

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Student motives, expectations and preparedness for higher education: A gender-based study

Motivations, attentes et état de préparation des étudiants à l'enseignement supérieur : Une étude basée sur le genre

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to identify whether gender differences exist related to the motives, expectations and preparedness of students entering accounting studies at a South African university. A questionnaire was used to gather the data from a sample of first-year students and t-tests were employed to identify differences in findings between gender groups. The findings indicate that gender differences exist in the motives for studying and for choosing to study accounting, in particular with females indicating a stronger desire to gain a better understanding of themselves, while males appeared more confident of succeeding in the programme and scoring marks at the top of the class. Identifying and understanding gender differences is expected to have implications for teaching and learning which can further reduce gender imbalances in the profession. The study is of particular interest to academics, professional bodies and universities educating students in the field of accounting, which has historically been perceived to be a male-dominated profession.

KEYWORDS

Accounting education, gender differences, motives, preparedness, expectations

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude vise à déterminer s'il existe des différences entre les sexes en ce qui concerne les motivations, les attentes et la préparation des étudiants qui entreprennent des études de comptabilité dans une université sud-africaine. Un questionnaire a été utilisé pour recueillir les données auprès d'un échantillon d'étudiants de première année et le test t a été utilisé pour identifier les différences de résultats entre les groupes d'étudiants de différents sexes. Les résultats indiquent qu'il existe des différences entre les hommes et les femmes en ce qui concerne les motivations à étudier et à choisir d'étudier la comptabilité, en particulier chez les femmes où l'on constate un désir plus marqué de parvenir à une meilleure connaissance de soi, tandis que chez les hommes, on constate une plus grande confiance dans la capacité à réussir le programme et à obtenir les meilleures notes de la classe. L'identification et la compréhension des différences entre les différents sexes devraient avoir des répercussions sur l'enseignement et l'apprentissage, ce qui peut contribuer à réduire les déséquilibres entre les hommes et les femmes dans la profession. Cette étude présente un intérêt

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particulier pour le corps académique, les organismes professionnels et les universités qui forment des étudiants dans le domaine de la comptabilité, une profession historiquement perçue comme dominée par les hommes...

MOTS-CLÉS

Enseignement de la comptabilité, différences entre les sexes, motivations, préparation, attentes

Introduction

Introduction and motivation

The objective of this study is to identify gender-based differences related to the motives, expectations and preparedness of students embarking on an accounting degree programme at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), South Africa.

Public finances are a significant source of university funds through government subsidies (Jansen & De Villiers, 2016). To ensure the efficient use of these funds, the government has mandated South African universities to increase and maintain high pass rates (Council on Higher Education, 2011). Studies such as those by Sallai et al. (2023) identify factors such as motivation and expectations as contributing to student attrition and performance. Identifying and managing factors affecting pass rates can result in benefits to all stakeholders.

Research on the success of first-year students in South Africa studying toward a tertiary accounting qualification has focussed on student background factors using archival data (Baard et al., 2009; Du Plessis et al., 2005, 2007; Jansen & De Villiers, 2016; Myburgh, 2005). Gender, ethnicity, prior academic achievement and language are some of the factors commonly considered in these studies. Most of the extant studies focus on the relationship between these factors and the success of first-year students. The focus of the current study is to consider factors related to students' psychological state at the point of entry to the university, with an emphasis on the identification of potential differences related to student gender.

