

Responding to needs of the first year undergraduate students

The Wits Experience

Nhlanhla Cele and Ntsundeni Mapatagane
University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa



Introduction

- Various factors contribute to unpleasant first-year students experience
 - Transition from high school to university
 - High school performance vs. student success
 - Financial recourses
 - Motivation
 - University support mechanisms

“... vaunted for creating an intellectually vibrant, socially embracing and culturally diverse teaching and learning environment. Student-centredness at the University does not only focus on provision of facilities that are sensitive to student needs but also on the use of pedagogies that respond appropriately to the learning needs of all students. It includes the creation of a conducive environment, inclusive institutional culture, explicit concern and support for student development, and promotion of student responsibility for the quality and effectiveness of their learning. It is a given reality that these values cannot be achieved without co-ordinated and transformative programmes informed by rigorous intellectual debate and critique in a research-intensive metropolitan university like Wits.”

Support Mechanisms

- An attempt to mitigate the risks that first-year students face, includes:
 - Student counseling services (CCDU)
 - Devolved academic development programmes (FYE – Student Affairs Division)
 - e-Learning tutorials
 - First-year students tutoring programme @ residences
 - Support group for ‘first generation’ students
 - Targeting Talent

Benefits of the study

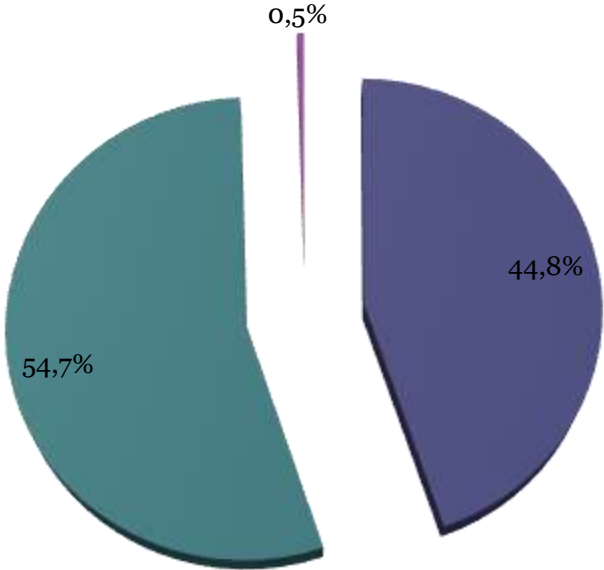
- Influence on the expectations and perceptions of other students
- An improved quality of service and total learning experience at Wits
- Enhanced responsiveness through strategic planning
- An indication of future student success and throughput
- The nurturing of a long-lasting graduate sense of pride and attachment to the Wits experience
- Possible contribution to reduced dropout rates

Methodology

- Web-based survey platform
- Quantitative & Qualitative
- Target sample= 4887 – 15% dropouts
- 20.2% response rate
- Questions based on three organising phases
 - Applying to Wits
 - Joining Wits
 - Settling in at Wits (institutional culture)

