Raising the bar: Finding a balance between academic challenge and support for first year students

Sonja Loots and Francois Strydom

Inspiring excellence. Transforming lives.
Inspireer uitnemendheid. Verander lewens

UNIVERSITY OF THE
FREE STATE
UNIVERSITEIT VAN DIE
VRYSTAAT
YUNIVESITHI YA
FREISTATA

UFS·UV
**CENTRE FOR TEACHING
AND LEARNING (CTL)
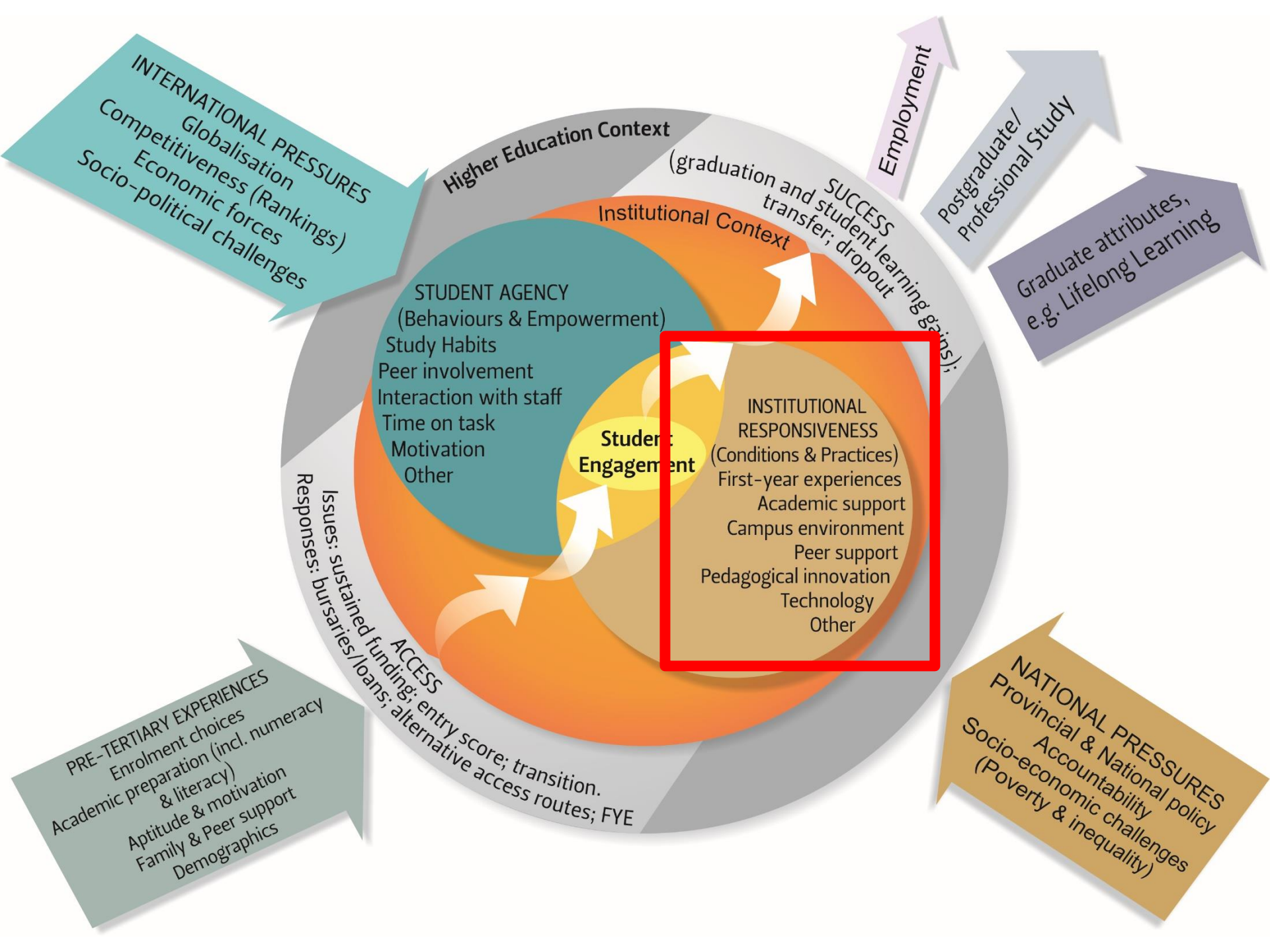ONDERRIG-EN-LEERSENTRUM
(OLS)**

OUTLINE

- Underprepared students vs. underprepared universities

- Framing the university environment from a student engagement perspective

- What do we know about environments first year students enter into?