South Africa's disproportionate gender representation in professional and management roles still reflects high gender inequality (Callaghan & Papageorgiou, 2020), with questions being raised specifically about the representation of women in the accounting profession and the degree to which the accounting profession reflects the shifting gender demographics of society or even actively shapes that society (Haynes, 2017). Haynes (2017) emphasises that research on gender and accounting should be a central concern of critical accounting scholars in the interests of emancipation and social justice, with women having been admitted to the accounting profession after many decades of struggle. The focus on gender differences arises from this and the fact that findings in earlier South African studies on accounting students and gender produced mixed results (Davidson, 2002; Du Plessis et al., 2005; Jansen & De Villiers, 2016). Research has found gender differences in the way accounting students approach their studies (Arquero et al., 2009; Wally-Dima & Mbekomize, 2013). For instance, Everaert et al. (2017) found that female students engage more in deeper learning and spend more time learning than male counterparts. The current study proposes interrogating gender-

based differences in the motives, expectations and preparedness of students embarking on an accounting degree programme at the UWC.

Background

The UWC was established as a university for coloured students by the Extension of University Education Act of 1959 (Nyahodza & Higgs, 2017; Lalu & Murray, 2012). UWC is one of a few historically disadvantaged institutions that maintained its autonomy after many tertiary institutions were merged between 2002 and 2005 (Lethoko, 2016). UWC has historically attracted students from economically disadvantaged communities because its fees have been significantly lower than other residential universities in the Western Cape (Council on Higher Education, 2010). The result is that UWC students are typically first-generation university students from less affluent families (Venter et al., 2001). Although this differentiates the UWC student profile from most universities, where different results may be expected from similar studies, understanding these students' motives, expectations and preparedness is expected to be beneficial to both current and future students of the institution and other universities.

Literature review

Motives, expectations and preparedness

Student motives, expectations and preparedness have varied in educational research. To understand the university experience from the student's perspective, researchers need to identify and understand the student's expectations and motives in choosing a course of study and a particular university. Student motives, expectations and preparedness for higher education affect how students learn and approach higher education, with motivated students expected to be more successful (Beatson et al., 2020; Everaet et al., 2017).

Studies on the source of student motivation distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Kotera et al., 2021). Intrinsically motivated students are motivated by internal factors such as the pursuit of knowledge. This reflects internally inspired behaviour for the attainment of personal goals and achievement (Kotera et al., 2021). Extrinsically motivated students are motivated by external factors such as obtaining a particular job or salary (Han et al., 2022). Since higher education seeks to inculcate deeper learning (Asikainen & Gijbels, 2017), intrinsically motivated students will presumably gain the most from the learning process at institutions of higher education.

Research has shown that realistic expectations and confidence positively contribute to student performance (Beatson et al., 2020). Confident students cognitively engage more in the education process (Rowe et al., 2023). However, overconfident students tend to overestimate their abilities, creating expectation gaps that might serve as impediments to adjusting their behaviour when they receive negative feedback (Pintrich, 2003). It is useful to identify and manage expectation gaps between the student and the university.

Students' preparedness for higher education has been found to relate to their success, while other studies found that successful students often have better time

and study management skills (Holder, 2007). Venter (2020) found that many economic and management sciences learners are not prepared for studies at a higher education institution. Byrne and Flood (2005) concluded that students should be encouraged to enhance their time management skills after finding that students spent considerably less time on their studies than desired, decreasing their chances of successful completion. Interestingly, a study by Jansen et al. (2022) found students had reasonable expectations about the time commitment required to succeed in their undergraduate accounting course.

Along with unpreparedness, misplaced expectations of first-year students have been found to impact student attrition (Arquero et al., 2009) and performance in higher education, consequently, placing heavy demands on university resources (Papageorgiou & Carpenter, 2019).

Gender

There appear to be gender differences in the selection of a particular qualification (Charles & Bradley, 2009). Liu and Morgan (2020) found that the choice of course of study was driven more by personal interest for male students, while female students' selection of the course of study related to the career it could give them, with an emphasis on a career that would allow them to focus on quality time with their families. These differences could reflect societal differences stemming from social pressures.

