

How first-year students can set themselves up for success

Matriculants heading for their first year at university in 2022 now have a golden period ahead of them, in which they can take the steps that will ensure they make a success not just of their first year, but which will allow them to lay the groundwork for a productive and fulfilling career after graduation.



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Entering Higher Education is a major culture shock for many students and making the right preparations prior to this rite of passage to adulthood can make an important contribution to better outcomes, an education expert says.

“First year dropout rates have historically been – and remain – a problem in South Africa,” says Natasha Madhav, senior head of programme at The Independent Institute of Education, SA’s largest and most accredited private higher education provider.

She says the reasons why students with seemingly good prospects struggle during their first year are numerous, and many have to deal with a combination of factors which include: the relative loss of adult supervision and institutional structure of schools and the need to work more autonomously, the increased academic demand at university, the culture shock of campus life, the temptations of the social scene, personal circumstances and a lack of support. Additionally, many students did not do their research properly before settling on a qualification and institution, and will soon find themselves at sea as they realise they are on the wrong academic path.

“There is a myriad of things that can potentially go wrong during your first year of post-school study, but the good news is that by getting your head in the right space before you even set foot on campus, a great deal of potential challenges can be either ameliorated or entirely neutralised, setting you up for first year and future success,” Madhav says.



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She says in the coming weeks, prospective students and first years who are already enrolled at a university can take the following steps to firm up their further study foundations:

1. U-turn or full-steam ahead

Probably one of the most important steps to take, is to ensure you are confident that you have enrolled for the right qualification (for you) at the right institution, Madhav says.

“Unfortunately, matrices often scramble to apply for studies without having a clear idea of what they want to do, or what they are going to do once they have completed a qualification,” she says.

When considering whether you have made a good decision about your studies, ask yourself the following questions:

- 1) Have I chosen a qualification that matches my interests and my vision for my future?
- 2) Has my institution been clear about the curriculum and its relevance to what is required in the industry in real life?
- 3) Am I clear about how my qualification will help me enter a specific field or career, or am I still vague about my prospects post-graduation?
- 4) Does my institution have a demonstrable track record in helping graduates bridge the gap between the world of study and the world of work?

Getting a satisfying answer to the above questions will set your mind at ease that you are on the right track, and remove doubts about the massive investment of time and money you will make in coming years.

If, however, uncertainty remains, it is not too late to take action.

“Making the change now, while there is still time and your potential losses are limited, is crucial,” says Madhav.

“Don’t think what’s done is done and there is no changing direction if you have doubts about your prior decisions. If you already have doubts, or can’t answer the above questions satisfactorily, it is unlikely that things will sort themselves out while you are thrown in the deep end next year. Rather take the time that you have now to investigate your options and ensure that you make the best decision for your future *before* you enter higher education.”

2. Logistics

Make sure you get all your logistical ducks in a row before heading to tertiary education, Madhav advises.

“Make sure you stay on top of your institution’s communication with future students, so that you know when, where and how everything is expected to happen next year. Sort out living arrangements if you are going to be away from home, put together a budget, and as far as possible, ensure that you have the textbooks, technology and stationery you’ll require.”

Of course for many, not all of the above will realistically be in place on day one, but by understanding where the gaps are, and what you have to work with, you can at least start out with a plan.

3. Mental preparedness

Campus life is a whole different kettle of fish compared to school life, and knowing what's coming, and how you are going to approach this new phase, is crucial.

"Think about what you want from your time in higher education, the outcomes you wish for yourself, and the challenges that might stop you from reaching your dream. How will you handle the party life? How serious are you about attending all lectures – even 8am ones - and submitting assignments timeously? What are your daily, weekly, monthly goals and how will you ensure you reach them? Do you know where you will be able to go for assistance – emotionally or academically - at your institution should you require it?"

Working towards your qualification can be one of the most exciting and fulfilling times of a person's life if it is underpinned by a clear vision, discipline and determination, says Madhav.

"As with all things, first year students must start as they wish to finish. Don't leave it up to fate – take control of your life and your future from the outset, so that you can step into your studies with confidence next year."

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