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An evaluation of the factors that influence academic success as defined by engaged students

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**An evaluation of the factors that influence academic success as defined by engaged students**

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## **An evaluation of the factors that influence academic success as defined by engaged students**

### **Abstract**

Grades are frequently used by academics as a measure of academic success. The literature has largely neglected to ascertain how students define this important concept. This study aimed to give voice to how university students define academic success and what they perceive as the contributing factors. This qualitative study used three focus groups with 16 undergraduate psychology students attending a London university. Experiential inductive thematic analysis (TA) was used to analyse the data. Students defined academic success as a combination of outcomes including grades and more holistic outcomes of personal development and achievements. Three themes emerged to summarise students' perception of the factors that influence academic success. The first theme student agency included two subthemes: setting goals and self-regulation. The second theme was aptitude, with two subthemes: self-evaluation and motivation. The final theme was type of support which included the subthemes institutional support and external support. This study adds the student voice to the definition of academic success and the factors that facilitate it.

The challenge for higher education institutions is to incorporate these student-defined attributes into the curriculum to facilitate student success, particularly targeting malleable elements such as study and social skills, financial and other tailored provisions especially for non-traditional students. Researchers also need to develop instruments to measure holistic academic success outcomes to assess if students are reaching these objectives.

**Key words:** academic success; personal development; achievement; goals; motivation

**Word Count:** 7788

## Introduction

### *Student Voice*

The contemporary student is imagined as consumer, producer, co-creator, partner, and change agent (Dollinger & Mercer-Mapstone, 2019), all seemingly positioning the student in a situation of power. However, the student voice is not always sought in ways that benefit the student. The neoliberal marketisation of higher education (HE) envisions the student as a customer of financial benefit to the university (Tilak, 2015), thus allowing the financial transaction to overshadow what is of value to the individual student. The consumer model also uses public markers of student satisfaction commercially to attract new ‘customers’, superseding the enhancement of the individual student experience (Canning, 2017). One such survey, the National Student Survey (NSS) in the United Kingdom, asks non-validated questions (Holligan & Shah, 2017) non-student authorities deem important, the same authorities who will then decide how to react to the survey results. These surveys therefore set boundaries on the student voice and how it is heard (Canning, 2017; Holligan & Shah, 2017). This is contrary to Nelson and Charteris’ (2015, p. 213) definition of the student voice “as educational activity (including research and pedagogy) that operates to include students centrally in educational debate, design and decision-making pertinent to their interests.” To this end it is imperative to ask students directly how they define academic success and the factors that affect it.

### *Definitions of Academic Success*

York, Gibson, and Rankin’s literature review (2015) highlighted that the student voice is often neglected by researchers in this field. They also indicate the difficulty of measuring and striving for academic success when it is insufficiently defined, and the meaning is user dependant. For example, academics may define it by grade, university executive boards by

1  
2  
3 retention, and students by personal development. Researchers investigating academic success  
4 have used a range of differing definitions for this outcome, including: academic  
5  
6 achievements; satisfaction; acquisition of skills and competencies; persistence; attainment of  
7  
8 learning objectives; and career success (York, et al., 2015). These studies frequently omit the  
9  
10 student voice. Grades and Grade Point Average (GPA) are most used by researchers as a  
11  
12 measure of academic success. These measures are easily accessible but omit other holistic  
13  
14 components of academic success, such as personal development and life skills, that are of  
15  
16 equal importance to students (Burger & Naude, 2020). Kenneth et al.'s (2011) Canadian  
17  
18 study found that students' reasons for attending university varied from degree attainment to  
19  
20 personal development and career objectives. Delahunty and O'Shea's (2018) Australian study  
21  
22 and Burger and Naude's (2020) South African study concur. As benefactors of the HE  
23  
24 academic experience institutions need to know how students define academic success in order  
25  
26 to support students to attain their respective goals.  
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### 35 ***Factors that affect Academic Success***

