Journal of Student Affairs in Africa

Collaborative Approaches to Scholarship in Student Affairs

Guest editor
Matete Madiba, SAASSAP

AFRICAN MINDS

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Journal of Student Affairs in Africa

The *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (*JSAA*) is an independent, peer-reviewed, multi-disciplinary, open-access academic journal that publishes scholarly research and reflective discussions about the theory and practice of student affairs in Africa.

Vision and mission

The *JSAA* aims to contribute to the professionalisation of student affairs in African higher education by publishing high-quality scholarly articles, research and reflective discussions by academics, professionals, researchers and students about student affairs and services in African higher education.

The *JSAA* strives to be the foremost academic journal dealing with the theory and practice of the student affairs domain in universities on the African continent, and an indispensable resource for national policymakers, the executive leadership of universities and colleges dealing with student affairs, deans of students and other senior student affairs professionals, as well as institutional researchers and academics and students focused on the field of higher education studies and student affairs.

Focus and scope

The *JSAA* considers theoretical, practice-relevant and reflective contributions from across the scholarly field of student affairs and professional domains of student development/student affairs, taking due cognisance that the scope is broad, fluid and context-dependent.

The scope of *JSAA* is indicated by keywords such as: student affairs, student career development, student counselling, student development theory and research, student discipline, student engagement, student experience, student finances and financial aid, student housing, disability/disabled students, student leadership and governance, student life cycle, student living and learning, student movement, student organisations, student orientation, student policy, student politics and activism, student sport, student support, academic development (and its intersection with the student affairs co-curriculum), graduate attributes, and teaching and learning support. This list of keywords is not exhaustive. Our key focus area is the core functions of student affairs and services in Africa.

Submissions are encouraged from scholars and reflective practitioners from across the globe. Submissions must be original and relevant to the mission, scope and focus of the journal. Especially encouraged are submissions from African scholars and professionals working in higher education on the African continent. Submissions dealing with student affairs issues from other contexts (e.g. the African diaspora; other emerging economies; developed countries) that are transferable to the African context are also considered for publication. Submissions must be made on the *JSAA* online submission website. Please register, log in and submit your manuscript at: https://upjournals.up.ac.za/index.php/jsaa. For any queries and to contact the editors please email Ms Bronwin Sebonka at bronwin.sebonka@up.ac.za.

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Collaborative Approaches to Scholarship in Student Affairs

Birgit Schreiber,* Teboho Moja** & Thierry M. Luescher***

JSAA 10(2) is guest–edited by the South African Association of Senior Student Affairs Professionals (SAASSAP) and Matete Madiba led this effort. The collaboration between the South African Association of Senior Student Affairs Professionals and the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (*JSAA*) has been a longstanding one. Indeed, it was in the wake of the 2011 SAASSAP conference at Stellenbosch University in South Africa that the idea of creating a platform for publishing the conference proceedings of student affairs conferences in Africa was mooted. In the course of 2012 and 2013, *JSAA* was conceptualised by its original editorial team, but particularly Dr Birgit Schreiber, Dr Thierry Luescher and Ms Tonia Overmeyer. It became a reality with the help and leadership of Prof. Teboho Moja.

Many members of the South African student affairs leadership and SAASSAP members have contributed to the journal over the years and have contributed and collaborated to strengthen student affairs scholarship. This second issue of volume 10 of *JSAA* is the first formal collaboration; a guest–edited issue conceived and implemented under the leadership of Dr Matete Madiba, SAASSAP research and development officer and Director: Student Affairs of the University of Pretoria in South Africa and Dr Birgit Schreiber of the *JSAA* Editorial Executive. This is an issue rich with papers reflecting the diversity of voices and issues in student affairs in South, Southern and continental Africa. The issue reflects how we are still grappling with, reflecting on, researching, and writing about the #FeesMustFall student activism of 2015/16, and also continue to

*   Dr Birgit Schreiber is a member of the Africa Centre for Transregional Research at Alberts-Ludwig-Universität Freiburg, Germany, and the vice-president of IASAS and a member of the *JSAA* Editorial Executive. She is a senior consultant for Higher Education Leadership and Management, South Africa. Email: birgitdewes@gmail.com. ORCID: 0000-0003-2469-0504.

** Prof. Teboho Moja is clinical professor of Higher Education, New York University, USA. She is also a visiting research fellow at the Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship, University of Pretoria, South Africa, and an extraordinary professor at the Institute of Post School Studies, University of the Western Cape, South Africa. She is *JSAA*'s Editor-in-chief. Email: tebohon.moja@nyu.edu. ORCID: 0000-0001-6343-3020.

*** Prof. Thierry M. Luescher is the research director for Post-schooling in the Inclusive Economic Development Division of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), Cape Town, and associate professor of Higher Education affiliated to the University of the Free State, Mangaung/Bloemfontein, South Africa. He is a member of the *JSAA* Editorial Executive. Email: tluescher@hsrc.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0002-6675-0512.

discuss the impact the 2020/21 COVID-19 pandemic outbreak has had on our practice and theorising of student affairs.

This issue is also a reflection of *JSAA*'s commitment to promoting collaborative research in student affairs. This issue in particular, has a noticeable number of articles that are co-authored and/or based on collaborative research and the resulting co-authorship is becoming, one hopes, the standard. This is a trend that was described already by Hunter and Leahey (2008), who found that collaborations in research were on the increase, and that co-author prestige was higher than that of sole-author, and only male sole-authorship remained, at least at that time, most common. In healthcare research, for example, collaborative interdisciplinary research also enjoys higher publication rates of high quality than single authorship (Bruzzese et al., 2020).

This guest-edited issue is also a great example of collaboration in a further way in that it is made up of two parts: One part are the articles edited by the guest editor, Dr Matete Madiba, and the second part are articles from the open submission pool of manuscripts that were edited by the *JSAA* Editorial Team. The articles that fall into this second category include the following:

In this issue Dick, Malefane and Müller explore the experiences of student peer leaders using arts-based reflections to complement a qualitative methodology. They explore the intersection of multiple roles of students as peer educators, student leaders, activists, and residents in a student community. The study highlights the complexities emerging from navigating these different challenging roles.

Govender, Reddy and Bhagwan explore the impact of COVID-19 on a group of students and discuss the emerging themes, using the online platform Microsoft Teams as research medium – a medium that has become normalised since the advent of COVID-19. The emerging themes include the need for students to understand the transmissions processes of the virus, mental health issues, and financial stresses.

The article by Machaba and Mostert uses statistical research methods with a large sample (N=1,211) to explore first year students' fit with their course of study. The article highlights the importance of course choice for students and the role that high schools and universities can play in preparing students for making meaningful and good-fit choices, given that a change of faculty and course is difficult in the current rigid degree structures at universities in South Africa and other countries in Africa. The article highlights the kinds of changes required at structural degree and programme level at universities to support student success.

Another article exploring the first-year student experience (FYE) during COVID-19 is authored by Bengesai, Paideya, Naidoo and Mkhonza. They conclude that the contact with, and support from the university in the form of the FYE transition programme was experienced as positive by this sample of first year students.

De Klerk discusses notions and constructions of students as contextualized learners and how this understanding changes the nature and focus of academic advising. The author argues for a broader lens and that deeper contextualization of students is required

to include a consideration of the socio-economic challenges and constrains into which many students are embedded.

The next article is co-authored by Matlala, Pila-Nemutandani and Erasmus and they explore the impact of peer pressure on alcohol use in students' lives. Matlala et al. find that many factors, especially the influence of family, play a significant role in mediating the impact of peer pressure.

McConney and Fourie-Malherbe focus on the FYE and the role and impact of peer mentoring. They find that multiple factors in the peer mentors themselves, and in the quality and frequency of the mentoring process, play a significant role in increasing the positive outcomes of a peer mentoring programme.

The final article in the research section of this issue is authored by Ntema who employed data mining to advance a predictive model of students who are at-risk of dropout. He identified that the carry-over of failed courses is a reliable predictor of high risk of de-registration of a student.

We have three book reviews in this issue, and each of them reviews a significant and outstanding book.

Cunningham reviews Torabian's book *Wealth, Values, Culture and Education: Reviving the Essentials for Equality and Sustainability* and highlights the multi-disciplinary lens Dr Juliette Torabain employed to illuminate the intersection of factors that derail and advance access to education.

Dipitso reviews Walker et al.'s book entitled *Low-Income Students, Human Development and Higher Education in South Africa Opportunities, Obstacles and Outcomes* published by African Minds, which provides critical insight into equity and access of low-income students to higher education in South Africa.

Moletsane reviews *#FeesMustFall and its Aftermath: Violence, Wellbeing and the Student Movement in South Africa*, by Luescher, Wilson Fadiji, Morwe, et al., published by the HSRC Press. This extended visual essay and its accompanying exhibition of photographs and narratives generated by photovoice has become a topic of discussion on many campuses where the exhibition has been held. It provides the frame for reflection on the well-being impacts of violence in the context of the student movement in South Africa.

This issue would not have been possible without the tireless support of Bronwin Sebonka, our Journal Administrator at the University of Pretoria, and the meticulous work of Imkhitha Nzungu at our publishing house, African Minds. In addition, we thank our expanded editorial team for their sterling work. As customary, all the reviewers of the past volume and related manuscripts are gratefully acknowledged in the 'Thank you to our reviewers' included in this issue.

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Embracing SAASSAP Scholarship

Matete Madiba*

This issue was initiated as part of an effort to raise the level of scholarship within the South African Association of Senior Student Affairs Professionals (SAASSAP). It was conceptualised in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. As guest editor, I had a number of opportunities to engage with members and associates of the SAASSAP throughout the process of compiling and finalising this issue. A key moment of engagement was when the association undertook an "identity check", to reflect on who we are as SAASSAP members. The pandemic provided a time to be contemplative about our work.

The "P" at the end of the SAASSAP acronym stands for "professional" as well as "practitioner". The Collins Dictionary defines a practitioner as "a person engaged in the practice of a profession"[1]. A practitioner is someone who has learned about and is actively working in their field. Carpenter and Haber-Curran (2013) raise a critical question in their argument for what they call a "scholarship of practice" for student affairs professionals. They ask: "What if student affairs professionals fully embraced a role as practitioner-scholars engaging in practice in a thoughtful and intentional way that is both informed by research and informs research?" (Carpenter & Haber-Curran, 2013). The point being that student affairs practitioners should fully embrace their roles as professionals, as practitioners and as scholars. For SAASSAP members, there is also a leadership component that is embedded in the role since this is an association for senior practitioners who would largely be in leadership positions in their institutions. Komives et al. (2005) argues for leadership capacity and an identity that is created and developed over time. It is this type of identity that SAASSAP members should assume – an identity that embraces the professional–practitioner–scholar–leader role.

If members of the association are to embrace such an identity, which includes the role of scholar, they must then ask: How do scholars work and what do they do? A related question is: Is there a difference between research and scholarship or between researchers and scholars? A CQUniversity of Australia YouTube video,[2] which describes what scholars do, says that scholars work in a "systematic, rational, balanced, evidence-based way" and through "a systematic process of framing questions and providing

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1   https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/practitioner
2   https://www.youtube.com/@CQUniversityOLTv

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* Dr Matete Madiba is research and development officer at SAASSAP and also Director: Student Affairs at the University of Pretoria in South Africa. Email: matete.madiba@up.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0002-6127-8087.

answers". In this regard, it should be noted that there is no definite distinction between research and scholarship: the two are closely related.

Huenemann (2014) argues for a distinction between research and scholarship on the basis of disciplinary differences. He associates research with experiments, "finding new stuff, unknown correlations and or causal connections", and argues that "humanists are not in that kind of business". He further posits (emphasis added): "To be a humanist scholar, one needs to *read a great deal*, think deeply and humanely about it, and pick up on *interesting patterns* or glaring exceptions to patterns commonly thought to exist. It is rare to find such scholars" (Huenemann, 2014).

Huenemann's argument in seeking to differentiate between research and scholarship indicates how narrow the distinction can be. Against this background, a number of key identifying features are ascribed in the literature to the practice of scholarship. Scholars read, and read a lot, to acquire knowledge about their field of practice (Huenemann, 2014). I would further argue that they reference their work as they share and publish it. They apply their acquired knowledge to their practice and by so doing continuously improve their practice. They read classics in their field, as well as newly published works. In addition, scholars are mindful about how old their citations are when they are working towards publication, whether in the form of a thesis or an article in a journal.

I want to argue that scholars read for confirmation, confrontation, contradiction, challenge, and critique, and that these are the "Five Cs" of scholarship. Scholars read to confirm the observations they make and the trends they have noticed. They read to confront their own biases, beliefs, judgements, and subjectivities. They read to address the contradictions they have identified in their work and the work of other scholars. They read to deal with the challenges with which their practice is confronted. They read to critique their own practices and opinions; to critique other scholars; and to enable their institutions to engage in institutional self-critique.

Universities in South Africa are challenged to place transformation high on their agendas. In this regard, the journey towards a transformative turn starts with self-critique. Student affairs practitioners should not shy away from being at the centre of such an agenda, helping their institutions to change and acting as agents of the transformation process. Professional-practitioner-scholar-leaders are required to assume such agency in a meaningful way. Grappling with the nationwide student revolt of 2015, Booysen (2016, p. 2) cites the work of Achille Mbembe (2016) who notes that "we have to find for ourselves the vocabulary" and engage in "the task of naming and elucidation", and work our way towards a "sympathetic critique" to deal with the turmoil that might continue for a while in South African universities. Though Mbembe argues for "sympathetic critique", what South African higher education institutions need more is self-critique. In this context, student affairs practitioner-scholars should engage their university communities and lead the way towards the processes of elucidation and the creation of vocabularies for self-critique, as advocated by Mbembe, in and outside the classroom and at the executive levels of these institutions.

Scholars engage in scholarship. Neuman (1993) argues that to differentiate between scholarship and research is like "walking in a semantic minefield". She describes scholarship as an activity that updates or maintains the knowledge of an individual or adds to their skills and experience. She further describes scholarship as the manner of pursuing a serious, sustained line of enquiry, and as entailing the dissemination of findings. In a research project, as part of which she interviewed senior academics and administrators, she makes a distinction between two ideas of scholarship, that is, "the role of scholarship in providing the context for research"; and "scholarship as a far broader notion than research, spanning the entire endeavor of academic work". Her analysis is worth quoting at length:

> [Scholarship] is both preliminary to, and simultaneous with, research. Scholarship is part of the whole process of the asking and answering of questions – enquiry – in seeking to understand a particular field of study. In doing so, there has to be theoretical and conceptual understanding of the area of knowledge being investigated. Scholarship involves the ability "to glean information" and to respond critically to what has already been done in the field. This encompasses digesting and appraising what is already known, as a result of which the gaps in knowledge can be clearly perceived and appropriate questions of enquiry asked. Indeed, scholarship necessitates placing one's own research within the existing knowledge of the field. The result is "research in context". (Neuman, 1993)

Neumann (1993) further posits that scholarship entails greater contemplation and reflection than research. She notes that her interviewees asserted that the distinction between research and scholarship was less clear in the humanities, with some extending this view to the social sciences and professional areas. The participants in her research described "poor research" as "research without scholarship" (Neuman, 1993). She concludes her paper by arguing that research and scholarship are interrelated and yet separate, and that scholarship is broader than research, "encompassing aspects of research as well as relating to other areas of academic investigation" (Neuman, 1993). Her research confirms that academic enquiry is central to both research and scholarship. In this context, academic enquiry is described as a critical reflection on existing knowledge and a desire to ask unanswered questions.

In a report entitled "Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate", Boyer (1990) describes four kinds of scholarship: the scholarship of discovery; the scholarship of integration; the scholarship of application; and the scholarship of teaching. For Boyer (1990, p. 16) it was time to define "what it means to be a scholar" and to recognise "the great diversity of functions higher education must perform". This remains true for student affairs practitioners today. Student affairs practitioners must contend with what it means to be a scholar in their roles within a higher education system that faces many challenges. Over the years, Boyer's views on scholarship have received a lot of attention and have contributed to a growing Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) movement, which has its own conferences and journals and which produces its own research alongside an existing "pure" form of research which Boyer categorises as the

scholarship of discovery. The influence of SoTL has now become so great that student affairs practitioners who fail to position themselves as active participants within this field of scholarship are liable to find themselves on the academic periphery.

Meanwhile, Carpenter and Haber-Curran (2013) argue for a fifth type of scholarship which they call "the scholarship of practice". They identify 11 core values that are associated with and could constitute a scholarship of practice. In their suggested vision, such a scholarship should be: (1) intentional; (2) theory-based; (3) data-based; (4) peer-reviewed; (5) tolerant of differing perspectives; (6) collaborative; (7) unselfish; (8) open to change; (9) careful and sceptical; (10) attentive to regeneration; and (11) autonomous within institutional contexts. The authors offer these values as they reflect on a call for "student affairs and academic affairs professionals to unite in service of facilitating student development and learning" (Carpenter & Haber-Curran, 2013). The question remains whether it is necessary to think of a fifth type of scholarship as Carpenter and Haber-Curran (2013) propose – that is, a scholarship of practice – or whether the call should be to embrace the scholarship of integration identified by Boyer (1990).

The notion of a scholarship of integration becomes more critical and relevant considering the silos that have been built within higher education institutions and how these silos can stifle the work that is undertaken to advance student success. I argue elsewhere (Madiba, 2014) that student success is and should be the number one priority of student affairs work. A recent report from The Chronicle of Higher Education (2022, p. 1) argues that "as more colleges seek to raise graduation and retention rates, it has become clear that to make meaningful strides in student success, they must look at the *whole student*" (emphasis added). I have continued to argue in various recent engagements that the notion of looking at "the whole student" provides a valuable critique of the "single-axis framework" (Crenshaw, 1991) which dominates many student success interventions and the siloed approaches that accompany them at higher education institutions. I argue that "indicators of student success and the quality of 'graduatedness', like all the other indicators, is as much a matter of the classroom as it is of organised student life outside the classroom" (Madiba, 2014, p. 59). I further argue that "there is a need for a deliberate, concerted, and collective effort by all role-players in order to achieve student success" (Madiba, 2014, p. 59). With another author, I argue that "curriculum learning, academic development and student affairs need to combine forces and share expertise and resources to optimise students' chances of success" (Torres & Madiba, 2017, p. 161).

The partitions that continue to be erected between what are described as the "academic" and "non-academic" aspects of higher education institutions create further barriers to student success, when the goal should be to remove such barriers. The building of such walls prevents student from being seen as whole beings. In this context, interventions become fragmented, structures work in silos and student affairs practitioners deal superficially with the challenges that threaten student success. However, the theoretical and conceptual understandings that may emerge from a scholarship of integration would allow student affairs practitioners to forge necessary

partnerships across disciplinary, functional and structural boundaries and deal with these challenges.

Much has been written about the challenges that students experienced during COVID-19, including in relation to their mental health. In fact, many of these challenges existed prior to pandemic outbreak, but in a less visible form, or were not previously taken seriously. COVID-19 "visibilised" them. Czerniewicz et al. (2020) assert that the pandemic as a crisis "has made it impossible not to recognise the historical, geospatial, economic inequalities of the country and the world students live in". They further assert that "the pandemic, and the pivoting to online made visible, the invisible". The authors are worth quoting at length as they describe how the pandemic led to a push for integration, where previously there had been none, or at least too little:

> During this period, *fields of practice and scholarship*, which had previously intersected *far less* than one would have imagined, are now thrust together. The scholarship has drawn on different theoretical sources. The practice has been supported institutionally in different ways, either centrally or distributed. Historically, questions of access to and success in education were *the purview* of "academic development", while the digital divide and digital inequalities fell in the parallel realm of "educational technology". These *separations* have been shown to be impossible, with Student Affairs thrown into the mix as students demand that #NoStudentIsLeftBehind (emphasis added). (Czerniewicz et al., 2020)

Though it appears that greater attention has been paid to the pedagogies of care and compassion in academia, or at least in some parts of academia, it is a concern that much thinking remains siloed and that the need to forge partnerships that may advance the culture of care in the academy persists. In this context, Brodie et al. (2022) argue:

> Given that *the culture of the academy* has been that such support has not usually been a primary focus of lecturers, we argue for *better integration of student support services into the core academic project within the broader institution*. In decentering this key structural and cultural element of the university space, this article has shown that we can support multiple opportunities for students to engage with disciplinary knowledge and that we can enable *care and concern* to be integrated into higher education pedagogy and thus become a stronger cultural element of teaching and learning in our institutions (emphasis added). (Brodie et al., 2020).

Brodie et al. (2022) call for integration. A scholarship of integration needs to be promoted if student support services practitioners are to be considered as equal partners with lecturers and in order to forge the partnerships that are required to advance a culture of care within the academy. In addition, a new class of "scholarly practitioners" will need to be established: a class who by their craft make "decisions primarily for the benefit of students, relying upon theory and research, remaining accountable to peers, providing professional feedback, acting ethically, and enacting the values of the profession generally"; a class of scholarly practitioners whose members continuously "exercise professional judgment", as argued by Carpenter and Haber-Curran (2013).

Accordingly, I and a fellow author have posed the question (Madiba & Mathekga, 2018): "How well are we able to name and frame the problems students face as they enter and proceed through their studies in higher education?" Mathekga and I have further argued that the "question should be extended to the policies, interventions and solutions that are put in place to support students throughout their academic journey". The broader argument being made here is that student affairs practitioners deal with complex and highly challenging problems that are systemic in nature and deeply entrenched. If they are to make any inroads, they need to demolish the walls separating functions and structures at universities. For this to happen, student affairs practitioners should seek to advance the scholarship of integration.

The call for papers for this issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (*JSAA*) was made within this context of asking whether SAASSAP members have acquired the identity of scholars who undertake their work in a systematic, evidence-based way, and whether they are able to frame the relevant questions and explore the resulting answers in a meaningful way. The theme that accompanied the call was: "Leading through Covid-19: The impact of the pandemic on student affairs and student services at South African universities." Under lockdown, when there were few opportunities to meet face-to-face, two webinars were organised to support those considering responding to the call for papers. The first webinar on "writing for publication" was led by Birgit Schreiber and Siseko Kumalo. The second webinar on "writing for *JSAA*" was led by three well-published authors, Thierry Luescher, Laura Czerniewicz and Dantew Teferra, who shared the tools of the trade. Laura, who made a presentation on collaborative writing at the meeting, published her notes as a blog post,[3] in which she advised: "Keep everything transparent, be organised, give and take feedback respectfully, be open minded, be flexible and be clear."

The response to the first call for papers was encouraging. Twenty-four abstracts from eight different institutions were submitted. Finally, eight papers were submitted and sent for peer review. During this process, a number of challenges were identified. For example, it became clear that student affairs practitioners who are immersed in student-life activities and related crises may be hard-pressed to find the time to write for publication. In this regard, it would have been ideal to organise research retreats in support of this issue's call for papers. The authors who answered the call for papers also faced the challenge of their relative scholarly inexperience. In this regard, there is a great need for student affairs practitioners to be supported in developing the skills that are required to write for publication if they are to make advances in scholarship and research. Student affairs and services (SAS) practitioners need to be encouraged to initiate sustainable collaborative research projects which can simultaneously inform policy and practice. Such projects should be undertaken in collaboration with other academics and with master's and doctoral students within and across institutions, both locally and internationally. Ethical clearance poses another a challenge. It can take a

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3   https://czernie.weebly.com/blog/writing-collaboratively

relatively long time to obtain, which can disrupt the writing, paper–submission and publication schedule. In this regard, there must be more support within institutions to establish and implement clear, transparent and workable ethical–clearance protocols and procedures. More generally, SAS practitioners should organise and participate in reading groups and book clubs at which book reviews may be presented to advance the Five Cs of scholarship. In addition, SAASSAP should periodically and continuously organise and plan for special journal issues and book projects.

The scope for collaborative scholarship projects in the field of student affairs and services is wide and practitioners are spoiled for choice as the 2021 SAASSAP conference, which can be a platform for the advancement of scholarship within the SAS community, demonstrated. The theme of the conference was: "Ramping up engaged scholarship, gender equity, and enhancing leadership in student affairs practice". Presentations at the conference provided convincing evidence that, indeed, the scope for scholarship in this field is wide and that there is ample room for collaboration. Presentations were made on a range of topics, including, "exploring humanising practices and humanising scholarship"; using Photovoice to document and reflect on reality; curating experiences using the camera lens; student leadership and governance; and community and civic engagement. Research into such topics indicates the viability and broadness of the scope for collaborative projects and for longitudinal multi– and trans–disciplinary research. Engagement in such research allows for the creation of a communal space to explore and share methodologies and resources to advance scholarship.

The future of higher education will look far brighter if SAS practitioners can continue to forge partnerships and advance the scholarship of integration. In this way, they can make room to assert their place in academia; acquire their identity as professional–practitioner–scholar–leaders; and fully assume their roles as agents of transformation within their institutions.

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Thinking with Nancy Fraser in Understanding Students' Experiences of Accessing Psycho-social and Academic Support during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Faeza Khan*

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the face of higher education institutions in profound ways. After the restrictions of movement under lockdowns imposed in response to the pandemic from 2020, higher education institutions were forced to think creatively and quickly about how to respond to arising challenges of completing the academic year and ensuring throughput and retention of students. Historically disadvantaged institutions in South Africa were particularly hard hit in taking on the challenge of online learning given their restricted resources and the under-preparedness of the student cohort who are attracted to these institutions. This article uses data from two surveys conducted among students at the University of the Western Cape which measured students' experiences and access to psycho-social and academic support services in 2020. In addition to the findings of these surveys, emails from a student counselling line at the university are also used to reflect on students' expressed needs for support during the COVID-19 pandemic. Utilising Nancy Fraser's model of social justice and focusing particularly on the economic and cultural dimensions of this model, this article seeks to provide an understanding of the constraints and support that students experienced when seeking to access online academic and psycho-social support. Fraser's affirmative and transformative approaches to producing change are discussed to help identify how the constraints that were experienced could be addressed to achieve participatory parity.

Keywords

social justice, online academic support, psycho-social support, participatory parity, COVID-19, higher education

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and the imposition of restrictions on movement and gatherings which were imposed by the national government in response severely impacted the higher education sector. Many students were expected to adapt to learning in an online environment, while many of those living in residence halls were asked to make the journey home when a national lockdown was announced from March 2020, leaving them without the support services provided to them on campus by universities'

* Dr Faeza Khan is the Living Learning Coordinator for Residential Services at the the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. Email: fakhan@uwc.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0003-4736-7638.

student affairs departments. The challenges that students faced at home were significant. The new mode of learning brought about many psycho-social challenges for students who were now back at home with limited to no support. Not only were students having to contend with using a new online platform for learning, they also faced increasing levels of anxiety and isolation from their social circles and increasing levels of hunger (Sifunda et al., 2020).

Creating conditions that can support online learning and facilitate access to psycho-social support requires a set of institutional arrangements. Fraser's thinking (2008, 2009), which is used in this paper to examine the data, presents a multi-dimensional, multi-level theory of social justice which provides a lens through which injustices can be scrutinised in the higher education space. Fraser's (2009) social justice framework enables an appraisal of existing social arrangements against the principle of participatory parity which, she explains, provides for all social actors in social life to participate as equal peers. Fraser's (2008, 2009) concept of social justice is therefore useful in examining whether the institutional arrangements that were put in place under COVID-19 were sufficient in allowing all students to participate in learning and access support on an equal basis. For this reason, only two dimensions of Fraser's theoretical framework of social justice, namely the economic and cultural dimensions, are utilised in this study as it seeks to foreground issues of maldistribution and misrecognition. Fraser's (2009) theory is also valuable insofar as it presents an understanding of how affirmative and transformative strategies can contribute to the achievement of participatory parity among students to enhance academic learning and access to online psycho-social support.

Literature Review

According to the United Nations (2020), an estimated 40% of the poorest countries failed to support learners at risk during the COVID-19 crisis, and past experiences show that both education and gender inequalities tend to be neglected in responses to disease outbreaks. Domestic chores, especially for girls and young women, and the care work required to run households can also prevent female students from being able to access sufficient learning time.

Insufficient resources

At a basic level, many families lack the space for both parents and students to work from home, which leads to competition for the use of limited home space for teaching, learning and work (Mukute et al., 2020). Meanwhile, teaching and learning within the higher education sector has become increasingly technologically based. Within this space, students need access to tools such as computers, Wi-Fi and printing facilities to complete academic tasks (Khan, 2019). In this context, prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, many students at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) were already struggling with access to technology and resources. After the COVID-19 outbreak, access to these resources became an even bigger issue for many students who now found themselves

in homes where access to such necessary technology was non-existent. (Khan, 2020b). Furthermore, a study conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in 2021 found that only half of the students (49.9%) surveyed reported having a suitable place to study during lockdown (Sifunda et al. 2021). A total of 20.8% indicated that they had a suitable place to study only some of the time; while 29.3% of the students indicated that they had no suitable place to study. Meanwhile, although the majority (78.6%) of the students had regular access to electricity, 5.7% did not have access to electricity during lockdown.

According to a study conducted at the University of Johannesburg, a conducive learning environment where optimal learning can take place refers to an environment that is safe and provides the appropriate technology (computers, Wi-Fi and printing equipment and services) to facilitate learning (Agherdien, 2015). The study acknowledges that optimal learning takes place when the student is stimulated intellectually; when ideas and opinions are encouraged; and when students are supported by the university to develop themselves intellectually, socially and personally (Agherdien, 2015). Also, ensuring that students' basic needs are met, including in relation to safe accommodation, access to basic utilities and food security, is a precondition for students' holistic development, that is, their intellectual, social and personal development. These findings are supported by other studies (Swartz, 1998; Khan, 2019) which show that student residences are strategically important as ideal locations for teaching and learning, as well as for social and recreational life, not least because they can create a sense of community. The COVID-19 pandemic forced students into isolation in their homes with many of them living in conditions that were not conducive to studying. The lack of resources for many of these students resulted in them experiencing maldistribution, which impeded their capacity to compete with their peers from wealthier families in completing their academic projects. According to Fraser (2008, 2009), insufficient resources to support student learning results in distributive injustice, preventing students who lack such resources from achieving academic success on a par with those students with access to the necessary finances to purchase laptops and data. In the digital age, with technology being an integral part of learning, not having access to a computer places a student at a serious disadvantage.

Food security

One of the greatest challenges for Southern Africa during COVID-19 has been food security (Goolsbee & Syverson, 2020). In the HSRC (2021) study, a total of 41% of the students between the ages of 18 and 35 years who were surveyed reported that they had been unable to buy food at various points during the hard lockdown that was imposed in 2020. A further 10% had relied on food donations and 15% had gone hungry on some days. In 2018, a study conducted at UWC found that 70% of students were food insecure (Makwela, 2018). Food-insecure students have great difficulty studying and focusing on their academic projects (Raskind et al., 2019). In addition, they also report

feeling stigmatised because, unlike many of their peers, they are reliant on food support programmes (Khan, 2019). This, according to Fraser's (2009) theory, results in students losing their sense of self-esteem in society as they feel inadequate in relation to their peers who are not food insecure.

Mental health

In another study conducted at the University of the Witwatersrand in 2021, it was found that undergraduate and full-time students were, respectively, about two and four times more likely than postgraduate and part-time students to indicate problems associated with mental health (Oje et al., 2021). Those aged between 18 and 24 were approximately 1.75 times more likely than students older than 24 to present problems associated with mental health. The findings also revealed a gender dimension to mental health. Specifically, female students were 1.83 times more likely than male students to indicate problems associated with mental health. These problems included stress, anxiety and depression. In an earlier study conducted by Freeman (2018), it was found that a significant percentage of university students who participated in the study were not equipped with the coping skills or support structures required to handle the kind of problems that they have to deal with every day.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, students had to adjust to a new situation of lockdown and confinement. They were unable to enjoy the social engagement which face-to-face contact had allowed; and the increased sense of isolation eventually took its toll, affecting the mental health of students (UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2020). Research has shown that the families of people living with mental illnesses are often subjected to stigma by virtue of their association with them. This stigma against families may take the form of blame being assigned, and may also be made manifest in the form of social isolation and rejection (Nxumalo & Mchunu, 2017). Such stigma perpetuates a cycle of disability for the patient and family (Nxumalo & Mchunu, 2017) and affects their social status as they feel inferior to their peers.

Markers of inequality and gender-based violence

Students' experiences of campus life can reflect exclusionary and unequal practices on the basis of gender, race, class, and other markers of inequality that they encounter in their communities (Clowes et al., 2009; Gordon & Collins, 2013; Hames, 2009). The material and ideological contexts of inequality and how they play out in higher education are instrumental in shaping students' participation in higher education. South African students' experiences on university campuses continue to be shaped by inequalities and broader social perceptions of being and belonging which find their roots in apartheid history and centuries of colonisation (Shefer et al., 2018). Lived experiences continue to be significantly shaped by the legacies of apartheid and its divisive and unequal systems of education. The inequality in lived experiences has been bolstered by the strengthening

of individualised and corporatised neoliberal policies in higher education (Badat, 2010; Mbembe, 2015a, 2015b). A study conducted at the University of Stellenbosch among residence students in 2018 revealed significant inequality in students' experiences of university life on the basis of race, gender and sexuality (Robertson & Pattman, 2018). Race, gender and sexuality were intertwined and framed the marginalisation or exclusion of students from certain programmes and activities at the residences. This marginalisation or exclusion was deemed to be part of the university's culture which has its roots in the apartheid era (Robertson & Pattman, 2018).

The presumption of men that they have a right to sex is entrenched in the notion of patriarchy and misrecognises female students' rights to determine when and with whom they wish to engage in sexual encounters. Clowes et al. (2009) found that university campuses are highly sexualised spaces and that there is great pressure on students to engage in sexual activity. This peer pressure places students who are experimenting with their sexuality and their identity in difficult positions, with many students claiming that they engage in sex because this is considered normal behaviour (Matthyse, 2017). Meanwhile, under lockdown many women and children were unable to escape the wrath of abusive men in home spaces (UN Women, 2021).

Drawing the parallels between maldistribution and misrecognition

It is unjust for some students to be excluded from participating as full partners in social interaction as a result of institutionalised patterns of cultural value which debase them on the basis of immutable and inherited characteristics. Fraser (2009) contends that misrecognition is a status injury that finds its locus in social relations rather than in individual psychology. Misrecognition occurs when students are devalued because of their identity, cultural background or if the subjugated knowledge that they bring with them to university is debased (Bozalek, 2017). This devalued status prevents students from being able to participate on a par with their peers and acts as a constraint to their learning. Fraser (2009) contends that maldistribution can result in misrecognition: a student feels that, because of their straitened circumstances, they enjoy less social esteem than those students with greater access to financial resources. A rise in student poverty during COVID-19 has been linked to increased depression and suicide among young people (Hattangadi et al., 2019). An analysis by public health researchers showed a rise in the number of young people in Japan taking their lives in 2020, potentially due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (Kakuchi, 2021).

Nancy Fraser's framework on social justice

Central to Fraser's (2008, 2009) concept of social justice is the notion of participatory parity, that is, the ability of an individual to participate equally with peers in social interactions. Participatory parity is shaped by a number of factors: the distribution of resources (social or economic dimensions); whether the perceived attributes of individuals, groups or institutions are valued or devalued (cultural dimension); and

whether people are included or excluded from the learning context (political dimension). For social justice to be achieved and for participatory parity to be promoted, all three dimensions need to be addressed. First, the distribution of material resources must be equitable to enable all students to interact equally with others in social interactions (economic dimension). Second, the status order must reflect respect for all students, regardless of their perceived attributes (race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, ethnicity, etc.) and must ensure conditions under which all can achieve social esteem (cultural dimension). Third, all social actors must have access to a political voice to influence decisions that affect them (political dimension). All three dimensions are interlinked and influence each other; no single dimension can be reduced to another and none alone is sufficient to achieve participatory parity.

According to Fraser (2008), a lack of participatory parity on account of maldistribution (in the economic dimension), misrecognition (in the cultural dimension) and misrepresentation (in the political dimension) can be addressed by either affirmative or transformative types of intervention. Affirmative strategies for redressing social injustice aim to correct the inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying social structures that generate them (Fraser, 2003). Transformative strategies, on the other hand, aim to correct unjust outcomes by restructuring the underlying framework which gives rise to social injustice in the first place (Fraser, 2003). Simply stated, affirmative strategies target the end-outcomes of social arrangements, while transformative strategies address the root causes of injustices.

For the purpose of this article, the author has addressed the economic and cultural dimensions as posited by Fraser (2008, 2009) because these are the most useful in providing an understanding of the constraints and enabling factors that shaped how students experienced using online platforms to continue learning and accessing psycho-social support under COVID-19 lockdown. The economic and cultural dimensions also highlight how a lack of resources (maldistribution) as well as insufficient strategies for addressing issues of misrecognition prevented students from achieving participatory parity. The article will then go on to consider some affirmative and transformative strategies to ensure more equitable access to learning and psycho-social support.

Methodology

The study reported on in this article used a mixed-method methodology in the form of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative method includes the use of two annual surveys conducted at the University of the Western Cape (Khan, 2020a; Khan, 2020b) comprising statistics assessing students' usage of services, and a qualitative component to establish student experiences of these services. The table below outlines the details of the data sources that were used in developing this paper.

The students who completed the survey were enrolled at UWC and had received a place within UWC's residential precinct for the 2020 academic year. The survey targeted both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Students who participated in the surveys, as well as those whose emails were reviewed for the purposes of this article, hailed from

rural and peri–urban, poor socio–economic South African communities. The gender of the students was not requested as part of the survey, but there were more female students (35 out of 50 emails) who sought assistance through the counselling helpline.

Table 1: Description of data sources

Data source	Purpose	Target population	Sample
UWC's Residential Services Annual Feedback Survey (Khan, 2020a) which surveyed students from the 2020 academic year	To measure how many students use the services of UWC's Department of Residential Services and to obtain feedback on what their experiences of this service were	Residence population: 3,602 students	535 students responded to the survey
UWC's Students' Experiences of Academic Support Services at Residences Survey 2020 (Khan, 2020b) surveyed students from the 2020 academic year	To understand how those students who have accessed academic support experienced it and to understand how the academic support services can be improved	Those who sought tutoring in the 2020 academic year: 500 students	52 students responded to the survey
UWC ResLife helpline emails (from March to November 2020)	Students request academic support or counselling assistance via this helpline.	Residence population: 3,602 students	50 emails from students were reviewed

Students were requested to complete the surveys on a voluntary basis. The Residential Services Annual Feedback Survey (Khan, 2020a) collected data about student experiences of various aspects of service delivery, ranging from the conditions of the facilities to the students' ability to access academic and psycho–social support. The survey asked students to describe their challenges in accessing services and asked for any recommendations about how the services on offer may be improved. The academic support survey asked students to describe their experiences of using the academic support services on offer and sought to elicit how, if at all, they had been helped by these services. The data gathered from these surveys were collated into a Google spreadsheet so that they could be analysed.

In addition to relying on data from the two surveys referenced in Table 1 above, this paper also draws on data received through the ResLife helpline, which is an email service that students can access to seek either academic or psycho–social support. The author is responsible for ensuring that all emails that come through this helpline are attended to. This article also draws on the overall experiences of the author who is responsible for coordinating psycho–social and academic services for the Department of Residential Services at UWC.

The above data sources provided information about students' experiences of working online and attempting to obtain academic or psycho–social support from UWC's

Department of Residential Services. The email inquiries that were reviewed provided significant background information on students' actual situations and problems.

For this article, the data were analysed with reference to the economic and cultural dimensions of Nancy Fraser's participatory parity framework (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013). The author made use of the economic and cultural dimensions as a lens through which to examine the data and make sense of it. The data were analysed using a number of themes presented as part of the economic or cultural dimension of Fraser's theory.

Permission to use the content from the data sources listed above was obtained from UWC's Department of Residential Services which collects these data as part of its quality assurance process. Consent was also obtained from the students who participated in the surveys to use the data for research purposes which included the writing of articles. When the Google survey was presented to the students, they were given some information about why the survey was being conducted and how the results would be used. The students were informed that their participation was completely voluntary. Their anonymity was assured; and they were told that they could choose to stop participating in the survey at any point. They were then asked to provide consent for using the data for research purposes. All survey responses were anonymously completed, thereby protecting the identity of the respondents. For this article, the author reviewed 50 emails which came through the helpline between March and November 2020. Where data were drawn for the purposes of this article, the author requested permission from the student in question via email, asking whether their experience could be used as part of the data for this article. Only the stories of those students who consented via email were used in this article. Anonymity was assured and the author indicated that no personal markers would be used in the article in order to maintain the anonymity of the student.

Findings

Data for this section were drawn from UWC's Residential Services Annual Feedback Survey (Khan, 2020a) and Students' Experiences of Academic Support Services at Residences Survey 2020 (Khan, 2020b). This section also draws on emails that were sent to the ResLife counselling helpline.

Economic non-equivalence maldistribution

A lack of resources can be seen as one of the biggest challenges encountered by students during the COVID-19 pandemic at UWC. Many students recounted narratives that reflected their impoverished home circumstances and how these severely affected their ability to access psycho-social and academic support.

Considering the provision of online support during COVID-19 from the perspective of the economic dimension, social justice is concerned with economic constraints which impede a student's ability to participate fully in the academic project and access psycho-social support. Referencing Fraser's framework (2008, 2009), economic constraints can

result in students being subjected to distributive injustice. In this context, social justice is concerned with the (mal)distribution of rights, resources and opportunities which impede students' ability to participate as equals with their peers in university life and, by implication, to achieve academic success. The section below describes some of the rights, resources and opportunities that were unavailable which impeded the students' abilities to study and access the psycho-social support needed to further their academic pursuits.

Conditions in the home: Creating a conducive learning environment

Students reported to the counselling helpline that environmental conditions in their homes were not conducive to studying, with many reporting that they had no privacy and no electricity which had prevented them from undertaking their academic activities.

> *During the day, my mum expects me to do household chores and look after my younger siblings. At night I am so tired I cannot focus on my studies and complete my assignments.*

> *My family is suffering and I look after the children in the community to bring in extra income to help my family during this time. My mother lost her job as a domestic worker due to Covid [sic] and we have no income. At night there is no electricity in our home, so I cannot do my assignments.*

> *The workload online is so much and I can't finish everything during the day. At night there is no place for me to study. I live in a shack and we all sleep everywhere. There is also no electricity and it is impossible for me to work at night.*

The resources that are required to support student learning and create a conducive learning environment also include adequate study halls; functional computer laboratories; functional and adequate printing facilities; and reliable internet connectivity. All of which many students were unable to access from their home environments under lockdown.

> *I rely on the computer labs in the library and at residence because my own laptop is so old, I worry that one day soon it will no longer switch on. At home now I am so anxious because sometimes my screen blanks out and I think about how I am going to study without this laptop. I asked the university to get me a laptop but it is taking so long I have given up.*

Access to technology: Connectivity and data issues

Many students reported that they had no internet connection or experienced poor connectivity and that this was hampering their ability to study online; reach out for psycho-social support; and keep in touch with their friends. In addition, many students did not have laptops and under normal conditions are reliant on the computers that are generally available in computer laboratories on campus. Some students reported that they had tried using their cell phones but that this had limited their online activity and ability to complete assignments in the prescribed formats. One student expressed frustration at the fact that the data given to them by the university was barely sufficient to complete the academic requirements. Meanwhile, undertaking an online counselling

session or attending a co-curricular event in support of their mental health was not in their immediate purview due to their lack of data.

> *I needed to speak with someone because my home situation was becoming unbearable. Where we live there is no stable internet connection and when my university data was up there was no money to get more. I suffered alone because my family does not believe in talking about problems.*

> *I have to go to a specific spot in our community on the hill to get some kind of connection. The connection is not strong enough to access and download any readings. I am so worried that I am going to fail.*

The lack of connectivity and insufficient data were huge stumbling blocks not only in relation to learning but also in trying to gain access to psycho-social interventions.

Accessing psycho-social and academic support

The Residential Services Annual Feedback Survey (Khan, 2020a) asked students about the difficulties they had experienced with online support, including in relation to accessing psycho-social support as well as academic support. One student described it thus:

> *It's been a rollercoaster experience but talking to my Development Officer in my residence helped me survive.*

Another student noted:

> *Very stressful and very time consuming. It's much more work this semester and the work keeps piling.*

> *I could not survive without the support of my residence tutor who broke down concepts for me in the absence of the lecturer. I know I could email my lecturer but this kind of learning feels so impersonal and I am still getting used to these online platforms.*

Many students were not prepared for the drastic switch to online learning platforms. The social isolation produced by lockdown was impacting their ability to reach out and engage in peer learning and approach lecturers for additional support. The lack of data was a major obstacle in getting students to reach out and get support.

Student experiences of misrecognition

Misrecognition goes beyond just looking down on someone or thinking ill of them; it entails a denial of their status as a full partner in social interactions and prevents them from participating as peers in social life. The deeply entrenched institutionalisation of cultural devaluing denies people social esteem and respect. When such patterns of disesteem are entrenched in societal life, they impede parity of participation in the same way that economic inequalities can. Fraser, (2007, p. 11) argues that "recognition reforms cannot succeed unless they are joined with struggles for redistribution – no recognition without redistribution". Three key themes emerged from the data concerning the

ways in which students felt misrecognised and prevented from participating in social interactions as full partners. These are described below.

1. Student hunger

A key factor that can compromise participatory parity is student hunger. This was a real concern at UWC under lockdown. Students indicated that food insecurity was an economic constraint that was hampering their learning:

> At home we run out of food and this makes it very difficult to concentrate on my studies. I am far away from campus so I cannot get assistance with food.

> I always share my NSFAS [National Student Financial Assistance Scheme] food with my family back at home. This means that sometimes I run short but I feel better knowing that my family is also eating. Now things are so difficulty [sic].

2. Mental health stigma

In the Residential Services Annual Feedback Survey, Khan (2020a) found that just over 46% of students who were surveyed had sought counselling services. Anxiety and depression accounted for two of the major issues for which counselling was sought, followed by relationship issues with family members. A total of 42% of students indicated that they had found counselling to be helpful and that it had alleviated the stress that had been brought on by their personal circumstances.

> Being in lockdown made me feel so alone. I thought of ending it all so many times. I wake up in the morning sad and went to bed at night feeling sad [sic]. Nobody in my family understood me. I reached out to the ResLife helpline and got some help.

Stigma in relation to mental illness is a serious social problem that has a multitude of consequences for the individual concerned, as well as for his or her family. In the 2020 Residential Services Annual Feedback Survey, 54% of students indicated that they had not sought counselling (Khan, 2020a). This number is statistically significant as it bears testimony to the stigma that still commonly exists in relation to seeking assistance for mental health issues. Stigmatising students suffering from a mental health illness is a form of misrecognition, since such students are seen as being less competent, unreliable and innately disposed to fail. As a result, they are unable to participate in society on a level footing with other students who are not labelled as suffering from a mental health illness.

> I recently had a breakdown and feel deeply ashamed to let my friends and family know what is happening to me. People don't understand this kind of illness and I feel like I am different from my friends because of what happens to me.

> Suffering from depression is a lonely place and people treat you differently because of what you go through. You are seen as weak and different.

As part of the drive to provide improved services to students, UWC in collaboration with the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) provides a 24-hour toll-free line to students who are experiencing mental health distress. Given the fact that mental health is not freely discussed, many students who contacted the residential services counselling line expressed a reluctance to talk to someone with whom they were not familiar.

3. Gender-based violence

In the Residential Services Annual Feedback Survey (Khan, 2020a), 27 students noted that they had been exposed to gender-based violence during lockdown, while 37 students indicated that they knew of someone who had been affected by gender-based violence.

> I know a good friend who lives in residence with her boyfriend. During lockdown they were fighting every day. He threatened not to give her food and I know he beat her a few times.

> There are many students on residence who are in abusive relationships. Most of them stay because they are fearful or because they are dependent on the boyfriend.

Gender-based violence is a violation of the rights of women and is an extreme form of misrecognition. It annihilates the self-esteem of the woman and erodes her sense of self-worth. Within weeks of countries being placed on lockdown, violence against women increased sharply across the region (UN Women, 2021).

Discussion

Affirmative strategies to address maldistribution and misrecognition

Maldistribution arises when a lack of economic resources prevents students from participating as equals with their peers. For example, when students do not have data, or laptops, or smart cell phones, they are unable to access online learning platforms and psycho-social support. In response to this predicament, UWC embarked on a "Leave No Student Behind" campaign which was aimed at ensuring that all students could purchase a laptop (the expense was added to their fees account) and were given data to complete their academic assignments Many unfunded students were concerned about the increase in the fees as a result of the additional laptop charge.

> I applied to the university via the link they sent to get a laptop. I am still waiting and I am really struggling to complete my academic assignments. I am using my phone at the moment and this only allows me limited functionality.

An additional strategy adopted by the university was to allow all students who were unable to complete assessments during the first semester of 2020 to participate in a catch-up programme which took place immediately after the close of the second semester.

I was told by my lecturer that I qualify to write one of my modules during the catch-up time as I did not have a laptop and was waiting for the university to deliver to me. I am not so sure how I am going to make it. I missed so much work and am so overwhelmed.

The laptop-provision and catch-up initiatives could be viewed as affirmative strategies, as defined by Fraser (2003), since they do not change the status quo that produces and perpetuates the economic inequality in question but rather provide short- to medium-term relief to enable students to participate.

A student who is a victim of gender-based violence will experience low self- esteem as a result of the psychological impact of the violence and this will impact on their academic ability. The university's strategy to address gender-based violence has included the promulgation of a Sexual Violence Policy (UWC, 2018) which is an important measure to give expression to the rights of victims. However, the policy in itself does nothing to dismantle the normative gender relations at the university and in society at large which are steeped in the notion of patriarchy and which promote men's power over women.

I am aware that the university has a sexual violence policy but it doesn't help me when the person I am telling my story to doesn't believe me and makes me feel like the sexual assault is my fault because I went out alone.

Transformative strategies to address maldistribution and misrecognition

Transformative strategies which seek to change the current status quo promise outcomes that are more sustainable and enduring but which are more difficult to achieve. Transformative approaches, while more challenging to implement and sustain, are more likely to bring about social justice, as they aim to change the status quo in society, making participatory parity possible. It is important to note that the provision of transformative strategies to address maldistribution may not be in the purview of the university as this would entail an anti-poverty strategy that addresses the fundamental inequalities that are a legacy of apartheid and which were exacerbated by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic which included the loss of jobs and livelihoods (Sifunda et al., 2020). In this situation, affirmative strategies bring some relief, but do not address the underlying inequities in the provision of higher education.

In order to address misrecognition. Fraser (2003, p. 30) proposes that a transformative approach requires moving beyond reification; and suggests "a status model" under which recognition is treated as a question of social status. This approach rejects models which simplify individual identities into a single group identity and rather advocates for a deconstruction of identities that broadens knowledge and perspectives and, in relation to student development, challenges students to think critically about themselves and the broader social world. A transformative strategy to address misrecognition would further require interventions that target unequal gender relations and seek to promote recognition that identities are multi-faceted (and that university policies and processes should take cognisance of this).

Conclusion

Fraser's (2008, 2009) three-dimensional view of social justice emphasises that, for such justice to occur, institutional arrangements must facilitate the participation of all social actors at the same level as their peers (participatory parity). While the implementation of transformative strategies would bring about substantive change, affirmative strategies can provide temporary solutions which may serve as platforms to raise awareness of the structural changes that are needed. It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic and government and institutional responses to it impacted the student experience in a number of far-reaching ways. Despite the efforts of higher education institutions to transition students to online teaching platforms, the impacts of being isolated in communities where resources are scarce had a profound effect on the ability of many students to participate in the academic project. Increased pressure on mental health; exposure to gender-based violence; and heightened food insecurity during the pandemic affected the social statuses of many students and revealed a close correlation between those who experience maldistribution due to lack of resources and those who experience misrecognition due to a devalued social status.

In this regard, there is a need for both the state and institutional leadership in higher education to prioritise pertinent affirmative and transformative strategies which could bring about participatory parity so that all students can study in an environment that is conducive to learning, including in the real world as well as in relation to online access.

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An Assessment of COVID-19 Pandemic Quarantine and Isolation Programmes: A Case Study of the University of Limpopo

Mochaki D. Masipa,* D. Justin Ramoshaba,** L. Thomas Mabasa,***
K.A. Maponyane,**** Koko N. Monnye,***** Seponono Mampa,·
Tiisetso A. Chuene,·· Mathibedi F. Kgarose··· & Kgaogelotsenene J. Motloutse†

Abstract

South Africa, like the rest of the world, was affected by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. From March 2020, the country's president, Cyril Ramaphosa, imposed lockdown regulations in an attempt to curb the spread of the coronavirus, which led to the closure of universities. When the national regulations allowed for the resumption of university activities, the University of Limpopo had to set up quarantine and isolation facilities as a strategy to manage infections. As a new initiative, challenges would be expected in managing this unfolding situation. Against this background, this paper considers the findings of a study which focused on the establishment and operations of quarantine and isolation facilities at the university. Documents were analysed for the purpose of data construction and substantiated with data collected through semi-structured interviews. The university staff members responsible for the facilities were purposively selected to participate in this study. Data were analysed through thematic content analysis. The study found that the university established the quarantine and isolation facilities according to government guidelines; the facilities were well managed; and activities were implemented as expected. However, operational challenges that require improvements were identified and this article accordingly makes recommendations.

* Dr Mochaki D. Masipa is Dean of Students at the University of Limpopo, South Africa. Email: mochaki.masipa@ul.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0003-3404-7440.

** Mr D. Justin Ramoshaba is a lecturer in the Department of Social Work at the University of Limpopo, South Africa. Email: justinramoshaba17@gmail.com. ORCID: 0000-0002-6961-1972.

*** Prof. L. Thomas Mabasa is an associate professor in Education Studies in the School of Education at the University of Limpopo, South Africa. Email: thomas.mabasa@ul.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0002-8270-4495.

**** Mr K.A. Maponyane is director of the Sport and Recreation Administration, University of Limpopo, South Africa. Email: kakata.maponyane@ul.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0002-9069-8873.

***** Ms Koko N. Monnye is a student research assistant at the University of Limpopo, South Africa. Email: koko.monnye@ul.ac.za. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4119-3756.

· Ms Seponono Mampa is an assistant manager at the Student Health and Wellness Centre, University of Limpopo, South Africa. Email: seponono.mampa@ul.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0001-9907-0567.

·· Mr Tiisetso A. Chuene is a pharmacist at the Student Health and Wellness Centre, University of Limpopo, South Africa. Email: tiisetso.chuene@ul.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0003-1976-146X.

··· Mr Mathibedi F. Kgarose is a data capturer at the Student Health and Wellness Centre, University of Limpopo, South Africa. Email: mathibedi.kgarose@ul.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0001-6955-3883.

† Mr Kgaogelotsenene J. Motloutse, at the time of writing, was a student research assistant at the University of Limpopo, South Africa. He passed away in the course of the production of JSAA 10(2). ORCID: 0000-0002-0458-1063.

Keywords

assessment, COVID-19, quarantine facility, isolation, University of Limpopo

Introduction

On 30 January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus disease 2019 (SARS-CoV-2) outbreak a pandemic and a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). It further proclaimed the outbreak to be a biological threat to 21st-century society (Remuzzi & Remuzzi, 2020). In South Africa, the first COVID-19 case was diagnosed on 28 February 2020. In an endeavour to curb the spread of COVID-19, the WHO came up with multiple strategies, among which quarantine and isolation strategies were identified as fundamental. Considering the magnitude and severity of the COVID-19 outbreak, South Africa declared a National State of Disaster on 15 March 2020. In anticipation of actions that would follow, universities were advised by the Department of Higher Education in collaboration with Higher Education and Training, Health, Wellness and Development Centre (Higher Health) to close and evacuate students. The University of Limpopo suspended operations on 16 March 2020 and sent staff members and students home.

As a decisive measure to save millions of South Africans from infection, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced a national lockdown on 23 March 2020, which officially began on 27 March 2020. The lockdown enforced travel restrictions and led to the closure of educational institutions. The lockdown was categorised into different levels, from level 5 to level 1, with alert level 5 representing the worst case scenario, high levels of infection amidst low health system readiness.

As lockdown alert levels were relaxed, the process of returning students to campus (referred to in this article as "repatriation") came into effect. The university established a repatriation committee, which consisted of a number of university stakeholders, to manage the return of staff and students. Under alert level 4, final-year medical students were repatriated to the University of Limpopo. All other students were supported through remote multi-modal teaching, learning and assessment.

With the return of students, universities were expected to establish quarantine and isolation sites to accommodate students who might have been affected by the virus. The establishment of such sites on campuses was meant to relieve the overburdened national healthcare system. The literature shows that the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has surfaced a range of problems which include putting pressure on healthcare systems which have limited resources to manage the pandemic effectively in the context of high global infection rates (Zhao et al., 2020). The South African Department of Health (DoH) and Higher Health, with guidance from WHO, designed protocols and guidelines to be observed by quarantine and isolation facilities. The guidelines explicitly outlined procedures, processes, and standards for establishing and implementing quarantine and isolation sites (Higher Health, 2020; Department of Health, 2020). Deploying the Higher Health (2020) guidelines advising post-school education and training (PSET) institutions on how to manage and respond to COVID-19 outbreaks, the University of Limpopo

developed a quarantine programme and an isolation programme, which led to the establishment of quarantine and isolation facilities. The quarantine facility was developed to accommodate students who had had close contact with those who had been infected, as well as those who were showing signs and symptoms of COVID-19. The isolation facility was developed for students who were infected with COVID-19. In addition, the university adopted self-quarantine and self-isolation strategies for staff members.

Assessing the implementation and performance of the quarantine and isolation programmes at the University of Limpopo is essential for compliance, accountability and quality enhancement (Babbie & Mouton, 2011). Assessment provides feedback on how the programmes operated and the extent to which their expected objectives were attained (De Vos et al., 2011). To the best of the researchers' knowledge, no study has been undertaken to assess the implementation and performance of the quarantine and isolation programmes at the University of Limpopo. It is this background that necessitated that this study be conducted.

