Journal of Student Affairs in Africa

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Living communities

AFRICAN SUN MEDIA
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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 policy makers, 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.

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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. Submit by email to: jsaa_editor@outlook.com.

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Editorial team

Congratulations to Prof. Teboho Moja

Our Editor-in-chief, Prof. Teboho Moja, honoured with NRF Lifetime Achievement Award, a Women in International Education award and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Faculty Award (NYU)

It is with great joy and pride that we announce that the Editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (*JSAA*) has been honoured by the South African National Research Foundation (NRF) with the 2019 Lifetime Achievement Award. This is a highly prestigious award and we congratulate Prof. Moja for this deserved acknowledgement of her contributions to research and policy on higher education in Africa. For a narrative of the incredible contributions Prof. Moja has made to South African and African development, please see the NRF video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29Io49DdBgE

In addition, our Editor-in-chief and Professor of Higher Education, Teboho Moja, was named Teacher/Academic Director of the Year at the Women in International Education (WIE) Awards in Berlin on 2 November 2019, sponsored by the Accreditation Service for International Schools, Colleges and Universities. This award celebrates the achievements of inspirational women and aims to inspire confidence and to facilitate more women into positions of leadership.

Prof. Moja has also been recognised with the Martin Luther King, Jr. Faculty Award by the New York University for her outstanding teaching and publishing in the field of Higher Education Leadership.

A most heartfelt congratulations from the editors of the *JSAA*!

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Editorial

Living Communities

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

We want to open this issue with special aknowledgement of Prof. Teboho Moja, our Editor-in-chief, who has been recognised and esteemed with a number of national and international awards. Prof. Moja has been honoured in 2019 with the South African National Research Foundation's Lifetime Achievement Award, the Women in International Education Award as Teacher/Academic Director of the Year, and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Faculty Award.

Prof. Moja has committed her career and life to the development of higher education with special focus on South Africa and Africa. She has been absolutely instrumental in strengthening Student Affairs in Africa as a field of knowledge and as a practice domain. All the editors, reviewers and authors who have published in the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (*JSAA*) have benefitted from her guidance, vision and encouragement and we continue to be grateful for her tireless contributions to higher education in Africa.

Most open access academic publications, and particularly open access academic journals that publish following a regular schedule, face the challenge of securing sufficient funding to finance the basic processes for publication. The *JSAA* is intentionally open access – for both readers and authors – which means there are neither page fees for publishing nor fees for accessing our articles. We deliberately designed our journal publishing model in this way from the inception of the journal in 2013 as we want to promote wide and open access by and from our readers and authors. It is obvious that financial sustainability is this model's weakness, hence we are always grateful to the sponsors of special issues and to our host institution for supporting the publishing costs of open submission issues.

This issue was generously supported by the Division Student Affairs, Stellenbosch University, with special support by the Senior Director Student Affairs, Dr Choice Makhetha.

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We are grateful for sharing our vision for the professionalisation of Student Affairs in Africa and her unconditional support of the journal.

We are also grateful for the enthusiastic contribution of our Journal Manager, Maretha Joyce, who has taken on the pre-publishing aspect of the work. She is supported by Stellenbosch University and we are grateful for this support. Again, sustainability is an area that the *JSAA* will need to consider much more critically in the future.

In this issue

Three themes are the focus of this issue of the *JSAA*, all within the core focus areas of Student Affairs and Services as understood across the globe. The first theme is student residences and student living communities, and how residences policy, and living and learning experiences play a role in institutional and student success. The second theme is the focus on disability in higher education, and the third is the experience of first-year students and their adjustment to the new challenges in higher education and the political pressures on campus. The articles present a collective theme on the importance of Student Affairs in shaping an environment that is conducive to institutional and student success.

This issue illustrates that it is not one approach or one intervention that creates a change in status quo, but a joint and collaborative approach and a systemic understanding of what makes a successful or less successful living and learning environment. This is a finding that has repeatedly been made in past articles published in *JSAA*. In this issue, Groenewald and Fourie-Malherbe emphasise a 'holistic and integrated' approach to make a difference in the living and learning environments when it is conceived as the partner site to in-classroom learning. They emphasise that a holistic approach is as much about a skill set and relevant competencies of staff as it is about the essential nature, the 'being', of staff and of the institution. Xulu-Gama, in the second article, employs an ethnographic methodology to conclude along similar lines of Groenewald and Fourie-Malherbe, namely that the "strategic positioning of student housing in building sustainable communities of living and learning uncovers the often not-so-obvious connections between academic success and students' socioeconomic backgrounds and their psycho-social issues", which emphasises the influences within the broader context as contributing towards a holistic understanding of the factors which impact on success.

The next four articles focus on various aspects of disability and jointly argue for the value of learning communities as supporting agency and participation in the learning process of students with unique needs. The voices of students, in the qualitative articles, speak for themselves when they point out the subjective experience and sense-making in the living and learning context for students with different needs. What is particularly interesting about this section is that we have articles from South Africa (including Venda) and Zambia, bringing a unique richness to the discussion of this theme from across Africa.

The next two articles on particular experiences of first-year students focus, on the one hand, on intervention frameworks and, on the other, on the subjective adjustment aspect of first-year students. The article on the political climate on Ghanaian campuses concludes our set of research articles.

The issue is rounded off with a wonderfully rich review by Vicki Trowler of the book, *Decolonisation in Universities: The Politics of Knowledge,* edited by Jonathan Jansen and published in 2019 by Wits University Press.

We wish the readers of this issue much enjoyment and use of the articles, and thank all our reviewers who have contributed tirelessly with very helpful and developmental reviews.

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Research article

Residence Heads as Intentional Role-Players in Promoting Student Success

Johan Groenewald* & Magda Fourie-Malherbe**

Abstract

Research evidence suggests that approaches to promote student success in higher education are becoming more holistic and integrated in nature. This implies that not only classrooms and laboratories, but also residences, as informal out-of-class learning environments, can potentially contribute significantly to promoting student success. The research question we sought to answer is: what is the preferred role and skill sets of residence heads that will enable them to promote student success? In order to answer this question, the study proposes a student success framework with five levels, and the role of the future residence head is explicated in terms of this framework. The findings of the study are significant as they suggest a practical skill set, underpinned by sound theory, for residence heads to contribute to student success.

Keywords

blended higher education roles; educational mindset; residence heads; residence heads' skill sets; student affairs; student success levels

Introduction

Massification and democratisation have become defining characteristics of higher education (HE) systems across the globe (Mohamedbhai, 2008; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002; Strydom, 2002; Teichler, 2001; Vaira, 2004). Widened access and the concomitant increasing diversity in student populations have, however, put student success under pressure. Improving undergraduate student throughput and completion rates has become one of the major challenges that HE education institutions are grappling with (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges & Hayek, 2007). Furthermore, our understanding of student success is evolving to the extent that it is increasingly being defined as more than the acquisition of classroom knowledge (Hamrick, Evans & Schuh, 2002). We now acknowledge that student learning occurs continuously and in different places (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), leading to a more holistic view of student learning. This broadened notion of student learning and student success underpinned our study into the role of residence heads in promoting student success.

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Residence heads have traditionally been regarded as "house mothers" or "house fathers", playing an *in loco parentis* role (Blimling, 2015). This view of the role of the residence head – and of residences – personifies what we call "an accommodation mindset". Currently, the accommodation mindset that considers residence heads as merely managers of "beds where students sleep" is still the reigning one in HE in many countries, including HE institutions across Africa (Wahl, 2013). Hence, the potential educational role of residence heads is often overlooked.

Against this background, this article presents the findings of a case study done at one residential higher education institution in South Africa regarding the role that residence heads could play in promoting student success. The research question for this study was: what is the preferred role of and skill sets required by residence heads to promote student success? This problem is complex, systemic and equivocal; hence, Interactive Qualitative Analysis (IQA), which adopts a systems perspective, was selected as an appropriate research method (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004). This involved gathering data through focus groups and personal interviews with mostly purposively sampled populations of students and staff of the case university.

As backdrop for the empirical investigation, a brief overview of the background to the research problem is given. This includes massification of HE, particularly in Africa, and the development of residential education, together with a more detailed discussion of the residential education context of the case university.

Massification of Higher Education and its Impact on African Universities

The growth of HE systems from elite to mass systems has gathered momentum during the latter half of the 20th century (Dobson, 2001; Mohamedbhai, 2008, p. 6). In the 1970s, Trow (cited in Teichler, 2013, p. 309) distinguished three types of HE systems, depending on the participation rates of the 18- to 24-year-old age group: elite systems, serving up to 15% of the respective age group; massified systems, serving more or less 20-30% of 18- to 24-year-olds; and universal HE when student participation in HE surpasses 50% of the respective age group. Currently all three types of systems exist globally, with the USA, Japan and Western Europe having achieved universal HE, and many African countries, with low participation rates in HE, still having elite HE systems.

Whereas universities have traditionally been regarded as institutions of higher learning upholding high standards of academic excellence (Kivinen & Kaipainen, 2002), massification is posing challenges to these high standards and to the conception of student success in HE (Fraser & Killen, 2005). The increase in the number and diversity of students has led to various notions of student success. It has also led to diversification in the types of HE institutions required to address the varying learning needs of a more diverse student body.