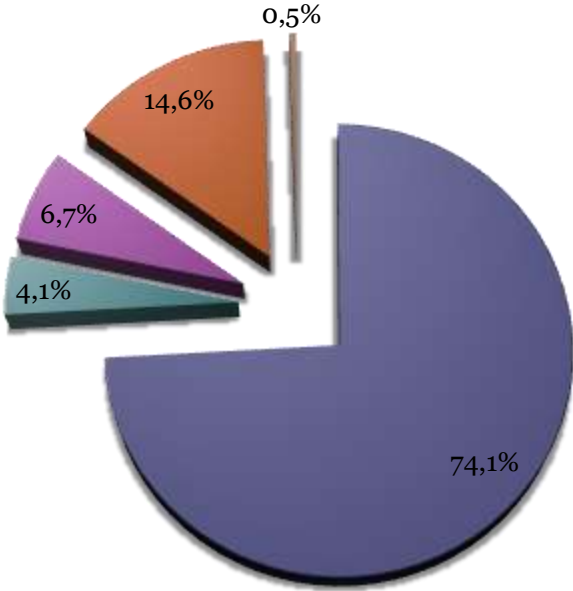
Data Analysis

Gender profile



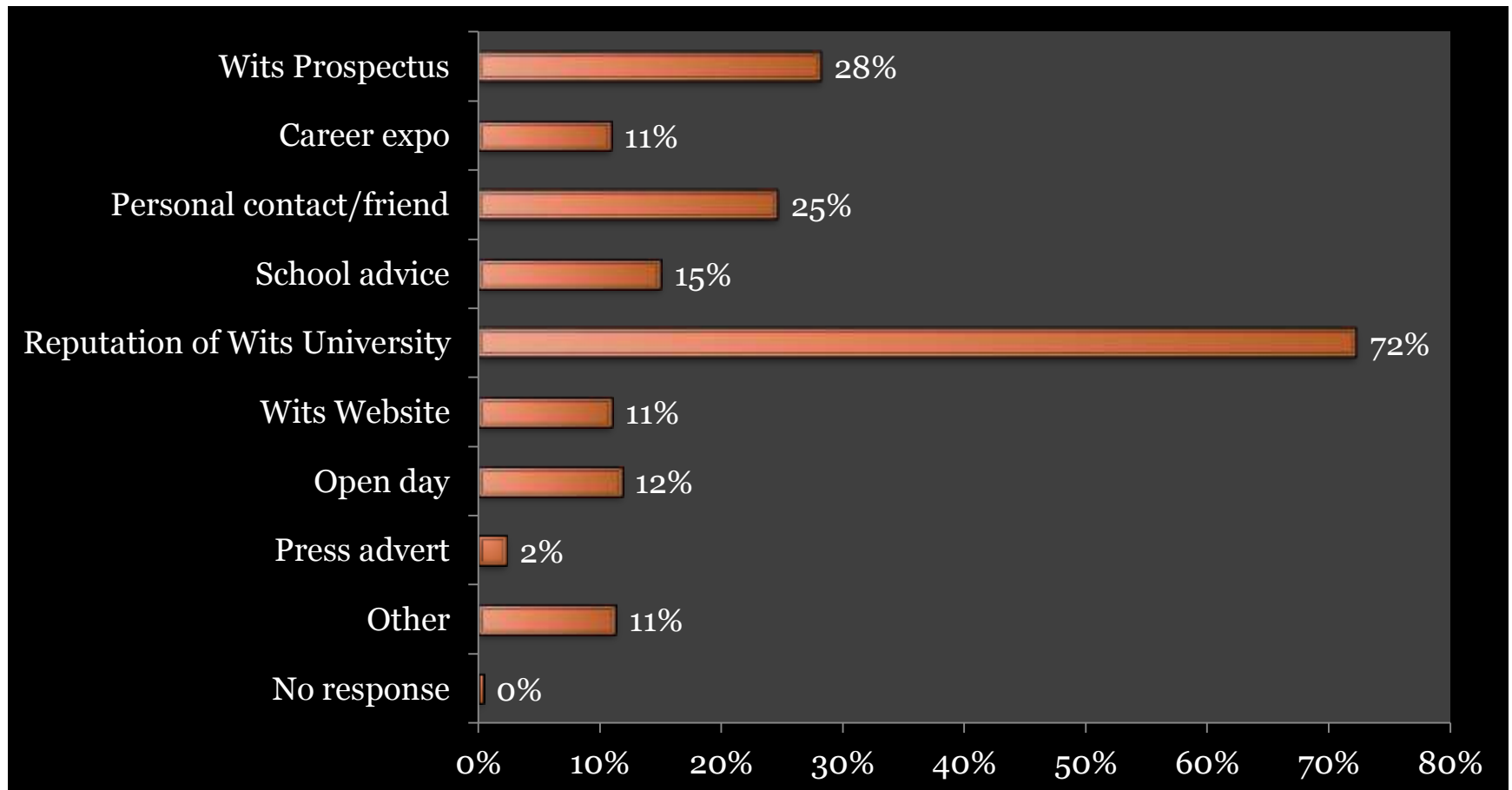
■ Male ■ Female ■ No response

Race profile

