Improving Higher Education throughput is one of the major challenges facing the Higher Education system in South Africa. The alarmingly high dropout rate at tertiary institutions is urging universities to determine the reasons why so many students fail to complete their studies.

Many young people leaving school dream of a carefree university life that eventually leads to a successful career. These ambitions are disappointed more often than we realize. Research shows that dropout figures at universities and tertiary institutions are beginning to take on shocking dimensions. Various universities and colleges are currently investigating interventions to prevent the large number of students that register for courses from dropping out in future study years.

The matter came to light a number of years ago when the Education Minister told Parliament that 50% of the country’s undergraduate students drop out without completing their degrees and diplomas. She continued to say that only 30% obtain their qualifications within five years of enrolling as first year students. The statistics were confirmed by a study completed by Professor Amanda Lourens of the North-West University. She conducted a research study about the dropout figures at 10 different tertiary institutions in South Africa and focused on determining the dropout figures of students that are registered for three-year degree courses.

Lourens concluded that approximately 24% of students who are registered for a three-year qualification drop out during the first year of study. Approximately 43% of students who are registered for a three-year qualification drop out during the third year of study (and never complete the degree). Only approximately 21% complete their three-year qualification within the minimum time limitation.

What are the reasons for the high drop out rates? Although many reasons may be responsible, dr. de la Harpe from Equilibria School of Life proposes the following reasons to be amongst the main contributors:

**Reason 1 – Rushed, ill-informed career decisions:** The pressure of the Grade 12 year does not create the ideal environment to make a correct career decision. Stress reduces a person’s ability to make well-informed decisions and many students do not have the time to do sufficient career research. Decisions
are rushed and based on inadequate information. To make an informed and correct career decision, nowadays, is more difficult than ever. In the past there were only a few mainstream careers to choose from. The career world today consists of many new specialised career choices because of modern technology. There are also more tertiary educational institutions available. It becomes more difficult for career counselors to keep track of the swiftly changing industry and the new study possibilities that are developing.

**Reason 2 – Lack of motivation:** Many young adults depend on the recommendation of a career consultant or a career psychologist to decide on the correct career. They accept the expert opinion of the guidance counselor because they are often confused. This causes the problem that the decision is often an “intellectual” decision and not a “heartfelt” decision. When there is a lack of sincere passion for a career choice, there is usually a lack of sufficient intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is one of the most important aspects which ensures a student’s dedication during academic pressure or difficult times. A student who is not motivated for a course tends to give up when pressure increases. Young adults who are not mature enough to make a career decision tend to rely on others’ opinions. Therefore, when making a career decision, there must be a level of maturity as well as sufficient self-confidence.

**Reason 3 – Inability to manage time and stress:**
The tertiary environment often creates high demands on students – especially during the senior year of study. Stress can be caused by various aspects, for example academic constraints, the workload and performance pressure to keep scholarships. Students who do not have the ability to manage time and stress often snap when the pressure increases. The education provided at school does not teach learners this extremely important skill. Very few people can manage time and stress naturally. It is a skill that must be acquired deliberately.

**Reason 4 – Lifestyle:**
Many students are inclined to succumb to lifestyles that were previously taboo at school and restrained by parents, once they leave their parental homes for the first time to study. The first lifestyle change involves eating habits. Students will often eat mostly junk food and take in too much sugar and caffeine. They often lapse into the habit of late nights and little sleep. Then they do little exercise because they are too tired. Young adults at university are, for the first time, old enough to use alcohol. It is then often used excessively and injudiciously. During the third year of study the students’ bodies often experience the effects of the bad lifestyle of the previous two years and several problems start, such as headaches, fatigue, depression and more. Health problems can lead to poor
class attendance which, in turn, can influence academic performance and increase stress levels.

**Reason 5 – The gap between school and university:**
The gap between the protective world of the parental home or school and university is often larger than many young adults realize. Students at university have to deal with the difficulties of the adult world for the first time. They often have, for example, a car and must deal with it on their own if the car breaks down. Classes are sometimes as large as 300 students per class. Lecturers often do not have time to give individual attention to students if they missed a class or fell behind. Students may start serious relationships with the opposite sex and must deal with conflict and relationship issues on their own. The sudden adjustment to university can lead to dropouts, if students do not have sufficient emotional intelligence or independence.

**Reason 6 – A lack of self-knowledge:**
Sufficient self-knowledge is one of the most important factors to ensure a correct career decision and to assist a person to handle life’s challenges. A lot of young adults rely on a few psychometric and aptitude tests to decide on a career. This is, however, not always sufficient. It is important to lead the young adults – preferably by means of a structured process – to determine what they really want from life, what their dreams are and what makes them unique. Self-knowledge does not happen overnight. It is the result of a dedicated, specialised process that deliberately addresses a variety of human facets.

There may be many other reasons why students drop out of university. A lack of sufficient finances, for example, cannot be excluded as an additional contributing factor. Whatever the reasons are something drastic need to be done to address the situation. The implications are far reaching. In the words of Prof. Lourens: “These poor graduation and retention rates and high drop-out rates are unacceptable and represent a huge waste of resources, both financial and human. For example, a student drop-out rate of 20 per cent implies about R1.3 billion in government subsidies is spent each year on students who do no complete their study programmes. Moreover, the cost to those who drop-out, in terms of the moral and psychological damage associated with ‘failure’ is incalculable”.

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