‘AS A PERSON YOU NEED HELP EVERY NOW AND THEN’: ACCESSING STUDENTS’ SUPPORT NEEDS IN A HIGHER EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT

S. Manik
School of Education, Edgewood Campus
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Pinetown, South Africa
e-mail: manik@ukzn.ac.za

ABSTRACT

Student departure from higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa has recently garnered renewed enthusiasm with attempts by researchers to understand and address its impact on university statistics. Whilst studies initially focused on the aetiology of student departure, the pendulum has now started to swing in the direction of the elements and environments for students achieving success in higher education. A key perspective involves gaining insight into what students think they need to ensure they achieve success. This article reports on undergraduate students’ conceptions of what their support needs are at a university in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa. The data draws from a questionnaire administered as part of a mixed methods study on student departure. The findings indicated a myriad support needs articulated by the students across all years of study that serves to affirm Benjamin’s theory on the
complex nature of students' lives that impacts on them. An interesting finding was students' request for physiological support, that is, a basic need for food. Another key finding was that of the students' on-going need for psychological support given the stressful nature of their academic and personal challenges.

**Keywords:** student departure, success, support needs

**INTRODUCTION**

This article on student support needs, foregrounding students’ voices, is conceived in a higher education context in South Africa with student departure as the backdrop. It should be read in tandem with a previous article (Manik 2014, as both articles emanate from the same study), on the causes of student departure from a university in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa. The findings discussed in that article (Manik 2014) were particular to the institutional environment and included career derailment, a lack of counselling, financial requirements and academic workload demands. In respect of career derailment, students who had departed reported that university personnel influenced them to pursue a career choice that differed to their initial career choice. Students who had departed also shared a lack of academic counselling at the institution and having sparse knowledge of the career options available to them at the institution. The lack of finance was also a key variable in student departure as was the high workload demands with students feeling unable to cope. Interestingly, despite students experiencing several stressors, there appeared to be a culture of silence amongst some students, in that they were not actively seeking assistance. That article concluded with the view that there should be greater institutional engagement with students to address their needs. The current article is a follow-on centring on the institutional environment and it reports on the strand of current undergraduate students in terms of their own conceptions of what their support needs are at this institution for them to achieve success. Whilst students have shared their support needs to achieve success, this article in no way contends that if their needs are met, they are guaranteed to achieve success.

Student departure is indeed a pressing issue of enormous concern in higher education worldwide (Roberts and Styron 2010) and in South Africa. At higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa, student departure has recently garnered enthusiasm with attempts by researchers to understand and address its multiple facets (Beck 2011; Letseka and Maile 2008; Manik 2014; Ramrathan 2013; Roos 2009) with a view to improving students’ success. Student success, in this article, is understood as being students’ persistence at the institution and their achievement of degree completion. There is adequate literature which attempts to unpack the aetiology of student departure. For example, Letseka and Maile (2008) have linked the socio-economic status of students with student departure whilst Beck
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(2010) and Roos (2009) examined biographical variables and student performance. However, the trends that have been identified have been criticised by virtue of the methodologies used in the studies, for example Ramrathan (2013) drew attention to the poor response rates and I (Manik 2014) reported that there was an over reliance on the ‘student departure rates’ calculations as a pathway to understanding student departure. I have argued that understanding student departure must emanate from studies wherein students are provided with opportunities to give their voice to the phenomenon of student departure as quantitative data alone fails to provide adequate insight into addressing the key nuances that underpin student departure. Qualitative data emanating from students’ articulations have the capacity to highlight salient aspects that collectively contribute to their departure, such as the role of the institution with regard to students’ career choice, counselling services, high workloads and financial constraints (Manik 2014). Thus, whilst there is a fair expanse of studies on the reasons that students depart from higher education, there is still a need to fill in more pieces into the puzzle of students’ lives, particularly their challenges thwarting their attempts to achieve success in HEIs in South Africa. Hence, accessing students’ support needs is one such piece that can assist in providing a more comprehensive picture.

