

# Rethinking the First Year Experience at the University of the Free State

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FREE STATE  
UNIVERSITEIT VAN DIE  
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UFS  
CENTRE FOR TEACHING  
AND LEARNING (CTL)

# **Supporting first year students' university transition: A data-driven approach to mapping and responding to the student journey**



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(UKZN); Kudayja Parker (DUT); Mzwandile Khumalo (DUT)**

# Student Journey

## **Pre-university**

Applying to university  
Accepting offers / admission

## **Start of the academic year**

Applying to university  
Accepting offers / admission

**Academic and social transition/ engagement throughout the first semester**

**Start of the second semester**

**Academic and social transition/ engagement throughout the second semester**

**Transition into second year**

# Overview

01

**The first few years**

2012-2014

02

**Change is necessary**

2015-2017

03

**A new FYS**

2018-2022

04

**Lessons learned**

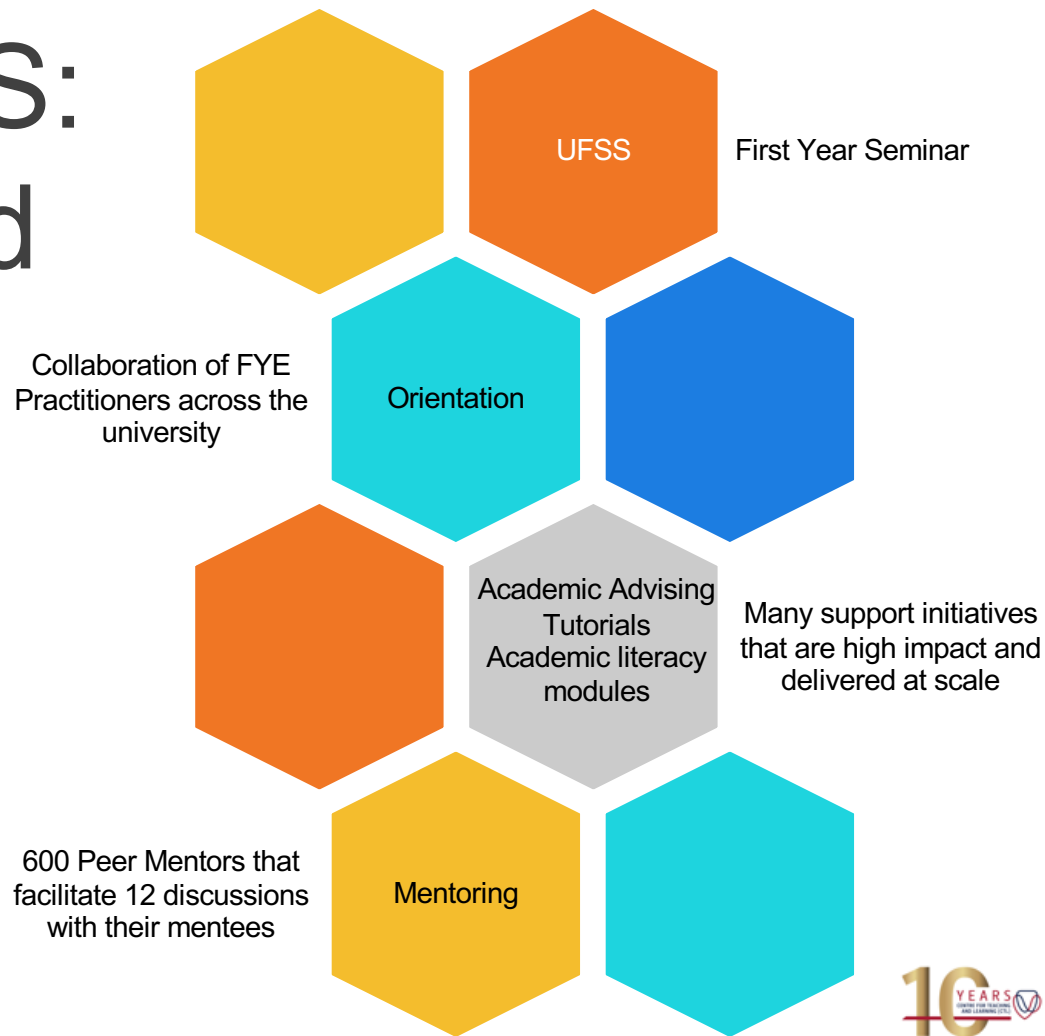
Key lessons learned in the last decade

05

**Q+A and Sharing**

Discussion

