising integrated insights into teaching and learning processes based on lecturer-success stories. The narrative evidence is analysed by considering how the participant practitioners constructively aligned their practice for student achievement in their reflective success stories. Based on the narrative evidence (Lewis, 2024), the research hopes to expand future pedagogies, reflect on pedagogic reform and uncover alternative modes of assessment and practices. Gibbs (1998), Schön (2017) and Biggs et al. (2022) develop a theoretical approach to pedagogic reflection (reflective teaching), a practice in which lecturers (as the participants do) think about their practices to analyse the efficacy of their teaching approaches. Based on critical reflection, the analysis may improve teaching methods as part of an applied study.

METHODOLOGY

The research paradigm and design

The research intention was to navigate student success practices within top-achieving departments and modules at the selected metro-public university, via personal stories of the university's sampled academic teaching staff. Furthermore, to better understand factors influencing student success and attempt possible replication. The design was a narrative inquiry that utilised a qualitative approach within the interpretivist paradigms (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Punch, 2013), consisting of participant lecturers' subjective representation of pedagogic experiences in a university teaching community.

Eight Heads of Departments (HODs) and lecturer representatives of departments with high pass and success rates were sampled and invited to share their stories and think about their teaching practices in achieving student success. The interview schedule was emailed to all research participants to help them prepare their success stories before the interview commenced. Semis-structured interviews aimed to facilitate the full articulation and amplification of ideas and permit participants to communicate and share their experiences fluidly and elaborately. The investigation's narrative-storytelling concept (Lewis, 2024) stresses that knowledge derives from participants' genuine, personal life experiences, giving it authenticity, profundity and meaning. The intention was to cultivate understanding from the viewpoints of those immersed in the relevant experiences (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014) and explore the reflective pedagogic lived-experience narratives around high pass rates - the starting point of wider student success. The research questions led this storytelling exploration (Creswell & Poth, 2016), which was framed around reflections (Schön, 2017), stories, and links to participants' ideas and contributed experiences. The study probes human lives through a narrative lens, respecting lived experience as a source of critical knowledge and understanding (Clandinin, 2016).

The researcher hoped to enter the teaching stories and experiences via narrative inquiry to understand and learn about student success. The interview data were evaluated through thematic content analysis to make sense of the stories (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Fouché et al., 2021). Fundamental ideas revealed by participants were condensed, considering overlaps between reflective narratives. Significant quotes that illustrated practices and experiences were identified to establish the emerging themes from the narratives presented. The interview data, referred to constantly, highlighted the participants' observations and experiences and maintained their presence (Maree et al., 2016).

Sampling and setting up the project

The study was conducted at an urban and diverse Johannesburg university in Gauteng province, South Africa. This metropolitan, public university (like the departments and lecturers or module participants) was chosen because, despite exponentially growing student numbers, it outperformed the national mean for student success. Moreover, this is in a country where low student success and throughput rates have troubled the HE system for years.

The researcher used administrative data to identify top-ranking students' academic performance rates and top-achieving departments and modules with overall success rates of over 90%. Representatives were asked to participate and given time to prepare for interviews,

where they told their success stories. Specifically, departments were invited to share their stories or views on what they did differently in the current years. Additionally, they shared factors they thought might have led to the improvements. The participants are South African and are part of the larger academic corps working to fulfil the mandated task of 'progressively developing pathways to success for enrolled students' (Council of Higher Education [CHE], 2013a:32).

Table 1:

Participant information

The Head of Dept (cum lecturer) participants are distinguished in the data presentation as HOD 1, 2, 3 and 4. The Lecturers are (A, B, C, D).

