

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19344275>

## STUDENT VOICES ON TEACHING, LEARNING, AND ASSESSMENT: INSIGHTS FROM FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS IN A TEACHER TRAINING HIGHER EDUCATION MODULE

**Irene Roy**  
University of Fort Hare  
South Africa

**Karin Hackmack**  
University of Fort Hare  
South Africa

### ABSTRACT

This study examined first-year students' reactions to the School-Based Work: Integrated Learning module, drawing on Kirkpatrick's Level 1 reaction model of learning evaluation. Using qualitative data derived from student reflections and feedback, the research explored perceptions of lecturer behaviour, communication, assessment, emotional support, and mode of delivery. Findings revealed six major themes: lecturer attitude and support, communication, assessment and feedback, emotional and psychological support, teaching and learning practices, and mode of delivery. Students consistently emphasized the importance of empathy, patience, and respect in fostering engagement and belonging, particularly during the transition to higher education. The results highlight that relational and emotional dimensions of teaching are central to students' satisfaction and persistence. While some students appreciated the flexibility of online learning, most preferred face-to-face delivery due to challenges related to interaction, connectivity, and comprehension. Effective communication, timely feedback, and humanizing pedagogical practices were identified as key drivers of positive learning experiences. The study concludes that first-year student success depends not only on curriculum design and technological access but also on lecturers' ability to create supportive, inclusive, and emotionally responsive learning environments.

**Keywords:** first-year students; student reactions; humanizing pedagogy; lecturer support; communication; assessment feedback; online learning; student engagement

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the emphasis on student-centered learning has highlighted the importance of student feedback as a powerful tool for enhancing teaching and learning practices in higher education (Winstone & Boud, 2019). Particularly in teacher education programmes, understanding how students experience modules that bridge theoretical knowledge with practical engagement is crucial. This study investigated student feedback on a first-year, second-semester module titled School-Based Work: Integrated Learning. The module, an 8-credit component of a four-year teacher training qualification is offered to first-year students. At the time when the

research was conducted, 531 students were registered for the module. Delivered and assessed by four lecturers through the Blackboard e-learning platform, the module aims to blend academic instruction with practical application. Feedback was gathered from 328 students through an online Survey Monkey questionnaire and analyzed using inductive thematic analysis conducted by two independent coders. This research is part of an ongoing evaluation of the School Based Work Integrated Learning Year 1 course since 2021. The research included both a pre and post course evaluation. The post course evaluation used Kirkpatrick's (2006) four-level taxonomy as a theoretical framework. The four levels are: 1) reaction, 2) learning, 3) behaviour and 4) results. These four levels are all designed for course facilitators to understand the responses of students. This paper particularly focused on Kirkpatrick's Level 1, which is related to students feedback on their experiences in the course. This level, therefore, answered the research question related to students' reaction to the course. The data presented in this paper was in response to an open-ended question which asked the participants to reflect on their own experiences with teaching, learning and assessment and suggest ways in which these could be improved for future participants.

Guided by Kirkpatrick's learning evaluation model, the analysis revealed six key themes which emerged from the data, which indicated that students have a need for clarity, kindness, structure, and support, not only in academic delivery but also within the emotional and psychological dimensions of the learning environment. These findings underscore the significance of a humanizing pedagogy in higher education, where meaningful engagement, empathetic teaching, and supportive structures enhance both academic and personal development. Based on these insights, the study offers practical recommendations to strengthen communication, feedback practices, lecturer empathy, and student support, especially in technologically mediated learning spaces.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The reviewed literature provides an intellectual foundation to anchor this research in four key areas. These include first-year experience, the role of lectures in student academic success, online learning as mode of delivery and assessment and student feedback.

The first-year experience has emerged as a critical focus in higher education, as students' early academic encounters often shape their trajectories of engagement, success, and persistence. Within this landscape, the lecturer plays a pivotal role—not only as a source of academic knowledge, but also as an essential resource and predictor of first-year students' academic success through their pedagogical practices, accessibility, and support. As universities increasingly adopt diverse modes of delivery, particularly online learning, the nature of lecturer–student interaction becomes even more pronounced in influencing students' adjustment and performance. Furthermore, student feedback has gained prominence as an important mechanism for understanding and enhancing teaching quality, informing institutional practices, and strengthening the overall first-year experience. Together, these dimensions underscore the interconnected factors that shape first-year academic outcomes and highlight the need for

continued research into how teaching practices and learning environments influence student success.