36  
37 Undoubtedly, intellectual ability influences grade attainment (Busato et al., 2000). A  
38  
39 growth-mindset is the belief that intelligence is malleable and can be developed through  
40  
41 learning and effort, and that motivation can be nurtured (Ng, 2018). However, Sisk et al.'s  
42  
43 (2018) meta-analysis found only a weak positive correlation between growth-mindset and  
44  
45 academic achievement in undergraduates. This may be context dependant as they concluded  
46  
47 that at-risk students, such as those with low socioeconomic status, benefited from mind-set  
48  
49 interventions. Similarly, Broda et al.'s (2018) growth-mindset interventional study found that  
50  
51 the intervention was successful at increasing GPA scores in ethnic minority students but not  
52  
53 in white students. However, to strive for growth requires motivation to pursue goals.  
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3 Students' fundamental goals will determine their motivations to succeed at university.  
4  
5 An emphasis on intrinsic meaningful goals (such as group affiliation and personal  
6  
7 development) over extrinsic goals (such as wealth and fame) is preferable and leads to better  
8  
9 health, well-being, and performance (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004). As a result, students' drive  
10  
11 to succeed will be determined by their ultimate goals. Self-determination theory (SDT) as  
12  
13 first described by Deci and Ryan (1985) separates motivation into two categories of  
14  
15 autonomous and controlled motivation. The former comprises both intrinsic motivation and  
16  
17 elements of extrinsic motivation where an activity's value has been integrated into a sense of  
18  
19 self. Controlled motivation consists of external regulation, where behaviour is determined by  
20  
21 the prospect of reward or punishment, and introjected regulation. Amotivation is merely the  
22  
23 lack of incentive to act. Students regulated by autonomous motivations experience better  
24  
25 academic success and progression through HE (Kyndt et al., 2015). Hence, being motivated  
26  
27 to broaden one's knowledge and gain greater competence is a better driving force than  
28  
29 extrinsic motivational factors.  
30  
31  
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34  
35 However, the effect of intrinsic motivation may be stronger for high socioeconomic  
36  
37 status (SES) students who have fewer environmental pressures such as financial worries  
38  
39 (Guiffrida et al., 2013). It is known that financial stressors can negatively impact on academic  
40  
41 achievements and is one of the main reasons for student attrition (Bradley, 2017). Lower SES  
42  
43 groups may experience unavoidable pressure to succeed academically for financial reasons,  
44  
45 and this may adversely affect the role of intrinsic motivation on their academic goal  
46  
47 achievements. Adequate support for students helps to improve goal attainment.  
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51 Academic support is important in determining student engagement, and influences  
52  
53 engagement with assessments (Authors, 2018). Teaching factors such as classroom vitality,  
54  
55 good support services (Próspero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007), and good lecturer-student  
56  
57 relationships (Al-Kadri et al., 2012) all have an impact on grades and learning. The university  
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1  
2  
3 environment influences student satisfaction which is also a marker of academic success and is  
4  
5 a strong predictor of student progression (Suhre et al., 2007). One of the predictors of student  
6  
7 satisfaction is engagement with their university (Filak & Sheldon, 2008). Zepke and Leach's  
8  
9 (2010) literature review found that higher student engagement not only leads to better student  
10  
11 retention and higher grades but also improved employability after graduation. The "What  
12  
13 Works? Part: 1" project (Thomas, 2012) highlighted the importance of students' sense of  
14  
15 belonging at university to academic success. Student engagement means students show up,  
16  
17 whether face to face or online, and therefore provides better learning opportunities. Academic  
18  
19 and social integration at university is particularly relevant for first-generation university  
20  
21 students who lack a family tradition of university attendance (Próspero & Vohra-Gupta,  
22  
23 2007). These first-generation students lack the cultural capital afforded to other students  
24  
25 (Swartz, 1997). Therefore, their engagement is more pertinent due to their greater need for  
26  
27 support. Devlin (2013) points out that there is an overlap between being a first-generation  
28  
29 student and other sociocultural disadvantages such as low socio-economic status. She argues  
30  
31 that socioculturally disadvantaged students lack the tacit knowledge required to navigate HE  
32  
33 and that this constitutes discrimination, therefore the responsibility to improve this  
34  
35 disadvantage should not lie solely with the student.  
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42 In addition to academic support, social support can affect academic persistence (Rayle  
43  
44 et al., 2006). Reeve et al. (2013) found social support to be a legitimate strategy for dealing  
45  
46 with course-related stress, and there is also evidence that poor social support can have a  
47  
48 negative effect on academic grades (Hassaskhah, et al., 2015). Reeve et al. (2013) found  
49  
50 support from peers, friends and family was more influential to student engagement than  
51  
52 faculty support. Kirikkanat and Soyer's (2018) study suggests that academic coping, which  
53  
54 includes the use of approach coping and social support such as family and peer group,  
55  
56 influenced academic achievement as measured by GPA. Mishra's (2020) systematic review  
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1  
2  
3 concluded that social support networks, including family, peer and institutional support,  
4  
5 positively influenced academic success of ethnic minority students. This social support was  
6  
7 important in overcoming academic stresses and those related to discrimination.  
8  
9

10 Furthermore, students who attend university straight from school tend to seek social  
11  
12 support from their peers while second-degree and mature students sought this support more  
13  
14 from their family or significant others (Reeve et al., 2013). Therefore, age and academic  
15  
16 experience of individual students may affect the type of support that is most influential to  
17  
18 success. It is important that varied and positive social support coexists with other positive  
19  
20 factors such as course motivation, otherwise excessive engagement with non-academic  
21  
22 pursuits can be detrimental to academic outcomes such as persistent and GPA (Guiffrida et al.,  
23  
24 2013).  
25  
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28 Moreover, Bandura's (2006) agency theory postulates that people are not just products  
29  
30 of their life circumstances but are active contributors. Therefore, students have some power  
31  
32 to shape their own successes. He defines human agency as “influencing intentionally one’s  
33  
34 functioning and life circumstances” (p.164). Bandura believes that the role of the agent in  
35  
36 determining their future depends on personal resources, the activity in question and the  
37  
38 environmental circumstances. This concurs with constructivist learning theory which  
39  
40 describes the active process of learning that includes learning through socialisation (Bada,  
41  
42 2015). Students who are proficient self-regulators maintain higher GPAs (Heikkilä et al.,  
43  
44 2011). For instance, high GPA attainment and personal goal achievement requires good time-  
45  
46 management (George et al., 2008), while poor time management skills and procrastination  
47  
48 were found to be linked with low GPA (Beattie et al., 2018). Learning approaches also affect  
49  
50 academic outcomes. The surface approach to learning as defined by Marton and Saljo (1976)  
51  
52 is the superficial learning of information, while deep learning is preferable as it is considered  
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54 more permanent and involves understanding information in order to facilitate learning.  
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3 Students who use deep learning approaches have higher HE retention rates (Asikainen et al.,  
4  
5 2013).  
6

7  
8 The ability to control and manipulate one's environment to achieve academic success  
9  
10 is determined by several psychological variables including self-efficacy, self-esteem, and  
11  
12 response to stress. A strong sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem are associated with high  
13  
14 GPA scores (Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2013; Li et al., 2018), and positive self-efficacy is a  
15  
16 vital personal resource which is needed to effect change and realise ambitions. Lane, Lane,  
17  
18 and Kyprianou (2004) also found a significant positive correlation between student self-  
19  
20 efficacy and self-esteem. In addition everyday stressors and a perception of a high workload  
21  
22 can have an adverse effect on learning (Al-Kadri et al., 2012; Naude et al., 2016). If students  
23  
24 are better able to moderate their negative emotions and stress levels this could have a positive  
25  
26 effect on academic success (Schroder et al., 2017). In addition, research assessing the  
27  
28 relationship between positive affect and GPA have found a weak positive correlation between  
29  
30 these variables (Chow, 2005).  
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### 38 **Rationale for this study**