Research Problem

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a sudden closure of universities and colleges in South Africa, had extensive impacts on the teaching and learning activities at these institutions. The ensuing effects included unprecedented levels of anxiety and stress among staff members and students as the spread of the virus continued to threaten the well-being of those on campuses and in the communities around the institutions (Morganstein et al., 2017; Al-Rabiaah et al., 2020). When the government allowed for the resumption of academic activities, universities and colleges were left with the task of preventing and controlling the spread of the virus in order to create a conducive environment for living, teaching and learning. Although universities and colleges resorted to online platforms for teaching and learning and for general communication in an effort to minimise contact (Römer, 2020), the implementation of some academic and support activities continued to require face-to-face interaction, which compelled some staff members and students to return to campuses. To mitigate the spread of the virus on campuses, the government provided *Guidelines for Quarantine and Isolation in Relation to Covid-19 Exposure and Infection* (Department of Health, 2020) for the establishment and maintenance of on-campus quarantine and isolation facilities to ensure that those affected by the virus in these environment would receive appropriate care.

Subsequently, the University of Limpopo adopted the principle of self-quarantine and self-isolation for staff members and provided quarantine and isolation facilities for students. The university created quarantine and isolation facilities based on the government's guidelines; and the Student Health and Wellness Centre (SHWC) was tasked with the responsibility of providing programmes of care and support. There is no evidence that the university programmes have been assessed since their initiation. Considering that the logistics were relatively new and complex, a need arose for the programmes to be assessed in relation to their implementation and to establish possible challenges that would require improvements in the programmes.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to assess the COVID-19 quarantine and isolation programmes of the University of Limpopo. In line with a number of theories which were used as frameworks for the study, the study sought to provide answers to the following main question and sub-questions:

Main question: To what extent did the University of Limpopo implement the intended programme activities?

Sub-questions:

- Does the University of Limpopo have quarantine and isolation facilities?
- How did the University of Limpopo operationalise its facilities?
- Were the COVID-19 standard operating procedures adhered to as prescribed?
- How was the tracking and placing of people under investigation (PUI) implemented?
- How was COVID-19 data managed in the facilities?
- How was quality ensured in the programmes?
- What were the challenges faced in managing the quarantine and isolation facilities and how were they addressed?

Theoretical Framework

To assess the COVID-19 quarantine and isolation programmes of the University of Limpopo, the theory deemed as the most appropriate guide by the research team was the Realistic Evaluation Theory and the Theory of Action.

The Realistic Evaluation Theory as developed by Pawson and Tilley (1997) argues that the success of interventions depends on the underlying mechanisms at play in a specific context. This is confirmed by Maben et al. (2018), who refer to the theory as concerned with the identification of underlying causal mechanisms that explain how an intervention works and under what conditions. This theory is said to be suited for the assessment of new initiatives and innovative programmes, which makes it suitable in relation to this study's efforts to establish what in the University of Limpopo's quarantine and isolation programmes worked, for whom, and under what circumstances, as well what did not work (Pawson & Tilley, 1997).

In addition, the Theory of Action was also deployed in the context of the Realistic Evaluation Theory as a guide for this research. According to Aguilar (2020), the Theory of Action entails predicting what will happen when implementing a set of strategies. The components of a system and the linkages between them are said to be outlined in a Theory of Action (D'Brot, 2019).

Methodology

There are different methodological approaches that can be used to assess a programme. The choice depends on the focus of the assessment (Gerrits & Verweij, 2018). The focus may either be implementation assessment, outcomes assessment or impact assessment. Given the focus of this study was on the implementation of the COVID-19 pandemic

quarantine and isolation programmes, a qualitative approach was adopted. The choice of methodology was informed by the fact that it enabled the researchers to interact with the participants in the study (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). The chosen methodology also helped the researchers to determine the challenges, the support and the ongoing concerns that needed to be addressed as the programmes were being implemented.

Research design

A case-study design was used to assess the programmes. The use of the design was prompted by the research question of the study, and the advantages that it offered in relation to how the study could be conducted, that is, with a focus on assessment of implementation. The design helped the researchers to interrelate with the participants and also to achieve a holistic view by understanding the nuances of the processes involved in the implementation of the COVID-19 quarantine and isolation programmes (Harrison et al., 2017).

Sampling

Ten respondents who were involved in the implementation of the programmes were purposively and conveniently selected to participate in the study. They were: the chairperson of the repatriation committee (CR); the overseer of repatriation coordination (OR); the head of the Student Health and Wellness Centre (HW); the manager of the quarantine and isolation programmes (MP); a data capturer (DC); a pharmacist (P); a nurse who was employed for the programmes (N1); a manager of housing (MH); an officer responsible for catering (C); and the head of the Centre for Counselling and Development (P). Both De Vos et al. (2011) and Greeff (2011) advise that in purposive sampling a particular case is chosen because its demonstrable features are of some interest for the study in question and are of relevance to the topic under study.

All respondents in this study were sampled because they had a stake in the development or implementation of the quarantine and isolation programmes and were expected to have rich information that was deemed appropriate and relevant in answering the research questions. Consequently, the selection criteria were: involvement in the establishment or implementation of the programmes; health practitioner qualification; and a willingness to participate in the study.

Data construction/collection

Research instruments are tools used to collect data (De Vos et al., 2011), and this study made use of a schedule of structured interviews with individual respondents. Structured interviews were utilised to prevent deviation from the scope of the research. In terms of question construction, this study used open-ended questions to gather detailed information on the implementation of the quarantine and isolation programmes and facilities. Open-ended questions, according to Cleave (2017), allow participants to provide detailed information, providing researchers with more useful and contextual responses.

The construction of the interview schedule was guided by both the Department of Health's guidelines (2020) and the University of Limpopo's COVID‑19 health protocols. The 2020 guidelines were provided by the National Department of Health; and the university's health protocols were obtained with the permission of the university's registrar.

As a participatory study, with some of the researchers also participating in the implementation of the quarantine and isolation programmes, internal observations were made through site visits undertaken by those who were authorised to access the highly contagious facilities. A number of people who were involved in the establishment and implementation of the programmes, but were based outside the facilities, were also interviewed. A checklist based on the requirements outlined in the DoH guidelines was used to establish the availability of facilities and resources; and interviews were used to corroborate and confirm the responses in relation to this checklist.

Data Analysis

Analysis of data helps researchers to break data down into a manageable state (Flick, 2013). As the study was qualitative in nature, the data were analysed through a Thematic Analysis approach. This approach was selected because of its potential to assist researchers in identifying and analysing emerging patterns and themes from the data (Nowell et al., 2017). The process started with the transcription of the interviews into text. As Bazeley (2013) and Miles et al. (2014) advise, this was followed by reading the transcripts so that the researchers could familiarise themselves with the data. Data were sorted by developing codes which led to the development of categories. Codes and labels were allocated to words, sentences and paragraphs. This process helped the researchers to analyse the responses of the participants which led to the development of themes (Mori & Nakayama, 2013). The themes that emerged included the establishment of quarantine and isolation facilities at the University of Limpopo; the operation of the quarantine and isolation facilities at the University of Limpopo; adherence to government COVID‑19 standard procedures; tracking and placing people in the quarantine and isolation facilities; managing data in the quarantine and isolation facilities; and quality assurance of the programmes.

Ethical Considerations

As Fleming (2018) and Bos (2020) advise, ethics play an important role in research. This is due to the fact that some of the methods that researchers use can be quite personal and invasive. The conduct of this study adhered to ethical guidelines. An ethical clearance was obtained from the Turfloop Research and Ethics Committee (TREC) of the University of Limpopo with the following project number TREC/139/2021: IR. Permission to utilise the university's documents was obtained from the university's registrar.

Other aspects taken into consideration included informed consent (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Participants were fully informed about the study, its purpose, and the benefits and consequences of participating in the study. They were also informed that

they had a right to not participate in the study and thereafter asked to sign a consent form. Other aspects taken into consideration included confidentiality and anonymity (Fleming, 2018; Bos, 2020). This was ensured by keeping the data confidential and using pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants as reflected in the sampling section of the study. For example, the participants were coded as "MP", "HW", "NI" and "DC".

Discussion

This section discusses and synthesises information relating to the two programmes. Research results are presented based on the themes that were identified during research and in alignment with the research questions to allow for thematic analysis as suggested by Mori and Nakayama (2013). After analysis, six themes emerged, each of which is discussed according to the information that was gathered. Any challenges that were identified in relation to each theme, and any solutions that were proposed under each, are also discussed in relation to the views expressed.

Theme 1: The establishment of quarantine and isolation facilities at the University of Limpopo

The research found that the University of Limpopo repatriation committee established separate quarantine and isolation facilities for students. The quarantine facility was established to accommodate students who presented with COVID-19 symptoms as well as those who had close contact with a COVID-positive person; while the isolation facility was strictly reserved for students who had tested positive. The quarantine and isolation facilities were established as part of efforts to manage the COVID-19 pandemic. This is in line with Brooks et al. (2020), who postulate that facilities such as those for quarantine have been used as a preventive measure for centuries in an effort to deal with major infectious outbreaks; and have proven effective in controlling the spread of infectious diseases, such as cholera.

The respondents indicated that the process followed in identifying sites for the facilities met the requirements of the national guidelines. The researchers are of the view that compliance with the national guidelines enabled the university to provide better facilities and healthcare. This is supported by Aiken (2008) and Shortell et al. (2009), who argue that better health facilities are associated with better healthcare. The national requirements for establishing such facilities included secluding them from dwellings; ensuring security was tight; and deploying the necessary resources for a healthy living environment. It is important to note that the context within which the quarantine and isolation programmes were implemented was an unusual one for the participants. The repatriation committee identified a number of student residences that met the national requirements for establishing the necessary facilities.

At the same time, there was a lack of complete adherence to the infrastructure guidelines. A few problems were identified in establishing the facilities, including the

absence of ramps for wheelchairs, and the fact that rooms and ablution facilities had to be shared, a concern especially at times of heightened levels of infection. The absence of ramps comes as no surprise since the university's residences for students living with disability were not among the identified sites. The sharing of rooms was arranged in a manner that met social-distancing requirements. Such sharing occurred mostly in the isolation areas.

To fulfil the requirements for the establishment of such facilities, it is suggested that a wheelchair-friendly environment be created. Antonak and Livneh (2000) and Wiman and Sandhu (2004) note that neglect of the needs of people living with disability can increase their vulnerability. One of the managers (MP) of the programmes succinctly made the point:

> *My biggest worry and challenge lies with the issue of easy access to the facilities by disabled students, as the facilities are not wheelchair-friendly.*

Maintenance challenges such as power disruption were also reported, with the university's emergency services being called upon to alleviate the resulting problems. This finding is in line with Gehringer et al. (2018), who found that power disruptions pose a serious challenge to paediatric hospital admissions in South Africa.

Theme 2: The operation of the quarantine and isolation facilities at the University of Limpopo

Respondents indicated that the quarantine and isolation facilities operated as per the government guidelines and that the services were available at all times. The participants noted that students were quarantined or isolated for 10 days as per the guidelines and were released from the facilities when declared clear of the coronavirus. An existing management team comprising staff from the Student Health and Wellness Centre provided administrative support and cleaning services, alongside professional nurses who had been trained in how to respond to COVID-19 and were employed on a temporary basis. The services provided in the facilities were said to meet the minimum requirements for the implementation of quarantine and isolation. For example, three meals were provided every day; cleaning followed the required procedure; all staff members were supplied with the appropriate personal protection equipment (PPE); and sanitizer and cleaning disinfectants were made available at all the relevant spots.

Although the number of nurses and the absence of a proper data-capturing programme were initially cited as challenges, a lot of compromise and improvisation facilitated the smooth running of the facilities. In line with the theories used as a frameworks for this study, it was found that the quarantine and isolation programmes benefitted the students and eased the health threat to the broader welfare of the campus, as alluded to by Morganstein et al. (2017). One respondent (HW) noted:

> *The operation of the university quarantine and isolation facilities is as per the guidelines. For example, the facilities are open for 24 hours [a day, each] week.*

Participants indicated that the university had not employed an environmental health practitioner, which had inhibited appropriate inspection of the facilities. Therefore, the strict facility-inspection procedures suggested by the national guidelines could not be undertaken. The challenge was exacerbated by a ban on external visitors under the university protocols at this time. This is in line with the findings by David and Mash (2020) at a quarantine facility in Cape Town where a number of staffing-logistics challenges were identified. Some of the facility management activities at the University of Limpopo were managed internally by university staff members.

Theme 3: Adherence to government COVID-19 standard procedures

It is necessary to state that reporting on most of these services required site visits for direct observation. Unfortunately, such visits were vetoed as a result of the nature and behaviour of the coronavirus. Thus, the information on this aspect of the facilities' operations was obtained indirectly from the staff members working in these spaces.

It was reported that the SHWC team developed a protocol to guide the delivery of services in the quarantine and isolation facilities, based on national standards. Pawson and Tilley (1997), in line with one of the theories used as a lens in this study, advise that deployment of good mechanisms leads to successful interventions. In this regard, the delivery of the services at the facilities entailed the implementation of standard operating procedures for both clinical and non-medical teams and the establishment of appropriate infection prevention and control measures. The study found procedural adherence to the protocol in areas including the stringent use of PPE within the facilities; well-executed daily clinical examinations of the residents and referrals to the nearest hospital for stabilisation; proper record keeping; and appropriate housekeeping, disinfection and decontamination procedures. Laminated paper was used for demarcating areas where necessary. The adherence to guidelines and protocols was confirmed by one of the respondents (N1) who noted:

> Students are mandated to wear masks in the facilities and must be catered for in the facilities and this has been happening in the university facilities.

The movement of residents from one facility to another and the processes for their discharge strictly followed the protocol. That said, services were often affected by a surge of infections and some instability would be caused by the limited staff complement. Although the disposal of waste material was not supervised by an environmental health practitioner, staff members were well trained on how to dispose of PPE in coordination with the university's waste management company. Although it had been expected that an entrance and an exit would be provided at each of the facilities, the study found that, in fact, one main gate at each of the facilities was used to monitor and restrict both inward and outward movement. Inside the facilities, residents' rooms were separated, and no visits were allowed.

Challenges experienced in this area of service provision were reported as manageable mainly because staff members were well prepared to deal with the problems. This is contrary to the findings of David and Mash (2020), who found that there were challenges with regard to staff.

Theme 4: Tracking and placing people in the quarantine and isolation facilities

The respondents indicated that, in line with the national guidelines, the professionals within the facilities were tracking and placing students who came under investigation. The respondents indicated that the process of tracking and placing was triggered by a number of factors such as: arriving with COVID-19-related symptoms and reporting having been in close contact with a person who had tested positive for coronavirus but had failed to take the recommended safety precautions. In such cases, tracking and placement would be initiated immediately. Screening at the university gates also assisted in identifying people suspected of having contracted the virus, who would then be immediately placed under observation in the quarantine facilities. One respondent involved in the repatriation process (HW) noted:

> *At the gates, for example, everyone is screened and mandated to disclose any symptoms they might be having. If the person is positive, all their close contacts will be contacted or reached for placement or admission in the facilities.*

According to one of the respondents (DC) involved in the facilities, those with whom the students who tested positive had been in contact were tracked down.

> *Say during screening a positive student indicates that they have been in contact with so and so, the process of tracking and placing will unfold.*

According to the respondents, the main challenge in this regard was when the alleged contacts of those who had tested positive denied having had any such contact. This made it difficult to bring suspected cases to the quarantine facilities. Another reported challenge was the difficulty in detecting COVID-19 among students living off campus, especially if they did not seek help from the SHWC. This finding is in line with Kariuki et al. (2021), who found that privacy and confidentiality concerns can inhibit quarantining and tracing, especially when using an app.

The Realistic Evaluation Theory as developed by Pawson and Tilley (1997) argues that the success of interventions depends on the underlying mechanisms at play in a specific context. Accordingly, this study found that the quarantine and isolation programmes had been satisfactorily implemented.

Theme 5: The management of data in the quarantine and isolation facilities

The respondents indicated that the data captured at the quarantine and isolation facilities were well managed and kept safe and confidential. The quarantine and isolation programmes utilised an electronic register designed by the data capturer in the SHWC

to capture data and to enable access to these data, while the hard copies of the patient files were kept locked away. This adherence to ethical standards of confidentiality and anonymity was confirmed by one of the facility managers (MP):

> *The confidential information does not get shared with wrong people. It is managed and shared within professionals. Even in the reporting to seniors, like those in student affairs, the names of students are not shared; only statistics, general challenges and successes are shared.*

Captured data were reportedly analysed statistically for reports that were shared with the management of the institution. This is in line with the findings by Ienca and Vayena (2020), who found that data management can also be used to mitigate future infections. This indicates that instead of treating data management as an ethical issue only, it can also be used as a strategy to mitigate future pandemics.

Theme 6: Quality assurance of the programmes

In line with the theories used as lenses for this study, one of the themes that emerged was that of quality assurance. The managers of the programme provide supervision at the facilities. For purposes of compliance with the university's health protocols, public health officers paid weekly visits to the facilities to monitor their activities and compile reports. These reports were presented at weekly meetings of the Division of Student Affairs, where general challenges are discussed and solutions are sought.

The study found that an online client satisfaction survey tool designed by the COVID-19 response team in the SHWC had been produced for quarantined and isolated students. Such online forms of communication have become quite common under what may be referred to as the "new normal" and, as Römer (2020) indicates, have provided some of the most effective strategies for "mediating" the situation under COVID-19. On admission, students were provided with particulars of those responsible for the management of the quarantine and isolation sites, as well as the details of those in authority at the university who could be contacted when emergency attention was required. The study found that, accordingly, the offices of the Dean of Students, the director of the SHWC and the director of the Centre for Student Counselling and Development (CSCD) were among those regularly consulted by students. This strategy of furnishing the students with a range of contacts who may be contacted in relation to COVID-19 issues assisted with the monitoring of services in the facilities.

Meanwhile, the study also found that the isolation and quarantine facilities offered no opportunities for physical and recreational activity, which could explain why many of the students in these spaces reportedly expressed discomfort in the facilities, with some demanding an early discharge. Most such cases were referred to university psychologists who offered counselling online. In this context, problems of internet connectivity experienced by a number of students were reportedly resolved when a new facility for the quarantine and isolation programmes was established. Baker and Greiner (2021)

assert that there is also a need to manage patient stress by giving them comfort and providing them with knowledge about the pandemic.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study include following: limited literature on the assessment of COVID-19 quarantine and isolation facilities; insufficient responses to some of the questions because only a few respondents had access to the facilities.

Recommendations

There is a need
- for the utilisation of facilities that are disability-friendly to accommodate disabled individuals;
- for the university to employ an environmental health practitioner not only for COVID-19-related matters, but also for general assessment of its own facilities;
- to intensify health education to address challenges such as refusing to disclose close contacts in the facilities; and
- for the establishment of physical and recreational activities to deal with the discomforts that were reported by occupants of the facilities.

Conclusion

The data and analysis above suggest that the University of Limpopo developed effective quarantine and isolation programmes and established facilities within which quarantine and isolation could take place. This research found that the quarantine and isolation programmes adhered to government COVID-19 standard operating procedures and that the tracking and placing of people under quarantine and isolation were effectively implemented. The programmes were managed by experienced SHWC staff members who were able to capture and manage data properly and administer a client-satisfaction survey tool effectively.

The study identified a number of challenges and made recommendations where necessary. It found that some of the challenges encountered had been resolved through improvisation by using available resources. However, it was found that the university should attend to the lack of an environmental health practitioner, whose services are essential for the effective management of health programmes and facilities in general, as a critical matter.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Demographic and Systemic Factors Affecting Student Voter Turnout in Africa's Largest Distance Higher Education Institution

Tshegofatso Mogaladi* & Motlatso Mlambo**

Abstract

Public higher education institutions in South Africa conduct Student Representative Council (SRC) elections yearly. However, there is a paucity of studies to determine factors that affect voter turnout in these elections. This descriptive quantitative study conducted an empirical analysis of factors influencing students' voter participation at Africa's largest Open Distance eLearning institution. An electronic survey instrument was distributed among the sampled students and yielded a final response count of 6,851. A joint descriptive statistical analysis and binary logistic regression model were applied to analyse the data. Regression analysis revealed that there was a significant relationship between students having encountered one or more of a number of marketing initiatives employed in relation to the elections and voter participation. This positions marketing as a significant predictor of student voting given that respondents who encountered SRC election marketing initiatives were seven times more likely to vote, as shown by the odds ratio (OR=7.9 [95% CI:6.6-9.3], p=0.001). The second-highest predictor of voting in this study was the impact of the closing date for voting. Student respondents who indicated that the voting period was long enough were two times more likely to vote compared with those who did not believe it was long enough (OR=2.2 [95% CI: 1.9-2.7], p-value <0.001). Other significant predictors of SRC voting included gender, employment status and level of qualification. Whereas the study revealed a fair balance between the influence of demographic and systemic factors on SRC electoral process, institutions need to pay close attention to systemic factors, which have great potential to constrain voter participation.

Keywords

elections, voting, voter participation, student governance, higher education institutions

*   Tshegofatso Mogaladi is currently deputy dean of Student Affairs at the University of the Witwatersrand. The research reported on in the present article was based on an initiative he undertook as deputy director of Student Development at the University of South Africa. Email: tshegofatso.mogaladi@wits.ac.za; gtmogaladi@gmail.com. ORCID: 0000-0002-8643-1981.

**   Motlatso Mlambo (PhD) is the director for Institutional Research, Department of Institutional Intelligence at the University of South Africa. Email: mlambmg@unisa.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0002-3061-4770.

Introduction

According to Lewis and Rice (2005), there is high quality research being conducted on national elections in the United States (US), although numerous other elections held in that country are less researched and reported on. Similarly, in South Africa, there is a paucity of research on elections beyond those conducted for positions in government, for example, in relation to positions in business associations; boards; the labour movement; student governance structures; and many other societal organs. Studies on elections in South Africa predominately focus on national and provincial (general) elections, as well as local government (municipal) elections. Other forms of election remain relatively unexplored. This could be attributed to the societal perception of general elections as the main conduit for conveying demands and aspirations related to service delivery (Paret, 2016). However, elections of representatives to bodies such as Student Representative Councils (SRCs) and other organisational elections need to receive greater research attention, in part because such studies may reveal some of the reasons for participation and non-participation in elections in general, including in local government elections which have suffered from declining voter participation, especially among the youth, in South Africa.

Hahn (1998) provided an insightful analysis on the importance of SRCs and the purpose they serve in fostering engagement in society and communities. For example, SRCs can provide a platform for nurturing leadership capabilities, as well as exposing students to the nature and role of elections as mechanisms for decision-making in society. In this way, SRCs and SRC elections play an important role in developing future active citizens. The societal benefits accruing from SRC elections and involvement in student governance activities have been elucidated and corroborated by other researchers (Print et al., 2002; Print, 2007; Saha & Print, 2010). These researchers note that voting and participating in student governance activities raises consciousness among students and is a predictor of their involvement in political activities in the future by imparting indelible lessons in democracy. Voting and participating in student governance activities is also indicative of students' preparedness to vote later in life as well as their propensity to advocate for peaceful social activism.

Mattes and Richmond (2015) suggest that South Africa is contending with youth voter apathy which manifests in the form of low participation rates in local, provincial and national parliamentary elections among young people. South Africa's youth were relatively unlikely to identify with any political party and a relatively high number indicated that they had not voted in recent elections although they reported following the election campaigns of political parties quite closely (Mattes & Richmond, 2015). Meanwhile, Statistics South Africa (2021) reports that a significant percentage (23%) of youth within the 18–35 age group is enrolled in public higher education institutions. In this context, an investigation into voting behaviour in respect of SRC elections might help to explain this cohort's inclination, or lack thereof, to participate in general elections.

The current study offers an empirical assessment of how factors such as field of study; access to information communication technologies (ICTs); employment status;

and student age and gender, influenced voter turnout in the recent SRC elections at the University of South Africa (UNISA) – an open distance e-learning institution of higher learning which states on its website that it boasts 350,000 enrolled students and therefore accounts for one-third of students enrolled in formal public higher education in the country.[1]

Theoretical Framework and Relevant Literature

This study is underpinned by three theories: social systems theory; structural conduct performance theory; and participative leadership theory. Social systems theory, which was coined by a biologist named Ludwig von Bertalanffy in the 1940s, contends that organisations and societies comprise multiple systems which, while performing distinct roles, work iteratively to advance organisational and social missions (Wambui, 2015). Accordingly, universities are systems consisting of numerous units or sub-systems that work collaboratively for the attainment of their broader goals. SRCs are one of the important units within universities. The Higher Education Act 101 of 1995 mandated that SRCs be established at higher education institutions on an electoral basis to represent students and as an essential aspect of institutional co-operative governance. Although the management of universities in terms of institutional policies and statutes is firmly a responsibility of appointed senior executive managers, the voice of students, as championed by the SRC, is taken into account in decision-making.

In his seminal work, Bain (1951) argued that the conduct of an industry is informed by its structure. In this context, the higher education landscape in South Africa encompasses private and public institutions with different operational models. The focus of the current study is on the largest higher education institution in the country, which adopts a distance and electronic model for the delivery of its educational programme. Given its character, UNISA would be expected to elect and constitute its SRC in a manner distinctly different from that adopted at contact institutions. Similarly, the election of SRCs at UNISA is necessarily shaped by a diverse range of operational and systemic factors that reflect the distinct structure of UNISA as an institution.

The theory of participative leadership assumes that participation improves institutional effectiveness; affirms democratic principles; and makes leadership available for legitimate stakeholders (Leithwood et al., 1999). In the context of this study, it is argued that participation in the SRC elections by students has a long-term benefit for society as it increases students' consciousness and gears them to become responsible citizens who can contribute to the country's political and socio-economic system. In this regard, a determination of the factors that impact on the participation of students in SRC elections may support efforts to improve individual perceptions of elections in general, particularly among the youth.

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1   See https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default#:~:text=Unisa%20at%20a%20glance&text= We%20enrol%20nearly%20one%2Dthird%20of%20South%20African%20students.

Previous research (Wolfinger & Wolfinger, 2008; Milligan et al., 2003; Berinsky et al., 2001) demonstrated how various factors influence voter turnout. In their study, Wolfinger and Wolfinger (2008) considered how registered voters' decision to vote or not to vote related to social attributes which numerous other researchers had considered to be predictors of voter turnout, namely, age; education; and residential mobility. Wolfinger and Wolfinger (2008) added four more variables to this list: family income; race; sex; and employment status. Married people with and without children recorded the highest turnout rates in comparison with those whose marriages had been ended by death, separation or divorce, who were found to have a lower inclination to participate in elections. Those who were never married yielded the lowest turnout. Among married couples, a more politically perceptive spouse was more likely to inspire a less politically informed partner to vote (Harder & Krosnick, 2008). Meanwhile, in relation to divorced or separated couples, earlier research (Sandell & Plutzer, 2005) found increased voter participation among whites compared with other races.

People with little or no education and living in low-income households tend to record a low voter turnout (Wolfinger & Wolfinger, 2008). Milligan et al. (2003) found a robust relationship between education and voter participation in the US but not in the United Kingdom (UK). People with higher educational attainment possess skills and enhanced ability to navigate often-cumbersome election-registration processes (Harder & Krosnick, 2008). In addition, the more education one attains the greater the inclination to take interest in civic activities in comparison with people with less education (Harder & Krosnick, 2008).

Studies have shown that higher-education graduates in the social sciences tend to be more involved in civic activities and tend to vote more than graduates in other fields of study (Nie & Hillygus, 2001; Hillygus, 2005). In this regard, it was anticipated that the present research would establish whether there was variation across discipline of study in relation to turnout for SRC elections at a South African university.

A Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) survey on South African voter participation in elections conducted in 2005 revealed that interest in participating in the elections was lowest among those who had matriculated and higher among those with no schooling. This finding contradicts Wolfinger and Wolfinger (2008), who found that the more highly educated took voting more seriously than their less-educated peers.

Leighley and Nagler (1984) found that income significantly impacts voter turnout. In this context, Harder and Krosnick (2008) investigated whether the greater propensity to vote among wealthier people and earners was a question of motivation or of ability, or of both. In the context of the present study, this leads to the question: Did income levels significantly influence turnout for the SRC elections? The result may provide clarification on the economic status of participants in SRC elections.

Berinsky et al. (2001) found that voter turnout hinges on, among other factors, the amount of time that eligible people are willing to spare to cast their vote. People are generally preoccupied with many personal and private obligations which they are expected to forego on a voluntary basis and opt instead to queue to vote. In other words,

there is an opportunity cost entailing a choice between participating in the election, on one hand, and optimizing one's available time to meet private personal obligations and commitments, on the other. Ryabchuk (2017) concluded that widespread abstinence from participating in South Africa's 2014 elections was partly caused by logistical obstacles which included an inability to travel from home to the voting stations.

Casting a vote is a culmination of numerous electoral activities such as following candidate's campaigns; attending rallies and debates in some instance; and registering as a voter. Although the financial costs to the voter of participating in these activities may not be that evident, they cannot be ruled out as a factor in determining levels of participation. McMurray (2010) argues that high-income earners who are older and educated have the luxury of participating in political activities, although the opportunity cost of such an engagement is higher for this group than it is for older people living in a lower income base.

Efforts to eliminate the opportunity cost of participating in elections may lead to increased voter turnout. Accordingly, ICT mechanisms to enable online voting have been introduced for many elections. The introduction of such mechanisms may be viewed as a necessity in the context of the fourth industrial revolution, and also as an answer to widespread voter dissatisfaction about the opportunity cost of participating in elections. For example, HSRC (2005) found that 49% of respondents in Mpumalanga province were quite dissatisfied with the amount of time they had to spend in the queues to cast their votes. Berinsky et al. (2001) posit that whereas voting by email is not necessarily effective in attracting the participation of non-traditional voters, it is effective in retaining active existing voters and therefore contributes to voter turnout.

Against the backdrop of this finding, there would be value in exploring whether the benefits of an enhanced online ICT electoral system that went beyond voting by email would extend to more than merely ensuring the retention of existing voters, as Berinsky et al. (2001) found, and could include encouraging non-traditional voters to take an active interest in the elections.

In this context, institutions of higher learning may be seen as places where new forms of voting could be deployed to test their potential effectiveness if they were to be rolled out more widely across society. Accordingly, there is clear value in assessing the nature of student uptake of the ICT-enhanced online voting system adopted for the SRC elections at UNISA, as well as the factors which shaped student access to this system.

Age has been found to be a significant demographic factor shaping voter turnout across the United States during presidential elections (Leighley & Nagler, 1984). In South Africa, turnout at general elections among 25–34-year-olds rose by a mere 11% from 1999 to 2004 and declined by 1% among people between 55 and 64 years of age (HSRC, 2005). Meanwhile, those between 18 and 44 years of age expressed a lack of interest in voting at forthcoming elections (HSRC, 2005). The influence of age on voter turnout in the context of SRC elections in South Africa is unexplored. In this regard, a key question is whether participation is higher among the first-time registered voters who are typically young (between 18 and 20 years of age) and then diminishes as the

student becomes older and more socialised into the university's system, and thus sees less value in the role of the SRC.

Harder and Krosnick (2008) argue that people with greater political efficacy are generally expected by society to cast a vote; although this argument is, to an extent, countered by Mattes and Richmond (2015) who found that South African youth, despite following the campaigns of various political parties, did not translate their political awareness into participation in recent elections. Saha and Print (2010) posit that, given the significant role played by student governance structures in contributing to an individual's comprehension of democracy and the nature of their future political engagement, involvement in these structures should not be viewed in isolation from other kinds of academic engagement, as if it were a form of extracurricular activity. Accordingly, there is a need to debunk what has become a dominant narrative: that, in some way, SRC activities should be considered "non-curricular". In this context, the compulsion to draw a disconnect between student activism and the purported core business of institutions of higher learning – that is, teaching, research and community engagement by academics and those in authority – may be countered by studying factors associated with student elections.

Data and Methodology

This study explored factors that influenced voter turnout during SRC elections at the University of South Africa. A survey was administered among selected South African students who were eligible to participate in the 2018 SRC elections in accordance with a university policy limiting participation to students who are registered for formal qualifications. Such qualifications include higher certificates, diplomas, and undergraduate and postgraduate degrees.

Data set

Qualtrics software was used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. In administering the survey, a Qualtrics-generated link was sent to 10,000 randomly selected South African students who were eligible to participate in the 2018 SRC elections at the University of South Africa. Each province's representation in the sample was determined on the basis of its number of students proportionate to the university's total student headcount at the time of the elections. For example, given that students residing in Gauteng province constituted 42.2% of the total UNISA student headcount in 2018, according to the university's Higher Education Data Analyser (HEDA), 42% of the 10,000 sample comprised students who resided in Gauteng. The same principle was followed for the other provinces, that is North West (NW), Limpopo (L), Mpumalanga (MP), Northern Cape (NC), KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), Eastern Cape (EC), Western Cape (WC) and Free State (FS). The composition of the complete sample by province is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Sample construction by province

	GP	NW	L	MP	NC
Head count	157,166	19,447	28,929	22,443	4,129
Head count %	42.2	5.2	7.8	6.0	1.1
Sample selection	4,300	500	700	600	100
	KZN	EC	WC	FS	Grand Total
Head count	85,075	17,334	29,497	8,195	372,215★
Head count %	22.9	4.7	7.9	2.2	100
Sample selection	2400	400	700	300	10,000

★ *Excluded from the total number of eligible students were all the students residing outside South Africa (9,153), who could not be attached to any province.*

Method and variables

Whether or not the particular surveyed student voted during the 2018 SRC election was used as the determinant of turnout and constituted a dependent variable. Students who did not vote were assigned a zero (0) and those who voted were coded one (1), making this a dichotomous variable. As in previous research (Leighley & Nagler, 1992; Lewis & Rice, 2005; Saha & Print, 2010), the influence of a number of demographic and systemic factors on voter turnout were considered. Regarding demographic factors, the influence of age; education by broad discipline; household income; and gender were considered in relation to turnout. The impact of the individual student's adaptability to electronic voting and access to ICT infrastructure, as well as the closing date of voting, and access to election marketing and campaign debates were included in the model for the present study as control variables. Student age was categorised under two codes, with zero "0" representing the youth, that is those aged 35 and under, and one "1" for students who were over 35 years of age but under the pensionable or retirement age of 60.

UNISA has nine faculties referred to as colleges. For the purposes of this study, the college of graduate studies and the business school were excluded. So, only students at the seven colleges offering both graduate and undergraduate programmes were surveyed, so that the comprehensive diversity of UNISA's Programme Qualification Mix could be represented. The chosen colleges were grouped into two broad categories for the purposes of this study: technical and non-technical. Accordingly, the colleges offering the most technical qualifications (College of Science and Engineering; College of Agriculture; College of Accounting; and College of Economics and Management Sciences) were clustered together and assigned a code of zero "0". The other colleges (College of Human Sciences; College of Education and College of Law) were regarded as human and social science disciplines and non-technical, and were coded one "1".

A student who was unemployed was coded zero "0" and a student who was employed was assigned a code of one "1". In relation to income, a code of zero "0" was assigned to students who earned an income, or lived in a household with an income equivalent to less than the ZAR 350,000 threshold set by the National Student Financial

Aid Scheme (NSFAS) to determine eligibility for receiving a state study grant. A code of one "1" was assigned to students who earned an income or lived in a household with an income above the NSFAS threshold and the band qualifying for a gap grant – in other words, above ZAR 600,000. A code of two "2" was allocated to those students whose household income was more than the threshold but fell within the band that qualifies for a gap grant – that is, from ZAR 350,000 to ZAR 600,000.

Regarding gender, female students were coded zero "0" and male students one "1".

In relation to access to ICT, students who had no access were coded zero "0"; students who used their own data or cell phone to cast a vote were coded one "1"; the students who used their employer's or UNISA's Wi-Fi or network facilities were coded two "2".

Voting during the SRC elections was opened for two weeks. Students who found the period too short were coded zero "0". Those students who found it sufficient were coded one "1". The SRC elections were marketed through various media. A code of zero "0" was assigned to students who did not see any of the marketing and promotional materials. Students who saw an actual SRC elections poster were assigned a code of one "1"; those who read an online publication about elections were assigned a code of two "2"; and students who encountered printed t–shirts, branded caps, and other promotional paraphernalia were coded three "3". Students who attended one of the student debates that were arranged by the election commission across many regions before the elections were coded one "1". Those who did not attend the debates were coded zero "0".

The model

To model the demographic and systematic factors influencing the student voter turnout in SRC elections a logistic regression by Field (2009) was employed:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \times_{1i} + \varepsilon_i \tag{1}$$

where Y_i represents an observed turnout outcome, for example, whether or not the respondent voted in the last SRC elections; β_1 is a vector of estimable parameters (coefficients) of $\times_{1i}$, which is a vector of explanatory variables (independent variables); and ε_i is the error term. Turnout in SRC elections is influenced by a number of factors which are quantified to serve as the explanatory variables. Therefore, the model in equation 1 is reconstructed to set dependent variables as well as all identified independent variables within a multiple regression:

$$\begin{aligned} Vot_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1\, age + \beta_2\, edu + \beta_3\, inc + \beta_4\, gen + \beta_5\, ict + \\ \beta_6\, cdat + \beta_7\, adv + \beta_8\, deb + \beta_9\, emp + \varepsilon_i \end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

Where Vot_i is whether or not student $i'th$ voted during the recent SRC elections, *age* is a predetermined age group to which the student belongs; *edu* is the field of study in which

the student is enrolled; *inc* is the student level of income; *gen* is the student's gender; *ict* the manner in which a student accesses ICT infrastructure; *cdat* the extent to which a student perceives the impact of the closing date on their decision about whether or not to vote; *adv* is the depth of the advertisement mechanisms employed during the elections; *deb* is the student's awareness of election debates; and *emp* is the student's employment status. All in all, there were nine independent variables that may be considered linearly related to voter turnout.

Survey respondents

In adherence to the ethical requirements of this study, respondents gave consent to participate in the survey before responding. The electronic survey had an opening phrase requiring consent for participation. Only participants who read and accepted the terms of the opening phrase, thus granting consent, were eligible to participate.

Table 2: Consent participation

Consent to participate	N	Percentage (%)
Yes	6,851	97.4
No	181	2.6
Total	**7,032**	**100**

As can be seen from Table 2 above, a total of 7,032 students opened the survey link. Only 181 (2.6%) declined to participate. Accordingly, the analysis of the survey results is based on the total 6,851 (97.4%) respondents who agreed to participate.

Results

Characteristics of voters and non–voters in the SRC elections

Table 3 shows that among those aged 31 to 35 years a relatively high proportion (52%) voted. While almost half (49.7%) of those aged 22 to 25–year–olds voted, which was the second highest proportion. At the other end of the scale, 53.3% of those aged 40 and above did not vote. All of which indicates that the younger students under the age of 35 years were more likely to participate than those older than 35 years, particularly if they were aged 40 years or above.

Table 3: Characteristics of SRC election voters and non–voters

Variables	Not voted		Voted		p-value
	N	%	N	%	
Age					
18–21 years	90	51.1	86	48.9	.460
22–25 years	417	50.3	412	49.7	
26–30 years	555	51.3	527	48.7	
31–35 years	375	48.0	407	52.0	
36–40 years	276	51.9	256	48.1	
40 and above	367	53.3	322	46.7	
Gender					
Male	739	42.9	983	57.1	<0.001
Female	1,337	56.8	1,018	43.2	
Other	4	30.8	9	69.2	
Employment status					
Unemployed	1,032	47.1%	1,159	52.9%	<0.001
Employed – part time	136	49.1%	141	50.9%	
Employed – full time	789	55.8%	626	44.2%	
Self-employed	86	67.2%	42	32.8%	
Retired	3	33.3%	6	66.7%	
Other (specify)	34	48.6%	36	51.4%	
Annual income					
ZAR 10,000 – 350,000	1,521	51.4%	1,437	48.6%	0.203
ZAR 351,000 – 600,000	190	55.4%	153	44.6%	
ZAR 601,000 and more	104	47.9%	113	52.1%	
Qualification					
Certificate	179	53.1%	158	46.9%	0.187
Undergraduate degree	1,538	51.1%	1,472	48.9%	
Honours degree	115	45.6%	137	54.4%	
Master's degree	45	42.1%	62	57.9%	
Doctorate	32	56.1%	25	43.9%	
Other (specify)	107	54.6%	89	45.4%	
Postgraduate below master's	64	48.9%	67	51.1%	
Election debate awareness					
Yes	50	10.8%	412	89.2%	<0.001
No	1,883	56.8%	1,431	43.2%	
Did not know	147	47.4%	163	52.6%	

Variables	Not voted		Voted		p-value
	N	%	N	%	
Timing					
Voting period was short	1,006	62.6	600	37.4	<0.001
Voting period was long enough	900	39.4	1,384	60.6	
Marketing of SRC elections					
I did not see any of the SRC election advertising and marketing	1,529	76.6%	466	23.4%	<0.001
I did encounter a poster promoting the SRC elections	121	21.5%	442	78.5%	
I did read an online publication on the SRC elections	341	28.3%	864	71.7%	
I did encounter a printed t-shirt, branded cap or other SRC election material	23	11.3%	181	88.7%	
Other (specify)	34	68.0%	16	32.0%	
Email	3	37.5%	5	62.5%	
MyUnisa	2	33.3%	4	66.7%	
SMS	3	60.0%	2	40.0%	
Word of mouth	2	28.6%	5	71.4%	
WhatsApp	1	100.0%	0	0.0%	
Facebook	0	0.0%	2	100.0%	
P<0.05*, P<0.01** and P<0.001***					

Binary logistic regression model on predictors of SRC voter turnout

Table 4 below shows the binary logistic regression model on the predictors of SRC voting. The assessment was conducted at a confidence level of 95%. A positive coefficient implies that the explanatory variable positively impacted the dependent variable, whereas a negative coefficient would imply that the explanatory or independent variable impacted the dependent variable negatively. Although there was a positive coefficient among the 31–35-year-olds (b=0.06, SE=0.243) and the 36–40-year-olds (b=0.091, SE=0.257), age was not a significant predictor of SRC voting. Whereas gender reflected a negative coefficient (b= -0.713, SE=0.091), it was a highly significant predictor of voting, with females showing less chances of voting (OR=0.4 [95% CI: 0.4-.0.6], p=0.001) compared with males. Additionally, although being employed full-time and/ or self-employed was a highly significant predictor of SRC voting, the chances of these groups voting were below the odds of 1, (OR=0.6 [95% CI:0.5-0.7], p=0.001) and (OR=0.3 [95% CI: 0.2-0.5], p=0.001) respectively. Retired respondents had a positive coefficient (b=0.904, SE=0.922) and the odds of them voting in the SRC elections were higher (OR=2.5 [95% CI: 0.4-15.0], p=0.327). However, this was a non-significant

predictor of SRC voting. A positive coefficient was noted among the respondents with a relatively high salary of ZAR 601,000 and more (b=0.258, SE=0.193). However, this was not a significant predictor for SRC voting. Therefore, income was found to be an insignificant predictor of SRC voting.

Table 4: Binary logistic regression model on predictors of SRC voting

	B	SE	p-value	Exp (B)	95% CI for exp (B)	
					Lower	Upper
Age (years)						
18–21				1		
22–25	–0.105	0.24	0.661	0.9	0.563	1.44
26–30	–0.088	0.236	0.71	0.916	0.577	1.454
31–35	0.06	0.243	0.806	1.062	0.659	1.711
36–40	0.091	0.257	0.724	1.095	0.662	1.81
40 and above	–0.221	0.255	0.385	0.802	0.487	1.321
Gender						
Male				1		
Female	–0.713	0.091	<0.001	0.49	0.41	0.585
Other (specify)	0.583	0.879	0.507	1.792	0.32	10.042
Employment						
Unemployed				1		
Employed – part-time	–0.264	0.171	0.122	0.768	0.55	1.073
Employed – full-time	–0.495	0.113	<0.001	0.609	0.488	0.76
Self-employed	–1.187	0.259	<0.001	0.305	0.184	0.506
Retired	0.904	0.922	0.327	2.471	0.406	15.049
Other (specify)	–0.451	0.346	0.192	0.637	0.324	1.254
Annual income						
ZAR 10,000 – 350,000				1		
ZAR 351,000 – 600,000	–0.105	0.158	0.509	0.901	0.66	1.229
ZAR 601,000 and more	0.258	0.193	0.182	1.295	0.886	1.892
Qualification						
Certificate				1		
Undergraduate degree	0.219	0.17	0.197	1.245	0.892	1.738
Honours degree	0.518	0.237	0.029	1.679	1.054	2.674
Master's degree	0.689	0.312	0.027	1.991	1.081	3.668
Doctorate	0.178	0.397	0.653	1.195	0.549	2.603
Other (specify)	–0.184	0.257	0.476	0.832	0.503	1.378
Postgraduate below master's	0.22	0.281	0.432	1.246	0.719	2.16

	B	SE	p-value	Exp (B)	95% CI for exp (B)	
Election debate awareness						
Yes				1		
No	–2.052	0.2	<0.001	0.128	0.087	0.19
Did not know	–1.551	0.246	<0.001	0.212	0.131	0.343
Closing date impact on voting						
Voting period long enough	0.803	0.09	<0.001	2.232	1.872	2.662
Marketing						
Seen marketing	2.065	0.088	<0.001	7.889	6.644	9.367

Qualification has a positive coefficient and is a significant predictor of voting among the respondents with honours degrees (b=0.518, SE=0.237) and master's degrees (b=0.689, SE=0.312) with odds of more than 1, (OR= 1.7 [95% CI: 1.0-2.7], p=0.029) and (OR=1.10 [95% CI:1.1-3.7], p=0.027) respectively. In relation to awareness of election debates, respondents who were not aware of the debates recorded a significantly higher negative coefficient (b=–2.052, SE=0.2), suggesting that students who were not aware of election debates were less likely to participate in voting in the SRC elections (OR=0.1 [95% CI:0.1– 0.3], p=0.001). The coefficient of –2.052 suggests that for a unit increase in students who were not aware of election debates, voter turnout would decline by an average of 2.052. In relation to the impact of the closing date on voting, there was a positive coefficient (b= 0.803, SE=0.09) and it was found to be a significant predictor of voting for those who indicated that the voting period was long enough (OR=2.2 [95% CI: 1.9-2.7], p-value e <0.001). In relation to exposure to SRC election marketing, there was a strong positive coefficient, and this was found to be a highly significant predictor of voting (b=2.065, SE=0.088), especially among the respondents who had seen SRC election marketing information and materials. Respondents who had seen such marketing were seven times more likely to vote (OR=7.9 [95% CI:6.6-9.3], p=0.001) than those who had not.

Model summary

The Omnibus Test of model coefficients shows a significant chi-square indicating that the model fits well in describing predictors of SRC election voting. However, the Cox and Snell R and Nagelkerke R squares were non-significant. On the other hand, the Hosmer and Lemeshow Test revealed significant results suggesting that the model was a good fit for the predictors of SRC election voting. The study R-squares is 0.42, which implies that the variability in voting could be explained by independent variables at a scale of 42%.

Discussion

The survey had a high response count/rate of 6,851 or 97.4%. This could be an indication of the importance students attached to participation in the SRC elections as a means of ensuring student representation in university decision-making structures and processes.

This study aimed to determine the profile of students who voted in the 2018 SRC elections and assess predictors of voter turnout for SRC elections using binary logistic regression analysis. Additionally, the research sought to ascertain whether and how students' access to ICT infrastructure had influenced turnout during these SRC elections. The profile of the students, including in relation to gender; age; employment; income level; and level and field of study, was analysed to assess whether and how these factors had influenced voter turnout. Taking a closer look at the profile of students who participated in the SRC elections, descriptive analysis revealed less involvement among the young group of students between 18–21 years in the first years of study, which could be explained by the relatively small size of this cohort as part of UNISA's student body. At the same time, participation in elections of the SRC was generally greater among those aged 35 and under. This could be ascribed to the electoral model followed at UNISA, which is student-organisation based and may thus limit interest and engagement among older students. Interestingly, there was no significant difference between those who voted and did not vote by age ($p < 0.460$).

It was found that more female students of Indian descent seemed to be participating in the SRC elections. The reasons for this may relate to access to technology; socio-economic status; and the kind of marketing that was deployed during the elections. This was unexpected in the context of the electoral model and the racial profile of successive SRCs over time.

There was a highly significant difference between those who voted and did not vote by gender, confirming the findings of Wolfinger and Wolfinger (2008) who noted a disparity in voter turnout in relation to gender. Additionally, the results revealed that unemployed females were relatively quite likely (70.6%) to vote, although this could be a reflection of the nature of the high national unemployment rate. This finding may corroborate Berinsky et al.'s (2001) assertion that voting depends on people making time to cast their vote. In this context, unemployed female students might have more time enabling them to vote. Interestingly, the current study also found that males pursuing the highest qualification level were also more likely to participate in SRC-related processes, which may be viewed as testament to Milligan (2003) who found that educated people were more likely to vote. In the context of this study, this finding could also be indicative of the greater interest in politics in general among male students. The income category for both male (76.4%) and female (88.5%) respondents was generally in the ZAR 10,000–350,000 annual income range, regardless of race. This is inconsistent with Harder and Krosnick (2008) who demonstrated income disparity among voters.

Binary logistic regression revealed numerous predictors of SRC voting. The study found that exposure to SRC election marketing was a highly significant predictor of voting. Respondents who had been exposed were seven times more likely to vote

(OR=7.9 [95% CI:6.6-9.3], p<0,001) than those who had not. This variable was the most significant in the study, indicating that greater efforts should be made to address challenges relating to access to, and visibility of, election marketing, including information on the why and how of voting. The second-highest predictor of voting in this study was the impact of the closing date. Those who indicated that the voting period was long enough were two times more likely to vote than those who did not believe it was long enough. At the same time, this study found that adequate time was given to the voter. That there is no justification for the duration allocated for voting to be associated with low voter turnout affirms Berinsky et al.'s (2001) finding regarding the intricate balance that voters must create between their personal engagements and the time that they need to set aside to cast their vote.

The current study also revealed that being unaware of SRC election debates was associated with not voting. Manifesto presentations by candidates are an important factor in moving people who would not otherwise participate in an election closer to casting a vote. This finding is consistent with Ryabchuk (2017) who places the emphasis on the logistical arrangements that electoral agencies should put in place to make voting simple. Noting that this study attributes abstention to a lack of awareness about SRC election debates, organisers of future elections should ensure broad awareness about the debates and ascertain that they are accessible to potential voters.

Other significant predictors of SRC voting were gender, employment status and level of qualification. Females were less likely to vote than males. Accordingly, the way in which the SRC elections are held should challenge the gender imbalances that characterise the country's political landscape at present. Those who were employed on a full-time basis or who were self-employed were less likely to vote. So, future voting campaigns should target these two groups of students in an effort to improve turnout.

Contrary to previous studies (Leighley & Nagler, 1984; Harder & Krosnick, 2008; Wolfinger & Wolfinger, 2008), no significant relationship could be established between age and voter participation in the SRC elections. Similarly, household income disparities were found to be a non-predictive factor in SRC elections, which runs contrary to Leighley and Nagler's (1984) findings and is of interest given the interconnectedness between employment and voter participation that the study found.

Conclusion

This study explored demographic and systemic factors that impacted voter turnout during the 2018 SRC elections at South Africa's largest institution of higher learning, UNISA. The study revealed the importance of numerous factors, including marketing; election debates; gender; employment status; and level of qualification, as significant predictors of voter turnout.

In accordance with structural conduct performance theory, the marketing of the elections using various media including technological infrastructure resonated with the structure of UNISA as an open distance e-learning (ODeL) institution. In this context, the performance of the election system may be seen as reflecting the investment made in

marketing the elections online to reach students who are not on campus but are scattered across the world. Against this background, a key finding was that awareness of election debates could improve voter participation (the coefficient of –2.052 related to electoral debates suggests that for a unit increase in students who were unaware of election debates voter turnout would decline by an average of 2.052). This indicates that proper logistical planning by the organisers and implementers of election projects is required to promote greater awareness of, and engagement in, election debates.

Meanwhile, the disparity in turnout according to level of education among male students, with those at the postgraduate level significantly more likely to vote, could be a reflection of the level of consciousness among this part of the student cohort of students; and may possibly be an indicator of broader societal politics in the country which are male-dominated and in which the level of education among political leaders and public representatives has become an increasingly contentious issue. In essence, the study results indicate that male students who were enrolled for postgraduate studies were more likely to vote than male undergraduates, which could be attributed to a more sophisticated political understanding on the part of the postgraduate students.

The study also revealed an urgent need for the university to revise its policies in an effort to accommodate older students more meaningfully in its electoral dispensation. The relatively low levels of turnout among members of this group seem to indicate that they perceive little or no relevance in the present student party-based system for electing students into SRC office, which also fails to reflect the demographics of the university's student cohort that accurately.

Most of UNISA's student body is composed of students who come from low income-based households. Accordingly, the study reflects no significant impact on voter turnout by student household income.

The limitations of this study include the fact that the survey was conducted months after the elections. So, the circumstances of some of the survey participants might have changed between the elections and the time of survey. Another limitation is that the results of this study cannot be generalised given the uniqueness of UNISA and its student profile. In this regard, future such studies may be undertaken at contact universities. Furthermore, in order to improve the performance of the model, future studies should consider dropping non-significant variables following the first test and run second and third tests in order to reduce multicollinearity which could distort the results.

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Developing Online Student Leadership Training Interventions so that Disadvantaged Black Students May Enjoy a Seat at the Proverbial Table

Juan-Pierre van der Walt*

Abstract

The advent of COVID-19 and the consequent imposition of a national lockdown from March 2020 in South Africa spurred South African universities to introduce new remote ways of delivering their curricula and offering extra-curricular activities. Some of these new modes of delivery tended to disadvantage already socio-economically disadvantaged black students whose lack of access to appropriate equipment, tools and data prevented them from properly accessing and fully utilising the new forms of e-learning on offer. In this context, this article considers the challenges faced by student affairs professionals at the University of Pretoria in offering new, inclusive forms of online leadership-development training to students in leadership positions at the institution. It analyses data collected from student leaders between 2016 and 2020 at the university which indicated that there had been a lack of leadership development among disadvantaged black students at high school level compared with that on offer to white students in high school. In this context, this article describes how student affairs professionals at the University of Pretoria sought to translate face-to-face leadership training into online initiatives that would ensure that already disadvantaged black students would not be disadvantaged further through differential access to leadership-development training, particularly given their greater need for such support due to their relative previous lack of exposure. This article further places black students' needs for equitable access to leadership training in the context of the individual and structural advantages that can accrue from such training, including in relation to career development and occupying leadership positions in the economy and society.

Keywords

student development, WhatsApp, student life, student leadership, student development, training, student leadership development, COVID-19

Introduction

As South Africa entered a government-mandated lockdown imposed in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, academic and professional staff members of residential universities were faced with a highly complex predicament: How to continue academic and extracurricular programmes while face-to-face contact was

* Juan-Pierre van der Walt is Coordinator: Day Houses and manager of SRC sub-committees in the Department of Student Affairs, Student Development Unit, at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. Email: Juan.pvdwalt@up.ac.za.

impossible? Under various levels of lockdown, the problem persisted for most of the 2020 academic year.

In response e-learning[1] as an emergency measure became a priority in tertiary education (Mpungose, 2020) and budgetary and development resources were deployed accordingly. At the same time, extracurricular programmes, such as student development, were placed on hold at many institutions, including at the University of Pretoria. At the universities where these programmes continued, they were deprioritised and resources were funnelled elsewhere towards the curriculum. Deprioritising critical extracurricular programmes became part of the devastating collateral damage caused by the pandemic.

As the academic year continued and the situation in countries such as South Africa showed little sign of significant improvement, student affairs professionals faced the challenge of re-establishing extracurricular activities and training in what had now become a predominantly online environment. As a student affairs professional who specialises in leadership development within the University of Pretoria, I have first-hand experience of the challenges that were faced at this time.

This article considers the vital role of universities in exposing students to leadership development, with particular reference to the exposure of black students to such development and their need for such training, as shown by the quantitative analysis of data gathered from student leaders at the University of Pretoria. The data, which were collected via a number of surveys of student leaders at the university with the purpose of improving the training on offer, were interpreted with reference to these students' previous experience of leadership development at school and their resulting needs in occupying leadership positions at the university. It was found that there had been no leadership training for many black students at school; while almost all the white students had been exposed to such training. In this context, this article considers how the university's Department of Student Affairs sought to provide inclusive virtual leadership-development support under COVID-19. In particular, the article focuses on the department's efforts to close the existing gap in leadership-development between the white and black students, instead of allowing it to deteriorate due to a lack of access to data and equipment among disadvantaged black students.

Student Leadership Development

The student development model adopted by the Department of Student Affairs (2016) at the University of Pretoria places emphasis on the development of students as the leaders of extracurricular activities and student life at the university. The institution is structured in such a way that the Student Representative Council (SRC) and its subordinate structures are mandated to (among other responsibilities) ensure a healthy and diverse student life. This mandate is implemented through an intricate leadership structure of executive committees operating in the various areas of student life.

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1   E-learning refers to education that takes place over the internet. It has become an umbrella term for non-face-to-face learning platforms (Mpungose, 2020).

Comprising about 280 selected and elected student leaders every year, the student leadership cohort promotes stability on campus. Including by playing a crucial role in managing the implementation of extracurricular activities. In an effort to help these students perform their roles effectively, the Department of Student Affairs, mainly but not exclusively through its Student Development Unit, contributes leadership–development support. A crucial aspect of this work is to ensure that the support on offer addresses the variable exposure of students to leadership development before university. The students on the various student leadership committees form the basis of the sample for this study.

Table 1 below indicates the extent of leadership training received before entering university as reported by incoming black and white student leaders between 2016 and 2020. The information in this table was sourced from successive annual student leadership development initiation surveys undertaken by the Student Development Unit after the election of incoming student leaders every September from 2016 to 2020. This survey was designed to indicate, through self–identification, the leadership background of the new student leaders. The aim of this survey is to provide data so that student development initiatives and training are of relevance and meet identified needs. One of the questions student leaders were asked was: "Have you received leadership training or development in high school?" A follow–up question for students who replied "No", was: "Did your high school provide leadership development and training?"