HOD (Head of Dept)	Gender	Age	Education: Highest level attained	Lecturing since	Teaching Area	Students taught
1	M	58	PhD	2005	Social Work & Community Service	1 st – 3 rd year undergraduates, postgraduates
2	F	60	PhD	2007	Sociology	
3	F	60	PhD	2008	Languages, Cultural Studies and Applied Linguistics (LanCSAL)	1 st – 3 rd year undergraduates, postgraduates
4	M	52	PhD	2011	Classical Studies & Mythology	1 st – 3 rd year undergraduates, postgraduates
Lecturer	Gender	Age	Education		Teaching Area	Students taught
A	F	42	PhD Candidate	2012	Applied Communicative Skills	1 st – 3 rd year undergraduates, Hon
B	F	38	PhD Candidate	2019	Applied Linguistics	1 st – 3 rd year undergraduates, Hon

C	M	52	PhD	2010	Classical Studies & Mythology	1 st – 3 rd year undergraduates, postgraduates
D	M	55	PhD	2006	Applied Communicative Skills	1st – 3rd year undergraduates, Hon

Ethical clearance

The researcher attained Ethical Clearance for the study from the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee (research university site).

Data analysis

The qualitative data were reduced to themes and subjected to thematic /discourse analysis. Participants' interview data supported each emerging theme.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Five themes arising from the inquiry are discussed in this section. These are: (i) Some Preconditions for successful HE Pedagogies; (ii) Innovative Approaches to Assessment and Assessment Procedures (and sub-themes on assessment types); (iii) Tutorials, Consultation and Student Support; (iv) Technology-aided Teaching and Learning; (v) Student-Centred Practices that Promote Learning Success. Though widely covered, these five themes are supported and confirmed as still relevant in literature.

Some preconditions for successful HE pedagogies

A critical emerging point is that student success depends on several prerequisite factors, including student management, wherein things work well when trust and empathy dominate. Lecturer A says about her Applied Languages and Communicative Skills Department:

We mainly try to develop strong relationships of trust, openness, and empathy with our students. (Lecturer A)

Current literature corroborates links that positive student relationships, involving empathy, trust and creating connections with students, support learning and are essential for student success. Research on this topic (e.g. Vanner, 2022; Dreer, 2024; Willis, 2024) concur that when students trust lecturers, they will be more willing to take risks, be more open, feel supported, and likely to engage in learning and enjoy academic success.

Secondly, HOD 3 highlights students' agency, autonomy, self-regulation and awareness,

We mainly look to give students agency to help them develop excellent personal skills of self-awareness and self-regulation so that they can take charge of their learning. We aim to bring students more fully and purposefully into their learning processes. (HOD 3)

Current scholarship on student agency (Stenalt & Lassen, 2022; Inouye et al., 2022; Abelo et al., 2022; Olivier et al., 2022) verifies the importance of granting learners agency as a powerful pathway to create personal development, independence and academic success.

Studies generally agree that students can own their scholarship and develop essential skills for success.

Next is feedback, and HOD 4's prototypical reflection on feedback is:

We allow much more room for student feedback and lecturer feedback. (HOD 4)

Participants identified feedback as a necessary condition for their students' success. Scholars on feedback and learning, e.g. Yan and Carless (2022) and Carless and Winston (2023), have a consensus that together, student feedback and lecturer feedback are indispensable components of successful learning processes. They improve learning outcomes and student engagement.

All participants reported that to create optimum conditions for students' success, they had tried to consider factors beyond the classroom that powerfully impact learning quality, such as domestic and family life, community, social, cultural, environmental, economic, and others - a position generally derived from and supported by Vygotskian-oriented research.

HOD 3 says the following about environments that breed student success:

With all lectures, all lecturers can explore exciting new pedagogies and approaches. They are encouraged to create new types of assessments to streamline or even remove old and cumbersome practices. (HOD 3)

A selection of studies (e.g. Boud & Solé, 2022; Carless & Winston, 2023; Jacobs & Zmuda, 2023) encourages new pedagogies, strategies, and streamlining burdensome practices. Such research proves that empowering lecturers to develop teaching and learning methods can positively influence student engagement and success.