- Finding the balance between academic challenge and support

UFS
UV

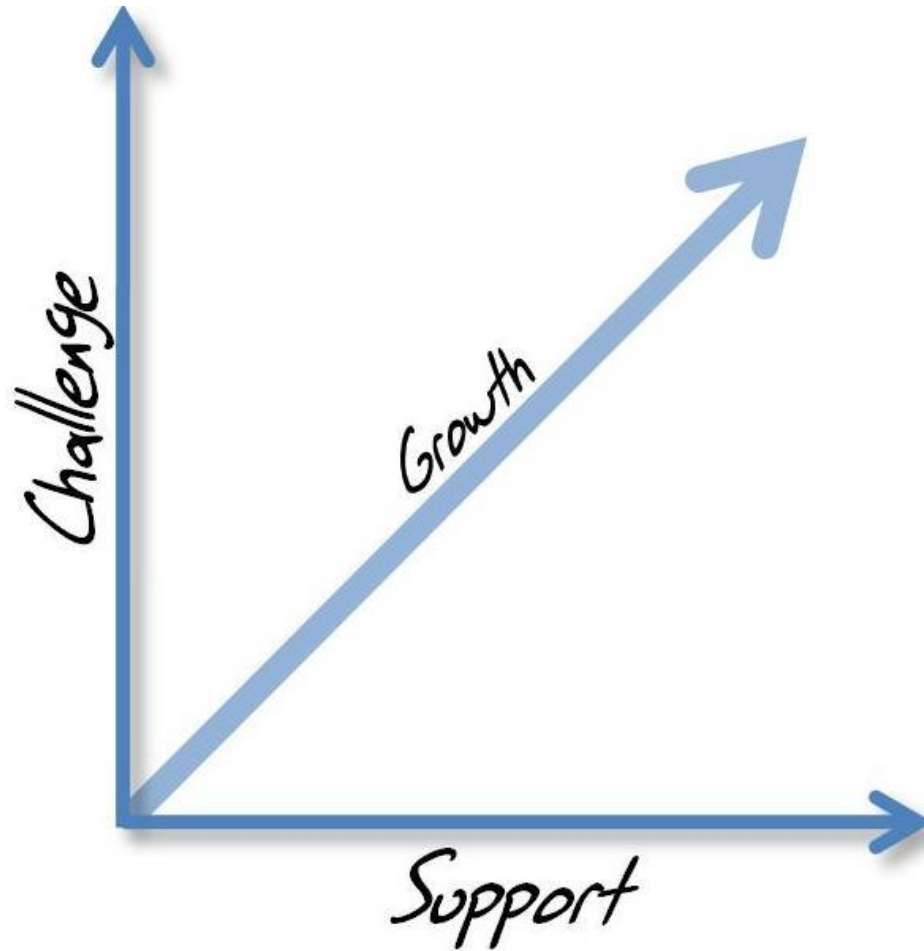# UNDERPREPARED STUDENTS
VS.
UNDERPREPARED UNIVERSITIES

"The dominant thinking in higher education attempts to understand student difficulty by framing students and their families of origin as *lacking* some of the academic and cultural resources necessary to succeed. This constitutes a deficit thinking model: *it focuses on the inadequacies of the student, and 'fixing' this problem*. In the process the *impact of structural issues is often ignored or minimised. This disregards the role of higher education in the barriers to student success.*" Smit, 2012, p. 369.