Most African universities were established in the colonial era as elite residential HE institutions (Mohamedbhai, 2008). Currently, many of these residential universities have neither the capacity nor the resources to deal effectively with larger numbers of students

(Jansen, Pretorius & Van Niekerk, 2009; Teferra & Altbach, 2004). Mohamedbhai (2008) posits that the victims of massification in African HE are primarily the students themselves, and their success, or lack thereof, as they are often faced with overcrowded undergraduate facilities, including residential facilities.

Student Housing and Residential Education in South African Higher Education

South African universities, although in some cases better resourced, share many of the same problems as their counterparts on the African continent, including increasing enrolments, overcrowded facilities and lack of funding for infrastructure development. These difficulties often have a profound impact on student accommodation. Yet, a literature search revealed that research and published studies on student housing and residential education in South African HE are scant. A notable exception is the *Report on the Ministerial Committee for the Review of the Provision of Student Housing at South African Universities* (DHET, 2011). A shortage of student accommodation was clearly indicated in the report, which revealed that student accommodation capacity at HE institutions catered for around 20% of student enrolments. In addition, the conditions of student housing, especially at universities in rural and poor areas, did not meet minimum standards to provide accessible, decent and safe accommodation to students in order to foster academic success. This flies in the face of international research findings demonstrating that students in residences display greater persistence towards graduation than students in off-campus housing (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005); hence, the emphasis of the DHET report on the importance of sufficient and well-managed student accommodation. In addition, the report (DHET, 2011) recommended further research on the impact of residence life on students. Recommendations from this ministerial report led to the drafting of the 'Policy on the Minimum Norms and Standards for Student Housing at Public Higher Education Institutions' (*Government Gazette*, 2015). Amongst other things, this policy highlights the importance of the professional development of student housing staff, by indicating that "[t]he ongoing professional development of student housing staff must be encouraged by both universities and private housing providers" (*Government Gazette*, 2015, p. 9).

In addition to in-house professional development activities at the institutional level, at the national level, this policy expectation with regard to the ongoing professional development of student housing staff is currently being responded to by the Association of College and University Housing Officers – International South African Chapter (ACUHO-I SAC). This association plays a key role in addressing the demand for professional training in student housing in South African HE (Dunn & Dunkel, 2013), especially of residence heads. ACUHO-I SAC established the first Student Housing Training Institute (SHTI) in South Africa at Stellenbosch University (SU) in 2011. Since then the SHTI has been offering annual training sessions for the professionalisation and competency development of student housing officials, including residence heads. Between 40 and 60 professionals per annum have been trained since 2011 (Dunn & Dunkel, 2013).

At an ACUHO-I SAC forum in September 2010 chief housing officers from the majority of South African public universities completed a survey to determine the most important competencies needed in the South African student housing context. The top 10 competencies identified were:

(a) application of technology;
(b) budget development and resource allocation;
(c) facilities management;
(d) personnel management;
(e) strategic thinking and planning;
(f) policy development and interpretation;
(g) professional development;
(h) assessment of student needs and interests;
(i) knowledge of student affairs functions; and
(j) knowledge of student development theory (Dunn & Dunkel, 2013, p. 71).

Only two of the aforementioned competencies (assessment of student needs and interests, and knowledge of student development theory) actually focus on the educational role of the residence head. This is particularly disquieting, given the potential of student residences to contribute to student success, as research has shown that living in a residence contributes to retention of students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). A paradigm shift amongst policymakers and student housing professionals alike seems to be required for an understanding of the importance of professional training of residence heads in order for them to promote student success holistically.

The acknowledgement of the contribution that student housing can make to student success, and the importance of well-equipped student housing professionals to facilitate this, supports the principles of Residential Education (ResEd). ResEd, which has been widely adopted at several universities in the USA, is a holistic approach towards intentionally promoting student learning and student success in residences (Blimling, 2015). In South Africa, Stellenbosch University (SU), having adopted a ResEd paradigm, has been acting on this imperative to utilise residential spaces for educational purposes for the past 11 years.

Residential Education at Stellenbosch University (SU)

The residential experience at SU has long been a major drawcard of the institution. The expansion in student numbers has, however, resulted in a decreasing proportion of the student body being accommodated in university residences: currently only about 24% of the student population are in university residences. This has made places in residences even more sought after.

An overview of SU residences (SU, 2019) reveals that the majority of residences are traditional, gender-specific residences, while the newer residences, such as Ubuntu House, Nkosi Johnson House and Russel Botman House, provide for more inclusive, multi-racial and multi-gender residence communities.

Since 2007, an intentional education engagement approach has been promoted in SU residences through the establishment of the ResEd programme. The aim of this

programme is to ensure that every activity in residences, whether sport, culture, or social in nature, contributes to nurturing healthy, values-driven student communities. The ResEd programme commences soon after the annual election of the various leaders in residences. During the next few months, residence heads engage with student leaders in activities such as individual and group conversations at leadership camps, and residence house meetings, to promote a values-driven student residence community approach (CSC, 2012a, 2012b, 2014; Kloppers, 2015; SU Vice-Rector Teaching, 2012). Furthermore, throughout the year, residence heads intentionally engage with students on their journey towards developing as well-rounded individuals and, through the activities and conversations within the residence, they assist students in building flourishing student communities.

However, the lack of sufficient scholarly literature and research data on residential education is a limiting factor in developing and implementing innovation and improvement in this field. There is a particular need for studies on the preferred role of the residence head in the South African context; hence, the importance of this research. The rationale for this case study research on the role of the residence head at SU in promoting student success, was that it could provide valuable insights into and guidelines towards promoting student success through residential education on a macro scale in South African HE.

Conceptual Framework

A comprehensive literature review on student learning theory, student success factors and residential education led to the development of a five-level student success framework as a heuristic, bringing together the educational skill set and theoretical knowledge required by residence heads to effectively play an intentional educational and leadership role that will optimise student success at each of the five levels. These conceptualised student success levels increase in depth and complexity as the levels progress, with Student Success Level 4 (see SSL4 in Table 1) being the ultimate and preferred Student Success Level (SSL). This conceptual student success framework is an attempt to assist residence heads in understanding the complexity of factors influencing student success, preparing them for their roles in optimising residence environments for promoting such success. The theories linked to each of the student success levels give further depth to the framework. These theories provide greater conceptual clarity, enabling residence heads to fully understand each student success level. Each of the theories in the framework has been extensively applied in previous studies.

However, for the purpose of this study, they were reorganised to form an integrated whole. The five proposed student success levels are:

- Student Success Level 0 (SSL0), which focuses on student access into HE;
- Student Success Level 1 (SSL1), which focuses on student retention;
- Student Success Level 2 (SSL2), which focuses on student persistence towards graduation;
- Student Success Level 3 (SSL3), which focuses on student engagement; and
- Student Success Level 4 (SSL4), which focuses on enhancement of graduate attributes towards employability.

Table 1: Educational skill set required by residence heads to promote student success at various levels (SSL)

SSL	Theory	Theoretical understanding required	Educational skill set required
SSL0	Validation (Rendón, 1994)	Validation increases the students' sense of self-worth and the conviction that they are capable of learning and can succeed.	Inspire: *using motivational speeches/conversations to create welcoming residential environments*
SSL1	Interaction (Tinto, 1982)	When students interact on a healthy basis, socially and academically, they integrate optimally into the student community and are more likely to succeed.	Mentor: *creating opportunities for students' social and academic interaction*
SSL2	Involvement (Astin,1984) Environmental causal (Pascarella, 1985)	When students are involved in the input to their learning experiences, taking their environment into consideration, the output in terms of learning is higher. Better persistence towards graduation is seen.	Manage: *deliberately structuring involvement opportunities*
SSL3	Student engagement (Kuh, 1995)	Engaging students in real problems that provide collaborative learning opportunities creates opportunities for deep learning resulting in student success.	Facilitate: *encouraging collaborative learning and multicultural conversations*
SSL4	Integrated and holistic learning processes (Bronfenbrenner, 1995)	For holistic development and learning students must engage and interact with their environment over a period of time to contribute to the attainment of appropriate graduate attributes.	Coach: *enabling student leadership through research and innovation*

The role of the residence head and the challenge in promoting success in each of the levels is explained as follows:

Inspire – Educational skill set required for SSL0: The residence head should continuously inspire and motivate students, regardless of their background or educational preparedness. For the residence head, being inspirational and assuming an intentional educational role on SSL0, the validation theory is presented as theoretical underpinning (Rendón, 1994). The challenge of this SSL is whether the residence head is able to inspire students. Understanding the validation theory will increase the residence head's capacity to inspire the students' sense of self-worth and the conviction that they are capable of learning and can succeed, especially in the case of first-generation students.