Innovative approaches to assessment and assessment procedures

Timperley, Wiseman and Fung (2013) highlight the need to constantly update and improve pedagogic practices for lifelong learning. HOD 1 agrees:

We're looking for innovative solutions. We're not just willing to follow things that people came up with ten years or 15 years ago and are, you know, following those practices because they were seen as important ten years ago. We are rethinking and appraising assessments. So, we push back on tradition. We are willing to question and challenge old routines and practices that may not be educationally sound today. (HOD 1)

Timperley, Wiseman and Fung (2013) agreeably argue that educators must continually revise and develop their expert knowledge foundation and develop or update their pedagogies to meet student learning needs. They argue that evolutionary dynamism in societies requires educators who do not use obsolete knowledge to prepare current students for a future society. The data and literature link student success to actualising new initiatives with innovative approaches.

The main idea underpinning assessment success factors has been the movement of some participant departments away from assessing learning to assessment for learning. They reported exploring ways of thinking and doing Assessments under the banner of *'outsmarting Assessments'*, according to HOD 4. Her department has been trying new assessment

technologies, such as the visual essay in the Applied Communicative Skills modules, which are reportedly successful. According to her story, the innovative visual essay moves students away from doing an oral presentation where they panic and have to speak in front of a host of strangers. Lecturer B affirms that the visual essay gives students much more scope to learn and get assessed in a calm, non-threatening learning space, as envisaged by (Finch, 2001; Makarova, 2014; Angadiki, 2024), setting them up for study success.

Continuous assessment practices – A game changer

Participants present Continuous Assessment (CA) as their newly adapted way of improving learning outcomes and an instrument for bettering educational results, as demonstrated by the following quotes:

HOD 3: One of the main game changes is our continuous assessment practices. Our continuous assessment model provides more fair coverage for assessing students' learning. It helps us to increase and space the number of assessments students take and diversify the nature of the assessment tasks. We have also found that it works more favourably in meeting the course outcomes than the single, high-risk, major summative examination. We have also found that continuous assessment allows us to employ precise, nuanced, and comprehensive technologies to appraise and inform the cultivation of students' competencies. (HOD 3)

Lecturer B adds:

For us, continuous assessment is a far better fit for testing and even for allowing students to engage and develop the skills we are trying to test with an exam. Setting aside a once-off summative assessment is not the best fit for us. In contrast, continuous assessment allows students multiple opportunities to hone, polish, and take ownership of the skills they have been taught by the time they leave the module. (Lecturer B)

The interview data suggest that students can better grasp the content, get tested better and more fairly, and succeed through the continuous assessment approach. Dejene (2019) supports this finding, arguing that CA ensures no one is left behind because it evaluates a student's progress throughout a prescribed course and alerts instructors when learners are at risk in time for intervention. Current literature on continuous assessment (CA) testifies to its positive impact on student success. The literature (e.g. Wallace et al., 2022; Holmes, 2018) demonstrates a high correlation between CA and successful final results, concluding that CA has an enabling impact on both the student's results and learning methodologies, warranting serious attention. Grace et al. (2024) conclude in a Nigerian case study that CA contributed to students' academic achievement growth and offers a more valid and reliable appraisal or testing. Morales et al. 2022 are of the view that CA is beneficial as a summative and formative assessment; it offers student feedback, and students take advantage of it to succeed. Playfoot et al. (2023) argue that CA techniques are likely valuable for identifying vulnerable students at risk of academic failure or withdrawal. They conclude that CA aptly tackles assessment challenges and that, despite positive results, further research on its efficacy may still be necessary.

Authentic assessment and experiential learning

The participants also identified the authentic assessment in experiential learning as a factor contributing to student success.