## **The first-year experience**

For first-year students, the transition from secondary to tertiary education can be a daunting experience (Hassel and Ridout, 2018). Research on the transition from secondary to tertiary education (the “first-year experience” or FYE) treats the first-year as a critical period that shapes retention, achievement and long-term student outcomes (Tinto, 2006). Major models of student persistence emphasise academic and social integration as central mechanisms influencing whether students succeed or drop out (Spady, 1970; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 2006 ). According to Li and Xue (2003), students frequently report difficulties adapting to new academic demands: independent learning, critical thinking, academic writing, self-regulated study and different assessment conventions which are strongly associated with early poor performance and course withdrawal. Rawal & Razak (2022) provide a narrative review of student retention models in online higher education, highlighting newer models (e.g., composite persistence model, adult dropout model) in the online/distance learning context. More recent models focus on learning in online contexts.

A second research theme that has emerged within studies on the first-year experience and the factors that predict academic success, are studies that report that feeling a sense of belonging and building peer/academic relationships strongly predicts persistence, engagement and wellbeing specifically for students from marginalized , non-traditional groups (Crawford et al, 2023). Stokoe et al (2024) in their study explored the overall impact of anxiety, homesickness, stress and feelings of isolation on academic success and retention. These are common amongst first-year university students and can undermine their full engagement with the academic project. Most higher education institutions provide access to emotional support for improved retention and academic performance.

## **The lecturer as a resource and predictor in first-year academic success**

Leibowitz et al (2009) investigated what high achieving students appreciate in their first-year lecturers. High achieving students reported that they appreciated lecturers who demonstrate thorough subject knowledge, enthusiasm, accessibility, and interpersonal warmth. They value lecturer confidence (whether genuine or simulated), humor, and personality traits that foster engagement and motivation. Students reported that they react positively to lecturers who show enthusiasm and are approachable, making themselves accessible both inside and outside of lectures. Additionally, attributes like empathy, understanding students’ struggles, and building personal connections such as knowing students’ birthdays or encouraging them to seek help were reported to be valued (Leibowitz, 2009:16).

This is corroborated by Su and Wood (2012) who in their paper reported that lecturers who ‘stand out’ in the minds of university students are those who demonstrate a deep knowledge of the subject and are open and approachable, willing to help whenever needed. Such lecturers

offered teaching that inspired them. Inspirational teaching was defined as ‘passion and enthusiasm for the subject’ which inspired them (Su and Wood, 2012, 13). In addition, inspirational teaching also extended to building meaningful relationships with students, fostering enthusiasm, and connecting with students as whole people, which may involve emotional engagement and creating a supportive atmosphere. (2012, 13). Hassel and Ridout (2018) on the other hand draw a clear distinction between the difference in approaches between experienced and less experienced lectures. According to them, less experienced lecturers expect less engagement from students, while more seasoned staff adapt by focusing less on just delivering information and more on helping students rethink concepts.

### **Mode of delivery – online learning**

Recent research indicated that face-to-face versus online learning impacted both positively and negatively on the teaching, learning and assessment contexts. On the positive side, students perceived online learning to provide them with how and when they engaged with courses (Samara et al, 2023). Hongsuchon et al (2022) reported that the effectiveness of online learning is positively related to students’ knowledge and skills growth, as well as their satisfaction, especially when they have confidence and motivation. In a systematic review (covering 2019-2024), Akpen et al (2024) reported that students in online learning scored higher or no worse than in face-to-face settings: “a majority of the articles ... showed that online learning did not negatively affect the academic performance of students” and in some studies improved it.

On the downside, García-Machado et al (2024) found that the additional support students received during online learning only improved their academic performance if it increased their intrinsic motivation and engagement. So, while students’ grades did not suffer, students in online environments often report lower levels of engagement, less interaction with instructors and peers, and feelings of isolation (Akpen et al, 2024).