Mentor – Educational skill set required for SSL1: The residence head should provide mentorship and create networking opportunities for students to enhance healthy social and academic student interactions. The residence head should understand the interaction theory (Tinto, 1982) with a view to being a mentor to enhance student retention. Residence communities provide opportunities for social and academic integration which, in turn, enhance retention of students. Interactions are mostly on an informal basis, which allow for interpersonal and intrapersonal interaction. Residence heads should encourage and create opportunities for the student community to interact both socially and academically. Tinto (1982) indicated the importance of social integration before academic integration; the residence environment could be conducive to both kinds of integration. The challenge for the residence head on this level is time constraints. Many of these informal interactions take place after normal office hours. The challenge therefore is that residence heads do not always have the time to mentor towards SSL1.

Manage – Educational skill set required for SSL2: SSL2 focuses on student persistence. Understanding the involvement theory (Astin, 1984) and environment causal theory (Pascarella, 1985) will enable the residence head to structure involvement opportunities that will enhance persistence towards graduation. According to Astin (1984), students can incidentally interact socially or academically in the residence environment without really being involved. Astin (1984) proposed the student involvement theory as a theory for practical student development. According to the theory, involved students spend a substantial amount of time on campus, participate in student organisations and interact regularly with faculty members and other students. Achieving SSL2 student involvement could be challenging for residence heads seeing that residence structures are not all similar and optimal to enable such effective student involvement. Substantial research dealing with the influences within various student subcultures, such as the culture of roommate assignments, has been conducted within residence facilities (Pascarella, 1985, p. 29). Peer influence of students living in close proximity to one another has different effects on student learning and cognitive development. When residence heads understand the resulting indirect learning opportunities in residences, they can influence the structural and organisational characteristics of the residence by effectively placing mentors and other student leaders into those living environments who could assist the cause of student persistence towards graduation.

Facilitate – Educational skill set required for SSL3: Student engagement has two critical components (Kuh, 1995, 2003, 2009, 2010, 2011), the first of which is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other effective educational practices. The second component of student engagement is how HE institutions employ effective educational practices through, for example, organising their curriculum and other learning opportunities. To optimise the potential of informal learning opportunities in the residence, a residence head needs to understand

student engagement theory. Such understanding (Kuh, 2010) will assist the residence head in creating opportunities to engage students in real problems and in collaborative learning for deep learning. The challenge to achieving SSL3 would be the expertise of the residence head in structuring meaningful and effective educational engagement opportunities.

Coach – Educational skill set required for SSL4: Ultimately, acting as a coach for particularly more senior students will enable the residence head to demonstrate role-model leadership to students. Bronfenbrenner put forward an integrated and holistic learning process model (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, 1999) called a "bioecological model" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 795). The core of the model consists of four principal components with dynamic interactive relationships amongst these components. The four principal components are: process (Pr), person (P), context (C) and time (T). Residence heads aiming at enhancing graduate attributes towards employability should understand that for holistic development and learning, students (P) must engage and interact (Pr) within their residence environment (C) over a period of time (T) to contribute to the attainment of appropriate graduate attributes. This preferred role for the residence head should be a blended role of *being* a leader in the residence environment who is *doing* the educational role (enacting these educational skill sets) and in so doing, promoting the various student success levels with an integrated and holistic mindset. The challenge to achieving SSL4 is acquiring the competencies and finding the time to coach students.

The empirical study, which is explicated below, was done against the backdrop of the student success framework, while the framework at the same time served as the conceptual framework or theoretical 'lens' through which the research data was interpreted.

Research Methodology and Research Paradigm

The research was conducted within an interpretive research paradigm. As one form of qualitative research, interpretive analysis aims to arrive at a better understanding of the experiences of people interacting within a complex social context (Tuli, 2010). In such a context, the research participation of people close to the phenomenon supports the construction of mental models and meaning-making of experiences (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smith, 2004). Therefore, researchers working in an interpretive paradigm explore phenomena in order to gain an understanding of people's experiences and the deeper meanings of a phenomenon by optimising focus group discussions and personal interviews (Yin, 2014). Within an interpretive paradigm, IQA as an interactive method (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004, p. 44) was regarded as ideal for this research study. IQA is discussed in more detail below in the section on research method.

Research Design

The research design selected for this study was an embedded single-case study. Yin (2014, p. 51) argues that there are five reasons for selecting a single-case research design,

namely that it is a critical single case, a common single case, a longitudinal single case, an unusual single case, or a revelatory single case. The Ministerial Committee Report (DHET, 2011), referred to earlier, highlighted the comprehensive residential education practices at SU as an example of good practice. Exploring these comprehensive practices formed the rationale for a revelatory single-case study of SU residences. Moreover, the holistic nature of the residential education practices justified the exploration of this phenomenon at SU. The research design was therefore also explorative in nature. Explorative case studies focus on explaining a social phenomenon within a specific social context (Bleijenberg, 2010). This case study, as an explorative and revelatory embedded single-case design, had four embedded units (Yin, 2014) that formed the population for the study.

Population

It goes without saying that the SU residence heads formed the central population unit of this study. The second population unit of importance were the students. Given the institutional context of SU as a historically white university, that is slowly but surely transforming, we considered it appropriate to distinguish between first-generation students (FGS), and second- (and more) generation (traditional) students (S+GS) in this population unit. Lastly, senior institutional administrators as the creators and custodians of institutional policies were also regarded as an important population unit. Therefore, the four embedded units in this single case study were: residence heads, second-, third- or fourth-generation students (S+GS),[1] first-generation students (FGS)[2] and senior administrators. Because of the critical inputs of the members of each of these population units in the research results, they are discussed in more detail below.

Unit 1 consisted of the residence heads at SU. Each of the more than 30 SU residences has a residence head. The role of the SU residence head is a secondary position within the institution. This means a residence head already has another primary appointment at SU. The secondary role of the residence head is performed mostly after normal working hours. As residence heads are close to the phenomenon and the focus of this study, and have some influence and power over student success in residences, their experiences and insights were important for seeking answers to the research question of this study.

Considering the historical background of SU and where the institution currently finds itself on its transformation journey, we decided to differentiate between two units from the student population. Unit 2 denotes the traditional (second+generation) residential students (S+GS) of SU. For many years, S+GS have had the strongest influence on traditions within the SU residences (and to a large extent still do). More recently, though, S+GS have been influenced by the ResEd Programme, which has led to the re-thinking of long-held traditions within SU residences. Because of their influence on traditions and change, these S+GS formed an important population for this study. Unit 3 consisted of the residential

1 S+GS are students whose parents, grandparents and even great-grandparents are or were SU alumni.
2 FGS are students whose parents did not study at a university.

first-generation students (FGS) of SU. A small but growing FGS population is currently accessing SU and is increasingly gaining placement in SU residences. Their experience of the residence environment, and of the broader university environment, differs substantially from those of S+GS – hence splitting them into two population units. Both FGS and S+GS are close to the phenomenon, are influenced by the role (power) of the residence head and were therefore important populations for the study.

Unit 4 included senior administrators who have the most power over the SU residence environment. Although they do not reside in residences, these administrators give strategic direction, take decisions, formulate policy and oversee policy implementation in the SU residences. The significance of their strategic role made the contribution of this population important in seeking to answer the research question for this study. Sampling for this single-case study occurred from each of the four units.

Sampling

By means of both purposive and convenience sampling, individuals in the four units were selected to participate in the study on the basis of their rich experiences, which would contribute to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, 2011). We purposively approached residence heads who had engaged with both FG and S+G students to send us the names and contact details of potential participants. We sampled 30 students (about 80 references were provided) and sent a personal email and WhatsApp invitation to each student. Eighteen students responded after a further personal telephone call. Of these, 10 were FG students and eight were S+G students. Furthermore, we purposively sampled residence heads, who in our observation were intentional residential educators. Eight of the 12 residence heads who were approached accepted the personal invitation.

Research Method

IQA takes as point of departure that people closest to a phenomenon or problem are able to provide appropriate solutions to the problem. Northcutt and McCoy (2004) acknowledge that IQA uses tools from various other research methods, such as observation from ethnographic research, focus group discussion from market research, and the concept of mapping. Furthermore, various theories influence IQA, such as grounded theory, field theory and, primarily, general systems theory (Du Preez & Du Preez, 2012; Hendry, 2005; Human-Vogel, 2006; Northcutt & McCoy, 2004, pp. xxi-xxiv; Von Bertalanffy, 1972).

As a rigorous qualitative research method, IQA (Bargate, 2014; Du Preez & Du Preez, 2012; Human-Vogel & Mahlangu, 2009; Human-Vogel & Van Petegem, 2008; Mampane & Bouwer, 2011; Smith & Leonard, 2005) has been applied for data gathering and data analysis in different fields of master's and doctoral studies such as curriculum studies (Robertson, 2015) and economic and management sciences (Nienaber, 2013). IQA has four distinct phases: phase 1, the research design phase; phase 2, the focus group discussion phase; phase 3, the interview phase; and phase 4, the report phase (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004, p. 44). The qualitative responses from the focus group discussions and the individual interviews were analysed by means of open and axial coding, from which themes

emerged which guided the researchers in answering the research question on what the preferred educational skill sets for residence heads would be in order to promote a holistic student success framework. What transpired from the analysis of the research data in many respects confirmed the educational skill sets required by the residence head as proposed in the student success framework (Table 1). How this emerged from the inputs of the four population units is illustrated below.