HOD 1 said:

Social and Community Work is a professional qualification and not just an academic discipline. Our first-year practice course internship programme wants students to learn relational skills, so we set it up in the experiential programme. Experiential training has worked well for us and our students' success. (HOD 1)

Lecturer B added:

Applied Linguistics successfully runs an externship programme where students are taken to different places in the country for an internship and some exposure to the work environment. (Lecturer B)

Authentic assessment (AA) (Anderson et al., 2022) in experiential training seemed to have yielded expected aligned outcomes for the departments. Participants associate it with '*success*', '*creative learning experiences*' and '*exposure to the work environment*', testing students' skills and knowledge in realistic situations within '*internship*' and '*externship programs*'. Saher et al. (2022) credit AA, arguing that it can evaluate whether or not students can effectively transmit the understanding and abilities they have attained in the lecture rooms to different settings, situations, or locations. Participants concur that authentic assessment motivated their students and catalysed their success in that the focus was on relevance to the skills required of students once they finish their course or degree programme.

HOD 1 surmises,

Experiential training has worked well for us and our PR students' success. Students get engaged. (HOD 1)

Bain (2004) strongly believes that students learn via authentic assessment by tackling real problems and realistic assignments that test competencies for handling ideas, reconsidering their suppositions, and questioning their representations of reality. The authentic assessments stand out as a student-success triggering factor in the data.

Lecturers agree that embedded evaluation and assessment procedures within authentic assessment frameworks played a significant role in success rates:

HOD 2 elaborates how his department has successfully entrenched assessment, saying:

Our lecturers introduce a major assignment at the beginning of a course, keep reminding students, and speak through different perspectives of different ways and avenues to tackle the task. We also gave second opportunities to write a test that students might need to catch up on or improve. (HOD 2)

HOD 3 adds:

For the major assessment, we used the long essay with case studies, and most lecturers started talking about the essays in combination with the work they presented from week one to engage the students. (HOD 3)

Lecturer A reinforces,

We have continued to use take-home and open-book style exams as opposed to the traditional ones we used to use. Students get the paper two weeks before the exam's due date. What we expect from them is more complex, interpretive, and applied. And then, some of us give students who fail an essay an opportunity to revise and resubmit for a passing mark. (Lecturer A)

The authentic and differently 'embedded' assessments (Kim et al., 2021; McCarthy et al., 2011) mentioned above gave students time extensions and supported deep learning (Biggs et al., 2022), increasing departmental success and pass rates. The long essay becomes part of authentic, everyday work, permitting suitable occasions to rehearse rather than being created just for assessment purposes.

Tutorials, consultation and student support

The interview evidence also indicates that after-class academic support in the form of course-embedded faculty tutoring is vital for student success.

HOD 1 had the following to say about the contribution of tutor programmes:

Historically, we only had tutorial classes in the first year, and we now have a strategic tutor every year from the second to 4th year and honours. Furthermore, we proactively identify at-risk students at the beginning of each year and refer them to the tutor. (HOD 1)

HOD 3 agrees:

Tutors have also been very instrumental in our success. They are the interface between the lecturer and the students. (HOD 3)

Lecturer A adds:

We also had a far-reaching tutorial programme where students could engage and do peer learning, get enriched, and work on developing higher-order skills in general. During tutorials, we also focused on creating new platforms to provide feedback, remediation, and enrichment targeted at students, groups of students, or whole classes. (Lecturer A)

The excerpts above indicate that tutor learning interactions and support were viable interventions that directly aided student achievement. This finding concurs with Garcia-Melga et al.(2021), who show that Tutor Assisted Learning programs offer academic support to co-students and develop academic literacy in an accessible and open learning environment led by experienced and knowledgeable students. Xiaodong Zhang's (2021) study at a Chinese university also confirmed that students' visits to the after-class tutorial programmes stabilised their developing interpretation and grasp of sense-making and mindfulness in writing, which was coached in lectures and enriched by tutorials.

Tutorial programmes seemingly offered further aid and direction outside of regular lecturers, helping students better grasp course content, hence improving students' academic performance, academic success, and grades and developing essential learning skills. Similarly, in a Nigerian study, Olulowo et al. (2020) found that student participation in peer tutoring programmes improved GPA and retention rates. Another empirical research conducted in the Western US (Guarcello et al., 2017) found that undergraduates who partook in Supplemental Instruction(SI) programmes exhibited higher academic achievement and persistence, concluding that student involvement in SI heightened the chances of completing modules successfully. As in the current study, tutorial programmes in the literature are linked to student academic achievement, higher grades, better programme completion rates, better student retention rates, and lower dropout rates (see Agee & Hodges, 2018; Guarcello et al., 2017).