# FYE at UFS: background



# The first few years: 2012-2014

Compulsory  
Core-curriculum

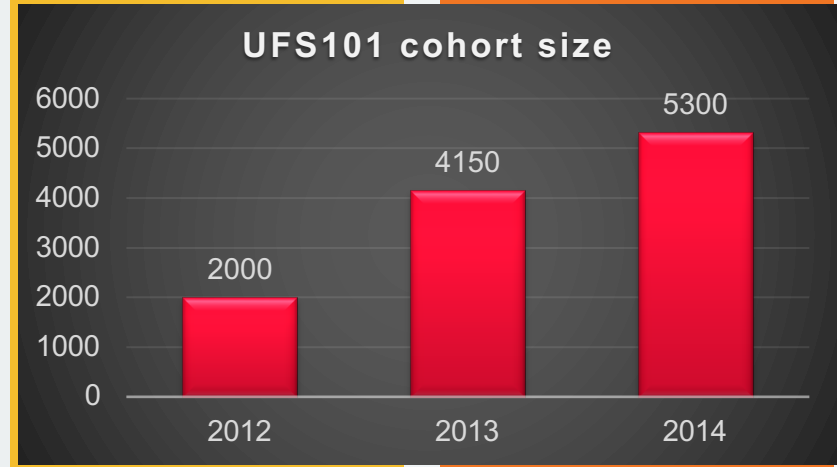
Aim: Teach  
students to think  
critically and seek  
knowledge

Multi-disciplinary  
Big questions  
course

- History
- Psychology
- Anthropology
- Law
- Chemistry
- Theology
- Economics
- Astrophysics + Astrobiology

Growth in  
numbers

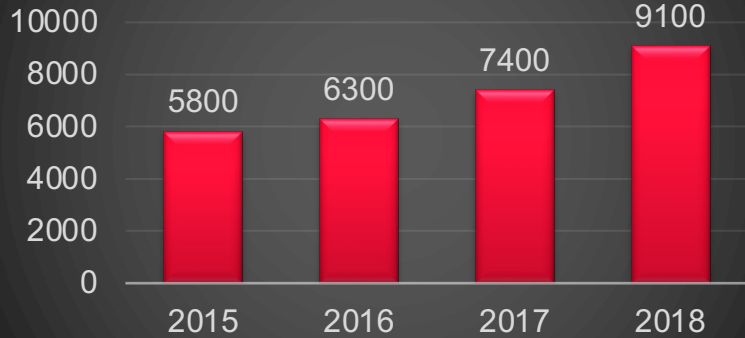
Lessons learned



Can you teach critical thinking at scale in the first year?  
If yes, what is critical thinking, and how will you continue to teach it after first year?

# Change is necessary: 2015-2017

UFS101 cohort size



2015-2016

Technology at  
a university

Will I get a job  
after  
graduating?

Critical  
thinking:  
Putting the  
ME in  
metacognition

Lessons  
learned

Computer literacy

Communication  
skills at university

Time management  
and goal setting

Study skills

2017

Growth mindset

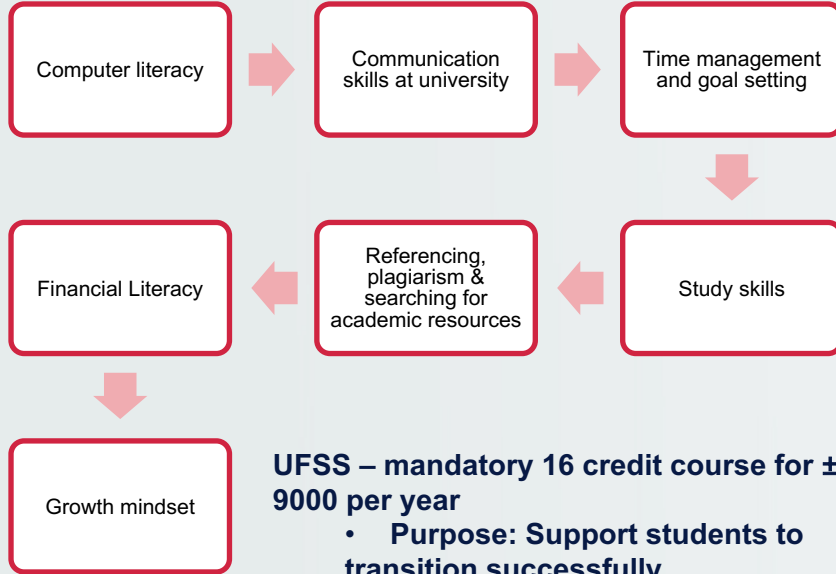
Financial Literacy

Referencing,  
plagiarism &  
searching for  
academic resources



# A new FYS: 2018-2022

FIRST SEMESTER



Academic Success

Strategies for Success 2.0

Entrepreneurship

How does an entrepreneurial mindset boost my employability?

