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
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

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

2.1 INTRODUCTION
2.2 THE TERM “STUDENT DEVELOPMENT”
2.3 A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE MAIN STUDENT DEVELOPMENT THEORIES
2.4 THE PURPOSE OF USING A SPECIFIC BASIS FOR THE STUDY
2.5 CHICKERING’S SEVEN VECTOR THEORY OF STUDENT DEVELOPMENT
   2.5.1 Vector One  Developing competence
       2.5.1.1 Intellectual competence
       2.5.1.2 Physical and manual competence
       2.5.1.3 Interpersonal competence
   2.5.2 Vector Two  Managing emotions
       2.5.2.1 Recognition and acceptance of emotions
       2.5.2.2 Becoming more aware of and expressing emotions
       2.5.2.3 The exercising of flexible emotional control
   2.5.3 Vector Three  Moving through autonomy towards interdependence
       2.5.3.1 Emotional independence
       2.5.3.2 Instrumental independence
       2.5.3.3 Interdependence
   2.5.4 Vector Four  Developing mature interpersonal relationships
       2.5.4.1 Tolerance of difference appreciation
       2.5.4.2 Establishing intimacy
   2.5.5 Vector Five  Establishing identity
       2.5.5.1 Comfort with body and appearance
       2.5.5.2 Comfort with gender and sexual orientation
2.5.5.3  Sense of self in social, historical and cultural context  43
2.5.5.4  Clarification of self-concept through roles and lifestyles  43
2.5.5.5  Sense of self in response to feedback from valued others  43
2.5.5.6  Self-acceptance and self-esteem  43
2.5.5.7  Personal stability and integration  44
2.5.6  Vector Six   Developing purpose  44
  2.5.6.1  Vocational plans and dreams  45
  2.5.6.2  Personal interests  46
  2.5.6.3  Interpersonal and family commitments  46
  2.5.6.4  Intentionality  47
2.5.7  Vector Seven   Developing integrity  47
  2.5.7.1  Humanising values  48
  2.5.7.2  Personalising values  49
  2.5.7.3  Developing congruence  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  Time management  55
    3.2.2.2  Teaching style as an aid to understanding  55
    3.2.2.3  Language  56
    3.2.2.4  Poor course and institution choice  56
    3.2.2.5  Study habits  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

3.2.8.1 Institutional policy

3.2.8.2 Bureaucratic red tape

3.3 PERFORMANCE AND ACHIEVEMENT

3.3.1 Introduction

3.3.2 Academic variables in performance and achievement

3.3.2.1 Previous performance and selection tests

3.3.2.2 Study habits and cognitive abilities

3.3.2.3 Reading ability

3.3.2.4 Time management

3.3.2.5 Learning and teaching style

3.3.2.6 Student-faculty interaction

3.3.2.7 Academic climate, setting and ethic

3.3.3 Psychosocial variables that affect performance and achievement.

3.3.3.1 Motivation

3.3.3.2 Goal-setting

3.3.3.3 Self-efficacy

3.3.3.4 Wellness

3.4 UNDER ACHIEVEMENT, FAILURE AND WITHDRAWAL

3.4.1 Introduction

3.4.2 Variables associated with underperformance and withdrawal

3.4.2.1 Individual dispositions

3.4.2.2 Institutional experiences

3.4.2.3 External forces

3.5 CONCLUSION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER FOUR</th>
<th>THE RESEARCH DESIGN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 EXPLANATION OF CONCEPTS IN RESEARCH DESIGN</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.1 Research project</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.2 Literature study</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.3 Qualitative research methodology</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.3.1 Qualitative research validity</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.2.3.2 Qualitative research reliability

4.2.3.3 Specific techniques in the qualitative research study
   a The workshop technique
   b The focus group interview technique

4.2.4 Quantitative research methodology

4.2.4.1 Quantitative research validity

4.2.4.2 Quantitative research reliability

4.2.4.3 Specific technique used in the quantitative method

4.2.4.4 Validity and reliability of the questionnaire

4.2.5 Triangulation methodology

4.2.5.1 Advantages of using triangulation

4.2.5.2 Disadvantages of using triangulation

4.3 RESEARCH METHODS

4.3.1 The problem statement and aims of the research study

4.3.2 Preparation and literature study

4.3.3 Empirical investigation
   4.3.3.1 The workshops
      a The role of the workshop in qualitative research
      b The selection of participants
      c The participant observation technique in the workshops
      d Validity and reliability of the workshops
      e Analysis of raw data
   4.3.3.2 The questionnaire in quantitative research
      a Compilation of the questionnaire
      b Validity and reliability in this phase
      c The administration of the questionnaire
      d Analysis of the questionnaire data
   4.3.3.3 The focus group in qualitative research
      a The technique of using the focus group interview
      b Selection of the focus group
      c Designing the interview guide
      d Administration of the focus group
      e Advantages and disadvantages of using the focus group
4.4 CONCLUSION

CHAPTER FIVE THE EMPIRICAL STUDY

5.1 INTRODUCTION

5.2 PHASE ONE THE WORKSHOPS

5.2.1 Data obtained from workshop 1

5.2.1.1 Student issues

5.2.1.2 Staff issues

5.2.1.3 Institutional issues

5.2.1.4 Social issues

5.2.2 Data obtained from workshop 2

5.2.2.1 Student issues

5.2.2.2 Staff issues

5.2.2.3 Institutional issues

5.2.2.4 Social issues

5.2.3 Data obtained from workshop 3

5.2.3.1 Student issues

5.2.3.2 Staff issues

5.2.3.3 Institutional issues

5.2.3.4 Social issues

5.2.4 Data obtained from workshop 4

5.2.4.1 Student issues

5.2.4.2 Staff issues

5.2.4.3 Institutional issues

5.2.4.4 Social issues

5.2.5 Data obtained from workshop 5

5.2.5.1 Student issues

5.2.5.2 Staff issues

5.2.5.3 Institutional issues

5.2.5.4 Social issues
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 Group 1 Business science access course 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 Course 2 Credit management 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 Course 3 Human resources management 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 Course 4 Management 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 Course 5 Management services 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 Course 6 Public relations management 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 Course 7 Marketing management 172
CHAPTER SIX SUMMARY AND FINDINGS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

6.2 FINDINGS FROM THE LITERATURE STUDY

6.2.1 Findings concerned with student development

6.2.1.1 Developing competencies

6.2.1.2 Managing emotions

6.2.1.3 Moving through autonomy towards interdependence

6.2.1.4 Developing mature interpersonal relationships

6.2.1.5 Establishing identity

6.2.1.6 Developing purpose

6.2.1.7 Developing integrity

6.2.2 Findings concerned with new student adjustment issues

6.2.2.1 Competency issues

6.2.2.2 Emotional issues
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 Study skills 242
7.3.2.2 Learning centre 242
7.3.2.3 Experiential learning 243
7.3.2.4 Leadership training 243
7.3.2.5 Adjustment and orientation 243
7.3.2.6 Financial aid 243
7.3.3. Practical solutions for the institution

7.3.3.1 The establishment of a learning centre 244
7.3.3.2 Life skills curriculation 245
7.3.3.3 Establishment of a non-residential student centre 245
7.3.3.4 Implementation of the proposed model 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
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