

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Listen, live and learn: A review of the application process, aiming to enhance diversity within the Listen, Live and Learn senior student housing initiative at Stellenbosch University

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Abstract

The Listen, Live and Learn (LLL) initiative at Stellenbosch University (SU) is a senior student housing model with the aim of providing an experiential opportunity for students to make contact with ‘the other’. It is posited on the social contact theory assumption that if people of different genders, races, ethnicities, and/or religions make contact and interact with one another on an equal level, then less stereotyping by them will occur. The initiative therefore aims to enhance interaction between diverse students and to enable social integration. However, as diversity is a core element of LLL, an application and selection process had to be developed in order to provide a holistic, transparent, unbiased and scaleable tool. The present results suggest that the application and selection process, specifically developed for the enhancement of diversity within the LLL initiative, maintained the distribution of race and gender, as constructs of diversity throughout the process. The conclusion can be drawn that the process is holistic, transparent, unbiased and scaleable while providing a practical example of a standardised alternative selection process for programmes seeking to increase diversity.

Keywords

Diversity, student housing, application and selection process, social contact theory, race, gender.

Introduction

Until the early 1990s, Stellenbosch University (SU) was a racially exclusive institution for white students only, although a small number of black students had been admitted since the late 1970s. SU could unfortunately not escape the political turmoil of the apartheid era (Stellenbosch University, 2013). The strong association between apartheid, racial segregation and SU can be noted. The University currently has a student population of 28 500 with a diversity profile of 25%. Within this context, SU prioritised its aim to diversify its student population to ensure fair access to higher education for all.

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Several initiatives are implemented at SU to address diversity and integration, ranging from the recruitment of diverse students to a residential placement policy focusing on diversifying residences on the SU campus. One intervention aimed at achieving this is the Listen, Live and Learn (LLL) initiative, a senior student housing programme being directed at minimising stereotyping and discrimination among students. It is posited on the assumption that if people of different genders, races, or ethnicities or religions make contact or interact with one another on an equal level, then less stereotyping by them will occur (Kloppers, Dunn & Smorenburg, 2012). Diversity of students is a key element of the experience of participants in the initiative and the success of LLL as a whole. It is for this reason that any application process designed for an initiative such as LLL needs to take cognisance of the process design, specifically, the implications that it can have on diversity in terms of biases.

This article aims to review the application process developed specifically for the LLL initiative. After a framing of the concept of diversity, a brief overview of the LLL initiative will be provided, whereafter the application process and its results will be introduced. Limitations of the study and concluding remarks will follow.

Diversity

While it would be very easy to consider diversity specifically in the historical context of SU to be solely a race- or ethnicity-based consideration, the conceptions of diversity on the multicultural campuses of the 21st century represent a stark change to the relative homogeneity of the early 20th century campus. Diversity needs, rather, to be considered as a multifaceted and highly complex array of factors that can significantly influence society in terms of cohesion, in part, due to conflicts of interest and perspective (Chang, Millem & Antonio, 2011; Dunn, 2013). The composition of the student body and staff and the distribution of individuals therein play a significant role in the nature of social interaction, institutional atmosphere and educational potential of a university (Dunn, 2013; Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012; Milem, Chang & Antonio, 2005).

In order to enhance the aims of the LLL initiative, a diverse student population is needed. For the purpose of the LLL initiative, diversity is defined in the broader and less measurable sense. While specific diversity targets in terms of race, gender and field of study are utilised in the placement process, these serve as proxies for diversity of culture, background and experiences. The other factors of diversity, like personality, thought process, stances, values and so forth, need to be considered. The article will specifically focus on race and gender as constructs of diversity.

The importance of an application process that embraces diversity is therefore necessary for the LLL context. For this reason, a simple written application in English with one or more motivation essays followed by a standard interrogation-style interview is most likely to favour extroverted first-language English speakers who have experience writing and debating. Given this premise, the aim of this application and selection system was for it to be holistic, standardised, transparent, unbiased and scaleable, to accommodate significant increases in the size of the initiative.