The need for self-regulation and motivation increases in online learning contexts. Students are required to have higher levels of self-discipline, motivation, effective learning strategies and self-regulation (Hongsuchon, 2024). The effectiveness and student satisfaction with online learning is closely related to internet connectivity, device availability, technical skill and resources. Li et al (2023) reported that students in developing countries, such as the one where this study was conducted, indicated their preference for in-person learning as against 20% for online learning.

### **Assessment feedback versus Student feedback**

Assessment feedback is regarded as one of the most important components of all learning processes (Henderson et al, 2019) as its intended primary purpose is to bridge the gap between current performance and desired learning outcomes, helping students to reflect, correct errors, and improve future performance. In understanding the role of assessment feedback and student feedback in learning processes, it is important to distinguish between the purpose of these two distinct processes. Assessment feedback is defined as the information given *to students* by lecturers/teachers about the student or learner’s performance on a task, test, assignment, or other assessment activity. The lecturer engages in this process with the intention of helping students

understand what they did well; where they did not and how they can improve in future tasks. Assessment feedback is often labeled as developmental and formative and the communication flow is from teacher/instructor to student/learner (Tomičić-Pupek et al, 2024). Student feedback on the other hand refers to information provided *by students* to lecturers, institutions, or curriculum developers about their experiences with teaching, learning, assessments, resources, or the course in general. Institutions, lecturers or curriculum developers routinely call for the information as the intention is to use the information to evaluate the quality of teaching and learning; identify the strengths and weaknesses and areas for improvement and inform curriculum development and teaching practices. The communication is therefore from the student, the recipient in the process, to the provider or developer of the product or process (Tomičić-Pupek et al, 2024). Bovill et al. (2011) highlight student feedback as central to developing more inclusive and responsive learning environments.

### **Student Feedback in Higher Education**

There has been an increasing trend to view students in higher education from a consumer economic perspective. From all sectors the call is to treat students as consumers, hence the insistence that on a regular basis academic staff are reminded to engage in the assessment of their teaching and assessment practices, which in economic terms could be equated with market research when one determines the need for a specific product.

Globally, institutions of higher learning are enforcing the practice of seeking feedback from its 'customers' which forms the basis for future expansion and development of its offerings. The practice of seeking student feedback is further enforced by making it a requirement that proof of such engagement form part of promotion applications and annual individual performance assessments.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

As part of the annual course evaluation conducted in 2023, students completed a Survey Monkey questionnaire containing both qualitative and quantitative questions. One open-ended question focused on their reaction to the course. An interpretivist paradigm was used to analyze their responses. Using purposive sampling, all students (n=531) enrolled in the School-Based Work Integrated Learning Year 1 course were invited to complete the questionnaire. A total of 328 students responded.

The data were analysed using an inductive thematic analysis. In their seminal paper, Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes in rich detail. They, along with other scholars (ibid.; Byrne,2021), differentiate between inductive (bottom-up) and deductive (top-down) thematic analysis. A deductive approach is top-down in the sense that the analysis is guided by existing theories or frameworks. An inductive approach is bottom-up, allowing analysis, and for themes to emerge directly from the data. In an inductive analysis, the researcher does not follow a predefined coding process, as the analysis is not bound by a pre-existing framework. Instead, the approach is

reflexive, flexible, and organic, aimed at generating deeper and more nuanced understanding of the data and its meanings (Byrne, 2021).

In this study, two independent researchers conducted the initial coding of the dataset, generating preliminary themes. A reflexive, iterative process followed, during which the researchers met to compare and discuss their findings. This collaboration resulted in a final set of themes agreed upon by both coders. Figure 1 outlines the data analysis process used in this research.

### **Insert Figure 1 : The coding process that was followed in this research here**

The final coding resulted in six key themes: assessment and feedback, communication, emotional and psychological support, lecturer attitude and support, mode of delivery and accessibility, and the teaching and learning process. As shown in Figure 2, the theme that received the most student comments was lecturer attitude and support, with 157 responses. This was followed by communication (141 responses) and emotional and psychological support (75 responses). Both teaching and learning practices and modes of delivery and accessibility received an equal number of comments, with 27 each.

### **Insert Figure 2: The six themes emerging from the data**

## **4. FINDINGS**

In the following section, examples of the qualitative responses from the respondents related to the overarching themes are presented.