According to Bonneville-Roussy et al. (2017), although they are generally more sensitive in reacting to stress, women seem to exhibit greater persistence at university. They found significant gender differences in how students deal with academic situations. Smith and Naylor's (2001) study of more than 400 000 university students found that females were more likely to show long-term persistence in their studies, which was significantly less influenced by their grades. Other studies suggest gender differences in how students engage with and manage stress (Osborne, 2001; Tamres et al., 2002). Papageorgiou & Callaghan (2020) found gender-related changes in the performance of accounting students in 2017 and suggested the change might be attributable to the different genders' responses to the #FeesMustFall student protests.

Severiens and Ten Dam (1994) report males scoring more on extrinsic and achievement motivation and lower on the fear of failure, but gender differences may be situation-dependent, and similar to Huikku et al. (2022), they suggest future research into potential gender differences. Everaert et al. (2017) state that female students spend significantly more time on accounting and engage more in deep learning when compared to males and consequently perform better in their accounting exams. Identifying these gender differences may be the start for educators to develop gender-specific teaching strategies to enhance learning outcomes. This has implications for educators who plan and present gender-neutral lessons on the assumption that such lessons are equally beneficial to the genders (De Lange & Mavondo, 2004).

Determining whether such gender differences exist with the subjects of this study might have teaching and learning implications in terms of ensuring an inclusive curriculum.

Research design and methodology

The target population of this study consisted of first-year students registered for the compulsory Financial Accounting (FIA) 131 module in the first year of the B.Com (Accounting) degree at UWC, in the 2018 academic year. Students enrolled for this degree at UWC are required to do four compulsory core subjects, including Financial Accounting. FIA 131 is the first semester module of the first year of Financial Accounting. The research instrument consisted of a questionnaire, adapted slightly from that used by Byrne and Flood (2005). The questionnaire consisted of closed and open questions in three sections. Section A consisted of closed questions gathering biographical data and the students' intentions about engaging in part-time work. Section B consisted of questions related to students' intentions regarding the amount of time they intended to invest in their studies. Section C consisted of a further six sub-sections. Section C was answered using a five-point Likert scale similar in design to that used by Arquero et al. (2009). The questions generally requested students to rate the likelihood of them agreeing or disagreeing with the question, with a score of 1 indicating that they 'strongly agree', 2 indicating that they 'agree', 3 indicating 'neutral/don't agree or disagree', 4 indicating 'disagree' and 5 indicating 'strongly disagree'. The first subsection in Section C enquired about external parties' influence on the student's decision to study at a tertiary institution and to study B.Com (Accounting). The second subsection evaluated the student's considerations in deciding to study at a tertiary institution. The third subsection investigated the student's willingness and ability to self-manage their active engagement in the learning process. The fourth subsection evaluated the student's reasons for deciding on the B.Com (Accounting) degree. The fifth subsection asked the students about their expectations of the outcomes of studying this degree and the sixth subsection investigated how confident the student felt about their imminent academic journey.

Individual members of UWC staff interrogated and commented on the questions, process and objective of the questionnaire before it was finalised and administered. The objectives of the study were explained to students attending the first FIA 131 lecture and it was emphasised that their responses would be kept confidential and only used in the study. The questionnaire was then administered to the students. Of the approximately 169 students registered for FIA 131 in 2018, 166 students completed the questionnaire, but 37 questionnaires were not fully completed and therefore disregarded. Therefore, the study consists of information obtained from 129 students or 78% of the registered students. The group consisted of 67 (52%) female and 62 (48%) male students.

Similar to Arquero et al. (2009), t-tests were used as the primary statistical analysis to identify differences between the groups of male and female students. The students' genders were used as the dependent variable with females coded 1 and males 0.

Results and findings

Time allocation

To gauge what students' expectations were regarding the amount of time that they would need to spend on their studies, they were asked how much time they expected to spend on various activities, including studies, leisure time and part-time work. The university communicates its guidelines and expectations regarding students' time commitment to studies in faculty calendars, including that students are expected to complete 47 hours of study weekly (excluding assessments) across all their subjects for the first semester of their first year.