Digital Skills

How do I position myself in a digital workforce?

Career Psychology

How do I build my future?

Graduate Attributes

How do UFS Graduate Attributes enhance my employability?

SECOND SEMESTER

9000+ students;  
100 Teaching Assistants



# Before COVID-19

Blended learning since 2012



## Classes

Students were attending face-to-face classes in smaller groups in Discussion classes and larger groups in Learning experiences.



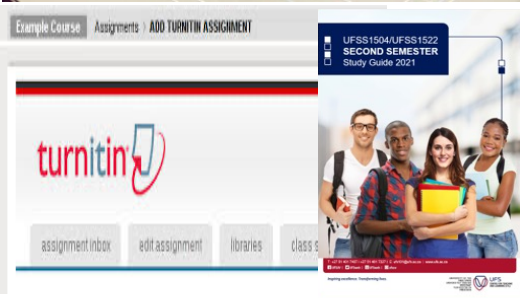
## Learning materials

Students could access all their learning materials on the Learning management System (LMS), Blackboard.



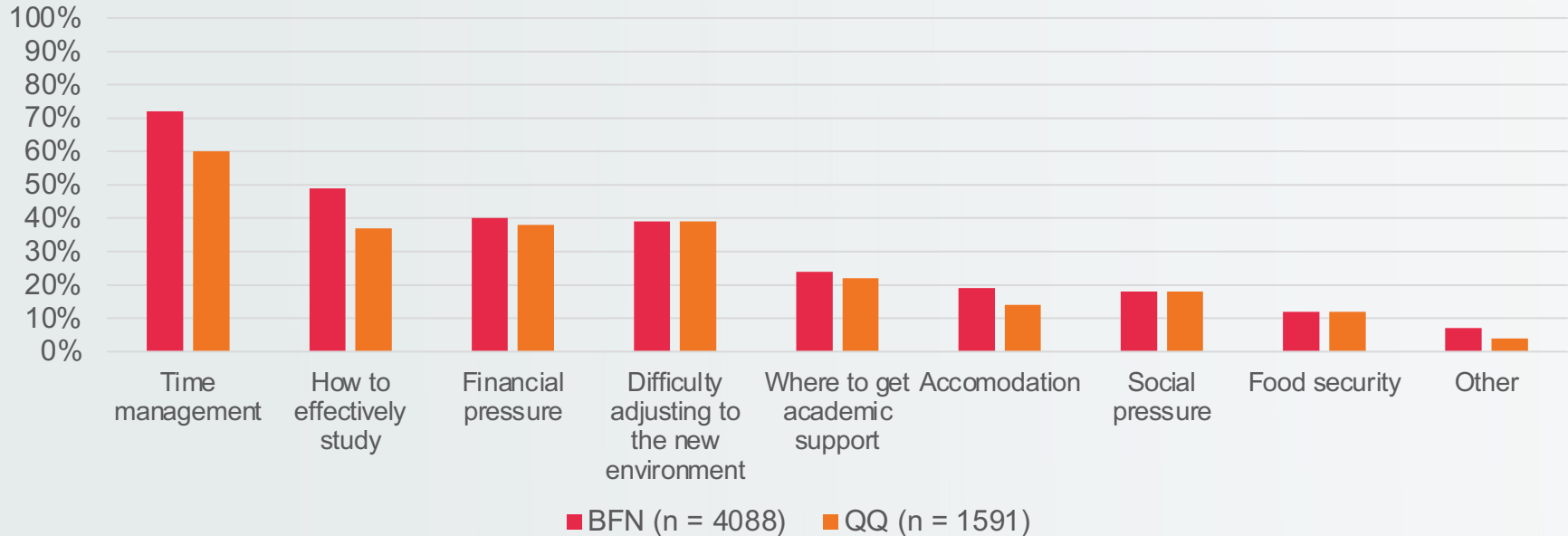
## Assessments

Students submitted all their assessments through Blackboard, using Turnitin.