### **Lecturers' attitude and support**

The data indicated that students felt staff–student interaction needed improvement, especially considering their status as first-year students. A recurring concern was the desire to be treated with kindness, respect, and patience, reflecting the vulnerability and inexperience of first-year students. Respondent 150 notes, “be kind to your students”. While respondent 60 notes, “I wish the lecturers could be more patient with us as we are first-years... and without a negative attitude”. While students did not specifically unpack what they meant by patience and kindness it was mentioned by a number of students to be noteworthy.

Respondent 185 outlines the fact that students thought that lecturers could be more understanding and patient.

*I enjoyed the module a lot, I just wish the lecturers could be more understanding and patient with the next year first-year students when preparing them, bearing in mind that it's their first portfolio and so many questions are going to arise.*

Respondent 213 highlights the need for lecturers to show greater kindness, especially considering that first-year students often lack sufficient experience. This sense of vulnerability is echoed by Respondent 222, who states, “lecturers should bear with us as first-years...”. Similarly,

Respondent 60 expresses the desire for more patience from lecturers, noting, “I wish the students could be more patient with us as we are first-years...”. Beyond vulnerability, students also pointed to the diversity of learning styles, with Respondent 105 noting that “some of us are slow learners.” This idea is reinforced by Respondent 107, who explains, “We are new to this, and it takes longer for us to grasp what is being explained.” Respondent 234 similarly stresses the challenge of adjusting to university expectations: “stop expecting us as first-years to know everything about this module,” and Respondent 39 reminds us that “not all students have equal knowledge on certain things.”

Lombard (2020) notes that one of the reasons for students’ lack of success is the fact that institutions of higher learning often do not provide adequate support for the academic and social transition for first-year students. The need for support for students transitioning from secondary schooling into tertiary education is described by van Zyl et al (2020) as demanding and stressful. This is particularly true for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are underprepared for the university setting and find the independent pedagogical structure of the university alienating (Zithe et al., 2024).

## **Communication**

The delivery of this course was primarily online with very few face-to-face lectures. The communication theme encompassed both the lecturers' communication in class and for assignments, as well as the students' communication with the lecturer. The statement “*They [lecturers] must improve their communication skills*” expresses a clear concern from students (or stakeholders) regarding the quality and effectiveness of communication provided by lecturers.

## **Communication: In-class interaction**

Students perceived the way in which certain lecturers spoke to them during online lectures as demeaning which prevented proper interaction between the students and lecturers. Respondent 137 notes, “You have to stop being rude to us and you have to understand that we are still new in this, because now we become scared to even ask questions because you make fun of us in front of others”. This respondent was not alone in their perceptions as Respondent 26 notes that students needed to be engaged with in a respectful manner and not belittling them, “when they ask you for clarity on things they do not understand, please stop embarrassing students”. Finally, Respondent 274 urges lecturers

*To be kind to students and know that students are different, do not say things that you would not want to be said to you if you were a student some of us are already doubting themselves; you don't have to add salt to the wound*

As this was not the perception or intention of the lecturers, a possible reason for the students’ perception of the lecturers’ communication could be because both academics and students found it difficult to adjust to the norms of communicating online (Mgoduko & Zwane, 2024).

## **Student communication in on-line classes and with lecturers**

Respondent 79 felt that due to lecturer attitude students were prohibited from asking questions. Once again, the issue that they were first-years was raised as they had more questions that needed clarity and were weary of asking questions due to fear of being belittled (Respondent 104). This was an issue that was also noted by Respondent 85 who specifically mentions that lecturers must be willing to listen to students' concerns. While respondent 137 notes the:

*You have to stop being rude to use and have to understand that we are still new in this, cause [because] now we become scared to ask questions because you make fun of us in front of others.*

The students felt that the hard line that the lecturers were following with them was prohibiting students from asking questions. Respondent 117 notes, "You have to answer our questions in a polite way and be friendly so we won't be afraid to ask questions". This was not acceptable as lecturers should "make sure that students are not afraid to ask questions, they must be free to express their views" (Respondent 150). The constant fear students expressed could be directly linked to an unwillingness to learn through exploration which meant making mistakes, which for a first-year student could result in failing the module.