Findings

Residence heads concurred that the residence head who plays an educational role is pivotal in promoting student success. This population unit defined their educational role holistically, suggesting that it should contribute to student learning that reaches beyond degree attainment. During the IQA focus group discussion this educational role was defined by residence heads as "*guiding them [students] from the unknown [SSL0] to the known [SSL2] to them leaving res into the working world [SSL4] … cultivating a solid basis for the development of graduate attributes [SSL4]".* Furthermore, the personal interviews with residence heads and senior management highlighted the importance of the residence head possessing a variety of skill sets to perform this educational role, such as facilitation and coaching skills.

A residence head expressed the importance of facilitation skills [SSL3] as follows: *"… when you facilitate you need to mediate, and that really requires particular skill."* Furthermore, senior management indicated the importance of coaching [SSL4] stating that the residence head *"is the coach of graduate attributes in the co-curricular sense".*

Although FG and S+G students experienced the SU residence environment differently, the research findings demonstrate considerable congruence in the expectations of these two groups of students regarding the educational role of future residence heads. All the students who were interviewed, indicated that the residence head should be a leader who, amongst others, should inspire [SSL0]: *"A residence head should be able to lead and be accountable for their decisions and inspire others to be leaders."* Furthermore, the residence head should be *"someone you [student] can look up to for leadership, also for mentorship"* [SSL1]. As managers, residence heads should deliberately structure involvement opportunities [SSL2], so that residence heads *"are actively involved in the process maybe of [student] planning … being the liaison between the res and outside factors".* Further, the residence head as leader should adopt multiple and flexible leadership styles that enable student engagement and collaboration in teams with students [SSL3]. An FG student said: *"By doing this, it will help create more leaders, and build stronger leadership qualities. A residence head should be a team player by knowing when to lead and when to follow or engage with the students."*

From the students' perspective, the optimal role of the residence head is that of *being* that leader. For the students, this *being* role as leader involves much more than managing the residence building but implies assuming an educational role. This educational role that emerged from the research showed that the residence head should be intentional in coaching [SSL4], facilitating [SSL3], managing [SSL2], mentoring [SSL1] and inspiring [SSL0] in the residence environment. This pivotal educational *doing* role is a blend of various skill sets, which could promote student success at various levels, as seen in the conceptual student success framework (Table 1).

Conclusion

Our research has shown that the residence environment provides manifold opportunities for rich out-of-class learning experiences to occur. For this to happen residence heads need to be leaders with an intentional educational mindset promoting the conceptualised holistic student success framework. The residence head's leadership skill sets as intentional educator should be to inspire, to mentor, to manage, to facilitate and to coach. These preferred skill sets are practical and will equip residence heads to promote student success at all levels. These preferred skill sets of the residence head should influence the job description and policies regarding the role of the residence head at universities. The significant finding of the study is that the preferred role of the future residence head is a blended one which comprises *being* a leader and *doing* an intentional educational role with the preferred educational skill sets, underpinned by theory, that will enable the residence head to promote student success.

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Research article

The Role of Student Housing in Student Success: An Ethnographic Account[1]

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Abstract

The role of university student housing in the lives of undergraduate students has changed. While student housing used to be understood only as a space to accommodate students who primarily come from out of town, now universities have started using student housing strategically to advance the success of the students. Student housing is now used to build sustainable living and learning student environments in the interests of promotion of student access and success. Through an ethnographic account, where the researcher spent two consecutive semesters living in an undergraduate university residence which accommodates 577 students, the article provides an 'insider-outsider' interpretation of students' context for success from one of the South African university student residences. This article uses Tinto's theory of student integration model to frame an understanding of students' experiences and perceptions of success. It further highlights socioeconomic hardships as well as stories of caring and partnerships that students experience in their journeys towards success. These student experiences are very relevant to their integration into the university culture and systems and are critically important to the success of the student. This article concludes that the role of student housing is key to student success as it provides various opportunities for support from fellow students and staff.

Keywords

ethnography; student experiences; student housing; student success; university residence

Introduction

This research has been conducted in response to the dearth of research in the field of student accommodation in South Africa, as noted by the Ministerial Report (DHET, 2011). It is also part of the Siyaphumelela ("we succeed") research project, titled *Who are our students? Investigating access and success of undergraduate students* (Xulu-Gama, Nhari, Alcock & Cavanagh, 2018). It is in line with one of the Durban University of Technology's four strategic focus areas as documented in the Strategic Plan, 2015-2019 (DUT, 2015). This

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strategic plan addresses how the university should actively work on building sustainable student communities of living and learning so that students can succeed. Conducting ethnographic research attempts to bridge the gap in institutional data by presenting a qualitative context of the students who are living in the university student housing/residence.[1] Methodologically, the researcher lived for one academic year with the students in one particular residence in order to observe their day-to-day experiences and activities. Ethnographic methodology allowed access to the 'inside', hence providing a specific vantage point from which to understand points of success and challenges for the students towards their stories of success or failure.

The main argument of this article is that student housing plays a key role as a conditioning context for student success. The article argues that as a result of being based in a residence, the students benefit from an extra set of people (staff members and senior students or peers) who look out for their academic and social needs. Moreover, it argues that students at university residences have more chances of succeeding socially and academically because of the additional resources and conducive environment which are offered by the Department of Student Housing and Residence Life working in collaboration with various departments of the university, as a way of building a living and learning environment for students' success.

Over the past two decades, student housing has experienced rapid growth which has been driven predominantly by increased student enrolments across the globe (Najib, Yusof & Tabassi, 2015; McCubbin, 2003). Student Housing Departments broadly have been under enormous pressure to respond to the massification of higher education in South Africa. This, in turn, has resulted in changing demographic trends (Jones Lang LaSalle, 2016). In line with most previously black South African university residences, race and gender demographics show that black females are in the majority in student housing (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2012; DHET, 2011).

Amongst many other things, the quality of student life as well as housing still need improvement (CHE, 2016). Although the number of previously disadvantaged students registering at universities has increased drastically in post-apartheid South Africa, Jaffer and Garraway (2016) and Tinto (2014) argue that the throughput rate remains low. Van Zyl (2016) concurs that students in South African higher education find it hard to succeed. Jama (2016) found that access with success has not been achieved in the South African universities. Xulu-Gama, Nhari, Alcock and Cavanagh (2018) document the experiences of access and success of students, although excluding university residence experiences. Research on university residences has found a shortage of at least 207 800 beds nationally (DHET, 2011). Living at university on-campus accommodation is a privilege of the few (Tinto, 2014). Research points to the importance of the interaction between students and further shows that student satisfaction with student housing is a critical factor in success and retention in the campus environment (Clemons, Banning & McKelfresh, 2004).

1 'Student housing' and 'student residence' will be used interchangeably in this article.

There are many positive educational and social ways in which students benefit from living in a university residence. Najib, Yusof and Abidin (2011) and Godshall (2000) draw our attention towards the importance of the role played by student residences in expanding intellectual capacities and achieving educational objectives. Scholars argue that student housing plays a vital role in the social and academic success of the students (Clemons et al., 2004; Christie, Munro & Rettig, 2002). Najib, Yusof and Tabassi (2015) argue that student housing providing high-quality services has a positive influence on students' behavioural intentions as well as their personal attainments.

Student housing policies can impact student success in academic programmes (Sebokedi, 2009). Case (2015) argues that the traditionalist view focuses on student difficulties in isolation from the broader conditioning context. Pansiri and Sinkamba (2017) and Tinto (2014) accordingly advocate for the programmes aimed at student success to be extended beyond the classroom. They further argue that this should be done as part of the university's goal of improving student experience.

There is an acknowledgement of the importance of knowing who our students are and this is indicated by the growing literature in this area (Xulu-Gama, et al., 2018; Taylor & Sobel, 2011; Kangas, Budros & Yoshika, 2000). Dixon and Durrheim (2000, p. 27) discuss questions of 'who we are' and how that is often intertwined with 'where we are'. This knowledge is seen as important as it then informs educational practices, university systems and processes as well as academic development initiatives (Kangas et al., 2000; Taylor & Sobel, 2011).

Tinto (2014) argues that providing student access without support does not constitute an opportunity (Jama, 2016). Durban University of Technology has a Residence Educational Programme (REP) which is driven by the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT) and the Department of Student Housing and Residence Life. The REP forms part of the process of building sustainable student communities of living and learning so that students can succeed. It is an intervention aimed at increasing and enhancing holistic student success. The contribution of Tutors, Mentors and Advisors (TMAs) is designed to complement formal lectures where meaningful interaction between lecturer and students is often limited. This programme is rolled out to all university residences, taking different forms and activities, according to the needs of the residence as identified by the RA (Residence Advisor) working in collaboration with the Department of Student Housing and Residence Life.

Tinto's theory of student integration is based on the idea that a student has to have a reasonable level of integration both socially and academically at the university. He argues that a lack of proper integration in either can result in the student dropping out of the university. He also maintains that too much integration on either the social aspect or the academic aspect can also result in an unbalanced university life, leading to the student dropping out. The student needs to be able to maintain a balance between these two aspects (Tinto, 1975). The major criticism of this theory is its failure to recognise the individual psychological features that could expose the student to giving up (McCubbin, 2003).