# 2019 Student experience

## Challenges students experienced in the first 6 months of university



86% BFN (n=3922)

87% QQ (n=1541)

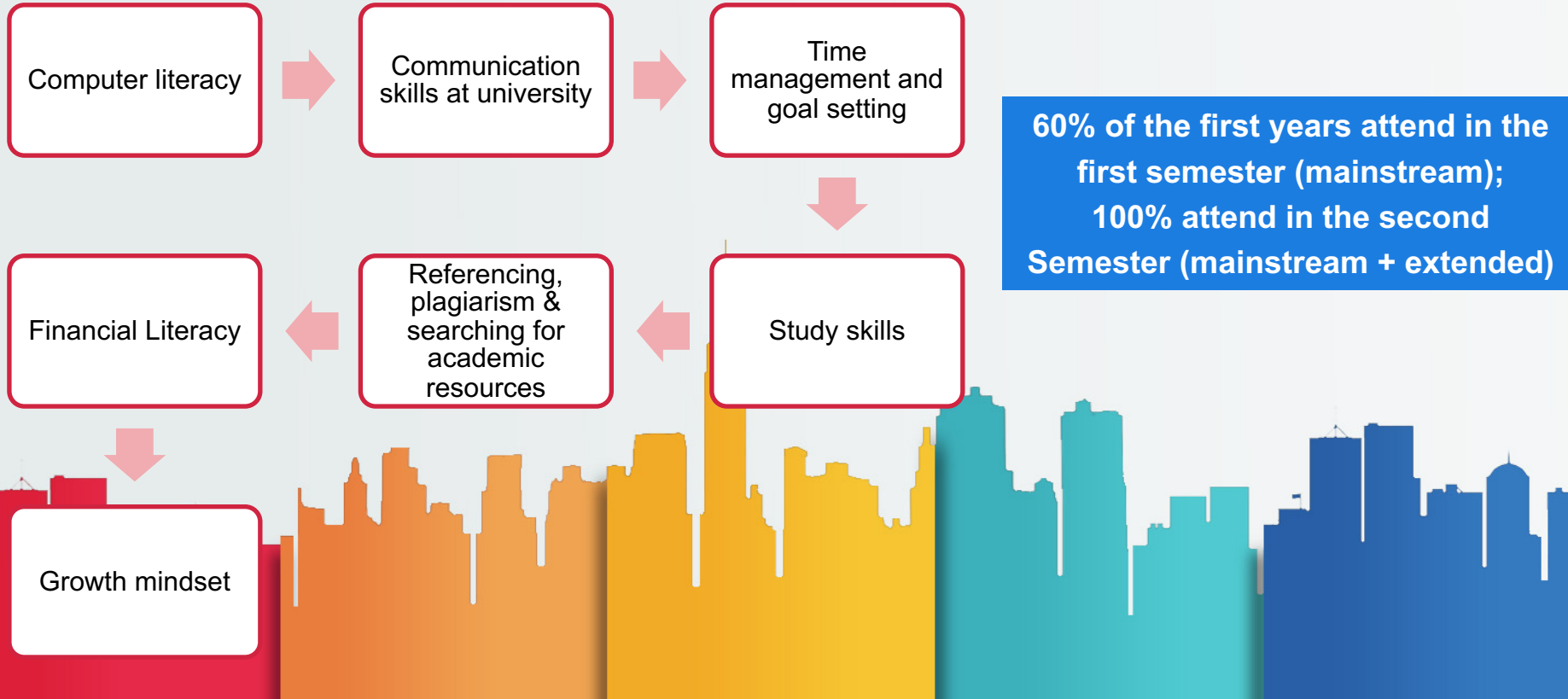
Said UFS101 helped them address these challenges

# 2019 Lessons learned

1. How to **engage students in a f2f class** (Barkley, 2010).
2. How to **get the blend between online and f2f to work** for our students in our context.
3. **Piloted a summer school version of UFSS with two faculties** in order to fast track the access to content that could help students address their challenges.



# 2020 Summer School



# 2020

## Group 1 face-to-face

Students attended the summer school face-to-face during registration period.

## Group 3 self-study

Due to the timing of the classes, some students did not get an opportunity to attend a class and only made use of the self-study study guide.



## Group 2 face-to-face and self-study

Due to COVID-19, some students could attend a class but then were forced into lockdown. A low-tech self-study study guide was created for students to continue the semester.

## Group 4 could not access anything

When student were moved into lockdown, there were students who could not access any learning materials, had no access to the internet and did not have a device.