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40 A discussion involving one of the researchers and a student piqued the researchers' interest in  
41  
42 investigating how students define and achieve academic success. The student's motives for  
43  
44 attending university were career driven. Accordingly, they questioned where to focus their  
45  
46 energy at university. To achieve their goal, should they concentrate on achieving good  
47  
48 grades, adequate voluntary or paid work experience, or develop their industry network? As  
49  
50 academics we had an assumption that academic success was measured by degree  
51  
52 classification. This is also reflected in the neoliberal marketisation of universities that may  
53  
54 not always have the interests of students at its heart. This encounter questioned our  
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3 meritocratic assumption and spurred us to investigate how students define academic success  
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5 and the factors that influence it.  
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8 The cost of attending university, both financially and in time, is substantial, therefore it is  
9  
10 imperative students are provided with the optimal circumstances to allow them to succeed.  
11

12 Previous research assessing the factors that influence academic success has mainly  
13  
14 concentrated on assessing quantifiable measures such as GPA that may not reflect how  
15  
16 students envisage their success. This study aims to give space to students who are engaged  
17  
18 with their university course to express their perception of academic success and the factors  
19  
20 that affect it. We recognise that this is only a fragment of the student voice and is filtered  
21  
22 through the lens of academics. But it aims to open discussion amongst students and  
23  
24 academics about how we define academic success and how we work to support students to  
25  
26 attain it.  
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29  
30 The research questions for this study were: How do university students define academic  
31  
32 success? What do students perceive to be the factors that influence academic success?  
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## 37 **Methodology**

### 38 *Design*

39  
40 This qualitative study involved three focus groups and utilised a semi-structured interview  
41  
42 technique. This method of data collection best allowed the researchers to explore the research  
43  
44 questions fully and allow participants to create their own collective narrative and definitions  
45  
46 based on their lived experiences. The focus group methodology allows the group dynamic to  
47  
48 stimulate discourse that is lacking in individual interviews (Freeman, 2006). Experiential  
49  
50 inductive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) was used, involving three researchers  
51  
52 independently coding the data, to improve the validity of the analysis.  
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### 58 *Participants*

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3 Participants were recruited from a psychology undergraduate degree programme in London  
4 using an advertisement on the university's virtual learning platform, Blackboard, and via the  
5 psychology noticeboard. A qualifier was that they must have completed at least one full year  
6 of study so that they had a minimum of two semesters' experience to draw from and discuss.  
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12 Participants were given research incentive credits for taking part. These credits could then be  
13 used by the students to recruit participants for their own studies.  
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16

17 There were 16 participants (See Table 1) aged between 19 and 53 years of age (mean  
18 age = 29.2, mode age = 19). Eleven participants were female (mean age = 31.4) and five were  
19 male (mean age = 24.4). Four students had an average grade of a first (70% or above), eleven  
20 had an upper second (60% to 69%) and one had a lower second (50% to 59%). Nine (56%) of  
21 the students were white, seven (44%) were ethnic minorities. The participant demographics  
22 reflected the student demographics of the department and the university. The method of  
23 recruitment tends to lead to a sample of particularly engaged students, and the grade average  
24 of our participants would also indicate that this was the case.  
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### 35 **Materials**

36  
37 A multi directional audio recorder was used. Semi-structured interview (SSI) questions were  
38 devised by the researchers to allow participants to openly discuss their personal interpretation  
39 of academic success and their perceived contributing factors. In line with Gill et al.'s (2008)  
40 methodology for SSI in focus groups, the questions were open-ended and non-leading, and  
41 moved from general questions to more specific. An example question is: "How would you  
42 define academic success at higher education?" The group dynamic shaped each focus group  
43 discussion. Therefore, the themes discussed were determined by the participants with the  
44 researcher facilitators ensuring the group remained focused on the topic and that everyone  
45 had an opportunity to contribute.  
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### 58 **Procedure**

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3 The focus groups took place in a quiet room on campus familiar to the participants. The  
4  
5 students read a participant information sheet and signed a consent form if they were happy to  
6  
7 take part. The purpose of the focus group was explained. The students then completed a short  
8  
9 demographic questionnaire. Two psychology lecturers, familiar to the students, together  
10  
11 facilitated the discussion and took notes. Most of the participants were meeting each other for  
12  
13 the first time. After a group discussion on how the students defined academic success, the  
14  
15 participants were given a marker pen each and asked to write on a communal A1 (59.4 x  
16  
17 84.1cm) sheet of paper what they considered to be the factors that affect their academic  
18  
19 success, followed by a group discussion on each of these factors in turn. Each focus group  
20  
21 lasted approximately one hour. Students appeared at ease throughout the process and needed  
22  
23 little prompting from the facilitators. Finally, participants were thanked, debriefed and given  
24  
25 the contact information of the researchers.

26  
27 The interviews were transcribed for analysis. The researchers used a systematic approach, as  
28  
29 outlined by Creswell (2009), to read, reread and wholly acquaint themselves with the data.  
30  
31 Experiential inductive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) was used to extract  
32  
33 pertinent codes and themes related to the research questions. The data was manually coded  
34  
35 and the process of generating codes and themes was repeated until saturation of the data.  
36  
37 Coding and theme selection was carried out independently by the researchers. The themes  
38  
39 were also checked against the individual reflections recorded on the A1 sheet to check that all  
40  
41 these factors were accounted for in the final themes. There was general agreement of the  
42  
43 coding and the themes development was completed collectively.