According to Tinto (1975), academic integration directly influences the student's goal commitment while social integration directly influences his (or her) commitment to the specific institution (see also McCubbin, 2003). McCubbin (2003) further claims that Tinto's student integration model is too ambitious in trying to explain a full range of student attrition behaviour.

This article, through ethnographic research, documents the context and experiences of students which are part of their journey to success at university. It focuses on the key issues of student housing in relation to their conditions for success, survival strategies and family relationships. The researcher's epistemic and cultural access provides vantage points from which data has been accessed and analysed. The researcher, an academic staff member of the university, played the role of RA with the intention of collecting data through ethnography for this particular study. This was made known to the Department of Student Housing and Residence Life at the time of the application for the RA position. The core business of the RA is to assist, mentor, advise and monitor the social and academic progress and success of students in residences.

Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative research paradigm specifically using ethnography and participant observation as data collection methods. Ethnography is about maintaining physical and social proximity to the people as they go about their everyday activities. The researcher enters the research site with the intention of getting to know the people and of developing an understanding of the meanings and the values that they attach to their everyday lives (Emerson, 1995). It allows the researcher to provide an insider-outsider interpretation of their everyday lives. Participant observation is a research instrument that is engaged by ethnography (Herbert, 2000). It is a process whereby the researcher enters a community in its natural setting for the purpose of developing a scientific understanding of the lives, systems and values of the people in that community.

Ethnographers unearth what people take for granted (Herbert, 2000). Ethnography, while it involves no systematic method at all, produces an in-depth understanding of real-world social processes (Forsythe, 1999). Ethnography was conducted in one of the university residences, Ngunyeweni Residence (pseudonym). Ngunyeweni is located on the periphery of the city and it accommodates 577 male and female African undergraduate students. It has 210 rooms, each of which is shared between two to four students and the sizes of the rooms differ accordingly.

Ngunyeweni Residence should be understood as a vantage point from which we can begin to understand some of the key threads of student lives leading to or failing to lead to success at the universities' student housing. Ethnography has been used, with full consciousness of the major criticism against it, such as the claim that it is unscientific, that it is too limited to enable generalisations and that it is not representative (Herbert, 2000). However, using ethnography is learning to *see* (original emphasis) social institutions in a way that problematises certain phenomena. Ethnography is an exercise of epistemological discipline (Forsythe, 1999). Emerson (1995, p. 3) encourages us to understand that

"consequential presence" should not be seen as "contaminating" what is observed and learned but rather as a revelation of ongoing patterns of social interaction.

There is a need to understand the contexts at the micro-level in which our students live. Analysis of large sets of institutional quantitative data is never fully complete without access to the qualitative data. Researchers are becoming more aware and beginning to appreciate that there is a story behind every number. This understanding allows us to delve into certain complexities which are easier to comprehend once one understands the context (Santhanam, Ashford-Rowe & Murphy, 2017).

Research Findings

Conditioning context for student success

Residence life is a unique student experience associated with special benefits (Radder & Han, 2009). Residence becomes a new temporal home for many students who have to leave their homes in order to be closer to campus. A home is an environment that can exhibit a sense of place for the student (Clemons et al., 2004). Cuseo (2007) notes that student success is enhanced by human interaction, collaboration and formation of interpersonal connections between students and other members of the university. Student housing programmes provide students with opportunities to participate in different leadership structures (Swartz, 2010).

At Ngunyeweni Residence, amongst many other essential structures, there is a House Committee, which is composed of students who are elected and this excludes first-year students. The committee and the RA are provided with various training programmes to help carry out their roles and responsibilities. The House Committee along with the RAs respectively develop a Plan of Action, which needs to be approved by the Senior Residence Life Officer. Programmes need to be inclusive of academic and social activities and aimed at student integration and success. They are prepared partly in consultation with students and in response to their social and academic needs.

For most students, campus is the only place where they meet and engage (Tinto, 2014). However, by the mere fact of being accommodated at a university student residence, students have more time to meet and get to know each other. For study purposes, this is more beneficial for students who are registered in the same programme. Being based at a student residence improves access to university facilities such as the library for research and study purposes. The library closes at 10:00 p.m. every day from Monday to Thursday and hours are extended during the examination period. There are buses that transport students in the evening from residences to campuses and back from Monday to Thursday at 6:00 p.m., 8:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. Students use this time for either individual, formal or informal group study on campus. Travelling by bus to campus in the evening is preferred by those students who do not wish to use residence study areas. Students who do not have computers or laptops also have easier access to computer laboratories on campus.

Students living at residences have access to additional evening tutorial classes. They can choose which specific subjects they feel they need more support with. These tutorial classes

are voluntary and there is no limit to their choice of subjects. CELT, through REP, allocates students into groups accordingly and generates a timetable for those extra evening tutorials. RAs assist in facilitation of the logistical arrangement of these classes.

Being based at a university residence means continuous Wi-Fi access for students' online learning and research. Students are demanding more comfort and creative features in their residences, DSTV connection, more heating or cooling systems. They are claiming those things which they believe they have a right to.

Department of Student Housing and Residence Life gives students more opportunities to participate in various recreational, cultural and spiritual activities. Students are confronted with diversity and opportunities to integrate at many levels (Najib et al., 2011). The actual individual residences are also pots of diversity with differences in gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language, religion and qualification registered for.

Travelling from student residences to campus and back takes less time than moving from off-campus residences or family homes to campus. Students in residence can save up to three hours of travelling, which they can use towards their studies or relaxing. This also means that no funds are directly spent on bus fare. Less time is spent on house chores, which most students understand take a lot of time, especially female students living in their family homes. This directly translates to saving time and having more time to relax, study or socialise.

Social integration as conditioning context for student success

Being in residence for students, creates not only physical distance but also psychosocial distance from their families. When students get to residence, they have to create new associations and also find new and different survival strategies from the ones they were using while at high school or at home. Students made various positive references to the supportive and mutual relationships they have with their fellow students, who are also their friends and with whom they live together in residence.

Most students claimed that their friends are more important than their families. "A friend is a person who knows and understands you better than your family," one student uttered. More than one student made reference to how there is always judgement coming from family, whereas a friend does not judge but rather supports you in all you do. Family is seen as a selfish circle of support as they expect students to do things according to family values in terms of aspects such as sexual orientation, substance abuse and career choice. On the other hand, by virtue of the mere fact of being in residence, students have an opportunity to reconstruct their identities based on their own preferred values and beliefs.

The idea of having friends at a university residence is important for this study because it speaks to the social integration of Tinto's student integration model. Tinto (1975) argues that if a student is socially well-integrated within the university system, there is a greater chance of academic integration and success. For the purposes of this study, having a good circle of friends (as defined by students) at university is interpreted as an indication of some degree of social integration into the university system. For students in residences, the

kind of friendships are mostly along the lines of roommates, floor or residence mates. The other set of friends are the ones with whom one studies the same subjects, or who come from the same geographical origins, especially the rural areas. Sometimes these categories of friendships are intertwined. These are important sets of people who are in a position to assist academically and socially.

One student explained that friendship is not always about influencing each other, it is often about supporting each other in whatever each one likes, as part of proclaiming their identity. She argued that one must appreciate the other's differences and learn from each other. Another student maintained that a friend is somebody who actually feeds you, not only with food when you are hungry, but also with drugs when you are in need of intoxication.

A number of students admitted to being addicted to various substances, such as dagga and codeine. They offered different explanations about how or why they became addicted. Some use these substances to deal with the harsh home environments that continue to confront them even when they are in university residence. Some use them as a way of dealing with the academic pressure as well as peer pressure associated with being a university student. In the midst of such pressure, friendships are very highly valued by students because friends do not judge each other in situations where families would be inclined to reprimand them for their choices.

This study, through participant observation, confirmed the widespread presence of hungry students at university residences. So, while students can miss opportunities to be fed by certain organisations of the university, because of fear of stigmatisation, they can never hide the reality of not having food from their roommates. The reality of hungry students[2] was always brought to the attention of the RA not by the hungry student, but by roommates.

Discussion

The university has a responsibility and has committed itself to building a sustainable living and learning environment for students which, for the purposes of this article, is understood as a conditioning context for success. Unlike in the past, where university residence was just a place for students to be accommodated so that they could be geographically closer to the campus environment, student housing is now a place where students live and learn. The learning, as much as the living, is facilitated by the university. This research shows that the university has done well in providing human resources, as has been shown in the roles played by the RA, House Committee and TMAs, which maintain an environment

2 Some students have to work while studying in order to be able to feed themselves while at residence. A few students have to work to supplement payment for their tuition fees. Some have to work to support the families they left at home. Some have to work because they are parents themselves. They need to support their children, who remain at home with their parents or relatives. Some students are orphans and have to play the role of household head to their younger siblings. Most students get support from their grandparents, especially grandmothers, who primarily rely on the social grant for the elderly. While they are at university fighting their challenges on campus and at residence, they still have to deal with socioeconomic difficulties at home.

conducive to success for students. All their programmes are designed in response to students' needs, e.g. substance abuse.

Furthermore, the election of second-, third-, or fourth-year students into the house committee and to be TMAs allows them an opportunity to share their experience and knowledge acquired in the previous year(s) with all students. So the students get a chance to learn from the house committee members about matters that are both academic and social in nature.