Table 1: Responses to student leadership development initiation survey conducted from 2016 to 2020 on high–school leadership–development experience, by race.

	Students who had received student leadership development in high school		Students who did not receive student leadership development in high school		Schools that provided student leadership development		Schools that did not provide student leadership development	
Racial demographics	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White
2016	31%	98%	69%	2%	38%	100%	62%	0%
2017	34%	94%	66%	6%	41%	100%	59%	0%
2018	35%	97%	65%	3%	40%	99%	60%	1%
2019	30%	97%	70%	3%	43%	100%	57%	0%
2020	31%	98%	69%	2%	37%	99%	63%	1%

Table 1 indicates that black students were much less likely to have received leadership development training at their high schools than white students.

This article does not aim to research the background of leadership development in South African high schools and the reasons for the differential provision thereof. However, the results of the student leadership initiation surveys undertaken at the

University of Pretoria indicate that a lack of pre-university leadership development among black students might be an issue worth further study.

In the context of this proviso, Table 1 indicates that black students were much less likely to have received leadership development training at their high schools than white students, most of whom had participated in some form of leadership development at high school. The data in Table 1 further indicate that not only had most of the black students lacked exposure to leadership development, they had also been denied the opportunity of such exposure since their schools had offered no such programme.

Participating in leadership development at high school level can foster greater understanding among the students interested in assuming positions of leadership at university level of what such roles are likely to entail. In this regard, annual student leadership development conclusion surveys conducted as the student leaders came to the end of their terms in office from 2016 to 2020, asked: "At the beginning of your leadership term, did you have an accurate idea of what the term [in office] will entail?"

Table 2: Results from student leadership development conclusion surveys conducted from 2016 to 2020 on expectations of leadership, by race.

	Students who had an accurate idea of what their term in office would entail		Students who did not have an accurate idea of what their term in office would entail	
Racial demographics	Black	White	Black	White
2016	43%	74%	57%	26%
2017	40%	71%	60%	29%
2018	39%	77%	61%	23%
2019	39%	76%	61%	24%
2020	37%	77%	63%	23%

This survey, which was conducted among the same student leaders who had been surveyed at the beginning of the year, implies that far fewer black than white students knew what they were letting themselves in for when they became leaders, which would have had a significant effect on their understanding of the impact that student leadership would have on them, including on their academics.

The data from the various student leadership development surveys conducted from 2016 to 2020 indicate that black students at the University of Pretoria were more likely to lack exposure and opportunities for leadership development at high school than white students, which implies that the university provided the first opportunity for many black students to gain exposure to leadership development. Against this background, Gott et al. (2019) note that experience in leadership development during the course of one's education can foster substantial future career-development opportunities. In this context, the university should focus on developing the leadership skills and understanding of disadvantaged students as part of its mission to make all students more

employable and more likely to lead the society and economy of the future (Department of Student Affairs, 2016).

Leadership Development and the COVID-19 Challenges

Under COVID-19, the challenge of ensuring equitable access to leadership skills and the need to support black student leaders in this respect was compounded by the shift to e-learning (Mpungose, 2020), which generally further disadvantaged students from already disadvantaged backgrounds.

Previously, leadership development efforts had either taken the form of face-to-face interventions or had been implemented using a hybrid approach offering learning content both face-to-face and online. Access to the training on offer had been partial prior to the pandemic outbreak. For example, student leaders whose transport options were limited could not take advantage of the leadership-development support that was on offer as effectively as the others. However, with the complete shift to online interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic, the split between privileged and underprivileged students became even clearer, with many disadvantaged black students unable to access the interventions provided, as was found by Mpungose (2020).

Much of the online content previously made available by the Student Development Unit at the University of Pretoria had been forged on the understanding that it would be fully accessible to students deploying the Wi-Fi and digital devices available on campus, the assumption being that students spend most of their time on campus and could therefore access these resources at will.

However, under lockdown and with the closure of residential campuses, such access was no longer possible. In addition, it soon became apparent that the online interventions that had previously been made available to support access to learning and extra-curricular activities were insufficient to meet the needs of the new situation. The main stumbling block for many students without access to internet via either Wi-Fi or LAN was inadequate access to sufficient data packages to use the online services. Although institutions provided data and zero-rated internet resources, such resources were quite limited. Given the need to prioritise data use, students tended to reserve data for online learning and other academic endeavours. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds also had lacked adequate access to smart devices, such as smartphones, laptops and tablets, preventing some of them from accessing any form of online learning. Although higher education institutions did their best to assist students, limited resources remained the reality. In this context, extracurricular activities were not prioritised by institutions and became inaccessible to disadvantaged students facing data and equipment shortfalls.

A number of further challenges in producing appropriate online versions of curricula and training were identified. In particular, syllabi that had been delivered face-to-face or in hybrid form were not that easily translated into content that could be distributed online. For example, many materials could not simply be translated into videos and slideshows in relation to the leadership development training offered by the University of Pretoria. In addition, it was difficult to assess how much time students had

at their disposal to engage in this training under the new online conditions for learning. In this regard, time and resource constraints among students led to the syllabus being redesigned, so that essential parts of the training were covered first. However, in seeking to redesign the leadership-development syllabus, the Student Development Unit also had to take account of the different kinds of training required by the student leaders at the various stages of their leadership.

Furthermore, given that much time had already been lost due to initial uncertainty around the pandemic and its likely impacts, there was a need to condense the information that was to be made available without rendering it inaccessible or less meaningful to students who had previously had little to no previous interaction with, or exposure to, student leadership development.

At the same time, many of those in student leadership positions who had been elected or selected in September, which is when the university's one-year term in office for such positions starts, had already undertaken the first part of their training in 2019, and were already halfway through their term in office when the South African lockdown was announced in March 2020. This bought the Student Development Unit some preparation time, since only the supplementary and additional parts of the training had to be redesigned and presented in the immediate future.

However, in the medium and longer term, it became apparent that the likelihood of contact sessions resuming by the time of the next round of leadership elections and selection in September 2020 was extremely low. This prompted a rush to redevelop and adjust the syllabus and interventions in such a way that incoming leaders would receive the necessary training. This was a challenge that created significant uncertainty as such had never before been attempted at the institution.

There also arose a moral question about equitable access to extracurricular student development under lockdown. Given the inability of some students to participate in, and make use of, student leadership development resources as a result of socio-economic constraints and limited access to the necessary resources, a new threat had emerged: that advantaged students would be further privileged by their ability to access online leadership interventions, placing already disadvantaged students at a further disadvantage as a result of their inability to strengthen their capacity through such training. In this context, it was asked: Should student development be continued with those who had access at the cost of those without access?

In response, it was decided by the Student Development Unit that students could not be left behind because of their socio-economic status and inability to access online training. So, the question then became: How to find a way to allow all students to enjoy the benefits of extracurricular student development? In this context, it became quite clear that the form of online engagement undertaken prior to lockdown was insufficient for the new situation and that the form and content of this engagement had to be rethought and redesigned to create accessible, efficient, inclusive platforms for student leadership development.

Redesigning Student Leadership Development to Meet COVID-19 Challenges

Identifying needs

The first challenge in redesigning student leadership development under COVID-19 entailed identifying the needs of the students who were no longer on campus, some of whom were also experiencing limited online access. In the past, student development surveys had offered quick and easy means of gauging information and making informed decisions. However, under the pandemic and conditions of limited online access for many students, it was realized that any information gathered online would be skewed towards those students who had access to data and devices. Therefore, the establishment of more widely accessible contact and communication lines became the priority.

Given that the cohort of students in leadership positions was relatively small (about 280), it was decided that each of these students could be contacted via telephone by staff members of the Student Development Unit in order to gather information on the best way forward for establishing a scalable, sustainable communication channel. From the telephone survey, it became clear that most students, black and white, had access to some form of smart device, predominantly smartphones, but very few black students (18%) and a significant proportion of white students had quite limited access to data. This meant that many of the students would not be able to access data-heavy training videos or spend significant time on online training platforms. However, from the telephonic survey, it also became clear that every student in the cohort had access to the WhatsApp communication platform.

Table 3: Student leader data and device requirements

	Students who required data		Students who required devices	
Racial demographics	Black	White	Black	White
2020	82%	17%	4	0%
2021	71%	22%	1%	0%

Choosing a communications platform

The WhatsApp platform thus became the clear front-runner for communication. With its relatively low data-consumption rate compared with, for example, web-based communication platforms, and with the added benefit of low device requirements, it became the platform of preference for student leaders in the cohort. Deploying the programme's functionality, it also became easy to group students together and tailor communications to meet individual needs. Furthermore, various communication providers had data plans that dedicated data specifically to the WhatsApp platform. It was therefore agreed that WhatsApp would be the predominant communications medium for the student leadership cohort.

With lines of communication established in the form of various small, specific WhatsApp groups, a quick, responsive process of establishing student leaders' needs regarding training, and communication and access requirements was put in place. This provided the data required by the Student Development Unit in its efforts to understand how the university's leadership-development initiatives should be redesigned to align with the students' identified needs and the communications platforms at their disposal.

Redesigning the form and content of the training

Listening to the expressed views of the student leaders, the Student Development Unit realized that long videos exceeding two minutes in length were inefficient, and that any intervention that required downloading or printing was out of alignment with the resources and equipment to which many of the students had access. In this context, significant parts of the content developed and adjusted over the years of the leadership development programme became obsolete, as the focus turned to producing a solution designed around the media and resources to which the students had access.

Accordingly, the first step was to redesign the curriculum to include short, high-impact interventions through which the Student Development Unit focused on engaging student leaders with questions that could be answered quickly and directly.

A rapid redesign of the syllabus content also had to take place. In this regard, the Student Development Unit moved away from long, text-heavy slideshows to making use of small, low-resolution infographics. A focus on systematic flow and core information replaced the deployment of heavily contextualized settings and image- and text-heavy content. The emphasis was on producing clear summaries of the key content and presenting these in a simple way that did not require the use of large amounts of data or complex software. An added benefit of the new form for the content was that it spoke to the image literacy of the student cohort. Once the information presented in support of student-leadership development had been condensed, it became that much easier and quicker to present, addressing the challenge of student time constraints which had previously been identified. At which point the main outstanding challenge remained that of the platform that should be chosen to communicate the syllabus.

A two-pronged approach

A two-pronged approach was adopted in relation to the question of which media to use. The first prong was to replace the video content that had previously been provided before the pandemic with discussions held on the various WhatsApp groups that had now been established among the student leadership cohort. Expert trainers were scheduled to present the content in summary form, deploying low-resolution images and short voice notes as required. In the smaller groups, student leaders could then engage and question the presenters, and a fast, responsive form of engagement was created. The learning environment that was created in this way proved to be a robust one which had the added advantage of linking student leaders together to further their learning process

through the deployment of various supplementary resources. Student leaders were able to lead the communication and interaction process, guiding the topics under discussion so that they addressed their actual training and capacity-building needs. The WhatsApp approach also fostered quite strong participation among the students, presumably because the discrete groups that were formed tended to protect participants from the greater exposure that they would have faced had they engaged in discussion on a larger public platform.

The second prong was the University of Pretoria's online blackboard learning programme, ClickUP – which, like WhatsApp, has a zero rating. This was deployed to provide supplementary resources. The students were already familiar with this easily accessible platform, which meant they could spend their time on understanding the content being presented, rather than on orientating themselves to the platform.

The deployment of WhatsApp and ClickUP allowed the discussions and content disseminated via these platforms to remain available for future reference. In addition, the emphasis on engagement produced by the deployment of these platforms encouraged continued learning among the student leaders. By enabling the establishment of smaller groups, the use of WhatsApp also facilitated a more focused form of engagement and an approach better suited to the specific student leadership structures to which the students belonged, allowing leadership development that had never been previously possible during face-to-face training. At the same time, a number of students were unable to access these platforms because they lacked either data or devices, which posed a challenge that had to be overcome by the Student Development Unit in its quest to ensure that no student would be disadvantaged in the new training environment.

Equitable access to devices and data

Although the cohort had access to WhatsApp, some students did not have a sustainable source of data or lacked appropriate devices. In the context of institutional budgetary constraints under which funding for academic programmes was prioritised, this posed a significant challenge. In part, this was addressed by a scheme under which the university loaned devices to students in need. In addition, the Student Development Unit sought to help students receive devices via donations.

Addressing the issue of access to data, the Student Development Unit found that only 5GB or less of data was required for the redesigned student-development training curriculum. The relatively low levels of data required meant that students who were identified as being in need could be assisted quite easily via various fundraising initiatives which led to the data being delivered directly to their devices.

Sustainability

The final challenge that needed to be addressed was the long-term scaling and sustainability of the newly developed training process. In this regard, the problem of access to devices seemed to have been addressed by the widespread provision of these to students in need

by higher education institutions keen to ensure continued learning via online media. This placed the Student Development Unit in the strong position of being able to leverage this provision to further students' extracurricular learning at the institution.

The long-term sustainability of providing sufficient data for the leadership-development training was less assured in the context of the fundamental uncertainty of funding provision. However, given the relatively small size of the student leadership cohort and the low data-consumption requirements of the new training programme, the risk of the necessary data costs not being covered from the internal budget and donations was considered minimal.

Monitoring and evaluation

Although measurement of the impacts of the new leadership-development programme was incomplete at the time of publication, preliminary monitoring indicated positive results. At the same time, it should be noted that the cohort surveyed soon after lockdown was implemented had previously received initial face-to-face training at the beginning of their terms in office in September 2019. Furthermore, the second cohort, that entered office from September 2020 and was trained exclusively online, was still in office at the time of the preparation of this study and the process of measuring the impacts of the new low-data, online leadership-development programme on them was still under way. Nevertheless, it would seem that the initiative has proven successful on a practical basis insofar as the student leaders have continued to function at the expected level, although exploration of the longer-term effects of the new training programme would require further research and data collection.

Providing Black Students a Seat at the Table

In the aftermath of the Fallist student protest movements which erupted across South Africa from 2015 (Lester et al., 2017), the challenge of access to universities, particularly for black, disadvantaged students has been a recurrent theme in the discourse and remains a key issue of contention (Nkanjeni, 2021), as was made clear when national protests against tuition and accommodation fees and financial and academic exclusions at South African universities broke out once again early in 2021. In this context, the lockdowns imposed in response to COVID-19 from March 2020 highlighted and exacerbated inequity in the provision of higher-education services to students – inequity that has been shaped by a legacy of oppression on the basis of race which has continued to deny poor, black students the same opportunities as white students.

So, for example, Table 1 above shows that almost all of the surveyed student leaders who had not previously participated in a leadership-development programme at school were black, reflecting the disadvantaged background of many black South Africans (Cejas, 2007). In this context, institutions of higher learning have a responsibility to provide disadvantaged students with platforms and access to training and experience that can help to negate the legacy of inequity (Nathane & Harms Smith, 2019). This responsibility

extends beyond simply providing black students with access to academic qualifications. It should also entail offering them extracurricular development and, in particular, leadership training which can not only enhance their employability (Speckman, 2015), but also equip them with leaderships skills and experience to which they previously had no access in high school (Gardner-Lubbe et al., 2016).

Before the pandemic and the resulting lockdowns in South Africa, students were able to access equipment and the internet on campus. However, under lockdown, students no longer had access to these resources, placing a responsibility on institutions of higher learning to redesign and foster student leadership-development and other extracurricular activities in such a way that all students could access them.

The provision of equitable access to leadership development programmes should be considered as crucial given the impacts of such programmes in equipping student leaders with the confidence, the eloquence and the voice to represent the interests of their student peers and to claim and insist on opportunities that foster their own economic and social betterment. Such betterment may take the form of enhanced career opportunities for the particular student leader, including in the shape of a relatively high income and senior managerial position. In addition, promotion into managerial positions would enable these individuals to make decisions and implement changes at a high level, potentially shaping the future of South African society and the country's economy. Thus, leadership-development training can offer students, in particular disadvantaged, black students, a seat at the table.

In this context, the student development model adopted at the University of Pretoria (Department of Student Affairs, 2016) includes a mandate to help students to develop themselves as potential future managers and leaders in an equitable way. Such efforts entail ensuring that the provision of leadership-development opportunities must not be to the detriment of a particular group, which is an issue that requires constant attention. In this regard, responsible, equitable innovation in the area of student development, including in relation to the deployment of institutional resources and the creative use of accessible platforms, should be promoted.

In this context, the case study described in this article may serve as an example of how a student leadership-development programme may be adapted creatively and in an innovative fashion to ensure equitable provision under difficult circumstances. It further indicates the importance of producing individual, tailored approaches in response to student needs and specific resource constraints. Student development professionals should not be afraid to redesign and adapt approaches away from the norm to ensure that individual needs are met and to ensure that all students enjoy a seat at the table regardless of their socio-economic background. This case study also indicates the importance of adopting new media and different approaches to addressing student needs. In particular, it illustrates how, in an age of fast-paced, interactive communications, the students themselves may be best placed to advise on how their needs may be most effectively met, as long as student affairs and development professionals are prepared to listen to and learn from them.

Conclusion

The participation of black student leaders at the University of Pretoria in school leadership–development programmes was found to be much more limited than that of white student leaders, placing black students at a significant disadvantage in terms of leadership skills and experience. In addition, black students had less access to communications devices and, in particular, internet in their home spaces. It is therefore essential, in an effort to ensure equity, that institutions of higher learning employ creative methods to overcome the legacies of inequitable access to opportunity, as well as current impediments to access, which may be faced by black students in relation to leadership development training (as well as other extracurricular activities). This became quite evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when lockdown restrictions on movement highlighted and exacerbated the challenge of inequitable access, leading student affairs professionals at the University of Pretoria to address this problem in new ways. In this regard, institutions of higher learning had, and continue to have, a particular responsibility to foster the leadership abilities of black students so that they can enjoy a seat at the table of socio–economic power and influence on an equitable basis.

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Research article

Keeping Up with Changing Times: Student Leaders, Resilience, Fragility and Professional Development

Liezl Dick,* Marguerite Müller** & Pulane Malefane***

Abstract

The Fallist movements of 2015/16 brought about rapid change to the South African higher education space, which required student leaders to reconsider their roles as agents of change and transformation. Student leaders contribute as stakeholders of and decision-makers in student governance, and some find themselves in a context where their working and living spaces become increasingly entangled. This is a particularly challenging context, which requires them to conflate their personal and "professional" lives. In this article, we focus on the challenges student leaders face as peer educators in both on- and off-campus residences of the University of the Free State (UFS), Bloemfontein, South Africa. The resilience and vulnerability of student leaders, and how these play out in their experiences at UFS, will be highlighted. The importance of self-reflection, resilience and fragility in professional development will be explored. Guided by the theoretical underpinnings of pedagogy as transformative and humanizing, and a multiple-method-approach that included survey data as well as arts-based methods, we engaged with student leader experiences in order to understand how they negotiated challenges in a space of tranformation and constant change. We found arts-based research to complement and support the more conventional data gathering process. Our article thus highlights how methodological inventiveness can address new and different questions that arise in our rapidly changing pedagogical space. Through this, we highlight the complex micro-social experiences of student leaders who live in spaces of transformation. Student leaders are in a unique position as people who live and work in the student community, and their role as peer educators remains largely unexplored. In this article, we hope to contribute to a body of knowledge that could foreground student leadership in relation to transformed pedagogy.

*   Liezl Dick is a ResEd curriculum coordinator at the Centre for Student Communities, Stellenbosch University, South Africa. Email: liezldick@gmail.com. ORCID: 0000-0001-8261-1910.

**   Marguerite Müller is a lecturer in Education, Communication and Society at King's College London, United Kingdom. Email: m.muller@kcl.ac.uk. ORCID: 0000-000107620-470X.

*** Pulane Malefane is assistant director of Student Affairs at the University of the Free State, South Africa. Email: malefanep@ufs.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0002-1881-1835.

Introduction

During a time of crisis, leadership is tested, and leaders can either rise to meet the challenge or fail to live up to the expectations of their role. Working at the University of the Free State (UFS), South Africa, and specifically within the division of Student Affairs, we have witnessed the toll that crises such as the Fallist movements and COVID-19 pandemic have taken on student leaders.

The 2015 #RhodesMustFall movement, culminating in the #FeesMustFall and #PatriarchyMustFall movements and together known as the #Fallist movements, posed new challenges to higher education transformation. The demands of the students centred around "free education" and the "decolonization of knowledge" (Hendricks, 2018, p. 17).[1] On a global scale and more recently, as the COVID-19 pandemic spread from country to country, national lockdowns and work from home became the new norms. Education swiftly moved from physical classroom spaces to virtual and digital platforms. Unexpectedly, teachers around the world were teaching from their living rooms. A sudden move out of the traditional workplace setting into personal space undoubtedly influences the way we think about professional identity. For student leaders, it was no different – overnight, they found themselves having to perform leadership roles in the virtual space. The shift to online learning and interaction during the COVID-19 pandemic further exposed some of the fault lines and inequalities in the South African education landscape (Schreiber et al., 2020).

The Fallist movements and COVID-19 pandemic have changed the South African higher education landscape dramatically. Given this, the role of a student leader has been redefined by intense challenges and sudden changes. In the context of this article, we consider the student leadership role to be a semi-professional. We understand the semi-professional as being someone who is trained for a role and acts as a mediator between organisational goals and stakeholders. In this case the organisation is the university and students are the clients. According to Whitty (2006) the nature of professionalism is traditionally tied to occupations like law and medicine with teaching and educator's being viewed as semi-professional. However, in contemporary sociology – and specifically those sociologists working from a feminist perspective – has taken a critical view of what professionalism entails. For example, Davies (1995, 1996) sees traditional notions of professionalism as "characterised by elitism, paternalism, authoritarianism, highly exclusive knowledge, control and detachment" (Whitty 2006, p. 3). Taking a more collaborative and democratic view on professional work, and how organisations like universities function, it could be argued that student leadership is semi-professional work as these leaders mediate the university's organisational goals in relation to the student needs of the cohort they serve. Although student leaders do not belong to a professional body or have a formal qualification for this role, they do receive training for

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1   Decoloniality, in this context, can be read as the recognition of "the incomplete nature of political decolonization and in particular the displacement of local knowledge and hierarchy, and privileging of certain knowledge systems" (Hendricks, 2018, p. 10). See Nyamnjoh (2016) for more in this regard.

their role and have significant responsibilities to various stakeholders within the higher education sector which is why we consider them as semi-professionals.

In this article, we use private/public and personal/professional entanglements as a backdrop, to highlight the importance of pedagogy as transformative, holistic and humanizing. We furthermore explore some of the challenges student leaders faced as they moved beyond their leadership development to a place where they experienced tension between the professional-personal binary. Student leaders in on-campus residences are expected to perform their roles and duties in the same spaces that they live, thus creating this tension between their working and living environments, where the private and the public spheres of their lives merge. We view student leaders as peer educators with responsibilities in semi-professional roles and will consequently explore the importance of self-reflection, resilience and vulnerability in their student leadership development roles and professional development.

The question we explore in this article is: How can we better prepare our student leaders to lead during times of rapid change and crisis? Our aim was thus twofold. First, we explored the experiences of student leaders in 2019 in order to acquire an understanding of the context they worked and lived in at the time. We also looked at how these experiences could be used to inform peer-educator role-training that would be suitable to respond to their experiences. Student leaders are uniquely positioned as they simultaneously work and live among the student community. Their roles as educators deserve more exploration. In this article, we hope to contribute to a body of knowledge that could foreground student leadership in relation to transformed pedagogy.

Exploring the Student Leadership Experience: 2018-2019

After a number of student protests on the UFS campus, it became clear that students were unhappy and frustrated with university management and the student leaders were caught in the middle of the engagements and communication. We noticed that the challenges of the role took a toll on some student leaders, whereas others were able to meet the demands of their professional, academic and personal obligations. Therefore, we decided to initiate a project to explore the student leader experiences in order to improve training and support that could develop more resilient student leaders.

We collaborated on this project from different angles. Pulane is the head of residence life, which includes residence programmes and the training of student leaders. Liezl is a former residence head and researcher in the higher educational space, with a specific focus on transformation. Marguerite is a former residence head and also a lecturer in education, with an interest in educator experience and professional development. We came together on this project because of shared experiences and a shared commitment to transformation of the higher education space.

It is understood that the transformation of higher education in South Africa is complex because it is part of the broader process of political and socio-economic transition to democracy that the country and its people have been undergoing, officially, since the first democratic elections in 1994. Therefore, the role of student leadership at

an institution in the process of transformation may not be as simple as expected (Sebola, 2019). Student leadership is increasingly becoming a priority of higher education institutions, and programmes that claim to develop leadership capabilities in students are proliferating across university campuses worldwide (Skalicky et al., 2020).

Programmes such as student leadership development provide curricular experiences where learning outcomes help to organise resources and hold students responsible for their learning by helping them make sense of their experiences while they serve on their roles in an intentional way. Students must be provided with regular opportunities to succeed and struggle in various contexts because at some point in their lives, they might need to apply the intended behaviour, knowledge or attitude outcomes after the experience (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018).

To investigate the issues at hand, we were guided by the following research question:

How can we better prepare our student leaders to lead during times of rapid change and crisis?

From that, we formulated the following four subsidiary questions:

1. What are the complex personal–professional experiences of student leaders?
2. How can we use different methodologies to understand student experiences?
3. How do we support student leaders in the context of transformation?
4. How can our professional development programmes inform and support the resilience of our student leaders?

Theoretical Underpinnings: Humanizing and Transformative Pedagogy

This article's theoretical underpinnings align with the UFS's Integrated Transformation Plan (ITP), in which transformed pedagogies are seen as one of the goals for teaching and learning at the UFS. Transformed pedagogy is understood as a humanistic (Jama, 2017) or humanizing (Zembylas, 2018) pedagogy which can be described as a form of critical pedagogy (Freire, 2003).

Drawing on Freire's critical pedagogy, Salazar (2013) define humanization as a "process of becoming more fully human as social, historical, thinking, communicating, transformative, creative persons who participate in and with the world" (Salazar, 2013, p. 126). More than a process, however, humanization is "the practice of freedom" (Salazar, 2013, p. 126) through which subjugated people become conscious of oppression, rid themselves of limiting and oppressive worldviews imposed by the oppressor, reimagine their world and work towards self-actualization. Hence Freire wrote, "[t]o transform the world is to humanize it" (Freire, 2003, p. 70). Freire's notion of humanization integrally links with his definition of *pedagogy*, defined as an educational practice that should actively work towards the transformation of oppressive social conditions. A transformative and humanizing education is therefore more than the teaching and learning of technical skills in the classroom, but rather encompasses the holistic development of a student in every sense of his/her/their existence. Such a practice of transformative education should be contextual, whilst using the local

knowledge of the student to guide pedagogical outcomes (Salazar, 2013, pp. 126-127, 129; Zembylas, 2007).

With this in mind, a humanizing approach to pedagogy means that educators "are responsible for creating the conditions suitable to promoting a more fully human world through their pedagogical practices" (Zembylas, 2018, p. 5). During a time of social change, the educator is challenged to develop cognitive and emotional resilience and develop strategies to productively engage with change and transformation. Therefore, the educator's professional development and resilience are central to a transformative practice.

We consider a transformed pedagogy as relational encounters that make opportunities for growth possible (Zembylas, 2007). As such, pedagogy is extended beyond the classroom space into the support services offered by the university. This implies that "educators" can be understood to encompass all who interact with students in an educational setting, therefore including student leaders. It also means that learning is seen as that which happens both inside and outside the classroom. In other words, the co-curricular project is vital for the holistic development of students and the professional grounding of staff and students.

Methodological Approaches

We used different sources to gather qualitative and quantitative data that would inform our interpretation and help us in making suggestions for the preparation of peer educators to lead in times of crisis, social change and transformation. A survey was used to gather general feedback on student leaders' experiences in leadership. From the survey respondents, a smaller sample participated in a focus group discussion to delve deeper into their experiences. This was followed up with an arts-based workshop, where we engaged in a creative manner with those experiences. Both the survey and the arts-based workshop helped us to gauge the student leaders' experiences to understand how they negotiated challenges in a space of transformation.

Outgoing chairpersons and members of the residence committees (RCs) at the UFS were invited to participate in this research project. These student leaders were asked to complete a Yearly Residence Student Leadership Survey. We wanted to determine what skills they had gained and what support they had received during their leadership term. Some of the students who had completed the survey were then invited to participate in focus group discussions. Following the focus groups, we also invited the participants to further participate in an arts-based workshop. We used arts-based methods of enquiry (drawing and a puppet show) and arts-based forms of interpretation (poetry) to express some of our learnings from engagement with the participating student leaders in the course of a one-day workshop. For this research project, we obtained ethical clearance from the University of the Free State (UFS-HSD2018/1280). All the participants signed informed consent letters before participation and could withdraw from participation at any point during the project.

Such a multi-layered research approach affords different methods of data gathering. For this project we used survey and qualitative data generated during focus groups and arts-based workshops. The survey helped us to gather quantitative information that was followed up by a focus group discussion. Approximately 100 surveys were distributed electronically amongst outgoing student leaders. All the outgoing student leaders from 30 residences were invited to participate; 23 on-campus and 7 day-residences. Of those invited 70 student leaders responded to the survey. A sample of 40 accepted the invitation to participate in a focus group session which was two hours long. The survey used closed-ended questions, which focused on the knowledge required for the role of student leadership, the processes for attaining student leadership positions and knowledge of elections. It highlighted the effectiveness of the training they had received and its impact on their experiences.

Findings

Survey and focus group discussion

The first part of the survey aimed to understand if the participating student leaders were aware of the procedures to become an RC member. The results showed that during their candidacy the participants were well informed about the election process and their duties before entering into residence leadership (Figure 1).
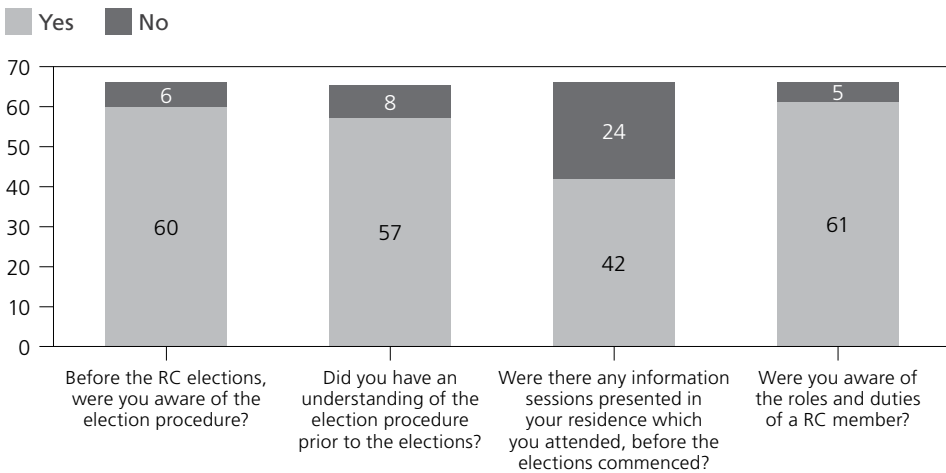

Figure 1: Election procedure

Once students are elected as student leaders, they undergo several training programmes. Some programmes are arranged by the student leadership development office as generic leadership training, some are arranged specifically for portfolio purposes by the office

of residence life along with the residence heads, who serve as staff members within the residence environment.

Of the 66 respondents who answered the question regarding the election procedure, 60 chose 'Yes', agreeing that they were aware of the election procedure prior to the voting process and only 6 responded with 'No' (Figure 1). Fifty-seven (57) respondents chose 'Yes' to indicate that they had understood the election procedure prior to the elections and 8 chose 'No'. Usually, there is an information session with residences before the election. Forty-two (42) respondents chose 'Yes' to indicate that they had attended the said session, whereas 24 indicated 'No'. Lastly, 61 of the respondents chose 'Yes' to indicate that they were aware of the roles and duties of an RC member and only 5 indicated 'No', which means the majority of the respondents were fully aware of the RC processes and roles.

It is clear from the responses that the training with residence heads provided value in developing the respondents' capacities for their leadership roles, with the majority agreeing that the training had prepared them (Figure 2a). With regard to this question, 36% of respondents agreed, 29% were neutral and 35% disagreed. However, some respondents indicated that improvements could have been made that would have assisted them to respond better to many of the experiences and to become more resilient. With regards to general training (Figure 2b), 40% of respondents indicated that the training had equipped them optimally for their terms, 33% felt neutral about this and 27% disagreed.
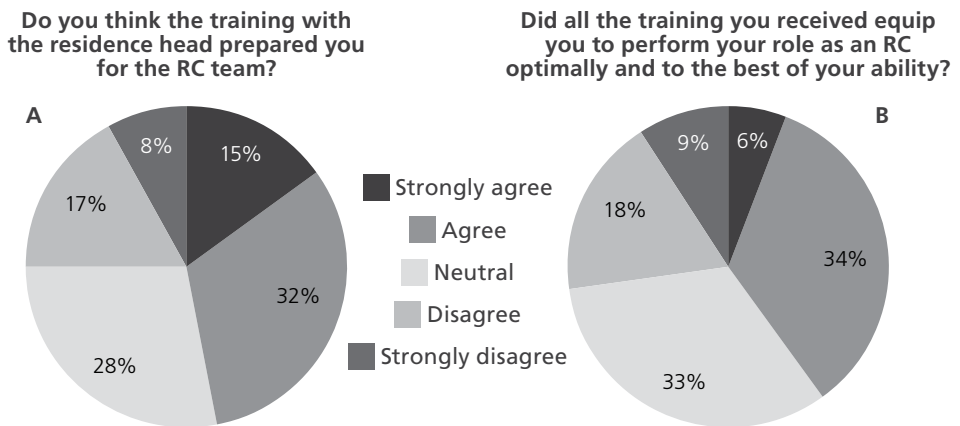
Figure 2: Preparedness

Respondents also indicated whether the overall training had been of value, prepared them and improved their performance (Figure 3).

Overall training response
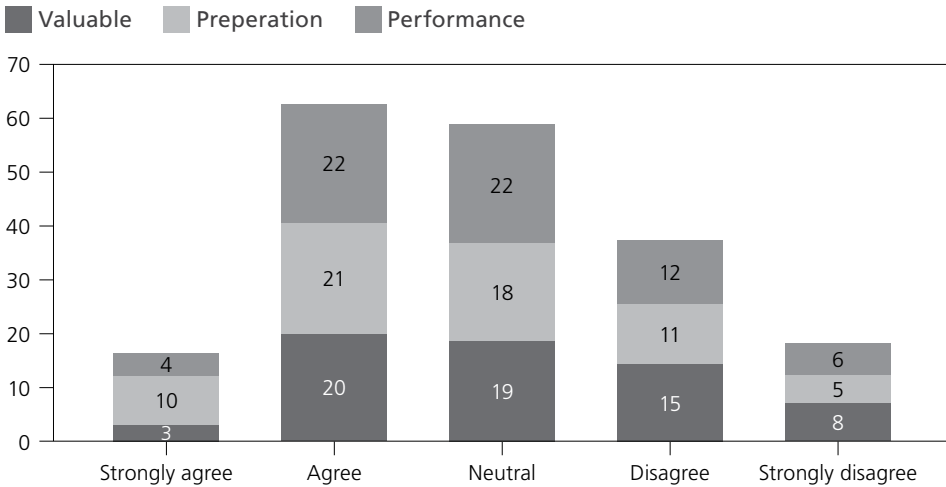
Figure 3: Overall training response

Regarding whether the training had been valuable, 23 respondents indicated that it was valuable, 19 felt neutral about this and 23 felt that the overall training was not valuable. Regarding whether the training had prepared them, 31 respondents felt that the training had prepared them for their roles, 18 felt neutral about this, whereas 16 felt the training had not prepared them for their roles. Lastly, 26 respondents agreed that the overall training had contributed to their performance as RC members, 22 felt neutral about this and 18 felt that the training had not contributed to their performance.

Skills acquired during RC term
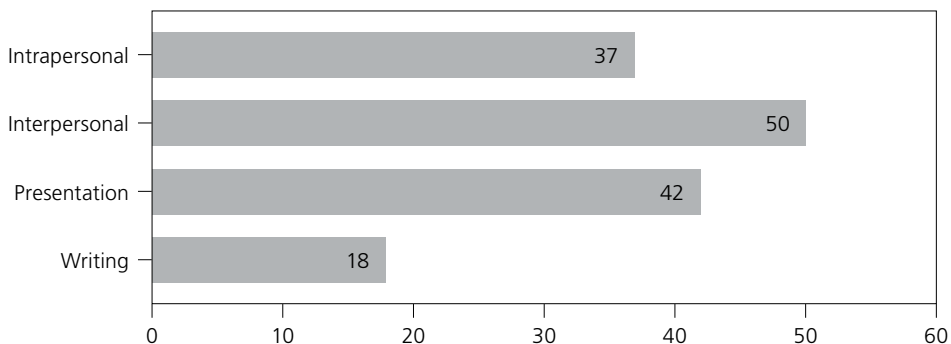
Figure 4: Skills acquired

Almost all respondents indicated that they had received support during their leadership term (Figure 5).

Support received
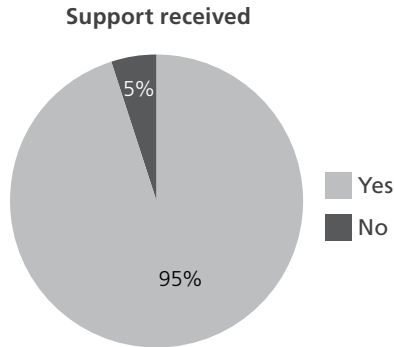
Figure 5: Support for student leaders

When asked where their support had come from, a few sources were highlighted by respondents as their source/s of support. These include (from highest to lowest) friends, residence head, RC team members, RC from another residence and parents (Figure 6).

Top 5 support sources
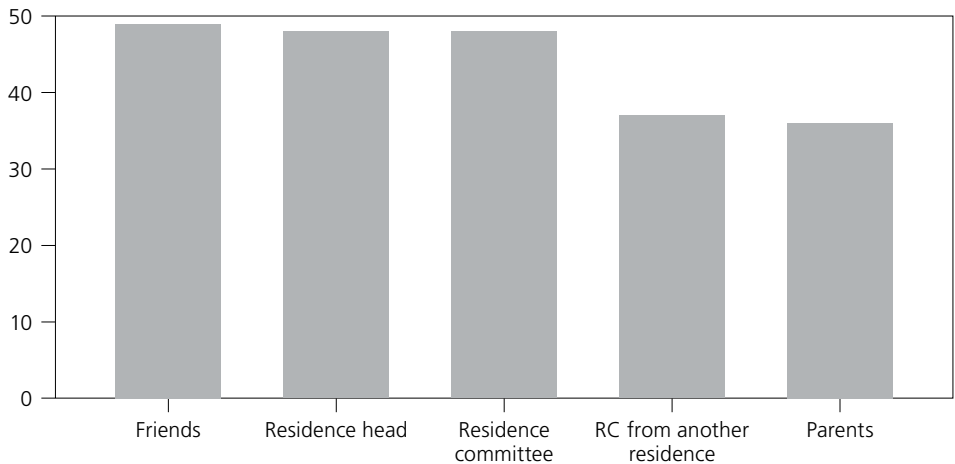
Figure 6: Main support sources

Although the above were the main sources of support that had assisted the respondents in being resilient student leaders, other sources were also mentioned. These included lecturers, administrators, senior students and university management. The results on support highlight the complexity of the experiences of residence student leaders, as these are student leaders that have to work and lead in an environment in which they also live and stay. Thus, with the support of the sources mentioned, student leaders can overcome the challenges in their environment.

The survey was followed up with a focus group discussion. Engagements during the focus group elicited introspection by participants on their experiences as student leaders in residences. Participants could reflect on themselves on a personal level, as student leaders, and on their experiences with the university management, sharing both positive and negative experiences. They expressed their appreciation of the monetary stipend they had received and the skills they had gained, amongst other benefits. In addition to what they highlighted on the survey, they added the following skills gained during their time as student leaders: conflict resolution, time-management and dealing with diversity. They also shared what they did not like, including the lack of support from their fellow students or university authorities.

When asked about what could be improved, especially by student affairs and staff responsible for student leadership, participants highlighted mostly support and instruction or practical advice on how they should cope with multiple roles, and issues of communication and transparency. Training was also emphasised, more specifically that training should not only occur at the beginning of the term, but that some developmental and support programmes should also be initiated in the middle of term as well. The word cloud below represents the issues in need improvement as highlighted by participants (Figure 7).

If there was one thing you would improve, what would it be?

Figure 7: Areas of improvement word cloud

Thus, students highlighted that support, training, accountability, transparency, and communication were most valued for the fulfilment of their roles. The critical reflections that emerged from the focus group discussion support the findings from the survey data. In the next section we proceed to juxtapose the arts-based workshop findings with the findings from the survey and focus group discussion.

Interpretation of the arts-based workshop

The workshop was attended by the group of 40 student leaders that also participated in the focus group discussions, and lasted for 2 hours. One of the activities in the arts-based workshop was to create a river of experience (inspired by the river of life exercise). Below, some images of what the participants created, as well as our interpretations thereof are provided. Most participants depicted their term as a linear progression, with a start and a finish. Only one student (Figure 8) depicted it as a cycle.
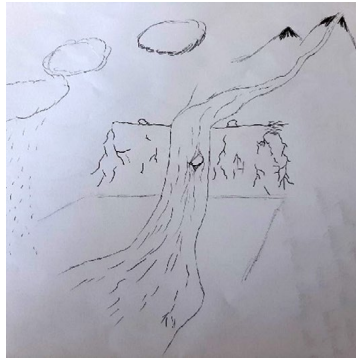
Figure 8: Leadership is a cycle

It was interesting to see that participants perceived their growth as linear. A general theme that emerged from almost all the drawings was a type of "blockage" (Figure 9), "rock" or dangerous obstacle (Figure 9) at the start which participants felt they had to overcome in order to grow.
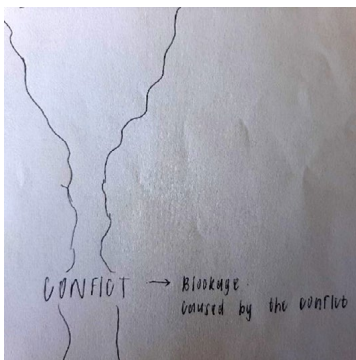
Figure 9: Conflict
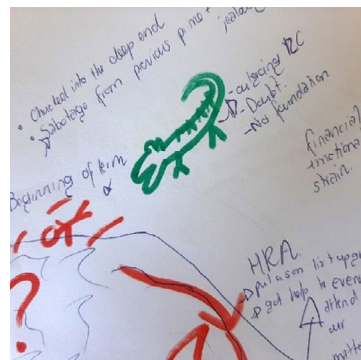
Figure 10: Danger

Overall, participants tended to depict their term as "having a happy ending". Some of them illustrated the river as branching out into new possiblities. In other words, the leadership experience could be extended into new opportunities. One of the participants

wrote the following on their rivier of experience: "I learnt in that role that not everyone thinks like me or has the same capabilities […] [I] learnt to understand others that are not like me with the help of those leading me and leading with me." Furthermore, many participants showed how leadership had exposed them to different *others* (where "other" can be defined as the racialised, religious, differently abled or gendered other) and how this was perceived as something positive. Participants showed how obstacles had helped them learn and grow and also how they had sometimes needed support (from residence heads) to overcome (represented by a bridge) difficult situations (Figure 11). It was interesting to see how their river was depicted with fewer obstacles towards the end, and perhaps this is an indication that student leaders had developed the necessary skills to handle conflict, etc., towards the end of their leadership term. Some also showed how becoming a leader was similar to being thrown into a river and how you had to either "sink or swim" (Figure 12).
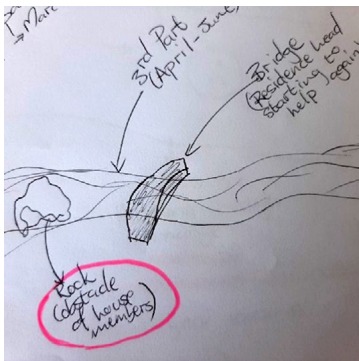
Figure 11: An overcoming bridge   **Figure 12: The deep end**
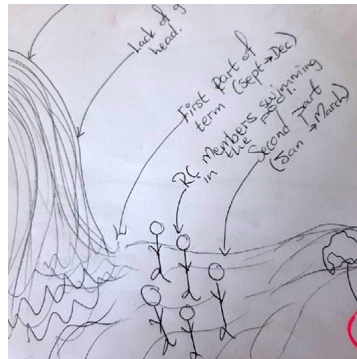
In most cases, the participants depicted some form of resilience in their drawing to show that the leadership experience had shaped them to become stronger. For example, one participant wrote down the words "pressure is privilege".

From the individual river of experience exercise, we then moved to collaborative creation and performance through a puppet show. Participants were divided into smaller groups and given the task of making puppets (Figure 13) and using their puppets to create a performance or skit of a specific significant incident during their terms as leaders.

What emerged during the puppet show was very different from the river of experience exercise. We noticed that the collaborative and performative form of expression allowed the participants to be far more critical of the institution and their own roles as student leaders. Where the river of experience exercise allowed the participants to reflect on their leadership terms, it seemed that they had the desire to show a logical progression of overcoming challenges, growing and changing.

During the puppet show, some of the performances got intense and one participant became emotional as she recalled how difficult being a leader had been for her. Others

showed how RC members became isolated from their peers. One group expressed the experience as follows: "Leadership makes you more vulnerable. Everyone is watching and judging […] She used to be happy go lucky, but not anymore […]". Furthermore, the puppet show performance seemed to be a space for participants to vent their frustration at not having been supported enough: they felt they were "thrown into the deep end". Another group also showed the reality of sexual harassment within the student leadership structures and how female leaders face this added challenge. From the performances, participants expressed their desire to be respected and heard. They also showed a desire for immediate answers, and an impatience with having to wait for things to happen. Given their youth, this impatience is to be expected, yet it was interesting to see that, despite their roles, they showed little knowledge of the bureaucratic and operational processes of the university, or the different stakeholders and governance structures within the institution. To them, everyone and anything that is not a student was reducible to the all-encompassing "management". This response seems almost childlike, yet is also a strong indication that if students are not substantively educated about and invited into the governance structures of the university, they feel disempowered and frustrated on the outside of the formal structures of decision-making. What we saw was an interesting tension between the desire for freedom (just leave us alone), on the one hand, and guidance (show us what to do), on the other.
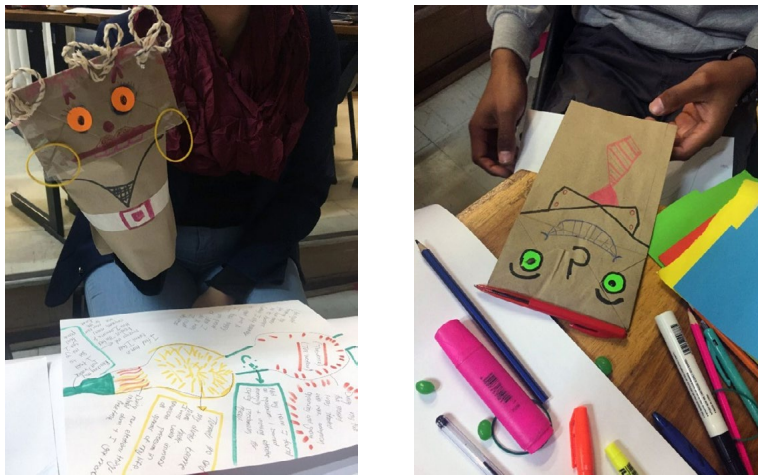
Figure 13: The puppets

The river of experience exercise showed participants' experiences as more harmonious ("happy ending"), whereas the puppet show was more critical and showed how some of the problems they faced had remained unresolved. Thus, there was a difference between what they reported on the individual level and what they reported on the collective level. This difference of experience could also suggest that on the individual level, they experienced the changes as positive, even if the problems had remained unresolved (as

expressed collectively). From the workshop with the participating student leaders, it became clear they had faced a variety of problems they could not solve. The workshop however revealed that the students' focus shifted from trying to solve problems, to developing the resilience to face problems confidently.

In keeping with the arts-based method of enquiry, poetry was utilised as an interpretive response to the data we generated through the river of experience exercise and puppet show. In this project poetry was used as a form of professional learning (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2019). "Poetry is increasingly recognized as a means of representing the distinctiveness, complexity and plurality of the voices of research participants and researcher in qualitative studies," according to Pillay et al. (2017, p. 262). Below, we offer a poetic response to express our interpretation of what emerged from the arts-based workshop with participants. The poem was created from selected phrases from the river of experience exercise that students created during the workshop. By bringing the phrases from individual student leaders together in this poem, a portrayal of the affective experiences of student leadership in transformative times, is created. The voices of the student leaders become one voice, alluding to a "student leader subjectivity" that has to balance a private and public, personal and professional life, emotional and cognitive life. In other words, a holistic life:

My life is not a river
it is a tree
I have roots
And rhizomes flow from me
Like a river
I hope for a happy ending
I wanted to get my vision across
I wanted to benefit others
Through major changes
But there were obstacles in my way
I look back and see I was not realistic
I had to learn that not everyone thinks like me
Transform my mindset
Learn to understand others
Into the unknown,
doubtful,
I did not find enough support
I felt useless
Until I asked for help
And kept on asking
Meeting new individuals
being able to interact with different cultures, ethnic groups and races
I had to be guided to guide others

When I started this journey – everything made sense
and I knew what I was gonna do
What kept you going – kept on smiling ☺
through all the bullshit
… I had to be fragile to become resilient

Conclusion and Way Forward

In this article, we aimed to answer four research questions. Our first question was: What are the complex personal-professional experiences of student leaders? From our findings, it is evident that for some students, the student leadership position is their first professional experience. Although student leaders are almost always initially enthusiastic about their terms as leaders, they often become overwhelmed by the demands of their positions. These demands include time-management, professional conduct, balancing work and studies, leading with integrity, and coping with challenging situations and conflict. The student leaders living in on-campus residences and serving on RCs also need to situate themselves differently in their living and now working environment. Establishing new boundaries and executing their new authority as residence leaders often put an emotional and psychological strain on these leaders. The convergence of the professional and personal has been accentuated by crises, such as the protests during #FeesMustFall and the challenges posed by COVID-19. As such, in preparing student leaders for their roles and supporting them during their terms, we need to pay attention to professional development and how to help them navigate the personal-professional demands of the roles.

The second question we asked was: How can we use different methodologies to understand student experiences? Both methods used (arts-based and survey) can be of immense value to understand these complex student experiences. From our research, it became evident that arts-based research methodologies enable students to express a wide array of emotions, frustrations, insecurities and fears. The affective dimension of their experiences was "extracted" through arts-based methods, as non-verbal, demonstrative methods enabled them to explore unresolved emotional experiences. Consequently, the holistic experiences of students as fully human could be expressed and captured with the help of arts-based methods. These visual and performative methods provided students with the opportunity to "become conscious of their presence in the world" (Salazar, 2013, p. 126), and to be fully present as emotional, cognitive and spiritual beings. In doing this they can participate in self-reflexive professional development in their peer-educator roles. In addition, surveys make it possible to connect the relationships between different items. Analysing the responses creates opportunity to identify the significance of their responses.

Our third question was: How do we support student leaders in the context of transformation? From the student feedback, we have learned how important it is for students to feel included in university structures and decision-making. The support of residence heads and other staff members is crucial to student leader success, but can only

be constructive if there is a strong relationship of trust and a shared vision. The lived experiences of staff are extremely valuable as a source of support for and guidance to the student leaders working in a transformative space. Seeing that the transformative space is always in flux, the staff members need to be able to cope with extreme instability and insecurity. The resilience of staff members from all the spheres of the university, becomes the biggest source of support for students in a time of rapid social change. The intricate relationship between student leaders and their mentors should hence be considered in the training and support provided. If we approach organisations as multifaceted and professional development as a multi–stakeholder collaboration then experiential learning is a huge part of this process, and creative reflection could be one way to help engage with learning and development.

The last question was: How can our professional development programmes inform and support the resilience of our student leaders? Guiding students on how to engage productively with uncertainty might be the best way to develop resilience. Open channels of communication and strong relationships of trust are also important between mentors and student leaders. Acting as soundboards for students, guiding them towards resilience, is one way of developing resilience. Being able to listen, and teaching students the value of true and active listening, is also valuable. As part of student leadership development and professional development, a training pack that includes areas of resilience for student leaders, advice on time- and crisis-management needs to be structured intentionally to respond to and support student leaders in higher education.

This article thus highlights how methodological inventiveness can address new and different questions that arise in our rapidly changing space. Similarly, by using humanizing and transformative pedagogy as a framework, we highlighted the need for all university staff and students to embrace their full humanity and develop as semi–professionals and peer–educators. Such an approach can contribute towards stronger professional relationships, interpersonal support and resilience for staff and students, which are imperative in times of rapid social change and transformation.

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Research article

An Exploratory Study of the Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Lockdown on the Emotional and Social Well-being of Students Enrolled at a University of Technology

Nalini Govender,* Poovendhree Reddy** & Raisuyah Bhagwan***

Abstract

This qualitative descriptive study explored the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown on the emotional and social well-being of students enrolled at the Durban University of Technology, South Africa. A sample of students was selected across all levels of study (first, second and third years and postgraduates), using convenience sampling. Data saturation was reached after interviewing the fifteenth participant on Microsoft Teams. The interview schedule included details on understanding how the pandemic and the ensuing lockdown affected students' emotional and social well-being. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and subjected to content and thematic analyses. Four broad themes emerged, viz., fears associated with coronavirus and its transmission; the lockdown experience; personal anxiety and mental health; as well as financial distress. Our study highlights the potential risks associated with the emotional and mental health status of our cohort in the advent of the COVID-19 lockdowns that characterised the immediate responses of the South African Government and institutions of higher learning to the pandemic outbreak. These data may assist our understanding of the possible adverse effects on emotional and social well-being amongst a university population. These are important factors for higher education institutions to consider in order to provide better mental health support to students.

Keywords

coronavirus, transmission, lockdown, personal anxiety, mental health, financial distress

Introduction

The recurring fluctuations in COVID-19 infection rates have seen many countries shift between varying levels of "lockdown". While the lockdown strategy has been essential in curbing the exponential rise of COVID-19 cases, it has increased anxiety and adversely affected mental strength (Shigemura et al., 2020). University students

*   Nalini Govender is senior lecturer in the Department of Basic Medical Sciences at the Durban University of Technology, South Africa. Email: nalinip@dut.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0002-4047-6340.

** Professor Poovendhree Reddy is full professor and senior lecturer in the Department of Community Health Studies at the Durban University of Technology, South Africa. Email: PoovieR@dut.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0003-0197-8951.

*** Professor Raisuyah Bhagwan is full professor in the Department of Community Health Studies at the Durban University of Technology, South Africa. Email: bhagwanR@dut.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0002-1584-9432.

are prone to loneliness, characterised by a psychological state that predicts poor mental health outcomes (Auerbach et al., 2016; Bruffaerts et al., 2018; Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010; Vasileiou et al., 2019). The current pandemic adds to the academic, social and personal stresses that this population is subjected to and may substantially impact the academic and mental health of the university milieu in the longer term (Araújo et al., 2020; Sahu, 2020).

The suspension of in-person classes by universities in efforts to curb the spread of the coronavirus resulted in students expressing concerns regarding their education, socio-economic issues, the safety of their families, and their education, thereby predisposing them to increased anxiety (Zhai & Du, 2020). High anxiety levels amongst a Chinese medical college student cohort were significantly correlated with factors such as being in contact with a COVID-19 positive patient (Cao et al., 2020). In Albania, quarantine procedures significantly influenced depression levels amongst nursing and midwifery university students and their families, emphasising the necessity of mental health service provision during quarantine (Mechili et al., 2021). Depression levels increased to almost 60.9% during the lockdown among a Greek university cohort (Kaparounaki et al., 2020). In China, no change was noted in the incidence of depression or other mental health issues amongst those resuming face-to-face employment during the pandemic, which may be attributed to renewed self-assurance achieved during psychoneuroimmunity prevention practices prior to work recommencement (Tan et al., 2020).

In a Spanish university group, however, COVID-19 quarantine measures resulted in higher Impact of Event Scale (IES) scores associated with anxiety, depression, and stress amongst students (Odriozola-González et al., 2020). It is possible that the high IES scores observed may be attributed to a more pragmatic attitude and the varying discipline-specific training students receive. Similarly, Wang and colleagues demonstrated significant emotional and adverse mental health symptoms associated with anxiety, stress, and depression, albeit in a general population in China (Wang et al., 2020). The consequences linked to academic progress is likely to adversely affect the emotional and mental health status of students. An exploratory report evaluating changes in social networks and mental health in Swiss undergraduates identified COVID-19 related stressors, such as physical and societal isolation and limited emotional assistance, as significant correlates with negative mental health symptoms (Elmer et al., 2020). Limited physical access to universities and social distancing may contribute negatively to the social integration of the student, resulting in feelings of isolation and increased vulnerability to further emotional and mental health symptoms.

Due to the national lockdown associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, the emotional and mental health of South African youth aged between 18–35 years was also evaluated using the 10-item Centre for Epidemiological Studies on Depression Scale (Mudiriza & De Lannoy, 2020). Findings from this web-based cross-sectional investigation demonstrated a 72% prevalence of depressive symptoms amongst this age group. The findings indicate that mental health issues among youth require closer scrutiny (Mudiriza & De Lannoy, 2020).

It is also important to understand the lived experiences of students from Africa, more specifically South Africa, with regard to lockdown, as limited resources and infrastructure may adversely impact on emotional and social well-being. Of note, approximately 89% of the South African learners lack the basic online learning necessities such as personal computers, laptops and/or internet access, consequently reducing the success rates of remote learning (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). Despite the support received from the South African government regarding the continuation of teaching and learning amidst the COVID-19 lockdown (Dube, 2020), the limited access to information and communication technologies (ICT) and personal electronic tools remains a major issue for many, which can adversely impact the emotional and social well-being of the student (Dube, 2020).