### 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 ***Ethics***

52  
53 Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the university's ethics committee.  
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55 Adequate information was provided to participants before and after taking part and written  
56  
57 consent was acquired, in line with the British Psychological Society guidelines. Participants  
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3 were reassured that their data would be anonymised, their participation would be kept  
4  
5 confidential, and that they could withdraw at any time.  
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### 10 **Data analysis and interpretation**

11  
12 The premise of this study was to understand students' perception of what academic success is  
13  
14 and the factors that influence its realisation. Three themes emerged from the data to  
15  
16 summarise the students' perception of the factors that influence academic success (see Table  
17  
18 2). The first of these is student agency which included two subthemes: setting goals and self-  
19  
20 regulation. The second theme was aptitude with the subthemes: self-evaluation and  
21  
22 motivation. The final theme was type of support which included the subthemes: institutional  
23  
24 support and external support. These themes and subthemes together explained students'  
25  
26 perception of academic success. The following interpretation is supported by extracts from  
27  
28 the three student focus groups. (Fg1, 2 or 3 refer to the focus group number and P1, 2, 3 and  
29  
30 so on refers to the participant number within that focus group).  
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### 38 ***Defining academic success***

39  
40 Students defined academic success in terms of measurable outcome markers, for example  
41  
42 grades, together with less tangible outcomes, such as personal development and personal  
43  
44 achievements. Achieving a degree and good grades were seen by the participants as only one  
45  
46 marker of academic success: "it's not just about grade success, success as you as a person as  
47  
48 well...and you're in university to get a degree" (Fg2, P2).  
49

50  
51 Participants viewed personal development in terms of becoming more open minded  
52  
53 and open to opportunities along with doing their best and coping with university: "A  
54  
55 successful student copes with it all" (Fg1, P4). Students strived to become lifelong learners:  
56  
57 "keep on researching, keep on informing yourself. I think that that's the success" (Fg2, P1).  
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3 In addition, students defined academic success as knowing one's place in the world:  
4  
5 "...knowing who you are, and your place in the world, and how you impact on other people  
6  
7 and that kind of thing" (Fg2, P2). This learner explained that HE affords them the opportunity  
8  
9 to expand their beliefs and attitudes about various concepts as well as about themselves:  
10  
11

12  
13 What I like is the fact that every day we have the opportunity to reconsider our ideas, our way  
14  
15 of thinking about specific subjects, also how we see ourselves [...] it's not only academic, but  
16  
17 it's also a way of discovering yourself (Fg2, P1).  
18  
19  
20

21 Students' perception of personal achievements as a marker of academic success included  
22  
23 accomplishing their personal goals: "Achieving what you set out to achieve" (Fg1, P6). They  
24  
25 also expressed that they aspired to become more independent. This student expressed how  
26  
27 overcoming a challenge was a satisfying marker of success: "Challenge, yes, [...] if you have  
28  
29 to overcome some difficulties, this process is going to be more satisfying for yourself" (Fg2,  
30  
31 P1).  
32  
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36 For some, the perception of academic success is of both personal happiness and  
37  
38 financial stability: "However you define success to be, it is not just about personal goals. It is  
39  
40 about actually getting somewhere and being happy and financially stable. I think financial  
41  
42 stability is really important as success" (Fg1, P2). An important personal achievement for this  
43  
44 student that was shared with other students was aspiring to be independent: 'This degree is  
45  
46 going to make me more independent and financially stable' (Fg1, P7).  
47  
48  
49

### 50 ***Factors that influence academic success***

#### 51 *Theme 1. Student Agency*

52 Student agency refers to the actions students intentionally perform that lead to academic  
53  
54 success. Students acknowledged that they needed to be proactive to be successful. The two  
55  
56 subthemes identified within this theme were: setting goals and self-regulation.  
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### *Setting goals*

Setting goals motivated students. Students' long-term goals depended on their definition of academic success and their future plans. These goals varied from achieving the desired grades or degree: "I think keeping long-term goals in mind and the grades that you want to achieve, or you want to leave here with" (Fg1, P5), to aspects of personal development and growth. Short-term goals were seen as more achievable and less overwhelming to allow students to remain focused without getting disheartened. This student rewarded their efforts in order to continue concentrating on their goals: "After that hour I'd give myself something to do and that was my treat [...] then going back and doing a bit more feeling that I'm actually building on what I've done" (Fg1, P1).

Students perceived challenging goals to be inspirational. This student felt challenges kept them focused and helped them aim for their final goals: "The fact that I have a challenge, that it's difficult, that it's hard, and I have to put 100% of myself in it. That's what keeps the interest going and that's what keeps success a goal" (Fg2, P1).

### *Self-regulation*

The self-regulation subtheme refers to the ability of students to control their actions in a manner that is conducive to achieving their goals and ultimately their desired academic success. This includes being organised and using their time efficiently, having self-discipline, good attendance, and the use of effective learning strategies.