The plea to improve communication was also mentioned by Respondent 255,

*The lecturers must exercise patience because I know how tiring it is to be asked the same question all over again, but they must keep in mind that we are first-years and we have never done this before and we don't want to do it incorrectly and a little kindness can go a long way.*

Respondent 10 sums it up in their comment that improved communication would mean mutual understanding of students and lecturers". These comments could be because of the "culture shock" of students who are transitioning from a face-to face school context to an online context (Zitha et al., 2024) and the fact that students now have to adapt to lecturers' from different languages backgrounds and accents. Furthermore, in an on-line context, lecturers' are unable to access the visual cues from learners which hinders communication as well as making students feel invisible (ibid.)

## **Lecturer -student communication outside of lectures**

The feedback on the use of the e-mail communication system was conflicting. Respondent 151 flagged it as a struggle for students (Respondent, 151), while Respondents 231 and 248 urged for the use of e-mail communication as the preferred means of communication. Merridian and Warrior (2015) reported that email is frequently used for communication between students and lecturers and some students prefer email because they feel shy or nervous in face-to-face settings. Emails therefore allow them to compose their thoughts and ask questions without the immediate pressure of real-time interaction. This comment also suggests that some students may prefer more flexible, less time-sensitive modes of communication (like email). According to Butler & Pinto-Zipp (2005) emails allow students more time to cognitively process the content of the e-

mail(s) and respond appropriately, something which is difficult in real-time communication setting.

## **Assessment and Feedback**

This compulsory module is the heart of the teacher training programme which is assessed through a portfolio of evidence. Students, therefore, experience a lot of anxiety in ensuring that they understand what is required from them. Respondent 111 felt that “there was a lot of confusion about the portfolio and the documents that students had to complete”. One of the issues was the belief that adequate communication regarding the assignments needed to be provided. “With regards to instructions on how to go about with assignments, you should make them more transparent and confusing. One student thought that the instructions for the assignments were too vague (Respondent 205). In particular, lecturers were requested to, “elaborate how to do handwritten journals and how to compile the reflections in the Portfolio”. A request was made for an example of a portfolio be provided for the first-years as a template for them to follow (Respondent, 98)

These comments align with existing research indicating that students often find assessment requirements confusing in remote learning contexts (Mäkipää, 2023). Since portfolios represent a new form of assessment for many first-year students, they may struggle to grasp what is expected of them (Zitha et al., 2024). Furthermore, Boughey and McKenna (2016) note that students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds often encounter unfamiliar academic standards that become decontextualised within higher education environments. The request for a template may therefore reflect a belief that there is only one correct way to complete the portfolio, and the novelty of the task may heighten students’ anxiety about the unknown (Ravi & Besharat, 2025). The quick turnaround time for the submission of individual assignments was also seen as an issue. Respondent 93 noted that “I would like the module to improve in assessment time for submission...” and for the assessments to be communicated timeously to students. Respondent 169 lamented that they had missed the cutoff time for one of their assessment tasks. As all assignments were uploaded onto Blackboard, the issue of connectivity was noted (Respondent, 217)

The importance of language was raised by one of the students, as they requested that, “In assessment next time please try to translate into isiXhosa to give clear instructions” (Respondent 292).

The issue of late feedback was also an issue mentioned by students. Respondent 210 comments that feedback must be provided on a previous task before issuing the next task so that students are constantly aware of their progress and highlight areas for improvement (Respondent 184).

Finally, with regards to the issue of the use of group work, students requested that they be informed of the task in time, be given the opportunity to connect with their group prior to going to schools. While other students requested that lecturers stop using group assignments. (Respondent 177)’

## Teaching and Learning Practices

The students requested clear teaching methods and explanations.

Respondent 167, ... Your teaching is very good you make things clear for us and I have enjoyed this module... However, not all students were of the same opinion as respondent 208 notes that they need more assistance in this module as they are first-years.

## Mode of delivery

In connection with the issue of technical difficulties that prevented all students from attending class, Respondent 147 states “Try to fix blackboard so it can accommodate all of us in one class”. Blackboard is the learning management system used at this institution of higher learning. In addition, students requested that online lectures are “Record classes for students who are unable to attend...” (Respondent 107). The first-year students also requested that the online lectures be replaced with face-to-face lectures. Respondent 152, 272 and 218 all advocate for face-to-face classes, while Respondent 115, commented on the obstacles faced in online learning environments.