Based on the quantitative findings reported by Dube (2020), it was prudent to undertake a qualitative enquiry to understand the underlying reasons for this decline in the mental health and social well-being of this vulnerable population. Hence, we explored the impact of the pandemic and the lockdown on the emotional and social well-being of students enrolled at a university of technology (UoT) in an attempt to understand the possible ramifications on their mental health.

Methods

Research design

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative design. The study was exploratory in nature, with the objective of understanding the experiences of students related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study took the position that students' experiences related to the pandemic were important, given that it could enhance knowledge related to the psycho-social effects of COVID-19 on university students. The use of semi-structured one-on-one interviews was considered most appropriate, given the pursuit of the subjective experiences and situational meanings of the participants' experiences (Liamputtong, 2010). Taking an interpretivist position, these methods were used to reveal participants' subjective life experiences, regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.

Study participants

The participants were drawn from the faculty of health sciences at a UoT in Durban. The researchers approached the executive dean of the faculty for permission to recruit students to participate. Given that this was an exploratory study, non-probability sampling strategies, specifically convenience sampling was used to guide sample selection. Convenience sampling is a type of non-probability or non-random sampling where members of the target population that meet certain practical criteria, such as easy accessibility, geographical proximity, availability at a given time, or the willingness to participate, are included for the purpose of the study (Dörnyei, 2007). Participants were recruited from three different departments in the faculty and included both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Fifteen students participated in the study,

with the majority aged between 19–25 years, of which 14 were females. Data collection continued until saturation was achieved with the fifteenth participant.

Data collection

Data was collected between July and August 2020. Students were recruited through liaison with the department heads in the faculty of health sciences. To achieve the study objectives, the interviews were semi-structured in nature which allowed flexibility in data collection. A pre-determined interview schedule was used to facilitate the same. The interview guide (Table 1) was developed by the team of researchers in accordance with the objectives. Since this was a qualitative study, the guide was not pilot tested as it allowed for flexibility in terms of adding probing questions. The advantage of semi-structured interviews is their capacity to invite the interviewee's experiences and encourage broader dialogue, while remaining confined to the focus of the research (Brinkmann, 2014). Interviews were held online via Microsoft (MS) Teams due to lockdown regulations. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were audio recorded.

Table 1: Interview guide

Questions that guided the interview
1. Can you share with me how you experienced the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. Probe: Did you understand the physical aspects of its transmission and its effects?
3. Can you describe how you understood the lockdown … (Probe: Where was this)?
4. Can you share with me what the experience of the lockdown was for you and your immediate family?

5. What were some of the anxieties and stresses you experienced
   a) personally, and
   b) academically?

6. Can you describe some of the most challenging moments for
   a) yourself, and
   b) your family?

7. What was the experience of being disconnected from normal university life and how did it affect you and your studies?
8. What are some of the ways that the university can support you once normal campus activity resumes?

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Durban University of Technology Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC 061/20). Informed consent was obtained from the students prior to their participation (Kendrick et al., 2008), with written information regarding the study provided in English. Volunteers were also given choice around participation, including the time of interview and audio recording. Participants were clearly informed of the non-compulsory nature of the research, and that they could withdraw and/or cease from participating at any time, thereby minimising the potential for coercion.

Strategies applied to enhance trustworthiness

The four criteria of credibility, dependability, conformability, and transferability were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Credibility was ensured as all three researchers were employed at the university and were familiar with the culture of the setting. Participants were asked to provide honest responses, by reassuring them that there were no "correct" responses to any questions. Those who agreed to participate were further allowed to refuse participation, such that data collection included only those willing to partake and offer data freely. Data analysis was undertaken by an experienced qualitative researcher and involved individual analysis together with group discussion and interrogation of the emerging categories with two other researchers. Hence credibility was achieved as the themes and conclusions were confirmed by three researchers from different disciplines. Transferability was achieved by providing a description of the higher education context to allow sufficient detail for the reader. A detailed description of the research process has been provided to assist with dependability. Confirmability was achieved through keeping records and transcripts of all interviews.

Data analysis

Data analysis first involved completing a data extraction table to record key participant data including age and gender. Interviews were transcribed verbatim which formed the corpus of data that underwent analysis for this study. Data were analysed for coding by a team of three co-coders and the thematic analysis process drew on the work by Braun and colleagues (Braun et al., 2019). Analyses involved familiarising the researchers with the data, which was achieved by listening to the audio tapes several times. This was followed by a reading of the verbatim transcriptions, discussions, reflecting on the data and re-reading of the transcripts. Initial codes were developed to encapsulate and mirror important concepts and participant experiences in the data (Flynn & McDermott, 2016), followed by a broader search for themes and relationships. This process was essentially inductive, with the intent of keeping analysis close to participants' experiences that were significant and meaningful to them (Boyatzis, 1998).

Results and Discussion

We sought to understand how the pandemic and lockdowns influenced the emotional and social well-being of UoT Health Sciences students. Current challenges experienced by university students may be seen as existing on a continuum. The pandemic intensified existing social and economic inequalities amongst vulnerable and marginalised groups, while creating new challenges related to wellness and mental health (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2020). Four broad themes emerged in the data, viz., fears associated with coronavirus and its transmission; the lockdown experience; personal anxiety and mental health; and financial distress. For all themes, direct participant quotes are italicized and are described.

Theme 1: Fears associated with coronavirus and its transmission

Theme 1 highlighted the limited understanding regarding transmission, spread and impact of the coronavirus on personal health. Seemingly, students' risk perception was influenced by an initial lack of understanding of COVID-19 and the transmission process. This uncertainty may have contributed to increased fear and worry and stricter self-isolation, which could lead to feelings of loneliness and despair. Participant 2, 3 and 4 shared similar accounts:

> *I was really scared to travel because the same transport we are using maybe there is a person who is positive since it can be easily transmitted.* (P2)

> *I try by all means to make sure that I don't get exposed to the outside world.* (P3)

> *I was really afraid to go out because in the beginning they weren't even sure about how the virus is being transferred … someone saying you can get it through the air, some were saying not.* (P4)

In the faculty of Health Sciences, students who needed to complete laboratory practicals and clinical work were eventually allowed back on campus into specific residences under COVID-19 protocols. However, insecurities relating to coronavirus transmission led to increased anxiety among many students returning to campus after the lockdown:

> *It can be easily transmitted because we are using the same bathroom, using the same sink, we are using most of the things that we have … in my residence, in my room, we are sharing them … it's highly transmissible to us since we are like four.* (P2)

> *This virus is very different from the other viruses because you could be walking around with this virus and you could be asymptomatic … you don't show any symptoms, but you could be infecting ten other people, you know.* (P5)

A limited knowledge about COVID-19 is reported to worsen mental health by increasing anxiety, depression, interpersonal problems, and substance use (; Zhao et al., 2020; Zhong et al., 2020). Self-imposed isolation represents an extreme disruption to social life and can aggravate loneliness (Killgore et al., 2020), as well as prevent student access to emotional and psychological support, even if it is peer support. During the pandemic, electronic/social media contributed to an exponential growth in individual knowledge regarding the virus, resulting in an "infodemic" as well as dissemination of inaccuracies regarding the spread and treatment of COVID-19. Moreover, the fear emanating from the "infodemic" escalated anxiety, predisposing many to mental ill-health. Hence, it is possible that this information overload can result in fear and distress associated with feelings of hopelessness.

> *I think they overwhelmed us with information they gave. They put too much pressure on the topic. And it wasn't healthy. So I think they should have limited the amount of information they were putting out because some of them weren't even legitimate and they were scaring everyone.* (P4)

Dealing with self-quarantine, panic associated with becoming infected and the stigma of being infected thus increased the risk of stress amongst many. Findings from a South

African university highlight the discomfort experienced by many students during the lockdown, and the consequent feelings of social disconnection and adjustment issues associated with academia (Visser & Law-Van Wyk, 2021). Moreover, first-year students in their cohort seemed to experience greater emotional struggles than older students, possibly because of inadequately developed coping skills.

> *When I heard about the virus, I just couldn't believe it, I just thought that everything is going to end … we just going to die and having to realize that so many people around the world are affected by this. Being in a developing country, I actually just thought everything is going to be havoc after that.* (P8)

In China, an increase in stress levels was also associated with concerns about family members contracting COVID-19 (Charles et al., 2021). Consequently, constant fears and misconceptions about COVID-19 may have resulted in emotional disorders (Akdeniz et al., 2020). In our study, major concerns over loved ones, especially for the elderly, parents and family with pre-existing comorbidities, was shared by participants.

> *My mom also happens to be a frontline worker … one of her challenges is being able to fulfil all those work hours, but also making sure that she's not contracting the virus and making sure she's maintaining a social distance at work.* (P7)

> *My sister happens to be type one diabetic with renal complications. And so one thing I was constantly concerned of was if it had been transmitted from me to her, if I was infected, my biggest concern and still is giving the virus to someone else, whether that be a family member or someone else.* (P7)

Theme 2: Lockdown experience

In theme 2, the stress associated with experiencing the lockdown and consequences for personal health were highlighted. The abrupt shutdown of South African higher education institutions and student confinement to their homes under national lockdown regulations, represented a profound loss of freedom and autonomy for students (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2020). The academic infrastructure provided by universities (i.e. access to libraries and internet connectivity) supports students' ability to meet academic requirements. The sudden and enforced move back to their homes, however, created major distress as, for many, their home environments were not conducive to learning activities. Students may have overlooked the severity of the threat of COVID-19 while still at university prior to the lockdown. However, as soon as they were forced to leave the university due to the lockdown restrictions, the personal impact was felt and they began to acknowledge the crisis. Participants 8 and 9 share similar accounts:

> *Firstly, I don't want to go home because all of a sudden you just told to go home with all the plans that you have made. But then on the other hand, you also fearing that maybe this is actually more serious, than you actually think.* (P8)

> *It was a bad experience because first of all, we were not aware of it and it influenced us badly because now we had to leave school and go back home and the lockdown restricted us to do the things that we had to do before.* (P9)

The lockdown was an important strategy to break the chain of transmission, but it also created restlessness and boredom. Domestic confinement appears to be more difficult for impoverished students living in homes with poor infrastructure, overcrowding, and severe spatial constraints with limited privacy and/or opportunities for studying and relaxation (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2020). The confinement left some feeling isolated and stressed, socially disconnected.

> *The most difficult parts now because you see we are from rural areas. So definitely no one wants to be stuck in rural areas because there are no facilities for us as young children as young adults.* (P3)

> *We are not really from an advantaged background, its really disadvantaged. So you see we have to share bedrooms and all that. So now having to have my quality space or some quiet space, it's really difficult because we are sharing a room.* (P3)

> *We were so stressed that we were not even going out of our yard. When they said lockdown all of us were just in our house. But then we started to realize that what it means is that you just don't go to public gatherings and go out to.* (P5)

Participant 11 voiced her concern about the implications of the lockdown restrictions for families with issues such as domestic violence and abuse. The notion that such victims remained trapped in their abusive environment, with limited recourse for outside assistance bears reference to the ongoing discussion about gender-based violence during the lockdown periods and beyond.

> *Lockdown meant no contact with the outside world. We should remain isolated with our families. That being said, I also thought what would happen to those who have to be forced to stay indoors in an environment where they are subjected to abuse, violence or depression. For us it was okay because it was time we could use to spend with our families, but for others the circumstances could not have been the same. It would have been their worst nightmare that no one could really help them with.* (P11)

Theme 3: Personal anxiety and mental health

Mental health support during public health emergencies is imperative. This theme highlighted the impact of the pandemic on personal mental health and well-being. The mental health status of university students during the COVID-19 pandemic should be prioritised, particularly as mental disorders that first appear during young adulthood can negatively impact developmental trajectories through reduced educational achievement, increased substance use, and poor health behaviours (Sun et al., 2021). Participant 2, 5 and 9 reported:

> *I was really scared because you can't see if a person is positive with this virus, you can't see the person.* (P2)

> *It was very stressful because, remember, the only thing we did, we were watching news because it's something that's unprecedented. It's never happened before. So we take so much of uncertainty, you know, so we just sit and watch the news and check updates on the virus and how many people are infected and how many people died.* (P5)

I'm so scared of COVID-19 because people are dying. So, I was so stressed because I didn't even know what's going on. So, the first time that I experienced the lockdown in my whole life so I was so stressed. (P9)

Findings from a meta-analysis of longitudinal studies exploring the link between COVID-19 lockdown and mental health, confirms a disparate psychological impact within various social clusters, settings, and nations (Prati & Mancini, 2021). These findings, however, cannot be generalised across countries, as data from various geographical regions like South America and Africa were unavailable for interrogation in the meta-analyses. In South Africa, mental health support is essential since students are already navigating multiple challenges including difficulties with finances, depression, sleeping, family and personal relationship problems, anxiety, as well as academic issues (Bantjes et al., 2019; Laher et al., 2021; Schreiber, 2007).

Notably, the South African national lockdown associated with the COVID-19 pandemic negatively influenced both academia and the physical health of socio-economically disadvantaged students registered at a university based in a rural area (Makgahlela et al., 2021). Students there reported experiencing major challenges in accessing remote learning because of inadequate access to ICT tools, data and internet connectivity. These findings confirm that rural-based universities require major support from both government and private sectors to improve ICT infrastructures and provide physical and mental health support to maintain their basic right to teaching and learning (Makgahlela et al., 2021). Tellingly, university healthcare services were identified as convenient medical care access sites for many students, access to which was thus compromised by the lockdown, leaving the general physical health needs of such students neglected.

Feelings of depression and the sense of heading towards mental breakdown were also reported, although none sought professional assistance. The excerpts below are self reported:

Days became weeks and weeks became months up to a point where I actually had a breakdown. (P8)

I was so depressed. First of all, it was schoolwork because, since I'm doing my last year, I was worried when I'm going to start my research, my master's, and I was also worried about home since my mom and dad was not working anymore on how we were going to survive. (P9)

Zhai and Du (2020) highlight the effectiveness of health-support mechanisms such as online counselling support via social media (Zhai & Du, 2020), a practice which is corroborated by others (Cao et al., 2020; Irawan et al., 2020) as a major support structure. Online counselling support thus holds the potential of contributing towards improving teaching and learning, as well as the physical, social and mental health of students during the pandemic and in their emergence from the lockdown. Anxiety, fear and feelings related to stress and depression emerged from several participants. Students worried about becoming infected, and the media updates seemed to exacerbate their

anxiety levels. It is possible that following new case (incidence) and death (mortality) counts updated on a daily basis may be associated with increased levels of fear and anxiety.

Medical students are reported to have experienced unparalleled levels of depression and anxiety under the prevailing global pandemic situation (Islam et al., 2020), which may be attributed to their anxiety about their future roles as frontline healthcare professionals (Rakhmanov & Dane, 2020). In our study, participants shared feelings of fear and anxiety as well as sustained sleep loss:

> *I could barely sleep. I couldn't do anything because there was this uncertainty. All the time you thinking about this and especially the death rates, the death, every time you're hearing someone die.* (P4)

> *I went to a general practitioner, I had difficulty sleeping. I told her with the virus outbreak, I actually saw the end of everything because this was supposed to be my last year in a varsity, where I actually next year wanted to get a job and also pursue with my studies further. So, I just saw everything [as] pointless. So it was rather emotional and hard to accept.* (P8)

Sleep disturbances together with somatic complaints such as back pain, eye strain, increased headaches, migraines and stomach cramps associated with the COVID-19 pandemic was also reported by another student cohort (Laher et al., 2021). In our study, a major concern reported was the fear associated with inadvertently transmitting COVID-19 to others and bearing the guilt and responsibility for transmission:

> *The biggest concern that I had was that fear. I was just very concerned about being the one that, you know, spreads that to someone else, whether it be a stranger or a family member. I have a real fear that I'm going to make someone else sick and be blamed for someone else's death.* (P7)

Stigma and discrimination has been associated with COVID-19, particularly during the initial stages of the pandemic. We learnt from South Africa's public health responses to HIV and the HIV/TB co-infection that stigma and social isolation negatively impact prevention campaigns and may cause reluctance to get tested (Padmanabhanunni & Pretorius, 2021). A similar pattern has been observed with COVID-19, and needs addressing through community outreach and support programmes, as well as increased information literacy. Students in this study also shared their concerns related to social isolation. Simple everyday tasks such as shopping or using public transport (e.g. taxis) created episodes of fear and anxiety related to contracting COVID-19.

In spite of the fearfulness, the level of understanding and knowledge related to the transmission and prevention of COVID-19 was good; however, panic associated with "knowing too much" may have aggravated fear. Fear emanating from the information overload exacerbated feelings of anxiety amongst many as they continued with daily activities such going out to buy basic necessities.

> *Whenever I would go out to the shops and stuff, we'd always be left on panic mode, you also very stressed out. And when you go out, you know, so most of the anxiety was related to that going out and hoping that you don't mistakenly touch something, because I have a very bad habit of touching*

my face. It's sometimes … an involuntary action, you know … my fiancé is an essential worker. So personally I was very stressed out because he would be out there. (P5)

So it's been stressful because some of the people do not wear their mask even the taxi drivers, their helpers do not wear a mask. They will take full loads of people without making sure that everyone is safe and giving them sanitizer when they're in the taxi. So you have to think a lot when have to go out of what to do and how to make sure that you are safe at all times. (P6)

University students experienced disruptions in their living situations, financial status, education and social lives. Participants shared concern about their academic progress and employment and referred to these as additional sources of distress.

Feel overwhelmed and scared at the same time? I'm asking my friends who were job hunting and some of them are saying they actually don't want a job right now, their lives are going to be in danger. (P4)

Given that approximately 20% of college students are reported to have a mental health disorder, though many go untreated (Auerbach et al., 2016), the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has left this population at particular risk (Charles et al., 2021). A global study examining experiences of students in 62 countries found that students expressed concerns about their academic and professional careers, as well as feelings of boredom, anxiety and frustration (Browning et al., 2021). Increased anger, sadness, anxiety and fear were also reported by students in China (Cao et al., 2020). Students in Switzerland reported a decrease in social interaction and higher levels of stress, anxiety and loneliness (Akdeniz et al., 2020).

Providing space for mental self-care in the curriculum may help unpack issues that normally seem taboo, so that students are not afraid or embarrassed to seek assistance when required. Moreover, universities should consider disseminating webinars on mental health education and self-care programmes, with support and/or referral being readily available after the presentations. These initiatives may enhance students' well-being and positively impact their academic success, developing graduates with adequate attributes for our future work force.

Theme 4: Financial distress

The pandemic has had an unprecedented effect on the economy by decreasing employment levels and thus livelihoods. Mental well-being is almost irrevocably tied to an individual's financial well-being. The financial stresses caused by the pandemic and its impact on the students' well-being were emphasised in theme 4. Students spending more time at home have experienced their families' financial trials first-hand, as shared by participants 3, 10 and 11:

You have to stay with your parents 24/7 and now I can see that they're actually taking a lot of strain financial-wise and also psychological because you see when you actually staying with your kids and now there's no income and all that so you can see that they are stressed but on the other hand there are trying to hide this from us. (P3)

> *It caused a lot of financial strain. We have a very minimal financial support coming from one person to sustain the whole family. Eating was the most common activity which required the purchase of groceries more than usual. However, it did strengthen bonds as a lot of games, talks and family time was had.* (P10)

> *My sister and brother have lost their jobs and we are now stressed due to the economy going downhill and will they be able to get jobs again soon.* (P11)

Besides fear and anxiety, the threats of not being able to access basic needs like food and shelter have perpetuated psychological manifestations. The informal sectors have been most affected, and the consequent uncertainty as they struggle for their livelihoods leads to depression and/or suicidal ideation, and even suicide (Kumar & Nayar, 2020). Participant 3 shared how her parents were affected:

> *The main strain they are actually facing [is] just the financial strain as I've said because well, they're not working currently like we do have a … we have a small bottle store, it's a tavern actually so it was closed from March up until late June.* (P3)

Our findings corroborate the report by Charles and colleagues that the continuous spread of the pandemic, strict isolation measures and delays in getting back to "normal" in universities, has significantly impacted the mental health and well-being of students (Charles et al., 2021). This situation is likely to worsen before it stabilises, as insecurities about future employment and financial stability also contribute to the mental health burden.

Practical Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study may be used to inform relevant university stakeholders on the emotional and social well-being of our students, particularly those with limited resources, so that they may assist in future preparedness for outbreaks of pandemics such as COVID-19. While professional help may not be readily available to all students (access may be restricted by stigmatisation and financial barriers), it is prudent that students are advised of personal coping strategies to avoid negative psychological impairment (Charles et al., 2021). Some strategies include avoiding excessive exposure to COVID-19 media coverage but simultaneously ensuring one is well-informed via reliable sources; enhancing and/or maintaining physical health; seeking out safe (e.g. virtual) ways to obtain social support; maintaining daily routines; and engaging in relaxation techniques to reduce stress.

In South Africa, universities can assist by providing some of these options through webinars and virtual programmes that promote mental health; including mental and emotional health topics in mainstream curricula, where students would be encouraged to engage with such issues. Universities can also provide links to telehealth networks facilitated by their campus clinics. Fruehwirth et al. (2021) have aptly written that students must "Maslow before they can Bloom" (i.e. their basic physiological, psychological, and safety needs must be met prior to their focusing on academic life).

Thus, universities should provide support for student mental health and well-being, before expecting throughput and output, in a manner that promotes academic recovery in order to produce balanced graduates.

Greater experience sharing and support seeking among peers could be established and supported by "student ambassadors" or "buddies" (Vasileiou et al., 2019). It would be overly optimistic to suggest that professional help is made available to all students, as such services are under-resourced in our universities. Sensitising academic tutors and supervisors to identify signs of loneliness and signpost students at risk may improve their chances of referral to suitable support services (Vasileiou et al., 2019). Thence, the provision of suitable and relevant online coping strategies, educational, psychological and peer support by the university healthcare services is vital in developing academic resilience in students, maintaining their mental health and improving their adjustment during future public health crises.

Conclusion

Our data highlight the potential risks associated with the emotional and mental health statuses of our student cohort. The pandemic has had an unprecedented effect on the economy, by increasing unemployment and decreasing livelihoods. Universities are required to take into consideration issues pertaining to financial support and the subsistence of disadvantaged students, as well as regularly providing online mental health support, which may improve the overall well-being of our students. Our data may assist in mitigating possible adverse complications on mental health, including the emotional and social well-being, of a university population.

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Conflict of Interest

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Psychometric Properties of a Short Measure for South African First-Year Students' Perceptions of Fit with their Courses of Study

Reitumetse Machaba* & Karina Mostert**

Abstract

The first year of higher education is one of the most critical and challenging times in a student's life and choosing a specific course of study can be very difficult. Often, first-year students realize they have different expectations from the courses of study they chose and perceive that their abilities, skills, interests, and ambitions for a future career do not match their chosen courses of study. When the wrong choice has been made, and there is no intervention to choose a course with a more appropriate fit, students may decide to leave university prematurely, which may have a major impact on a student's life. Identifying students who do not experience alignment with their choice of study course, and offering these students assistance and guidance, is imperative for universities to retain as many students as possible. Unfortunately, there is a paucity of research on a short scale that measures student-course fit validly and reliably, and which can be fairly applied to different groups in an unbiased manner. This study analyses the psychometric properties of a measure of students' perceptions of fit with their course of study, adapted from a widely used person-job fit scale. Statistical techniques used to determine the validity and reliability of this scale were structural validity, differential item functioning to determine item bias, measurement invariance, and reliability. A quantitative, cross-sectional design was used. A sample (N = 1,211) of South African first-year university students studying at a university with three different campuses was used. As expected, confirmatory factor analysis provided evidence of a one-factor structure. No item bias was present for language and gender groups. Although item bias was present for item 2 between campuses, the post hoc analysis indicated that the impact was practically negligible. Measurement invariance was established, as well as good reliability of the scale. The findings of this study can contribute to knowledge concerning the valid, reliable and fair measurement of first-year students' perceived fit with their courses of study. In addition, insights could assist universities in identifying students who need proper career guidance to better match with their chosen courses of study.

* Reitumetse Machaba currently works as an organisational development consultant at Sanlam Corporate and had previously worked in higher education at North-West University, focusing on organisational development and organisational culture initiatives. Email: reitumetsemachaba@gmail.com. ORCID: 0000-0003-4472-3537.

** Karina Mostert is a professor in industrial psychology in the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences at North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus, South Africa. Email: Karina.Mostert@nwu.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0001-5673-5784.

Keywords

Introduction

One of the most important decisions first-year students must make is choosing a university and suitable courses of study to pursue fulfilling careers. However, deciding which course to follow can be difficult for students because they are often underprepared and unprepared to make decisions of this magnitude (Freedman, 2013). Many first-year students find themselves registered for courses or programmes that are not aligned with their interests and career aspirations; as a result, they find themselves dissatisfied, unmotivated for academic success and making slow progress (Partenie, 2019). It is crucial for students to have a positive experience at university and in their study programmes during their first year of study because it is during this year that universities either retain or lose their students (Lekena & Bayaga, 2018; Tinto, 2014). In a telephone survey of undergraduate students who withdrew in their first year of study, Harrison (2006) reported that nearly half of all participants withdrew for reasons related to their course. Therefore, understanding first-year students' career decisions, the factors driving their choice of a study course and assisting them during this process is essential for retaining students (Hickey et al., 2013; Sim et al., 2021).

One of the aims stipulated in the National Plan of Higher Education in South Africa is to direct the type of enrolment of students in higher education concerning their chosen fields of study to better align with the needs of society and the economy of South Africa (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2018). Being well-informed about the content and requirements of the course of interest is also essential for later motivation to continue in the chosen occupational field (Hillmert et al., 2018). Therefore, it is essential that students experience a good *fit* or *match* with their chosen course of study, as it contributes to the mandate and objective of the DHET to lead and co-ordinate career development services in South Africa (DHET, 2019).

Study-course fit is closely related to person–job fit, traditionally referred to as the match between an applicant's knowledge, skills, and abilities to job requirements (Saks & Ashforth, 1997). Person–job fit theory stems from the interaction theory, of which the basic assumption is that the function of the interaction between an individual and the environment leads to specific behavioural outcomes; when there is a good fit between the person and the environment, it leads to positive outcomes for the individual (Tak, 2011). Kucuk (2022) summarises "person–job fit" as being dependent on the characteristics of the individual and the job; the fit between the individual and job is a determining factor in individual outcomes in the workplace, specifically emotional, attitudinal, and behavioural outcomes. Person–job fit also refers to the congruence between an employee's skills, attitudes and needs and those required by the job; a proper fit leads to higher levels of work engagement and well-being (Akanni et al., 2020). On the other hand, research in the South African context has shown that work engagement

is a strong predictor of person–job fit over time and not the other way around (De Beer et al., 2016). Also, in a sample of participants from various South African organisations, Hall et al. (2022) aligned the concept of person–job fit with career congruence. They argue that when people enter a job and work in an incongruent environment, it could result in a potential cycle of entering and leaving jobs throughout their careers.

Similar to the conceptualisation of person–job fit by Saks and Ashforth (1997), student–course fit can be defined as students' perceptions of the extent to which their knowledge, skills and abilities match the requirements of their chosen courses of study in order to fulfil their ambitions and needs and enable them to do the kind of work for which they have been prepared by their studies in the labour market once they leave university. It has been argued that a good fit between a student and a specific course of study will leave students feeling academically, personally, and professionally successful and more engaged and increase the sense that they are fulfilling their academic, personal, and vocational goals (Freedman, 2013). Students who have considered their choices are also inclined to be more motivated and committed to their studies than those who may not have thought about their choices before making them (İlğan et al., 2018). Furthermore, students who perceive a good fit with their chosen courses of study have higher levels of vigour and dedication; there is also a mediating effect of student–course fit between strengths use, deficit development and engagement (Van Niekerk et al., 2016).

Lauri et al. (2011) argues that work fulfilment is vital for students' mental health and well-being; therefore, educational institutions should provide students with sufficient guidance before they choose a course of study. For HEIs to accurately identify students who do not perceive a good fit with their chosen courses of study, it is necessary to use an adequately validated measure to identify students who need assistance and proper career guidance. However, the Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998, Section 8 (Government Gazette, 1998) stipulates that psychological testing and other similar assessments are prohibited unless they have been scientifically proven to be valid and reliable, that they may not discriminate unfairly against any individual or group, and that it must be possible to use these measures in a reasonable and unbiased manner. Therefore, the psychometric validation of instruments is necessary to ensure that measures adhere to this legislative point of view, and in the university context as well.

Psychometric properties of a scale that measures students' perception of their fit with their courses of study in a valid, unbiased, equivalent and reliable manner have not been investigated in the South African higher education context. This study aims to test the appropriateness of a scale measuring student–course fit in the university context.

Literature Review

The well-known *Person-Job Fit Perceptions Questionnaire* (Saks & Ashforth, 1997) was adapted to the education context to measure *student-course fit* perceptions. The authors of this questionnaire designed four items to explicitly capture specific aspects of employees' perceptions of fit with their jobs.

Adapting work-related measures to the student context is becoming increasingly common. However, adapting work-related measures depends on the results of proper validation practices. Several psychometric properties should be investigated before using Western and adapted measures in the South African context. This study focused on structural validity, item bias, three types of measurement invariance (structural, measurement unit, and scalar), and internal consistency.

Structural validity is the degree to which the measurements of constructs conform to the assessment of the defined structure and demonstrate the internal structure of a construct (Koeske et al., 1994). The analysis for structural validity depends on the hypothesised relationships among variables and the extent to which inferences from scores on a test can be made concerning the construct of interest (Messick, 1993).

Item bias is an essential aspect of a test in a multilingual society such as South Africa. An item is biased when score differences do not occur based on actual differences in the measured underlying construct but because of anomalies at the item level. A poor translation of the item, ambiguity in the formulation of the item or low appropriateness of the item content to the different groups can be some of the causes of item bias (Van de Vijver & Tanzer, 2004).

Invariance (or equivalence) consists of various forms. *Configural invariance* (also known as structural equivalence) assesses the extent to which the factor structure of the measure can be replicated in the same way for different subgroups – that is, the factor structure has the same pattern and fits the data equally in all groups. *Metric invariance* refers to the equivalence of the item loadings on the factor(s) and indicates that each unit of measurement (i.e. each item) contributes equally to the latent construct across different groups. *Scalar invariance* tests if item intercepts are equivalent between groups – that is, if mean differences in the latent construct are captured in all the mean differences in the shared variance of the items (Byrne et al., 1989; Putnick & Bornstein, 2016).

Internal consistency can replicate a reliable result from different witnesses concerning coherence, stability, equivalence, and homogeneity (Mahembe et al., 2015). Reliability estimates are affected by numerous characteristics of the assessment environment, such as the type of instrument, administration method, rates, sample numbers, and statistical method (Golafshani, 2003).

Method

Research design

Since adapting the person–job fit scale of Saks and Ashforth (1997) to measure student–course fit is a new area of enquiry, it is important to use the most efficient method to provide initial evidence of the validity and reliability of the scale. For this purpose, the cross-sectional design is the most useful (Spector, 2019) and was used to collect data for this study.

Research participants and research procedure

A convenience sampling method of first-year students studying at a South African university was used (N = 1,211). Permission and ethical clearance were obtained from the participating university (ethics number: *University*-HS-2014-0165). A web-based survey with a secure link was placed on the HEI's online platform. The hyperlink was posted on specific course modules students from different campuses were required to take. Before completing the questionnaire, students were asked to complete an informed consent form. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, the nature of their participation in the study, and other ethical aspects (e.g. voluntary participation, doing no harm, and confidentiality).

Participants were between the ages of 17 and 25, with most participants being 19 (40.1%) and 20 years old (22.0%). With regard to language, 29.0% spoke Afrikaans, followed by Setswana (18.0%), Sesotho (15.9%), English (7.3%) and other languages (28.7%). In total, 48.5% studied at campus 2, 36.3% at campus 3 and 12.2% at campus 1. The sample consisted of 63.9% female students and 35.3% male students.

Measuring instrument

Four items that measure *person-job fit* (Saks & Ashforth, 1997) were adapted to measure perceptions of student–course fit in the education context. Participants answered on a 5-point Likert-type scale with anchors 1 (to a very little extent) to 5 (to a very large extent). The items were adapted as follows:

Table 1: Adapted items of the Person–Job Fit Perceptions Questionnaire (Saks & Ashforth, 1997, p. 406) to the student context

Person–Job Fit original items	Student–Course Fit adapted items
Instruction: *The following questions are about your experiences related to your specific study course (e.g. B.Com Tourism, B.Ing etc.). Read each statement carefully and mark the answer that you think best corresponds to your own opinion or perception.*	
To what extent do your knowledge, skills, and abilities match the requirements of the job?	To what extent do your knowledge, skills, and abilities match the requirements of your study course?
To what extent does the job fulfil your needs?	To what extent does your study course fulfil your needs?
To what extent is the job a good match for you?	To what extent is your study course a good match for you?
To what extent does the job enable you to do the kind of work you want to do?	To what extent does your study course enable you to do the kind of work you want to do?

Statistical analysis

The latent variable modelling programme Mplus 8.6 was used (Muthén & Muthén, 2021) to analyse the data. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to test the *structural validity* of the student-course fit scale. Maximum likelihood with robust standard errors (MLR) was used (Rhemtulla et al., 2012). The following specific fit indices were used: the likelihood ratio (chi-square, χ^2 statistic), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and the standardised root mean square residual (SRMR). For CFI and TLI, values higher than 0.95 indicate an acceptable fit (Brown, 2015). For RMSEA scores, a cut-off value between 0.50 and 0.80 is usually considered, with a score below 0.50 being considered the "golden rule of thumb" (Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Chen et al., 2008; Hu & Bentler, 1999; Steiger, 1989). For SRMR, a cut-off value of 0.05 was considered (Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Hu & Bentler, 1999).

Multi-group analysis and differential item functioning (DIF) for language (Afrikaans, Setswana, Sesotho and English), campus (three different campuses) and gender (male and female students) were determined using the *lordif* package (Choi et al., 2011) in *R*Studio (https://www.rstudio.com/). DIF is used to determine the presence of item bias (Sireci & Rios, 2013). Uniform bias occurs when the likelihood of similar responses for one group is systematically higher or lower at specific ability levels compared to other groups. Non-uniform bias occurs when the difference in the likelihood of similar answers across groups is not the same across all ability levels (Swaminathan & Rogers, 1990; Teresi & Fleishman, 2007). The following models were used and compared using ordinal logistic regression to generate three likelihood-ratio χ^2 statistics (Choi et al., 2011):

Model 0 : logit $P(u_i \geq k) = \alpha_k$
Model 1 : logit $P(u_i \geq k) = \alpha_k + \beta_1 \star$ ability
Model 2 : logit $P(u_i \geq k) = \alpha_k + \beta_1 \star$ ability $+ \beta_2 \star$ group
Model 3 : logit $P(u_i \geq k) = \alpha_k + \beta_1 \star$ ability $+ \beta_2 \star$ group $+ \beta_2 \star$ ability $\star$ group,

When logistic models 1 and 2 (χ^2_{12}) are compared, $p < 0.01$ indicates uniform DIF. Non-uniform DIF is indicated by a significant difference between models 2 and 3 (χ^2_{23}). The total bias is indicated when comparing models 1 and 3 (χ^2_{13}) (Choi et al., 2011). Configural invariance tests for similar factor structures, metric invariance tests for similar factor loadings, and scalar invariance tests for similar intercepts (Preti et al., 2015) were tested using the same language, campus and gender groups used to test item bias. Internal consistency was determined using Cronbach's coefficient alpha, with values higher than 0.70 generally considered reliable (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). In addition, MacDonald's omega was also considered and calculated in the CFA framework, which has been shown to provide a more accurate approximation of internal consistency (Dunn et al., 2014). Reliability coefficients ≥ 0.80 indicate good internal consistency (Kline, 2015).

Results

Structural validity

The results of the CFA showed that a one-factor structure of the student–fit scale fitted is a good fit to data (χ^2 = 4.091; df = 2; CFI = 0.994; TLI = 0.983; RMSEA = 0.041; SRMR = 0.016). All items show acceptable and statistically significant factor loadings. Table 2 shows the results of the items' standardised factor loadings (λ).

Table 2: Standardised factor loadings for the latent variables of the student–course fit scale

Item	Item text	Loading (λ)	S.E.	p
Item 1	To what extent do your knowledge, skills, and abilities match the requirements of your study course?	0.656	0.038	0.000
Item 2	To what extent does your study course fulfil your needs?	0.809	0.030	0.000
Item 3	To what extent is your study course a good match for you?	0.841	0.026	0.000
Item 4	To what extent does your study course enable you to do the kind of work you want to do?	0.731	0.035	0.000
S.E. = standard error; all *p*-values < 0.001				

Item bias

The results of the DIF analyses for language, campus, and gender groups are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Summary of the DIF analyses for the student–course fit scale

Group	Item	χ^2_{12}	χ^2_{13}	χ^2_{23}	β_1	R^2_{12}	R^2_{13}	R^2_{23}
Language	Item 1	0.7645	0.5976	0.3291	0.0005	0.0006	0.0025	0.0019
	Item 2	0.1054	0.1485	0.3412	0.0117	0.0029	0.0044	0.0016
	Item 3	0.0130	0.0655	0.7844	0.0109	0.0051	0.0056	0.0005
	Item 4	0.2293	0.1985	0.2344	0.0013	0.0021	0.0042	0.0021
Campus	Item 1	0.9784	0.9331	0.6717	0.0002	0.0000	0.0004	0.0004
	Item 2	0.0000	0.0001	0.4483	0.0224	0.0102	0.0110	0.0008
	Item 3	0.3087	0.0580	0.0338	0.0018	0.0011	0.0044	0.0033
	Item 4	0.3866	0.1166	0.0643	0.0031	0.0009	0.0035	0.0026
Gender	Item 1	0.0862	0.0803	0.1474	0.0029	0.0014	0.0024	0.0000
	Item 2	0.4054	0.6983	0.8720	0.0004	0.0003	0.0003	0.0000
	Item 3	0.1205	0.2964	0.8830	0.0055	0.0011	0.0011	0.0000
	Item 4	0.3926	0.5373	0.4745	0.0018	0.0003	0.0006	0.0000

χ^2_{12} = chi-square of model 1 compared to model 2; χ^2_{13} = chi-square of model 1 compared to model 3; χ^2_{23} = chi-square of model 2 compared to model 3; β_1 = change in beta coefficient; R^2_{12} = pseudo-McFadden R^2 of model 1 compared to model 2; R^2_{13} = pseudo-McFadden R^2 of model 1 compared to model 3; R^2_{23} = pseudo-McFadden R^2 of model 2 compared to model 3

There were no significant differences between the four tested items for language and gender groups. However, this was not the case for the three campuses. The results in Table 3 and Figures 1 and 2 show significant differences for item 2 across campuses.
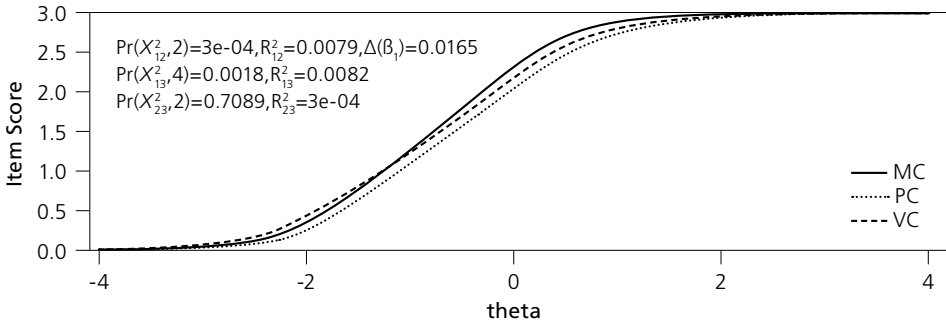
Item True Score Functions – Item 2

Figure 1: Item true score functions of item 2.

Impact (weighted by density)
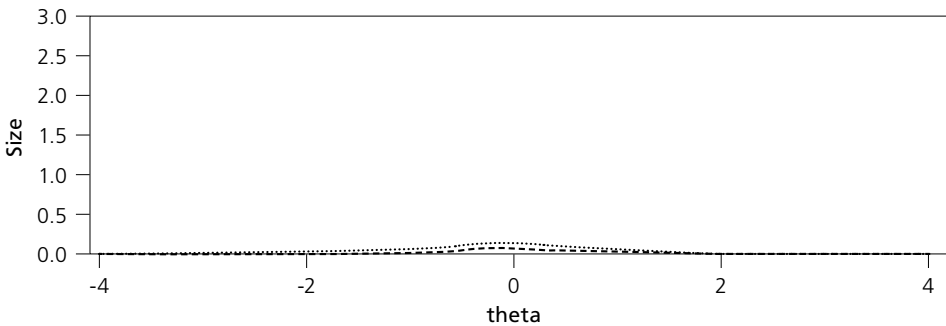
Figure 2: Impact (weight by density) of item 2

As shown in Figure 1, the plots for item 2 show statistically significant uniform DIF, $Pr(\chi^2_{12})<0.001$. The likelihood ratio χ^2_{13} was also significant. Because the likelihood ratio χ^2_{23} was non–significant. This suggests that DIF was primarily uniform bias. However, this effect was practically insignificant because McFadden's R^2 change for uniform DIF was 0.008 (a negligible effect size, Cohen, 1988). It is also clear that few subjects have the trait level in this population, as seen by the density-weighted impact (Figure 2).

Measurement invariance

Measurement invariance was tested between the different language, campus, and gender groups. As Putnick and Bornstein (2016) describe, metric and scalar invariance was tested to determine if the dimensions are invariant across the different groups. The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Summary of measurement invariance analysis for the student–course fit scale

Group		χ^2_{12}	df	CFI	ΔCFI	RMSEA	ΔRMSEA
Language	Configural	17.93	4	0.982	–	0.076	–
	Metric	25.32	7	0.976	–0.006	0.066	–0.010
	Scalar	31.97	10	0.971	–0.005	0.060	–0.006
Campus	Configural	14.20	6	0.988	–	0.059	–
	Metric	18.34	12	0.991	0.003	0.047	–0.012
	Scalar	29.44	18	0.984	–0.007	0.040	–0.007
Gender	Configural	13.51	8	0.992	–	0.057	–
	Metric	22.63	17	0.992	0.000	0.039	–0.018
	Scalar	39.14	26	0.981	–0.011	0.049	0.010
	Partial scalar	33.69	25	0.987	–0.005	0.040	0.001

χ^2 = chi-square; df = degrees of freedom; CFI = Comparative fit index; ΔCFI = delta (change in) CFI; RMSEA = Root mean square error of approximation; ΔRMSEA = delta (change in) RMSEA

Regarding *configural* and *metric invariance*, it can be seen in Table 4 that the scale is invariant across the different language, campus, and gender groups, with CFI scores above 0.95. However, based on the DFI change, the results show that scalar invariance exists for language and campus groups, but not for gender (with ΔCFI = –0.011, just above the cut-off point and ΔRMSEA = 0.018 slightly above 0.015). A ΔCFI value higher than 0.01 between two nested models indicates that the added group constraints have led to a poorer fit; in other words, scalar invariance has not been achieved, and the more constrained model was rejected (Chen, 2007; Cheung & Rensvold, 2002; Preti et al., 2015). It was, therefore, meaningful to free one of the intercepts (item 2 in the Afrikaans group), resulting in an acceptable change in CFI and RMSEA and partial scalar invariance achieved (Vandenberg & Lance, 2000).

Internal consistency

As a measure of internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated. A Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.87 showed acceptable internal consistency (α ≥ 0.70) for the study course fit scale (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). McDonald's omega (ω) was 0.84, indicating good internal consistency (Kline, 2015).

Discussion

This study assessed the psychometric properties of a short measure for South African first–year students' perceptions of fit with their courses of study (i.e. student–course fit). The following was examined: structural validity, item bias (differential item functioning), measurement invariance (including configural, metric and scalar invariance) and reliability.

The results for the structural validity show that a one-factor structure fits the data. The statistically significant factor loadings (λ) ranged between 0.65 and 0.84, which is considered acceptable. In practical terms, this implies that the test's actual (empirical) structure matches the theoretical structure of the test and that student–course fit can be measured with this scale as only one dimension. The significant factor loadings (or items/ questions asked to the participants) show how student–course fit can be interpreted, as measured with this scale. Therefore, when using this scale, student–course fit refers to (1) the perception that students have that their course of study fits their knowledge, skills, and abilities, (2) fulfils their career-related needs, (3) is a good match for them, and (4) enables them to do the kind of work they someday want to do.

In universities with multilingual students, it is of the utmost importance to ensure that measures are fair to use for different language groups and that students understand the questions of a measure in an identical manner (Schaap, 2011; Van De Vijver & Rothmann, 2004). Item bias typically occurs when items are ambiguous, formulated with difficulty, or when the content is not appropriate or familiar in a particular cultural context (Van De Vijver & Rothmann, 2004). This study utilised differential item functioning to determine uniform and non-uniform bias. Items were not biased for different languages or gender groups. Although statistically significant uniform item bias was detected for item 2 ("To what extent does your study fulfil your needs?") for different campuses, the effect size, and therefore the practical impact, was negligible (Choi et al., 2011; Cohen, 1988). Therefore, score differences were found to be similar between groups, the formulation of items were appropriate for different groups, and no practical anomalies were detected at an item level (Van de Vijver & Tanzer, 2004). This shows that male and female students, students from different campus groups, and students from different language groups included in this study understood the items in the same way and that, based on the results from this sample, the student–course fit scale can be applied fairly to these groups.

It is also essential to test if a construct (in this case, student–course fit) can be interpreted and understood similarly across different groups (Van de Schoot et al., 2012). In this study, it was tested whether (1) meaningful comparisons can be made between different groups (configural invariance), (2) students in different campus and language groups understand the construct in the same way (metric invariance), and (3) a test score on the scale is interpreted in a similar way against different cultural backgrounds (He & Van De Vijver, 2012). The scale demonstrated configural and metric invariance for the different language, campus, and gender groups, indicating that the factor structure and item loadings are similar between different groups. Although full scalar invariance was confirmed for language and campus, partial scalar invariance was found for gender groups after releasing the intercept of item 2 in the Afrikaans group. This indicates that the intercept of item 2 was not invariant for the Afrikaans group; therefore, the mean difference in the student–course fit construct is not captured in the shared variance of this item (Putnick & Bornstein, 2016). This result should be interpreted with caution since the value of ΔCFI = -0.011 was *slightly* above the cut-off point of 0.01 (Shi et al., 2019).

Reliability is the degree of consistency of a measure. In this study, Cronbach's coefficient alpha coefficient ($\alpha = 0.87$) and McDonald's omega ($\omega = 0.84$) were calculated and showed sufficient reliability of the scale. Therefore, the study-course fit scale has proven to be reliable in this study and would produce the same repeated results when administered under the same conditions.

Practical Implications

In South Africa, there is a great need for accessible career guidance services for all students, including first-year university students. However, many students, specifically from less-resourced settings, do not have access to teachers or career counselling services (Sefotho, 2017). As a result, many students enter university and register for a course of study that does not fit their vocational goals and aspirations. The findings of this study provided preliminary evidence of a valid and reliable short scale that universities can use to identify students who perceive a mismatch between themselves and their chosen courses of study. Identifying students who are unsure about their courses of study could assist policymakers and career counselling services in designing intervention programmes to assist these students in their career decision-making processes. Many students are not aware that such services exist. Therefore, counsellors in the university system need to reach out to these students, enabling them to participate in programmes offered by the university, directing them to align their chosen fields of study with their knowledge, skills and abilities and the needs of the labour market and the broader South African economy. Therefore, first-year students can be supported in the complex process of planning an appropriate career path and become more proactive in career decision-making (Jemini-Gashi et al., 2021; Oberrauch et al., 2021).

Limitations and Recommendations

Only first-year students participated in this study. Future research should include students from other academic year groups since they may also experience a mismatch with their chosen courses of study. Only students from one South African university were used; therefore, future studies should replicate these findings in different South African universities. Although this study included language groups most represented at the participating university (Afrikaans, Setswana, Sesotho and English), future studies should include an equal representation of all South African language groups.

Future research could examine the items of the scale more closely. For example, the first question reads: "To what extent do your knowledge, skills, and abilities match the requirements of your study course?". Although this is in line with the original item of the person-job fit questionnaire of Saks and Ashforth (1997), this is a triple-barrelled question, asking participants about their knowledge, skills, and abilities (i.e. three different constructs). Such questions could leave participants unclear about what is being asked and unsure how to respond (DeVellis, 1991). Future studies can explore the option of formulating three different questions for each of these three constructs and refine the scale accordingly.

Additional validity evidence should be obtained concerning the convergent and predictive validity of the scale. The concept of study–course fit could be related to career self-efficacy. For example, youth with higher levels of career self-efficacy are more likely to make career-focused preparations and persevere in pursuing their vocational goals (Bandura et al., 2001). Regarding predictive validity, there is some evidence that perceptions of the fit with study courses of first-year students are related to study engagement and the proactive behaviour of using one's strengths and developing one's weaknesses (see Van Niekerk et al., 2016). However, it is necessary to determine the predictive value of study–course fit on outcomes such as academic performance, intention to leave the university and study commitment. For example, based on a recent study on the conceptualisation of commitment in South Africa, there could be multiple types of commitment to consider (Van Lill et al., 2020). The same authors included considerations for cognitive conviction in the importance and practicality of a study course, positive feelings and dedication to a course, and a willingness to do more than required to pursue a course of study.

Author's Note

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Research article

Student Perceptions on their Transition Experiences at a South African University Offering a First-Year Experience Programme

Annah Vimbai Bengesai,* Vino Paideya,** Prim Naidoo*** & Sthabiso Mkhonza****

Abstract

The transition from high school to university is often a challenge for many students, as they face numerous academic and social adjustments during this time. For the 2020 cohort, these challenges were compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic which further exacerbated the existing concerns and uncertainties. This study reports on the perceptions of a cohort of first-year students enrolled in 2020 at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic regarding their transition experiences. The analysis was carried out against the backdrop of a pilot first-year experience programme at one South African university. Data were collected using a survey method from a sample of 299 students who had participated in the pilot programme. A multi-construct approach was used to assess student perceptions on the success of the First-Year Experience programme in providing (i) a supportive learning environment, (ii) assisting students to understand academic demands, and (iii) creating stimulating learning experiences with acceptable levels of reliability (0.66–0.74). Despite facing many transitional challenges at the beginning of the academic year, student responses to questions on the above three factors were affirmative. This suggested that students perceived their experiences of support and interactions within the university as instrumental in assisting them to cope with transitional challenges. These findings provided the necessary guidance for the continuation and improvement of the support given to first-year students.

Keywords

first-year experience, student integration, transition

*   Dr Annah Vimbai Bengesai is head of the Teaching and Learning Unit, College of Law and Management Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Email: Bengesai@ukzn.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0002-2711-8530.

**   Dr Vino Paideya is a senior lecturer and first-year coordinator in the School of Chemistry and Physics, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Email: paideya@ukzn.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0002-5231-2458.

***   Prim Naidoo is the academic monitoring and support coordinator of the Teaching and Learning Unit, College of Law and Management Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Email: Naidoopri@ukzn.ac.za.

****   Sthabiso Mkhonza is a first-year experience coordinator in the Teaching and Learning Unit, College of Law and Management Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

Introduction

Globally, universities have become increasingly concerned with student retention and dropout rates. This is no different at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). Several cohort studies nationally and globally, have shown that many students who enter higher education leave without obtaining a qualification (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2013; Vossensteyn et al., 2015), with the highest attrition occurring in the first year of study. For instance, the average first-year dropout rate for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries is approximately 30%, with the statistics being higher in Italy, the United States of America and New Zealand, where the rate is almost twice the regional average (Vossensteyn et al., 2015). In South Africa, where nearly 50% of students leave before graduation (CHE, 2013), approximately 20% of those who do not complete their degrees leave in the first year of study (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2019).

Although there are many dimensions of student success, the first year has been identified as the most crucial, given that it poses a density of emotional, epistemological and practical transitional challenges for students (Krause et al., 2005; McMillan, 2013; Tinto, 2017). It is a well-documented fact that first-year students are often underprepared for university learning and struggle to adjust to academic expectations (Tinto, 2017). Apart from adjusting to the new academic environment, first-year students may relocate to new cities, necessitating finding suitable accommodation and deciding on degree majors (Bowles et al., 2011). These decisions can leave students feeling anxious and overwhelmed. For the students enrolled in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic compounded their challenges (Visser & Law-Van Wyk, 2021). The prevailing circumstances under which they experienced higher education were unlike any other, with universities nationally and internationally undergoing dramatic shifts, from face-to-face instruction to digital strategies (Rasheed et al., 2020; Aboagye et al., 2021).

Several studies have suggested that these transitional experiences can potentially influence students' attitudes, motivation and decisions to withdraw from their studies (Krause et al., 2005; Lowe & Cook, 2003). Consequently, universities across the globe are under pressure to develop strategies that will improve student retention rates, especially during the first and second years of a degree programme. These strategies, commonly referred to as First-Year Experience (FYE) programmes, aim to promote successful student transition into the university culture, which is key to the student's resolve to persevere despite the odds, by addressing the educational and psycho-social needs of these newly matriculated students entering the academic world (Schreiber et al., 2016).

Although FYE programmes have existed for more than four decades globally (Gore & Metz, 2017), some South African universities, particularly the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), have been slow to catch up. To illustrate: the focus at UKZN since the inception of the academic and monitoring policy in 2009 had been overwhelmingly on at-risk students whose academic performance was below the progression requirements for a degree programme (UKZN, 2009). Hence, academic support initiatives have consistently remained reactive. For an institution with a large undergraduate cohort,

mostly from disadvantaged backgrounds, there is a need for intentional and proactive interventions that support students before they encounter performance problems.

The FYE programme was piloted at the College of Law and Management Studies (CLMS) in 2019 and was in its second year of implementation when the data for this study were collected. As a new programme, some of the core questions that have been at the forefront of our practice have included understanding the activities that work for the students and the challenges they face, and their perceptions of their overall transitional experiences. Given the complexity of the first-year student's experiences, and the diversity of topics covered in the programme, a multi-construct approach was used in the study to assess the students' perceptions on whether the FYE programme had succeeded in (i) providing a supportive learning environment, (ii) promoting an understanding of academic demands, and (iii) creating stimulating learning experiences. This analysis assisted in determining the needs of first-year students at UKZN, identified priority areas and assisted in creating a comprehensive FYE programme that would best meet these needs. We also contend that universities have distinctive characteristics which may influence the corresponding FYE programmes. Hence, the success or failure of each programme should be assessed in line with the particular needs of the particular institution.

The next section describes the CLMS FYE programme, followed by a review of the literature guiding our conceptual and practical understanding of the FYE programme. This is followed by a discussion on the survey methodology used in this study and the emerging results. Finally, the findings, focusing on key trends and lessons emerging from the data, are discussed, and how these findings were used to develop a comprehensive, university-wide FYE programme.

The CLMS FYE Programme

The College of Law and Management Studies' First Year Experience Programme was piloted in 2019, in line with the UKZN Academic Monitoring and Support (AMS) policy and the University Capacity Development Plan, Objectives 1 and 8. The key features of the FYE programme are academic orientation, mentorship support and skills development workshops. The academic orientation component orientates students around undergraduate degree programme requirements, progression rules and curriculum specialisations. FYE peer mentors provide mentorship support and are selected from second, third or fourth-year students with good academic standing. They work with first-year students from orientation onwards and serve as a peer resource that new students can approach with any questions related to their studies throughout the year. Each mentor leads a group of approximately 25 first-year students and holds regular meetings with their mentees through a blended online and face-to-face approach, providing ongoing academic and social support. Skills development workshops are held weekly, with facilitators selected from both academic and student support staff. Topics facilitated during skills workshops include, *inter alia*, how to be a successful online student, reading and writing strategies, time-management, note-taking, discipline-specific study skills, exam preparation and self-motivation.

Conceptual Framework

Tinto (1993) in his most cited theory of student departure, likened the process of persistence to that of becoming incorporated into a community's life which is demarcated into three stages. The first, the separation stage, involves students dissociating themselves from their past communities (e.g. high school), including parting from past habits and affiliations. The second stage is the transition stage, where the student is learning to become part of the new community, while the third and final stage is integration – where the individual becomes incorporated into the life of the university. Although different propositions can be tested at each of these stages, they are nonetheless too diverse to be examined in a single study. Hence, this study focused on the transition stage. During this phase, students learn new rules, expectations, policies and roles in order to develop the *ability to cope with the academic demands*. The transition stage requires students to develop relationships as they engage with others, such as lecturers, tutors and mentors (Tinto, 2017). Tinto also drew attention to what he termed "attributes of effective classrooms", which include "clear expectations, timely support, feedback on assessment and engaging pedagogies" (Tinto, 2012, p. 4). He further argued that this transition was an "intentional, structured and coherent set of policies and actions that coordinate the work of many programmes and people across campus" (Tinto, 2014, p. 6). With this in mind, the first-year students' transition experiences were explored within the context of an intentional FYE programme at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Methods

The study adopted a descriptive survey approach, which saw first-year students completing a questionnaire, comprising background information, the challenges they faced and their perceptions of the FYE strategies in helping them to cope. The focus was on the students' perceptions of their academic difficulties and the support initiatives that might have assisted them in coping with or better understanding the academic demands. In addition, the study was also concerned with the extent to which the teaching environment was supportive of learning and whether the learning experiences were adequately stimulating, given the additional concerns and uncertainties brought about by the coronavirus pandemic. Given that our goal was to gain a holistic understanding of the above three constructs, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) model was selected, which, according to (Child, 2006), allows for illumination of the underlying structure of observed variables. Permission to conduct this study was granted by the UKZN Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC/00000912/2019).