Organised students managed their time constructively, made plans and stuck to them. Some students felt that being organised guaranteed success (as defined by the individual student): "As long as you are organised you can get yourself there" (Fg1, P4). Learners were also aware that time was finite and so they had to be realistic and disciplined with their time: "What I mean by time allowance is just to be realistic. I'm like, I'm going to do this for a certain amount of time, move onto another one" (Fg3, P2). Conversely disorganisation

1  
2  
3 hindered success: “All my coursework, I’ve never prepared for it. I’ve always been doing it  
4 three days, four days before, maximum, so my marks...have always been affected....” (Fg2,  
5 P1). Students appreciated the importance of attendance for their learning and development.  
6  
7  
8 This learner was motivated to attend as they feared missing important teaching: “I know it is  
9 very important for attendance to be good. I personally think it is vital. I’d hate to miss  
10 something in case it was an important thing” (Fg1, F6).  
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17 Self-regulation also involved the adoption of learning strategies, which influenced  
18 learning outcomes. For most students the most important learning strategy was consistent  
19 work and insight into their own learning as explained by this learner: “I worked and worked  
20 and worked and I found it, now I am getting the grades that I want to get, just through not  
21 thinking that I know it all” (Fg3, P8). Learners had a sense of achievement in developing a  
22 deep understanding of the subject area: “Actually I have gone past this and I’m into the  
23 realms of really understanding and can contribute as opposed to chasing the subject” (Fg1,  
24 P1). They had an understanding that superficial learning is not true learning. This student was  
25 happy with their high grade, but they realised that they had no understanding of the module:  
26 “I’m happy for the 70, but I don’t even know what the module was about, to be honest” (Fg3,  
27 P1).  
28  
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## 42 *Theme 2. Aptitude*

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44 The previous theme of student agency refers to the actions required of students to achieve  
45 student defined academic success. The theme of aptitude refers to students’ ability to carry  
46 out these actions and includes the subthemes self-evaluation and motivation.  
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### 51 *Self-evaluation*

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53 Self-evaluation is the way in which students viewed themselves. This is affected by self-  
54 esteem, self-efficacy, and their emotional state. When students had a positive evaluation of  
55 themselves, they had a strong belief in their ability to succeed: “I believe once you achieve a  
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3 certain success you feel more empowered in a sense, like, ‘This was me. I did this’” (Fg3,  
4 P2). Students’ self-efficacy further improved when they overcame challenges and could see  
5 themselves making progress: “The more difficult, the more challenging, the better the result  
6 at the end if you have tried hard, and the more you grow and the more you think, ‘Crikey I  
7 can do that’” (Fg1, P4). One learner felt that overconfidence can hinder academic success by  
8 reducing the drive to work: “I think underestimating your abilities is a good thing sometimes”  
9 (Fg3, P8).  
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20 Students felt emotions affected their academic endeavours. Positive emotions were  
21 seen as conducive to academic success while negative emotions such as stress could have the  
22 opposing effect. Facing challenges was easier if students felt contented and unstressed: “The  
23 happier I am, the less stressful I feel; the less things I have to be stressed about, the less  
24 difficult it is to overcome obstacles” (Fg2, P3). Participants confirmed that they gained  
25 enjoyment from the learning experience: “What I enjoy most, obviously it’s the  
26 learning aspect” (Fg2, P3). Others admitted that being academically successful required  
27 passion for the subject area: “You’re going to have to have a passion for psychology if you  
28 want to achieve well” (Fg3, P2).  
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42 This learner acknowledged that last minute stress encouraged them to work but that it  
43 was not a pleasant experience. However, they were reticent to dedicate too much time to their  
44 studies since to fail despite a substantial time investment would have been difficult for the  
45 student to come to terms with: “...it’s a horrible thing to have that stress, but I succeed under  
46 that, whereas I’m too scared that I’m going to f\*\*\* it all up if I spend too much time on it and  
47 how I would deal with that” (Fg2, P3).  
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### 56 *Motivation*

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3 The drive for success was stimulated by the level of student motivation. Intrinsic motivation  
4 was determined by students' interest in the subject area and dedication to their personal goals.  
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6 Extrinsically motivated students were driven to succeed for grades and other external  
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8 rewards. Intrinsically motivated students reported self-regulation activities, such as being  
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10 organised and appreciating a deep approach to learning, that were conducive to achieving  
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12 their goals.  
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17 This student was driven by a desire for continuous self-improvement: "I'd like to see  
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19 a steady incline so that I can see that I'm improving as opposed to staying the same" (Fg1,  
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21 P1). For another learner, love of the subject matter made it easy to learn, in addition to their  
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23 desire to help others and learn a new skill: "It makes it easier... I loved the historic aspect of  
24  
25 it and the practical aspect of helping people" (Fg1, P4).  
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29 For some students extrinsic motivational factors such as financial stability pushed  
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31 them to succeed: "we're in debt...sometimes it's deflating, but then sometimes you use it to  
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33 motivate yourself" (Fg3, P2). For other students, good grades were incentivising: "Yes. I  
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35 know how nice it feels when you get a pass with a good mark" (Fg1, P4). Some learners were  
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37 motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. This student appreciated the learning  
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39 process but felt very satisfied by good marks: "I have to reach for a certain mark and I also  
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41 have to understand the progress whilst I am doing that. While I am doing that I feel good,  
42  
43 when I get the mark I'm feeling even better" (Fg1, P1). Poor learning strategies demotivated  
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45 some students: "I think not knowing how to revise, that is what leads to it because I have  
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47 nothing to motivate me to sit down and do it earlier" (Fg1, P1).  
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### 54 *Theme 3. Type of Support*

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56 This theme refers to how support systems influence students' ability to succeed. It includes  
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58 the subthemes of institutional support and external support.  
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### *Institutional support*

Institutional support includes the communication between the tutors and students, the level of support offered by tutors, and the teaching strategies they use. Good communication between staff and students means students are clear about what they need to do to succeed. This communication helps connect the students to the institution. This student illustrated the importance of this communication and the interaction between the students themselves and its effect on their sense of belonging:

For me that crosses the void between the staff and the students. Communication in what we are supposed to be reading and what we are supposed to be doing...but it is just connecting well with the organisation and with each other and with our work (Fg1, P6).