Several authors have noted a link between addressing ‘customer needs’ and their ‘success’ (Hénard and Roseveare 2012; Tinto and Pusser 2006). I crafted the current article by accessing undergraduate students and allowing them the opportunity to provide feedback to the university on their support needs that they believe can lead to their success. It has been and still is a contention of mine that is also congruent with Low (2000), that a satisfied student in higher education will be a student who persists and achieves success unless there are outside environmental factors (not within the scope of the institution) that prove to be overwhelmingly powerful. When students feel that their needs are not being met, it will lead to dissatisfaction with the institution and Hénard and Roseveare (2012) warn institutions that they will have to learn how to best serve the students. Low (2000), in Tillman (n.d. 2) further remarked that ‘successful institutions focus on the needs of their students’, and it is within these larger parameters that the article should be understood, as a call for institutions to access their students’ support needs. Tinto and Pusser (2006, 7) contend that ‘support is a condition that promotes student success’, but I re-iterate that the current article does not provide evidence for a claim that student support leads to success although it does illuminate students’ support needs at the institution. This provides an enhanced understanding of what students consider to be their needs at the case study institution. I have chosen to pursue students’ support ‘needs’ as opposed to their ‘wants’ because a ‘need’ is considered a necessity, that is what students consider to be necessary for their success at university, whilst a ‘want’ can enhance a person’s life but is not necessary. This understanding draws from Doyal and Gough’s (2003, 08) ‘A theory of human need’ where they explain that needs are
a specific segment of universal goals important to all human beings to prevent harm, which is different from ‘wants’ that arise ‘from an individual’s particular preferences and cultural environment’. They also argue that ‘appropriate education’ is one of the eleven categories of intermediate needs (Lavers 2008, 132).

THEORETICAL ORIENTATIONS TO STUDENTS’ NEEDS AND ELEMENTS PROMOTING SUCCESS

Students’ needs have long been a topic of higher education discussions with students being perceived as ‘customers’ (Brits 2011; De Shields, Kara and Kaynak 2005; Seymour 1993). The simile of the student as a ‘customer’ has been framed in the thinking that institutions have to be responsive to their clientele base to ensure their survival and growth. Herein, Seymour (1993) has argued that the use of students as customers is linked to the purpose of HEIs in that they are there to serve since they exist because of the students and if there were no students, then the HEIs would have to close. Seymour (1993, 42) explains that creating content ‘customers, whether they are students, parents of students, alumni, or company and government employers, should be a primary goal of higher education’. Brits (2011) goes a step further and links quality in HEIs with the customer’s needs and expectations. He reports in a study on student satisfaction using satisfaction surveys at a HEI in South Africa that his case study institution had a strong customer-centred approach and as such had created a quality assurance framework, which rested on total quality management. He cites Oakland (1988, 27) in explaining that quality is ‘addressing the needs and expectations of the customer’. Hénard and Roseveare (2012, 09) in their Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report on fostering quality teaching in higher education note that HEIs ‘will have to learn how to best serve the student community’ implying that HEIs still have to grow in strengthening their relationship with students. In their policy on engaging students they suggest that students can offer vital ‘customer feedback’ in two respects, namely: on what is successfully done in the institution; and also on what students ‘would like to be done differently and how’ (Hénard and Roseveare 2012, 21). This is where students can provide input on what types of support needs they require in order to encourage their success, which is in keeping with the argument in the article.

A causal relationship has been advanced between customer/student satisfaction and student retention/persistence. For example, De Shields et al. (2005) purport that students’ satisfaction impacts on their intention either to remain at or exit an institution. They do not correlate satisfaction to student success but to student persistence. Another theoretical strand comes from authors who have considered students to be partners (Kotler and Fox 1995) with HEIs and they have argued for the need to develop a close relationship between students and HEIs. Aside from the similes/metaphors used to understand the relationship between students and HEIs,
what is quite transparent is that students are a critical variable in HEIs, yet what is still opaque are their articulations of their needs at institutions, particularly what they consider to be their support needs.