The t-tests revealed that female students expected to spend an average of one hour fewer on studies per week (46 hours per week) than male students (47 hours per week). This finding is insignificant ($p > 0.1$) and aligned with the university's suggestion (47 hours per week). Of the 67 female students (62 male), 63% (males: 65%) intended doing part-time work, with females expecting to spend an average of 2.9 hours (males: 3.3 hours) per week on part-time work. It would be interesting to interrogate the type of part-time work that students planned to engage in and whether they aligned to their education goals (which would enrich their learning experience).

Table 1: Time allocation

Question	Mean	t-score	Sig
How many hours per week do you plan to spend on:			
Part-time work?	(3.71)	(1.337)	0.198
Entertainment away from your studies?	(0.66)	(0.248)	0.805
Sport/gym?	(0.94)	(0.804)	0.423
Studying?	(1.02)	(0.373)	0.710

Motives

Motivation seems to play a major role in students' success in accounting studies (Du Plessis et al., 2005). Intrinsic motivation comes from a passion to understand the subject matter, which is aligned with the student's identity and sense of purpose; while extrinsically motivated students wish to fulfil an external goal, such as to attain recognition from others, avoid punishment or obtain a better salary (Ho et al., 2021).

The results in Table 2 show that female B.Com (Accounting) students were influenced significantly more by parents ($p < 0.05$) and relatives ($p < 0.05$) than male students. That females placed more reliance on family in guiding their decision to study accounting might suggest a gender difference in the general family dynamic and the roles of young males and females within the family. The results did not reveal any significant difference in role players' influence on the decisions taken by male students to study accounting.

Table 2: Role players

Question	Mean	t-score	Sig
Indicate to what extent the following people influenced you to study at a tertiary institution and in particular to study B.Com (Accounting):			
Your parents	(0.43)	(2.11)	0.037**
Your teachers	(0.17)	(0.796)	0.428
Your siblings	(0.06)	(0.271)	0.787
Extended relatives	(0.44)	(2.016)	0.046**
Friends	(0.20)	(0.837)	0.404
Career guidance teachers	(0.23)	(0.948)	0.345

** significant at the 5% level with $p < 0.05$

Gender differences also emerged in the motivation to study at a tertiary institution and to study B.Com (Accounting) specifically (see Table 3), with differences not isolated to intrinsic or extrinsic motives. Significant differences were noted for females wanting to face new challenges and broaden their horizons ($p < 0.05$) and wanting to develop a better understanding of themselves ($p < 0.1$), but also indicating a greater likelihood of having ended up studying because they seemed to have rather drifted into higher education ($p < 0.1$). Males seemed to be motivated significantly more by the fact that accounting has better career prospects ($p < 0.1$), which might emanate from socialised gender roles of males being the breadwinners of a household. This is supported by Liu and Morgan (2020), who found that males were interested in a career that could enable them to provide for the family.

Table 3: Motives

Question	Mean	t-score	Sig
To what extent did the following influence your choice to study at a tertiary institution?			
I believe that a university degree will create new opportunities for me in the future	(0.16)	(1.150)	0.252
The degree will enable me to get a good job	(0.09)	(0.693)	0.490
I want to develop my mind and intellectual abilities	0.07	0.600	0.549
Completing this degree will increase my earning potential	0.05	0.418	0.667
This degree will help me develop knowledge and skills which will be useful in my life after university	(0.04)	(0.381)	0.704
I want to become a better-educated person	0.01	0.046	0.963
This degree will enable me to meet the education requirements for my career	(0.032)	(0.253)	0.801
I wanted to study accounting in an in-depth way	0.02	0.121	0.904