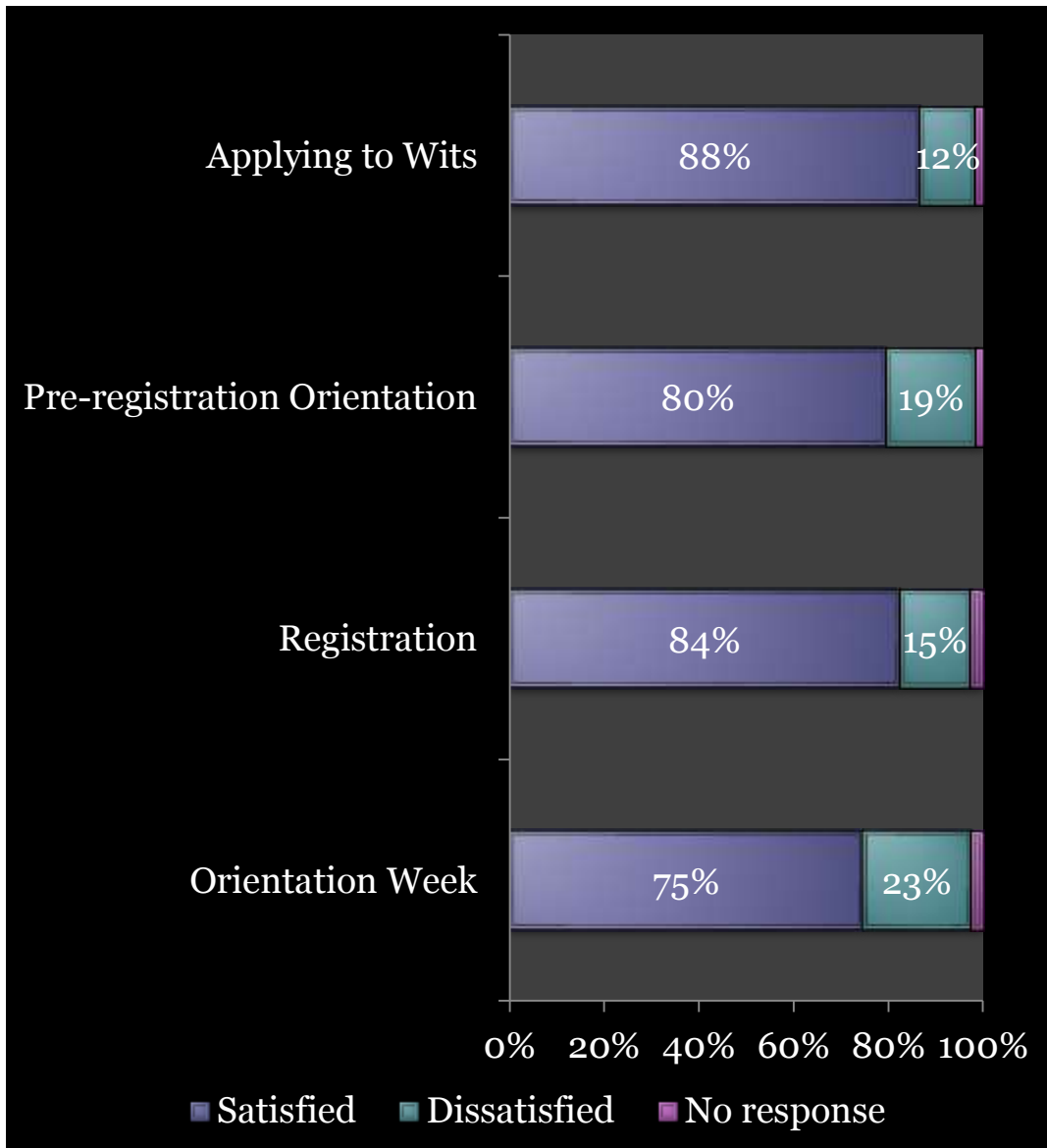


■ African ■ Colored ■ Indian ■ White ■ No response

Applying to Wits

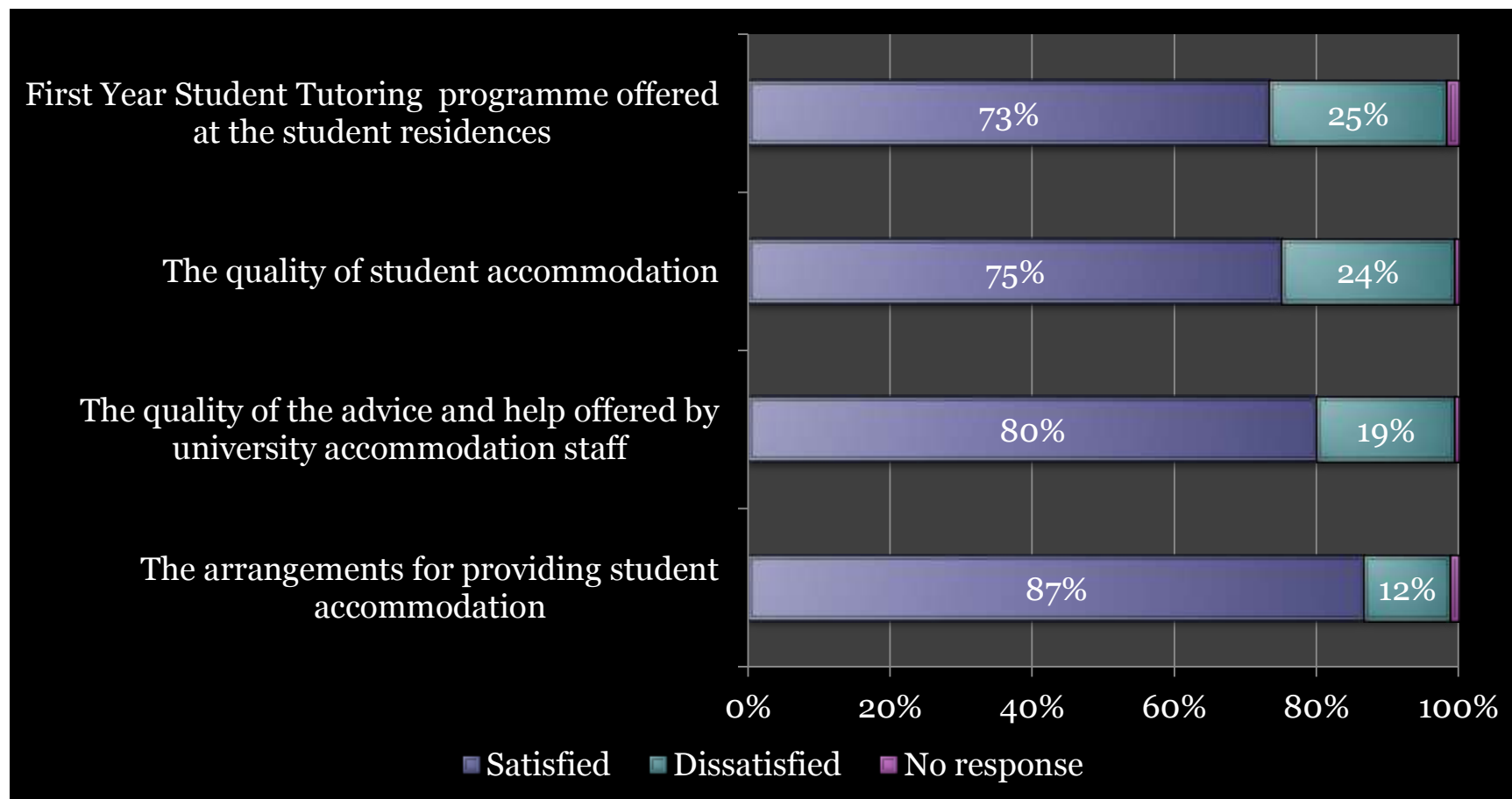


Upon joining Wits

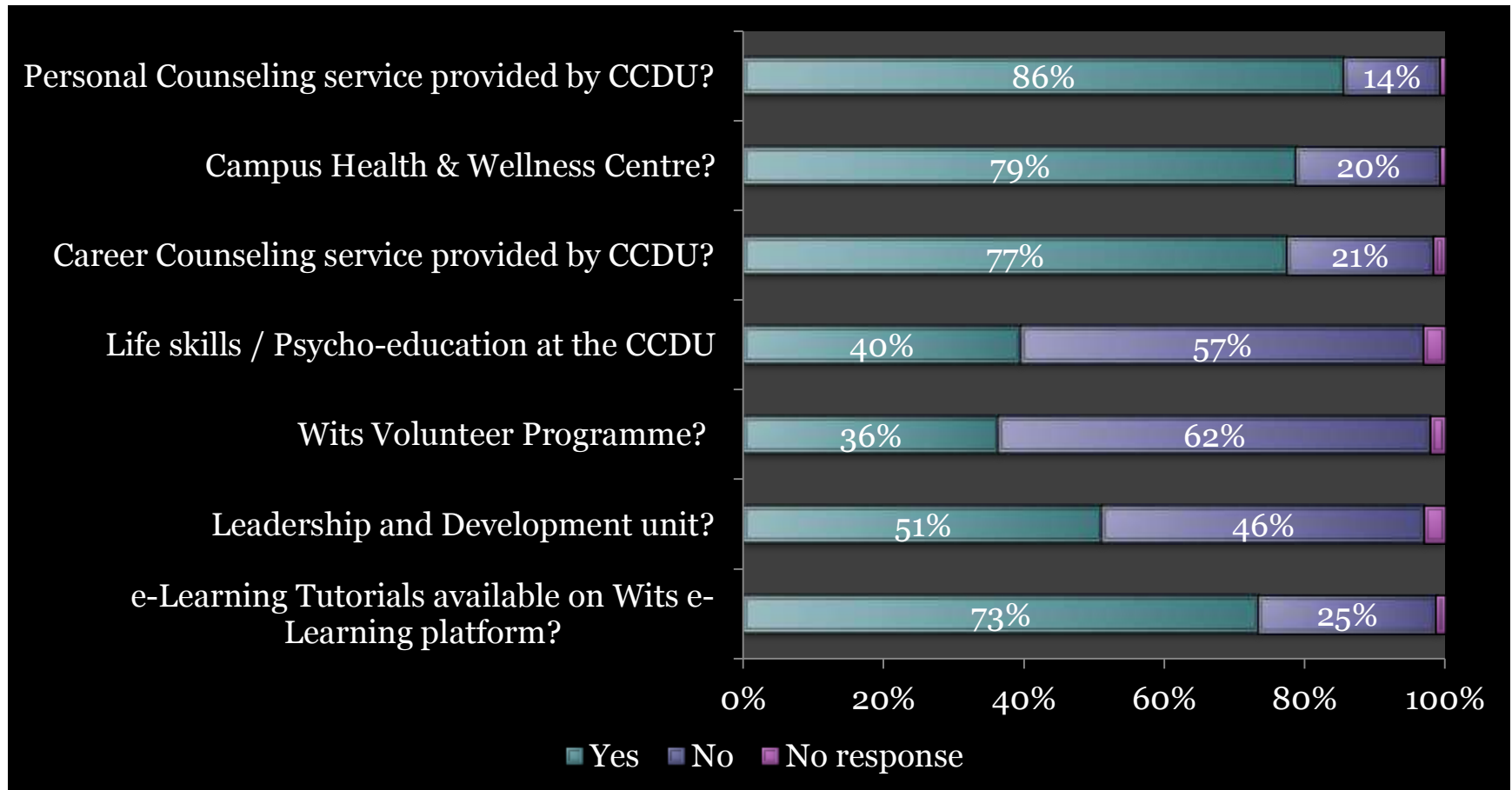


- Clarity on the admission and registration procedures
- usefulness of information provided
- Academic timetable arrangements
- Curriculum Advice
- Career Education