Barefoot (2004, 13) notes that when student departure became a grave issue in the United States (US), institutions implemented an assortment of support programmes to promote student success but these programmes ‘were a function of perceived student needs as well as resources’. Hence, the implemented programmes were not the result of HEIs accessing students to find out their needs. These were also largely fashioned for first-year students given the research findings on the relationship between students’ involvement in various groups and their persistence (Astin 1993). Also, much of the research which had informed these programmes was amongst students living in residences and therefore not applicable to students who commute to university. Nevertheless, the programmes were generally of two avenues: academic and social programmes largely as a result of Tinto’s (1993) findings on social and academic integration of first-year students. Later research by Tinto and Pusser (2006, 5) led to a report where they noted that research indicated five elements which promote student success, namely: ‘institutional commitment, institutional expectations, support, feedback, and involvement or engagement’. With regard to support, they delineated three types of support that students need at university, namely: academic, social and financial.

**Student support programmes**

Academic support initiatives that HEIs have included constitute the following: ‘developmental education courses, tutoring, study groups and academic support programs’, whilst social support is frequently ‘in the form of counselling, mentoring, and ethnic student centers’ (Tinto and Pusser 2006, 7). Ethnic student centres in US HEIs are a relatively recent development for students who are from minority groups and who may feel out of place and need orientation at university. Many of the support programmes offered are either academic or a mix of academic and social given Tinto’s initial research.

A common programme in the US is the ‘first year seminars’ in a small class environment of no more than 20 students for increased interaction. The course content of the seminars includes learning what could be termed critical skills, such as study skills, time management and the use of campus resources such as the library, computer labs and learning assistance centres (Fiddler 1991). All the requisite skills are built into themes within the programme.

Another innovation with a socio-academic mix is that of ‘learning communities’. It is based on increasing interactions in small class environments. Again, the premise here is that building friendships will lead to building a sense of belonging at university. This has had a measure of success in large universities in the US.
where small student-responsive segments were created (Barefoot 2004; Tinto and Pusser 2006). Increasing student interactions appear to be an underlining factor in the above two strategies and this has merit as Sax et al. (2002) found that students were dissatisfied with large class sizes of a few hundred students. In addition, black students and women had a preference for an instruction style that was relational (Claxton and Murrell 1987). Barefoot (2004) surmises that there has not been any research to demonstrate the links between race, gender, teaching strategy and student persistence.

An academic innovation, one which has been correlated with student persistence, is supplemental instruction (SI) (Martin and Arendale 1993). It has been replicated across the world including South Africa after being developed in the US and its key point of success is that it is directly related to a course/module that is offered. Tinto and Pusser (2006) have noted that when a support programme is attached to a specific class then it has been effective. SI functions as a weekly class which is led by a master student and offered in modules which appear to be high risk. Its value lies in the creation of an environment where students can clarify issues and address difficult content. It is offered to students across the board and is not dependent on students’ performance for inclusion, for example, being labelled as ‘at risk’. An adaptation of face-to-face SI has been the video version (Martin and Hurley 2004) where lectures are video-taped and students watch under the guidance of the master student. They are then at liberty to stop the tape, rewind it, select sections for discussion, and so on. The appeal of SI lies in that student departure is a phenomenon which does not exclusively affect ‘at risk’ students and even what could be termed the average or above average student may require help at some point (Barefoot 2002) in order to persist and work towards achieving success. In the case of South Africa, with an increase in the intake of previously disadvantaged students into higher education, more steps may be necessary to support students given that Barefoot (2004, 12) comments as follows on a similar scenario in the US: ‘As more students with a variety of at-risk characteristics enter colleges and universities’ it will be necessary to ‘imbed various forms of support throughout the undergraduate years’. This is a view also held by Ramrathan (2013, 215) and it is apparent in his conceptual framework that provides insight to understanding ‘student drop-out from university’. Forged in the current student population at a KZN HEI, he offers a quantitative and qualitative prism that can be combined in understanding student departure via a mixed methods approach. In his framework, university support is integrated from the point of student access all the way to student graduation, implying that support programmes should be inserted across all years of study to ensure student persistence and their success. Thus, it appears that HEIs will need to commit themselves and take particular forms of action across each year in working towards these goals.
THE INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT AND SUCCESS