Clear explanation of what tutors require from student assignments was needed to avoid student anxiety: "I remember for Module X, I didn't know, until the last couple of weeks anything. I think I was freaking out more than it was actually difficult just because I didn't know what it was about" (Fg3, P3). Feedback from tutors is a vital form of communicating to students on how to improve their work. If feedback is not understood this learning opportunity is lost: "...because you read the feedback, you understand, but that's a subjective understanding and basically it doesn't have to be what the lecturer or the person who marks means. It can be two different things" (Fg3, P1). Supportive tutors were valued by students and they appreciated the positive impact this support had on their learning experience without reducing their independence:

... being able to contact lecturers through the emails and stuff like that, they're really good at replying and they're detailed enough so they're not giving you the answer, you still have to think, but it points you in the right directions (Fg2, P2).

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5 Teaching strategies impacted on student learning. Ineffective teaching practices frustrated  
6 students, while other positive practices improved students' experience and aided their path to  
7 academic success. Students were energised by passionate lecturers: "when you get someone  
8 you can tell [...] this is their passion [...] you kind of vibe off that energy in a sense" (Fg3,  
9 P3). Some students felt that poor teaching cheated them financially. A perception of poor  
10 value for money risked students disengaging: "They are just reading off the screen [...] I am  
11 getting into a lot of debt for a substandard performance" (Fg1, P1)

### External support

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23  
24 This subtheme refers to the effect of peer support and social interaction on learners' academic  
25 success. Students also valued the support of their families and its effect on their ability to  
26 study. Learners recognised the role of student finance, and its influence on their motivation  
27 and ability to progress academically.

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A supportive peer group added to students' sense of belonging. This learner felt that  
their university peers were more helpful than their school peers: "Everybody is so supportive  
of each other... It is a lovely learning environment. Compared to college, compared to school,  
there is so much help" (Fg1, P4).

Attendance was also stimulated by the social interaction at university. Students were  
motivated to attend in order to catch up with their friends: "You come in and you get along  
with people, you're more driven to turn up to see those people" (Fg2, P3). However,  
friendships could also be distracting, and students needed to have strong self-control to resist  
the temptation to socialise in lieu of studying: "They are always calling you up. 'Do you want  
to come here? Do you want to go there?' You have to be really determined at what you are  
doing and really self-disciplined... But yes, that is really distracting" (Fg1, P5).

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3 Students appreciated the support of their family whether this was emotional, practical  
4 or financial. First generation HE students were aware that their families did not always  
5 understand the HE experience and as a result were not able to support them in the same way.  
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7 This student acknowledged that parental support is an important component of their academic  
8 determination: “It’s not only economical, because it’s support; it’s an emotional support  
9 because they are always behind me, they are always checking...do I need something else?  
10 This support is a good 50% of what keeps me going” (Fg2, P1). This student appreciated the  
11 advantage afforded to them by their father’s understanding of the process of HE: “My  
12 dad he’s ...done university courses...but I think he just understands the stress of learning in  
13 an intense environment and having all the deadlines and things like that” (Fg2, P2). This  
14 learner was frustrated by their family’s lack of cultural capital and understanding of the work  
15 involved in academic learning:  
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33 ...people can get the idea that you’re not really doing anything. “My job is nine to five; you  
34 try doing it.” You kind of think, it’s kind of the same thing; you’re doing as much  
35 work. They don’t quite understand that (Fg2, P3).  
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42 Financial worries can have a negative impact on some students’ ability to get on with their  
43 work. This student acknowledged that financial insecurity can be a distraction. They  
44 appreciated that their student finance loan allowed them to concentrate on their studies:  
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51 If you don’t have financial stability then can’t actually focus your mind on anything  
52 else... That is why it is really good that we get student finance to help us pay our way. We  
53 don’t actually have to, like, work...we can spend the time revising and stuff (Fg1, P7).  
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3 Debt can adversely affect students' decision to pursue postgraduate studies: "There's no point  
4 in doing a masters. That's just more money. It's deflating" (Fg3, P2). However, student debt  
5  
6 can have a positive effect. For this student the loan drove their ambition to get a good degree  
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8 classification: "The idea that I have to pay it back and I am going to be even more upset  
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10 paying it back if I didn't leave with a grade I was happy with. Yes, I think it does affect me"  
11  
12 (Fg1, P5). This learner would rather that financial factors did not affect their degree, but they  
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14 accepted that it is a factor: "Money shouldn't be a factor in terms of learning, I believe, but  
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16 that's not the case. We have to pay" (Fg3, P2).  
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## 24 **Discussion**

### 25 *Students' definition of academic success*

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27 The first aim of this study was to give voice to how students define academic success. We  
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29 have fulfilled Nelson and Charteris' (2015) definition of the 'student voice' by positioning  
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31 student perception as fundamental to defining academic success and the factors that influence  
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33 it. Students defined academic success as a combination of measurable outcomes, for example  
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35 grades and degree attainment, together with more holistic student outcomes, such as personal  
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37 development and achievements. The participants' concept of personal development  
38  
39 concerned becoming autonomous, self-aware, and open-minded lifelong learners, coping with  
40  
41 the university environment and fulfilling their potential. The personal achievements students  
42  
43 strived for included: attaining personal goals; learning to overcome challenges; and becoming  
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45 financially stable and independent. The student participants felt that academic success was an  
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47 ideal and that they had challenges to overcome to reach academic success.  
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54 These findings concur with other studies that noted the importance of personal development  
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56 in students' definition of academic success (Burger & Naude, 2020; Delahunty & O'Shea,  
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58 2018; Kenneth et al., 2011). These multifaceted outcomes contrast with the more meritocratic  
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3 measures used in previous research studies, such as grade outcomes or other readily  
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5 observable measures of academic success such as persistence and attendance (York et al.,  
6  
7 2015). Such variables drive HE policy and funding but fail to take account of the other  
8  
9 components of academic success defined by the participants of this study. Using grade-based  
10  
11 end points oversimplifies what academic success is. And the ranking of universities based on  
12  
13 such surveys ignores what students want from their university experience and calls into  
14  
15 question the role of HE (Holligan & Shah, 2017). The challenge for HE academics and  
16  
17 institutions is to acknowledge and incorporate student-defined outcomes of academic success  
18  
19 into the curriculum in order to facilitate students to achieve these outcomes. Researchers also  
20  
21 need to develop instruments to measure these outcomes to assess whether students are  
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23 achieving these holistic objectives.  
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### 28 ***The factors that influence academic success***