Sample

A total of 1,252 first-year students were enrolled in the CLMS degree programmes in 2020. Although all first-year students were invited to participate, only 1,055 signed up for the FYE programme. Out of these, 309 (24%) responded to the web-based questionnaire, of which 10 were excluded from the analysis due to incomplete information.

Analytical method

Our analytical method was primarily descriptive and exploratory in nature. We began with a preliminary analysis of the background factors of the sample as well as their motivation for choosing a particular degree programme. To visualise the challenges that first-year students face during the transition stage, we also used a Venn diagram. We opted for this approach because it allowed visualising any overlaps in some of these challenges. To identify the underlying structure of factors which measured students' perceptions of their transition experiences in the context of the FYE programme, we ran an exploratory factor analysis on the survey items. Factor analysis is a data reduction method which condenses many variables (in this case, questions on a questionnaire) into a few factors based on their commonalities (Watkins, 2018).

Given that factor analysis is concerned with relationships between factors, we first tested the suitability of the data (i.e. whether these relationships existed) using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy and Bartlett's test of sphericity (Child, 2006). We then used the principal axis factoring (paf) method with a varimax rotation to extract the factors that best explain how first-year students perceived their experiences in the context of the FYE programme. We used the paf method (Table 3) to focus on shared variances between factors to develop (i) a scale for each domain, (ii) determine the number of factors to be retained, and (iii) their relative importance to the scale (Watkins, 2018; Child, 2006). We then named these factors according to their common theme and subjected them to further analysis (Figure 4).

To provide a holistic understanding of the first-year students' experiences, we also included a descriptive analysis of their overall transition experiences and some of the challenges they experienced.

Results

Background characteristics

The sample (Table 1) comprised 36.8% (n=110) male students and 63.2% (n=189) female students. Approximately 83% (n=249) identified themselves as black South African, 14% (n=43) Indian and 3% (n=7) coloured. Approximately 25% (n=76) of the students were registered in the Bachelor of Commerce Foundation programme (BCOF), 24% (n=73) Bachelor of Commerce in Accounting (BCOM-A), 19% (n=56) Bachelor of Law, 17% (n=52) Bachelor of Commerce General (BCOM-G), and 11% (n=34) Bachelor of Administration (BAdmin). Bachelor of Business Science (BBusSci) and Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) constituted 2% (n=5) and 1% (n=3) of the sample.

In his theory, Tinto (1993) contended that student intent was a critical aspect of student persistence across the three stages, from separation and transition to integration. While different factors can be used to measure intent, one factor that has a bearing on the transition phase is the student's choice of majors or intended career.

Table 1: Sample characteristics

Characteristic	Sample Frequency	Sample %	Population Frequency	Population %
	299		1252	
Gender				
Male	110	36.8	546	43.6
Female	189	63.2	706	56.4
Race				
African	249	83.3	929	74.2
Other	40	16.7	323	25.8
Programme				
BCOF	76	25.4	243	19.4
BCOM-G	73	24.4	239	19.1
BCOM-A	56	18.7	270	21.6
BBusSci	5	1.67	17	1.4
BBA	3	1.00	78	6.2
BAdmin	34	11.4	93	7.4
LLB	52	17.4	312	24.9
First Generation				
Yes	116	38.8	–	–
No	173	57.9	–	–
Not sure	10	3.3	–	–

Figure 1 below indicates the factors that influenced the choice of degree programme among first-year students. It was found that 53% (158) indicated that the choice of the degree was their own, while 30% (n=90) indicated that their admission point scores (AP scores) influenced the choice of the degree. For 9% (n=28) of the students, the programme they enrolled in was the only choice they were offered, while for 8% (n=23), the choice was influenced by either their parents or teachers. These results suggested that nearly 50% of the students in the sample were enrolled in programmes that were not their first choice, a *status quo* that can affect a student's motivation to persist.

What influenced your degree choice?
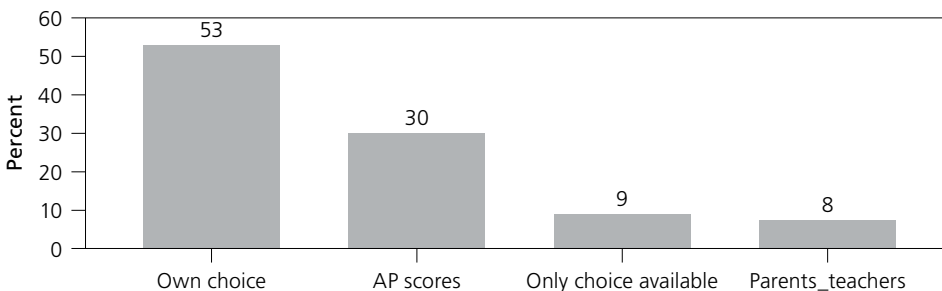
Figure 1: Factors influencing degree programme choice

After establishing student intention, the study focused on some of the challenges faced by the students enrolled in these degree programmes.

Challenges faced by first-year students

A considerable number of student responses indicated that their main challenges were related to the teaching and learning environment (Table 2). Approximately 65% (n=194) experienced significant challenges with adjusting to online learning, 60% (n=178) of students felt challenged by the teaching style, 37% (n=110) struggled with understanding the course content, while 33% (n=98) experienced challenges with self-motivation. In addition, 29% (n=88) were concerned about finances, 20% (n=6) struggled to balance family commitments with their studies, and 16% (n=49) indicated they had mental health-related problems.

In most cases, these challenges overlapped, with some students reporting having experienced more than five of these during their first year of study (Figure 2). Regarding the top four most-experienced challenges, the greatest overlap was between online learning and adjusting to teaching and motivation (14%, n=41), and adjusting to online learning, teaching and understanding the course content (13%, n=39). In addition, 8% (n=23) also experienced all the mentioned challenges. Only 6% (n=19) of the students in the sample did not experience any of these top four challenges.
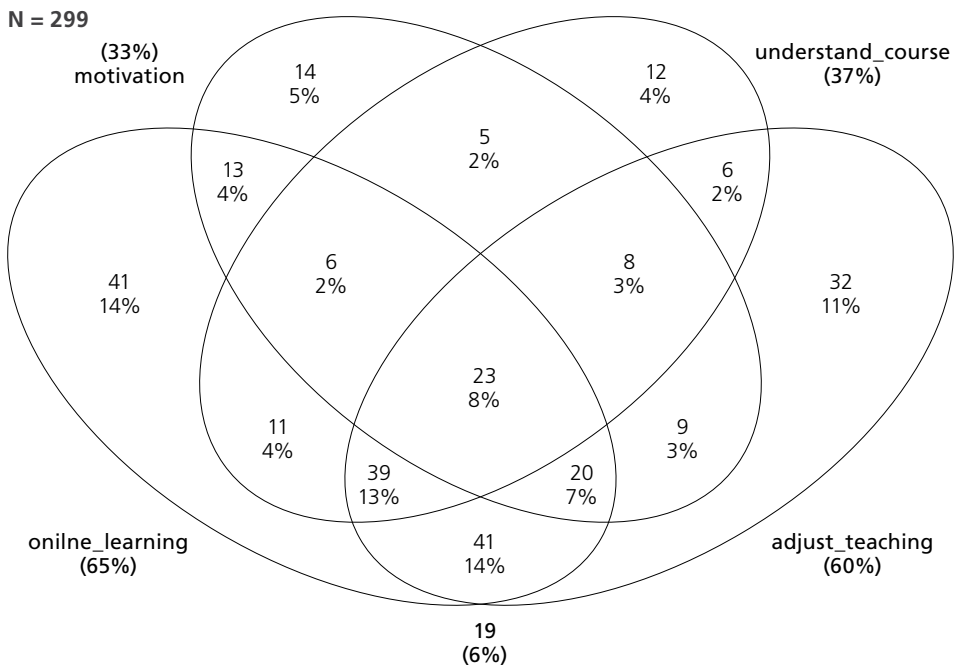

Figure 2: Venn diagram showing the overlap of the challenges faced by first-year students

Possible withdrawal from studies

Undoubtedly, first-year students experience many challenges as they transition from secondary school into a learning environment defined by the demands of academia (Tinto, 1999). While these challenges might be temporary for some students, they can have deleterious consequences, such as early withdrawal from the university, if not timeously addressed. Hence, the first-year students in this study were asked whether they had considered withdrawing at any point.

Table 2: Proportion of students who considered withdrawing by risk factor

Challenge	Freq.	% Experienced challenges	% Considered withdrawing (n=90)
Online learning	194	64.9	75.5
Adjusting to teaching style	178	59.5	60.0
Understanding the course content	110	36.8	42.2
Motivation	98	32.8	51.1
Financial concerns	88	29.4	36.6
Family commitments	60	20.0	21.1
Mental health	49	16.4	21.1

Student responses to the question regarding withdrawal were then cross tabulated with their responses to the question on challenges faced (Table 2). Approximately 30% (n=90) of the students in the sample indicated that they had considered discontinuing their studies before the end of the first year. The key reason for considering deregistration was mainly due to challenges with online learning (75.5%, n=68), adjusting to the teaching style (60.0%, n=54), lack of motivation (51.1%, n=46) and understanding the course content (42.2%, n=38). In addition, 36.6% (n=33) of students who considered deregistering had financial concerns, and 21.1% (n=19) experienced family commitments and mental health challenges, respectively.

The role of first-year experience strategies in coping with transitional challenges

The following analysis focused on student responses to the strategies to support them through their transition experiences. Students were asked to indicate how the FYE interventions influenced their decisions to remain on the programme. Figure 3 below indicates that almost half of the students (49%) attributed their decision to persist with their studies to the FYE programme. Approximately 35% felt that, although the FYE programme influenced their decision to continue, it was not the only determining factor, while 16% of the students indicated that their decision to stay on had nothing to do with the FYE programme.

The next level of analysis presented data from the three EFA scales (*supportive teaching environment, understanding academic demands, and stimulating learning experiences*) developed from Tinto's theory of student integration in the context of the FYE. Factor loadings for

the three scales and the relevant statistics are presented below (Table 3). This is followed by graphical representations of students' overall responses to each scale (Figure 4).

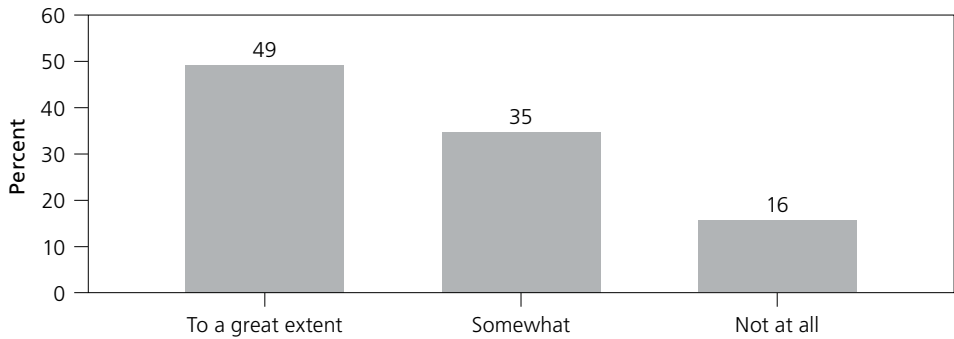**To what extent did the FYE programme influence your decision to stay on?**

**Figure 3: The role of the FYE programme in students'
decisions to remain in the academic programme**

Factor analysis was conducted on 13 items from the questionnaire (Table 3). Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant for all three factors, and the KMO measure of sampling adequacy showed that the strength of the relationships among variables was 0.74 for the first factor, 0.66 for the second factor and 0.73 for the third factor; hence, the data were appropriate for factor analysis. Almost all items loaded with sufficient magnitude on both constructs (i.e. above 0.1), which suggests that the items had sufficient interpretive value for the specified models. The reliability estimate for the supportive teaching environment was 0.79, understanding academic demands, 0.65, and stimulating learning experiences, 0.78.

**Table 3: Factor loadings for supportive teaching environment, understanding
academic demands and stimulating learning experiences scales**

Scale Items	Factor		
	1	2	3
Supporting teaching and learning			
My lecturers were helpful	0.165		
My programme was well organised	0.233		
My mentor was helpful	0.546		
The FYE programme helped me adjust to online learning	0.766		
The FYE programme helped me adjust to academic teaching	0.837		
Understanding academic demands			
My lecturers' expectations were clear		0.520	
The programme was what I expected		0.514	
My mentor helped me understand the university requirements		0.364	

Scale Items	Factor		
	1	2	3
Stimulating learning experience			
I am happy with my academic programme			0.245
My chosen programme is aligned with my career goals			0.191
I am happy with the mentorship I received			0.594
The FYE programme helped me adjust to university life			0.782
The FYE programme helped me make new friends			0.728
Percentage of variance	54.2	58.7	53.2
Eigen Values	2.712	1.761	2.662
Cronbach's Alpha	0.788	0.645	0.777

The student responses were analysed using bar graphs of grouped item means. The 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree) in Table 4 below, was subdivided into five equal intervals for analysis as follows:

Table 4: Classification of the mean for the 5-point Likert Scale

| 1.00–1.79	Disagree
1.80–2.59	
2.60–3.39	Neutral
3.40–4.19	Agree
4.20–5.00	

Students' responses to all three items, namely: a supportive teaching environment, understanding academic demands, and stimulating learning experiences, were generally positive (Figure 4 below). Approximately 86% of the students felt that the teaching was supportive. Lecturers were rated as helpful in engaging with the content and the facilitation aspects of online learning. Peer mentors and the FYE programme were deemed pivotal in assisting students to adjust to online learning and the academic teaching styles.

Similarly, 82% of the students in the sample indicated that they understood the academic demands of their different courses. This was attributed to lecturers' clear expectations and the FYE programme, which helped first-year students understand academic requirements. These students also felt that their academic programme met their content, workload and assessment expectations. In terms of stimulating learning experiences, 81% of the students responded in the affirmative. These students indicated overall satisfaction with their entire programme (i.e. the academic curriculum and the available support). They also felt that the academic programme was aligned with their career goals. The overall scale mean for the supportive teaching environment scale item was 4.05 (CI=3.97-4.14); whereas understanding academic demands was 4.10 (CI= 4.00-4.16) and stimulating learning experiences was 3.95 (CI=3.86-4.04).

Distribution of students' responses to items on supportive teaching environment
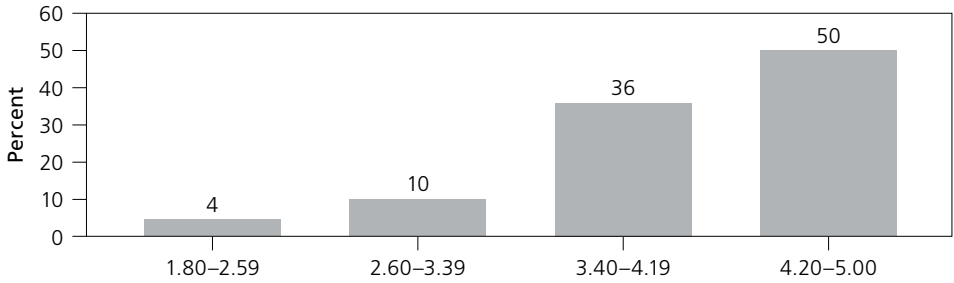
Distribution of students' responses to items on understanding academic demands
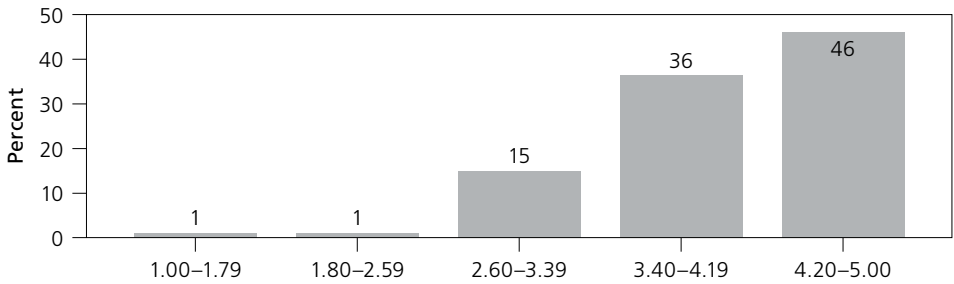
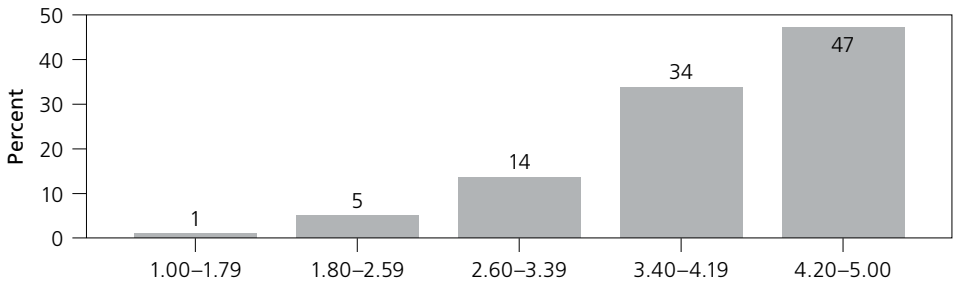**Distribution of students' responses to questions on stimulating learning environment**

Figure 4: Students' responses to questions on supportive teaching environment, understanding academic demands and stimulating learning experiences

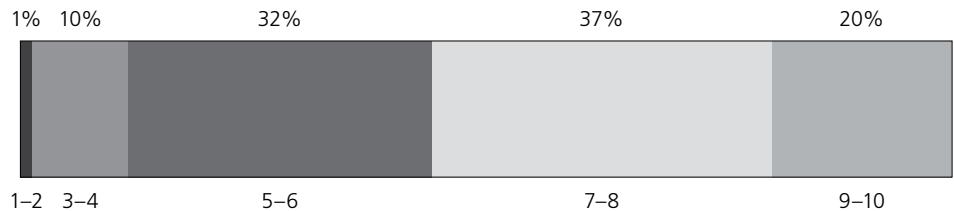**Please rate how well you feel you have made the transition to university:**

Figure 5: Overall rating of transition experiences

Students' self-rated perceptions of the level of their transition by the end of the first year was measured on a scale of 1–10 (Figure 5) where 1 represents poor experience and 10, a great experience. Using this scale, only 20% (n=58) rated their transition 9–10, and 37% (n=109) rated theirs 7–8. In other words, only 57% of the respondents in the survey rated their transition experiences to be above average. Approximately 32% (n=97) rated their transition 5–6, while 11% (n=35) gave a below-average rating of 1–4.

Discussion

This study presented the findings from an FYE survey conducted in 2020. The survey aimed to investigate student experiences of their transition into first-year university studies and the extent to which the intentional transitional opportunities (Tinto, 2014) offered by the FYE programme assisted students in coping with their academic demands. Overall, the findings suggested that first-year students who enrolled in 2020, were enrolled in degrees that were not their first choice and experienced challenges related to preparedness for online learning and the transition to university teaching.

Choosing a degree major is one of the most important decisions students have to make, influencing their entire career trajectory (Stock & Stock, 2016). However, when students are enrolled in degree majors they did not choose for themselves, they are likely to be less motivated, which could negatively affect their academic achievements. Some research suggests that a lack of motivation may also lead to course switching (Astorne-Figari & Speer, 2019), which, although common, comes at a high cost for both the student and the institution. Therefore, there is a need for the university to develop marketing strategies that will reach out to prospective students early on in their high school studies (Bonnema & Van der Waldt, 2008). A well-planned strategy that fosters the student's identification with the university and its degree programmes will also increase the number of enrolments, and forge strong institutional commitment (Tinto, 2017). In the case of UKZN, which identifies itself as a transformative university catering to disadvantaged students, there is a need to identify the information needs and source preferences of different sub-groups within this target population and tailor marketing strategies that reach out to them timeously.

Although the challenges faced by first-year students at the UKZN were varied, for most, these were related to the teaching and learning environment, with significant co-occurrence among the top four challenges. The student's adjustment to online learning was the most concerning issue during the period under study. While the COVID-19 pandemic has made online learning inevitable, students worldwide have struggled with the drastic shift from traditional classroom face-to-face learning to emergency online remote learning (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). The swift move to digital platforms has presented a steep learning curve for both students and academic staff, which was exacerbated by the low-level preparedness amongst students regarding the use of learning management systems such as Moodle (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Combrink & Oosthuizen, 2020). At UKZN, this was notably worse for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who comprised approximately 65% of the student population (UKZN, 2017).

Furthermore, the lockdowns imposed by the South African Government (Combrink & Oosthuizen, 2020) also aggravated the challenges students faced (Barrot et al., 2021). The temporary physical closure of universities implied that students' homes had to become online classrooms; hence it was not surprising that the notable challenges experienced by students in the sample related to limited access to the internet and devices such as laptops, poor internet connectivity and electricity outages in some communities. In addition, students reflected on the high data costs, balancing household chores whilst committing to a study schedule, lack of adequate spaces conducive to learning, and no quiet study time due to overcrowded family households. In contrast to our findings, a systematic review of online learning challenges faced by students in 27 countries found that technological literacy and competency was the main challenge faced by students (Rasheed et al., 2020). In one Canadian study, the authors found that overall, students rated online learning positively, with some indicating that the shift had given them more time with family, while some reported increased anxiety due to the shift (Lemay et al., 2021). Regardless, findings concerning the challenges faced by students in our sample mirror those found at other South African universities (Combrink & Oosthuizen, 2020) and in other developing countries (Aboagye et al., 2021; Adnan & Anwar, 2020). Thus, it can be concluded that the students' online learning experiences might differ in a developing country like South Africa (Rasheed et al., 2020), where they are mediated by resource availability and family conditions. Moreover, these challenges are not only technological or instructional but also social and affective (Lemay et al., 2021).

Students also reported experiencing challenges with adjusting to the academic teaching styles at universities. Due to a lack of exposure to a university setting, students expected the teaching style to be similar to that of a secondary schooling environment. This, however, is not the case in a university setting, and first-year students need to adjust over time and become accustomed to the style of teaching unique to this setting (Krause et al., 2005; Lowe & Cook, 2003) and the heutagogical approach encouraged by lecturers, which qualitatively differs from the pedagogical approach used by teachers in secondary schooling environments (Canning, 2010). Thus, it is to be expected that first-year students, as newcomers in a university setting, would be unaccustomed to the teaching approach and independent learning expectations (Lowe & Cook, 2003; Boughey, 2005).

Understanding the course content, particularly for most second language students at UKZN, is fraught with challenges, as they often lack the language proficiency required at the university level (Mgqwashu & Bengesai, 2016). These proficiency challenges continue to thwart first-year students' attempts to understand course content and disciplinary vocabulary (Mgqwashu & Bengesai, 2016; Boughey, 2005). In addition to language, understanding the course content also depends on the mastery of disciplinary practices and the conceptual and socio-cultural knowledge of particular disciplines (Lin, 2002). To support students' understanding of disciplinary practices and ways of thinking, epistemological access is essential (Schreiber et al., 2016), and this requires that lecturers make explicit rules and conventions that determine what counts as

"appropriate" in constructing academic knowledge. As Tinto (1999, p. 2), points out, "if the *most academically gifted* and *socially mature* students experience some difficulties making the transition from secondary school to the demands of college" (emphasis added), then it can be assumed that the transition experience must be all the more challenging for the *average first-year student* from a disadvantaged schooling background.

Certainly, some of the challenges faced by the students, such as family commitments or financial issues, are beyond the university's control. However, as the findings emanating from this study revealed, most of the challenges related to the teaching and learning environment were addressed in one way or another via the FYE programme, especially through the assistance of the peer mentors, the first-year lecturers and student academic support services. Although there is room for improvement, the results from this survey suggested that students were generally satisfied with most aspects of the FYE programme (i.e. academic orientation, mentorship support and skills development workshops). Students also reported satisfaction with the supportive teaching environment provided by their lecturers. They reported that the FYE programme assisted them in adjusting to university requirements, teaching approach, online learning, and coping with academic demands, while their lecturers were generally perceived as empathetic and helpful.

The high degree of satisfaction with the mentorship support component is likely due to the social proximity of the peer mentors and/or cognitive congruence with their mentees (Loda et al., 2019). This is because peer mentors and mentees share knowledge, familiar language and similar roles as students (Garcia-Melgar et al., 2021). Thus, peer mentors can explain concepts and requirements at a level that first-year students can access more readily. Tinto (2017, 1993) also argued that supportive staff, positive staff–student interaction and mutual understanding are essential for students' successful transition into the university milieu. Hence, it is gratifying to note that, despite the many constraints experienced by lecturers at UKZN under remote teaching conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a concerted attempt to support students as best they could.

There are, however, some limitations to this study. The first limitation relates to the sample size. Only 24% of the 2020 CLMS first-year cohort responded to the survey. Although this sample was sufficient for statistical measurement, it is not representative of the student population in CLMS. Hence, the findings should be considered exploratory at best. The second limitation relates to the survey questionnaire. Although reliability tests were conducted, and the items included had sufficient interpretive potential, some omitted questions would have assisted in providing a clearer understanding of the FYE for students enrolled in the CLMS. It is important to note that student satisfaction is complex, multidimensional, and influenced by many factors beyond the variables measured in this study. Apart from the teaching and learning environment and the students' interactions with the FYE programme, there are other dimensions, such as administrative services, student support services, institutional image, student housing, and student funding, which have been shown to influence the overall experiences of students.

Despite these limitations, the findings from this study, based largely on student perceptions, offer some support for the continued implementation of the FYE programme. Although these findings are preliminary, they suggest a positive link between the FYE programme and the students' perceptions of their transitional experiences, and in particular, the value of the mentorship programme. Although more studies are required to rigorously evaluate the programme in future, for now, it suffices that first–year students at UKZN, much like at many other institutions, both locally and globally, stand to benefit from this kind of programme and the improvements that may follow this research.

Conflict of Interest
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Demystifying the Work of South African Academic Advisors: An Exploration of Students' Structural and Material Constraints

Danie de Klerk* & Laura Dison**

Abstract

The structural and material factors affecting the lived realities and prospects of tertiary success for South African students are complex and manifold. Inexorably, these lived realities impact the work of academic advisors who guide and support students throughout their higher education journeys. The purpose of this article is to contribute to the growing body of literature about academic advising in and for South African higher education contexts, and in particular the daily work of academic advisors in the country. This is achieved by first drawing on literature to elucidate the various structural and material constraints affecting the lives of many South African students, before reconciling what emerges from the literature with quantitative data collected by an academic advisor working at a South African university about his engagements with students over a three-year period. This phenomenological study is underpinned by social realist principles as proposed by Margaret Archer and draws in particular on the notion of structure to advance its argument. Additionally, the work of Boughey and McKenna on the decontextualized learner is incorporated to demonstrate why students in this country cannot be decontextualized from their lived realities. The article concludes by highlighting how the complex structural and material constraints that influence students' higher education experiences manifest in the day-to-day work of academic advisors. The authors propose that these insights be used to enhance responsiveness to student needs, while informing how the sector makes meaning of advising for the South African higher education context.

Keywords

academic advising, academic advisors, decontextualized learner, higher education, South Africa, social realism, socio-economic challenges, structure, student success

Introduction

Academic advising is an emerging profession and practice in South Africa (De Klerk, 2021; Obaje & Jeawon, 2021, p. 18). While decades of literature underpin advising

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* Danie de Klerk is Assistant Dean: Teaching and Learning in the Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa. Email: Danie.deKlerk@wits.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0001-8051-0833.

** Prof. Laura Dison is Assistant Dean: Teaching and Learning in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa. Email: Laura.Dison@wits.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0002-1626-4954.

work done in the global North and Australia (Bishop, 1987; Tuttle, 2000; Cuseo, 2003; Mann, 2020), evidence-informed contributions about advising within and for South African higher education has only recently begun to emerge. The country's past and its current-day socio-economic realities[1] mean that unique intricacies and complexities characterise its higher education landscape (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). These complex realities have tangible and far-reaching consequences for many students pursuing tertiary studies, significantly affecting the work of academic advisors working at South African higher education institutions (HEIs) (De Klerk, 2021; De Klerk, 2022). In this article we draw extensively on literature to contextualize these complex realities by focusing specifically on structural and material constraints, before comparing the findings in the literature with data collected by a practising academic advisor over a three-year period. This juxtaposition of literature and data highlights how the material and structural constraints experienced by students influence the day-to-day work of an advisor working at a South African HEI. These insights are crucial for making meaning of the work of South African advisors, as well as for creating a socially just tertiary study environment which addresses student alienation and marginalisation.

Background

The #FeesMustFall (FMF) movement of 2015 and 2016 placed a spotlight on the national funding crisis affecting the South African higher education sector (Boughey & McKenna, 2016; Cloete, 2016; Dominguez-Whitehead, 2017; Tjønneland, 2017). Ironically, while protests were happening across campuses nationally, students most in need of funding for essentials like food and shelter (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2017) were still going hungry and/or sleeping in libraries and toilets on South African HEI campuses. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, these realities were further exacerbated for many South African higher education students (DHET, 2020a; Sifunda et al., 2021), immediate responses to which brought about emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL) (Hodges et al., 2020) in 2020 and 2021. The funding crisis itself continues to pose severe challenges to students' ability to succeed at tertiary studies (Essop, 2021). The consequences and fallout of the crisis is experienced first-hand by academic advisors engaging with students on the ground, despite any transformative educational gains that may have resulted from the disruptions (Dison et al., 2022).

Academic advisors are often faced with requests for food, toiletries, stationery and clothing, enquiries about accommodation, information about funding opportunities, support with funding applications, and are asked for advice about working while studying. Funding within the South African higher education sector is usually channelled towards first-generation, first-year students from the lower income brackets in the

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1   South Africa has an unemployment rate of more than 30% (Mulaudzi & Ajoodha, 2021, p. 420) and has one of the highest rates of inequality with regard to wealth distribution, globally (Chatterjee et al., 2022).

country[2], which leaves undergraduates from the so-called missing middle[3] (Cloete, 2016, p. 121; Garrod & Wildschut, 2021) and postgraduate students (Machika & Johnson, 2015) with limited to no funding opportunities. The problem is further compounded by the "hidden" costs of studying at a university, the pressures associated with *black tax* for many black African students, and warped perceptions by many individuals from the South African middle- and upper-income classes about the socio-economic realities of a large portion of students studying at HEIs in the country. The pressure on young people who must contend with these challenges, while having to fulfil academic requirements and perform satisfactorily is immense (Machika & Johnson, 2015; Case et al., 2018).

Many of these challenges emanate from external factors beyond these students' control, which exacerbate the difficulties they face while navigating unfamiliar social and educational expectations and spaces within their HEIs (Case et al., 2018; Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Ultimately, these obstacles often bring about major barriers to equal and equitable (Czerniewicz, et al., 2020) epistemological access to HE knowledge bases. As such, the role played by advisors in helping students navigate these challenges is vital, both in terms of breaking down barriers that hinder students from gaining different forms of access and succeeding academically, as well as enabling meaningful epistemological access for students through their academic engagement (De Klerk, 2021, p. 117).

Literature and Context

Academic advising

Academic advising is a high-impact practice (Moodley & Singh, 2015, p. 95; Strydom & Loots, 2020) that can enhance student success and the overall student learning experience (Surr, 2019, p. 9). Much has been written about academic advising for global North and non-South African contexts over many decades (e.g. Bishop, 1987; Clark, 1989; Grites, 1979; Beatty, 1991; Tuttle, 2000; Cuseo, 2003; Drake, 2011; Zhang & Dinh, 2017; Mann, 2020). Conversely, the literature about advising in South Africa remains quite limited (Strydom, 2017, p. 104). Encouragingly though, meaningful and necessary shifts have begun to occur in the sector since 2017, with the launch of a multi-institutional project focused on formalising academic advising for South African higher education contexts (Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021a, pp. 4-5). Tied to this project is a special issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (Vol. 9 No. 2, published in 2021), which focuses on academic advising in South Africa (Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021b). These shifts signal a significant step towards the laying of a rigorous and evidence-informed foundation (Surr, 2019) for advising in this country. However, a critical investigation of the available

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2   To be eligible to apply for financial support from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) in 2021, applicants may not have a combined gross family income of more than ZAR 350,000 per annum (DHET, 2021, p. 7).

3   This term is used to describe students from households where the annual income is too high for the student to qualify for funding support from NSFAS and many other sources of funding, but too low for the household to be able to cover the cost of tertiary studies.

literature has revealed a paucity of studies that document the factors that influence the day-to-day work of academic advisors in South Africa.

Studies like those by Naidoo and Lemmens (2015) and Kritzinger et al. (2018) discuss academic advising in relation to at-risk work and early-alert systems for identifying high-risk students. Others, like Emekako and Van der Westhuizen (2021), explore academic advising in a South African context in relation to students' academic performance, or investigate advising during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. De Klerk, 2022; Moosa, 2021). Additionally, much of the literature focuses on the adoption of global-North advising models in South African contexts (Obaje & Jeawon, 2021, pp. 24-25; Van Pletzen et al., 2021), which in itself warrants further investigation, although it goes beyond the scope of the current article. There is an absence, though, of literature about the daily practices of advisors in the country. Consequently, this article aims to contribute to the knowledge base about academic advising in South Africa by foregrounding the complex realities that affect their work. To achieve this goal, the authors first provide an overview of the structural and material constraints experienced by many South African higher education students, which is shown to have consequences for the day-to-day work of South African advisors.

Structural and material constraints

Funding limitations within the South African higher education sector

The demand for adequate funding by students within the South African higher education sector far outweighs its availability (Scott, 2016, p. 20) and is projected to remain problematic for many years to come[4] (Simkins & Task Team, 2016, p. 75). In a 2010 *Report of the Ministerial Committee on the Review of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS)*, the committee observed that within the South African higher education sector:

> funding falls far short of demand. Current estimates are that NSFAS has less than half of the funds it needs to meet the demand for financial aid from qualifying applicants, even at current participation rates. The Committee concluded that the main impediment to NSFAS achieving its objectives is chronic underfunding. (DHET, 2010, p. xiii)

More than a decade later, and despite the FMF protests of 2015 and 2016, Ahmed Bhawa (chief executive officer of Universities South Africa (USAf)) reported that South Africa universities were facing a ZAR 14 billion shortfall for 2019 alone, owing to unpaid student debt (Paterson, 2021). Although there was no prospect of recovering this debt, Bhawa explained that universities could not afford to nullify it either (Paterson, 2021).

Most South African higher education bursaries and funding opportunities are directed toward first-year and undergraduate students, with those from previously

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4   Simkins and Task Team (2016, p. 75) project a NSFAS shortfall of approximately ZAR 16,685 million in 2023, which is now likely to be even higher owing to the constraints and realities brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

disadvantaged backgrounds and those with the lowest annual household income more likely to be recipients[5] (Cloete, 2016; Garrod & Wildschut, 2021). As such, funding opportunities for undergraduate students from the missing middle (Cloete, 2016; Garrod & Wildschut, 2021), undergraduates who have been academically excluded and then readmitted (De Klerk et al., 2017, p. 6), and postgraduate students (Machika & Johnson, 2015) are extremely limited. Students in all these categories often approach academic advisors for guidance on how to source funding, which is seldom easily resolved. Ultimately, the crisis remains (Garrod & Wildschut, 2021; Paterson, 2021), as does the strain it places on students, on the advisors that work to guide and support them, and on these students' prospects of success.

The "hidden" costs of university study

The cost of university studies goes far beyond tuition and accommodation, which are the two funding areas most bursaries and funders are willing to cover. So-called "hidden" costs (i.e. expenditure not covered by bursaries or funders and that is seldom stipulated or outlined in cost breakdown documents) include: transport, stationery, textbooks and other learning materials, food and toiletries, clothing, other living expenses, medical expenses, and discipline-specific items. Van der Berg (2016, p. 182) points out that the cost of studying in South African higher education is a problem for most students, emphasising that for "the typical student, support of almost half a million Rand over the course of a degree may be required" (p. 182). Considering that this calculation was made in 2016, it is safe to deduce that the amount is now even higher. The maximum NSFAS funding cap was set at (i) ZAR 88,600 in 2019 (DHET, 2019a, p. 7); (ii) ZAR 93,400 in 2020 (DHET, 2020b); and (iii) ZAR 98,700 in 2021 (DHET, 2021, p. 9). This means that students who qualify for full funding through NSFAS annually during their studies (not all students are allocated the maximum amount), would receive in total ZAR 280,700 to cover a three-year degree programme.

However, considering Van der Berg's (2016, p. 182) estimate that a typical student would require approximately ZAR 500,000 over the course of their degree (including "hidden" costs), and that many students require more than three years to complete a three-year bachelor's degree[6] (DHET, 2019b[7]), the endless challenges students face with regard to food security, accommodation, transport, stationery, textbooks/learning materials, and a myriad other expenses should come as no surprise. These are all matters that are prone to arising during academic advising engagements between advisors

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5   Although, as Masehela (2018, p. 166) points out, high Matric marks do not guarantee any form of financial support owing to competitive demand, while the awarding of bursaries or other forms of financial aid often do not take "account of any disadvantage an applicant may have faced" (p. 166).

6   Students funded through NSFAS and the DHET Bursary Scheme are only eligible for funding for the minimum period of study of a qualification (N) plus one additional year (N+1) (DHET, 2021, p.14).

7   The DHET (2019b, p. xvi) found that the completion rate of the 2012 cohort of South African higher education students enrolled for three-year bachelor's degrees was just over 29% after three years (N) and only about 63% after five years (N+2).

and students, therefore requiring advisors to be responsive to the lived realities of the students they work with.

Food (in)security on South African campuses

Food insecurity on university campuses is a global challenge. A national study of basic needs insecurity conducted in the United States found that 56% of the more than 33,000 participants from 70 community colleges were food insecure (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017). Another study conducted at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa more than a decade ago found that 21% of participants were food insecure and a further 24% were at risk of becoming food insecure (Chaparro et al., 2009). Many other US-based studies conducted in the last 10 years share similar findings.

Correspondingly, a South African study conducted at the University of KwaZulu-Natal between 2007 and 2010 found that more than 40% of participants experienced some degree of food insecurity (Munro et al., 2013), while a subsequent study at the same university conducted in 2015 found that more than 53% of participants reported some degree of vulnerability to food insecurity, despite the implementation of a Food Security Programme at the institution in 2012 (Sabi et al., 2020). Another study conducted at the University of the Free State in 2013 found that 60% of participants experienced food insecurity and reports emerged that this may be contributing to high attrition rates (Van den Berg & Raubenheimer, 2015). This aligns with the findings of a study by Payne-Sturges et al. (2018) that food insecurity might affect retention rates. Worth highlighting is that food insecurity at South African HEIs is tied to the national funding crisis (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2017), and has been shown to have a negative impact on students' academic performance (Sabi et al., 2020; Wagner et al., 2021). Academic advisors are often the first port of call for students who are food insecure and looking for advice on who to approach for support.

The South African student accommodation crisis

Access to student accommodation/housing has been directly linked to student success (DHET, 2011, pp. xvii, xx; Xulu-Gama, 2019, p. 15) and to students' integration at HEIs (Sikhwari et al., 2020, p. 9; Simpeh & Adisa, 2021, p. 471). The necessity for safe and secure shelter is a common and basic human need, yet a national study of basic needs insecurity conducted in the United States of America found that 51% of the more than 33,000 participants from 70 community colleges were housing insecure (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017). In South Africa, the higher education accommodation crisis (Mzileni & Mkhize, 2019; Tshazi, 2021)) is not only tied to the massification of the sector (Mugume & Luescher, 2015, p. 3; Ackermann & Visser, 2016, p. 8; Tjønneland, 2017, p. 2), which has resulted in a shortage of student accommodation, but also to the country's apartheid past (Mzileni & Mkhize, 2019), the legacies of which have contributed significantly to the broader historical student funding crisis.

Mzileni and Mkhize (2019) explain how, during apartheid, "South African universities came to be fixed as physical and cultural elements of towns and cities based

on the broader trajectory of settler-colonialism and apartheid urban development, segregation and the Group Areas logic of the apartheid state" (p. 104). The reality is that the physical/spatial location and layout of many South African HEIs remain inextricably tied to the country's apartheid past nearly three decades post democracy, which serves to perpetuate the student housing crisis experienced first-hand by many HEI students (Mzileni & Mkhize, 2019), when they have to leave rural homesteads to access HEIs located in urban areas. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that accommodation-related challenges may arise during engagements between students and advisors. Apart from the spatial and associated cost implications for these students, there is a lack of adequate student housing, and living conditions can be substandard.

More than a decade ago, a review of the provision of student housing at South African universities (DHET, 2011) found that "the conditions under which students are being housed in some university-leased buildings can only be described as squalid" (p. xviii), that insufficient and inadequate "on-campus housing is resulting in overcrowding, jeopardising students' academic endeavours and creating significant health and safety risks" (p. xviii), and that "[p]rivate student housing in the country appears to be completely unregulated" (p. xviii). The same report estimated the shortage of residence beds in the country at the time to be in excess of 195,000, while the projected cost of addressing the shortage was said to amount to more than ZAR 82 billion over 10 years or in excess of ZAR 109 billion over 15 years (DHET, 2019, p. xviii). Regardless, the shortage of affordable student housing for South African higher education students (Mugume & Luescher, 2015; Paterson, 2021; Tshazi, 2021) remains a key element that impacts directly on students' ability to succeed at university (DHET, 2011, p. xvii, xx; Xulu-Gama, 2019, p. 15; Sikhwari et al., 2020, p.8).

Black tax

Black tax[8] is a sensitive and complex (Mhlongo, 2019, p. 1) cultural and economic phenomenon within the South African context. Mangoma and Wilson-Prangley (2019) define it as "the ways in which the emerging black middle class make financial contributions to their direct and indirect families in South Africa" (p. 443), while Carpenter and Phaswana (2021) describe it as the "financial burden [placed on black South Africans] of having to support direct and extended family" (p. 1). In turn, Fongwa (2019) explains that it is "the process through which a black individual (usually an employed recent graduate) uses a significant portion of their income and savings to support their immediate and extended family" (p. 2). The literature often associates

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8   Here the authors acknowledge their positionality as white South Africans and accept that they are unlikely to ever fully comprehend the cultural complexities and realities of black South Africans or how they perceive black tax. Mhlongo (2019) in his book *Black Tax: Burden or Ubuntu?* aims to highlight some of the complexities of experience and perception about black tax through a series of essays by "young and old, urban and rural, and male and female contributors" (p.1), in an attempt to determine whether it is "a burden or a blessing" (p.1).

black tax with young people and professionals[9], but seemingly not with students (except when speaking of young working professionals paying tuition fees for siblings who are studying (Fongwa, 2019, pp. 7, 8, 10)).

In reality though, the pressures of black tax are felt by black African students studying at South African HEIs, who often feel obliged to send a portion (or all) of their monthly NSFAS or bursary stipend (or annual textbook allowance) home to assist family members on pension, single-parent households, and/or siblings in primary or secondary school. Consequently, students may go hungry or choose not to buy essential learning resources, which can have a devastating effect on their academic performance and chances of successful degree completion. This is an important dimension to highlight, as the influence of black tax on the lives of many South African students has a direct bearing on the work of academic advisors who must support and guide them.

While in the past the far-reaching impact of the aforementioned structural and material constraints could be silenced and (arguably) avoided, the momentous events of recent times mean that they can no longer be ignored (Czerniewicz et al., 2020). In the section that follows, Archer's (1995, 2005) work on Social Realism and Boughey and McKenna's (2016) critique of the decontextualized learner are introduced as mechanisms with which to understand the inter-relationship of the aforementioned structural and material constraints with the work of a South African academic advisor.

Theoretical Underpinnings

This article is underpinned by the work of social realist, Margaret Archer. Archer (1995, 2005) builds on the work of Bhaskar (1975), and theorises about the interplay of structure, culture, and agency (autonomously and interconnectedly) across a stratified social reality to make meaning of complex social systems. The focus in this article is on the non-academic contextual social realities and structural constraints that affect the lives of South African higher education students and by association, the work of academic advisors that guide and support them. Case (2015) provides a useful definition of structure in a social realist context. She explains that structure "has to do with material goods (unequally distributed across society)" (p. 843), tying back to the previous "Structural and material constraints" section of this article. Structure, therefore, has the potential both to enable and constrain. In this instance, the focus is on the effect structural (and material) constraints experienced by students have on the work of academic advisors. Correspondingly, Boughey and McKenna's (2016) work on the decontextualized learner aligns with Archer's (1995, 2005) social realist view of social reality and the discussion about structural and material constraints.

Boughey and McKenna (2016) introduce the notion of the decontextualized learner in relation to academic literacy. The authors describe one of the presumptions in higher education discourse as being that those students who make their way through the system

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9   See, for example: Fongwa (2019, pp. 6, 8, 9 & 10); Mangoma and Wilson-Prangley (2019, pp. 443, 449, 452 & 457).

are detached from their "history, culture, and language" (Boughey & McKenna, 2016, p. 6). They further explain that through the decontextualization lens, success in higher education is attributed to qualities or abilities that lie within the individual (Boughey & McKenna, 2016, p. 1). This way of thinking feeds into deficit conceptions of students (Boughey & McKenna, 2021, pp. 59, 60, 80 and 115) who are disregarded as "holistic social beings who bring with them their own unique social realities – realities that have been constructed over time through numerous experiences, events, cultural stimuli, and structures" (De Klerk, 2021, p. 106). This article serves to underscore the premise that students cannot be decontextualized from the structural and material constraints that influence their social and educational realities, and highlights how these constraining factors impact on the work of the academic advisors.

Ultimately, structural and material factors have an incontrovertible and infinitely complex (Boughey & McKenna, 2021) effect on many South African higher education students' prospects of success at tertiary studies, despite these being beyond their personal control. Moreover, academic advisors work with students as holistic social beings, not decontextualized ones, *because* their engagement with students spans the breadth of those students' lived realities, whether academic in nature or not. In this article, a social realist lens is used to guide the analysis of the findings.

Methodology and Data

This quantitative study draws on phenomenological research design principles (Groenewald, 2004; Fisher & Stenner, 2011; Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015). The quantitative baseline data set that forms the basis of this article reflects the advising engagements of one academic advisor's encounters with students (from the University of the Witwatersrand) during a 46-month period between January 2015 and October 2018. The complete baseline data set contains 2,240 entries emanating from 1,023 consultations with 614 students. These data were categorised into seven overarching categories, consisting of 34 subsidiary categories. To analyse the data, we took advantage of the descriptive and explorative opportunities (Groenewald, 2004) afforded by adopting a phenomenological research design (Groenewald, 2004; Fisher & Stenner, 2011; Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015). This allowed for the data to be interpreted and disaggregated in several ways (see Tables 1 to 3), which enabled the authors to thoroughly interrogate the practice of academic advising and the work of advisors as practitioners. In this article, we focus on overarching category seven, which deals with socio-economic matters, thus providing a window into understanding students' structural and material constraints. To enhance holistic insights into the data, it is cross-referenced with students' race and gender information.

Findings

The present study has thus far used relevant literature to explicate the intricacies that influence the lives of students and the work of academic advisors in South Africa. Next, the authors introduce another layer of evidence to support and guide their argument.

The data are used to further elucidate the direct influence of students' structural and material constraints on advisors' daily work. Moreover, the data help to elucidate why students cannot be separated from these constraining factors and may begin to offer possibilities for addressing some of these factors through academic advising.

Overarching category "socio‑economic matters"

Table 1 shows overarching category seven of the baseline data set. Titled "socio‑economic matters", the overarching category consists of eight subsidiary categories that collectively account for 480 instances where students engaged with the advisor about socio‑economic matters (i.e. structural and material constraints). Most frequently discussed were issues related to food security (31.2%), toiletries (19.3%), funding/funding applications (24.0%), and accommodation (12.3%). Entries about funding refer to both funding issues and concerns, and enquiries about bursaries and funding applications or opportunities. Other matters covered include clothing, stationery, textbooks, and transport. Students would not necessarily consult about each subsidiary category separately but would, for example, raise matters of food security, funding concerns, and accommodation challenges during a single advising engagement. This demonstrates vividly how the structural and material constraints affecting students are intrinsically part of the work of the academic advisors who support and guide them.

Table 1: Overarching category socio‑economic matters and associated subsidiary categories

Overarching Category	Total Baseline Data Set Entries (%)	Subsidiary Category	No. of Entries in Subsidiary Category	Overarching Category (%)
Socio‑economic Matters (Total Entries = 480)	21%	Accommodation	59	12.3%
		Clothing	25	5.2%
		Food	150	31.2%
		Funding	115	24.0%
		Stationery	29	6.0%
		Textbooks	4	1.0%
		Toiletries	93	19.3%
		Transport	5	1.0%

Student gender and race information

Table 2 below provides a basic breakdown of the race and gender information of students who sought advice from the advisor during the period under investigation (i.e. the complete baseline data set). In terms of race, more than 75% of students were black African with the remainder being Indian and Chinese (11.4%), white (9.1%), and coloured (3.1%), which roughly aligns with the university's demographics (Wits, 2021).

Table 2: Student race and gender information gleaned from the complete baseline data set

Race and Gender Information	Number of Students	Percentage
Female	326	53.1%
Male	288	46.9%
Black African	467	76.1%
Coloured	19	3.1%
Indian & Chinese	70	11.4%
Unknown (race information unavailable)	2	0.3%
White	56	9.1%

Table 3 provides a cross-referenced disaggregated view of overarching category seven (Table 1) and the race and gender information of students as gleaned from the complete baseline data set (Table 2). Two particularly notable observations are: (i) the fact that 478 of the 480 (99.6%) entries about specifically socio-economic matters were from black African students, which ties back to earlier assertions about how current day student realities are linked to the country's apartheid past (Mzileni & Mkhize, 2019); and (ii) that the number of male students who consulted about socio-economic matters is double that of female students, which warrants further investigation in subsequent studies, seeing as the complete baseline data set contains more entries about female than male students.

Table 3: Overarching category "socio-economic matters" cross-referenced with gender and race information

Overarching Category	Subsidiary Category	Entries	Female	Male	Black African	Coloured	Indian & Chinese	Unknown	White
Socio-economic Matters	Accommodation	59	21	38	59	0	0	0	0
	Clothing	25	5	20	25	0	0	0	0
	Food	150	44	106	150	0	0	0	0
	Funding	115	50	65	113	1	0	0	1
	Stationery	29	11	18	29	0	0	0	0
	Textbooks	4	0	4	4	0	0	0	0
	Toiletries	93	27	66	93	0	0	0	0
	Transport	5	2	3	5	0	0	0	0
	Totals	**480**	**160**	**320**	**478**	**1**	**0**	**0**	**1**

Discussion

The constraining factors outlined in the "Structural and material constraints" section of this article can evidently not be divorced from the lived experiences of many South

African students, or from the work of academic advisors. The structural and material constraints captured in the overarching category "socio-economic matters" (Table 1) account for 21% of the baseline data informing this study. Accordingly, providing advice on navigating the effects these constraining factors have on students' tertiary study experiences denotes a significant dimension of the academic advisor's work. Matters of funding, accommodation, and food security, among others, remain interconnected; with one another, with the country's past, with the lived experiences of many students, and with the work of academic advisors working in this country.

A racial disaggregation of this overarching category shows that 99.6% of students who sought advice about socio-economic matters are black African. This compelling figure makes it nearly impossible to refute the systemically entrenched legacy of apartheid and its influence on the South African higher education sector to this day (Mzileni & Mkhize, 2019). Important to remember, is how apartheid was used to differentiate among racial groups based on the colour of their skin (in addition to culture), with black Africans affected most severely. Bearing this in mind, the data suggests that nearly 30 years after apartheid was abolished, many black African students are still experiencing tangible socio-economic and related consequences of that era. By extension then, and as shown in the data, these lived realities of black African students also affect the work of South African academic advisors. This is another reason why students cannot be decontextualized (Boughey & McKenna, 2016) from their lived social realities upon entry into the South African higher education system, nor can one divorce these realities from the work of advisors. Although the data are representative of an individual advisor's work, based on existing views about the socio-economic factors affecting South African students (Scott, 2016), it can be inferred that these realities would be applicable to most academic advisors working in South African HEIs.

For academic advisors these structural and material realities can bring about perplexing complexities that often cannot be solved, adding an additional layer of intricacy to their work. Although not directly linked in the baseline data, the advisor whose engagements are captured here recalls numerous interactions with students who had forgone purchasing food (or other necessities like textbooks and stationery) for the month, to comply with the pressure to send money home. The consequences of forgoing NSFAS or other financial aid monies in this way can be catastrophic and must not be discounted when considering the complex social realities students bring to the advising engagement or the institution more broadly. Importantly, these data must be utilised to develop and implement responsive strategies for enabling student success and for improving the integration of academic advising with all other components of South African HEIs (Moosa, 2021), to ensure that students (especially those most affected by the complex realities of the South African higher education sector) reap the benefits.

Conclusion

The impact of structural and material constraints on the lives of South African students, and the academic advisors who support them, is evident. The COVID-19 pandemic has

once again shone the spotlight on the inequities that permeate the sector (Czerniewicz et al., 2020), and the social impact it has had on many South African students (Sifunda et al., 2021).

These structural and material factors can directly impact students' prospects of success, which is why they cannot be decontextualized (Boughey & McKenna, 2016) from their lived realities when they enter the South African higher education system. Although not necessarily in a position to resolve these matters for students, advisors have the potential to help students navigate these complexities, both for themselves and within their institutions or the sector. Moreover, academic advisors may be positioned to enact agency (Archer, 1995, 2005) in the professional spaces they occupy at their institutions, by raising greater awareness about the interconnected realities of the students with whom they work. This emphasises the necessity for coordinated structural efforts to address these challenges and, working collaboratively with academics and other institutional stakeholders, developing mitigation strategies. Yet the onus cannot rest solely on advisors. There is an urgent need for coordinated efforts to bring about structural transformation in the form of policies, funding and the like (at institutional and sectoral level), as well as to facilitate shifts towards holistic, integrated student support and student-focused pedagogies and approaches to learning and teaching.

Although academic advisors cannot resolve these infinitely complex challenges, an intrinsic part of their practice is awareness of their impact and an understanding of their interconnectedness (Archer, 1995, 2005). This is essential, as advisors are often tasked with helping students navigate these structural and material constraints by enabling agency on multiple fronts. For this to occur effectively, advisors must know to whom to refer students, must be able to devise workable solutions while managing student expectations, and must maintain close bonds with students. Ultimately, the aim is to support students in the best way possible without disempowering them, with the objective of helping students persist and complete their studies successfully.

As the South African higher education sector shifts beyond emergency modes of instruction towards a post-pandemic reality, the conditions for change may be in place: the inequities entrenched in the sector are known and cannot easily be ignored (Czerniewicz et al., 2020); academic advising has emerged as a previously undervalued practice that can bridge gaps between the student, the institution, and the lecturer (De Klerk, 2022; Moosa, 2021); and calls for intentional shifts towards student-focused pedagogies and holistic student support within the South African higher education sector are on the rise. Now is the time for the South African higher education sector and its institutions to draw on the wisdom of these insights beyond paying lip-service to student challenges. The essence of our argument is that it remains the responsibility of HEIs to extract implications and opportunities offered by academic advising for realizing meaningful and long-lasting changes, especially as new modes of teaching and learning continue to evolve and adapt to changing circumstances.

Research Ethics

The authors subscribe to the highest levels of ethics during their research. Ethical clearance for this study was obtained through the authors' institutional Human Research Ethics Committee (Non–Medical) (Protocol number: H20/04/06). All data are presented in aggregate form and no individual is identifiable from the data shared in this article.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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Research article

Does Gender Moderate the Association of Peer Pressure on Alcohol Use during Emerging Adulthood of Students? A Multi-Group Analysis

Sibongile Matlala,* Refilwe Gloria Pila–Nemutandani** & Mianda Erasmus***

Abstract

Peer pressure and alcohol use in tertiary institutions remains a challenge amongst emerging adults. The study examined the moderating influence of gender on the association between dimensional peer pressure and alcohol consumption. The study employed a non-probability convenient sampling technique. The sample consisted of 414 participants who were students recruited from six faculties. Data collection used the Peer Pressure Inventory (PPI) and Alcohol Use Dependence Identification Test (AUDIT) on an online platform. Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Version 25 (SPSS-25), and structural equation modelling tested assumptions. There was no gender difference in terms of the relationship between peer conformity and misconduct on alcohol use. Results indicated an increased family involvement, which predicted lower alcohol consumption among females but not in males. School and peer involvements were not related to alcohol use in both genders. Family involvement against peer influence on the use of alcohol may be a protective factor in females, but not in males. Males were more likely to conform to peer pressure than females.

Keywords

peer pressure, family involvement, alcohol use, gender, students, higher education

Introduction

Alcohol use often leading to abuse is a major public health issue worldwide. Six people die every minute from harmful alcohol use with a total death toll of 3 million annually, as estimated in the global status report on alcohol and health (WHO, 2018). Globally, harmful alcohol use is responsible for 18% of interpersonal violence and suicides, 20% of tuberculosis, 27% of traffic injuries, 26% of mouth cancers and 48% of liver cirrhosis (WHO, 2018). The 2018 report on alcohol and health ranked South Africa as the country

*   Sibongile Matlala is a master's student in Clinical Psychology in the Department of Psychology Ipeleng Child and Family Centre at North-West University, South Africa. Email: sibongilematlala6@gmail.com. ORCID: 0000-0003-3531-2007.

** Dr Refilwe Gloria Pila-Nemutandani is a clinical psychologist and senior lecturer at the University of Venda in the student and counselling centre, South Africa. Email: Refilwepila@yahoo.com. ORCID: 0000-0002-1128-6492.