# 2020 Student experience

CHALLENGE	FACE-TO-FACE (N = 1133)	SOME F2F, SOME ASYNC (N = 347)	ASYNC ONLY (N = 417)	NO ACCESS TO CONTENT (N = 36)
TIME MANAGEMENT	60%	53%	56%	39%
DIFFICULTY ADJUSTING TO THE NEW ENVIRONMENT	57%	53%	55%	61%
HOW TO EFFECTIVELY STUDY	53%	50%	43%	25%
FINANCIAL PRESSURE	29%	31%	35%	33%
WHERE TO GET ACADEMIC SUPPORT	26%	26%	28%	44%
NO ELECTRONIC DEVICES/INTERNET	20%	29%	34%	64%
SOCIAL PRESSURE	16%	23%	21%	8%
ACCOMMODATION	10%	11%	16%	17%
FOOD SECURITY	8%	8%	8%	3%
WORKING WHILE STUDYING	4%	8%	7%	17%

# Lessons learned

1. How to **create low-tech, interactive materials**
2. How to be **flexible and intentional about our response to student needs**
  - **More opportunities for submission** of assessments
  - **Attendance was waived**
3. Though we were **successful** in creating and delivering content that **helped students transition**, the **peer interaction in class was a vital missing piece** of this transition (Combrink & Oosthuizen, 2020).





# 2021

## Online only; launched the winter school

Academic Success

Strategies for Success 2.0

Entrepreneurship

How does an entrepreneurial mindset boost my employability?

Digital Skills

How do I position myself in a digital workforce?

Career Psychology

How do I build my future?

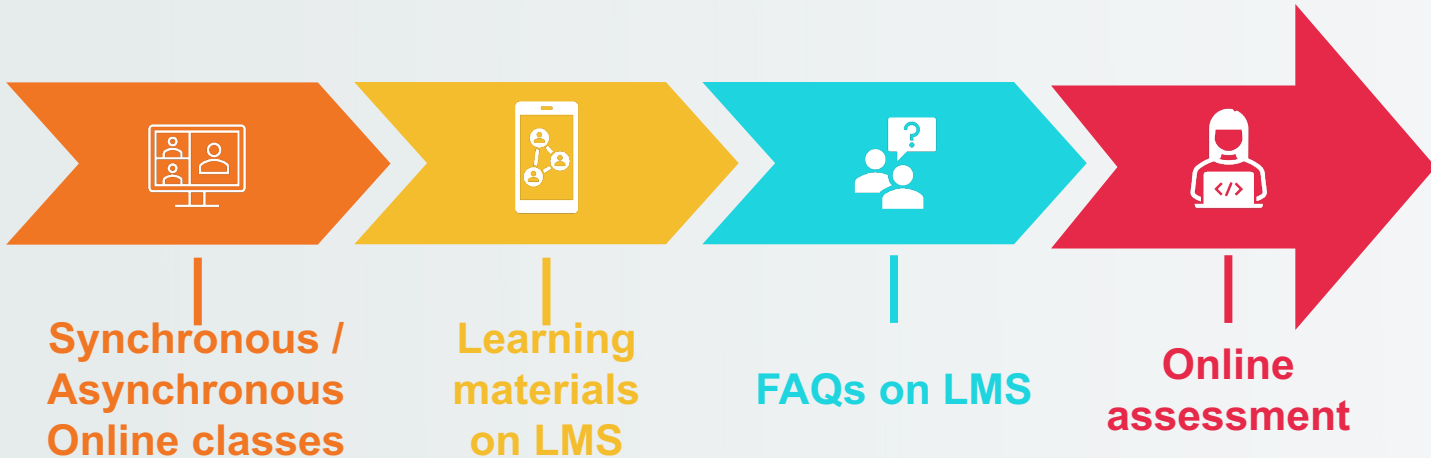
Graduate Attributes

How do UFS Graduate Attributes enhance my employability?