In the existing literature, tutorials, consultations, student care and assistance from faculties or departments (as in the current study) play a part in academic success. They are vital for retention and continuation in HE (Shweta, 2020). Walsh et al. (2009) assert that academic support positively impacts student success and dropout rates, ensuring the study continues.

Technology-aided teaching and learning

Technology integration in HE is presented as transformative in the learning terrain, presenting numerous opportunities for student success. The narrative shows that technology incorporation improves student engagement, learning outcomes, and accessibility.

In the vignette below, Lecturer D sums up the story of her department's adaptation of technology affordances for student success:

COVID opened up new online possibilities for teaching and learning using basic Microsoft Teams and Microsoft Office functionalities. We employed simple, straightforward technology and online or electronic textbooks that students could access anywhere at no cost. Changing our approach did not require expensive equipment or expensive software, but it meant making information more exciting and engaging and ensuring understanding and reception of this information. We engaged the content using technology, simple tools, Google Docs, YouTube, etc., and new digital semiotic technologies to harness these affordances. Our teaching and learning are thoughtfully blended and integrate selected harmonised face-to-face and tech-based online methods. Technology is not just an add-on; it has become part of an effective blended mixture of physical and virtual classrooms supporting success. (Lecturer D)

The lecturers quickly realised that the arrival of the digital era dictates transitions into digital, online modes of teaching for their students to succeed.

Empirical studies in the South African HE context (e.g. Yafele 2024) and HE institutions (HEIs) are increasingly endorsing the added flexibility of connectivism in online learning, efficacious in improving academic performance and a catalyst for student success. Connectivism approaches (Siemens, 2017; Utecht & Keller, 2019), as reflected and used in the departments' testimonies, are based on the premise that technology fundamentally changes learning processes and that successful learning may dwell in non-human appliances.

The '*Synchronous*' and '*Asynchronous*' learning alluded to in the vignette are, according to Hrastinski (2008), decisive forms of online digital pedagogies. Module coursework, learning assignments and tasks, materials, recorded lectures, videos and exercises can be put online for asynchronous teaching (Young & Duncan, 2014). According to online learning literature, group discussions and higher-order tasks happen in online lectures as synchronous components (Ali et al., 2023); hence, they can facilitate positive student outcomes. In an exemplary study on academic literacy, Yafele (2024) successfully used synchronous and asynchronous learning affordances in an HE context.

HEIs are increasingly becoming digitalised, and online modes of instruction are being embraced for student achievement. As indicated in the vignette, the emergent incorporation of technology in teaching and learning via connectivism (Siemens, 2017; Goldie, 2016) has led to various adoptions of Learning Management Systems (LMSs) – a global trend. LMSs encourage students to engage deeply in computer-generated lecture rooms and discussion forums for successful learning and better academic performance (Mohsen & Shafeeq, 2014). Hence, participants identified technology-aided pedagogy as a catalyst for student achievement. All agreed it had tangible benefits, contributing to good grades and deeper understanding, as demonstrated in the prototypical interview statements below.

HOD 1 states:

We have become much more flexible in how students access classes. Most lectures get prerecorded, so the main content is available online in a video or audio format. Students go through that before they come to class. Many of us record the live class or share it on Blackboard afterwards, or we live stream. I also teach hybrids. I have students in class and on Zoom. Students can return to the virtual class later and catch up on something they missed or did not understand the first time. Now, they can go back and listen two or three times. This has become the new normal in our department. (HOD 1)

It was further revealed that blended or online teaching increases accessibility to the material and that lecture recordings are vital for many time-strapped undergraduates who can access content virtually at any time. The finding aligns with online teaching trends, which have become the global standard for many institutions after the COVID-19 pandemic. Online teaching was convenient, promoting student success by connecting students and teachers - a new approach to 21st century teaching and learning (Siemens, 2017; Goldie, 2016).