*** Mianda Erasmus is a lecturer in the Department of Psychology Ipeleng Child and Family Centre at North-West University, South Africa. Email: Mianda.Erasmus@nwu.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0002-9521-8322.

experiencing the deadliest patterns of alcohol intake in Africa, with 41.2% of women and 48.1% of men engaging in heavy drinking and a yearly average consumption of 9.5 litres per individual (WHO, 2018). It is noteworthy that the alcohol per-capita consumption (APC) in South Africa seems high compared to other African countries. South Africa is ranked amongst the top five countries in Africa with the highest usage of alcohol, recording 9.3 litres of APC, with Seychelles being 13.8 litres, Nigeria 13.4 litres, Gabon 11.5 litres and Equatorial Guinea 11.3 litres (WHO, 2019). Despite the various alcohol policy reforms in place, heavy drinking continues to be a major problem in South Africa (Trangenstein et al., 2018). The increase in alcohol use has been reported as a challenge in institutions of higher learning (Kyei & Ramagoma, 2013; Young & De Klerk, 2008)

Alcohol use related-problems cut across all age groups, however, is it more prevalent amongst emerging adults (18–25 years of age) (Grant et al., 2004; Simons-Morton et al., 2016; Wilcox et al., 2010). In a South African university study, Nyandu and Ross (2020) noted 88% alcohol use in emerging adults, with 40% identified as binge drinkers. In a similar study conducted in a university in Limpopo Province, Kyei and Ramagoma (2013) reported that 65% consume alcohol, with 49% abusing it. Lategan et al. (2017) reported a 55.1% hazardous alcohol consumption rate among 474 emerging adults in South African university settings.

The university environment is considered a predisposing factor towards increased alcohol use, and reportedly, students in institutions of higher learning drink more than their peers who are not exposed to the university environment (Lorant et al., 2013). The debilitating pattern of alcohol consumption during emerging adulthood can be attributable to the intense turbulence from feeling in-between, identity exploration, uncertainties and instabilities that differentiate this life stage from other human developmental phases (Arnett et al., 2014). According to Arnett (2000), emerging adults feel in-between because they are neither at the dependency stages between adolescence and the enduring responsibility stage of adulthood. As part of the emerging adult stage, explorations may lead to alcohol use to relieve emotional symptoms and turmoil.

Regarding alcohol use by gender, studies showed that males consume higher quantities of alcohol and experience more alcohol related problems than females (Agabio et al., 2017; Lee & Chen, 2017). This difference is often attributed to the traditional gender role expectations, which allow males to consume more alcohol and freely express their level of drinking compared to females (Erol & Karpyak, 2015). Female students are reported to engage in alcohol consumption mostly to regulate stress reactivity and negative effects (Peltier et al., 2019).

In terms of peer influence and alcohol use, it was noted that strong and healthy relationships with peers during emerging adulthood is proposed as a protective measure against heavy drinking (Zhu et al., 2019) . This implies that healthy or unhealthy peer influence at this stage may have profound consequences on alcohol consumption among emerging adults. This notion was reiterated by Boyd and colleagues (2014), in that the perception of peer group heavy drinking tendencies predicted an increase in the level of alcohol consumption. There is also evidence that heavy drinkers select peers who are

also heavy drinkers (Stappenbeck et al., 2010). This could be associated with the need to conform to the norms of the peers. Studer and colleagues (2016) further stated that misconduct and involvement with peers predicted an increase in the level of alcohol consumption, while conformity to peer standard predicted a decrease in alcohol use. There was a similar outcome reported in which an increase in peer pressure to engage in misconduct was associated with an increase in drinking behaviour (Grazioli et al., 2018); however, Lee-Zorn (2011) indicated that increased consumption of alcohol was influenced by greater levels of peer conformity. As such, peer influence may serve as both a risk and protective factor for alcohol intake.

Gender difference has been indicated, where males are generally shown to be more susceptible to peer pressure compared to females (Chatterjee et al., 2017; McCoy et al., 2019). However, literature regarding gender differences in dimensional peer pressure is lacking (Clasen & Brown, 1985); this also includes literature in addressing peer pressure dimensions in emerging adults.

Theory of peer pressure by Clasen and Brown (1985) demonstrated that the influence of peers on individuals could assume different dimensions, which include pressure to engage in misconduct, conformity to peer norms, involvement with peers, and peer involvement in school and in the family. The aim of the current study was to examine whether the association between peer pressure and alcohol use varies according to gender. The findings of the study may contribute to knowledge regarding the role of gender in the relationship between peer pressure and alcohol use. This may ultimately inform institutions of higher learning of policy development and interventions in managing alcohol use.

Method

Sample

Using the cross-sectional approach, the conveniently recruited 414 emerging adults, who were undergraduates of North-West University (NWU), Mafikeng Campus, South Africa. As shown in Table 1, there were 269 females and 145 males, with an average age of 23.05 (±3.85). The sample consisted mainly of those aged 22–25 (50.5%), single (97.6%) and in their fourth year (43.2). The distribution of the participants was across six of the seven faculties in the Mafikeng Campus of the university. Altogether, the faculties of health sciences (25.1%), humanities (24.4) and commerce (21.5) comprised up to 71% of the total sample size, while the remaining 29% were among faculties of education (10.9%), Law (5.3%) and agricultural, science and technology (12.8%).

Procedure and ethical considerations

Prior to commencement of the study, the Health Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of the faculty of health sciences, NWU, granted approval. An invitation to participate in the study was sent out using online platforms, inclusive of eFundi (an NWU online teaching and learning platform that connects lecturers and registered students) and

the NWU Facebook page. Participation took place without the use of coercion or intimidation. The online invitation provided a QRL code. The opening of the QRL code provided a link to the purpose of the study. The potential participant would then proceed to complete the informed consent form and the questionnaire. Author contact details were provided in case participants needed further clarification regarding the study. The study maintained anonymity, confidentiality and the privacy of participants throughout. Each participant received a ZAR 10 airtime voucher as a token of appreciation. Data collection occurred over a five-week period. Due to the exclusion of psychology students, there was no conflict of interest.

Instruments

The Peer Pressure Inventory (PPI) (Clasen & Brown, 1985) assessed the perception of peer influence. This study used a shorter PPI version, containing 22 items (Azeez et al., 2020). The 22-item PPI was measured using a 4-point Likert scale format, ranging from "no response to do" (0) to "a lot of pressure to do" (3) in the present study. There was an internal consistency coefficient of 0.79 obtained for the 22-item PPI in this study. The five dimensional structure of the PPI moderately fits the data of this study, with adjusted goodness of fit (AGFI) and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) values of 0.83 and 0.87 respectively. High scores indicate an increase in peer pressure across the five dimensions.

The Alcohol Use Dependence Identification Test (AUDIT-C) is a shorter form of the 10-item AUDIT developed by the World Health Organization (Saunders et al., 1993). The three items in AUDIT-C assess the use and frequency of alcohol use. In previous studies, the full version of AUDIT has performed similarly to the AUDIT-C for detecting the frequency of drinking (Du Preez et al., 2016; Seth et al., 2015). This questionnaire has previously been utilised within the South African population (Du Preez et al., 2016). The Cronbach's α report was 0.73; scores ranging from 6 to 7 and 8 to 12 indicate high and severe risk of harm from alcohol use respectively, while those less than 6 suggest low to moderate risk of harm.

In addition to the PPI and AUDIT-C, there were other socio-demographic variables measured, including gender, age, marital status, level of study and the faculty to which participants belonged.

Statistical analysis

Analysis included descriptive and inferential data using the SPSS version 20.0 and the analysis on moment structure (AMOS) software version 25. The testing of the moderating effect of gender on the association between dimensional peer pressure and alcohol used an invariance test and multi-group analysis. The selection of the maximum likelihood (ML) was used as an estimation method. Model fitness was assessed using comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), standardised root-mean-square residual (SRMR), and root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA). To achieve a good model fit, CFI and TLI values must be above .90, while SRMR and RMSEA must be less than .08

and .06 respectively (Kline, 2011). There was no multicollinearity issue, given that the bivariate associations among the dimensions of peer pressure were between .09 and .50.

Results

Risk of harm from alcohol use and mean differences on continuous variables

Table 1 displays the prevalence of alcohol use risk and mean scores on all continuous variables stratified by gender. High and severe risk of harm from alcohol use together constitute 24.6%. Both males (17.93%) and females (16.7%) had almost equal percentages on high risk of harm from alcohol use. Compared to females (4.46%), a higher percentage of males (13.10%) indicated severe risk of harm. Males significantly consumed a greater quantity of alcohol than females (p=.002), although with a small effect size (d=32). Similarly, males were more pressured by peers to engage in misconduct (p=.003) and to be more involved with peers (p=.001) compared to females, with small (d=31) and moderate (d=52) respectively. There were no significant mean differences on peer conformity (p=.13), family involvement (p=.92) and school involvement (p=.91). Overall, males reported increased peer pressure than females (p =. 006), albeit with small effect size (d=52).

Table 1: Social demographics distribution and mean differences on continuous variables stratified by gender

n (%) or M (SD)	Male n =145 (35)	Female n = 269 (65)	Total N = 414	χ2/t(d)
Age category (in years)				15.07**
18–21	37 (25.5)	98 (36.4)	135 (32.6)	
22–25	70 (48.3)	139 (51.7)	209 (50.5)	
> 25	38 (26.2)	32 (11.9)	70 (16.9)	
Marital status				1.01
Single	143 (98.6)	261 (97)	404 (97.6)	
Married	2 (1.4)	8 (3)	10 (2.4)	
Level of study				2.27
1st year	22 (15.2)	48 (17.8)	70 (16.9)	
2nd year	28 (19.3)	42 (15.6)	70 (16.9)	
3rd year	29 (20)	66 (24.5)	95 (22.9)	
4th year	66 (45.5)	113 (42)	179 (43.2)	
Faculty				24.60**
Commerce	35 (24.1)	54 (20.1)	89 (21.5)	
Education	11 (7.6)	34 (12.6)	45 (10.9)	
FAST	31 (21.4)	22 (8.2)	53 (12.8)	
Health Sciences	34 (23.4)	70 (26)	104 (25.1)	
Humanities	23 (15.9)	78 (29)	101 (24.4)	
Law	11 (7.6)	11 (4.1)	22 (5.3)	

n (%) or M (SD)	Male n =145 (35)	Female n = 269 (65)	Total N = 414	χ2/t(d)
Alcohol use risk				11.52**
Low	58 (40)	111 (41.3)	169 (40.8)	
Moderate	42 (29)	101 (37.5)	143 (34.5)	
High	26 (17.9)	45 (16.7)	71 (17.1)	
Severe	19 (13.1)	12 (4.5)	31 (7.5)	
Age (in years)	23.72 (3.07)	22.69 (2.99)	23.05 (3.06)	3.32** (.34)
Alcohol use	4.34 (2.55)	3.58 (2.34)	3.85 (2.44)	3.08** (.32)
Peer pressure (full score)	25.41 (9.63)	22.85 (8.77)	23.75 (9.15)	2.74** (.28)
Misconduct	3.47 (2.85)	2.66 (2.52)	2.94 (2.67)	2.98**(.31)
Peer conformity	3.71 (2.04)	3.39 (1.92)	3.51 (1.96)	1.53 (.11)
Family involvement	3.89 (2.22)	3.87 (2.18)	3.88 (2.19)	.11 (.01)
Peer involvement	4.15 (2.67)	2.97 (2.04)	3.38 (2.35)	5.03** (.52)
School involvement	5.16 (1.84)	5.14 (1.77)	5.15 (1.79)	.12 (.01)

Bivariate associations of peer pressure dimensions with alcohol use

Table 2 presents the bivariate associations between peer pressure dimensions and alcohol use separately for males and females. Among females, there were significant and positive correlations of alcohol use with peer pressure to engage in misconduct (r=.37, $p < .001$), peer involvement (r=.12, $p = .046$), and negative association with family involvement (r= –.16, $p = .009$); however, only peer pressure to engage in misconduct was significantly and positively related to alcohol use among males (r= .46, $p < .001$). The overall score on peer pressure was associated with alcohol use in males (r= .22, $p = .008$) but not among females (r= .06, $p = .35$).

Table 2: Bivariate associations among variables for females (below the diagonal) and males (above the diagonal)

N = 414	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Age (1)		.07	–.11	–.02	–.11	–.15	–.11	–.08
Alcohol use (2)	.01		.22**	.46**	–.02	.07	.11	.09
Peer pressure (3)	–.22**	.06		.55**	.74**	.63**	.73**	.65**
Misconduct (4)	–.05	.37**	.61**		.25**	.12	.34**	.09
Peer conformity (5)	–.12*	–.003	.70**	.34**		.39**	.44**	.50**
Family involvement (6)	–.19**	–.16**	.61**	.11	.28**		.32**	.42**
Peer involvement (7)	–.18**	.12**	.70**	.41**	.42**	.33**		.34**
School involvement (8)	–.17**	–.07	.65**	.18**	.50**	.35**	.31**	

Comparison of the unconstrained and the constrained structural models

The structural model constrained across gender was compared to the unconstrained structural coefficients for model invariance. Table 3 indicates the fit indices for the constrained and unconstrained models, with both models showing adequateness in fit. The Chi-square difference test indicates a significant difference between the constrained and unconstrained models at χ^2 (3) = 10.61, p=.06. The results suggest that the influence of peer pressure dimensions on alcohol use is not the same for both males and females.

Table 3: Models fit indices for unconstrained and constrained models

Models	χ^2	Df	P	CFI	TLI	SRMR	RMSEA (90% CI)
Unconstrained	11.41	4	.02	.98	.88	.04	.067 (.02, .11)
Constrained	22.017	9	.009	.97	.90	.07	.057 (.03, 09)
CFI = Comparative fit index; TL							
I = Tucker–Lewis index; SRMR = standardised root-mean-square residual; RMSEA = Root-mean-square error of approximation							

Differences in structural path coefficients

Given that the influence of dimensional peer pressure is not the same across gender, it then follows to check where the difference exists. Figure 1 presents the structural model for the influence of dimensional peer pressure on alcohol use in both males and females. The results showed that only peer pressure to engage in misconduct was significant on alcohol use in both males (β = .51, p < .001) and females (β = .40, p < .001). Specifically, an increase in pressure to engage in misconduct predicted an increase in alcohol use. Peer involvement (Males: β = –.03, p = .76; Females: β = .07, p = .26) and school involvement (Males: β = .14, p = .10; Female: β = –.05, p= .41) were not significant on alcohol use in both genders. Peer conformity influenced alcohol use among males (β = –.22, p= .01), but not in females (β = –.09, p= .18); however, an increase in peer conformity predicted a decrease in alcohol use. Conversely, family involvement influenced alcohol use in females (β = –.18, p= .003), but not in males (β = .05, p= .63); an increase in family involvement predicted a decrease in alcohol use.

In order to examine the moderating effect of gender, each of the paths from misconduct, peer conformity and family involvement to alcohol use were constrained one after the other. Outcomes showed that the path from family involvement was different for males and females (χ^2 [1] = 4.37, p = .037). This means that gender moderated the association of family involvement with alcohol use, as there was an association confirmed in females and not in males; however, the paths from misconduct (χ^2 [1] = .88, p = .35) and peer conformity (χ^2 [1] = 1.42, p = .23) were not significantly different across gender.
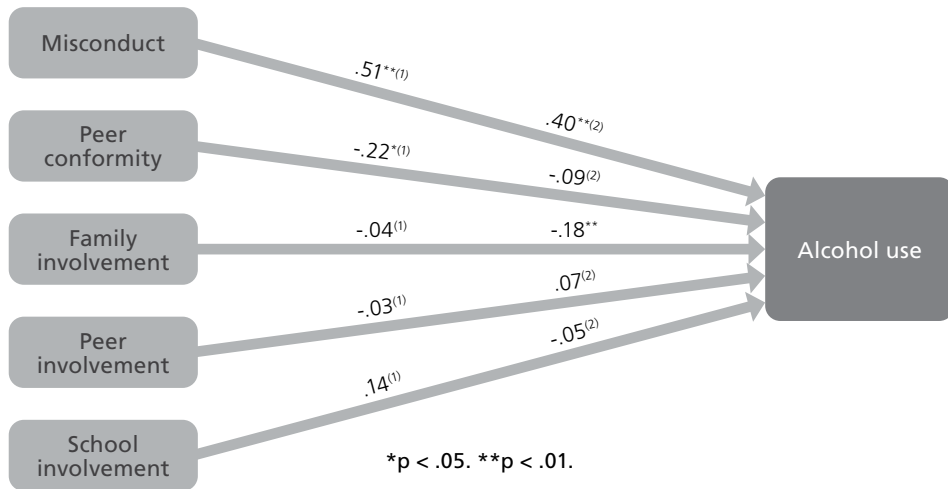
Figure 1: Structural Model for the associations between dimensional peer influence and alcohol use in males (1) vs females (2). Positive figures indicate statistically significant differences in the path coefficients.

Discussion

The focus of the current study was to investigate the moderating role of gender on the association between dimensional peer pressure and alcohol use in a sample of emerging adults. The overall results showed a 24.6% rate for high/severe risk of harm from alcohol use, which is about one in four emerging adults, indicating an increased risk of experiencing harm. Although this rate may be considered low compared to the 55% found by Kyei and Ramagoma (2013) and Lategan et al. (2017), these findings could be due to difference in settings, such as developed versus developing countries, and geographical locations of these universities (urban versus rural).

There were gender differences in alcohol consumption indicated; males were shown to consume a significantly higher quantity of alcohol than females. These findings are consistent with reports in literature (Agabio et al., 2017; Lee & Chen, 2017). Gender role expectations could be associated with the increased consumption of alcohol by males (Erol & Karpyak, 2015).

The peer pressure dimension of misconduct indicates a greater amount of peer pressure to engage in misconduct amongst males compared to females. The results further show no significant differences in other aspects of peer pressure (conformity, family involvement, peer involvement, and school involvement). Clasen and Brown (1985) partially concurred that there was no gender disparity found in their study in some dimensions of peer pressure, which includes peer conformity, family and school involvements. Although females experience pressure from peers, the effect is lower in comparison to males. These outcomes are consistent with previous work that showed that males are generally more susceptible to peer pressure compared to females

(Sayantani et al., 2017; McCoy et al., 2019). Previous studies (Studer et al., 2016; Grazioli et al., 2018) have shown that the dimensions of peer pressure are associated with the level of alcohol consumption among emerging adults.

Findings further show that peer pressure dimensions associated with alcohol consumption differ between males and females, while the association between peer pressure to engage in misconduct and alcohol use cut across both genders. The findings revealed that the increased peer pressure-misconduct dimension was associated with increased consumption of alcohol. When peer pressure is directed at engaging in misconduct and delinquent behaviours, then it is expected that one is likely to engage in alcohol use, given that alcohol intoxication in turn reinforces misbehaviours (Gatti et al., 2013). This implies that engagement in maladaptive behaviours among peers may include vandalism, substance use and theft, and can co-occur with increased alcohol intake (Gatti et al., 2013). This finding supports a previous study by Studer et al. (2016), which demonstrated that misconduct is positively associated with an increased drinking volume in a large sample of Swedish young men. Similar outcomes were reported by Grazioli and colleagues (2018).

Peer pressure dimensions of peer and family involvement indicated a significant association with alcohol use. The results showed a strong association between females with peer and family involvements, in comparison to males. Peer involvement associated positively with alcohol use, while peer influence on behaviours towards parents and the family in general associated negatively with the use of alcohol among females. Social interactions or involvement with peers in terms of leisure engagements, may lead to increased alcohol intake among females, whereas peer influence towards family may relate with low level of alcohol use. Therefore, family relations play a significant role with these emerging adults (Oliveira et al., 2019). Although, the current results indicate that family involvement fosters reduced level of alcohol use in females, this could be attributable to gender disparity in traditional roles. Additionally, Erol and Karpyak (2015) indicate that overall acceptance of male expression of drinking behaviour may indirectly be an enabler towards peer involvement and ultimately increased alcohol consumption, while family involvement in females serves as a protective factor, resulting in reduced levels of alcohol consumption.

Of all the peer-pressure dimensions, only the family involvement dimension was moderated by gender in alcohol use. An increase in the family involvement dimension predicted lower alcohol use among females, but there was no such outcome found among males. Family involvement may influence female emerging adults' behaviour towards adaptive conduct, such as responsible and less harmful alcohol consumption. Parents may encourage peers who share positive family values to associate with one another (McMorris et al., 2011). The expectation is that female emerging adults will mingle more with peers who share positive orientations regarding how one should behave towards ones' parents and the family in general. This is line with the social learning theory, in which behaviour is learned through modelling and imitation from the immediate environment.

The influence of peer conformity on alcohol use was significant among males, but not in females. Despite the difference, multi-group analysis did not detect any moderating effect of gender. This could be because the difference was not large enough to warrant a moderating effect. Given that peer conformity associated negatively with alcohol use in males, it is inferential that conformity to the general peer norms, which form the basis for exhibiting appropriate conduct in one's peer group, may prevent engagement in maladaptive behaviours such as excessive alcohol and other substance use (Studer et al., 2016).

Although the findings of this study are novel, especially the outcome showing the moderating effect of gender on the association of peer pressure regarding family involvement and alcohol use, it is necessary that the current results be interpreted within certain limitations. First, the association between peer pressure dimensions and alcohol consumption is not causal because the current study design is not longitudinal but cross-sectional. In addition, the current study employed convenient sampling, which may have affected the gender distribution (fewer male participants); future studies may need to employ more robust sampling methods.

Conclusion

This study confirms that gender moderates the association between dimensional peer pressure and alcohol use. However, this moderating influence is specific at the association between peer pressure concerning family involvement and alcohol consumption. Gender did not significantly moderate the associations of peer pressure to engage in misconduct and peer conformity with alcohol use. Additionally, peer pressure dimensions of peer involvement and school involvement did not significantly relate to alcohol use. Encouraging peer pressure relating to family involvement, specifically among the female emerging adults, may limit the harmful consumption of alcohol.

Action-orientated intervention programmes in institutions of higher learning should lean towards improving awareness and supporting students to reduce and ultimately assist with issues that perpetuate increased alcohol use. Additionally, alternative programmes and recreational activities that promote individual talents and skills may serve as a protective factor, resulting in reduced alcohol use.

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Facilitating First-Year Student Adjustment: Towards a Model for Intentional Peer Mentoring

Angelique McConney* & Magda Fourie–Malherbe**

Abstract

Attrition of first-year university students remains a global problem, and this is also of great concern in South African higher education. In an effort to address this challenge, many higher education institutions offer peer mentoring programmes to assist first-year students with their adjustment to university life, in order to improve their retention. However, evidence of the effectiveness of such peer mentoring programmes is still limited. This article intends to contribute in this regard. Stellenbosch University introduced its BeWell Peer Mentoring programme in 2013. In addition to providing psycho-social support, mentors offer developmental initiatives on holistic wellness to assist first-year students with their adjustment. After an institution-wide roll-out of the programme, the question arose whether the BeWell Peer Mentoring programme actually assisted first-year students in adjusting to campus life. In order to answer this question a research study with a sequential mixed-method design was employed. Our study found that adjustment outcomes were influenced by the intensity of peer mentoring participating students received. Mentor attributes, time invested in mentoring, reasons for mentoring and the wellness component of the programme all influenced the peer mentoring received. The findings underscored the importance of selecting intentional mentors, and effective programme implementation and monitoring. A model for intentional peer mentoring is proposed, to optimise the programme outcomes. Other institutions with similar programmes could also benefit from the proposed model.

Keywords

mentoring, peer mentoring, first-year adjustment, first-year experience

Introduction

Many first–year students embark on their university journey with great excitement, often oblivious to the multiple transitions that await them. Adjusting to their new educational environment is a complex and challenging process that entails coping with a range of interpersonal, social, academic and institutional demands (Credé & Niehorster, 2012). Adjustment is a multi–dimensional process of interaction between an individual and his/

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*   Angelique McConney is a senior clinical psychologist and peer help programme coordinator of Emthonjeni Student Wellness, Nelson Mandela University, South Africa. Email: angelique.mcconney@ mandela.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0002-8741-7129.

**   Magda Fourie-Malherbe is professor emerita of Curriculum Studies in the Faculty of Education at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. Email: mfourie@sun.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0002-8351-6111.

her environment, whereby the individual develops effective coping strategies in order to adapt to the new environment and the various demands it brings (Baker & Siryk, 2015). Baker and Siryk (2015) argue that the university environment requires students to adopt coping responses along four adjustment domains: academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal–emotional adjustment and institutional adjustment (attachment).

The inability to adjust in the first year puts first-year students at risk of leaving prematurely (Tinto, 2012). While first-year attrition is a global problem (Beer & Lawson, 2017; Tinto, 2012), this is of particular concern in the South African context where attrition rates are highest amongst the previously underserved groups of black African and coloured students who still represent low participation rates in the system (CHE, 2013). Research has found that adjustment challenges can either directly lead to attrition (Abdullah et al., 2010; Credé & Niehorster, 2012), or indirectly as inadequate adjustment could lead to poor academic performance resulting in attrition (Credé & Niehorster, 2012). Peer mentoring programmes have become pivotal in the formal support offered to first-year students as a means of facilitating adjustment (Jacobi, 1991) and improving retention (Shotton et al., 2007; Ward et al., 2012). In spite of the popularity of peer mentoring programmes, however, there is still limited research available on the outcomes of these programmes (Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2000; Knowles & Parsons, 2006) and their effects on first-year adjustment.

In its efforts to best support first-year students, Stellenbosch University in South Africa introduced the BeWell Peer Mentoring programme in 2013. The study on which this article reports, investigated the adjustment outcomes of the BeWell Peer Mentoring programme, in an attempt to gain reliable data on whether the programme was achieving its goal of assisting first-year students in their adjustment to university, and to contribute to filling the gap in knowledge on the outcomes of peer mentoring programmes in higher education.

Literature Review

Defining peer mentoring

Mentoring relationships are complex, which makes mentoring difficult to define (Gehrke, 1988) and while there are many definitions of mentoring, the mentoring literature still lacks a widely accepted definition of the concept (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Egege & Kutieleh, 2015; Jacobi, 1991; Lane, 2020). For the purposes of this study the following Campbell and Campbell (1997, p. 727) definition was considered to be the most appropriate: mentoring is "a situation in which a more experienced member of an organisation maintains a relationship with a less-experienced, often new member to the organisation, and provides information, support, and guidance so as to enhance the less-experienced member's chances of success in the organisation." In traditional forms of mentoring, the more experienced member of the organisation is usually a staff member (Campell & Campbell, 1997), whereas in peer mentoring initiatives, the more experienced member is a peer (Terrion & Leonard, 2007). While there is no

widely accepted definition of mentoring, the literature reports common functions that the mentor performs in relation to the mentee. These usually include a psycho–social and role modelling function (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Jacobi, 1991; Kram, 1983; Kram & Isabella, 1985), and a career and professional development function (Jacobi, 1991; Kram, 1983; Kram & Isabella, 1985), but could also include academic subject knowledge support (Crisp & Cruz, 2009) and a liaison function (Holt & Lopez, 2014).

Peer mentoring and adjustment

Numerous studies indicate a positive relationship between adjustment and attrition (Abdullah et al., 2010; Credé & Niehorster, 2012; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Krotseng, 1992), hence the primary purpose of peer mentoring programmes is often to assist students with adjustment during the first year (Collings et al., 2014; Allen et al., 1999; Grant-Vallone & Eshner, 2000; Treston, 1999), as a means of improving retention. Various studies have reported peer mentoring programmes as being effective in buffering the transition from school to university for first-year students (Collings et al., 2014; Etzel et al., 2018; Swart et al., 2019). In their qualitative study, Swart et al. (2019) found that first-year engineering students who participated in a peer mentoring programme, reported that the programme assisted them in adapting to the higher education environment. Similarly, Yüksela and Bahadır-Yılmazb (2019) found that a peer mentoring programme had a positive effect on the adjustment of nursing students. Collings et al. (2014) also found that peer mentoring moderated the effects of the transition to university in terms of social support, positive affect and self-esteem. Etzel et al. (2018), too, found that a peer mentoring programme aided pharmacy students in their adjustment during their first year. In a recent study done in South Africa, Joorst (2021) found that the guidance and support offered by mentors assisted first-year students in a bridging course to adjust to university.

While the benefits of peer mentoring programmes are widely acknowledged, some studies have underscored factors that contribute to differences in peer mentoring outcomes. A study by Phinney et al. (2011) found that a good mentor-mentee connection was associated with the mentee's sense of belonging to the university, highlighting the quality of the mentor-mentee relationships. Holt and Lopez (2014) emphasised the importance of contact time, as their study found that variations in contact time influenced perceptions of support received, with mentees who reported less contact time also reporting lower levels of support received. The level of participation from the mentee, according to Smith (2007), is another important aspect of peer mentoring, as high participation from mentees often strengthens the peer mentoring relationship and increases the benefits of the programme. Goff (2011) also found that students with greater attendance, benefitted more from participation in the programme. Tremblay and Rodger (2003), too, highlighted the importance of participation and concluded that the level of participation by mentees influences the outcomes of peer mentoring programs. These findings are significant, as they underscore the importance of *how* peer mentoring programmes are implemented, and the effect this has on programme outcomes.

The BeWell Peer Mentoring Programme

The programme is offered by the Centre for Student Communities, which is part of the Student Affairs Division of Stellenbosch University. Broadly, the BeWell Peer Mentoring programme, pairs first-year students (mentees) with senior students (mentors), to support their transition to the university environment. Upon arrival on campus during the welcoming period, all first-year students are assigned a mentor. This is done within the residence or private student organisation (PSO) environment the first-year student is affiliated to. The primary responsibility for implementation of the programme, therefore, lies within the individual residence or PSO environments, while the programme coordinator fulfils an oversight role.

The programme has a two-pronged approach to facilitating the adjustment of first-year students. On the one hand mentors offer psycho-social support to first-year students (a common function of peer mentoring programmes), and on the other, they facilitate formal developmental initiatives that focus on holistic wellness (Botha & Cilliers, 2012). The aim is to facilitate the adjustment of first-year students through a combination of psycho-social support and the optimization of holistic wellness (Botha & Cilliers, 2012; Du Plessis, 2015). To achieve this, mentors are expected to offer individual psycho-social support to their mentees, when required, and to facilitate at least six wellness sessions with their group of mentees. The wellness component of the programme is embedded in the holistic wellness model of Hettler (1984), which includes six wellness domains: intellectual, emotional, social, physical, spiritual and occupational wellness (Botha & Cilliers, 2012). Additionally, first-year students are supported by an individualised wellness website with numerous resources such as assessments, e-books, audiobooks, e-workshops and journals (Du Plessis, 2015).

New mentors are recruited annually in every residence and PSO. Seeing that mentors are not recruited via a centralised system, the recruitment criteria may differ. Mentor training takes place twice: the first opportunity is provided shortly after their selection (in the final term of the preceding year), followed by a second training session before the arrival of the first-year students the following year. The first training session focuses on the role and duties of a mentor, as well as on the implementation of the six wellness components of the peer mentoring programme. Mentors are trained extensively in the different wellness domains and are provided with "wellness cards" to facilitate wellness discussions with their mentor groups. The cards contain definitions of wellness, as well as suggested activities to guide mentors in engaging their first-year mentees in discussions about the various aspects of wellness, and "to help coach their mentees to adopt a lifestyle that promotes health and wellbeing" (Du Plessis, 2015, p. 3). The second training session focuses on all the available resources that first-year students can access via their individualised wellness websites.

First-year students are assigned a mentor upon their arrival on campus during the university's official welcoming period. Officially, mentors remain in their peer mentoring role throughout the mentee's first year. Both residential and commuter students are targeted. Every mentor is responsible for eight to ten mentees and

collectively they form a mentor group. Mentors are required to provide their mentees with individual support and to facilitate six wellness sessions (in group format). The aim of each wellness session is to create an awareness of the wellness domain concerned, to facilitate reflection on personal wellness, and to foster insight on how to manage personal wellness more effectively. While clear guidelines exist for the facilitation of the wellness sessions, how individual support is provided to mentees is left to the discretion of mentors. Both mentors and mentees are required to log the wellness group sessions and any individual sessions on the BeWell electronic portal for tracking and monitoring purposes.

Research Methodology

Our study investigated the effect that the BeWell Peer Mentoring programme had on the adjustment of first-time entering first-year students. The goal of the study was to investigate whether participation in the programme influenced the adjustment of participating first-year students. A mixed-methods approach was employed, and an explanatory sequential mixed-method design used. Data were collected in two phases: quantitative data were first collected by means of a survey, followed by the collection of qualitative data through focus group discussions. The rationale behind collecting the second strand of data was to gain a deeper understanding of the quantitative data (Creswell, 2015)

Participants and sampling

For the purposes of this study, first time entering first-year students at Stellenbosch University's main campus were targeted, more specifically, the first-year students from the 2017 cohort of registered students at the university (a total of 5,024). No sampling was required for the quasi-experiment, as the researcher had access to all registered first-year students. For the focus group discussions purposive sampling was applied.

Data collection and analysis

Two data strands were collected. In the first phase, a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest non-equivalent group design was used to compare the adjustment of students who participated in the peer mentoring programme (the experimental group) with the adjustment of students who did not participate in the programme (control group). Given that all first-year students are assigned a mentor during the welcoming period, the control group comprised of students who only participated in peer mentoring during the welcoming period or who did not participate at all. The experimental group comprised of students who participated in the programme beyond the welcoming period. The quasi-experiment was followed by focus group discussions, in phase 2, to explain the first data set.

Phase 1: Quasi-experiment

A standardised instrument, the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ), constructed by Baker and Siryk (2015), was employed to measure respondents' levels of adjustment. This instrument's multi-faceted approach to measuring adjustment to university was the primary reason for using the SACQ in this study. Other reasons included, amongst others, the fact that it is a widely used standardised instrument whose reliability and validity has been tested and proven. The SACQ is a 67-item self-report questionnaire that conceptualises adjustment along four adjustment domains: academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal-emotional adjustment and institutional adjustment (attachment). The instrument yields a full-scale score for overall adjustment to university as well as scores in four subscales for the different adjustment domains (Baker & Siryk, 2015). The SACQ was administered at two points in time: in March 2017 (pre-test version) and again in October 2017 (post-test version), to measure the post-intervention adjustment for both groups. A total of 1,064 respondents completed the pre-test version (response rate of 21.18%) and 425 respondents completed the post-test version (response rate of 8.46%). The Statistical Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for data analysis. Only completed questionnaires were analysed. Once the data had been checked, the quality of scores from the SACQ was examined to assess the reliability of the instrument itself. Cronbach alpha calculations were >.80 for all the adjustment subscales as well as for the overall adjustment score, indicating an acceptable reliability score. This was followed by a distribution of the demographic variables for the pre- and for the post-test samples.

Inferential statistics were thereafter employed to analyse and compare the responses to the questionnaires from the two groups, pre- and post-intervention, in order to determine whether the experimental group had in fact benefitted from participation in the peer mentoring programme, as indicated by higher scores on the SACQ. The null hypothesis was that there would be no significant change in adjustment between the control group and experimental group in the post-test results. Analysis of variance was performed on the pre-test and post-test adjustment scores. For the pre-test, the differences in adjustment between the two groups were analysed. In the post-test the changes in the adjustment of these two groups, over time, were compared.

Phase 2: Focus group discussions

For the second data strand, focus group discussions were facilitated. Focus group discussions were employed to collect the qualitative data because of the interactive nature of this method. As stated by Creswell (1998), focus group discussions are ideal in contexts where the interaction amongst participants is likely to yield the best information. This method enables discussion to develop and responses by one participant might trigger reflection by another (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Morgan, 1997). Five focus group discussions were facilitated with a total of 22 participants. A semi-structured interview schedule was used, informed by the results from the quasi-experiment. The focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed. Interview transcripts were

analysed according to accepted qualitative analysis procedures of coding and re-coding, categorising and interpreting, using the content analysis method. Inferences were then made from both data strands.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to conducting the research, ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Stellenbosch University. Due to ethical concerns, the researchers opted for a quasi-experiment as having a randomized control group would have meant that participation in the programme would intentionally have been withheld from some students to form a control group. The licensing fee of the questionnaire used in the study was funded by Stellenbosch University. All standard ethical considerations were respected (confidentiality, informed consent, debriefing, right to withdraw participation) and consent was received from all participants.

Research Findings

Questions on demographic details included in the SACQ were gender, race, language, nationality, geographic origin, living environment, parents' educational background and grade 12 results. Factorial analysis of variance was used to determine whether the demographic variables had any influence on difference in adjustment between groups and over time. No significant demographic interaction effects were found, meaning that the demographic variables did not influence the main results, namely group and time differences.

Adjustment scores from the SACQ

The overall adjustment scores from the pre-test data were compared with the adjustment scores from the post-test data. Analysis of variance was calculated to determine whether there was any statistically significant difference in the overall adjustment of the two groups. No statistically significant difference in post-test adjustment scores for the two groups ($p=0.7916$) was found. For the pre-test, Cohen D effect sizes showed a small difference between the two groups (0.3 small), and in this instance the control group had higher adjustment scores. For the post-test, however, the difference between the two groups was smaller (0.12 negligible), because the adjustment of the experimental group increased from the pre-test, while the adjustment of the control group showed a decrease. Despite the lack of a statistically significant difference in the overall adjustment of the two groups, this trend does suggest that participating students could have derived some benefit from participation in the programme, but that this was not as significant as the programme had intended it to be.

No statistically significant differences ($p<0.05$) were found between the two groups over time for any of the subscales either. The following p-values were found for the subscales: attachment $p=0.06078$, personal-emotional adjustment $p=0.07740$, academic adjustment $p=0.15205$, and social adjustment $p=0.25824$. As mentioned, none of the

demographic variables influenced the main results, namely group and time differences, for any of these subscales or the overall adjustment scores.

The results from the quasi-experiment raised questions about the extent to which the programme was actually assisting first-year students to adjust to campus. To understand these results, particularly why participating students were not optimally benefitting from participation in the peer mentoring programme, focus group discussions were facilitated in the second phase of this mixed-method study.

Results of the focus group discussions

Five focus group discussions were facilitated with four or five students each, giving a total of 22 participants. The focus group discussions were facilitated by one of the researchers, guided by a semi-structured interview schedule. Fourteen of the participants (63.64%) were female students, while eight (36.36%) were male students. The vast majority of the participants lived in university residences (86.36%), while only three participants (13.64%) lived in private accommodation. The participants were racially diverse: 36.37% were black African, 31.82% were coloured and 31.82% white.

Intensity of peer mentoring

The intensity of mentoring received emerged as a central theme during the focus group discussions. We use the term "intensity of peer mentoring" to refer to the level of involvement (support and/or guidance) the mentors invested in their first-year mentees. Some participants experienced high intensity mentoring, that is their mentors were actively supporting them through their first year (they were committed), and this assisted first-year students in adjusting to campus life. However, not all first-year students experienced the same level of support or involvement from their mentors, resulting in less intense mentoring. These students' mentors were less involved after the welcoming period, and therefore the first-year students did not benefit much from participation in the programme. The focus group discussions provided in-depth insights into what contributed to the differences in the intensity of mentoring received.

Factors influencing the intensity of peer mentoring

Two main factors influenced the intensity of the peer mentoring: (1) the nature of the peer mentoring relationship and (2) the nature of mentor-mentee interaction. First-year students who experienced intense peer mentoring described the relationship they shared with their mentors in positive terms. They described their mentors as their advisors, a go-to person or a friend, and in these instances the peer mentoring assisted them in their adjustment. Respondent 2, for example, said:

> *You become friends, so it's like this whole, not hierarchy, but they know more than you, they then teach you until the point where you guys know an equal amount of information.* (R2)

With less intense peer mentoring, the relationships were not as close and supportive. In some instances, the mentors served as a resource to their mentees (i.e. provided

information that was useful to their adjustment). This held some benefit, but the mentor did not provide guidance or serve as that "go-to-person" to support mentees during the first year. Respondent 17 shared:

> *It wasn't as close of a relationship … when I need directions, I just go to her. But we didn't have a close relationship.* (R17)

In other instances, the mentor-mentee relationship was experienced as quite distant, with minimal or no benefits experienced by first-year students, as articulated by Respondent 18:

> *I think she'd be like a distant acquaintance; I think. Yes, that's how I would describe it.* (R18)

The nature of the mentor-mentee interaction emerged as the second reason for the differences in the intensity of peer mentoring received, as well as the platform used for mentor-mentee interaction. Three modes of interaction were identified: WhatsApp messages, group sessions and one-on-one interactions with individual mentees. Individual contact was experienced as most beneficial. When only group sessions were used to engage with mentees, they became a barrier to the mentoring relationship and resulted in less intense peer mentoring received, as expressed by Respondent 8:

> *And because it's in a group I don't think you can interact, and be like, I'm not fine, and that stepping forward to someone that you kind of are still a stranger to. Cause we never actually got to know the mentor properly.* (R8)

Factors contributing to the nature of the peer mentoring relationship were also identified from the focus group discussions. Mentor attributes, time invested in mentoring, reasons for mentoring and the wellness component of the programme all contributed to the nature of the peer mentoring relationship and consequently the intensity of peer mentoring.

Mentor attributes

A genuine interest in their mentees and a sincere desire to be there for them, emerged as important mentor attributes that foster a good peer mentoring relationship, as illustrated by the responses given below:

> *Show interest. Actually, care about the person, not just do it because it is their job as a mentor.* (R13)

> *I think genuine interest. Not just doing it to do it, but to actually want to be there and making sure that your mentees feel seen and wanted to be there.* (R4)

Unfortunately, not all mentees experienced their mentors as genuinely caring and invested in them. When this was absent, mentors were perceived as only performing their duties as an obligation, as articulated by Respondent 12:

> *He had to help me. That's what it felt like. I didn't feel like he wanted to.* (R12)

The second mentor attribute that fostered a good peer mentoring relationship was expressed as being "relatable", as seen from the following responses:

> *I feel like we're just looking for a person who's going to be able to relate to us.* (R17)

> *He was much more relatable, and we just spoke easily.* (R10)

What students meant by relatable, was that mentors should have an openness to them and show empathy, especially for their struggles as first-year students. When mentees experienced their mentors as relatable, they were more open and engaging with their mentors, which contributed to a positive peer mentoring relationship. In contrast, a perception of not being relatable led to distance in the peer mentoring relationship.

Time invested in mentoring

The time that the mentors invested in mentoring affected the nature of the peer mentoring relationship. Mentors who invested time and availed themselves to their mentees fostered a stronger peer mentoring relationship, as explained by Respondent 16:

> *It was really a good experience because my mentor was there at all times. So, whenever I needed help, she was there …* (R16)

In contrast, when mentors did not invest enough time, there was no real connection between the mentor and mentee, as expressed by Respondent 15:

> *She couldn't connect with us. She never really did make an effort in that sense, trying to be like, so, you know, what are you doing?* (R15)

Reasons for mentoring

Reasons for mentoring also emerged as a factor contributing to the nature of peer mentoring relationships. Intense peer mentoring was facilitated by mentors who were perceived as genuinely motivated to support first-year students. Respondent 18 explains what makes a good mentor:

> *I think personally a good mentor is someone who doesn't particularly have an agenda in the sense that by them becoming a mentor they aim to gain something.* (R18)

In contrast, other mentors were perceived as being driven by personal gain. Respondent 2 explains:

> *I felt like after looking back at it and after we've done … everything I felt like the reason she was a mentor was to become or to have a single room, to get enough room points to have a single room.* (R2)

Administration of the wellness component of the programme

The logging of wellness sessions became a barrier to intense mentoring at times. Some participants expressed their frustration with the administration of the programme, as expressed by Respondent 15:

We had to do formal things instead of it just being about talking. Now there were cards and we had to log in and it took away from the intimacy of having that kind of mentor/mentee relationship. (R15)

To some participants, the administrative requirements of the programme were too time consuming for mentors and/or mentees and detracted from the primary focus (i.e. time invested in the peer mentoring relationship).

Discussion

The results of the study suggest that the programme assisted some students with their adjustment, but that it did not to a great extent contribute to the adjustment of participating students. This finding differed from other studies that showed more positive results. Studies like those of Swart et al. (2019) and Yüksela and Bahadır-Yılmazb (2019) and Etzel et al. (2018) showed more positive results on the contribution of the peer mentoring programme to the adjustment of first-year students. The differences in adjustment outcomes, found in our study, underscore the importance of scientific studies on the outcomes of student support programmes such as the BeWell Peer Mentoring programme. We can no longer rely on anecdotal reports alone, as these are generally positive and may not accurately reflect what is happening with the programme implementation and/or outcomes.

The level of mentee participation influenced the programme outcomes, as previously underscored by Smith (2007), Goff (2011), and Tremblay and Rodger (2003). However, the study went a step further by providing valuable insights into the factors that influenced the level of participation from mentees. The intensity of mentoring received was central to the level of participation from first-year mentees. First-year students who experienced high intensity mentoring reported greater benefits, as their mentors were more involved and offered the needed support to help them adjust in their first year. When intense peer mentoring occurred, students experienced the mentor as an advisor, supporter and a resource, as per the definition of the mentor proposed by Campbell and Campbell (1997), and this helped them with coping and adjusting in their first year. In the event of low intensity peer mentoring, this role was not fulfilled by the mentors, as the mentors were either absent or, after the welcoming period, mainly provided their mentees with information. Consequently, for these mentees, the programme did not assist them with their adjustment, as more intentional mentoring beyond the welcoming period was needed.

The role that the mentor played in the intensity of the peer mentoring emerged as a central theme in the focus group discussion. While this raised concerns about the implementation of the programme by some individual mentors, the findings also provided us with insight on the attributes of the ideal mentor that the programme should be more intentional in recruiting.

In addition to the mentor attributes, the study further underscored the differences in how the mentors interacted with mentees. Group sessions were most commonly used for

mentor–mentee contact. This could be due to the requirement that all mentors facilitate the six wellness sessions with their mentor groups. However, group interaction has to be supplemented with one-on-one engagements, as this is more effective in fostering a strong peer mentoring relationship and makes first-year students more comfortable to reach out for guidance when needed.

Another important finding of the study was the unintended outcome of the wellness component of the programme. The administration thereof became a barrier to some students, as it was experienced as too time consuming, and at times it overshadowed the importance of investing time in building a strong mentor-mentee relationship.

In summary, it is important for higher education institutions to select appropriate mentors who will be intentional in their mentoring and to monitor more closely if mentors do so beyond the welcoming period. The following model for intentional mentoring is proposed to assist Stellenbosch University and other higher education institutions in strengthening their peer mentoring programmes:

Table 1: A proposed model for intentional mentoring

A model for intentional peer mentoring	
The aim of the model is to select intentional mentors who will facilitate high intensity peer mentoring.	
Mentor selection	Focus on selecting intentional mentors. This can be facilitated through selection practices that focus on our proposed mentor attributes.
Mentor attributes	– Caring: shows a caring attitude to mentees – Genuine: shows a genuine interest in helping mentees – Invested in the mentoring relationship – Relatable: open and empathetic to mentees
Reasons for mentoring	Primarily to support mentees. Mentors should not be primarily driven by personal gain. However, mentors can pursue personal growth while genuinely supporting others.
Contact time	– Individual contact – Group contact (if applicable), but not replacing individual contact. – Informal contact aimed at building a peer mentoring relationship and showing interest in their mentees. – Formal contact, as indicated.
Administration	Administration for mentors and mentees to be kept simple and minimal.
Monitoring	Monitoring systems to track the level and nature of mentor–mentee interaction should be implemented.

Limitations of the Study

A major limitation of the study is that it focused only on the perspectives of the mentees. In the focus group discussions, gaps pertaining to how mentors implemented the programme were identified. These gaps were expressed from the perspective of the first-year students and did not account for the perspective of the mentors. Future studies

aimed at understanding the experiences of the programme from the mentor perspective are recommended. Furthermore, the study was context-specific and its contribution is practice-based. The results are, therefore, not necessarily generalisable to other contexts, but the proposed model for peer mentoring could assist institutions with similar programmes.

Conclusion

This study found that the BeWell Peer Mentoring programme was not reaching its intended adjustment outcomes, and also surfaced some reasons for why this was not being achieved. In addition, the study has brought about an appreciation for the complexities inherent in the implementation of peer mentoring programmes. We trust that the results, and particularly the proposed model of intentional peer mentoring, will be of use to all higher education institutions offering peer mentoring programmes.

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Profiling Students at Risk of Dropout at a University in South Africa

Ratoeba Piet Ntema*

Abstract

Student dropout is a significant concern for university administrators, students and other stakeholders. Dropout is recognised as highly complex due to its multi-causality, which is expressed in the existing relationship in its explanatory variables associated with students, their socio-economic and academic conditions, and the characteristics of educational institutions. This article reports on a study that drew on university administrative data to build a profile of students at risk of dropout from 2008–2018. The study employed a data mining technique in which predictors were chosen based on their weight of evidence (WOE) and information value (IV). The selected predictors were then used to build a profile of students at risk of drop-out. The findings indicate that at-risk students fail more than four modules in a year with a participation average mark of 43% or less and have joined the university in the second academic year. It is suggested that universities put measures in place to control and prevent students who carry over four or more modules from adding modules to their registration until the failed modules are passed.

Keywords

data mining, student dropout, weight of evidence, information value, risk profile

Introduction

Dropout rates in higher education are a significant concern in international and national contexts (Marquez-Vera et al., 2013; Orellana et al., 2020). The concept of dropout refers to the condition where students leave an academic programme either temporarily or permanently before the end of the academic year or before complying with the requisite requirements for graduation (Bonaldo & Pereira, 2016; Daniels, 2006; Letseka, 2007). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) the dropout rate increased in Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Costa Rica, Colombia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Latvia, Lithuania, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, Turkiye, the United Kingdom and United States from 35% in 2005 to 64.5% in 2018 (Guzmán et al., 2021). The dropout rates also increased substantially in countries such as Luxembourg, Hungary, Sweden, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia (Guzmán et al., 2021). Another

* Ratoeba Piet Ntema is a lecturer at North-West University, South Africa. Email: Piet.Ntema@nwu.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0002-3379-3532.

example is the situation in Latin America, where dropout rates in higher education have historically been high, hovering around 54%, and are predicted to rise in coming years (Becerra et al., 2020). Due to its multiple causes, and the subsequent effects on various stakeholders, such as students, their families, higher education institutions (HEIs) and the broader society, dropout rates are also considered a major concern in South Africa (Mthalane et al., 2021).

According to Moeketsi and Maile (2008) in a report for the Human Sciences Research Council, the Department of Education predicted in 2005 that 36,000 (30%) of the 120,000 students who started higher education in 2000 would dropout during their first year. In their second and third years, another 24,000 (20%) left. During the three-year span, just 22% of the remaining 60,000 obtained their bachelor's degrees. According to the study, dropout rates at some universities may surpass 80%. Between 2000 and 2004, one out of every three university students and one out of every two Technikon students were predicted as likely to dropout. Nearly 20 years later, in 2020 HEI students' academic stressors were compounded (Crawford et al., 2020), partly as a result of the rapid and drastic transitions in higher education teaching and learning compelled by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of South African HE students, notably those from historically black universities and HEIs, were affected, resulting in a high dropout rate (Camilleri, 2021).

Previous research has attempted to identify the factors that explain current dropout rates and the reasons for high dropout rates (Camilleri, 2021; Mthalane et al., 2021; Moodley & Singh, 2015). Amongst others, researchers speculate that incorrect career choice, inadequate academic support, insufficient funding, relations with other students, stress factors such as accommodation issues, background of students (including families and finances), individual traits, pre-university (academic potential), challenges associated with the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, and proficiency in the medium of instruction which some students struggle to cope with, as it affects their reading and processing skills, contribute to student dropout. This work has led to the development of tools and various perspectives that give decision-makers a comprehensive understanding of dropout prevention and mitigation (Kehm et al., 2019).

Notwithstanding previous international and national research, few studies have considered student administrative data in relation to dropout rates. Moreover, limited, if any, studies have reported on the use of statistical methods such as data mining to explore factors associated with dropout among South African universities. Instead, the majority of research into dropout has utilised primary response methods. Whereas primary response methods can provide relevant data, I hope to show here that other statistical methods, such as data mining, could offer unique insights into factors related to dropout within a South African context. Amongst others, a data mining approach could be used to build a profile of students at risk of dropout. Consequently, this article reports on a study that applied data mining techniques to administrative data to build a profile for students at risk of dropout from a university in South Africa.

The article begins with an overview of the literature related to the concept of dropout. Then, the methodology that guided the study is presented. This is followed by a presentation and discussion of the results. The article concludes with a summary of the main findings and their implications.

Review of the Literature

Higher education is an enabler of life chances and research indicates that graduates are less likely to be unemployed compared to persons who did not obtain a post-school education (Scott et al., 2007). Higher education also has a direct bearing on women's employment opportunities, productivity growth, and entrepreneurship. It is a crucial element of socio-economic development (Latif et al., 2015; Pouris & Inglesi-Lotz, 2014). Thus, student dropout is not only a major concern for HEI administrators but can also result in various negative consequences for students, their families and the broader society (Cloete, 2014; Van der Merwe, 2020).

In terms of economic costs, Magnum et al. (2005) assert that student dropout has a negative effect on the financial management of higher education institutions. Amongst others, universities invest financial resources in student recruitment, teaching and learning, and accompanying student development and support initiatives (Paura et al., 2017; Ameri et al., 2016).

Dropout is costly to students as well. They lose earning potential and find themselves with immediate out-of-pocket expenses (Paura & Arhipova, 2014). According to Rincón et al. (2022), the student's dropout represents a sunk cost for the family because the costs incurred to pay for the studies were never recouped. It also represents the destruction or impossibility of creating long-term social capital that would have allowed the family to improve its socio-economic and educational conditions in the future (Ghignoni, 2017). The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) review noted that the 2010 data indicated that 48% of NSFAS-funded students had dropped out or not completed their studies (Breetzke & Hedding, 2016). This implies that students' dropout also has negative results on public funds.

Various researchers have attempted to identify risk factors related to student dropout (Aldowah et al., 2020; Hegde & Prageeth, 2018; St. John et al., 2000). *Inter alia*, the following have been identified as risk factors: behavioural problems, poor attendance, low socio-economic status, choice of institution, poor grades, and attendance with large numbers of poor students (Aldowah et al., 2020; Hegde & Prageeth, 2018; St. John et al., 2000). In addition to the aforementioned risk factors, Tinto's (1975) student integration model theories postulate that the interaction between students and the institution ultimately affects a student's decision to persist or not.

Although substantial studies have been conducted on student dropout, most have relied on primary response data methods. There are disadvantages associated with primary response data methods, such as the cost and time to develop resources involved in preparing the data, collecting a relevant data set, and managing the information;

feasibility and accessibility of enough participants and lastly, the risk of inaccurate feedback from participants (Wilcox et al., 2012).

Therefore, this study proposes using data mining techniques to look at the issues that may contribute towards student dropout. Data mining techniques can identify and predict future trends, track the behaviours and habits of participants and, lastly, assist with decision-making (Hsu & Yeh, 2019). In particular, the focus of the study was on profiling students at risk of dropout using administrative data obtained from a university in South Africa.

Research Methodology and Approach

Data mining methods for student profiling

This section describes the data mining methods used to profile students at risk of drop-out. In particular, the study used weight of evidence (WOE) and information value (IV) to profile students at risk of dropout. These strategies help to explore data and screen variables. The underlying theory of WOE was provided by Good (1950), and the expression describes whether the evidence in favour or against some hypothesis is more or less strong. Although frequently employed in scientific and social science research, WOE analysis is rarely used in education research (Weed, 2005). It calculates the percentage of events vs nonevents for a given attribute (Good, 1950). An event stands for something that has already happened, such as a student's dropout from university, and a nonevent represents the opposite, non-dropout.

Weight of evidence and information value

Two data mining strategies for variable transformation and selection are the weight of evidence (WOE) and information value (IV). Because of the logarithm transformation used in WOE, they have a strong connection to logistic regression modelling, and IV is one of the most used feature selection methods when employing a logistic regression classifier (Zdravevski et al., 2011). The use of WOE involves a transformation of data that requires binning, which is a process that transforms a continuous or a categorical variable into set groups or bins. To initiate analysis, there is a need to assess the strength of each characteristic using the following criteria:

- The predictive power of each attribute is measured by the weight of evidence (WOE).
- The range and trend of WOEs across attributes within a characteristic.
- The predictive power of characteristic is measured by the information value (IV).

The calculation process is carried out as follows. Let Y be a binary dependent variable and a set of predictive variables $\chi_1, \ldots, \chi_n$. WOE can be used to measure the predictive strength of χ_j and help to separate cases when $Y = 1$ (dropout) from cases when $Y = 0$ (non-dropout). The weight of evidence (WOE) method assists in converting a continuous independent variable into a set of groups or bins.

If β_1, …, β_k denote the bins for χ_j, the WOE for χ_j for bin i can be written as

$$WOE = log \; \frac{P(\chi_j \varepsilon \beta_i | Y=1)}{P(\chi_j \varepsilon \beta_i | Y=0)}$$ (2.1)

To determine the IV for variable χ_j, WOE is used as follows:

$$IV = \Sigma_{i=1}^{k} [P(\chi_j \varepsilon \beta_i | Y=1) - P(\chi_j \varepsilon \beta_i | Y=0)] \times WOE$$ (2.2)

Generally, if IV < 0.05 the variable has very little predictive power and will not add any meaningful predictive power to a model. Table 1 summarises the criteria that can be used to interpret IV (Zdravevski et al., 2011).

Table 1: Information value interpretations

Information value (IV)	Variable's Predictive Power
<0.02	Not useful for prediction
0.02 − 0.1	Weak predictive power
0.1 − 0.3	Medium predictive power
>0.3	Strong predictive power

When employing the WOE, the following eight empirical guidelines should be followed:
1. Each category should have at least 5% of the data.
2. Each category should be non-zero for both "dropout" and "non-dropout" observations.
3. The WOE for each category should be different.
4. Similar groups should be grouped together.
5. The WOE for non-missing values should be monotonic, going from negative to positive (or positive to negative) with no reversals.
6. Missing values should be binned separately.
7. The relevant weight indicates where the lost data categories/bins originate.
8. Experimenting with different categories will usually result in good student profiling.

Using WOE and IV has several advantages. First, nonlinear data transformation via WOE grouping greatly boosts a model's flexibility in dealing with complex data patterns. Second, IV variable selection eliminates variables with low predictive power from the model, leaving only informative variables. Third, there are no restrictions on the input variable type (numerical or categorical), therefore, a variable's scale (or unit) has no bearing on the modelling outcomes.