With regard to the institutional environment and success, Tinto and Pusser (2006, 18) present a ‘preliminary institutional action model for student success’ and argue that there are particular institutional environments that influence students’ success. They report that students’ efforts and learning are the keys to their success but that institutions have the capacity to generate effort and in turn impact on student learning and success. They purport in their model that classrooms are the foundations for lecturer-student meeting and engagement whether it is in respect of providing support or generating more student involvement. They also note the value of professional development of lecturers in respect of pedagogy, curricula and assessment. They argue that it is the role of institutions to capacitate ‘faculty’ and to develop classrooms where students are actively involved in learning. Interestingly, they note that their model is incomplete as it selects particular environments of the institution that can be shaped for action. The model does posit that there are ‘events’ which are external to the university ‘that matter’, but these are omitted because they are seen to be outside of institutional control.

METHODOLOGY

This article derives from a study on student departure at UKZN. There were numerous strands in the study which accessed both current and departed students and academic staff. The instrument used to obtain the data for discussion in the current article was a questionnaire which was given to current students across all the years of study on multiple campus sites. The questionnaire sought to gauge whether students had considered departure at any point in their studies; the nature of the challenges they experienced at university; and what their support needs were to achieve success. In total 522 questionnaires were collected. A gendered profile of the participants revealed 336 females and 177 males. The majority of the students were African followed by Indian. Most of the participants were from the college of humanities followed by agriculture, engineering and science.

The questionnaire consisted of a mix of open-ended and closed-ended questions. The questions included ‘when students started feeling that they were not coping’ and ‘when they felt like dropping out of university’. Students were asked whether they had attempted to source some kind or assistance and what support needs they required. Of the 522 questionnaires, there were 20 invalid responses and out of the 502 responses, 232 students mentioned that at some stage they felt like departing from higher education, that is, almost 45 per cent of students that felt like departing at some point in their study. The open-ended questions included ‘why they had considered leaving’. They were then asked ‘what kinds of support they needed’ in order to cope with university life and achieve success. A total of 329 valid responses (66%) were received for this question. A qualitative discussion of students’ responses
is presented below. Each student is referenced in the findings according to the number allocated on his/her questionnaire.

**FINDINGS**

It is valuable to note that the majority of students provided what they considered to be their support needs with clarity. Students reported that the two main areas wherein they required support were in an integration into and understanding of the academic environment at university and coping with personal challenges. Within the parameters of the broad categories, there was a plethora of finer caveats where students felt that they required support.

### Integration into and understanding of the higher education environment

Adjustment to the academic environment at university was a significant area wherein students stated they required support. This comes as no surprise as it has been argued internationally and locally that more students are entering university and that they are inadequately prepared for what university study entails. Student 30 succinctly summed up the challenge that first year students face: ‘University is different from high school.’ There were several regions in the academic environment with which students needed assistance in terms of their academic integration into university life: the style of instruction, independent work, critical academic and administrative skills, career choices and workload demands.