UFS UV

Deficit thinking:

- Impacts how we view students and their abilities – which impacts how we teach and assess them – which in turn probably confirm how we view students and their abilities.

- What if we move the focus to what we are in control of – the university environment

- What are we doing to create environments which help students succeed?

UFS
UV

Higher Education Context

INTERNATIONAL PRESSURES
Globalisation
Competitiveness (Rankings)
Economic forces
Socio-political challenges

Institutional Context

STUDENT AGENCY
(Behaviours & Empowerment)
Study Habits
Peer involvement
Interaction with staff
Time on task
Motivation
Other

Student
Engagement

INSTITUTIONAL
RESPONSIVENESS
(Conditions & Practices)
First-year experiences
Academic support
Campus environment
Peer support
Pedagogical innovation
Technology
Other

SUCCESS
(graduation and student learning gains);
transfer; dropout

Employment

Postgraduate/
Professional Study

Graduate attributes,
e.g. Lifelong Learning

Issues: sustained funding; entry score; transition.
Responses: bursaries/loans; alternative access routes; FYE

ACCESS

PRE-TERTIARY EXPERIENCES
Enrolment choices
Academic preparation (incl. numeracy
& literacy)
Aptitude & motivation
Family & Peer support
Demographics

NATIONAL PRESSURES
Provincial & National policy
Accountability
Socio-economic challenges
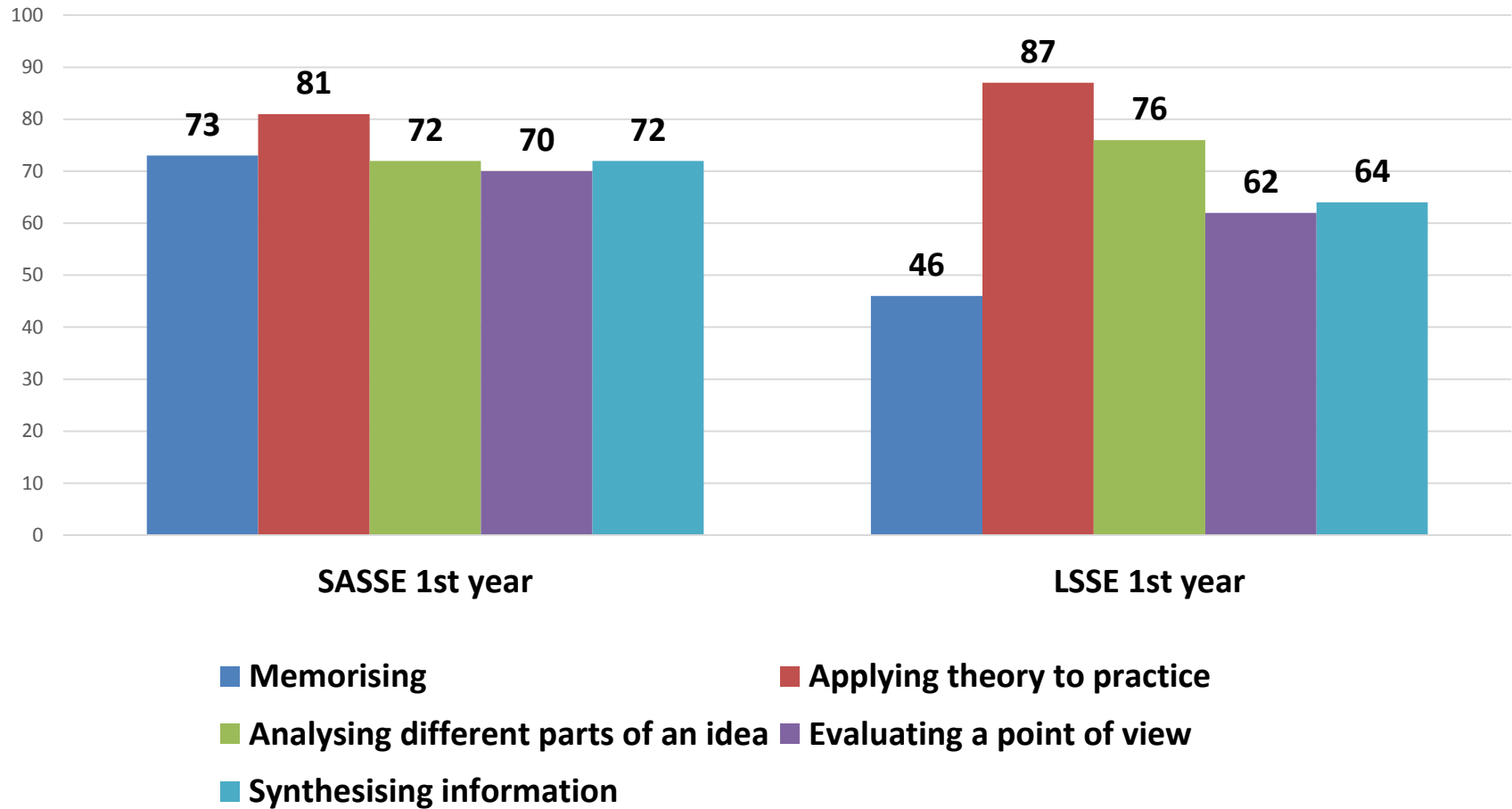(Poverty & inequality)