*For teaching you need to use face-to-face not online classes because some students they have wifi problems. Learning it's better to teach student about what... face-to-face, because they will not answer some questions during online classes*

The respondent 201 also commented on the online process. They stated that they preferred face-to-face lectures as it was difficult for them to focus during on-line classes. This is echoed by Respondent 27 who states that the

*Learning, assessment and teaching become[s] easily when we have face-to-face classes because we all attend and it's easily to participate rather than online classes that have link problems and most students are failing to attend classes.*

Respondent 36 also comments on the mode of delivery but is in favour of online learning, “I would like lectures, but I prefer online classes so that there will be greater clarity in every assessment”. Respondent 132 also notes that face-to-face classes should replace online classes. For respondent 141, it would be helpful ‘if we were having contact classes. The impact of large class size was acknowledged by students. Respondents 215 and 204 both commented that the classroom size was too big and the classes needed to be split.

One of the other suggestions were the need for additional tutor support. Students suggested that the faculty “hire student facilitators to help students who are struggling (Respondent 87). The use of tutors was seen as a way communication (Respondent, 89) and clearer instructions (Respondent 86) could be achieved.

## 5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study provide critical insight into first-year students' reactions to the *School-Based Work: Integrated Learning* module, aligning with Kirkpatrick's (2006) Level 1, reaction of the learning evaluation model. Students' reactions to their learning experiences reflected both affective and cognitive responses, revealing how perceptions of lecturer behaviour, communication, feedback, and support intersect with academic engagement and wellbeing. Six major themes: lecturer attitude and support, communication, emotional and psychological support, assessment and feedback, teaching and learning practices, and mode of delivery illustrate the complexity of students' experiences in a blended, technology-mediated environment.

### Lecturer Attitude, Support, and Humanizing Pedagogy

The dominant theme of *lecturer attitude and support* underscores the centrality of relational pedagogy in student satisfaction and engagement. Students repeatedly called for patience, kindness, and empathy, lecturer qualities that humanize the learning experience and affirm students' identities as newcomers navigating a demanding academic environment. This aligns with Leibowitz et al. (2009) and Sue and Wood (2012) who found that lecturers who display approachability, enthusiasm, and interpersonal warmth significantly enhance student motivation and sense of belonging. For many first-year students, particularly those transitioning from under-resourced schooling contexts, university culture can appear alienating (Boughey & McKenna, 2016; Zitha et al., 2024). Thus, emotionally supportive and empathetic lecturer-student relationships become essential mechanisms for academic and social integration, all key determinants of persistence in Tinto's (2006) model.

The students' emphasis on kindness and patience also signals a need for a *humanizing pedagogy* (Freire, 1970; Lombard, 2020), in which teaching transcends mere content delivery to foster emotional safety and mutual respect. The repeated requests to "be kind" and "understand we are first-years" reveal that learners equate pedagogical care with academic inclusivity. Such reactions suggest that the affective climate of a course may shape students' engagement and resilience as much as its intellectual demands.

### Communication and Power Dynamics in Online Spaces

The second major theme, *communication*, points to a complex interplay between linguistic, technological, and relational factors in online environments. Students' descriptions of lecturers as "rude" or "belittling" may reflect the loss of nonverbal cues and affective warmth in text-based or asynchronous communication (Mgoduko & Zwane, 2024). The transition from familiar face-to-face schooling to university-level online learning constitutes a form of cultural and communicative "shock" (Zitha et al., 2024). Students' fears of asking questions or seeking clarification illustrate how perceived power imbalances can be amplified in virtual classrooms where social cues are muted.

Improved communication emerged as a central student recommendation, both within synchronous lectures and via email. This echoes Butler and Pinto-Zipp (2005), who found that asynchronous channels such as email reduce anxiety and allow reflective engagement. However, effective online communication requires explicit scaffolding of tone, clarity, and feedback loops (Hassel & Ridout, 2018). The call for respectful, two-way communication indicates that relational dimensions of pedagogy remain crucial even in digitally mediated learning.