### Style of instruction and lecturer engagement

The case study university is located in South Africa, where the majority of the undergraduate students who attend university at present are young and have encountered post-apartheid public school education. Public school education is characterised by relatively small classroom sizes in comparison to university. In the former, the optimum teacher-pupil ratio in secondary school is 1:32, that is, for every teacher there is an average of 32 learners. Thus, in a 45-minute period, the average time spent per learner is more than a minute. By contrast, at university, the average class size is more than double that of the public school classroom, hence there could be less than 30 seconds allocated on average to a student. This calculation of time is also relevant for the nature of engagement that occurs between lecturers and their students. There have been several curricula innovations introduced in public school education, such as the Norms and Standards for teachers, which advocates the multiple roles that teachers have to develop to be effective teachers. One of those roles is a mediator of learning. Thus, classroom teaching at secondary schools allows
for various permutations of a variety of teaching strategies to enhance learning via teacher-learner interactions and learner-learner interactions, such as group work, explanation, questioning, direct instruction and storytelling. Indeed, this is not the full ambit of teaching strategies.

Students felt that the style of instruction at university was an area in which they required adjustment. For example, Student 16 said: ‘I was failing to adjust to the new type of learning whereby you had to attend lectures.’ It is common knowledge that the lecture method at university is what was once termed ‘teacher talk’ with minimum student interaction. This is a method for large class settings and it has its drawbacks, the most pronounced of which is student disengagement because as Student 16 noted, the only input from the student is ‘attending’ the lecture and perhaps not quite grasping the content. Thus, greater teacher-student engagement is a need for students with several students commenting on its importance. Other examples were Student 80 who said: ‘My lecturer’s support, when it came to things that I don’t understand’; and Student 79: ‘Just consultations with the lecturers.’ There was an interesting disclosure in Student 26’s articulations that he required: ‘additional info from lecturers for a better understanding of the presented work.’ A linguistic analysis of the students’ use of diction such as ‘presented work’ suggests that the manner in which the content is related to students lacks this much needed lecturer-student engagement. This lack of an interactive relationship between the student and lecturer is also evident when Student 20 exclaimed that she needed support ‘from lecturers if aspects of the content were difficult to grasp.’ Lecturer engagement is also important for other aspects such as module assessments as Student 66 explained: ‘There was [sic] times I needed assistance from lecturers as I did not understand what was required of certain assignments.’

This idea of a teaching rift between the lecturer and student was furthered by Student 30 when he called for a person’s help and not specifically the lecturer, which implies that students do not perceive the lecturer as being accountable for facilitating their understanding of the content: ‘Assistance, in need of a person to correct my wrongs.’ In fact, Student 101 shared a total breakdown in the relationship between her class and the lecturer on the basis of the teaching content. She explained: ‘Our lecturer did not know the content she was teaching, we tried to get a new lecturer and were called racists.’ In addition to the lecturer’s impact on student learning, this form of aggression to students does little to solve the challenges that they are facing in terms of seeking better engagement.

### Independent work and tutor/mentor assistance

Another area cited by students was that of independent work at university. For example, Student 75 stated: ‘I was finding it difficult to do my schoolwork on my own.’ Students who shared the view of Student 75 reported that university study required them to involve themselves in largely independent work, which they were
not prepared for. Again, this dilemma that students find themselves in is the result of curricula innovations in post-apartheid South African education where group work became emblematic of outcomes-based education. It is a learner-learner tool that gained prominence and secondary school learners are *au fait* with collaborative learning methods such as group work. Suddenly, at university, this is not the preferred choice for lecturers and students felt that they required academic support in adjusting to an environment where they have to work independently. Many students requested for a group environment such as that espoused in learning communities as can be seen in the following examples:

**Student 267 said:** I needed people to study with, this was because I wanted to do well and pass this course.

**Student 270 explained:** Study group to share ideas with others.

**Student 273 called for:** Support from class mates to go over work and test each other and ask anything I want to.

In addition, many students called for ‘someone’ to assist them to cope with their adjustment. For example, Student 46 said: ‘I need academic support in order for that someone to help me cope and adapt in a university life.’ In their call for ‘someone’ students are clearly sending out a message that they cannot adapt by themselves without some form of assistance. Frequently, they suggested tutors/mentors to assist them in gaining academic inroads. The teaching rift is again evident in students’ requests for help, Student 28 said the support he needs is: ‘Asking the tutor or lecturer questions on certain things to have a better understanding of what is required.’ It is interesting that the student’s first port of call is the tutor and not the lecturer to provide clarity. Does this imply that a better quality of content engagement is expected from the tutor and not the lecturer? The request is for tutors/mentors to provide content clarification but also for academic guidance as explained by Student 21: ‘Someone who will help me with my school work and be there when I have questions to ask.’ Also, Student 241 stated: ‘I wanted mentorship because I was unable to cope or focus on my studies due to the new environment of university that I was engaged in’; and Student 243 stated: ‘Need a mentor to monitor my work.’

This need for a form of support wherein students are informed if they grasp the content or not appeared to be a frequent appeal. Also, students need the satisfaction of knowing if they have the correct understanding of the content as Student 12 said: ‘To inform me if I was still on track.’ Students were requesting feedback, that is, some form of monitoring. They needed to have someone check their progress and provide them with comment. Indeed, this is similar to an early alert system to which students were referring, but it goes deeper in that they were not requesting an assessment to determine their understanding but an academic ‘guide/tutor’ to alert
them if they were making progress in their understanding of a module. This indicates that students have a strong commitment towards needing to understand their work.

Of course the request for the assistance of a tutor/mentor makes perfect sense if students cannot understand their lecturer as Student 18 articulated in her need for support: ‘Our maths lecturer didn’t speak proper English so making it difficult for us to understand the work’. It was evident that the lecturer’s command of the English language was a barrier to the student’s learning and the student suggests a tutor to assist her with the content to overcome this. Other students also confirmed that even when the lecturers communicated in English with ease, the level of the language used created hiccups in their learning. For example, Student 62 explained her multiple needs for: ‘more notes, clear simple English, more time to engage with tutors’. Her repetition of ‘more’ is valuable as she is of the opinion that she was getting less than what her requirements were at present, that is, students had particular expectations and they felt that these were not being met. Some students reported that they attended SI classes when they were available in a module and this they found to be useful. Students also suggested tutors/mentors to demonstrate to them how to undertake academic writing and research.

Critical skills

Students reported needing support to acquire the relevant skills in academic writing and time management. Being inducted into academia can be overwhelming for students especially when they have to submit assessments and they have not acquired the cultural capital to undertake the various endeavours such as writing an academic essay, conducting forms of research and adhering to the university’s style of referencing. Many students required support in academic essay writing, avoiding plagiarism and using appropriate referencing as evidenced below:

Student 44: How I can write my essay or assignments ...

Student 53: I needed support in writing an academic essay.

Student 65: Support on how to structure academic essays and write academically.

Student 87: The good essay writing and referencing.

Student 88: The way of writing assignments, such as how can I reference to avoid plagiarism (that was new to me) the reason is that I wanted to pass and learn for the future purposes.

Student 90: Academic assistance in terms of writing skills and psychological need (assistance), first felt it was too much for me. Stressed.
Student 45: How to conduct research effectively and be able to reference correctly.

Academic writing, researching and referencing appeared to be grave elements of concern for students calling for support as they were unfamiliar with these aspects of academia and it led to some students experiencing stress.

Another key skill that students needed to acquire was that of time management. Student 150 explained that he needed: ‘Student counselling − maybe had a shock of being in university and could not cope with the workload and time.’ Students felt the need to be taught how to carve out their time efficiently to meet their academic requirements. This is understandable as students have alluded to university being very different to high school. At school, time is managed for the learners via the timetable and there are no ‘non-lecture’/what students like to call ‘free’ periods as there are at university.