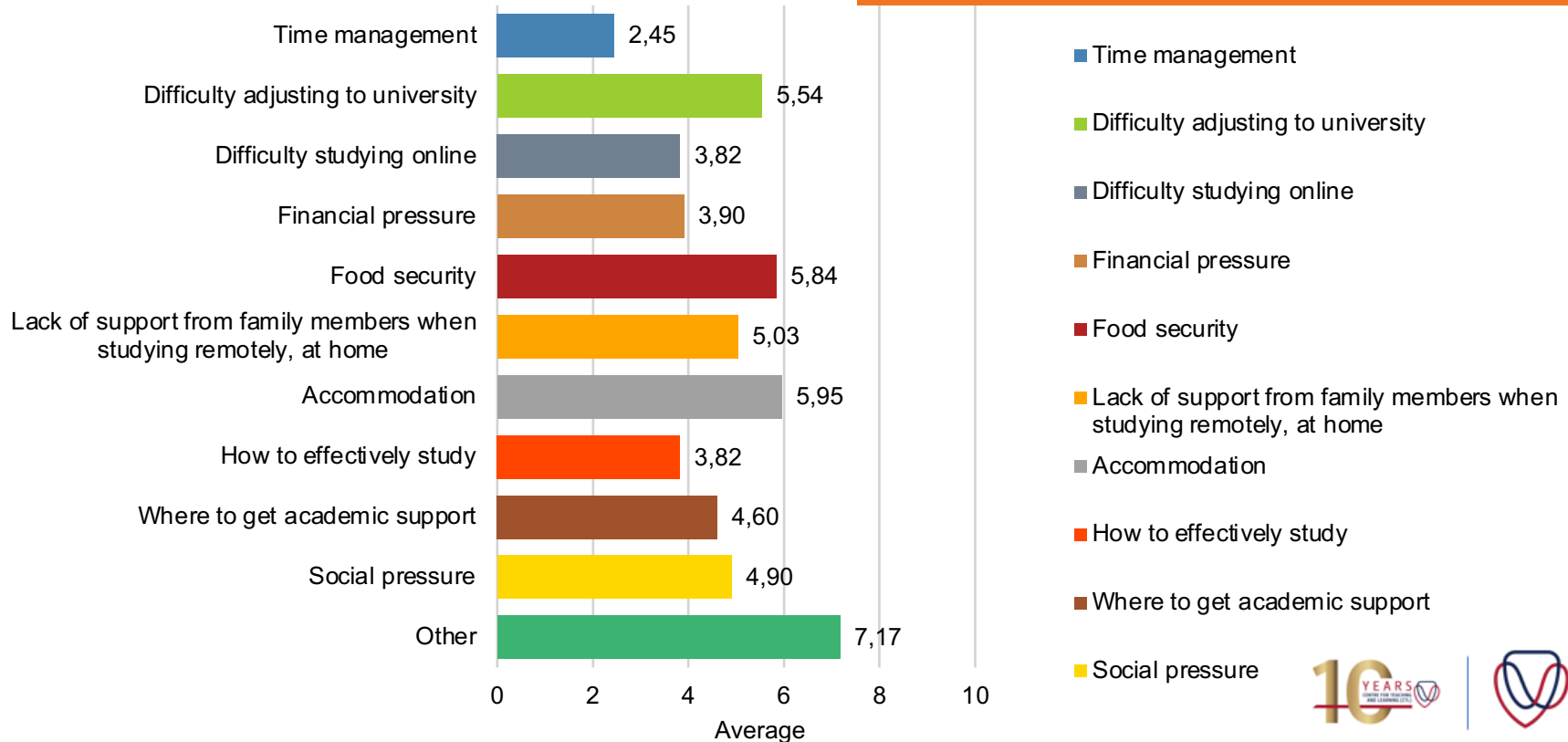
# 2021

Online only;  
summer and winter school delivered synchronously



# 2021 Student experience

Student ranking of the challenges experienced in the first 6 months of university



