

Psychological grit is overrated as the key to retention in distance education—new study debunks the myth

February 21 2023, by Kelly Anne Young



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Psychological grit has garnered a lot of interest in the last decade, particularly in the higher education arena. It's typically defined as

passion and perseverance for long-term goals. A great deal has been [written](#) about it and the role it plays in the retention and success of tertiary students. Kelly Anne Young [explored](#) the role grit played in determining postgraduate retention among historically disadvantaged students enrolled at the University of South Africa (Unisa)—the [largest](#) provider of open, distance e-learning in Africa.

How did you define grit?

I followed the widely accepted definition of grit coined by [Duckworth and colleagues \(2007\)](#). Grit is passion and perseverance for long-term goals, despite setbacks, adversity or plateaus in progress.

My study included 594 Unisa students who enrolled for an honors degree in 2017. Essentially, I wanted to know whether grittier students were more likely than less gritty students to enroll for their second year of studies.

So, I asked them to complete the [Grit-S scale](#). This scale includes items relating to your passion and perseverance towards long-term goals—for example, "I finish whatever I begin" and "Setbacks don't discourage me". Responses on these items range from "not at all like me" to "very much like me". The scores are combined to determine an overall level of grit, ranging from 1 (not at all gritty) to 5 (extremely gritty).

My sample scored towards the higher end of the grit spectrum (3.85).

The next year, I checked the proportion of my sample who returned, and paired this [retention](#) data with the grit scores. Although a relatively large portion of my sample returned for their second year of studies (62.3%), results revealed that a higher grit score did not mean the student was more likely to continue with their degree.

My study also looked at whether gender, age, ethnicity and home language were significant predictors of retention among the participants. They were not.

Why did you think it was important to look at the role of grit?

Retaining historically disadvantaged students in distance [education](#) programs is often cited as a major challenge facing South African higher education institutions. Nowhere is this issue more topical than at Unisa, which has over [95% of all enrolled distance education students](#) in South Africa.

A [recent cohort analysis](#) by the country's Department of Higher Education and Training showed that 56.8% of the 2000 cohort of distance education students had dropped out after their first year of studying. That's double the attrition rate reported among students in the contact cohort (23.6%). Although subsequent distance education cohorts had lower rates of dropout from first to second year (for example 29.6% among the 2017 cohort), these figures are still concerning and require further exploration.

In an attempt to mitigate this dropout and enhance [student success](#) at the institution, a number of studies have been conducted. Some have explored cognitive attributes, such as [school leaving exam results](#), [assignment grades](#) and past course performance. Others have looked at non-cognitive attributes, such as [motivation](#), [locus of control](#), [attribute style](#) and [self-efficacy](#), as predictors of success and retention among Unisa students.

This research has resulted in a better understanding of what shapes student retention at Unisa. One review has found, though, [that](#) "most

institutions have not yet been able to translate what we know about student retention into forms of action that have led to substantial gains in student persistence and graduation."

The question of grit then arose.

Psychological grit is often positioned as a panacea in higher education. This is because grit has shown enormous potential in predicting student success and retention in elite or historically advantaged traditional tertiary settings, both [in South Africa](#) and [abroad](#). What's more, grit has shown to predict success among tertiary students pursuing their [studies online](#) and among [those completing massive open online courses](#).

Very little research on grit has been conducted among South African distance education students, though. My [study](#) produced the first published findings on grit's predictive role in determining retention among historically disadvantaged distance education students in South Africa.

Why did you choose this particular cohort of students?

I included certain [ethnic groups](#) in the study as a proxy for historical disadvantage, because of the way apartheid policies identified these groups. The 594 Unisa students in my sample were black African (83% of the sample), Indian, Chinese and mixed-race South Africans who enrolled for an honors degree for the first time in 2017.

As an ongoing consequence of [apartheid](#) policies, South African university students are often first-generation students and academically [under-prepared](#). They often lack what's called [epistemological access](#), which means access to the knowledge that the university distributes.

Why do your findings matter?

Contrary to popular findings, my results revealed that historically disadvantaged students with higher levels of psychological grit were not more likely to enroll for their second year (when compared to their less gritty peers).

I think it's important to remember that the seminal literature on grit has (predominantly) emanated from largely privileged student populations, to the point that the only thing possibly missing in those students' lives is grit. And so it makes sense that the presence of grit would produce significant results (thus alluding to its importance).

But positioning [grit](#) as a panacea among historically disadvantaged students can be a dangerous distraction from the [real barriers to student retention](#). Moreover, the legacy of disadvantage remains, despite legislative and policy changes that were intended to transform the [higher education sector in South Africa](#). And because of this, we must remember that [higher education](#) institutions do not survive in "[hermetically sealed spheres](#)" in which past (and present) inequality gaps have no effect on [student](#) success and retention.

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