The university has provided facilities for students to pursue their academic goals at the university. Some of those resources are as follows: bus transportation, computer laboratories, library, sports, TMAs programmes, leadership and entrepreneurial programmes as well as cultural activities.

However, when it comes to social integration as a conditioning context for success, the findings above demonstrate that this is a complex area. Individual students have personal reasons regarding why they become friends with some and not with certain other people; why they would come forward when hungry or why they would not. Previous research (De Klerk, Spark, Jones & Maleswena, 2017; Manik, 2015; DHET, 2011) had already established that there are hungry students at universities. It had further been established that students are reluctant to respond to the programmes for the hungry students because they do not want to be seen as poor (Manik, 2015). Hungry students are one big challenge that the universities possibly will not be able to prevent because of the varied family backgrounds from which South African universities continue to receive students.

Gofen (2009) refers to families' habits, priorities, belief systems and values as non-material resources with which previously disadvantaged families provide their first-generation students on their journeys at university. He further argues that although students face many challenges, their families are often facilitators of their success. While Gofen's research might be true, the findings of this study provide a different lens through which one can look at the non-material support that families give students, with specific reference to those at residences. Students are actually challenging that part of what we mostly see as support but which they see as selfish acts by their families. Students' base at the residence gives them freedom to become who they want to be and free to choose how to deal with pressing circumstances.

Conclusion

Student success is broader than academic success, with the latter normally narrowing to the end-of-semester or end-of-year results. Student success speaks to the rounded identity of the student as a responsible citizen, inclusive of cultural, leadership, social and academic qualities. Using Tinto's theory of student integration, this study has focused more on the social integration of students because university residence was chosen as a research site. The intention of the study was also to focus on the qualitative data by the use of ethnography as a data collection method on student success versus the institutional quantitative data on student success.

This research has shown that student housing gives students the freedom to explore and determine their own identities away from familial and home pressures. It has shown that the perceived unconditional family support actually has strings attached. The support provided by the university in the form of resources also allows students to develop alternative social support systems in the form of friendships. It can be concluded that the lives of students in residence are not linear, which would often assume that their academic lives are not affected by other associations in their lives. The success of the student is made up of a mix of healthy and sometimes unhealthy relationships.

The strategic positioning of student housing in building sustainable communities of living and learning uncovers the often not-so-obvious connections between academic success and students' socioeconomic backgrounds and their psycho-social issues. These findings have cautioned us that we should never take for granted the role of the family and friends in the student's life. As varied and complex as are the student backgrounds, so are the kind of relationships they have with their families and friends. These findings have also shown that integration should not only be regarded as positive as it can also enhance peer pressure, e.g. in substance abuse.

From the initiatives of the university of building a living and learning student environment, a one-size-fits-all approach in supporting students cannot work (Van Zyl, 2016; DHET, 2011). Although students might have a lot of shared characteristics, they still retain a lot of individual complex differences and preferences.

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Research article

Learning Communities for Teaching Practice School Placements: A Higher Education Initiative to Promote Equity for Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

In South Africa, scholarship on the teaching practice learning experiences for students with disabilities is a relatively new area of sociological inquiry. Social justice arrangements in the South African Higher Education policy frameworks identify the equity imperative as being of critical importance for social redress and transformation for all students. This qualitative study drew on the teaching practice school placement experiences of five Bachelor of Education students with either visual or physical disabilities and who were part of a teaching practice learning community. The findings of this study suggest that, for students with visual and physical disabilities, learning communities were perceived to be a structure that enhanced equity arrangements for human development and well-being in teaching practice school placements. In addition, and in alignment with equity arrangements, the need for a social justice reform agenda for teaching practice school placements emerged from the data. The study concludes that learning communities as a context-specific institutional structure support freedom, agency, dialogue and participation, and respect for disability required for capability expansion for human development and well-being in the teaching practice school placements of students with visual and physical disabilities. These were found to enhance equity arrangements for students with visual disabilities and physical disabilities.

Keywords

equity; learning community; physical disabilities; teaching practice school placements; visual disabilities

Introduction

South African Higher Education (SAHE) policy frameworks draw attention to the equity imperative in higher education for students with disabilities. Human rights and social justice provisions are visible in higher education policies (DoE, 1997, 2018) that highlight the importance of specialised support for students with disabilities. To this effect the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006) plays a critical role in promoting the right to higher education for persons with disabilities.

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Scholarship on disability in higher education suggests that students with disabilities experience systemic barriers in SAHE (Bell, 2013; Ndlovu & Walton, 2016). This article aims to understand how SAHE is meeting social justice arrangements for students with disabilities in their teaching practice school placements. The findings and discussion presented in this article are based on part of the researcher's PhD study (Subrayen, 2017) that examined the equity, access and participation experiences of both students with visual and physical disabilities in their teaching practice school placements.

Literature Review

The social model of disability argues for disability as a human rights and social justice concern. This problematises disability as a system of discrimination, hence according respect to equity arrangements through the expansion of capabilities for human development (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999). Human development in the context of the Capability Approach (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999) provides nuances for social justice and inclusion to reduce inequities to strengthen human development. Central to the Capability Approach are freedoms and agency, democratic participation and dialogue, and respect for human diversity, all serving as critical information bases of inclusive policy arrangements. To this effect, education is a basic capability that allows individuals sufficient freedom and agency to choose valuable and worthwhile lives, should they choose to do so (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999).

In South Africa, Walker (2010) agrees that education is a basic capability and can influence the expansion and development of other capabilities in higher education. Walker (2010) strengthens her argument by claiming that student well-being and agency, autonomy, democratic participation and respect for human diversity might be offered for capability development. This can bring us closer to social change and transformation in higher education for students with disabilities (Walker, 2010).

This study argues for Tinto's (2003, 2004) learning community structure for student development to support capability expansion for human development for students with disabilities in their teaching practice placements. Tinto (2003, 2004) defines learning communities as a student development structure for beginning, undecided and academically developing students. Students with similar attributes come together on common themes and establish deep levels of dialogue in a focused and coherent manner to enhance their academic integration, thus serving as equitable and enabling spaces in teaching practice for students with disabilities.

In SAHE policies (DoE, 1997, 2018) disability is recognised as a system of discrimination requiring social redress and transformation. This means that disability should be guided by a "conscious and reflective blend" of multi-dimensional processes to improve equity as a social justice arrangement (Carlisle, Jackson & George, 2006, p. 57).

Contrary to this determination of social justice, research evidence globally and nationally, suggests regular instances of inequities experienced in higher education by students with disabilities. These inequities relate to gender, student funding, stigma, environmental,

attitudinal and social barriers, sexual harassment and inadequate technological software (Bell, 2013; Hammad & Singal, 2015; Opini, 2011). In addition, there is concern amongst researchers about the experiences of students with disabilities in their practice learning placements, referring to academic work undertaken outside the university within a stipulated time frame, during their academic course of study. It is in this context that professional competencies and application of theoretical knowledge and skills are assessed as an integral component of the students' academic curriculum (Department for Education and Skills, 2002; Ndlovu & Walton, 2016).

In the U.K., studies found that disability disclosure in singular- and multiple-practice learning placements presented challenges. Studies by Ashcroft, Sequire, Shapiro and Swiderski (2008) and Botham and Nicholson (2014) suggest that for singular-practice learning placements, disability disclosure was either deferred or delayed to a later stage of the placement due to the possibility of discrimination and stigma, whilst, in multiple-practice learning placements, students had to continuously and repetitively disclose their disability at various times and via various platforms. This negatively influenced their psychological processes required during disability disclosure (Botham & Nicholson, 2014; Morris & Turnbull, 2007). A further complexity relates to short-term practice placements which, due to the short duration, constrained the development of interpersonal skills and confidence, professional relationships and workplace maturity required for disability disclosure (Morris & Turnbull, 2007).

In addition to challenges arising from disability disclosure, other challenges were also noted. Glazzard and Dale (2015) found that normative teaching and learning strategies employed by able-bodied mentors and tutors produced negative attitudes and stereotyping towards student teachers with dyslexia. These normative teaching and learning strategies did not account for specialised support required by student teachers with dyslexia to foster inclusion and participation. This negatively influenced the self-image and confidence of participants' professional identities, leaving them belittled, stressed, humiliated and devalued.

Aside from the above, good practice models in practice learning placements have been noted. Griffith, Worth, Scullard and Gilbert (2010) developed a student centred, six-phase tripartite model to support nursing students in their clinical practice. This model, firstly, enhanced communication and collaboration between practice partners and the student with a disability. Secondly, the model improved the student's confidence to disclose the disability for reasonable accommodations required for clinical practice placements. Other U.K. studies indicate that structured pre-placement meetings with all practice partners and the student with a disability ensured effective communication, facilitation of reasonable accommodations and an understanding of the student's specialised needs in practice placements (Botham & Nicholson, 2014; Griffiths, 2012). For student teachers with dyslexia in their teaching practice school placements, spellcheckers, specialised software, oral communication, computers and word banks enhanced their practice learning placements (Burns & Bell, 2011; Glazzard & Dale, 2015). These best-practice models have contributed to equity arrangements for students with disabilities in practice learning placements.