Question	Mean	t-score	Sig
To what extent did the following influence your choice to study at a tertiary institution?			
I want the chance to face new challenges and broaden my horizons	(0.30)	(2.187)	0.031**
I am interested in pursuing postgraduate studies	(0.05)	(0.340)	0.734
I want to meet new people and make new friends	(0.06)	(0.413)	0.680
I like the idea of participating in sports and social activities at the university	0.12	0.623	0.534
I want to prove to myself that I can be successful at university	(0.04)	(0.360)	0.719
I really want to obtain a university degree	(0.01)	(0.124)	0.902
Having done well in school, going to university seemed like the natural thing to do	(0.21)	(1.212)	0.228
I am attracted by the opportunities of having an active social life at university	(0.12)	0.752	0.453
I believe that university will give me the opportunity to improve my self-belief and self-confidence	(0.03)	(0.240)	0.810
Progressing to university is what others expected of me	0.20	1.038	0.301
I want to develop a better understanding of myself	(0.22)	(1.755)	0.082*
Coming to university affords me at least three more years for me to decide what I really want to do	(0.01)	(0.058)	0.954
All my friends were going to university	(0.33)	(1.510)	0.134
I rather/kind of drifted into higher education	0.37	1.945	0.054*
I want to qualify as a Chartered Accountant	(0.07)	(0.480)	0.632
I think that I have the skills and abilities that are suited to the study of accounting	0.27	1.958	0.052*
I am attracted to career prospects for accounting graduates	0.24	1.771	0.079*
I enjoyed subjects at high school related to the degree	0.00	0.011	0.991
I want to learn more about accounting	(0.03)	(0.238)	0.813
My friends also planned to come to UWC	0.02	0.112	0.911
I wasn't too bothered about what I studied at university	0.30	1.362	0.176
My friends also planned to do B.Com (Accounting)	0.01	0.063	0.950

* significant at the 10% level with $p < 0.1$; **significant at the 5% level with $p < 0.05$

Preparedness for higher education

The transition to higher education is affected by students' preparedness for tertiary studies. Byrne and Flood (2005) state that most students who enter tertiary studies obtain their learning experiences from high school. Yet practices experienced at school may develop skills that do not adequately prepare students for higher education (Money et al., 2020). The resulting expectation gaps could lead to student failure and attrition.

Identifying and managing these expectation gaps is critical to retaining students and ensuring their success.

Table 4 shows no significant gender differences in the preparedness of students, except for males, assessing overall that they possessed the necessary skills to be proficient at accounting ($p < 0.1$). Males also seemed significantly more prepared to participate in class ($p < 0.1$). When evaluating expected performance, males were more confident about completing all the exams on the first attempt ($p < 0.05$), their ability to perform above average ($p < 0.05$) and their ability to achieve results in the top 10% of their class ($p < 0.05$). Further research could be conducted to understand what drives the confidence of male students and whether the confidence is realistic relative to their performance.

Table 4: Preparedness

Question	Mean	t-score	Sig
Indicate whether you feel willing and/or comfortable to do the following:			
Participate in class	0.35	1.836	0.069*
Organize your own life generally	0.16	1.281	0.203
Ask for help from your lecturers/tutors	0.14	1.185	0.238
Complete written assignments (projects/essays)	(0.08)	(0.557)	0.578
Take responsibility for your own learning	0.09	0.796	0.427
Plan your studies in a time-effective manner to meet your deadlines	0.04	0.365	0.716
Initiate your own study activities	(0.14)	(1.270)	0.206
Evaluate your own progress	0.027	0.233	0.816
Participate in group work	0.05	0.251	0.802
Know what is expected of you academically at university	0.028	0.253	0.801
Work independently without direction from a facilitator/lecturer	(0.03)	(0.164)	0.870
Be confident about your ability to use a computer	(0.07)	0.463	0.644
Indicate the extent to which you feel confident in:			
Your ability to handle the course material	0.15	1.064	0.289
Your ability to pass all your exams at the first attempt	0.35	2.480	0.014**
Your ability to perform above average in your university studies	0.31	2.014	0.046**
Your ability to achieve results in the top 10% of your class	0.32	1.988	0.049**