Student-centred practices that promote learning success

The data suggest that instructional approaches can determine success rates. Lecturer A felt that student-centred instructional methods made a difference in teaching, learning, engagement and understanding, significantly improving pass rates.

About student-centeredness and engagement, Lecturer B says:

We realise we need to be student-centred because students engage with knowledge and information very differently from what we do. We must understand how students receive and process that information. We need to understand the student profile, content and the type of information we are presenting and continuously engage with students. So, for our different pedagogies to work, they need different student-centred engagement levels. (Lecturer C)

The evidence of the excerpts constitutes learner-centred approaches (Ryan et al., 2021; Molloy et al., 2020; Weimer, 2013) which personalise the learning objectives, allow errors and permit mistakes. Huba and Freed (2000) prove that student-centred pedagogies provide helpful direction and apt and constant feedback in a context that supports risk-taking behaviour, imaginative ideas, and collaboration. The students of these stories, exposed to student-centred pedagogies, thrive and succeed. Engagement increases as undergraduates take proprietorship and control in learning (Weimer, 2013). Active deep learning (Biggs, 2003) likely occurs when students receive feedback in learner-centred instruction and problem-solving opportunities. The narratives point to student-centredness in pedagogies (e.g. collaborative, dialogic, reflective or integrative pedagogies) as a possible catalyst for improved pass and success rates.

Student-centred practices, focusing on students' needs, experiences, and interests and changing the role of the educator from lecturing to facilitating, seem to give students more control over their learning. Student-centredness, the stories suggest, can help groom students for future success, infuse a growth mindset, and help promote engagement and success. Significant current sources (e.g., Sahmal et al. 2025; Awidi & Paynter, 2024; Murtonen et al. 2024) similarly support student-centred approaches and illuminate their effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

This study explored lecturers' and HODs' narratives at a chosen university in South Africa for practices that best contribute to academic and, ultimately, all-inclusive student success. The participants' reflections and stories allowed a deeper understanding of their practices and teaching experience for students' deep approach to learning (Biggs, 2003: 3), good grades, academic achievement and success beyond their classrooms and graduation. The participants' stories explored innovation in assessments and new technologies and actualised new (for themselves) teaching initiatives, essentially those that centralise learning and bring students more fully and with purpose into their learning processes. The tales of student-centred practices and assessments thrive on understanding students and how they process information. The stories inform the cultivation of students' competencies, which give students an edge. Academic success possibly also lies in the autonomy given to lecturers to intervene in their modules, taking ownership. Their reflective and reflected practices uncovered viable solutions enabling teacher autonomy and initiatives in university classrooms for student achievement and programme completion.

By telling their stories, lecturers provided invaluable insights into their efforts to actualise student success and their experience teaching students for passing. Storytelling was a valuable experience that enabled lecturers to reflect and increase awareness and understanding of avenues to student success. The exploration generates a fuller understanding of student success as lecturers' stories offer a new angle to current research. The identified pedagogies and assessment practices provide valuable insights into initiating and implementing student success. With higher throughput rates, students can proceed with their academic journeys to active citizenship and service to sustainable socioeconomic development – a pinnacle of student success. This study contributes to a more comprehensive knowledge of the implementation of student success by lecturers in higher education and how lecturers' experiences achieve student success.

Increased knowledge of the catalysts and enablers of student achievement and success can foster increased efficiency in successfully teaching skills and proficiencies that HE aims to develop and that students need. The literature points to student success as highly flexible, contextual and subjective, and the study's results confirmed this. Combining the storied factors and practices seems to translate into favourable teaching and learning outcomes. It would also be valuable to conduct studies on student success within specific academic disciplines rather than faculty to understand further how student achievement and success manifest in particular disciplinary contexts.

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