### **Assessment, Feedback, and the Demand for Clarity**

Students' confusion around portfolio tasks and assessment criteria highlights the need for transparency and structured guidance in assessment design. Many respondents requested clearer instructions, examples, and translated materials, underscoring the linguistic and epistemic challenges first-year students face. These reactions align with Henderson et al. (2019), who note that feedback functions best when it closes the gap between current and desired performance. However, as Boughey and McKenna (2016) argue, underprepared students often misinterpret academic expectations when institutional literacies are not explicitly taught.

Requests for earlier feedback and extended submission timelines further illustrate that *feedback timeliness* and *clarity* are integral to students' perceptions of fairness and learning value. Delayed or vague feedback can weaken students' self-efficacy and sense of progress, affecting both emotional engagement and academic persistence (Mäkipää, 2023). The students' desire for exemplars or "templates" also suggests a preference for modelling and guided practice, strategies that promote confidence and reduce anxiety during the first-year transition.

### **Mode of Delivery: Online Learning and Student Success**

Reactions to the *mode of delivery* revealed polarized preferences. While a small number valued the flexibility of online learning, the majority expressed frustration with connectivity issues, limited engagement, and diminished focus. These perceptions reflect global trends reported by Akpen et al. (2024) and Hongsuchon et al. (2022), who found that while online learning can maintain or even improve performance, it often reduces interaction and increases isolation. For students in developing contexts, unreliable internet access and insufficient devices exacerbate these challenges (Li et al., 2023).

The strong preference for face-to-face delivery among respondents suggests that technology-mediated instruction must be complemented by opportunities for human connection and peer collaboration. The suggestion to "hire student facilitators" indicates students' desire for more accessible peer support, which aligns with research on the value of near-peer tutoring for fostering belonging and engagement in large classes (Crawford et al., 2023). Ultimately, the success of online learning depends not merely on technology but on the social and pedagogical structures surrounding it.

## Emotional and Psychological Support

The recurring emphasis on empathy, patience, and psychological understanding reflects students' broader emotional needs during the transition to higher education. The first-year is a period marked by anxiety, homesickness, and self-doubt (Stokoe et al., 2024). When lecturers respond with compassion, they contribute to emotional regulation and resilience, which are foundational to academic persistence. The findings thus support Tinto's (2006) assertion that integration is both social and emotional and extend Kirkpatrick's Level 1 framework by showing that positive emotional reactions are precursors to effective learning and behavioural change.

Across all themes, students' reactions highlight an overarching demand for clarity, kindness, and connection. These findings suggest that the *quality of human interaction*, rather than the mode of delivery alone, plays the most decisive role in shaping students' perceptions of their learning experience. When lecturers communicate clearly, provide timely feedback, and exhibit empathy, students feel valued and empowered. Conversely, perceived harshness, ambiguity, and detachment erode engagement and trust.

The six emergent themes collectively demonstrate that first-year students interpret teaching not only through academic outcomes but through *relational and emotional lenses*. This reinforces the call for humanizing pedagogical approaches (Leibowitz et al., 2009; Freire, 1970) and aligns with institutional imperatives to strengthen student retention through emotional and social support (Tinto, 2006; Bean & Metzner, 1985).

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study examined first-year students' reactions to the *School-Based Work: Integrated Learning* module through the lens of Kirkpatrick's (2006) Level 1 evaluation model. The purpose of the study was to elicit student feedback from first-year students enrolled on a Bachelor of Education degree on a specific first-year module in the four-year degree. The research participants were specifically asked to comment on aspects of the course they felt would improve the teaching, learning and assessment in the module. It was anticipated that students would provide honest reflections on their own experiences as the researchers were looking for practical ideas that could guide future improvements of the delivery of content and delivery of the module. It was anticipated that the suggestions would focus on teaching methods (e.g., more interactive sessions, better pacing, or clearer explanations); feedback on learning materials (e.g., quality, relevance, or accessibility of readings and slides) and advice on assessment methods (e.g., clarity of instructions, fairness of marking, timing, or workload). What emerged was the high premium placed by this cohort on human interpersonal relations in an online teaching and learning context.

The findings revealed that students' perceptions of lecturer behaviour, communication, assessment clarity, and emotional support significantly shape their learning experiences and overall satisfaction. Students valued empathy, patience, and approachability as core elements of

effective teaching, underscoring the importance of humanizing pedagogy in fostering engagement and belonging during the transition to higher education.