However, there are two distinct disadvantages to using WOE and IV. First, the binning method may result in information loss (variation). Second, no consideration is

given to correlations between the independent variables. For example, some independent variables may have a strong link, highlighting the significance of data exploration prior to implementing the approach.

Population and data sampling

The population for the study consisted of all North-West University (NWU) contact (full-time) undergraduate students. The sample used includes student information spanning a 10-year period, from 2008 to 2018, made available for the study through request via ethical processes.

Data collection

Two sets of data were used to identify factors that contribute to student dropout accurately. The first data set on student dropout rates was obtained from NWU's higher education management information system (HEMIS). The HEMIS tracks the student dropout rate through cohort studies using the students' unique student numbers. The second data set was the Programme Qualification Mix (PQM) at NWU. The PQM contains all the information about the institution's current qualifications.

To obtain the data, the study first went through the ethics clearance process of the university (ethics reference number: NWU-01271-19-S9). Student data were handled with care and no student was identified in the study. Names and university numbers were excluded, and new and unique ID numbers were assigned to data entries relevant to the selected period for the purpose of valid analysis. To protect the integrity and digital security of the data, the researcher created password-protected data files.

Research procedure

This section discusses the pre-processing steps that were implemented in building the profile of the students at risk of dropout. Obtaining reliable and statistically valid data is crucial for the development of the profile of at-risk students. Therefore, the quantity and quality of data should comply with the requirements of statistical significance and randomness. Below, are the steps followed to ensure that the data were relevant for developing the profile (Siddiqi, 2012).

Step 1: Definition of event (dropout)

Dropout is defined as the interruption of studies by higher education students regularly enrolled for any length of time, regardless of university changes, before the conclusion of their study programmes (Bonaldo & Pereira, 2016).

Step 2: Dealing with missing values

The mode of the variable usually fills in the missing value of the data. The mode filling concept, which is based on the maximum probability filling approach and can improve the efficiency of data set integration, is aimed at the value with the highest number of

occurrences in the data. The missing values in the data were replaced by the means of the variables. If the missing value in the variable exceeds 95%, the variable is discarded.

Step 3: Checking correlation

In the case of correlated variables, one variable from the correlated group of variables will be selected. The ideal variable will be the one that will theoretically represent all the information contained in the other variables of the group.

Step 4: Bucketing of the variables

WOE was used to transform continuous independent variables into bins based on their similarities, whereby each bin contained more than 5% of observations. Furthermore, those bins did not have zero dropout nor non-dropout. After binning, WOE was calculated for every category as shown in equation 2.1. The calculated WOE was then used to calculate IV. The two concepts were then used to benchmark, screen, select and rank more suitable variables to predict the target variable by using their predictive powers. The criteria in Table 1 were used to select the variable with suitable predictive powers.

Step 5: Selection of variables

Variables were pre-selected for the process to be efficient. The chosen variables were selected based on their predictive ability using WOE and IV. Weak variables were discarded in building a profile.

Step 6: Risk profile

Finally, the process's main objective was to build a comprehensive risk profile for students at risk of dropout. The results of the process are presented in the next section.

Data description and analysis

This section presents the description of the data used and the inclusion and exclusion of specific variables as part of data analysis.

Data description

The total number of entries for this study was 495,771, with 28 columns as potential predictors of dropout. The data contained student information such as matric admission point scores (APS), personal demographics, university academic record, bursary information, residence status, duration of the qualification. For each of the 495,771 entries over the period 2008 to 2018, the study defined the binary dependent variable (dropout) as taking the value of 1 if the student dropped out and 0 otherwise.

Data analysis

All analyses were conducted using Microsoft Excel and Python. The data set was then divided into two parts: training (0.8) and testing (0.2). Correlations between variables

were checked as mentioned in step 3 of the research procedure. Out of the 28 variables, 9 were correlated: module marks sum; module passed; module marks average; credits sum; passed count; qualification commencement year; exam average; matric average; and presentation method. For analysis, all correlated variables were removed. Table 2 shows the remaining 19 columns (variables) used for feature selection and profiling.

Table 2: Variables used for feature selection and profiling

Variables (Features)	Descriptions
First_Student_Year	Year of first registration to degree
Year_of_Birth	Year student was born
Gender_Eng	Gender of student
Entry_Level_Eng	Level at which the student joined the university
Undergraduate_Postgraduate_Eng	Undergrad or postgraduate identifier for the student
IP_Qualification_Type_2_Eng	Type of qualification student enrolled for
Qualification_Commencemnet_lag_Year	Number of years in a qualification
Qual_Minimum_Duration_in_Years	Minimum duration of the qualification
Graduated	Describes whether the student graduated or not
Enrolment_Count	Number of times student enrolled for the course
Metric_no_of_subjects	Number of subjects student had at grade 12
APS_Score; Matric_Avg	Admission Point Score (APS) and average marks in matric
Bursary	Indicator for bursary holder or not
Residence	Indicator for staying in university residence or not
No_of_modules	Number of modules student enrolled for in a particular year
Modules_failed	Number of modules student failed in a particular year
Modules_otherreasons	Other reason other than pass or fail
Terminated_Studies	Indicator for drop-out or not
Participations	Participation marks average

Weight of evidence and information value technique was used on the remaining 19 variables to select more suitable predictors according to their weights and information value.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of the process of profiling students at risk of dropout using weight of evidence and information value. Data analysis was implemented using Python scripts (Jupyter Notebook).

Target variable distribution

Of the 495,771 entries in the data, 478,477 were recorded as retained (non–dropout) and 17,294 as dropout (i.e. terminated studies) (see Figure 1).
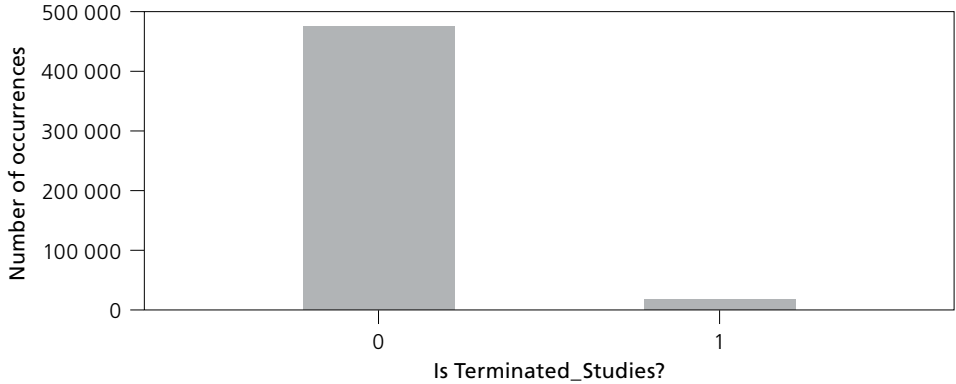
Distribution of Terminated Studies

Figure 1: Distribution of the target variable

A further insight into student dropout in relation to the number of modules failed (Figure 2) highlighted that the percentage of student dropout increased sharply when students failed more than four modules.

% Terminated_studies & Acct Distribution: modules_failed
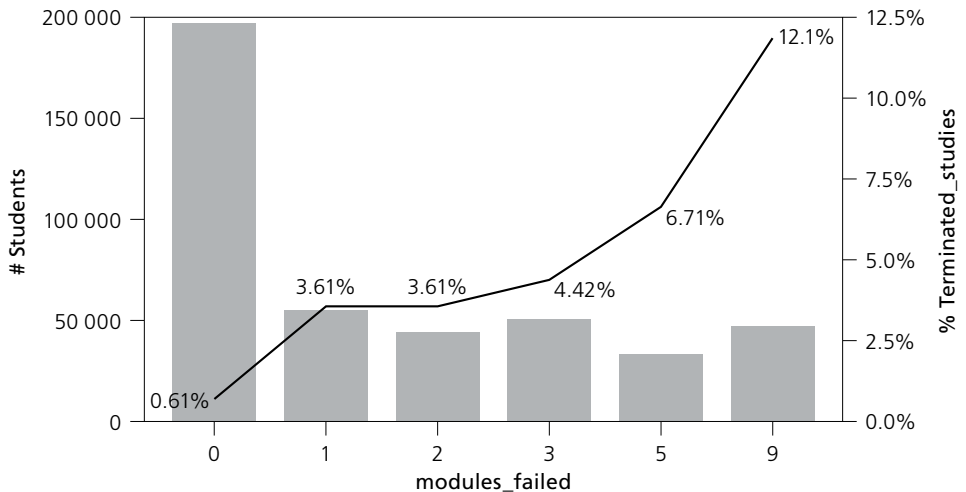
Figure 2: Distribution of students dropout in relation to number of modules failed

Figure 3 presents the distribution of dropout in relation to entry level at the university. Figure 3 shows a high dropout rate of students who entered the university at second-year entry level.

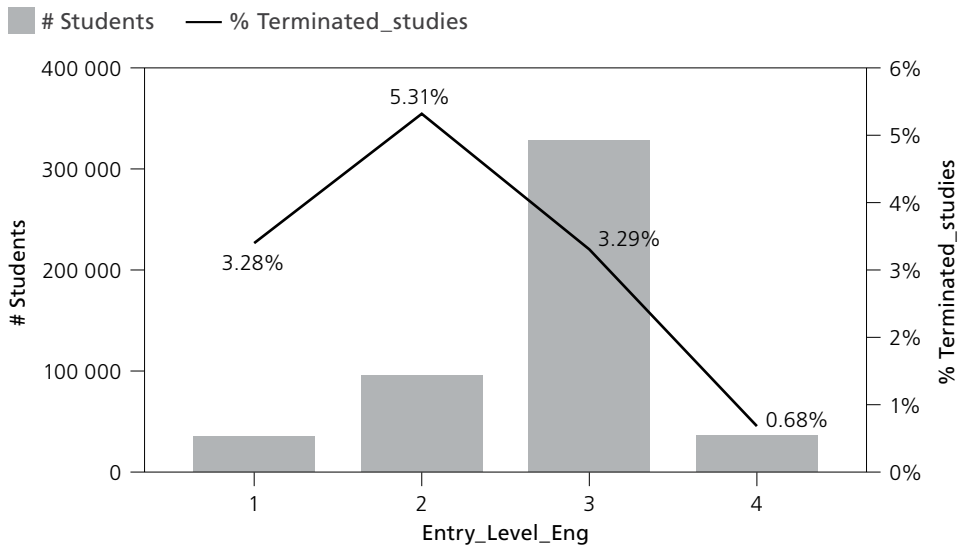**% Terminated_studies & Acct Distribution: Entry_Level_Eng**

Figure 3: Distribution of student dropout in relation to entry level

This section presents the results of the predictors that were used to build the profile of the students at risk of dropout. Tables 3, 4, 5 and 6 present the weight of evidence and information value of each predictor.

Table 3: Weight of evidence and information value for entry level

Cut Off	N	Events	%Events	Non-Events	%Non-Events	WOE	IV
1	35,061	1,151	0.07	33,910	0.07	–0.06	0.00
2	95,685	5,085	0.29	90,600	0.19	0.44	0.05
3	328,450	10,809	0.63	317,641	0.66	–0.06	0.00
4	36,575	249	0.01	36,326	.08	–1.66	0.10
	495,771	17,294	1	478,477	1	–1.346	0.15

The results in Table 3 show that a high proportion (29%) of event (dropouts) occur at entry level 2 as compared to (19%) of non-events (non-dropouts). At level 3, the (63%) proportion of events (dropout) is less compared to (66%) proportion of non-events (non-dropouts). However, the WOE for level 3 entry (-0.060) is less than level 2 entry, which implies there are more non-events (non-dropouts) at level 3 compared to level 2. Analysing the results in Table 3, the study can conclude that the WOE has more weight for entry level 2, and this suggests that students entering university in their second

academic year are likely to dropout as compared to other entry levels. According to the rule of thumb described in Table 1, the predictor's IV (0.15) indicates that it has a medium predictive value. Which implies that entry level 2 has medium predictive power to predict dropout of students.

Table 4: Weight of evidence and information value for number of modules failed

Cut Off	N	Events	%Events	Non–Events	%Non–Events	WOE	IV
(–0.01, 1.0]	293,925	3,723	0.23	290,202	0.61	–1.04	0.41
(1.0, 2.0]	42,769	1,541	0.09	41,228	0.09	0.03	0.00
(2.0, 3.0]	40,340	1,558	0.09	38,782	0.08	0.12	0.00
(3.0, 4.0]	26,091	1,319	0.08	24,772	0.05	0.39	0.01
(4.0, 7.0]	52,021	3,701	0.21	48,320	0.10	0.75	0.09
(7.0, 35.0]	40,625	5,452	0.32	35,173	0.07	1.46	0.35
	495,771	17294	1	478,477	1	1.71	0.86

The results in Table 4 show that a high proportion (32%) of events (dropouts) occur at the interval (7, 35] of modules failed followed by interval (4, 7] of modules failed with a proportion of (22%). From the results in Table 4, the study can conclude that the WOE has more weight for intervals (7, 35] and (4, 7] of modules failed than other intervals. This suggests that students failing more than four modules in an academic year are likely to dropout as compared to other students. According to the rule of thumb in Table 1, the predictor's IV (0.86) indicates a high predictive power. Which implies that number of modules failed has high predictive powers to predict students dropout.

Table 5: Weight of evidence and information value for participation average mark variable

Cut Off	N	Events	%Events	Non–Events	%Non–Events	WOE	IV
[0, 30]	49,679	6,930	0.40	42,749	0.09	1.50	0.47
(30, 43]	49,482	2,698	0.16	46,784	0.10	0.47	0.03
(43, 51]	57,542	1,927	0.11	55,615	0.12	–0.04	0.00
(51, 55]	44,306	1,093	0.06	43,213	0.09	–0.36	0.01
(55, 58]	49,903	1,176	0.07	48,727	0.10	–0.40	0.01
(58, 62]	60,725	1,194	0.07	59,531	0.12	–0.59	0.03
(62, 65]	44,691	676	0.04	44,015	0.09	–0.86	0.05
(65, 68]	41,984	580	0.03	41,404	0.09	–0.95	0.05
(68, 73]	50,926	570	0.03	50,356	0.11	–1.16	0.08
(73, 100]	46,533	450	0.03	46,083	0.10	–1.31	0.09
	495,771	17,294	1	478,477	1	–3.7	0.82

The results in Table 5 show that a high proportion (40%) of events (dropouts) occur in the interval [0, 30] of participation average marks which have (9%) of non–events

(non-dropouts). Another high proportion (16%) of events (dropout) occur in the interval (30, 43], which has (10%) of non-events (non-dropouts). Analysing the results in Table 5, the study can conclude that the WOE has more weight for intervals [0, 30] and (30, 43] of participation average marks than other intervals. This suggests that students obtaining a participation average mark (43%) or less in their modules for an academic year are more likely to dropout as compared to other students. According to the rule of thumb presented in Table 1, the predictor's IV (0.82) indicates that it has a high predictive power. Which implies that participation average marks have high predictive power to predict dropout of students.

Profile of at-risk student

Table 7 presents a summary of the most suitable predictors of student dropout and their information value scores. According to the criteria in Table 1, entry level has medium predictive power, while the number of modules failed, and participation average marks have strong predictive power.

Table 7: Summary of most suitable predictors of dropout

Variables	IV	IV rank
Modules failed	0.86	1
Participation average	0.82	2
Entry level	0.15	3

According to the results presented in the previous section, the study can now profile students at risk of dropout as follows.
1. The student fails more than four modules per academic year.
2. The student obtains a participation average mark of 43 per cent or less.
3. The student has entered at second-year entry level.

Study Limitations and Further Research

This results from this study should be read in light of certain limitations. First, the study only provides evidence that the variables described above may be relevant for at-risk student profiling for the administrative data utilised in this study but may not necessarily be exhaustive variables for profiling at-risk students in general. For example, there could be other relevant variables from qualitative data that are linked to, *inter alia*, student behaviour and attitude, university resources, and university leadership that were not considered in the analysis. Second, data were only collected from a single South African university. Hence, the external validity of the findings is limited.

Future research could focus on incorporating data from various university databases to develop a more holistic understanding of dropout rates among South African students. Furthermore, this study suggests that variables related to student behaviour and attitudes, university resources, university leadership, abilities, and skills of personnel (lecturers), teaching and learning environment, parental role, social aspects, health and psychological

issues, encouragement and motivation of students, study skills, time management, and other factors be included in profiling at-risk students for future research.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research aimed to use data mining techniques on university administrative data from a university in South Africa to create a profile of students at risk of dropout. Not all students will achieve their academic goals, and some will be labelled as at-risk. The risk profile may assist the university in identifying such students. After successfully identifying at-risk students, university officials and other university representatives may be able to establish appropriate intervention tactics and support programmes to help students at risk of dropout.

The study used WOE and IV to select suitable predictors with predictive power. To create a profile of at-risk students, the selected predictors were analysed. The study reached the following conclusions based on the examination of chosen predictors.

First, based on the criteria in Table 1, this study concluded that a student who has failed more than four modules in an academic year with a participation average mark of 43% or less has a high likelihood of dropping out without finishing their studies. Second, based on the findings that a student who enters the university at the second-year entry level is more likely to dropout, this study concludes that students who have previously dropped out (from another institution) will most likely dropout again.

As indicated in the data analysis section, the number of modules for which a student is registered has a strong correlation with the number of modules failed. The researcher recommends that universities put in place measures to control and prevent students who carry over four or more modules from adding more modules to their registration until failed modules are completed. This will assist students in managing the number of modules registered and focusing on failed modules. Furthermore, the control mechanisms could boost the chances of students receiving high participation marks, resulting in a high chance of passing the modules. A further recommendation is for universities to note that students who may have not been identified as at-risk in the current academic year, may be at-risk the following academic year. Therefore, a continuous monitoring system is needed.

For future research this study suggests inclusion of variables linked to student behaviour and attitude, university resources, university leadership, abilities, and skills of personnel (lecturers), teaching and learning environment, parental figure(s), social aspects, health and psychological issues, encouragement and motivation of students, study skills, time management, etc., to be included in profiling at-risk students.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Campus Mental Health Revisited

Linda Eskell Blokland* & Hanlé Kirkcaldy**

Abstract

This conceptual, reflective article explores recent innovations in mental health service provision at a large urban, residential university in South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, mental health services at this university were generally offered through face-to-face consultations, with secondary offerings in the form of well-being workshops at student residences and faculty houses. The need for mental health support was acute during the pandemic, placing great pressure on service provision. At the same time, however, everyone – that is, all staff and students – were working remotely as campuses had been closed under national lockdown. In this context, it was necessary to connect students to mental health services while they were studying remotely during the various phases of lockdown and to revisit the conventional and possibly largely reactive model of mental health service provision. Innovation in the promotion and provision of mental health services and products at this university, including through corporate partnerships and the responsible use of automation and technology, helped to achieve market penetration and widespread utilisation of services. In addition, ethical considerations; the factors inhibiting and supporting change; and the sustainability of the efforts undertaken during this period had to be addressed. Drawing lessons from the experience at this university, it is recommended that, while there will always be a place for conventional mental health service offerings, it may be time to expand the model permanently on modern campus environments, where there is a need for a caring community; committed leadership; the development of resilience in the student body; and the building of personal strengths in individuals.

Keywords

caring campus, mental health support, pandemic, student counselling, university

Introduction

In March 2020, the South African government instituted a national lockdown in response to the global spread of COVID–19. Under the lockdown, staff and students at a large urban residential university were instructed that they should work from home wherever possible, and all contact classes were suspended for students. Over the

*   Dr Linda Eskell Blokland is a clinical psychologist in private practice. She is also the chairperson of the Clinical Psychology Forum. Email: linda.blokland@gmail.com. ORCID: 0000-0003-2840-4720.
** Dr Hanlé Kirkcaldy is a clinical psychologist and the head of the Student Counselling Unit in the Department of Student Affairs of the University of Pretoria. Email: hanle.kirkcaldy@up.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0001-9797-2655.

next 18 months, the national and international landscape changed continuously, as the university, the country, and the world, had to respond and adjust to the profound impacts of the global pandemic.

Conventional Mental Health Service Delivery on University Campuses

Students experience unique demands and challenges while at university. They may need to adjust to a new phase of life, while experiencing significant neuro-psycho-social development, and possibly encountering adverse and stressful life events. The experience can damage students' wellness and jeopardise their mental health (Eskell Blokland, 2019; Gruttadaro & Crudo, 2012; Newman & Newman, 1984). In South Africa, students are exposed to mental health problems such as suicidality, depression, and anxiety due to pervasive systemic disadvantages in the society (Bantjes et al., 2019). The difficulties they may encounter include financial and economic insecurities; historical, societal and educational disadvantages; and exposure to personal loss, crime, and trauma (Eloff & Graham, 2020; Setlofane, 2019).

Student counselling and development (SCD) services and programmes on university campuses play an important role in helping students respond to the mental health and development challenges they face. These services assist students in reaching their primary objective at university, namely academic success. Important organisational strategic goals of any university, including student success and throughput, are enhanced through the professional support functions delivered by SCD service units. The inputs delivered by these units include psychotherapeutic and counselling support for students for a wide variety of conditions and presenting problems. In addition to such counselling services, other support may include academic and remedial interventions; career assessments and guidance; trauma interventions; assessments for concessions related to students with disabilities; interventions in conjunction with disciplinary and transformation committees; and management of psychological emergencies such as psychoses or other acute syndromes. In addition, workshops and group interventions targeting specific topics of importance to the student population, such as relationship and conflict management; anxiety and stress management; and lifestyle-related themes, are regularly provided.

These services are usually delivered in a conventional walk-in clinic set-up, where students request services and are offered appointments in a physical, on-campus location. A variety of service providers, including psychologists; counsellors; peer helpers; and psychology interns or master's students, are generally involved in the delivery of these services.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks in Student Counselling and Development

The conceptual frameworks underpinning the delivery of SCD services may derive from a number of theories, including systems theory frameworks such as Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems (1981); and wellness models (Witmer & Sweeney, 1992).

Systems framework

A systems framework focuses on the individual student in relation to various ecologically relevant contexts which can be visually represented as concentric circles expanding from the student, who is in the centre (Beekman, 2012). The student stands in relation to all the systems in his/her/their world, the parts influencing the whole, and vice-versa. As such, the contexts are bilaterally permeable, with the external context influencing all the narrower contexts, and with each sub-system comprising a valuable part of the bigger or whole system.

The first context closest to the student (the microsystem) could be conceptualised as those structures with which the student has direct contact – these include the immediate university environment such as is found on campus, namely the administrative structures; the academic faculties; the lectures and lecturers; the university staff; the residence environments; and the student bodies, including sport and cultural societies (Beekman, 2012). The microsystem context also includes relationships with fellow students in the immediate environment. The next context (the mesosystem) includes interaction with the broader community; inter-university activities; the university's culture and position in relation to other institutions; the geographical location of the institution; and the influence and role of the media or mass media on the student (Beekman, 2012). The broader context of the exosystem includes settings that can bear on the individual with greater or lesser intensity (Bronfenbrenner, 1981), such as family and extended family structures; the community whence the student came; cultural settings; and economic status and occurrences (Beekman, 2012). Then, the macrosystem implies the larger society; governmental regulations; and policy or legal changes; while the global system implies events and occurrences in the even broader, global environment. These systems may have strong influences on individual (student) life in direct or indirect ways (Bronfenbrenner, 1981).

Wellness theory

Models based on wellness theory focus on holistic individual development and emphasise salutogenic factors – that is, they focus on strengths and enabling and health rather than adopting a pathogenic paradigm which has a remedial or reactive focus (Witmer & Sweeney, 1992). Under this model, the focus is on the student as an individual, and the main concern is to enhance the student's strengths and resilience. This approach emphasises optimal well-being in various life spheres, including the emotional, physical, mental-health, environmental, occupational and spiritual spheres. It asserts that balance in these areas leads to the best outcome for the individual (Van Lingen, 2012). Thus, students are viewed in a holistic way considering their multiple facets and needs as individuals. Students are encouraged to attend to and regulate the various spheres of their lives, which may be depicted in the form a wheel of wellness, in a proactive way (Witmer & Sweeney, 1992).

Wellness approaches vary, but mainly delineate a number of areas of life, such as spirituality; self-regulation; work; friendships; and love, to which the individual should attend. Various positive characteristics are associated with each of these areas. For instance, efforts at self-regulation may entail cultivating a sense of self-worth; self-control; realistic and logical beliefs; spontaneity and emotional responsiveness; intellectual engagement; problem solving and creativity; a sense of humour; and physical care and fitness (Witmer & Sweeney, 1992). Wellness theory can be readily applied in support of student development and success. A well student with an optimal lifestyle; positive relationships; self-efficacy; and the capacity for stress management and emotional control, stands a better chance of academic success (Horton & Snyder, 2009; Morris-Paxton et al., 2017). In relation to mental health, positive psychological approaches may deploy a wellness frame of reference to focus on developing and building individual and group strengths, resilience and mental assets, and foster the creation of meaning and authentic happiness (Seligman, 2002; Wissing et al., 2014). In its focus on the individual student, wellness theory can also foster acknowledgement of the diversity of the student population, encapsulating dimensions such as culture, spirituality, gender, sexual orientation and economic factors, among others.[1]

Mental Health Impacts of COVID-19

The mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have been profound. Symptoms of anxiety, depression and stress have been commonly reported (Rajkumar, 2020; Hunt et al., 2021; Taylor, 2019). Researchers have discussed how students have reported fear and worry about their own health and those of their loved ones; concentration difficulties; sleep disturbances; a lack of socialising opportuniuties under lockdown; and anxiety in relation to academic success (Changwon et al., 2020). In a survey study evaluating a group of 5,074 South African students, it was reported that students experienced high levels of depression and anxiety and scored low on the mental health continuum during lockdown (Visser & Law-Van Wyk, 2021). These students were not only worried that they or their families would contract COVID-19, but experienced difficulties because they could not attend class. Difficulties came in the form of a variety of challenges such as unreliable internet access, family dynamics in the home, lack of peer contact and support, and low confidence with regard to self-study. Students complained that home life was not conducive to focus and concentration. Some students found themselves struggling with distressing domestic events. In addition, they reported feeling vulnerable and as if their lives were on hold. Some were victims of crime and gender-based violence during lockdown (Visser & Law-Van Wyk, 2021).

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1   For an overview of both the systems framework theory and wellness theory models as applied to the SCD arena, see Van Lingen (2012) and Beekman (2012).

The Impact of COVID-19 on Student Counselling and Development Services

The disruption produced by the global pandemic highlighted shortcomings in the traditional conceptualisation of mental health support systems and service provision, and posed challenges to psychotherapists working in the field, both globally and locally (McBeath et al., 2020; Nguse & Wassenaar, 2021). Campus mental health services had to respond to the increased demand and changing needs (Abrams, 2022). The interactions of the various sub-systems in which students function were placed under pressure and the homeostasis of these systems was threatened. The usual close and supportive structures within the student-life microsystem fell away because of forced campus closures during lockdown and were replaced with elements of a mesosystem which were not optimally geared to support student life and adjustment. Macro and global system elements curbed individual freedoms and choices.

According to Erikson's (1968) seminal theory of human development, the optimal psycho-social outcome in the development phase of students is to find a sense of belonging – that is, intimacy, as opposed to isolation. One could speculate that the impact of the protective lockdown measures, and the resulting microsystem restrictions felt by individuals in this life phase, would have been immense. This psycho-social developmental phase, as discussed earlier, would have been impacted severely by the lockdown procedures, as students were forced to isolate from their peers. Students were obliged to focus on survival and adaptation, rather than on thriving. This put students at risk of academic failure and mental ill health.

In response to the threat posed by the lockdown measures adopted to manage the pandemic, universities sought to redesign their academic programmes to address student needs under the circumstances of the "new normal". They were also required to adopt urgent measures to create a new psychological equilibrium for students, promoting and protecting their wellness under lockdown. To this end, services had to be delivered into a number of shifting spheres and systems in new ways.

Change and Innovation

Responding to the imperative to adapt the ways in which student counselling and development services should be provided, the Student Counselling Unit at one of South Africa's large residential universities implemented changes in its service provision in three main areas: the use of online modes of work; the establishment of new mental-health offerings to meet the student clients' evolving needs; and the utilisation of internal and external partnerships.

Moving online

As soon as the closure of campuses was considered by the university's management, the Student Counselling Unit at this university transferred its operations to a virtual office space, which implied that the provision of all resources and official documentation and

the management of the practice would now have to be undertaken via the internet. Given the sensitive nature of the work being undertaken in the unit, it was necessary to address a range of security issues around this move to the internet and to source student/client consent for the new virtual form of service provision. A virtual campaign was launched to inform the student body of the continued availability of mental health services. This campaign was conducted via email; articles and announcements on the university's website and on the unit's own microsite; advertisements on social media platforms; and more conventional methods such as posters and flyers. Client consent forms were updated to inform clients about the provision of telehealth services, outlining the relative benefits and risks associated with working online.

Synchronous and video-supported platforms were chosen as the preferred channels for undertaking therapeutic work, since these offered better compliance with the guidelines that had been issued in March 2020 by the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA). The aim was to ensure that contact with students would remain professional and would resemble conventional "sessions" as closely possible. Text messaging, telephone calls, and emails were used to make and cancel appointments and to facilitate referrals. A centralised email address was created for students seeking to access the services and make service requests. The hope was that the relative ease of access offered by email communication might encourage students to continue using the service while at home or off campus. The view was, since academic content was already being provided via a number of online platforms, the students were already adept at using these modalities of communication. In addition, it was hoped that the new online form of provision would offer the added benefit of removing a number of the existing barriers to seeking mental health treatment; barriers presented by factors such as stigma, and time and schedule constraints.

Staff training in the new system was seen as a priority. Various meetings and workshops were held at which the professional expectations of telehealth services were discussed with staff. Staff were encouraged to attend webinars on these topics to enrich the knowledge base at the university's Student Counselling Unit. The understanding was that the professionals in the unit had to broaden the scope of what it meant to be a mental healthcare provider and expand their technological capabilities in providing mental health care services.

Matching the mental health products on offer to student-client needs

As the months progressed and the lockdown continued, it became clear that additional mental health services and materials were needed to support the mental health of students. The service demands grew, although not all students wanted or needed individual therapy. An internal re-organisation and further diversification of services were required. A stepped-care approach in the mode of the United Kingdom's (UK's) improving access to psychological therapies (IAPT) approach (Clark, 2018), was adopted as a way of providing a more optimal use of resources.

IAPT was developed in the UK as a means of reaching a greater number of patients with more effective evidence-based treatments. A stepped-care approach to treatment in mental health is intrinsic to the IAPT system. Stepped-care entails three tiers of treatment (OCD-UK, 2018). Step 1 is the assessment and recognition of a psychological problem. Step 2 provides a low-intensity service for mild to moderate disorders. Step 3 moves to a high intensity service for severe cases. While in South Africa the triaging of patients is currently in place as an aspect of primary, secondary, and tertiary healthcare, there is a dearth of professional support for those in need of a lower level of service in the field of mental health care. For example, under the traditional model of SCD service-provision, every student seeking help is generally referred to a formal in-person service, such as with a professional psychologist or registered counsellor or in the form of a group intervention (Mair, 2021).

Identifying the gap in service provision at the lower level, the Student Counselling Unit at the university which is the subject of this article embarked on a number of changes to its service model in line with the stepped-care approach, which entailed the adoption of a number of new approaches, which are discussed below.

Tiering the cases among the professionals

The SCU sought to reserve high-intensity professional services for the more acute cases, such as when students presented with severe depression; suicidality; and/or severe anxiety disorders. Such cases were allocated to the more senior qualified psychologists, working within their scope of practice. Milder and more moderate problems were allocated to interns working under supervision, or, if it was deemed appropriate, students would be referred to a self-help or peer-support group.

Lower-intensity interventions

Lower-intensity interventions took a number of forms. These included webinars; podcasts; social media messaging; posters; and the use of other media to present information. These interventions were designed and implemented by the staff at the SCU and, as such, fell within the microsystemic environment of student life on campus.

In the absence of face-to-face workshops under lockdown, students became increasingly isolated and demoralised. In response, the SCU designed and presented a series of interactive webinars responding to particular challenges raised by students in their communications with the unit which students were able to attend from wherever they were based. The topics addressed by these webinars included time management during lockdown; managing online examinations and exam stress; effective study methods; and studying in the home-environment. In addition, a series of podcasts was produced on topics such as combatting anxiety and depression; building resilience; creating a routine with online learning and self-compassion; thinking traps; relational well-being; and how to live a healthy lifestyle. These podcasts became popular, even attracting attention from beyond South Africa.

Social media messaging was deployed at appropriate moments. For example, wishing students well with tests during test week, and acknowledging student events and days of national celebration. Posters and other media provided information on similar topics were produced.

A peer support group project established in 2019 took on greater significance, allowing students to connect with one another on a regular basis via a monitored, online format.

All the information and messages that were disseminated provided a link to the SCU and its services, including information on how to make contact. Information was also placed on the SCU's own website.

The content that was produced as part of the new, increased emphasis on the development of online self-help resources addressed the stressors experienced during the lockdown period, but also the expected difficulties and topics that students would normally encounter. In this regard, topics such as gender-based violence; substance abuse; managing anxiety and depression; and developing one's own study style were not neglected. The podcasts proved to be an innovative, exciting way of conveying a range of messages related to student life, resilience and coping with mental health difficulties. The ease of access of the various online materials, as well as their relevance to the student experience, were crucial to the success of this initiative.

Leveraging partnerships

Leveraging external partnerships

Various external partnerships within the mesosystemic environment of the students' lives were expanded in an effort to support and engage the students. Some of these are discussed below.

The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) (www.sadag.org), has been a mental health partner with the large urban residential university which is the subject of this reflective article for several years. They provide a 24-hour crisis and counselling line to assist students, especially students experiencing crises after hours. When the demand for mental health services increased during the COVID-19 pandemic at this large urban residential university, the service provided by SADAG became especially important in helping to manage the additional load. The process that was followed was that, after initial contact with a SADAG counsellor, more serious cases were referred back to the SCU at this university for higher intensity professional treatment. Meanwhile, SADAG also arranged and supported peer support group processes, including by training student group leaders on a regular basis, and sitting in at each group meeting to monitor the process.

Other partners engaged by the large urban residential university included sexual health organisations; Alcoholics Anonymous; Narcotics Anonymous; and Sex Addicts Anonymous. These organisations provided materials on the topics in which they had expertise and also presented talks via the university student radio station on request. Students were informed of the existence of these organisations and how they could help.

In addition, psychiatric service providers within the community assisted where they could, providing medication as necessary. Local clinics opened their doors to help students presenting with psychiatric problems at a time when public health services were over-stretched by COVID-19 cases.

Leveraging internal partnerships

Resources and support for the SCU at the university which is the subject of this article were made available from within the microsystemic environment of the university itself. Collaboration with a number of internal stakeholders who were already playing an important part in assisting students with their well-being was strengthened. These stakeholders included faculty staff members seeking information about identifying students at risk and where to seek help for them. In this regard, although the primary function of faculty student advisors at this university is to assist students with their academic problems, many of these staff members can also notice potential serious issues and refer students who may be at risk for further psychological help. The SCU at the university engaged these faculty stakeholders through training and conversations.

Residence affairs staff can also play a significant role in protecting, helping, and referring students with mental health issues. These staff are well-placed to detect problems at an early stage; point the student in the direction of the appropriate help; and assist with continued care. In addition, staff at the university residences cooperate closely with SADAG in relation to the use of the 24-hour careline and in promoting peer-support structures within the residences.

Other service units, including the Centre for the Study of Aids and Gender (CSA&G); the Transformation Office; and security services at the university also engaged in addressing students' problems and were able to connect students with the SCU at the university and the services provided by the unit.

In addition, student organisations such as the Student Representative Council (SRC) and a Student Wellbeing Committee at the university played an important role in attending to student problems, particularly in terms of rapidly identifying how negative events on campus could contribute to student distress. These student bodies, which are generally active on social media, can be useful allies in promoting student well-being.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, the SCU at the university received significant political and financial support for its efforts to deliver its services in new ways from the executive structures at the institution, including the director of student affairs and the vice-principal of student life.

Leveraging partnerships to deploy new technologies

In coordination with the university's information technology (IT) department and external service providers, the SCU at the university developed a chatbot in early 2021. This artificial intelligence resource provided materials and content to assist students in taking a stronger self-help approach to their own well-being. The chatbot, which was available only to registered students, focused initially on a number of specified mental

health issues while taking an overall well-being approach to mental health. It provided information, questionnaires, self-help exercises, and links to online videos and other external resources.

Gaps in Campus Mental Health-Service Provision

At the exosystemic level, the relative unavailability of psychiatric services for students in need has represented a serious gap in mental health-service provision on campus for a long time. For example, while psychologists within the SCU at the university which is the subject of this article are able to diagnose serious mental health conditions, they find it difficult to secure the appropriate medication for students due to financial and access constraints. In response and given the significance of students as a vulnerable local population, management noted that future consideration should be given to the possibility of a partnership of university clinics with the provincial Department of Health. Meanwhile, however, students tend to avoid attending public service–provider institutions which anyway cannot meet their needs in a timely manner. This has led to continual crisis management on campus. In this regard, if university campuses were to become sites for public clinics, as has been proposed, many of the crises that emerge after delays in treatment may be nipped in the bud.

Similarly, the various mental health initiatives promoted by Higher Health[2] may be more effectively deployed if it were acknowledged that universities may be best-placed to implement these at a local level.

In line with the IAPT approach and the understanding that there is a need for mental health information to be communicated more widely, units such as the SCU could benefit from the services of registered counsellors, who would be able to assist with the initial screening of clients; provide counselling; and promote mental-health projects within their scope of practice.

Reflections

Some initial, tentative conclusions may be drawn on the effectiveness of the new approach in providing mental health services to students which was adopted under lockdown at the university which is the subject of this reflection.

There was some confusion about the purpose of the new mental-health chatbot introduced by the SCU at the university, although it was accessed by many students after it was launched. Several students complained that the chatbot was not responding to their specific questions and indicated that they had been expecting greater engagement from the bot in relation to their needs – rather than seeing it for what it was, namely a device for providing mental-health information. In this regard, the communications campaign to promote the chatbot could have provided greater clarity on its actual purpose and function. At the same time, plans are in place to expand the functionality of

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2   Higher Health is a government organisation that aims to promote comprehensive student well-being across all campuses of tertiary institutions in South Africa, as a supplement to academic programmes.

the chatbot, although such technological innovation is expensive and time-consuming and would necessitate extensive private-sector engagement.

More generally, efforts to promote the mental health resources and services on offer were not entirely effective. For example, the SCU at the university was told on a number of occasions that some students appeared to have no knowledge of the mental health services that were available to them at the university. In addition, some students seemed reluctant to make use of the online mental health services that were made available, viewing the provision of virtual forms of assistance as less than adequate.

Recommendations

Given the global context, in which mental health and general health services are increasingly being provided virtually, thought should be given in future as to how students and staff may be helped to acclimatise to virtual services as an adjunct to conventional face-to-face modalities.

The various platforms for providing mental health and wellness support should be promoted and provided in line with the demand. In this regard, the incorporation of a hybrid approach to mental health service delivery, under which online and face-to-face services are blended, as well as the establishment of a tiered approach, under which the needs for particular kinds of services are matched with what is on offer, can lead to the provision of effective, equitable mental health services.

Throughout the lockdown period it became clear that mental health and wellness could not be the sole responsibility of a unit such as SCU. Wellness promotion and resilience-building should be an institutional objective, and an aspect of campus culture. It must involve students at the grassroots level, as well as all the faculties; the professional- and administrative-support units; and the university's leadership.

Looking to the future, the need to teach the hidden curriculum of life- and self-management to the next generation of students may be imperative if the next pandemic is to be survived.

Under lockdown at the university, it became clear that the mental health and well-being of students was not something that could be addressed through the provision of conventional counselling services. An innovative, holistic and comprehensive approach was required to provide adequate services.

In addition, the delivery of appropriate services depended on self-responsibility for well-being among students with the support of staff. In this regard, there should be greater acknowledgment of the benefits to be derived from confronting the stigma attached to mental health issues and talking about these issues more openly.

Benchmarking at other university counselling centres and further research should be undertaken to provide greater clarity on how best these centres can serve their student populations. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the current generation of students is generally at ease with digital content and digital platforms, while also appreciating the benefits of congruent human interaction. In this regard, institutions need to collect data through surveys, focus groups, and anonymised information via service platforms to

ensure that appropriate forms of professional support are made available in answer to the actual mental health needs of student populations.

The adoption of a wellness model and a stepped–care approach within a systems framework proved of great use to the Student Counselling Unit at the university which is the subject of this reflective article, enabling a more optimal use of resources in an exosystemic environment characterised by a paucity of resources for promoting mental health. This reflection and its lessons are provided here for the potential benefit of other higher education institutions facing similar challenges.

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Student Affairs and Services Leadership in Trying Times: Student Social Behaviour Project and Psycho-social Support Interventions at a Comprehensive University in South Africa

Sibusiso Chalufu* & Corrie Rheeder**

Abstract

The outbreak of COVID-19 and the lockdown measures that were widely implemented in response to the pandemic forced many of the forms of engagement and activities promoted by student affairs and services staff among students at universities to be curtailed or transformed – at first, so that they entailed no interpersonal contact and later so that they took place in line with health and safety protocols restricting contact. The moment of crisis required decisive, innovative leadership from members of staff as they sought to help meet the needs of students who were now deprived of the benefits of the psycho-social, intellectual and physical engagements that had been provided by in-person contact on highly interactive campuses. Accordingly, the student affairs and services staff at North-West University in South Africa collaborated with students, leveraging their creative potential to reach out, create and implement new student support systems and programmes through structured activities that could take place online and in the form of strictly controlled contact sessions. In this context, two new initiatives were established at the university: a student behaviour project which sought to deploy student peers to promote adherence to COVID-19 occupational health and safety protocols among the student population; and a raft of psycho-social support interventions, including webinars, cultural and sporting activities, and residence activities which promoted student welfare including by helping students to manage the realities of the pandemic more effectively. This reflective article, authored by two of the North-West University student affairs and services staff responsible for launching and leading these initiatives, considers the kinds of collaboration among university staff and with students that informed the establishment and implementation of these projects. Focusing particularly on how these projects may have contributed towards increased levels of social capital among the students at the university at a moment of crisis, with a view to extract lessons that may be learned for the proactive development of student-support measures under similar conditions in future.

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*   Dr Sibusiso Chalufu is Executive Director: Student Life at North-West University, South Africa. Email: sibusiso.chalufu@nwu.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0002-4578-7594.

**   Dr Corrie Rheeder is Campus Director: Student Life at North-West University, South Africa. Email: corrie.rheeder@nwu.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0003-2919-3005.

Introduction

More than a decade ago, scholar of biological psychiatry, Simon Young (2008) postulated that human beings are social beings who require social contact and relationship-building through which trusting, cooperative and deep meaningful connections are established. Conditions compelled by the recent advent of the COVID-19 pandemic which initially spread during 2020 have served almost as a test case on a global scale of this proposal, since one of the main limitations produced by the outbreak were restrictions on social interactions. These efforts to control social activities and movement were introduced in attempts to stem infections; the unforeseen by-products of which included causing social isolation, which in turn undermined the power of social capital as a means to achieve business objectives; manage crises; mobilise resources; and implement effective leadership (Wu, 2021). From a mental health perspective, there was a rise in anxiety and depressive symptoms and changes in sleeping patterns among the South African population (Nguse & Wassenaar, 2021) and among higher education students (Deng et al., 2021), as well as a rise in suicidal behaviour, frustration and impulsivity (Hossain et al., 2020). In response, there was a clear need for those in leadership to make and implement strong, compassionate and evidence-based decisions in an effort to halt the spread of the disease (Binagwaho, 2020) and curb the negative impacts produced by the pandemic and the necessary disease-prevention responses to it.

The COVID-19 pandemic posed a particular challenge to higher education globally and in South Africa, including in relation to the viability of existing teaching and learning practices and efforts to support socialisation among students. The education system had to rethink and re-strategise how to achieve its main goals in the new environment and in the context of limited access to resources (Djidu et al., 2021); insufficient time to adjust its mode of implementation (Daniel, 2020); and human capital shortfalls caused by increasingly glaring socio-economic stressors, instability, and inequality. Poverty, limited access to electricity, limited online connectivity and a shortage of appropriate information and communications technology (ICT) devices made it difficult for the higher education system to execute its goals among the tertiary student population (Daniel, 2020).

One of the reasons that students attend university is to obtain an education which will enable them to make a significant contribution to society and the economy. At the same time, the teaching, learning, research and community engagement functions through which students acquire this education are underpinned by social interactions. In addition, there is a broad sense in which universities also function as a place where students can reach out to people outside of their immediate family and community structures (Botha & Kourkoutas, 2016; Neuwirth et al., 2021). In this regard, studies show that students not only focus on their academic goals and/or obtaining a qualification, they also have a need for student-life experiences, which may be enhanced by social bonding activities and mental-health initiatives provided by the student affairs and services (SAS) divisions of higher education institutions (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Inazu, 2018; Pfund et al., 2020).

A Malaysian study found that the academic frustrations experienced by students at the height of the lockdown were mostly attributed to the new mode of online education delivery that had been deployed (Sim et al., 2021). The students said that they felt overwhelmed and stressed by the way in which their academic workload was delivered online and further indicated that they struggled to maintain their concentration and focus when being taught online, compared with being taught in person (Sim et al., 2021). It was also found that some students lacked the self-discipline and motivation to follow through with self-study work; and that the available resources were not conducive for online learning (Sim et al., 2021). Similar studies in the context of South Africa (Dube, 2020; Joaquim et al., 2022; Mhlanga, 2021) have reported similar findings. Meanwhile, Aristovnik et al. (2020) and Wang et al. (2020), reporting on the influence of the pandemic on students' mental health globally and in the United States (US) respectively, noted that the students described experiencing unbearable psychological pressure and feelings of boredom, anxiety, frustration and hopelessness. The point here is to note the potential negative short-term and longer-term impacts of the pandemic and the institutional responses to it on students' education and mental health.

Many educational institutions and students refused to accept the status quo of the limiting, paralysing consequences and effects of the pandemic on them and demonstrated great resilience, creativity and innovation in the establishment and implementation of various social behavioural and psycho-social support interventions and activities that could improve their lot (Funda, 2022; Mahlaba, 2020; Mestry, 2022). The effective deployment of leadership and social capital were crucial to such solutions, interventions and alternative modes and kinds of activities (Shah et al., 2021), many of which were undertaken in the field of student affairs and services due to its centrality to the effective functioning of student life, education and development at university.

Against this background, the aim of this article is to describe and consider the processes, initiatives, and interventions that a comprehensive university in South Africa, North-West University (NWU), followed in its efforts to manage the impacts produced by COVID-19 and the lockdown restrictions implemented in response to the pandemic, with a specific focus on the social behavioural projects and psycho-social support interventions that were implemented to enhance the social capital of students and their well-being on campus from March 2020. The article highlights the leadership role played by student affairs and services staff and students in addressing the challenges that the university faced during this period; and also considers the lessons learned from these efforts.

Literature Review

Social capital

Humans have an inherent need to socialise and form part of a group or community with shared interests, hobbies, and passions (Harro, 2000). There is a need to share experiences and activities which produce individual memories and through which one

is seen as part of a complete system (Kovacheva & Lamberton, 2018). There is a need for well-grounded relationships and friendships as a basis of such shared experiences (Firth, 2008).

The philosopher Aristotle noted: "In poverty and other misfortunes of life, true friends are a sure refuge. They keep the young out of mischief; they comfort and aid the old in their weakness; and they incite those in the prime of life to noble deeds." (Brannan & Mohr, 2022, p. 5).

Steadfast reciprocal relationships bring many benefits to the individual, ensuring that the person is tended to emotionally and/or that there is space provided in which one can talk about one's frustrations and be exposed to others' ideologies (Seeman, 1996). Valuable social and soft skills are developed and fostered in such relationships which offer a form of intimate accountability to someone else through which one's own behaviour and actions, and the consequences thereof, may be deciphered (Marquart et al., 2021). Such accountability partnerships foster growth and progress towards shared and individual goals and make the tasks of life easier (Fuller, 2017).

In this context, the concept of "social capital" bears some consideration. Social capital, in its purest form, refers to "the by-product of social interactions that are embedded in and accessed via formal and informal social relationships with individuals, communities and institutions" (Hawkins & Maurer, 2012, p. 356). Social capital is a term used to describe the various networks through which people can establish meaningful connections and collaborative relationships (Pitas & Ehmer, 2020). Social capital is deployed and acquired through the development or establishment of social relations and ventures, which are beneficial and productive to all parties involved, fostering the achievement of collective goals. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 119) describe it as "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition".

Social capital needs to be cultivated as it brings about many benefits. It can enable one to obtain valuable, reliable and current data and evidence that can inform decision-making (Aldrich, 2017). Some studies have found that social capital may help foster resilience in difficult times (Aldrich, 2017). Through the use of technology, new kinds of social capital have been created and new forms of collaboration have been identified which enable quicker achievement of goals (Deepak et al., 2016). Social capital has been linked to economic performance and productivity (Dasgupta, 2001).

Among university students, social capital has been found to enable engagement in learning that leads to improved academic performance (Deepak et al., 2016); and has been linked to creativity (Gu et al., 2014). Three main types of social capital that may be considered of relevance to university students have been identified: bonding, bridging and linking (Aldrich, 2017).

Bonding capital refers to the close relationships among friends and families through which emotional support is provided and group cohesion is encouraged (Laser & Leibowitz, 2009). Bridging capital refers to social connections among individuals from

different backgrounds and ethnic groups and who adhere to different societal norms and beliefs. Such capital forms a bridge among numerous social networks (Claridge, 2018). Linking capital refers to the establishment of social connections between particular entities or individuals and figures of power and authority who have decision-making influence (Claridge, 2018; Hawkins & Maurer, 2012).

The authors of this study believe that all three of these types of social capital were deployed among university students under pandemic conditions at the NWU as they sought to make sense of the "new normal" and go about their lives as students.

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns caused a major shock to the existing system of social capital, limiting the in-person interactions that had underpinned this system and producing a shift to virtual and restricted forms of social connection as a new dominant modus operandi (Zheng et al., 2020). In this context, universities and students were creative and innovative in rethinking the ways in which social capital could be fostered and how student social behaviour could adapt accordingly (Gu et al., 2014).

Student well-being

In addition, universities implemented a number of ideas to help buffer the severe impacts that COVID-19 and the resulting lockdown measures were having on the physical, emotional, and social well-being of the students (Kele & Mzileni, 2021).

The closure of academic institutions in South Africa from March 2020 impeded academic performance and success for many students. The restricted access to and cessation of numerous psycho-educational and social development activities at these institutions caused turmoil among students (Lederer et al., 2021). The students at the NWU were not spared from these negative impacts.

As much as young people like to use new technologies and online social media platforms, they mostly prefer their social connections and shared experiences to be in-person and spontaneous (Neuwirth et al., 2021). Many students attend university for the spontaneous, exciting happenings which are available on campus and which contribute to their own personal growth and development (Dodd et al., 2021).

From anecdotal evidence and based on our interactions with students at the NWU, students report that they feel a sense of belonging and that they are part of a community, as well as a sense of purpose, when they participate in events, particularly in-person ones. Once these kinds of events were put on hold or restricted, many students said that they did not know what to do with their time, talents, and creative energies. In addition, some student leaders reported a sense of loss as they were now unable to execute their portfolio-specific duties and activities effectively (Alaali, 2022).

The result was something of an existential crisis among the youth at universities (Lee & Jung, 2021). Student affairs and services staff at various higher education institutions in South Africa reported increasing requests for emotional support from students (Brodie et al., 2022; Naidoo & Cartwright, 2020). At the NWU, student wellbeing came under

threat in a number of ways (Kruger & Kok, 2020). Many students struggled with the idea of catching the virus, especially those who were living in communal spaces with other individuals. These students reported that although they complied with COVID-19 regulations and protocols, they were unable to control the behaviours and actions of others with whom they were living.

A Swiss study reported an increase in depressive and anxiety symptoms, with some students reporting feelings of loneliness and isolation (Volken et al., 2021). Another study found that many students felt vulnerable with insufficient resources available to help them cope and that, as a result, they reverted to unhealthy mechanisms for coping such as alcohol and substance abuse; high risk behaviour, such as drinking and driving; and anger and aggression (Charles et al., 2021). Some students at the NWU were similarly affected.

Nevertheless, and despite the severe challenges posed by COVID-19, most of the students at the NWU showed great creativity and resilience in their efforts to counter the negative effects of the pandemic on their well-being (Motswenyane, 2020).

Student social behaviour and psycho-social support

The APA Dictionary of Psychology (2022, para. 1) defines social behaviour as "any action performed by interdependent conspecifics (members of the same species); in humans, an action that is influenced, directly or indirectly, by the actual, imagined, expected, or implied presence of others; any one of a set of behaviours exhibited by gregarious, communal social species, including cooperation, affiliation, altruism." Research indicates that students are social beings who continually challenge themselves to grow and develop, including in environments that may not be conducive to healthy practices. Research has reported that students' learning experiences are influenced by the ways in which the social systems of which they are part function (Nandy et al., 2021). This includes the impacts of financial barriers within those systems, and how those systems may influence their mental health and, potentially, undermine their sense of social balance (Hagedorn et al., 2021). Such impacts can cause certain discrepancies in students' development which, in turn, necessitate the provision of appropriate psycho-social support and guidance.

Psycho-social support is described by the APA Dictionary of Psychology (2022, para. 1) as "a broad term describing a range of services offered by mental health professionals to those in pressing need. Whether designed to help individuals cope with a serious illness or to alleviate distress in whole communities following a disaster, such services may range from mental health counselling, psycho-education, and group support to spiritual support and other assistance which is provided by psychologists, social workers, and pastoral counsellors, among others. Studies have found that student social behaviour and the availability of psycho-social support may have both positive impacts, for example, in relation to academic performance and negative impacts, such as in terms of fostering crime; substance abuse; and peer relationship problems, on students' overall well-being (Armstrong, 2011).

Methodology

The current study describes some aspects of a social behavioural project and some of the psycho-social interventions adopted at the North-West University in response to the imposition of lockdown measures under COVID-19 from March 2020. The authors of this study, who played a leadership role in establishing and implementing these programmes, consider the contribution that they, and more generally, student affairs and services staff, made to the operational integrity of the university at the height of the pandemic; as well as the potential role of these programmes in fostering "social capital" among the students involved.

Prior to the establishment of these initiatives, data were gathered on the intermediaries responsible for communicating and engaging with students – for example, peer helpers; house committee members; radio station volunteers; students' campus council members; and faculty – the modes of communication deployed by these intermediaries; and their effectiveness in reaching a broad swathe of the student community. The aim being to establish a system of communications that would be effective under COVID-19 and lockdown conditions. These data were used for this study.

This study considers the processes which led to the establishment of the social behavioural project and a series of virtual programmes in support of student social engagement, particularly during hard lockdown levels 4 and 5 in South Africa. These programmes focused on sport and wellness, including e-sports and virtual training and exercises; arts and culture, including virtual art exhibitions, virtual arts and musical performances (such as by a choir, "harmonists" and a symphony orchestra), virtual art collections and digital jigsaw puzzles; psycho-social support in the form of webinars, podcasts, weekly content dissemination, and mental health challenges; and entertainment provided primarily via the various campus radio stations. In this regard, this study draws on data on the various offerings which were implemented among the students by SAS staff and the students themselves.

Discussion

Interventions to enhance student well-being and social capital

Student social behaviour project

At the height of coronavirus infections across South Africa, a student social behaviour project was implemented by staff members of the Student Life Department and the Campus Protection Services Division at the North-West University to address concerns that had been raised by the university's COVID-19 Response Team (C-19 RT) about a lack of student adherence to COVID-19 protocols and regulations.

A campaign was launched on all three of the university's campuses deploying a cohort of student volunteers dubbed "COVID-19 compliance buddies", with a view to educating and raising awareness among students, and monitoring and recording instances of non-compliance by students. Rather than using punitive measures to address instances of students flouting COVID-19 protocols and regulations, the

compliance buddies, working in collaboration with and under the supervision of student affairs and services staff, engaged with students to understand if and why they were not complying with appropriate rules and protocols. Based on these engagements and the observations of the compliance buddies, reports were submitted to the C-19 RT through the Office of the Executive Director: Student Life, with a view to establishing trends – both in terms of student behaviour and common areas of non-compliance – and making recommendations for ameliorative action. For example, based on the reports from compliance buddies, it was established that the university needed to reconsider its communication strategy and re-package its messaging. In essence, the idea was to focus on how the university could communicate important safety and practical considerations with regards to the threat posed by the pandemic, as well as the efforts that could be taken to prevent its spread. These reports to the C-19 RT also led to the development of other innovative intervention measures and strategies.

Psycho-social support interventions

Despite the restrictions imposed in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, student affairs and services staff at the university continued to implement various psycho-social interventions on a number of levels. Table 1 below provides an overview of the various interventions implemented.

Table 1: Psycho-social interventions and social events

Intervention	Description
Psycho-educational webinars and content	The university hosted online psycho-educational webinars on a bi-weekly basis in order to address the mental health needs of the students. The content for these webinars was developed by registered psychologists, social workers, and counsellors from the university's student counselling and development divisions, who also presented these virtual meetings. Psycho-educational content was also distributed to the students via the university's online platforms and various social media platforms. Psycho-educational themes addressed by the content on offer included: depression; motivation; goal setting; healthy relationships; gender-based violence; and examination preparation.
Continuation of student residence-life activities in a safe, controlled environment	A need for residence activities was voiced by residence students and student residence leaders (house committee members). Accordingly, a number of proposed activities were presented at the C-19 RT and approved for implementation. Subsequently, a number of residence activities, such as residence meetings; religion-related engagements; and recreational and sport activities, resumed on a smaller scale in line with the institution's COVID-19 occupational health and safety (OHS) guidelines. House parents and house committee members acted as compliance officers to ensure adherence to protocols in the course of these activities.