The Listen, Live and Learn initiative

The LLL initiative at SU is an experiential learning process based on the Contact Hypothesis of Gordon Allport (1954) and resulting contact theory that aids students in identifying and adjusting perceptions of 'the other' (those who are different from them) by broadening their university experience to include significant contact with 'the other' (Dunn, 2013). A senior staff member of the university is appointed to act as a mentor for a themed house for the year, acting as a catalyst for the creation of dialogue and guiding the students in terms of conversations. Participating students discover vastly different perspectives and have the unique opportunity to form friendships, to engage with experts on the theme of their house and to connect with the mentor of their LLL-house (Cornelissen, Dunn & Kloppers, 2011).

LLL was piloted in 2008 when it started with one student house. Currently there are 14 of these houses, and 24 will be added in 2014 (Kloppers, Dunn & Smorenburg, 2013). There are about 101 students currently in this initiative. An LLL-house ideally contains eight students living together in a student house. The participants have a specific theme for the year and engage in conversation on the theme for the year in which they live together. The students in the LLL house are ideally a small, diverse group of students from different faculties, gender, race, background and nationality. Each house adopts a theme for the year. The house hosts a conversation around the theme inviting academics, civil servants, experts and other people to join the conversation in the house. Each LLL house also engages in a small community project (Cornelissen, Dunn & Kloppers, 2011).

Students in the house model the new society that South Africa needs to grow into and prove that living together is possible, is healthy and is inspirational and allows people to become friends across diverse boundaries. The students share intimate spaces such as kitchen and bathroom facilities and the conversations negotiating house rhythm in the use thereof are invaluable in growing closer and celebrating one another's differences. Lounge conversations, which form the focal point of the initiative, are necessary to challenge thinking and promote critical thinking and open-mindedness. They also act as an inspirational space where academics and students can come together and inspire each other. The project is meant to teach people to not only to live together, but also to work and plan together (Kloppers, Dunn & Smorenburg, 2013).

The application and selection process was divided into five stages: application; short-listing; interviewing; calculation and placement; and acceptance. After discussing the ethical considerations of the process, each section will be examined briefly in this article, before concluding with an overview of the results.

Ethical considerations

This article is based on the concluding results of an application and selection process of the LLL initiative and not a specific research question or thesis. The results tabled constitute basic institutional data, which does not identify or reveal specifics about any participant in the process. The actual design and process implementation needed to take

into consideration the need to withstand institutional scrutiny in order to ensure credibility of both the initiative and validity of the selections. The design and process was presented to, and reviewed by, members of the student representative council and in a session of student parliament with no objections being tabled. Participants were provided with standardised process instructions and explanations before each of the distinct stages of the process and a full explanation of the method by which selection results were achieved was distributed on conclusion of the process. In all these communications, methods with which to indicate concerns or lodge complaints were included. All the individuals acting as interviewers were aware of the standard requirement to treat all information revealed in interviews as confidential; that notes were only to be made on the process papers that were collected and stored by the LLL initiative; and that no subsequent discussion of the contents or outcomes of the interviews were allowed to occur without at least one of the two process convenors being present. The four complaints lodged about the process were as a result of the outcome of four individual results – once clarification and further justification had been provided, the complaints were withdrawn.

Application and selection process

From the outset, and in line with the aim of scaleability, the applications were done exclusively online on the LLL website (www.sun.ac.za/lll) between 1 June and 3 August 2012. Applicants logged into the website making use of their university credentials and completed the four sections of the application. After providing basic biographical information and uploading curriculum vitae, applicants were requested to motivate their interest in one, more or all of the house themes and to answer three further questions, which were:

1. Why are you applying to LLL?
2. In what way (or ways) are you a participant in the university community?
3. Describe one characteristic that you feel will guarantee you a place in an LLL house in 2013.

All were given answer length restrictions of 300 characters with answers being accepted in either English or Afrikaans. By instructing applicants to answer honestly and not attempt to answer with what they perceived was the answer preferred by the evaluator, focus was placed on the need to highlight individuality rather than prove conformity.

Shortlisting process

Shortlisting was done to reduce the number of applicants that needed to be interviewed and filter out applicants who had applied simply for cheap accommodation, or other similar reasons, but had no intention of contributing to and participating in LLL. The assessment of each application was done electronically in three parts, by the two-person shortlisting panel, independently of each other, according to specific rubrics.