Administrative assistance and technology

Students felt that they needed support with a host of administrative activities upon their entry to university. These included registration, the use of computers and career guidance in terms of the selection of modules for particular degrees. Whilst many HEIs understand that new students require orientation to the university environment, the programmes appear to be inadequate to meet the students’ needs especially at crucial periods such as registration as Student 96 explained: ‘I just needed support with my registration.’ With the case study university located in one of the poorest provinces in South Africa, more disadvantaged students are now accessing university than ever before and their needs are also likely to be extensive in terms of technological support. For example, Student 228 stated: ‘I needed to get set up on Moodle (an online learning tool) and learning sites and accessing my student e-mail’; also Student 222 reported: ‘The use of electronic resources. I had no prior experience with the use of computers and computer resources.’ This can be a double challenge for a student who has to undertake computerised registration.

Career pathways

Many students enter university across the years with a vague idea of the exact modules they need to register for due to various reasons. One of the reasons is matching modules to their likes; for example, Student 97 said: ‘I wanted to know what it was we had to do to teach both high school and primary school and advice. ‘There are times when students just need an affirmation of their choices as Student 161 explained: ‘Because I wasn’t sure whether I was studying the right course and electives.’ It’s also not uncommon to have students unaware of how to select their majors and electives, how the credit points work across the various years to graduate on time and if they have failed a module, how to compensate for that failure as Student 99
explained, ‘career guidance in correspondence with my modules’. Student 156 felt that she required on-going career support and ‘would like continuous counselling from a career counsellor’. Collectively, numerous students were requesting for continuous career advice as they progressed or regressed at university.

Personal support

The requests for personal support were generally accompanied by requests for academic support. In terms of personal support, students required assistance with personal challenges they were experiencing whilst being on campus. Personal impediments do not constitute an institutional issue, or do they? It must be recognised that personal problems, such as work related stress and financial stress, can lead to an academic impasse for students which may lead to them not persisting and achieving success in higher education. Student 185 explained his predicament: ‘Financial support – fees are a lot to pay and unfortunately I come from a disadvantaged background.’ Student 104 explained how the ripple effect of ‘personal problems affected my work.’ Personal problems included students coping with poor finances, their emotions and other sources of stress including academia. Student 155 explained that she needed ‘counselling sessions in order to deal with life matters which help me to be able to manage them.’ Other students were similarly requesting assistance in multiple areas. Student 79 explained: ‘Academic obviously because my marks are very poor, financially because I am struggling to pay my fees.’ Another similar remark came from Student 93 who said: ‘I needed support in academic work; finances and transport.’ A lack of finances can be linked to the need for physiological support as Student 216 explained, ‘To be supported financially, I don’t have enough money for food and that disturb [sic] me to pass.’ Food is a basic need and some students were foregoing meals due to poverty which was affecting their studies as the following students explained: Student 186: ‘Financial support. I didn’t have money to eat while I’m at campus’; Student 195: ‘I need financial support because sometimes you can’t perform on an empty stomach.’

The effects of multiple sources of stress (academic, financial) are very real for students who are trying to access help as Student 59 reported: ‘I was seeking for support to my studies because it was difficult and I even get sick sometimes and I even got some stress because I was thinking about my future’. Also, Student 44 called for a way on ‘how to handle stress’. Equally, Student 143 called for ‘psychological support. To be able to deal with emotional issues which were blocking my progress academically.’ It was evident that the levels of strain appear insurmountable for these students making a blanket plea for on-going and several forms of support to alleviate their stress. As Student 102 succinctly summed it up: ‘As a person you need help every now and then.’
DISCUSSION

Students reported on a variety of interlinking key elements which they felt would encourage their success at university and three of these elements have been alluded to by Tinto and Pusser (2006), namely: support, feedback, and involvement/engagement. Students’ support needs were multiple from their entry to university up until graduation and it commences with the big leap between school life and university life. As Tinto and Pusser (2006) advocate in their preliminary model, the classroom is the epicentre of lecturer-student engagement and in this study students expressed the view that this engagement was lacking, hence their need for support. Thus, students were calling for forms of support where they would have opportunities for greater engagement in the content of courses and feedback in respect of their understanding of the work. They were seeking deep engagement with the lecturers and tutors/mentors to connect over module content and assessments. However, lecturers’ engagements with students that constitute ‘micro-aggressions’, such as labelling them as racists, ‘disinvites’ the students and fails to address their concerns. Purkey and Novak (1984 in Brits 2012, 1277) emphasise that ‘teaching is inviting’ and they contend that there are signal systems which either invite or disinvite academic success. Such micro-aggressions are clearly disinviting to students and will have the capacity to repel them from achieving success.