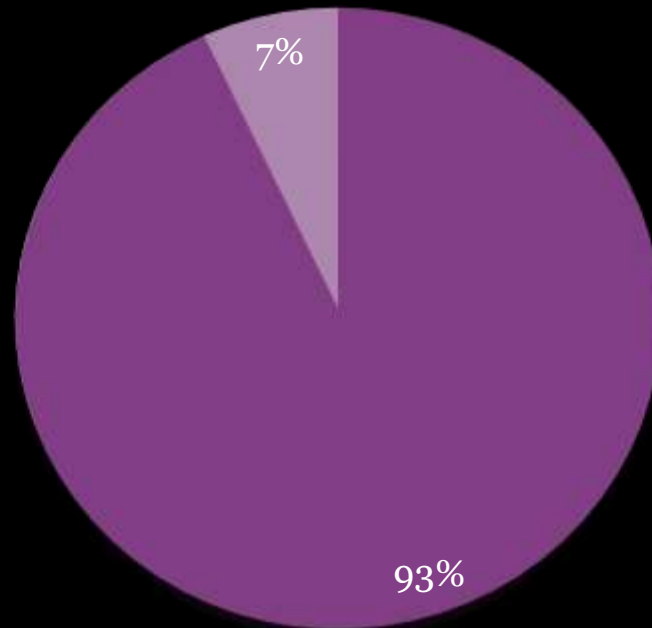
Settling in at Wits - Accommodation



Settling in at Wits - Psychosocial Support

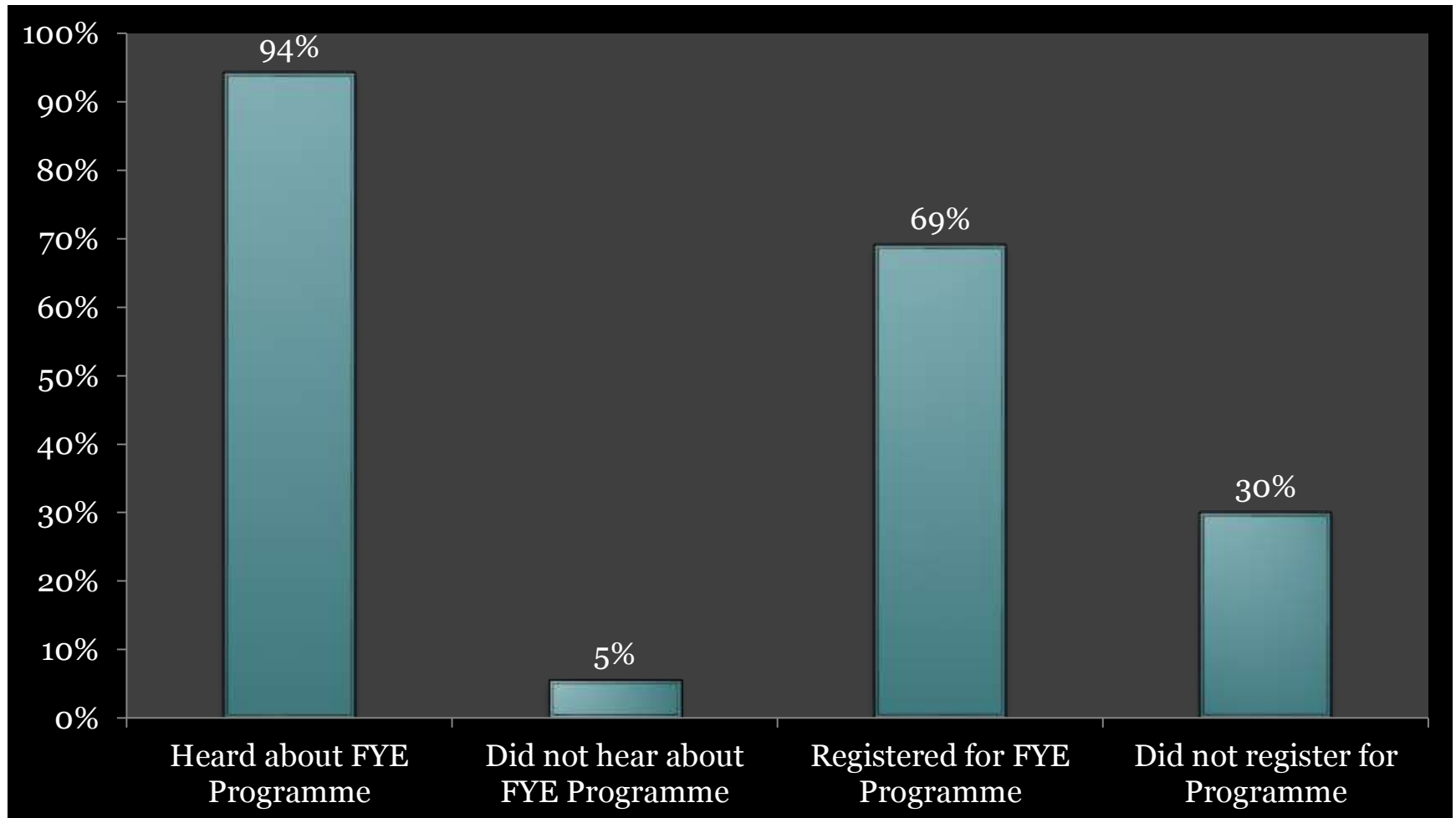


Satisfaction with Psychosocial Support



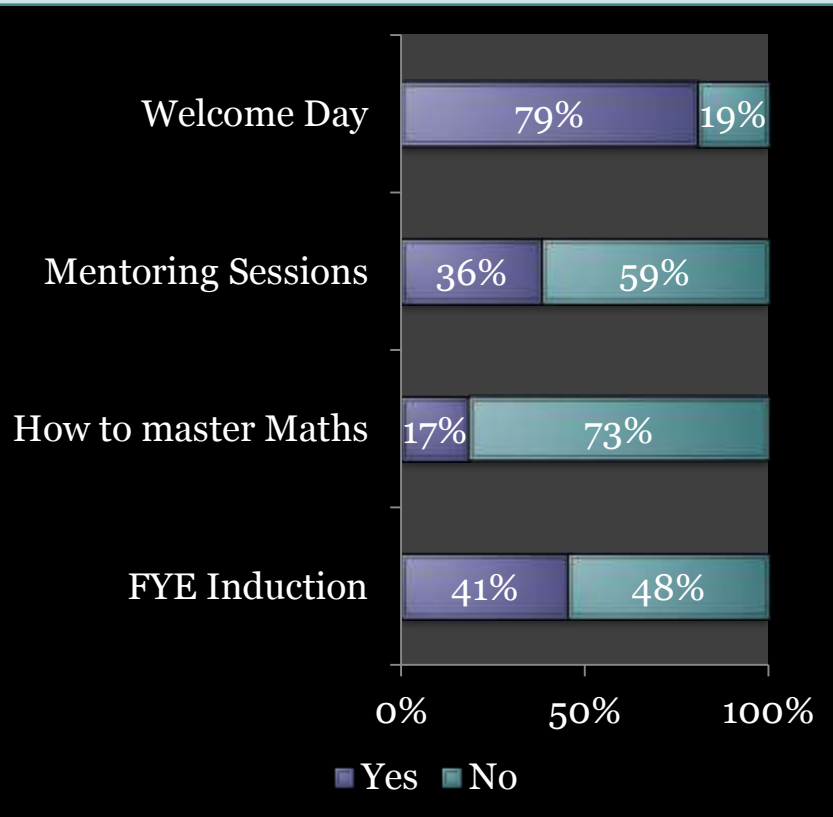
■ Satisfied ■ Dissatisfied

Participation in the FYE