The final score was obtained by addition of the three sections above of both members of the shortlisting panel ($2 \times (9+3+9)$) resulting in a score out of 42. After consideration of the distribution of scores, the minimum requirement for shortlisting was set at 26/42 rather than the 28/42 originally considered (28 is the result of a consistent score of 2 throughout). Once the ranking list had been compiled, students who were shortlisted but who had been participants for the two preceding years, and students whose conduct during the year had resulted in questions being raised about their suitability, were flagged and asked to submit further written motivation before a final decision regarding their application was made.

Interview stage

With 140 applicants shortlisted for the interview process, it would have been impractical and counterproductive to request one panel to conduct the interviews. Instead, parallel sessions were run with multiple panels consisting of three people each (two staff and one student). Panellists were all familiar with the LLL initiative, with the students having been part of the initiative in the past. All panellists were requested to indicate conflicts with applicants so that ideally a panellist had no real knowledge of the applicants they evaluated before they entered the room. Applicants were afforded the same opportunity and their CV, uploaded in the online application, was not provided to the panel, as that component had already been assessed and allowing it to influence the interview would effectively amount to double counting.

Interviews were conducted in 15 minutes with three interviews allotted to a panel per hour, allowing time for logistics and administration. Applicants were provided with a written set of introductions before the interview session to negate the panel having to repeat itself and to ensure that the instructions were standardised, specifically in terms of the question categories. Applicants who were part of the initiative at the time of interview and were applying for a second or third placement were required to answer a stance, an experience and a participation question, while applicants new to LLL were asked a scenario question in place of a participation question. On entering and being introduced to the panel, the applicant was requested to draw a question out of each of the three applicable category envelopes and then given two minutes to prepare his/her answer in whatever order s/he chose. When an applicant started answering the question, he or she was requested to read it to the panel and indicate the number for record and verification purposes. With 25 questions per category and questions being placed in the used question envelope after use, no panel was confronted with the same question more than once. This meant that comparisons of answers between candidates and question fatigue could not occur. Table 1 indicates the nature of each of these categories and aspects to be assessed (out of 5). Panellists were requested to engage with the applicants, probe their answers and provide redirect style questioning rather than interrogate them combatively. The rubric was constructed so that applicants should be assessed for how they answered the question rather than what their answer was or how 'correct' it might have.

Table 1: Assessment rubric for interviews: Question categories

Category	Nature of question	Aim of question	Aspects of answers assessed	For
Stance	Asked the applicant to elaborate on their stance on a topical, potentially controversial issue (e.g. What is your stance on gay marriage?)	To observe how the candidate forms opinions and approaches issues. All issues chosen allow for simple for or against answers but what was considered important was the unpacking of the reasoning supporting that stance and not the stance itself.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarity of the answer • Motivation of the stance • Critical understanding of the issue • Awareness of complexity of the issue • Response to questions/ redirection by panel 	All
Experience	Asked the applicant to elaborate on an experience that on reflection could provide the tools with which to improve, avoid, embrace or reduce similar situations in future (e.g. When did you feel the most helpless and why?)	To observe the candidates' willingness to share in a meaningful way with the panel, display familiarity and comfort with the concept of reflection and awareness of self.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depth of experience chosen • Interesting/original nature of the experience chosen • Sincerity/genuineness of the account • Learning displayed/ demonstrated by process of reflection • Response to questions/ redirection by panel 	All
Participation	Asked the applicant to reflect and critically assess their personal participation in the initiative to date (e.g. What do you think your housemates honestly think about you?)	To observe the candidates ability to critically self-assess their own performance while maintaining a constructive dialogue. Willingness to take responsibility for success/ failure along level of enthusiasm for another opportunity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree/depth of participation demonstrated • Ownership/responsibility taken of participation • Sincerity/genuineness of commitment to participation • Value contributed through participation • Response to questions/ redirection by panel 	Current LLL only
Scenario	Asked the applicant to place themselves in a situation that could realistically occur during a year in LLL and reflect on how they would approach/resolve it (e.g. How would you deal with an emotionally volatile housemate who has made another housemate of yours cry?)	To observe the willingness to deal with issues rather than simply avoid them. Ability to draw on past experiences, accommodate differing opinions and willingness to engage with others.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common sense utilised • Sensitivity of approach • Likelihood for resolution without persistent division/alienation • Sincerity/genuineness of commitment to addressing issues • Response to questions/ redirection by panel 	Non-LLL only

On completion of the interview and the individual panellist's rubrics, the panel was required to make a joint decision or panel recommendation, while the applicants were requested to indicate which themes they wished to be considered for. With the three sets of three completed rubrics ($3 \times (3 \times 5 \times 5)$) a total score out of 225 and a panel decision was the result for each candidate who completed the interview stage.