Students were also in need of critical skills training in administrative tasks and computers, similar to what Fiddler (1991) contends is the essence of the content in ‘first year seminars’ in the US. Academic skills (writing, researching and referencing) were an area wherein they felt they were greatly lacking. In addition, they were suggesting support in career guidance across all their years of study. Students were of the view that they required personal support for mental health issues, and financial burdens such as transport and paying their fees. A critical call for some students was meeting their basic physiological need for food. Academic and personal support should not be viewed as mutually exclusive categories and students reported on their personal hurdles influencing their academic focus. It was argued that personal challenges affecting students can influence their academic outcomes (Manik 2014). What also emerged as being fundamentally important for students is their need for psychological support as it spanned both the academic and personal challenges that they were experiencing. Students’ constant referral to being ‘stressed’ is worrying as the university environment should not be so stressful that it engenders health problems for students who feel unable to cope emotionally. But stress, particularly amongst first-year students at South African HEIs has been noted by Bojuwoye (2010) in his study of five institutions. Interestingly, Tinto and Pusser (2006) alluded much earlier to social support being a valuable aspect in students achieving success.

Billson and Brooks-Terry’s (1987) student retention model is underpinned by the construct of institutional support. They assert that combining student engagement and university support structures will lead to reduced student departure, but they do
not comment on attaining student success. The need to bridge the school-university divide and respond to the other needs of students can only be addressed effectively through support structures developed by the university based on the feedback from students. Thus, the support mechanisms have to be aligned to the needs that students have expressed and these needs are varied, because students’ lives are complex as Benjamin (1994) has asserted in his Quality of Student Life model where he reports on the multidimensional aspects of students’ lives. Benjamin (1994, 229) defines Quality of Student Life as ‘student short-term perception of satisfaction and happiness with multiple life domains in light of salient psychosocial and contextual factors, and personal meaning structures’. His model was seen to be cherished as it criticised previous student departure models on the basis that they were not reflective of the ‘complex and multileveled lives of today’s students’ (Andres and Carpenter 1997, 28). In this study students expressed needing on-going support in both the academic and personal domains of their lives. Furthermore, on-going support can be seen as the island central to the notion of students working towards achieving success in higher education as they appear to be faced with a swamp of challenges that extend from the academic to the personal across their years of study, thereby creating and festering stress.

CONCLUSION

Crosling, Heagney and Thomas (2009) have reported that student departure is quite complex and lately HEIs in South Africa have rightly had an obsession with student departure. This article has focused on a new perspective in the student departure discourse, in particular, students’ conceptions of what they consider to be their support needs. The literature emphasises that students have been conceived as ‘customers’ and later as ‘partners’ and that their support needs are a tripartite of academic, social and financial. The article avoids presenting an alternate simile from the findings, but it does contend that there is a reciprocal relationship between the student and university and that student support can be perceived as the umbilical cord linking the university to the student, nourishing him/her. Strengthening student support can function by carrying the much desired nutrients in the form of academic and personal programmes to meet a kaleidoscope of students’ needs, particularly physiological and psychological needs, unaccounted for in much of the literature but which has a strong bearing for students in the case study in KZN. Indeed, strengthening students’ support measures in higher education is paramount to addressing their satisfaction in higher education. Similar to Crosling et al. (2009), I believe that it falls within the parameters of the institution’s commitment to its students to provide several forms of support to help them achieve the university’s goals and their own goals if they have been accepted at the university.
REFERENCES