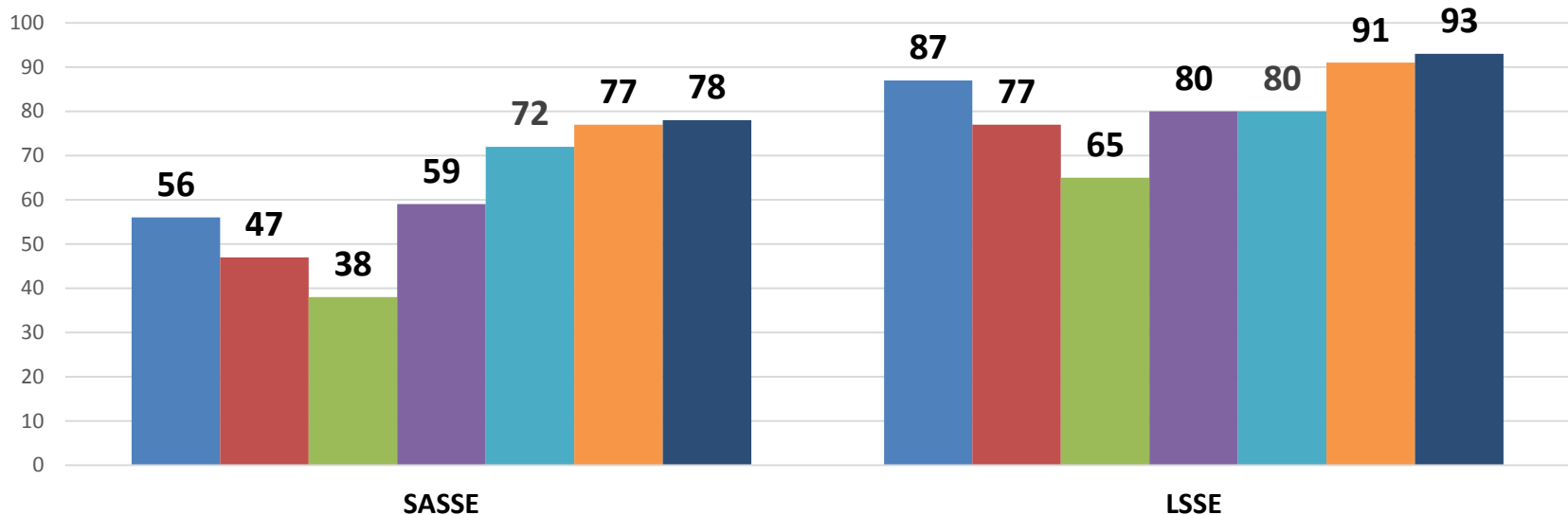# NEVITT SANFORD'S THEORY OF CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT

- What would such environments look like?
- Academic challenge (rigour/quality)
- Academic support
- Non-academic support

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT ENVIRONMENTS FIRST YEAR STUDENTS ENTER INTO?