Calculation and placement

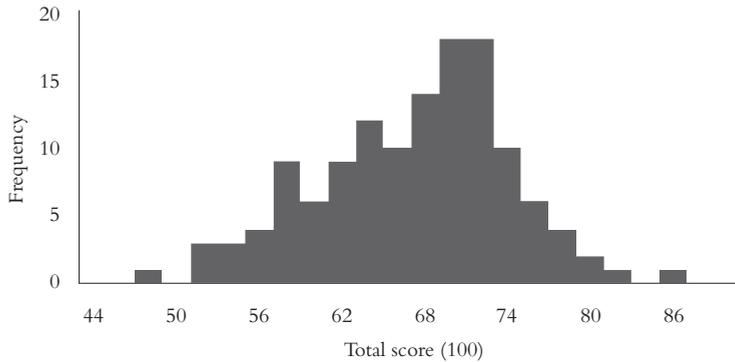
The biggest concern when using multiple panels is lack of reliable consistency in scoring. Each individual panellist interprets the rubric, to an extent, in his or her own way. It is for this reason that the panel recommendation was introduced. The panel recommendation allows comparison and normalisation of scores between panels. Once the interview scores of the 131 candidates who attended the interviews were captured, pivot tables allowed for the grouping and calculation of normalised scores.

The following calculation was used to normalise the scores across panels:

SCORE:	Applicant score with recommendation A from panel Y
GENERAL AVERAGE:	Average score with recommendation A from all panels
PANEL AVERAGE:	Average score with recommendation A from panel Y

The normalised score of each applicant was added to the shortlisting score in a ratio of 60/40, allowing for a final score of 100 with each of the five people who evaluated the applicant contributing exactly 20% of that score. The distribution of these scores can be found in Figure 1.

Before placements could be done, themes needed to be allocated to specific houses. By making it clear from the outset that applicants were applying for the theme and not a specific house, the likelihood that an applicant indicated an interest in a specific theme for the perceived benefits of a certain house location was eliminated. A count of the entire first, second and third preferences was utilised to determine the level of interest in a specific theme and these themes were then allocated to the houses with larger capacity. This is specifically important as houses range from 4 to 11 people in capacity and interest-capacity matching influences the number of applicants that can be placed in one of their selected themes. Once this had been determined, targets in terms of race, gender and faculty of study were set for each house. The first two were set in line with the demographics of the initial applicant pool, with faculty of study being a maximum of 30% per house from any one faculty. Applicants were placed in order of their final score ranking according to their theme preference indications. In practice, if a house had a capacity of 10 students it was set the targets of 7 women, 7 white, 2 black, 1 coloured and maximum 3 from any one faculty. If the first person to be placed was a Coloured, male, engineering student, the remaining 9 students to be placed would be required to fill the remaining targets of 7 women, 7 white, 2 black and maximum 3 per faculty.

Figure 1: Distribution of final scores

91 of the available 101 placements were done in descending order until a score of 60 was achieved. A score of less than 60 was used to classify the applicant as ineligible for placement and only three students with a score of above 60 were not placed due to very limited theme preference and low ranking overall (in all three cases, applicants scored below 65 with fewer than four themes were selected). The remaining places were filled after repeating the above procedures with the late or second-round applicants.

Acceptance

The results of the application process were communicated to all applicants with a full infographic regarding the process and final score calculation. Successful applicants were offered placement in a specific theme and house, which was not transferable between themes. Applicants who chose to accept the placement offer were required to sign an agreement form detailing expected participation, accepting that assessment would occur and formalising their commitment to the aims of LLL. Cancellation of placement after application was subject to the same penalties as any other university accommodation.