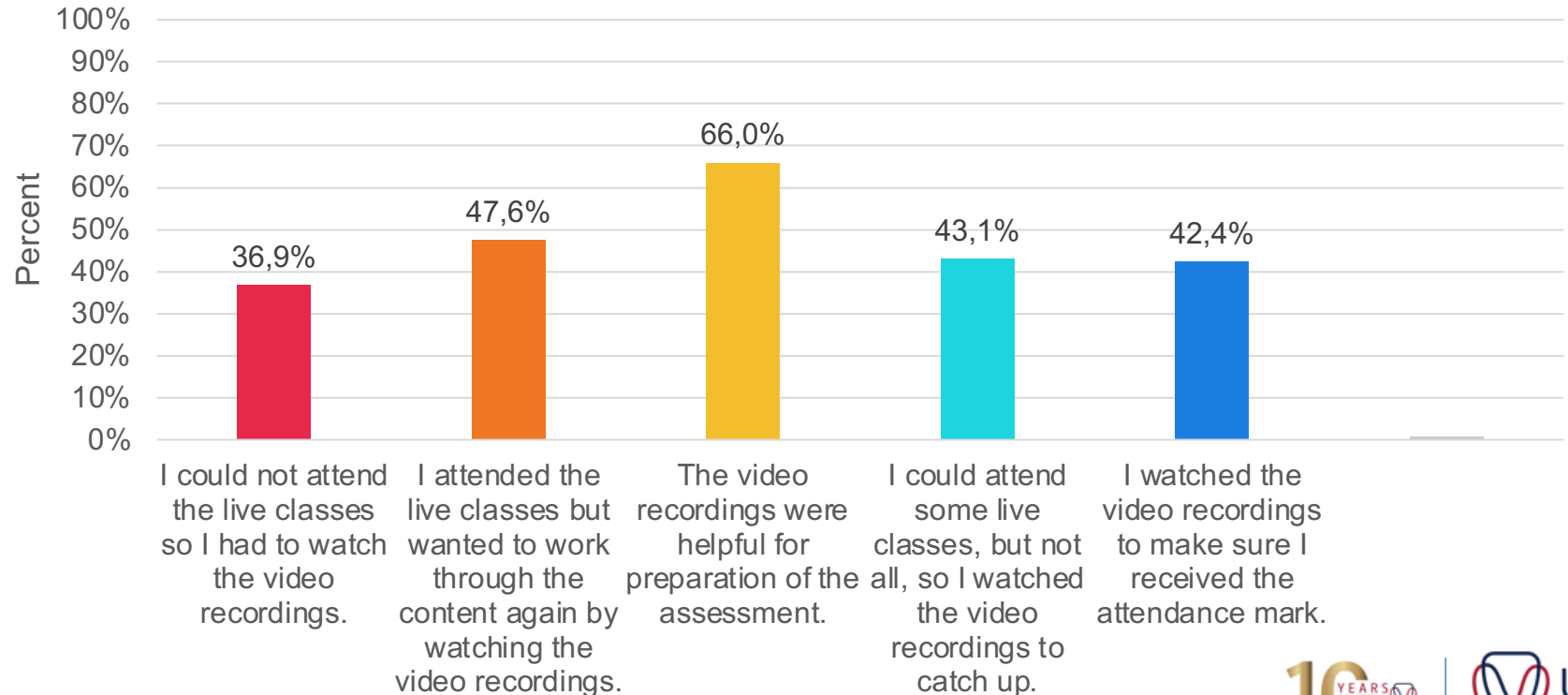
# 2021 Student experience

If UFSS helped, how did it do so?

	Through teaching (class discussions, assessments, videos, study guide, etc) about that topic.	Through referring to a support service that could assist.	Through success coaching on that topic.	N
Time management	89.2%	24.2%	25.8%	2491
Difficulty adjusting to university	68.1%	39.7%	27.2%	2350
Difficulty studying online	75.0%	35.1%	26.4%	2328
Financial pressure	60.0%	42.0%	26.3%	2192
Food security	42.8%	50.2%	24.1%	1981
Lack of support from family members when studying remotely, at home	48.1%	46.3%	29.0%	2016
Accommodation	35.6%	55.6%	21.9%	1974
How to effectively study	86.4%	30.2%	28.8%	2325
Where to get academic support	67.1%	53.7%	27.3%	2258
Social pressure	60.1%	41.4%	32.7%	2121