Intervention	Description
	Student wellness intervention measures project
	Born of a need to attend to the well-being of students who had chosen to remain at university residences and in an effort to keep them engaged, a student wellness intervention measures project (SWIMP) was developed and led by Student Life staff through the department's various divisions responsible for student counselling and development; sport; and arts and culture. The project emanated from discussions in the C-19 RT which raised concerns about the students' mental health and the possible devastating effects of the new lockdown measures on overall student wellness, particularly during the recess period when most students could not return to their homes.
E-sport	In response to COVID-19 restrictions prohibiting contact sport events, the university's sport division devised a number of new e-sports events such as local area network (LAN) leagues and online chess, as well as virtual training and exercise activities.
Arts and culture events	The university's arts and culture division hosted a number of in-person arts and culture events such as "COVAS" – a play on "Canvas" and COVID-19. (Before COVID-19, the university hosted an event known as "Canvas" at which students participated in a mural painting event using the wall in the student centre precinct as their canvas. With the advent of the pandemic, students' creative thinking led to the event's name being changed to "COVAS".) Other events included debates, and student serenading (Sêr), in line with COVID-19 protocols. COVAS was the first competitive student event hosted by the Students' Campus Council (SCC): Arts Council since the start of the pandemic in 2020. The goal of COVAS was to offer students a platform to voice their opinions in creative and constructive ways.
Community involvement	Students took part in a number of activities organised by the Student Rag Community Service (SRCS) such as Barefoot Day and virtual bus tours of local community projects.
Leadership development	Training and development officers in the student counselling and development division, with the approval of the C-19 RT, coordinated and conducted a number of online and controlled in-person leadership and support sessions for student leaders.

The role of student affairs and services staff

At the onset of the national lockdown in March 2020, the university established a COVID-19 Response Team to ensure operational continuity in the context of the major restrictions imposed in response to the pandemic, including lockdowns at a range of levels. Initially, Student Life staff members were not included on this team, raising the spectre of the marginalisation of the student affairs and services staff in the university's operations at this critical juncture.

However, this omission was quickly rectified and SAS staff went on to make a significant contribution to operational continuity and the completion of the academic year at the university, and also played a pivotal role in helping to create a vibrant, safe and supportive environment for students in the midst of the pandemic.

For example, the Campus Health Care Centres (CHCCs), which fall under the remit of the Student Life Department at NWU, were responsible for the quarantine and isolation site that was established under COVID-19; for managing reported positive COVID-19 cases; and for conducting regular contact tracing. They also promoted awareness of the pandemic and related health concerns, holding webinars on these topics, while continuing to attend to their primary healthcare responsibilities. In addition, Student Life staff, comprising a multi-disciplinary team of psychologists, social workers, counsellors, nursing practitioners, contracted doctors, general staff, sport scientists and managers, and radio station staff and managers provided psycho-social and other forms of support in an effort to promote the holistic well-being of students, thus enabling them to complete their academic work. Student Life staff also sought to engage students in co-curricular activities, including in the areas of arts and culture, sport, community engagement, and student governance and leadership.

Standard operating procedures (SOPs) for various activities were developed to ensure that they took place in a safe environment and with a view to curbing the spread of the coronavirus.

The authors of this article led these endeavours in their capacities as executive director and campus director in the university's Student Life Department. A key goal for the leadership of the Student Life Department in advocating for the student social behaviour project and the psycho-social interventions was to promote forms of on-campus social engagement which would dissuade students from going off-campus where there was no guarantee of effective COVID-19 preventative measures being in place, and then returning to campus and potentially spreading newly acquired infection.

Skills development

The establishment and implementation of the student social behaviour project and the psycho-social interventions were undertaken in collaboration with the students themselves, who provided a number of recommendations for the kinds of well-being initiatives that should be promoted, and also shaped the nature and the form of the resulting activities through their participation. This collaboration fostered the establishment of meaningful engagements and connections within a supportive environment, resulting in an increase in social capital among the student population and in the overall university environment.

Students at the university deployed a number of creative, critical-thinking and innovation skills in collaboration with SAS staff in helping to establish and implement the various psycho-social interventions and co-curricular initiatives that were undertaken. They collaborated with a range of stakeholders on campus, including in the

occupational health and safety division; at the various facilities; at the campus health care centres; and in the student support services division.

The students helped to conceptualise, plan and implement new activities and interventions within the necessary occupational health and safety protocols and guidelines. Under a constantly shifting COVID-19 regulatory framework, the students, with the support of SAS staff, developed crisis-management skills and demonstrated their adaptability to new circumstances.

Their engagement in forging and implementing the new initiatives also entailed honing their networking and negotiating skills and developing an understanding of the workings of institutional processes and how these processes may fit into realizing the bigger mission and vision of the university, including, in this instance, in a time of a global crisis. Accordingly, the student involvement in the initiatives led by Student Life to promote their social engagement and psycho-social well-being on campus may be viewed as having made a significant contribution to their own social capital.

Lessons Learned

It was found that it is possible to produce effective forms of student engagement beyond those conventionally produced through face-to-face interaction, particularly if such engagement is driven by effective collaboration and partnership between students, staff and management, as well as external stakeholders, on campus. Moreover, the adoption of a hybrid face-to-face and online model could allow for the implementation of multi-faceted initiatives. In this regard, the use of streaming to broadcast events, which was something of an innovation, enabled large numbers of students at the NWU to "experience" events from a distance.

Further, the establishment of a multi-disciplinary team, comprising students, staff, management and external stakeholders, was important to ensuring effective planning and implementation of interventions and initiatives.

As part of such a team, it was found that student affairs and services staff have a crucial role to play in supporting university operations in times of crisis. In this context, there is a need for future research to extrapolate the lessons that may be learned from the experiences of SAS practitioners during hard times, such as those occasioned by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the damaging impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the higher education sector in general and the work of student affairs and services staff in particular, a number of measures were implemented to ensure operational continuity at various institutions of higher learning, including the NWU, with some success. This article has described the leadership role played by student affairs and services staff at the NWU in collaboration with other university departments in support of student engagement and psycho-social well-being at a time of crisis, including in the context of how this

work supported the institution's operational integrity and fostered social capital among the students.

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Building Capabilities and Leadership for Youth Development: Nelson Mandela University's Approach

Luthando Jack,* Ayanda Mlatsha** & Buntu Mnyaka***

Introduction

The South African Association of Senior Student Affairs Professionals (SAASSAP) hosted a three-day conference on "Ramping up engaged scholarship, gender equity, and enhancing leadership in student affairs practice" at Nelson Mandela University, Port Elizabeth (Gqeberha), from 2 to 4 December 2021. The meeting, which was attended by student affairs leaders from South African higher education institutions, was a first of its kind, hybrid-level interaction for SAASSAP and affiliated stakeholders since the global outbreak of the coronavirus and the disease it causes, COVID-19, in 2020. The conference's programme, which sought to address current challenges and social injustices affecting students in South Africa, provided student affairs professionals with an opportunity to consider and guide the processes of change required to enrich student growth and development nationally and further afield.

The conference took place at a time when the higher education landscape had been greatly affected by the uncertainties produced in the advent of COVID-19. The pandemic and the lockdown measures that were implemented in response to it exacerbated several pre-existing student stressors, including the financial burden of higher education; impaired mental wellness; social concerns; and loss of identity. The pandemic also had a direct impact in terms of illness and death among the student cohort, their families, and communities, as well as an indirect impact in terms of the adoption of new learning and teaching strategies under lockdown. The resulting challenges led to a close-up critique and redesign of existing policies and strategies in the field of student affairs, including in relation to leadership and scholarship.

Against this background, the SAASSAP conference hosted scholars sharing innovative papers and keynote speakers who addressed the audience on patterns of best practice. The meeting also enabled participants to engage in thought-provoking conversations as part of a student-centric learning experience. The speakers included Professor Cheryl Foxcroft, deputy vice-chancellor of Learning and Teaching at Nelson Mandela University (NMU), who talked about the importance of the notion

* Luthando Jack is dean of students at Nelson Mandela University, South Africa.

** Ayanda Mlatsha is a student development practitioner and YouthLab coordinator at Nelson Mandela University, South Africa. Email: Ayanda.Mlatsha@mandela.ac.za.

*** Buntu Mnyaka is an assistant researcher and YouthLab coordinator at Nelson Mandela University, South Africa.

of engaged scholarship as a crucial element of learning and teaching. She cited Boyer's (1990) theory on what is meant by engaged scholarship, saying: "Engaged scholarship is described as teaching and research that connects the rich resources of the university to our most pressing civic and ethical problems." She further emphasised the relevance of the conference's theme insofar as it was linked to how institutions of higher learning produce value by giving back to societies and communities. Foxcroft further argued for an expanded notion of what is meant by scholarship, opposing the idea that something should be considered "scholarly" only if "it is published in a journal". Instead, she said, student affairs professionals need to search for other innovative ideas that could be considered scholarly which may take a range of forms beyond journal articles, such as videos in which the researcher expands on a topic, or new programmes which seek to realize approaches to student affairs promoted in the literature.

NMU Panel on Student Development

On the second day of the conference, an NMU panel reflected on the approach used by Nelson Mandela University in building capabilities and leadership for youth development. The panel referenced the complexity of universities as microcosms of society. Douglas (2005, p. 1) argues that the complexity of these institutions is informed by the market; government interventions; changes in learning and teaching; and the type of students who enrol. Douglas is of the view that the challenges arising from these factors must be perceived as positive since, in addressing them, universities increase their relevance to society. In other words, the nature of the institutional culture and posture at universities should be informed by the constant changes that occur within society. This can then lead these institutions to reflect on whether the current education and environment that they are providing for their students are adequate for fostering the democratisation and transformation of society. In this context, one of the speakers on the panel, Ayanda Mlatsha, a student development practitioner and YouthLab coordinator at NMU, noted that it was only through intense observation, research, and constant engagements with students on the ground that the Nelson Mandela University was able to understand the calibre and characteristics of the current generation of students.

Rather than being intimidated by the awareness that a constantly changing society requires a constantly changing university, the student affairs professionals on the panel said that their university had taken a conscious decision to embrace these changes and, accordingly, had encouraged the development of relevant, unique communities within the institution. Communities that embraced each student's background through their ethos and activities and upheld African values in the university's various structures.

In support of this approach, NMU has adopted a humanizing pedagogy, arguing that, as part of its public-good mission, higher education should practise humanizing ethics that promote fairness and opportunities for students about "what students are able to do and to be in and through higher education" (Walker, 2018, pp. 556–557). The approach is one that is centred on producing solutions to the challenges that face society and trans-forming the thinking of those within society and the world accordingly. Locatelli (2018,

p. 10) argues that, in service to society and as a public good, education must be relevant to people's lived realities and should embrace inclusivity, empowerment, innovation and the need to improve living conditions in society. One of the panellists, Buntu Mnyaka, an assistant researcher and YouthLab coordinator at NMU, noted that while the adoption of this approach at NMU had not been smooth sailing, there had been constant progress.

According to Ayanda Mlatsha, a key aspect of seeking to promote this approach has been the university's drive to transform leadership, including student leadership, at the institution. She emphasised the importance of guiding and mentoring young leaders in the context of a world facing economic strain in which there is inadequate leadership and a lack of appropriate role models. In this context, and as part of higher education's engagement with local communities, student affairs professionals should seek to empower student leaders who can help to transform their communities and societies, as well as their universities. Accordingly, the Student Governance and Development department at NMU seeks to establish platforms and an overarching environment that foster critical thinking and tolerance for all and promote citizenship, academic success, and engagement among the students (Nelson Mandela University, 2021a).

The university offers student leaders the opportunity to become involved in university decision-making, thus enabling them to acquire transactional and transformational leadership skills and knowledge and fostering their dynamism. In this way, the students can develop as individuals, while becoming effective leaders and agents of broader change. In this context, the students can benefit from programmes such as the *Ndingumntu Nam* ("I am human too") mental health awareness campaign which allows them to acknowledge their backgrounds and foster the realization that they are human beings first before they are graduates or scholars. Such programmes enable all students, including student leaders, to embrace their own identities and encourage openness towards other student identities and cultures. In this way, an inclusive environment is created in which students not only develop their academic skills but also become productive members of society. In addition, such self-acknowledgement produces a sense of belonging and makes it easier for student leaders to reach out to others, enacting the concept of *ubuntu*, "I am because you are", which is the basis of many communities in Africa. The concept of humanizing pedagogy espoused by the university also enables it to perceive its academics holistically, producing the understanding that, like the students, they are members of society before they are members of the institution, said Ayanda Mlatsha.

Another noteworthy practice established at NMU is that of regular "neighbour checks", which encourages students to check up on one another's well-being. This practice proved particularly effective under COVID-19 lockdown when student isolation led to an increase in mental illness. More broadly, the neighbour checks operate as a channel for mutual caring, fostering selflessness and a spirit of ubuntu among the students. Ayanda Mlatsha said that this practice, which is based on the values of the university, had cultivated a culture of *ubuntu* among students suffering from mental illnesses, post-trauma as a result of the pandemic, and social injustices.

During the pandemic, it became clear that the support offered by NMU's leadership to student affairs professionals in their efforts to mentor and guide the students was made possible as part of a larger institutional commitment to practising *ubuntu* and a humanizing pedagogy. In this context, Luthando Jack, the dean of students at Nelson Mandela University said:

> Part of our efforts in truly becoming an African university that is rooted in its local community entails being able to harness and underpin the canon of our education with the philosophy of *ubuntu*. The new kind of graduate the university will send to society ought to be imbued with the intrinsic value of placing the community above the self. (Jack, 2019)

The panellists at the conference also mentioned NMU's Madibaz YouthLab initiative. The platform seeks to establish spaces in which students come together to address the complex social challenges and injustices that confront the youth of South Africa and beyond (Nelson Mandela University, 2021b). This initiative seeks to promote a humanistic solution-orientated approach to addressing the challenges that face society, including by transforming people's thinking.

Nelson Mandela University's embrace of this ethos is demonstrated by its motto: "Change the world". In this regard, former NMU vice-chancellor, Professor Derrick Swartz, speaking at the launch of the university's name change in 2017, said that being named after Nelson Mandela:

> … means of course our students must be activists, not necessarily in a party-political sense, but must advocate for change, must work towards freeing up society so that we have a better world as well … We have to teach a curriculum that can equip our students with the best of tools and the knowledge to change the world. It has to be a radical transformation, and a call to that is the curriculum, what happens in the classroom, what knowledge comes through your mind. If you are not challenged with new skills and knowledge, you didn't even know alternatives to the world that has been handed by history to our society. But the power of education is to change the world. (Swartz, 2017)

Professor Sibongile Muthwa expressed similar sentiments at her inauguration as incoming vice-chancellor of Nelson Mandela University in 2018:

> Student life at Mandela University will centre the student. It will thoughtfully involve and connect our students into the full life and promise of the university and its inter-connection with wider society. Fashioned in an integrative way, student life should stimulate not only student development, social solidarity, multi-culturalism and diversity – through the execution of excellent and vibrant intellectual, social, cultural, sport, recreational and other value-adding programmes on campus … it will promote active student engagement in communities aimed at solving the challenges of poverty, inequality and unemployment. (Muthwa, 2018)

The point being made by both Swartz and Muthwa is that the institutional culture of the university is student-centric with the aim of producing an institution that is a

public good and serves society. In addition, there is an emphasis on the university's role in local communities. The vision is of an institution that fosters transformative and transformational capabilities and leadership – attributes which may also characterise its graduates. In this regard, the university prides itself on instilling its graduates with a capacity for inter- and trans-disciplinary thinking which can contribute to solving complex problems and challenges (Nelson Mandela University, 2021c, pp. 46–47).

In summary, Nelson Mandela University seeks to promote the philosophical concept of *ubuntu*, "I am because you are", as a core value and embed this in a humanizing pedagogical approach. The narrative of higher education institutions which promotes the separateness of learner and lecturer persists. However, under *ubuntu* the two are considered symbiotic. Furthermore, Wilkinson (1994, p. 327) argues that higher education institutions have always been forces of progress since their inception, including by fostering major developments in science, and by influencing culture and the development of ideologies and concepts. Moreover, Moscardini and Strachan (2020, pp. 10–11) state that, as society has changed, so must universities if they are to remain relevant to societal development. Accordingly, universities should seek to meet the needs of local communities and contribute to national development. Such is the thinking that provides the frame of reference for NMU's efforts to operate as a public good; be of service to society; and function as a space of transformation in developing community-orientated graduates.

Other Presentations at the Conference

There were a number of other presentations at the conference, including an address by Dr Neo Pule, Yeki Mosomothane and Dr Grey Magaiza from the University of the Free State (UFS) on "Student leadership engagement in institutional transformation: A model for leadership building and engaged scholarship". Dr Bernard Sebake of the National Association of Student Development Professionals, presented under the theme "Rethinking capabilities of student affairs professional practice: Reflecting on constantly emerging paradigms". Bonolo Makhalemele and Ester Mahlatsi presented a reflection on "Finding engaged scholarship in everyday living".

Professor Thierry Luescher from the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) delivered an address on "The photovoice project: Violence and student wellbeing". Dr Ramneek Ahluwalia from Higher Health presented on the state of health worldwide and how this impacts African higher education institutions. Tshegofatso Mogaladi from the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) addressed the audience on "The efficiency of student affairs departments in South African higher education: A conceptual analysis". The second day ended with a productive annual general meeting (AGM) of SAASSAP members.

The third day of the SAASSAP conference opened with a reflective session offering attendees an opportunity to connect with and assimilate some of the key points made during the proceedings. Then, Dr Thandi Lewin, Acting Deputy Director General: University Education in the Department of Higher Education and Training, considered

the work of the department. Lubabalo Ndzoyiya, president of the South African Union of Students (SAUS), considered the work of the union. Dr Birgit Schreiber and Sindi Kayi spoke about the work of the Higher Education Leadership and Management (HELM) programme being implemented by Universities South Africa (USAf) as part of the Department of Higher Education and Training's University Capacity Development Programme. Dr Neo Pule from the Department of Psychology at UFS presented on the "Advantages of engaged scholarship: A systemic and multi–level co–curriculum toward collective impact". Dr Matete Madiba, research and development officer at SAASSAP, talked about scholarship opportunities offered by the association.

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Book review

Wealth, values, culture & education: Reviving the essentials for equality and sustainability by J. E. Torabian (2022). Switzerland: Springer Nature Publications.

Reviewed by Bryan Cunningham*

This new book is an important addition to Springer's *Diversity and Inclusion Research* series. As Professor Robert Cowen observes in his foreword, it is not a book that is susceptible to easy categorisation on the basis of any one academic discipline or specialist focus: "its cultural and historical range is extraordinary". It is also one that I can readily attest "will invite thought, dispute and disagreement".

The author herself captures the essence and scope of her book by invoking such of its aspirations as "work[ing] for the betterment of the world". She also writes that its aim "is to provoke reflections – but not to propose definite responses". In these regards, and by its overarching concern to evidence the enduring inequalities and illusions of late capitalism, her work is extremely successful.

Comprehensively referenced, structurally *Wealth, Values, Culture and Education* is divided into five major sections, each with arresting titles such as 'The Capitalist Trojan Horse and its Tenets' and 'A Retour to Essentials: Reconstructing Wealth and Values'. As an educationalist, the chapter on 'Education and Culture' held special interest for me.

A number of key questions, and of apparently contradictory perspectives, are being addressed in this chapter. Is the present function of education fundamentally about producing "human outputs" with relevant, employment-ready skills? Is there scope for education to encompass an emancipatory dimension, "equip[ping] learners with philosophies of being and doing"? Ranging across incredibly diverse geographical, political and cultural contexts (this range in fact being a feature of each of the book's chapters) the author reviews a selection of theoretical and philosophical constructs that may serve to aid our understanding of *how* and *why* immense differences in educational principles and practices exist across the globe. Prevailing inequalities and authoritarianism loom large in Torabian's analysis.

I was caused to ponder, not for the first time, how, in highly developed countries such as the UK and France, one particularly striking phenomenon is the very large proportion of successive school leaver cohorts progressing to higher level study (despite what many would acknowledge to be the significant opportunity costs of doing so). While much space could be devoted to an interrogation of this trend, there are two drivers that

* Bryan Cunningham is emeritus associate professor of Education at the University College London Institute of Education. Email: bryancunningham1951@gmail.com.

almost certainly ought to be cited. One is qualifications inflation (or "credentialism"), whereby employers require in applicants an ever more impressive batch of certificates for any given occupational role. The other appears to derive from changing social norms – "*going to uni*" simply having become what so many of your friends are planning on. Universities themselves have also played a part in so dramatically raising participation levels; given that their funding base improves with every increase in student numbers, the pronounced monetisation of the higher education sector, with its growing numbers of marketing staff, is hardly surprising.

While the above – now long established – trend might be celebrated as an unalloyed good, there are however certain emergent negatives. For example, individual students seeking the so-called 'graduate premium' (higher predicted lifetime earnings for degree holders than for those who lack one) could well be disappointed: it is observable that that not all degrees are held in particularly high esteem by employers, and that over and above this reality they will often tend to prefer those from more prestigious universities. The impact of this, both practically and emotionally may be felt in particular by individuals who have left university not having found their time there either life enhancing or horizon broadening – or simply much fun. The outcome such graduates may well come to experience could be a case of the "*20 years of schoolin' and they put you on the day shift*" that Bob Dylan sang of back in 1965.

Witnessing first-hand the kind of realities I am briefly alluding to here certainly underlines the imperative for those of us in education to purposefully engage with Torabian's "Essentials for Equality and Sustainability". In saying so, I am in an important sense really only echoing some of the sentiments expressed in the sixth, and much shorter, section of her work. Titled 'The Road (not) Taken' this comprises what we can perhaps encounter as her *cri de coeur*. She acknowledges that moving away from our present materialistic, instrumentalist, preoccupations and practices may entail what she terms "baby steps" on the road to "*otherwise thinking*". In conceiving of a "revitalised role of education and culture", her highly ambitious, never less than deeply reflective, narrative offers the reader an astonishingly timely and stimulating basis for both individual and collective action.

Book review

Low-income students, human development and higher education in South Africa: Opportunities, obstacles and outcomes by M. Walker, M. McLean, M. Mathebula & P. Mukwambo (2022). Cape Town, South Africa: African Minds.

Reviewed by Paul Othusitse Dipitso[*]

Issues concerned with access, quality and equity remain topical in South African higher education research. Higher education researchers grapple with research that attempts to find solutions for educational deprivation, structural inequalities, and socio–economic issues related to poverty and lack of employment opportunities. These complexities constrain the advancement of human development and social justice. It is pertinent for higher education to advance equity, inclusion and humanistic values. Access to higher education is discussed both in national and international contexts as well as linked to learning outcomes (Jappie, 2020). Therefore, it becomes increasingly important to understand higher education learning outcomes and the effects of university education on equity as well as how they contribute to the research agenda.

Walker, McLean, Mathebula & Mukwambo provide valuable insights into underexplored educational experiences in *Low-income Students, Human Development and Higher Education in South Africa: Opportunities, Obstacles and Outcomes.* The book informs readers about the capability-based approach to understanding higher education learning outcomes for low-income students who encounter multi–modal challenges in pursuit of education. It has its origin in the Miratho Project which sought to examine the contextual realities of low-income students concerning how they access, succeed at university and transition beyond the university into the world of work. Walker et al. investigate the complex biographical, socio–economic, policy and educational factors that enable/inhibit pathways for rural youth to exit university with valuable learning outcomes. The book demonstrates how structural inequalities, the legacies of colonialism and apartheid, affect students' experiences in higher education.

The book consists of nine thematic chapters. In the first chapter, the authors focus on the educational experiences of students from low-income families and how they access university, succeed and transition into the world of work or further study. The chapter argues that structural inequalities limit human development thus inhibiting students' abilities to expand their choices to overcome the effects of poverty. The students' life

* Paul Othusitse Dipitso is a doctoral candidate at the Institute of Post School Studies, University of the Western Cape, South Africa. Email: 3742432@myuwc.ac.za. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-8351-6971

histories are in part shaped by legacies of colonialism and apartheid which continue to constrain the redistribution of resources equitably.

Chapter 2 makes a case for the capability approach as a foundation for reconceptualising learning outcomes to foster equitable inclusive higher education which prioritises students' well-being. The authors argue that the approach measures learning outcomes beyond economic terms by focusing on the quality students' attributes rather than attaining a qualification to enhance human capital.

The fundamental theme of Chapter 3 is understanding how context, history and intersecting factors enable/constrain capabilities for well-being. The authors contend that income inequality restricts agency to expand human capabilities thereby creating barriers to access and success in higher education. The authors emphasise that, despite fee-free higher education, some students still experience financial difficulties in accessing university education.

In Chapter 4 the authors highlight that the university should be a transformative space which should support a conceptualisation of learning outcomes that moves beyond students' intellectual development. This calls for an approach to learning outcomes with the potential to improve students' well-being holistically. Central to this chapter is the Miratho capabilitarian matrix characterised by eight domains, namely epistemic contribution which emerged as architectonic for transformative higher education, *ubuntu*, practical reason, navigation, narrative, emotional, inclusion and participation and future work/study. These domains are necessary for enabling students to choose what they value as a basis for evaluating the justice of higher education.

Chapter 5 focuses on examining the factors enabling and constraining access to higher education and emphasises that the students' life histories reveal the inequality in democratic South Africa's education system. The authors argue that it is necessary to increase access to funding support to enable wider participation and secure equal opportunities for previously marginalised groups. Students from low-income families often negotiate access to higher education due to their social and personal circumstances, therefore universities should consider minimising entry barriers for applicants, for example, revising the high school passes required of low-income students to gain entry to university.

Chapter 6 illuminates the participant students' experiences of being at university by considering the extent to which university participation was transformative. The authors argue that transformational learning in higher education should enhance freedoms and what students value as definitive of a good life thus creating better opportunities. Freedoms and the good life are terms that emerge from the capability approach which is grounded in human development.

Chapter 7 sees the authors critically examine the factors enabling/constraining successful completion of degrees and movement into employment. The authors allude that some students utilise their navigation capital to traverse the challenges of transitioning beyond university. The chapter shows that although students enhance their epistemic contribution and obtained university qualification, some nonetheless remain stuck due to a lack of employment opportunities.

Using life-history synopses and detailing participant students' experiences with access to and participation in university, Chapter 8 discusses the experiences of students to reveal the conditions that open opportunities and present obstacles in their everyday educational lives. The authors argue that structural inequalities restrict and limit the development of all the aforementioned eight capability domains.

The final chapter investigates the aspects that constitute learning outcomes for low-income students in South Africa. The authors call for reimagining inclusive learning outcomes that encompass the multi–dimensional value of university education. The authors argue that achieving higher education goals in a manner that dignifies human life will ensure that talent is not wasted, intergenerational poverty is interrupted and social cohesion is advanced.

The authors deliver their key message in a consistent manner which is relatable to higher education researchers and accessible to the general reader. They demonstrate that the issue of access to higher education is of great concern for students from low-income families. The book clearly articulates the challenges of equitable access to higher education and how this constrains the contribution of higher education to human development. Despite free public higher education, a large number of students still experience obstacles to access education thus affecting student learning outcomes in universities. Cloete (2016) argues that it is necessary to build a stronger higher education system that provides affordable funding for poor and middle–class students.

The challenges of inequalities in higher education, effects of poverty on low–income students and educational deprivation remain critical. In reading this book one appreciates that universities need to expand access and participation in higher education, which is valuable for advancing human development. Higher education provides a ladder for low-income students to elevate to the middle class. Family income is an important determining factor in accessing higher education in South Africa. McCowan (2016) argues that the advantage/disadvantage accrued from the chance of one's birth in a particular social class should not be considered as fair grounds to allow/disallow a person from entering university.

The key strength of the book lies in the approach of reconceptualising learning outcomes to reflect equitable and inclusive higher education. The capability approach emphasises that learning outcomes should move beyond intellectual development. In this regard, learning outcomes should foster freedoms and opportunities that aim to improve equitable higher education for students from low-income backgrounds. The authors do this by demonstrating that the measurement of learning outcomes should focus on quality of learning outcomes and students' values rather than attaining a qualification to enhance human capital. One cannot dismiss the marketization of student learning outcomes since they fulfil the accountability principles of new managerialism.

The authors show that distribution of funding and resources remains a challenge in historically disadvantaged universities that host students from rural areas. Peripheral institutions which serve a diverse population of students are often disadvantaged concerning the distribution of funds and resources (Schendel & McCowan, 2016).

Therefore, inadequate resource allocation inhibits universities' ability to provide effective and targeted student support, particularly for low–income students. Universities furthermore lack the resources to ensure academic support programmes for students at risk (Jappie, 2020).

The book demonstrated the value of transitioning to the world of work and beyond using navigation capital. This aligns with the pressing issue of employment opportunities and employability. Graduates with a tertiary qualification have the highest unemployment rate (Statistics South Africa, 2022). The book draws attention to how the structural inequities within the labour market disadvantage students from low–income families even after they obtain a qualification. It is worth noting that limited opportunities within the labour market compel graduates to utilise their navigational capability to secure employment in uneven contexts. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have further affected employment prospects in a context characterised by the scarcity of formal employment opportunities.

The other strength of this book is that it has generated valuable theoretical insights that connect issues of access and equity for low–income students in higher education through the capability approach. The authors emphasise that social capital plays a key role in aiding these students to access and succeed despite the challenges they previously encountered as well as during university life. This timely book strives to contribute to the current debates on critical conversations concerning inclusive education and human development.

This book presents an opportunity for researchers to engage and advance knowledge on access to higher education, particularly for students from low–income backgrounds. The authors present an interesting approach to reconceptualising learning outcomes that promote social justice. Researchers in the field of higher education and policymakers will gain critical insights from reading this book. Universities would also appreciate the prospect of improving the access and participation of low–income students. This could be achieved through fostering equal student participation and reducing barriers that limit students from low–income backgrounds from accessing university education. Future investigation could possibly explore the measurement of the capability domains of the capability–based Miratho Matrix to determine how they contribute to inclusive higher education. This could possibly identify the necessary indicators to measure the contribution of these domains.

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Book review

#FeesMustFall and its aftermath: Violence, wellbeing and the student movement in South Africa by T. M. Luescher, A. Wilson Fadiji, K. G. Morwe, A. Erasmus, T. S. Letsoalo & S. B. Mokhema (2022). Cape Town, South Africa: HSRC Press.

Reviewed by Relebohile Moletsane*

In a period where university management and the public have labelled students and student activists as violent and not focused on their studies, the book *#FeesMustFall and its Aftermath: Violence, Wellbeing and the Student Movement in South Africa* (Luescher et al., 2022) is not only significant, but it is also timely. #FeesMustFall and other student campaigns in 2015 and 2016 across South Africa's higher education institutions reminded the university system of the need for relevance in programming, including curriculum and research. The book contributes to deepening our understanding of who our students are and what has shaped and continues to shape their experiences and outcomes in our institutions. The found poem below synthesises some of the themes and issues covered in *#FeesMustFall and its Aftermath.* Located within the broad area of poetic enquiry in which words from research transcripts or fieldnotes are used, a found poem uses the actual words of research participants to highlight the various messages or themes communicated in the piece (SAGE Research Methods, 2017). The poem is comprised of captions and comments from interviews with the participants cited in *#FeesMustFall and its Aftermath.*

> *Protest*
> *The battle of liberty or the epitome of violence?*
> *No retreat, no surrender*
> *No VIP in the revolution*
> *A betrayal of hope*
> *The calm before the storm*
> *Spirit of unwanted peace*
> *Strategic*
> *Conscientize and mobilize*
> *Walk for a just cause*
> *Mobilise, educate and strive*
> *For our wellbeing*

* Relebohile Moletsane is professor and the JL Dube Chair in Rural Education in the School of Education and Pro Vice Chancellor: Social Cohesion at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Email: Moletsaner@ukzn.ac.za.

Escape to safe spaces
Spaces of strength
Joyful rebellion
(Re)Chillaxing!

Presented in the form of a photo essay (Angelo et al., 2021), *#FeesMustFall and its Aftermath* is organised into 18 chapters that tell a story of "35 student activists from five South African universities and their experiences of violence and wellbeing in relation to their involvement in the student movement" (Luescher et al., 2022, p. 9). Hence, the book is a form of visual storytelling, made up of photographs that "operate as a form of collage… [of images that] aim not only to construct a comprehensible narrative and to communicate information, but also to achieve visual and emotional impact through editing and design" (Sutherland, 2016, p. 116). As the found poem above suggests, the photo essay presented in *#FeesMustFall and its aftermath* is made up of three sections, which the authors describe as three sets of exhibitions, each made up of several chapters.

In the first section, Chapter 1 introduces the notion of student well-being as a precondition for learning and success in university, especially for those students from poorly resourced communities and schools. The chapter locates the idea of student well-being within the broader decolonisation imperatives and debates currently occupying curricular and institutional reforms in South Africa. Chapter 2 introduces the project and the book, providing the rationale for its focus on violence, well-being, and the use of photovoice "as a mode of inquiry and representation, and as a mode of dissemination and engagement" (Mitchell, 2011, p. 5). The project and the book use the participants' photographs as both the methodology (Pink, 2001) and the subject of analysis, including their production and interpretation (Margolis, 2004). Concluding this section is Chapter 3, which focuses on the history of struggle in South Africa, juxtaposing the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements with the 1976 student protests against apartheid education legislation in South Africa.

The second section is made up of nine chapters (chapters 4–12) which document, through photovoice, poetry, and dialogue, the students' experiences of violence and its aftermath in the context of the 2015/16 #FeesMustFall protests. The issues documented range from oppressive spaces in and around universities or the geographies of the violence in the various universities (Chapter 4), the violence within the institutions (Chapter 5), and the students' activism in terms of conscientizing and mobilising others to act (Chapter 6). Chapter 8 analyses the #FeesMustFall protest and its links to violence, which notably contrasted with earlier movements that saw participants resort to stone/rock throwing (1976 anti-apartheid movement), littering (the late 1990s and early 2000s), and fire setting (burning buildings and other structures) as weapons. Chapter 9 outlines the project's methodology and mode of dissemination, focusing on the book as a photo essay and the travelling exhibition, in which the photographs produced by the students are curated and exhibited to raise awareness and facilitate dialogue in various universities across the country.

#FeesMustFall and its Aftermath makes a critical methodological contribution. The book draws from a research tradition which aims to study the world (of South African higher education) from the perspectives of students as a group most impacted by the phenomenon (Maclure, 1990), viewing them as knowers and actors in their own lives (Oakley, 1994). To do this, the project on which the book is based used participatory visual methodology (PVM) with 35 students across five South African universities to investigate their experiences and perspectives of "violence on university campuses and the impact this has on student wellbeing … and to create awareness in the public, in government and among higher education policymakers and university leaders to ensure that student grievances are taken seriously without the need for protesting" (Luescher, et al., 2022, p. 16). Located within community-based participatory research, PVM uses the visual artefact, in this case, photographs, produced by participants, in this case, university students, to co-construct knowledge, including around difficult and controversial topics such as violence and marginalisation safely, and together, imagine alternatives to the social phenomena negatively impacting their lives. Its basic assumption is that the people who experience the problem are in the best position to describe and analyse the issues or conduct research on the subject. This is based on the understanding that to improve the lives of marginal groups, such as students in universities, researchers must enlist alternative research paradigms, drawing on the participants' insights (Maclure, 1990). Importantly, with participatory research often functioning as an intervention, it makes it possible for researchers, working with participants to influence social change (Schratz & Walker, 1995).

Specifically, *#FeesMustFall and its Aftermath* and the project on which it is based use photovoice as a participatory visual method. Photovoice is often traced back to Paulo Freire's work in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed (*1970) and Caroline Wang's work which investigates the experiences of Chinese peasants working in rice paddies (Wang & Burris, 1997). Wang et al (2004, p. 911) argue that as "a participatory-action research methodology based on the understanding that people are experts on their own lives", photovoice involves placing cameras in the hands of the participants, particularly those who are often not listened to, such as students. The aim is to document their experiences and the influence of social phenomena (e.g. violence linked to student protests) in their lives. This enables them to tell stories that were "previously rejected, silenced, or overlooked … [with] the photograph's narrative becom[ing] a participatory site for wider storytelling, spurring community members to reflect, discuss, and analyse the issues that confront them" (Singhal & Devi, 2003, p. 7).

Therefore, using photovoice (and other arts-based methods such as poetry), the project and the book, *#FeesMustFall and its Aftermath*, aim to open up democratic spaces for participants and other students who bear witness through the exhibitions and the dialogues linked to them, and extend participant students agency through the process of telling their own stories as students in higher education institutions in South Africa. In the hope that policy- and decision makers at universities are compelled to confront these issues, since ignoring them when they are visually (through the images) in their

faces is harder to do. Thus, the book challenges higher education institutions to think seriously and creatively about what to do about violence, including structural, symbolic, and physical violence in and around institutions and the interventions needed to ensure the well-being and success of the students these institutions enrol. As Caroline Wang, pioneer of photo-voice, concluded,

> Images contribute to how the participants see themselves, how they define and relate to the world, and what they see as significant to address or change. The lesson an image teaches does not reside in its physical structures but rather in how people interpret the image in question. (Wang, 1999, p. 186)

Other chapters in the section include a focus on gender (and gender-based violence) within the student movement (Chapter 10), the fear and trauma instigated by intimidation, police (and private security company) brutality against protesting students (Chapter 11), and the negative outcomes of protests (Chapter 12).

The third section of the book responds to Schratz and Walker's (1995) notion of research as social change. Chapters in this section document how student activists and their allies advocated for change (Chapter 13), how they developed unity and solidarity among themselves and other students (Chapter 14), how they sought and nurtured their own and others' well-being (Chapter 15), and how they found escape from the violence and safe spaces to cope with its aftermath (Chapter 16). Challenging the widespread belief that student protests are simply violent undertakings with no real purpose and that students engage in them because they are not serious about their education, Chapter 17 documents the student movement as purposeful and students as active knowers and actors focused on achieving success in education and contributing to their own and others' well-being in the process.

Chapter 18 concludes the book and foregrounds the volume's contribution to scholarship, activism and social change in the South African higher education system. Using photovoice and other participatory research methods, *#FeesMustFall and its Aftermath* highlights the nature and manifestations of violence within the student protest movement in South Africa and its negative impacts on student well-being and success in their studies. Importantly, it is a call to action for student activists to find alternative ways of protest that do not involve violence, and for university and higher education system policymakers to understand, from the perspectives of the students themselves, the nature and influence of violence and strategies needed for social and curricular change, including the decolonisation of the university and its programmes. Through the images or the various sets of exhibitions and captions it presents, as a photo essay, the book "open[s] up dialogue and asks questions about the numerous forms of [violence] materiality and altered landscapes that the authors have chronicled" (Angelo et al., 2021, p. 154).

Finally, *#FeesMustFall and its Aftermath* raises the bar on methodological relevance and rigour in investigating students' experiences of violence and well-being in universities. The book generatively and creatively draws on and contributes to contemporary

theoretical thinking and empirical work on violence and student well–being in higher education institutions, such as the book, *Studying While Black*, by Swartz, Mahali et al. (2017), and their documentary, *Ready or Not! Black Students' Experiences of South African Universities*. Swartz and her colleagues also used photovoice and other arts–based methods (storytelling, video documentary) to document the experiences of black students in eight universities in South Africa. Their study concluded that skills and systemic change are needed to address inequality, including disparities among students linked to socio–economic class, race, gender and other markers of identity, and the exclusion, violence and exploitation many students experience in universities.

As such, it is a welcome contribution to the scholarship on student activism and violence and strategies needed to address its aftermath.

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CALL FOR PAPERS

Journal of Student Affairs in Africa, 2023, *JSAA* 11(1)

Ten Years of Research on Student Affairs in Africa – scholarship, theory, practice and reflection

In 2013, the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* launched with the double issue "The professionalization of Student Affairs in Africa". Three years later *JSAA* became formally accredited by the South African Department of Higher Education and Training as a subsidy-generating journal. Over the last ten years, the Journal has published ten volumes, twenty issues, and over 200 research articles, reflective practice articles, campus reports, and book reviews, which have been cited over 1275 times (as per Google Scholar, October 2022).

To commemorate the Journal's achievements and the decadal milestone, the Editorial Executive of the *JSAA* calls for papers that take stock of the last ten years of research, scholarship, theory and practice reflection, and publication on Student Affairs in Africa. Through the tenth anniversary we seek papers that will analyse changes in the profession and its professionalization in Africa; and reflect on the emergence of this domain. In essence, we asks the question, where is African Student Affairs in 2023?

Articles for this commemorative anniversary issue of *JSAA* may be theoretical, empirical and case studies, or practice-relevant reflective contributions. They may deal with Student Affairs in Africa or beyond, Student Affairs as a profession in Africa or in a comparative framework, and with any specific aspect related to the profession, professionalization, and professionalism. Contributions may want to engage with the ten-year theme particularly by referring to trends over time, the status quo, or compare developments in different contexts over time. More particularly, we invite articles on the following:

- Critical contributions engaging with the notions of profession, professionalization, and professionalism, their meanings in relation to the practice of Student Affairs, changes thereof, and related processes and developments within Africa
- Explorations of the nexus of Student Affairs theory, policy and practice in the African context
- Explorations of professional trends, professional development and academic programmes and qualifications related to Student Affairs in Africa and beyond
- Critical analyses of the Student Affairs profession in the African context, including critical contributions that employ decolonial, intersectional, and Fallist lenses
- High level reflective practitioner accounts that make a contribution to understanding the profession within the African context

We also welcome papers that specifically deal with *JSAA* per se such as articles that examine the articles published in the *JSAA* over the last ten years and analyse them thematically or in terms of the services and functions they refer to, their scope, theoretical framework, methodology, and so forth, or their authorship, use/citations, and references. The Editors will be able to provide full datasets of the articles to interested researchers.

About JSAA

JSAA is an independent, peer-reviewed, multi-disciplinary, open access academic journal that publishes scholarly research and reflective discussions about the theory and practice of Student Affairs in African higher education. *JSAA* is published twice a year by the *JSAA* Editorial Executive in collaboration with the University of Pretoria and African Minds (publisher). The journal is full-text hosted on the website of the University of Pretoria at https://upjournals.up.ac.za/index.php/jsaa, as well as co-hosted by AJOL, DOAJ, and ERIC, and indexed in international indices including BASE, InfoBase Index, WorldCat Libraries, Sherpa/Romeo, and Google Scholar. *JSAA* has an IBI Factor of 2.2 (2019).

JSAA is accredited by the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) as a subsidy-earning journal on the SA list of scholarly journals. Authors publish free of charge; there are no processing or page fees.

Submission process and important dates

Submission of full papers to the *JSAA* journal management system by:	31 January 2023
Response from editors/vetting process to authors:	28 February 2023
Submission of revisions 1 from authors:	31 March 2023
Peer review process:	April 2023
Submission of final corrected manuscripts (revisions 2) from authors:	31 May 2023
Publication of *JSAA* Vol. 11, Issue 1:	31 July 2023

JSAA uses APA7 referencing style. Please consult the *JSAA* Author Guidelines for information about formatting etc. https://upjournals.up.ac.za/index.php/jsaa/about/submissions

To submit your paper please register and submit at https://upjournals.up.ac.za/index.php/jsaa

Please direct any queries to:

Prof. Teboho Moja, teboho.moja@nyu.edu
Prof. Thierry Luescher, tluescher@hsrc.ac.za
Dr Birgit Schreiber, birgitdewes@gmail.com

Journal of Student Affairs in Africa (JSAA) 2023

Towards Engaged and Student-Centred African Universities

Guest editors:
Prof. Thierry M. Luescher (HSRC/NMU) & Dr Somarie Holtzhausen (UFS)
in collaboration with Prof. Andre Keet (NMU) & Dr Bernadette Johnson (WITS)

How does an engaged, student-centred African university look? What theories and practices, implicit and explicit, are characteristic of engaged, student-centred universities relevant to the African context?

In the context of the ongoing expansion of higher education in South Africa and Africa, student interventions to advance transformation and decolonisation, and the recent experience of the Covid-19 pandemic, disruption, innovation, and complexity have greatly intensified in higher education. The increasingly hy-flex provision of education further requires the centring of students and student support and other aspects of student success; it places technology-based learning and development in the spotlight and at the centre of the university; and it prompts a renewed commitment to the social responsiveness of the university, its embeddedness within local communities, anchoring role in its location, and overall progressive role in advancing development and social justice. Understanding how these complex demands involved in notions of engagement and student-centredness interact with the leadership and management of universities, Student Affairs, and student development and success, what critical interventions and concrete experiences have been observed, and how they may be relevant to the development of engaged and student-centred African universities, are crucial dimensions of the current conversation in Student Affairs in Africa.

This guest-edited issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa (JSAA)* is edited and published in association with Universities South Africa (USAf) and the South African Council on Higher Education (CHE). The issue builds on the joint USAf/CHE National Higher Education Conferences of 2021 and 2022. The USAf/CHE National Higher Education Conference of October 2021 focused on "The Engaged University" and for 2022, the USAf/CHE Higher Education Conference focused on "Student-centred Higher Education". The proposed *JSAA* guest-edited issue will source papers primarily, but not only, from the two USAf/CHE conferences. Other research-based papers that fit the topic of the guest-edited issue will also be considered.

The papers for the *JSAA* guest-edited issue may be theoretical, empirical and case studies or practice-relevant reflective contributions broadly dealing with the Student Affairs and relevant dimensions of university community engagement and student-

centredness. The following provides a select list of Student Affairs topics within the scope of this *JSAA* issue:

- Student civic engagement, volunteerism, give-back
- Community engagement, social responsiveness, university anchoring
- Citizenship development, student leadership development, student movement
- Student governance, student organisations, student life
- Career development, entrepreneurship development
- Student development theory, student engagement, student experiences
- Higher education funding, student finances and financial aid
- Student communities, student living and learning
- Disability, diversity and inclusion
- Equity and social and epistemological access
- Student life cycle, student orientation, student transitions, transitions to livelihoods

Furthermore, the editors invite contributions that particularly advance African theory development and practice-relevant knowledge of Student Affairs in Africa with respect to:

- Critical and theorical explorations and engagements with the notions of the African university, community engagement, student-centredness, and related notions
- Decolonial, intersectional, and Fallist deconstructions and critiques of, and contributions to notions of engagement, student-centredness, the African university, social responsiveness, community engagement and related notions.

About JSAA

JSAA is an independent, peer-reviewed, multi-disciplinary, open access academic journal that publishes scholarly research and reflective discussions about the theory and practice of Student Affairs in African higher education. *JSAA* is published twice a year by the *JSAA* Editorial Executive in collaboration with the University of Pretoria and African Minds (publisher). The journal is full-text hosted on the website of the University of Pretoria at https://upjournals.up.ac.za/index.php/jsaa, as well as co-hosted by AJOL, DOAJ, and ERIC, and indexed in international indices including BASE, InfoBase Index, WorldCat Libraries, Sherpa/Romeo, and Google Scholar. *JSAA* has an IBI Factor of 2.2 (2019).

JSAA is accredited by the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) as a subsidy-earning journal on the SA list of scholarly journals. Authors publish free of charge; there are no processing or page fees.

Submission process and important dates

Abstract proposals (ca. 500 words):	28 February 2023
Response on abstracts to authors:	31 March 2023
Full papers due for editorial vetting and peer review:	15 June 2023
Responses from editors/peer review process:	15 June – 31 July 2023
Revisions from authors:	31 August 2023
Galley proofs:	15 November 23
Publication of guest–edited issue (*JSAA* Vol. 11, Issue 2):	December 2023

JSAA uses APA7 referencing style. Please consult the *JSAA* Author Guidelines for information about formatting etc. https://upjournals.up.ac.za/index.php/jsaa/about/submissions

Please direct any queries and submit abstracts by email to:

   Dr Somarie Holtzhausen, holtzhsm@ufs.ac.za

CALL FOR PAPERS

Globalisation, Societies and Education Special Issue: Student activism, translocality, and social justice

Guest editors:
Gritt B. Nielsen* and Thierry M. Luescher**

In many countries and universities, students engage in activities to promote social justice through inclusion, diversity, epistemic freedom and decolonisation, paying renewed attention to intersectionalities of race/ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality. In this special issue, we seek to focus on the *translocal* dimensions of student activism for equality and greater social justice. We understand 'activism' quite broadly to include student-led activities − ranging from small-scale mundane initiatives to large-scale protest events − that aim to change everyday life, practices or norms at the university and beyond. Students' activist engagement is often shaped in and through translocal/ transnational/international/global spaces in which geo-political imaginaries, academic theories, actionable knowledge or symbols, hashtags, materiality and people circulate and move across socio-political contexts. Struggles are connected across multiple scales, and partially common worlds and horizons are created.

Furthermore, public debates and political interpretations of student engagement for social justice also tend to be shaped in and through translocal spaces. Student activism in one country is compared to and understood in light of the political situation elsewhere, giving rise to political pressure or decisions that can restrict or encourage student political engagement in different ways.

This special issue offers an opportunity to explore the multiple ways in which translocal interconnectivities work to shape students' political engagement to promote social justice within their universities and/or society writ large.

There is a growing literature on *transnational* social movements, although literature on *student* movements tends to focus historically and currently on the national scale and/or on campus level activism. Similarly, while there is a growing literature on the role of the internet and social media in creating and sustaining translocal networks and solidarities in the form of networked social movements, thus facilitating translocal connective political action, literature on internet-age networked student movements

*   Prof. Gritt B. Nielsen is Associate Professor in Educational Anthropology and Globalisation, DPU Danish School of Education, Aarhus University, Denmark. Email: gbn@edu.au.dk

**   Prof. Thierry Luescher is Strategic Lead in the Human Sciences Research Council, Cape Town, Adjunct Professor in the Chair of Critical Studies in Higher Education Transformation, Nelson Mandela University, and a Research Fellow in Higher Education at the University of the Free State, South Africa. Email: tluescher@hsrc.ac.za

such as #FeesMustFall remains scant. Further analysis is also needed of the translocal dimensions of the more subtle forms of students' everyday activism, including the ways in which negotiations over use of language or particular practices resonate with or are shaped by, for example, wider social movements, international academic literature or public debates.

We invite contributions based on original empirical research that discuss the translocal dimensions of students' political engagement. This can include, but is not restricted to, analyses of student activism in relation to:

- The role of social media, e.g. hashtag movements and campaigns, that resonate across institutional/national/local contexts
- Questions of epistemic (in)justice and how knowledge/curriculum is negotiated in relation to e.g. national/international/global contexts or standards
- The production of socio-political imaginaries and horizons (e.g. decolonial, anti-racist, anti-wokeist)
- Converging transnational social movements, including Black Lives Matter and #MeToo
- The shaping of policies, reforms, public debates within and across specific contexts.
- The incorporation/negotiation of particular kinds of vocabulary/ phrases/ languages that relate to a wider translocal (e.g. cultural, political, historical) context

Submissions can also engage in conceptual discussions and theorisation of the role of translocal interconnections in student movements, moving beyond dichotomies of global–local to concepts like global forms and assemblages, translocal/transnational, networks, diffusion, scale shift, internalization/externalization, scaling, worlding, resonance.

Submission process and important dates

Abstract deadline: 15 December 2022
Manuscript deadline: 15 June 2023

For details please contact the editors after you have consulted the journal website at: https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/cgse20.

Thank you to our reviewers and editors

The JSAA Editorial Executive wishes to thank the peer reviewers and editors of Volume 10 of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* for their time and expertise in evaluating and helping to select and improve the submissions received:

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Alina Pap	Birgit Schreiber
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Publications by African Minds

(u)Mzantsi Classics: Dialogues in Decolonisation from Southern Africa

Edited by Samantha Masters,
Imkhitha Nzungu and Grant Parker (2022)
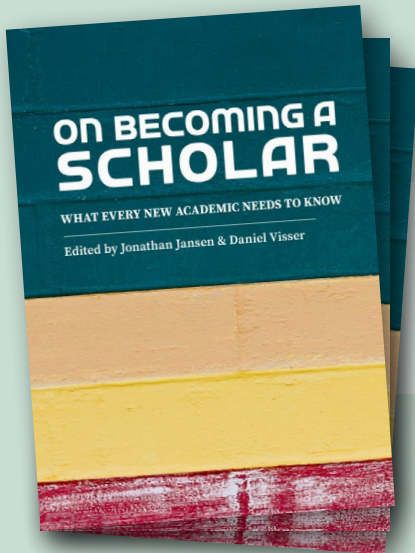
On Becoming a Scholar: What Every New Academic Needs to Know

Edited by Jonathan Jansen and Daniel Visser (2022)

Who Counts? Ghanaian Academic Publishing and Global Science

David Mills, Patricia Kingori, Abigail Branford, Samuel T. Chatio, Natasha Robinson and Paulina Tindana (2022)

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Submissions

Please register as an author and read the Author Guidelines at https://upjournals.up.ac.za/index. php/jsaa. Submissions must be made on the online system at https://upjournals.up.ac.za/index. php/jsaa. For information and help, please contact the Journal Manager, Ms Bronwin Sebonka at bronwin.sebonka@up.ac.za. Submissions in response to special calls for papers must also be made directly to the guest editors concerned (see Call for Papers).

The *JSAA* typically has themed issues. However, submissions that fall within the general scope and focus of the Journal can be made at any time and may be published irrespective of the overall theme of the Journal. Particularly encouraged are open-theme manuscripts that address the following:

- Case studies of innovative practices in student affairs in the context of African higher education (e.g. student lifecycle, orientation, residence management, student governance, student counselling).
- High-level reflective practitioner accounts.
- Explorations of the nexus of student affairs theory, policy and practice in the African context and beyond.
- Conceptual discussions of student development, and key enablers and inhibitors of student development in Africa.
- Explorations of authoritative literature, theory and professional trends related to student affairs in Africa.

Please note that there are different requirements for different types of manuscripts:

- **Research articles:** Contributors are encouraged to submit research-based manuscripts. Research articles must include an extensive consideration of recent literature and relevant theory. Research-based articles must be original and research-based and must make a significant conceptual (or empirical or normative) contribution relevant to the scope and focus of the *JSAA*. The length must be approximately 5 000 words, including all references, notes, tables and figures. Manuscripts should be accompanied by an abstract of approximately 150–300 words.
- **Reflective practitioner accounts:** High-quality reports on professional campus practice are screened and reviewed according to the same criteria as for research articles, albeit with a different emphasis. Unlike a research article, they do not need to include an extensive consideration of recent literature and theory, but they must nonetheless comply with standard academic convention and scholarly practice. Reflective practitioner articles must be original, must make a significant empirical contribution, and must significantly enhance our understanding of student affairs practice within their respective scope and focus. Typical length should be 2 500–5 000 words. Manuscripts should be accompanied by an abstract of approximately 150–300 words.
- **Book reviews** should be between 800 and 1 000 words in length. Competent reviews of key student affairs books are published at the discretion of the Editorial Executive.
- **Comments and critique**, of no more than 2 500 words, are also welcome.
- **Proposal for the Journal's Dialogue/Interview section and Calls and Notices** should be emailed directly to the Journal Manager. The publication of calls and notices (for conferences, vacancies, etc.) may incur a nominal fee.

Authors are required to check their submission's compliance with all of the following items, and submissions that do not adhere to these guidelines may be returned to authors.

1. The ethical requirements of social research have been considered and fully complied with.
2. The submission has not been previously published, nor is it before another journal for consideration (or an explanation has been provided in Comments to the Editor).
3. The submission file is in MS Word, OpenOffice, or RTF document file format.
4. The text is double-spaced; uses a 12-point font; employs italics rather than underlining (except with URL addresses); and all illustrations, figures and tables are placed within the text at the appropriate points, rather than at the end.

5. The text adheres to the stylistic and bibliographic requirements outlined on the Journal's website.
6. The Journal uses the APA author–date referencing system.
7. If submitting to a peer-reviewed section of the Journal, i.e. as a research article or reflective practiner account, the instructions in Ensuring a Blind Peer Review must have been followed.
8. If submitting a proposal for the Dialogue section, a Call/Notice, or a Comment/Critique, this should be emailed directly to the Journal Manager.
9. The final text of the article has been professionally edited and proofread prior to submission.
10. The front page of the manuscript indicates the Section under which it is proposed that the article be published, i.e. Research Article (peer-reviewed); Reflective Practice (peer-reviewed); or Book Reviews/Dialogues/other contributions.
11. Permission to reproduce any copyrighted material has been obtained and can be produced should this be requested by the Editorial Excecutive.

Section review policy and process

The *JSAA* publishes research articles (peer-reviewed); high-quality reflective practitioner accounts (peer-reviewed); dialogues/interviews (non-reviewed); and book reviews (non-reviewed). The Journal is committed to assisting emerging scholars and professionals in developing promising manuscripts to the point of publication.

Editorial commentary
☐ Open submissions   ☑ Indexed   ☐ Peer reviewed

Research articles and professional practitioner accounts
☑ Open submissions   ☑ Indexed   ☑ Peer reviewed

Campus dialogue/interview section
☑ Open submissions   ☑ Indexed   ☐ Peer reviewed

Book reviews
☑ Open submissions   ☑ Indexed   ☐ Peer reviewed

The editorial and peer–review policy adheres to the *ASSAf National Code of Best Practice in Editorial Discretion and Peer Review for South African Scholarly Journals* (ASSAf Council, 2008). All submitted manuscripts undergo an initial careful examination by the Editorial Executive to ensure that authors' submissions fall within the mission, scope and focus of the *JSAA* and conform to scholarly best practice. Qualifying scholarly research-based articles and high-quality, relevant reflective practitioner accounts are blind-reviewed by at least two peer reviewers, who would typically be members of the International Editorial Advisory Board of the *JSAA*. Peer reviewers have proven scholarly and/or professional expertise in the subject matter of a manuscript. Reviewer reports are assessed by a member of the Editorial Executive and form the basis of any decision by the Editorial Executive on how to proceed with a manuscript. The suitability of a manuscript is evaluated in terms of originality, significance, scholarship and adherence to the requirements of ethical social research, scope and interest, and accessibility.

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