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31 The second aim of the study was to gain an understanding of the factors that student perceive  
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33 to influence academic success, as defined by the students themselves. These included the  
34  
35 themes of student agency, aptitude and type of support. Student agency refers to the actions  
36  
37 students needed to carry out in order to be academically successful including setting goals  
38  
39 and the self-regulation activities that were required to achieve these goals. Aptitude is the  
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41 ability of students to carry out these actions to gain academic success. Support was an  
42  
43 important factor in assisting students to achieve their goals. It encompassed both institutional  
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45 factors that help support and nurture students, and external support structures.  
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50 Bandura's agency theory proposes that people are the architects of their own lives  
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52 (Bandura, 2006). The students in this study carried out specific actions which were conducive  
53  
54 to their own learning by setting specific goals and regulating their actions. Students' goals  
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56 ranged from extrinsic aspirations such as grade and degree success, financial security and  
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58 employment, to intrinsic goals such as personal development and growth. Previous research  
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3 has established that an emphasis on intrinsic goals over extrinsic goals is preferable for well-  
4 being and successful outcomes (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004). The participants of this current  
5 study valued both categories of goals and felt that they could complement each other. For  
6 instance, students understood that financial stability would give them autonomy and that  
7 good grades would allow them to grow in happiness.  
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15 Other researchers have found that self-regulation is conducive to academic success  
16 (Heikkilä et al., 2011). Participants reported that being organised and using their time  
17 effectively was beneficial to their academic success, with less organised students admitting  
18 that this hampered their learning. The effect of organisation on academic success corresponds  
19 with other research studies (George et al., 2008; Beattie et al., 2018). Students are not always  
20 instinctively organised, and institutions need to provide them with opportunities to learn these  
21 skills.  
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31 Students used either deep, superficial or undirected learning approaches with differing  
32 levels of success. However, a deep approach to learning and passion for their subject was  
33 most rewarding in terms of reaching their learning goals and personal development  
34 satisfaction. Other studies (Asikainen et al., 2013) also found that deep learning is associated  
35 with academic success. Superficial learning or undirected learning styles frustrated  
36 participants' attempts at learning. HE institutions need to support students to uncover their  
37 passions to facilitate deep learning processes.  
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47 The current study found that learning, overcoming challenges and grade success  
48 enhanced self-esteem and self-efficacy. Positive academic outcomes made the students feel  
49 confident in their ability and worthy of attending university. Students with low self-efficacy  
50 have been found to lack confidence in their academic abilities and this can result in poor  
51 academic outcomes (Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2013). In contrast, high self-efficacy (Schunk  
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3 & Zimmerman, 1994) and high self-esteem (Rayle, Kurpius & Arredondo, 2006; Li et al.,  
4  
5 2018) are associated with successful academic outcomes.  
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8 Congruent with previous research (Chow, 2005) students reported that positive  
9  
10 emotions enhanced their ability to learn. For some, negative emotions such as stress  
11  
12 interfered with learning but for others it was a useful last-minute motivator. Previous research  
13  
14 found that stress has an adverse effect on academic outcomes (Al-Kadri et al., 2012; Naude et  
15  
16 al., 2016) but the ability to moderate stress has a positive effect (Schroder et al., 2017). Those  
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18 who are motivated by last minute stress may be successfully moderating its effect and using it  
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20 constructively.  
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24 Students' motivation to succeed was determined by intrinsic motivators such as their  
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26 passion for the subject area. For some, the drive for success was enhanced by extrinsic  
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28 motivators, for instance financial stability and independence, while for others it was a  
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30 combination of the two. Amotivation hindered student engagement. In line with the self-  
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32 determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) autonomously motivated students have been found  
33  
34 to be more likely to be academically successful (Guiffrida et al., 2013; Kyndt et al., 2015).