SASSE LSSE HIGHER ORDER LEARNING

SASSE; LSSE; REFLECTIVE AND INTEGRATIVE LEARNING

SASSE values: Combine ideas from different modules 56, Connect learning to societal problems 47, Include diverse perspectives in discussions or assignments 38, Examined strengths and weaknesses of own arguments 59, Tried to better understand someone else's views 72, Learned something that changes the way you understand an issue 77, Connected ideas from subjects to prior experiences 78

LSSE values: Combine ideas from different modules 87, Connect learning to societal problems 77, Include diverse perspectives in discussions or assignments 65, Examined strengths and weaknesses of own arguments 80, Tried to better understand someone else's views 80, Learned something that changes the way you understand an issue 91, Connected ideas from subjects to prior experiences 93

■ Combine ideas from different modules

■ Connect learning to societal problems

■ Include diverse perspectives in discussions or assignments

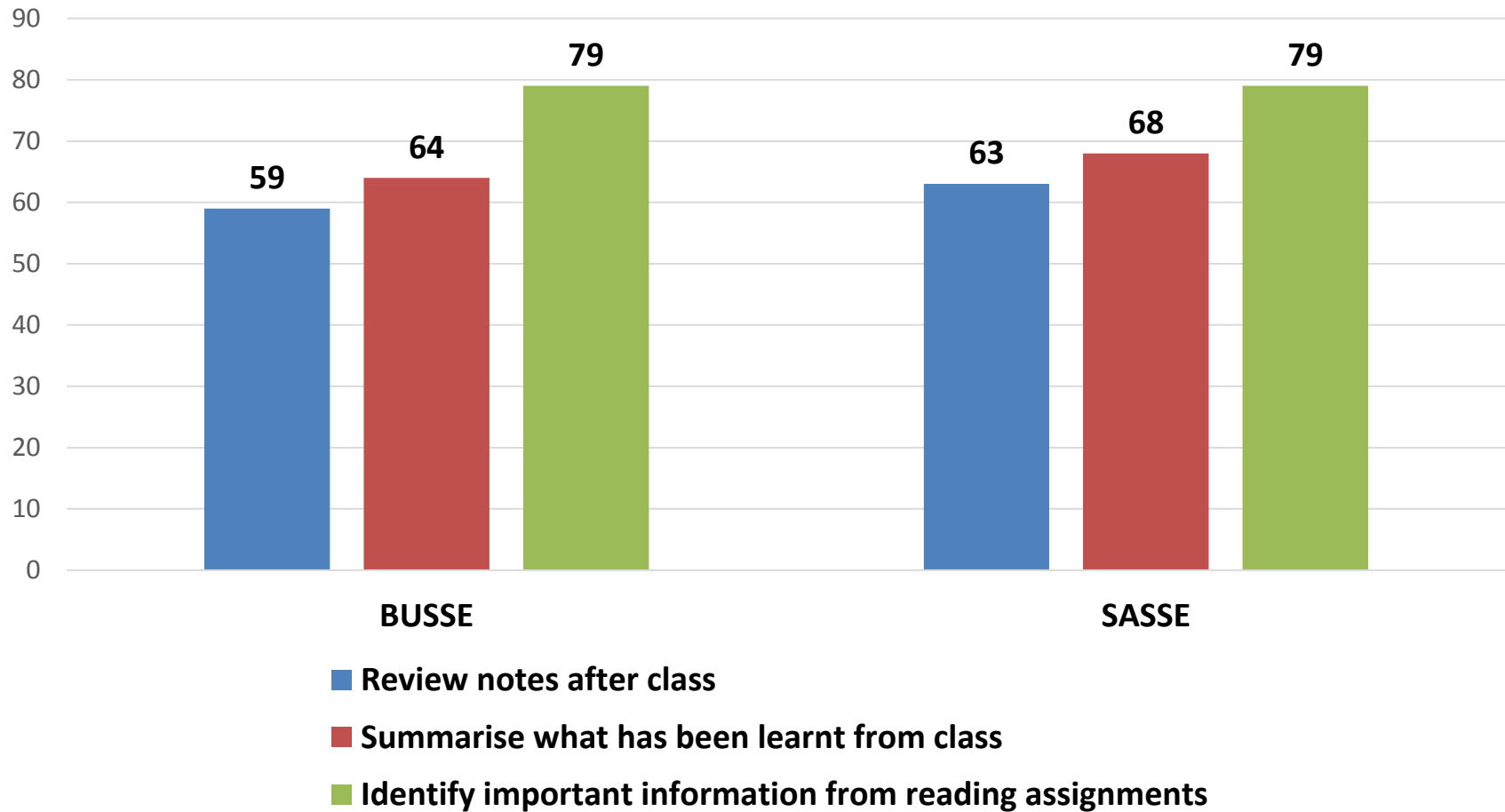■ Examined strengths and weaknesses of own arguments