Students' reactions to the *School-Based Work: Integrated Learning* module revealed that successful teaching in the first-year requires more than sound curriculum design—it requires compassion, clarity, and consistent communication. The findings affirm that humanized engagement, embedded feedback loops, and inclusive communication practices are critical to fostering positive student experiences and, ultimately, academic success and persistence. While some respondents appreciated the flexibility of online learning, most preferred face-to-face delivery due to challenges related to interaction, connectivity, and feedback delays. These insights suggest that successful online or blended learning requires intentional human connection, clear communication, and equitable access to digital resources. The results further highlight that emotional and relational dimensions of teaching are not peripheral but central to academic success and persistence.

The study recommends that higher education institutions invest in lecturer development focused on compassionate communication, inclusive assessment design, and responsive feedback practices. Strengthening emotional and peer-support structures, enhancing digital pedagogy training, and systematically integrating student feedback into curriculum evaluation will help build more engaging and supportive learning environments. Ultimately, the effectiveness of first-year teaching lies not only in curriculum design or delivery mode, but in the lecturer's capacity to create relational, caring, and communicative spaces where students feel seen, supported, and empowered to succeed.

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## FIGURES & TABLES

Figure 1

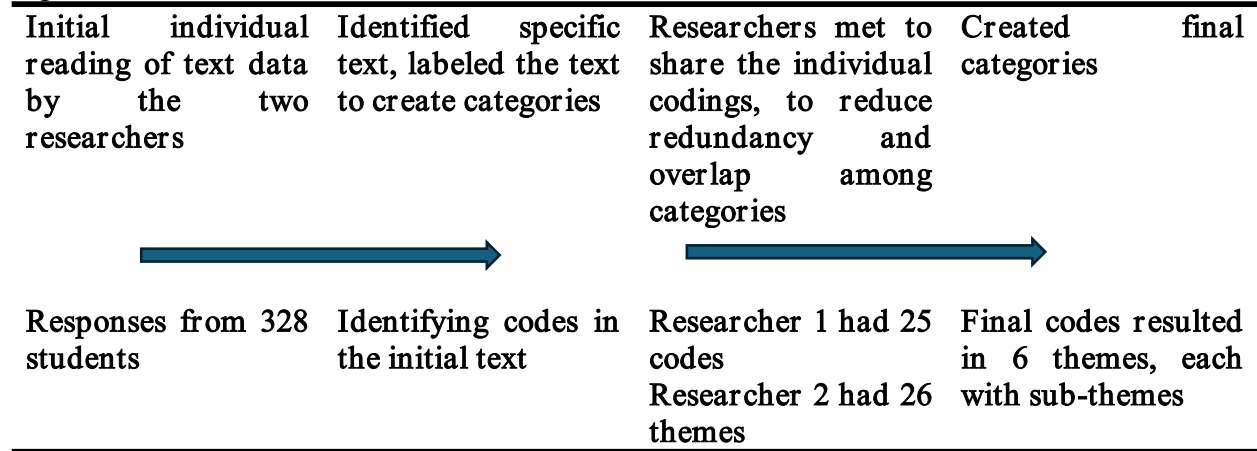


Figure 1: Data coding process

Figure 2

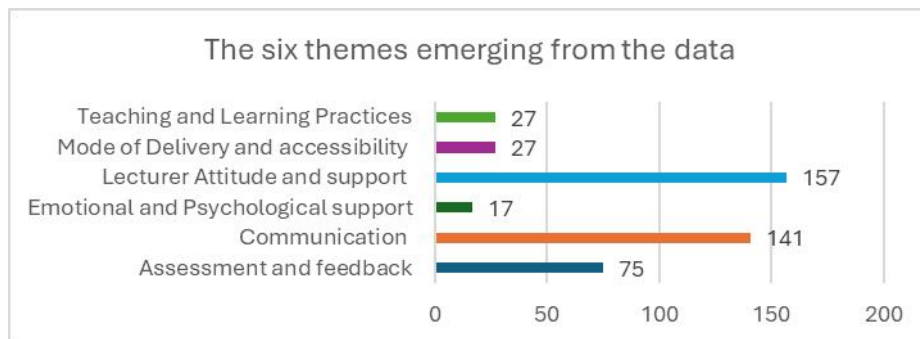


Figure 2: Themes emerging from the data