In contrast to the above, in South Africa, practice learning for students with disabilities is a relatively new area of inquiry, with little evidence to inform practice and policy (Ndlovu & Walton, 2016). This suggests that measures have to be instituted to reduce or eliminate barriers for the achievement of equity in practice learning placements. This is supported by Ndlovu and Walton (2016), who assert that SAHE institutions have a responsibility to adequately prepare students with disabilities in terms of theoretical and professional knowledge for application in practice learning contexts.

Ntombela and Subrayen (2013) in their situational analysis at a SAHE institution claim that despite the imperative of equity (DoE, 1997), students with visual disabilities experience challenges in their teaching practice placements in schools. This relates to the absence of specialised technology and human support for students who are blind. Yet, specialised support for students with disabilities in higher education is consistent with the imperatives of equity to reduce educational inequities (Tebutt, Brodman, Borg, MacLachlan & Khasnabis, 2016).

In other South African research, Subrayen's (2017) qualitative study at a SAHE institution, found that Bachelor of Education students experienced complexities in their teaching practice placements. This related to the absence of self-representation, multiple-power hierarchies acting simultaneously to produce and challenges emerging from the intersections of gender and disability. Subrayen (2017) also found that the chalkboard, a normative resource, imposed restrictions by not accounting for specialised needs of persons with disabilities in accessing the chalkboard. Thus, normative resources controlled, discriminated and hindered the inclusion of persons with disabilities from mainstream social arrangements by not accounting for their specialised needs (Reindal, 2009; Terzi, 2005). The argument made here is for the deconstruction of normative arrangements and for accounting for inclusive social arrangements for students with disabilities.

This minimal evidence in South Africa to inform practice and policy means that disability support units and practice partners are strategising without direction on supporting and enabling students with disabilities in their practice learning placements. Arising from this knowledge gap, this article identifies Tinto's (2003, 2004) Learning Community Model for student development as a framework within which to understand and interpret the ways in which students with visual and physical disabilities negotiated their teaching practice placements. The SAHE policy fails in its intentions to provide a framework to support equity redress for students with disabilities in their practice learning placements. Hence, new lines of accountability require debate and consideration to effect social change and transformation. The argument draws attention to a robust social justice reform agenda to dismantle educational inequities that marginalise students with disabilities in higher education (Liasidou, 2012).

Tinto's Learning Community Model

Tinto (2003, 2004) claims that students who require academic support experience higher education in isolation, disconnecting themselves from learning and peer group interactions.

This leads to academic and social barriers hampering student development. To address this challenge, many higher education institutions have included reforms that engage students in teaching and learning pedagogies. One of these reforms refers to learning communities where students work in cooperative and collaborative groups to become socially and academically engaged (Tinto, 2003, 2004). Learning communities are safe spaces where homogenous student cohorts mean that students with similar attributes come together to construct and share skills and knowledge on common themes in a focused and coherent manner. These homogenous cohorts allow for deep levels of dialogue and engagement where every voice matters in the learning community (Tinto, 2003, 2004). Therefore, homogenous student cohorts are applicable and important for this study as students with disabilities (similar attributes) come together with skills and knowledge around matters of disability in their teaching practice placements.

Studies on learning communities in other contexts, more specifically at universities in the United States of America, found that cooperative and collaborative learning for success, sharing of knowledge, decision making and improved teaching practices improved student retention (Berry, Johnson & Montgomery, 2005; Jackson, Stebleton & Laanan, 2013; Engstrom & Tinto, 2010).

It must be noted that research around learning communities for students with disabilities is not a well-developed area of inquiry in South Africa. South Africa is a developing context with its unique historical educational inequities, past education legislations, socioeconomic and language barriers (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012) which vastly differ from historical factors in developed contexts.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology, located within a narrative method of inquiry. A purposive sampling technique was employed, allowing for an in-depth study of the teaching practice placement experiences of Bachelor of Education students with visual and physical disabilities at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. A non-probability sampling method was used for the identification and selection of an applicable sample wherein rich data could be obtained.

In the Bachelor of Education curriculum, students engage in a 16-week teaching practice placement in schools during their second, third and fourth years of study. This provides for a nuanced and diversified school-based experience which prepares the students to become educators in a school context.

Before students with a disability embark on their teaching practice placement, they are invited, as a group, to a once-off scheduled teaching practice meeting hosted by the Disability Unit at the said university. This meeting is embedded in Tinto's Learning Community Model (2003; 2004) for student development. The learning community meeting is specifically designed to support the students' preparedness for forthcoming teaching practice placements as students with disabilities. It is here that students with disabilities come together to dialogue and share, individually and collectively, their

knowledge and skills regarding their disability experiences in teaching practice, for example, chalkboard management, benefits of disability disclosure and stigma management in the context of their teaching practice placement.

Arising from the stratified random sampling process, this study reports on the experiences of five participants who were part of a learning community in preparation of their teaching practice placements.

The nature of their disabilities ranged from differing levels of low vision, mobility challenges in both lower limbs, left hand amputation and left upper and lower limb paralysis.

Individual open-ended questions were used allowing for unlimited responses that were rich and in-depth. Some of these questions related to the participants' narration on:

- their experiences in learning communities as influencing equity in their teaching practice placements;
- support offered by learning communities to enhance the transition from the university to teaching practice learning placement schools; and
- learning together, shared knowledge, learning and developing together, and safe spaces for trust and belonging as aligned to Tinto's (2003, 2004) Learning Community Model.

Data Analysis

The NVIVO 11 analytical software program was used to analyse the data. Nodes were developed, modified and adjusted during data analysis. Thereafter, several themes were identified and analytically revised to derive clear and meaningful themes that accurately represented the data generated. A thematic analysis was undertaken through the use of, amongst others, bubble diagram cluster analysis where similar or related words from the data were illustrated in the form of a bubble (Gibbs, 2007). Word-tree analysis was also used to highlight different contexts, phrases and themes (Gibbs, 2007) emerging from participant voices. Finally, word clouds were used, highlighting frequently recurring words that were graphically represented in various font sizes (Gibbs, 2007). These visual tools allowed for the identification of critical themes.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was received from the University of KwaZulu-Natal to conduct this study. Ethical considerations related to obtaining voluntary informed consent to participate in this study and for the audio recording of the participants' interviews. Confidentiality and anonymity of all participants were maintained and respected at all times. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of all participants. Participants were informed of their freedom and agency to withdraw or refuse participation at any stage of the interview process. As a social justice concern, ethical consideration was given to reasonable accommodations for the reading and signing of the informed consent forms and barrier-free venues for the interview process.

Findings and Discussion

The value of learning communities for teaching practice placements for students with disabilities

It was found that learning communities presented as a context-specific structure to promote capability expansion for human development. Sen (1999) contends that persons with disabilities require various capability inputs, for example, inclusive policies, specialised resources and infrastructure to achieve the same level of human development and well-being as able-bodied individuals.

As such, three sub-themes are reflected below, indicating the ways in which learning communities contributed to the achievement of equity in teaching practice placements for students with disabilities.

A community of belonging

In the following responses, participants voiced their feelings regarding the positive impact of learning communities for the achievement of equity in their teaching practice school placements.

One participant commented:

> But if there is that [learning] community, they will feel'ah, I belong here, and there are people I can associate with. (Participant 2)

This was supported by another participant:

> It is a safety net … you feel free because you are all the same. We all disabled. You are not afraid to speak out. We all share the same thing, so no one is judging anyone. (Participant 3)

Participant 1 reported that:

> It makes people more open about their disability, so not hiding it, because they do feel inferior, unaccepted. So, if we are students with disabilities, it becomes easy to share our experiences and how we go about teaching practice, so that we will produce the best.

It is evident that learning communities provided belonging, participatory action, respect for individual and collective agencies, and voice affirmation on disability disclosure for teaching practice. The learning community structure allowed participants their freedom and agencies for decision making which contributed to the expansion of individual capabilities necessary for human development. It can be assumed then that learning communities, in addition to contributing to student development (Tinto, 2003, 2004), also contributed to the expansion of capabilities of students with disabilities in the context of their teaching practice school placements.

Similar findings were noted in a study undertaken by Engstrom and Tinto (2010) whereby students who participated in learning communities experienced academic integration as contributing to deep levels of trust, a sense of belonging, freedom to express themselves, motivation, respect, and academic gains through cooperative and collaborative learning. These attributes enhanced their levels of confidence and self-esteem. Engstrom and Tinto's findings (2010) suggest that collaboration and cooperative learning supported student development.

In addition to learning communities fostering a sense of belonging to enhance equity, Botham and Nicholson (2014) and Griffiths, et al. (2010) found that collaboration and cooperation between practice partners and the student contributed to equity arrangements in practice learning placements, while this study found that participatory action, freedom, and agency and respect for human diversity (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999) allowed an understanding of the way in which learning communities promoted human development and well-being for teaching practice. This translated to a safe space for disability disclosure, decision making, respect and non-judgemental attitudes, which reduced systemic barriers in the participants' teaching practice placements.