■ Tried to better understand someone else's views

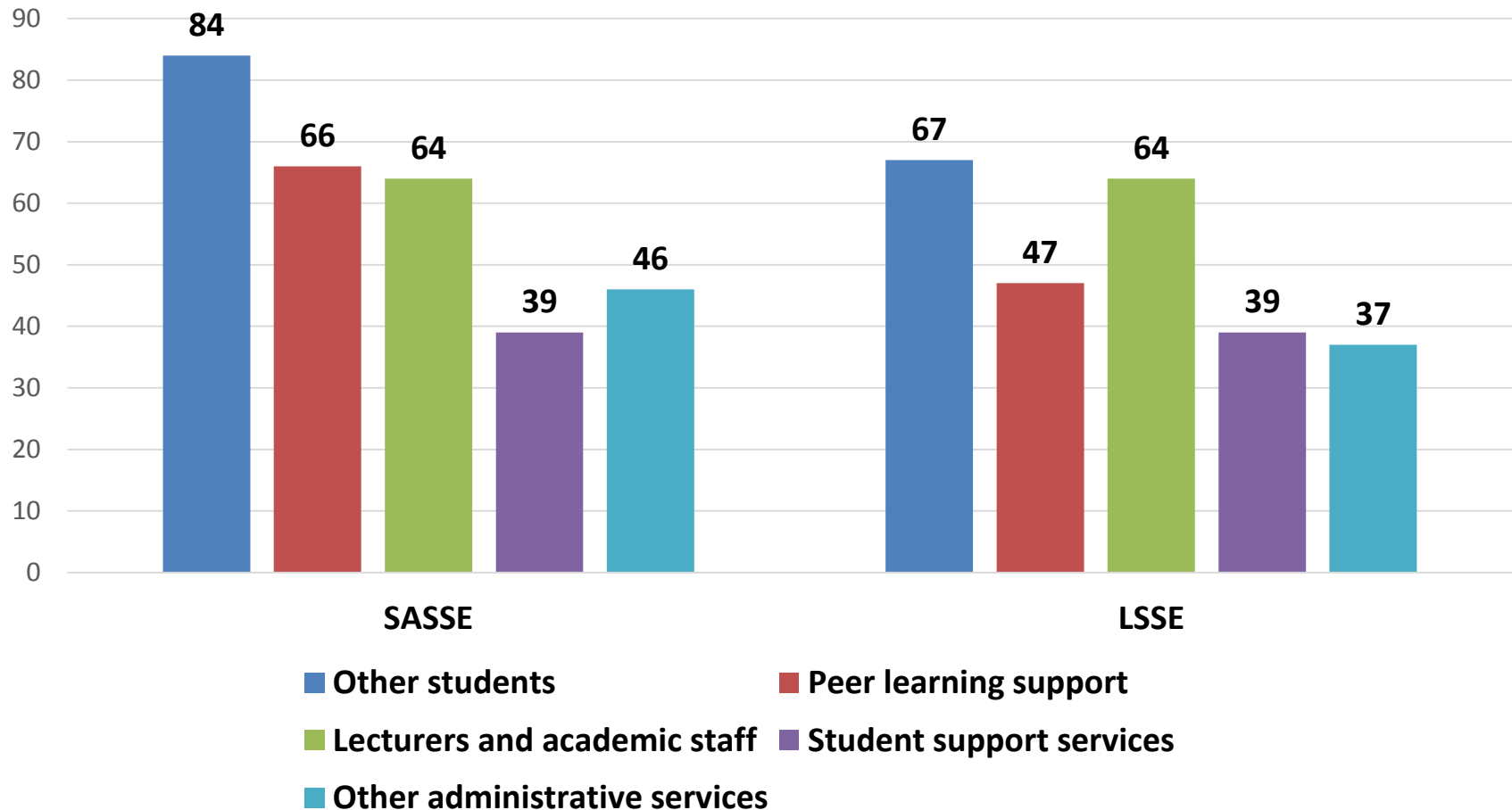■ Learned something that changes the way you understand an issue