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36 **However, if a growth-mindset is associated with goal attainment especially in non-traditional**  
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38 **and at-risk students (Broda et al's, 2018; Sisk et al., 2018) it stands that motivation is also**  
39  
40 **malleable. The higher education** (HE) curriculum needs to incorporate carefully designed  
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42 elements that facilitate the development of growth-mindset, especially in non-traditional  
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44 students. Students deserve to be told that their cognitive ability is not stagnant and can be  
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46 developed along with their motivation to achieve.  
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51 In line with previous studies students conveyed the value of family, social and  
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53 institutional support in achieving academic success (Kirikkanat & Soyer, 2018).  
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55 Similar to Reeve et al's (2013) study, social support outside of the formal institutional setting  
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57 from peers and family members affected attendance and students' ability to engage with their  
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3 academic goals. Mishra's (2020) systematic review found that such support is particularly  
4 valuable to ethnic minority students, and this is reflected in the current ethnically diverse  
5 student group.  
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10 The current study also found that institutional support improved learning, reduced  
11 anxiety and fostered a sense of belonging at university. The importance of students' sense of  
12 belonging to their HE institution has also been established (Thomas, 2012). It is important  
13 that universities lay down the foundations of belonging in students early on, to avoid attrition  
14 and to help students feel comfortable in the university environment. **Non-traditional students  
15 such as first generation and ethnic minority students experience many sociocultural  
16 disadvantages (Devlin, 2013). It is beholden on university institutions to ensure these students  
17 have a strong sense of belonging (Tinto, 2017) and can successfully navigate the HE system.  
18 This is achieved not by requesting the students to change but by adjusting the university  
19 culture to allow all students equal opportunities to achieve their personal ambitions at  
20 university.**  
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35 Students need to be made aware of the support available to them and how to seek this  
36 support. As this study has illustrated support is an important factor in academic success.  
37 Learners also need to be encouraged to socialise within their institution and with their peers  
38 on their course for them to benefit from the support of their peers.  
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44 Previous studies have highlighted the negative impact of financial stress on student  
45 success and attrition (Bradley, 2017). Our study found that debt motivated some students to  
46 succeed but caused stress for others and deterred them from pursuing postgraduate studies.  
47 This conflicting perception of debt may be down to several factors including the level of  
48 financial shrewdness in students, their differing levels of risk aversion and sociocultural  
49 disadvantage. Non-Traditional students such as first generation students and ethnic minority  
50 students are at the greatest risk of financial insecurity (Devlin, 2013). As the majority of UK  
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3 students are now leaving HE with a minimal debt of £30,000, it is imperative that HE  
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5 institutions educate their students in the basics of financial management and provide funding  
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7 and scholarships to support students who are financially disadvantaged. This is particularly  
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9 pertinent to non-traditional student groups including lower SES, ethnic minority, and first-  
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11 generation students who are most adversely affected (Guiffrida et al., 2013).  
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#### 14 ***Study limitations***

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16 The student participants in this study were engaged with their course and with research  
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18 activities within the department. Most had an average grade of 60% or above which is the  
19  
20 average grade for the university's subject group. Further research needs to look at the  
21  
22 experiences of learners with contrasting profiles as their perceptions of academic success and  
23  
24 the factors that affect or hinder it may differ. In addition, non-psychology students'  
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26 experience might differ to this student group. Both the focus group facilitators taught on the  
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28 psychology course, which may have affected student disclosure and biased the analysis. To  
29  
30 improve the validity of the results a third researcher contributed to the analysis of the data.  
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32 While the focus group dynamic was important to stimulate discussion, it is possible that some  
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34 participants may have been intimidated by the group and this may have hindered their ability  
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36 to contribute.  
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#### 41 ***Future Direction***

42  
43 Researchers and policymakers in HE need to review how they define academic success and to  
44  
45 use a student-relevant definition, as the definition used by participants in this current study  
46  
47 goes beyond student grades. Students expect to leave university with transferable skills that  
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49 prepare them for life and not just employment. They also envisage university as an  
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51 opportunity to deepen their personal understanding of themselves and their place in the  
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53 world. As such, it is beholden on universities to provide students with personal development  
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55 opportunities.  
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3 In order to be academically successful students need to be reassured that the skills and  
4 personal characteristics they possess on starting HE can be nurtured and improved. This is  
5 particularly important in widening participation HE institutions as more of these students may  
6 have financial concerns. The curriculum needs to incorporate elements to enhance self-  
7 regulation skills by providing training in time management, organisation and study skills.  
8 Students also need to be empowered to feel confident in their abilities and to value  
9 themselves. Mentoring and personal tutoring schemes, as well as good staff communication  
10 and support help build student confidence. In addition, innovative assessments can be  
11 designed to help foster self-esteem and self-efficacy by helping students use their individual  
12 skills successfully. It is also important that assessments, feedback and teaching strategies are  
13 designed in a manner that nurtures student motivation.

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Belonging encourages engagement, therefore students deserve to be informed of the  
supportive advantage of peer socialisation. HE institutions and Student Unions need to foster  
students' desire to socialise at their university and student induction events are a good  
opportunity to sow the seeds of belonging. However, engagement and progression can be  
negatively affected by financial stress and the opportunity to learn financial management at  
university may moderate this.

Further research is in progress to assess the role of academic feedback on student  
motivation. In addition, there is scope for this current study to be widened to include students  
with a more varied academic profile and from a variety of other study programs.

Declaration of conflict:

The authors have no potential competing interest.

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Table 1. Participant demographics

Demographic		FG 1	FG 2	FG 3	Sample total	Total %
Gender	Male	2	2	1	5	31%
	Female	1	1	9	11	69%
Age at start of degree	Under 21	2	2	5	9	56%
	Over 21	1	1	5	7	44%
Ethnic Group	White	1	3	5	9	56%
	Ethnic Minority	2	0	5	7	44%
Grade average	1 <sup>st</sup> (70% or above)	3	1	3	7	44%
	2:1 (60 to 69%)	0	1	7	8	50%
	2:2 (50 to 59%)	0	1	0	1	6%
Student status	Home	1	2	10	3	81%
	EU	1	1	0	2	13%
	International	1	0	0	1	6%
Participants per focus group		3	3	10	16	100%

FG= Focus Group

Table 2. Themes, subthemes and codes derived from the data analysis and interpretation

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>	<b>Codes</b>
Student Agency	Setting Goals	Long-term goals
		Short term goals
	Self-Regulation	Organisation and Time management
		Self-discipline
Attendance		
Aptitude	Self- Evaluation	Learning strategies
		Self-efficacy
		Self esteem
	Motivation	Emotions
		Intrinsic motivation
Support	Institutional Support	Extrinsic motivation
		Amotivation
		Communication
	External Support	Tutor support
		Teaching strategies
		Peer support and social interaction
		Family support
		Financial considerations