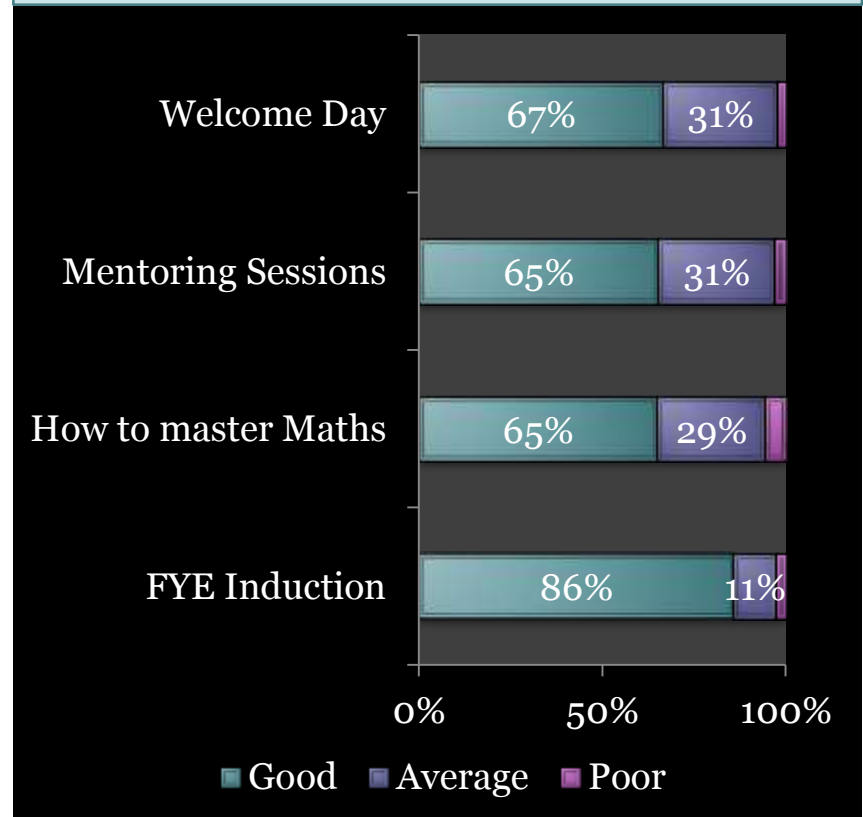


Experience of the FYE Modules

Sessions attended



Rate of overall experience

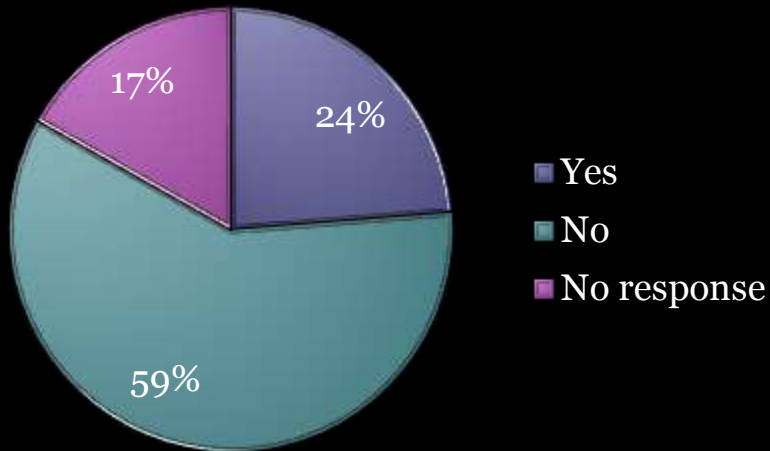


Voluntary Programs

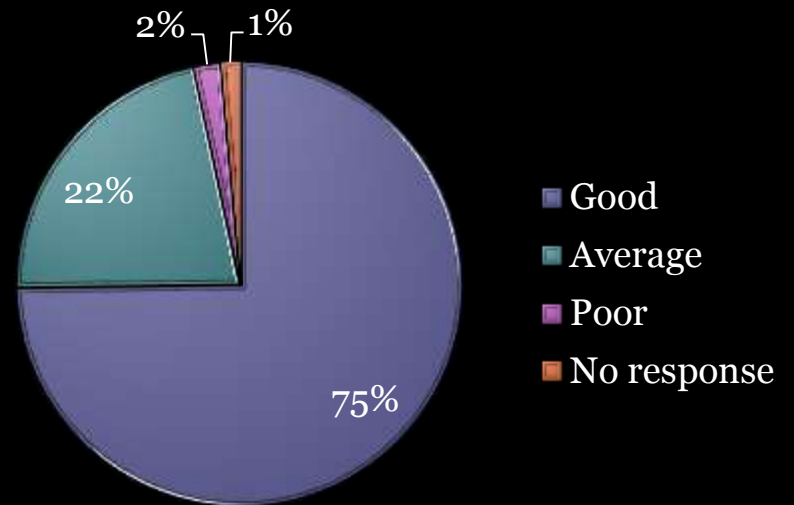
- Winter Leadership Camp (An Emerging Leaders Programme)
- Coping with Exam Anxiety
- Exam Preparations - Ukufunda
- Writing skills and note taking
- Stress Management
- Career Development
- What to do after lectures
- Copyright and Plagiarism
- FYE Camp
- Computer Skills
- Community engagement
- Personal Action Plans
- How to master Chemistry
- Time Management and Balance
- Ukufunda Study Skills