Results of placement

The process and results of the application and selection process are indicated in the figures below. The two constructs of race and gender, as some of the indicators of diversity, are individually represented. Firstly, the race and gender distribution of the total amount of applicants (N=179) are represented in Figures 2 and 3. The next two figures, Figures 4 and 5, represent the race and gender of the shortlisted applicants.

Figure 2: Race of applicants

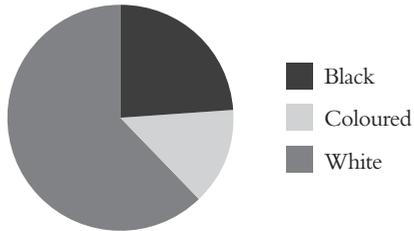


Figure 3: Gender of applicants

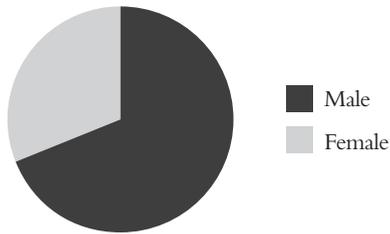


Figure 4: Race of shortlisted applicants

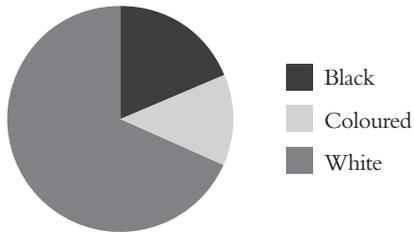
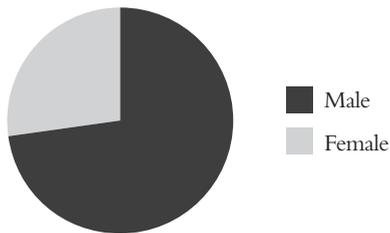


Figure 5: Gender of shortlisted applicants



The last two figures, Figures 6 and 7, represent the race and gender of the applicants placed in the LLL initiative for 2013.

Figure 6: Race of placed applicants

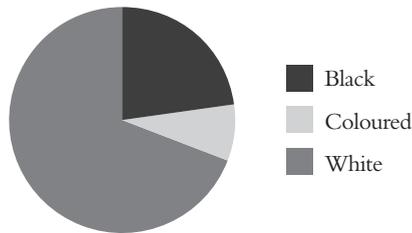
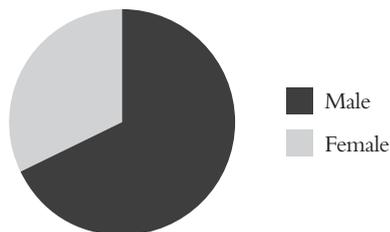


Figure 7: Gender of placed applicants



The application and selection process, as indicated in the above figures, managed to maintain the distribution of race and gender, as constructs of diversity, from the pool of original applicants (N=179) to the number of placed applicants (N=91). The deduction can therefore be made that the application and selection process, as implemented during 2012, fulfils the criteria of being holistic, transparent, unbiased and scaleable. The implementation of this process with more applicants, due to the increasing size of the initiative in 2014, can therefore be recommended.

Limitations of study

The construction of this application and selection system is obviously highly specific to both the context of SU and the nature of the LLL initiative, while the size of the resulting study is relatively small. That being said, it does provide a number of simple and practical methods and changes that could be applied in other application systems design to improve both standardisation, efforts to reduce systemic bias and diversity of candidates selected. While not presented in this paper, the results of the 2013/2014 round of applications and selections, which is more than double the number of the 2012/2013 round, reinforce the claims made in this article.

Conclusion

Diversity is a core element within the Listen, Live and Learn (LLL) initiative at Stellenbosch University (SU) and the successful development of an application process that supports this and enables applicants, as well as panellists, to participate fully in an unbiased, empowering and transparent manner was a unique challenge. The present results suggest that the application and selection process, specifically developed for the enhancement of diversity within the LLL initiative, maintained the distribution of race and gender, as constructs of diversity throughout the process. This maintenance of diversity proxy distributions, points to a lack of any significant systemic biases in the process that would most likely significantly hinder the selection of a maximally diverse group of participants. This conclusion fully supports the concept of holistic evaluation and provides grounds for significant justifiable expansion in the following intake cycle. This is a step forward in the development of a rich Listening, Living and Learning culture where students can build friendships while embracing their diversity.

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