*significant at the 10% level with $p < 0.1$; **significant at the 5% level with $p < 0.05$

Expectations emanating from studying B.Com (Accounting)

Students were asked to evaluate whether, and to what extent, a given range of possible outcomes would be met after their time at the university and after studying towards

a B.Com (Accounting) degree. As shown in Table 5, no significant gender differences were found between the expectations of students. This might be the result of marketing by the profession, career guidance by teachers and advertising by the university. These initiatives might create transparency and clarity about what can be expected from this and similar programmes. This might also relate to the fact that the entrance requirements for the programme are among the highest at the university and the programme often attracts relatively good students from both genders, who are looking for intellectual growth and stimulation.

Table 5: Preparedness

Question	Mean	t-score	Sig
To what extent does the following represent your expected outcome from studying B.Com (Accounting):			
To develop new skills	0.10	0.971	0.333
To broaden my horizons	(0.17)	(1.444)	0.151
To meet new people	(0.04)	(0.248)	0.804
To have a good time	(0.30)	(1.516)	0.132
To experience intellectual growth and stimulation	(0.01)	(0.141)	0.888
To learn about new ideas	(0.07)	0.650	0.517
To increase my self-esteem and self-confidence	(0.049)	(0.316)	0.753

*significant at the 10% level with $p < 0.1$; **significant at the 5% level with $p < 0.05$

Discussion

This study investigated the motivation, expectations and preparedness of first-year students studying B.Com (Accounting) at UWC. While this group of students represent an interesting and important group because of their socio-economic backgrounds, the generalizability of the findings might be limited as the study focused on students from one university in one region of South Africa. However, the findings add significantly to the knowledge of the student experience at the first-year level.

The data used in the study relates to the 2018 first-year B.Com (Accounting) class at UWC. Universities were forced to alter their teaching and learning strategies significantly during the 2019/2020 academic year due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. While teaching and learning conditions have mostly returned to pre-COVID-19 norms, the transition is not yet complete. Further, the increased use of online and distance learning technology has altered the higher education landscape somewhat. However, the fundamentals of student motivations, expectations and preparedness in the 2018 academic year still apply and, therefore, the findings of this study bear relevance for higher education institutions grappling with issues of attrition, throughput and student success.

These findings indicate that a mixture of intrinsic and extrinsic factors motivate students and that these differ based on the student's gender. Female students seem

motivated to study, and to study B.Com (Accounting) particularly, by parents and relatives and for reasons of self-discovery such as broadening their horizons and understanding themselves better. Understanding this finding, universities might want to offer electives, outside the business faculty where accounting-related subjects are traditionally taught, that broaden students' thinking and understanding beyond that developed by the core subjects in the programme. This will assist the holistic development of the student and contribute to fostering the desired graduate attributes.

The findings indicate that, at least at the beginning of their studies, students seem to have accurate expectations of the time commitment required to complete the first semester. This is contrary to prior findings that student expectations of the time required to complete their course were significantly lower than what the institution recommended (Byrne & Flood, 2005) and a finding (in Spain) that male students expected to commit considerably less study time than female students expected (Arquero et al., 2009).

Overall, males appeared more confident than females about their preparedness for higher education, although the reasons are not clear, indicating also a greater likelihood to participate in class and score above-average grades during their studies. Further research is warranted to explore the reasons for gender differences in confidence related to their preparedness for higher education.

Conclusion

Student success in higher education benefits all stakeholders and the economy. It is widely recognised that the greatest risk of attrition is at the first-year level and studies have found that attrition is attributable to expectation gaps and the unpreparedness of first-year students for the demands of higher education (Arquero et al., 2009). Consequently, reducing student attrition is a priority for all institutions of higher learning and institutional stakeholders, not least of which is the government, which has to ensure the efficient use of fiscal resources.

Ethics statement

The authors have obtained the necessary institutional approval to conduct the research.

Potential conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced the writing of this article.

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