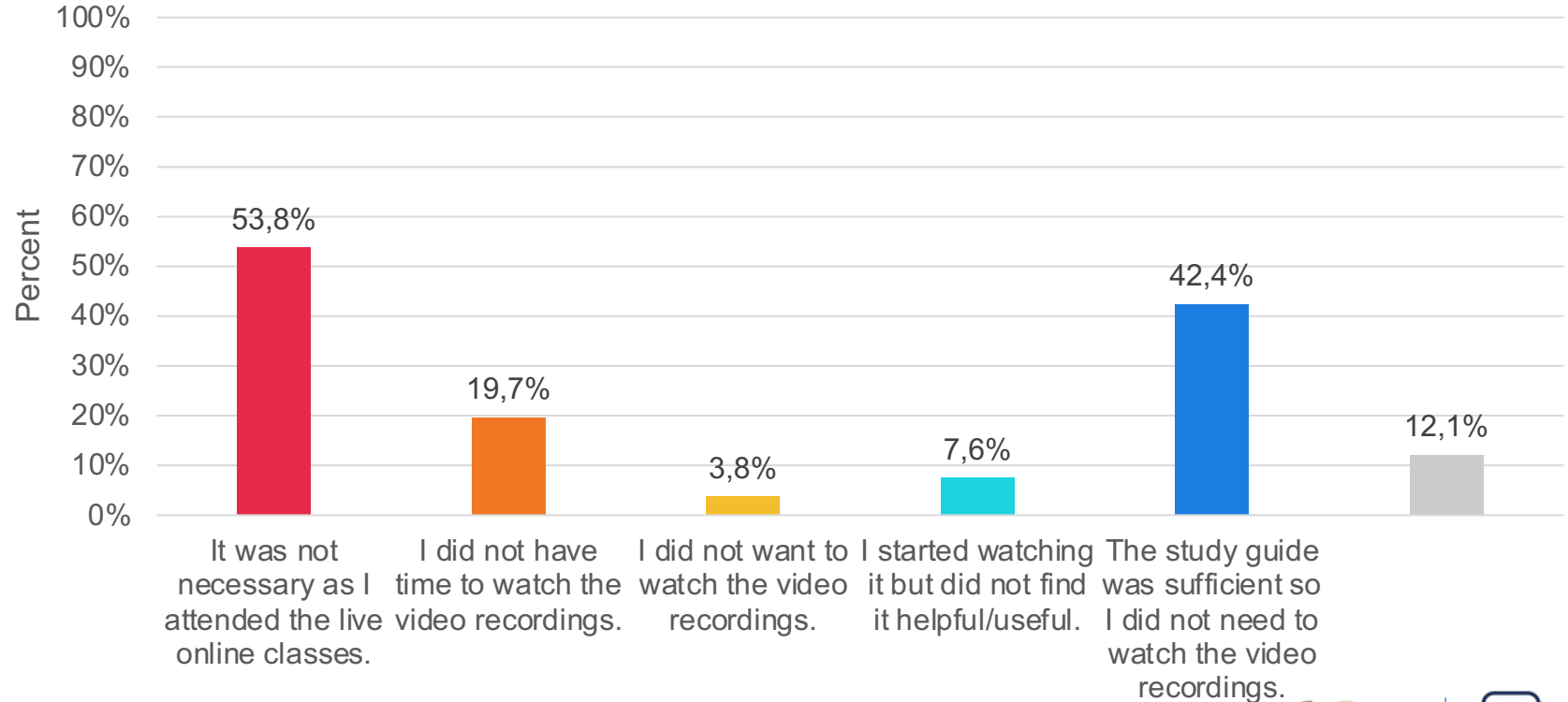
# 2021 Student experience

Why did you attend/catch up asynchronously?



# 2021 Student experience

Why did you not attend/catch up asynchronously?



# Lessons learned

1. How to teach online, synchronously and asynchronously.
2. The value of both synchronous AND asynchronous offerings available online.
3. **Need to work collaboratively across the university to address student needs** – intentional alignment with both the faculty programmes and other support initiatives is key.





# 2022 Hyflex approach

Hybrid? Blended?

HyFlex is a mode of delivery that offers students a variety of ways they can participate in their learning while providing them a choice to choose on how and when they learn.



# Breakdown of the summer school modes



# 2022 Impact

Better relationship with and understanding of our students

Teaching and learning can continue despite late registration

Teaching and learning can continue despite protests

Teaching and learning can continue despite the stage of the virus or lockdown levels



# 2022 Lessons learned

1. Students respond positively to choice.
2. The **change of format** allowed us to **respond** not only to **student needs**, but also to **student behaviour** and **student preferences** for learning.
3. **Each cohort** of students is different, and should be met where they are.
4. The **planning and logistics** required to make hyflex work is and should be **heavily front loaded** – this allows for a much lighter administrative load throughout the semester.



# 2022 Reflections on the Hyflex model

## Faculty

- Appreciated that UFSS reaches out and is willing to accommodate their students and timetable.

## Students

- Grateful that they can attend classes in different ways.

## Teaching Assistants

- *"I enjoy the face to face classes more than the online class because online classes had a lot of issues pertaining electricity and network. Face to face we have real interactions with one another and it's easy to see if students don't understand something"*
- *"I will be honest i enjoyed online more because the students were interactive than the face to face students. I do think the students were more comfortable asking questions with no one looking at them( unlike in a face to face class)"*



# Questions???



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