Participation in Voluntary Programs

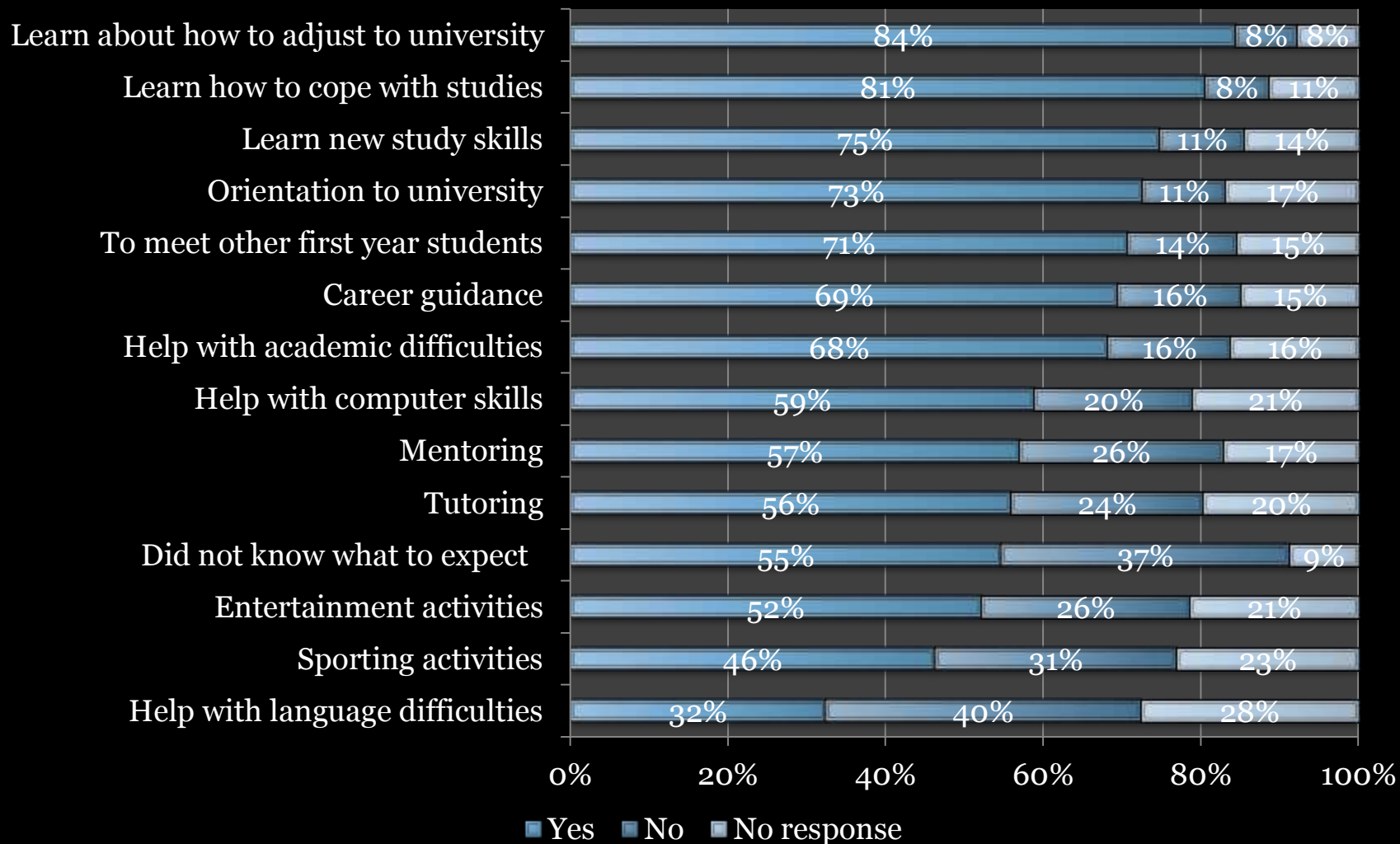
Participation in modules



Module experience rating



Expectations of the FYE Programme



Difficulties with attending the Programme

- Weekends are an inconvenient
- Did not get any notification about the events
- Off-campus accommodation
- Events time clashes with the academic timetable

Comments about the Wits experience

“I feel Wits is a good institute and has lived up to its expectations, promises etc. It’s a rather interesting place to be at. One really learns to appreciate diversity and open-mindedness here. Everyday there’s something new.”

“It is interesting and hard at the same time, you need to be responsible and know where you come from, which will prevent you from following your friends, like not attending. *You need to know how to manage your time properly.*”

Contd...

“Wits does not only encourage educational programmes but also the importance of socialising and interacting with different students, and also participating in different sports and recreational activities that are offered at the university”

“I did not expect the programme to cover such a variety of issues that concerned first-year students and I did not know of how involved it would be in our everyday activities and studies.”

Conclusion

- Areas that need special attention and strategic investment of resources:
 - Develop principles of teaching and learning premised on student-centredness
 - Put in place mechanisms mitigation against the high first year-drop-out rate
 - Improve student participation in the FYE
 - Provide guaranteed University residence accommodation
 - Help first-year students develop studying skills
 - Create more financial aid opportunities
 - Provide a distinct university experience to students to promote a ‘word of mouth’ recruitment drive