■ Connected ideas from subjects to prior experiences

UFS
UV

BUSSE; SASSE; LEARNING STRATEGIES

BUSSE

SASSE

- ■ Review notes after class
- ■ Summarise what has been learnt from class
- ■ Identify important information from reading assignments

UFS
UV

% class time	Activities							
	Lecture	Discussion	Small-group activities	Student presentation	Independent student work	Movies and videos	Assessing student learning	Experiential activities
0%-29%	20%	70%	78%	84%	76%	92%	78%	78%
30-49%	26%	20%	15%	10%	15%	6%	13%	13%
50-74%	39%	8%	5%	5%	7%	1.5%	6%	7%
75% or more	15%	2%	2%	1%	2%	0.5%	3%	2%

SASSE LSSE: QUALITY OF RELATIONSHIPS

SASSE
- Other students: 84
- Peer learning support: 66
- Lecturers and academic staff: 64
- Student support services: 39
- Other administrative services: 46

LSSE
- Other students: 67
- Peer learning support: 47
- Lecturers and academic staff: 64
- Student support services: 39
- Other administrative services: 37

Legend:
- Other students
- Peer learning support
- Lecturers and academic staff
- Student support services
- Other administrative services

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT OUR FIRST YEAR STUDENTS FROM THIS DATA?

1) Students think they are not expected to think outside of their discipline – nor to add different viewpoints when engaging in discussions or assignments. They also think they are supposed to memorise their work – even if lecturers do not expect that.

2) Students are using the same level of measured learning strategies during their first year of university study which they used in high school

3) Students are not efficiently guided or challenged to develop higher order and deep learning

4) Students might not have the confidence to seek help from support/administrative staff

UFS
UV

FINDING THE BALANCE BETWEEN ACADEMIC CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT

HOW DO WE FIND BALANCE?

1) We need to think differently about academic challenge

- Deficit thinking = developmental modules

- Ignoring adaptation of teaching approaches;

- Expectations and assessments – memorization/outcomes

- Equipping students with 'how to' knowledge about disciplines

2) Academic staff have to be empowered and developed to help meet their own expectations

HOW DO WE FIND BALANCE?

3) Students indicate high quality peer relationships – institutions could focus more on developing support structures through making use of these relationships

4) We need to combine datasets – the more we know the better we can shape the environment

5) Institutions need to make a deliberate effort toward considering how the environments we create are balancing student support with academic challenge

- Institutional self-reflection

- Aligning support initiatives with academic outcomes

UFS
UV

Who are the culprits of depressed success rates? Is it underprepared or unmotivated students? Or is it underperforming institutions and ineffective pedagogies?

(Kinzie 2012)

UFS
UV

✉ strydomjf@ufs.ac.za
lootss@ufs.ac.za