Therefore, it can be concluded that learning communities acted as a catalyst to reduce barriers and expand human development for students with disabilities in their teaching practice placements.

Learning communities: A structure to support the expansion of individual capabilities for human development

It was found that learning communities expanded important individual capabilities of the participants. This is supported in the responses below:

> Learning community is part of our professional development … I know that my fellow members, they did very well during their teaching practice. So, it affected learner's performance positively, due to the fact that my professional development is increasing.
>
> (Participant 3)

Participant 1 mentioned the following:

> When you develop something you start from small, like in this learning community. Then you expand, your development grows … because you keep sharing it.

These positive outcomes relate to learning communities as a structure for expanding the professional and personal capabilities of the participants. Furthermore, participation in learning communities promoted positive attributes for life through sharing of knowledge and skills with able-bodied students and with able-bodied learners in the classroom. In an attempt to highlight learning communities as a contributor to student success, Tinto (2003, 2004) argues that learning communities for students requiring academic support contribute to retention and success for students in higher education. From the

perspective of disability, it can be argued that learning communities serve as a context-specific tool, as clarified earlier, to promote the achievement of equity and, ultimately, equality. The foregoing is supported by participant responses in relation to learning communities as an equity tool to enhance equity and social justice in higher education for students with disabilities.

Participant 3 asserted the following:

> I think it [learning communities] is specifically going to make equity.

And another participant responded that:

> It is more like to make sure that everyone has the same experience. (Participant 2)

Similarly, Participant 1 stated that:

> Learning communities provides a little bit more to the student with a disability in order for them to be able to equally participate in this learning environment.

Participants' responses highlight that a learning community trajectory is a critical tool for higher education in relation to the achievement of equity. From the results, it emerges that the disability-related knowledge and skills were seen as an equity mechanism for the equalisation of opportunities with able-bodied constituencies in teaching practice school placements. The findings indicate that students with disabilities were able to make the connection of accommodating their disability to experience the achievement of equity in their teaching practice school placements.

Whilst this study found learning communities as contributing to equity arrangements in teaching practice placements in schools, Ashcroft et al. (2008) found that work practice in simulated laboratories for physiotherapy students with disabilities improved equity arrangements in clinical practice placements. The findings from this study and Ashcroft et al. (2008) suggest that specialised support enhances equity in practice learning placements. In furthering the discussion of learning communities as an equity tool, this article puts forward the claim that learning communities have the potential to provide a platform for students with disabilities to identify challenges relating to disability in the teaching practice environment and to develop interventions together. This was found to enhance equity teaching practice school placements. This is indicated in the participant responses:

> You take whatever you talk about with your peers and it helps you to grow cognitively. Then that person will be able to apply maybe the same strategies or techniques when they go for their teaching practice and be able to actually feel more confident as well.
>
> (Participant 1)

These learning and sharing strategies allowed for the sharing of knowledge and skills, which expanded participants' professional growth and development. This gave rise to

cognitive growth and improved levels of confidence in teaching practice placements. As implied by Tinto (2003, 2004), collaborative and cooperative strategies, shared knowledge and the sharing of knowledge and skills in learning communities allow for positive academic experiences.

Learning communities for teaching practice: Applying a social justice discourse in teaching practice policy and practice

Results suggest that learning communities for teaching practice support the dismantling of sociological barriers, hence contributing to enhancing psychological coping processes. This provides evidence that captures the urgent need for a social justice reform agenda for teaching practice placements for students with disabilities in South Africa.

Participant 5 emphasised the following:

> Learning community must be part of policy. I would say the teaching practice learning community is going to make equity.

Another two participants concurred:

> I think the university must also cater for disabled students in terms of teaching practice … They must try and come up for something for us. They must think about us, because it is clear they forget about us, actually they treat us as normal persons. (Participant 1)

> I think it should be included in the policy that there needs to be learning community within the university for all disability students. (Participant 3)

The excerpts above provide evidence that students with disabilities are coerced into teaching practice arrangements designed for able-bodied students, without accounting for specialised support required by students with disabilities in their teaching practice placements. Further, there is a critical need for the design of an inclusive teaching practice policy, one that acknowledges capability expansion for human development derived through Tinto's (2003, 2004) learning community model. These results show how learning communities for teaching practice for students with disabilities have the potential to dismantle normative arrangements required for social change, corrective justice and transformation. As mentioned by Liasidou (2012), a social justice agenda must underpin inclusive educational policy due to its potential to dismantle systemic barriers experienced by students with disabilities in higher education.

Conclusion

This article sought to provide a wider spectrum to human development and well-being to establish equity in relation to disability in the space of teaching practice placements. The findings and discussions arising from this study provide clear evidence of how the

Capability Approach (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999) might help us understand how learning communities provide for the achievement of equitable arrangements in teaching practice for students with disabilities.

Further, the results of this study suggest that learning communities can be seen as a good practice model for students with disabilities in their teaching practice school placements. This finding supports learning communities as safe-space communities where members feel trusted, respected and included. Furthermore, learning communities, through participatory action, promoted participants' freedoms and agency in decision making, hence contributing to the expansion of the individual capabilities that are important for human development. In light of this, this article argues that, from a South African perspective, the vision of equity for equal educational opportunities requires a social justice reform agenda for students with disabilities in their teaching practice placements. This is a relevant point of reference for the design of inclusive policy arrangements wherein the Capability Approach (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999) and Tinto's (2003, 2004) Learning Community Model can serve as informational bases for inclusive policy action. This can be an important milestone to support equity arrangements wherein students with disabilities can be seen as equal to their able-bodied counterparts in teaching practice placements contexts.

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Research article

Lived Disablers to Academic Success of the Visually Impaired at the University of Zambia, Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

The World Health Organization's (WHO) benchmark of persons with disability in every population is 15.6 per cent. However, the University of Zambia is way below that benchmark as it is home to less than 0.1 per cent of students classified as 'disabled'. Within the 0.1 per cent, students with visual impairment are the majority, estimated at 70 per cent. The purpose of this study was to explore disablers (also known as barriers) to academic success faced by students with visual impairment at the University of Zambia. A Hermeneutic Phenomenological approach directed the research process. Seven purposively sampled participants volunteered to voice their lived experiences and a cluster of themes emerged thereafter. Emerging from their lived experiences are thirteen disablers that impede the learning experiences at University and key amongst them are: (i) negative attitudes; (ii) policy-practice disjuncture; (iii) staff unreadiness and unpreparedness; (iv) inaccessible buildings; and (v) rigid curricula.

Keywords

disablers; Hermeneutic Phenomenology; inclusive education; University of Zambia; visual impairment

Introduction

This article is an extract from the principal researcher's doctoral thesis on lived experiences of Students with Visual Impairments (SwVI) while pursuing their studies at the University of Zambia in Sub-Saharan Africa (Simui, Kasonde-Ngandu & Nyaruwata, 2017) and (Simui, Kasonde-Ngandu, Cheyeka & Kakana, 2018). The University of Zambia is a public university with a history of more than 50 years (Mundende, Simui, Chishiba, Mwewa & Namangala, 2016). In principle, inclusive education was a well-accepted concept within the University since it existed within a country where the 2006 United Nations Conventions for Persons with Disabilities was ratified and domesticated (Simui, 2018). Hence, the

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presence of students with visual impairments within the University (Simui, 2018). In using the Hermeneutic approach, the researchers accepted the difficulty of bracketing, as advanced through the Transcendental Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). Instead, the study leans on the works of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) dubbed Hermeneutic Phenomenology (Simui, 2018). This departure was primarily because of the rejection of the idea of suspending personal opinions and the turn for the interpretive narration to the description, as advanced by numerous philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Lévinas, Jean-Luc Nancy and Jean-Luc Marion (Healy, 2012). Therefore, this study attempts to unveil the world as experienced by the SwVI through their life world stories.

Background

The World Report on Disability observes that about a billion people, including children, (approximately 15.6 per cent) of the world's population live with some form of disability (WHO, 2011). The report notes the disproportional effects which disability has on people, and children in particular, from lower-income countries and those living in the poorest wealth quintile of the world's population. According to UNICEF (2013), while access to education for other children is improving, the same cannot be said for children with disabilities. They remain most negatively marginalised and excluded from education. They continue to experience dismissive attitudes, discrimination and are largely invisible in official statistics used for education planning and programme implementation. Such discrimination and exclusion has a negative effect on their livelihoods (UNICEF, 2013). UNESCO (2014) further confirms this prevailing situation. UNESCO argues that, worldwide, there are still about 57 million children of primary school age, who are not in school due to financial, social or physical challenges. More than half of the 57 million children out of school are in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is anchored on the social model in order to understand the disability phenomenon. While the medical model emphasises biology and locates disability-related challenges in the affected person's body, the social model de-emphasises biology and situates disability within societal structures (Rieser, 2006). The social model is the term used by proponents opposed to the medical model way of viewing disability (Roulstone, Thomas & Watson, 2012). Under the social model, it is argued that the medical model severely and unnecessarily restricts the roles that disabled people can play in life (Watermeyer, 2013). Treating disabled people according to the medical models makes them dependent on certain (non-disabled) people and separates them from the rest of society.

Overall, the social model contributed enormously to disability dialogue and exposed the oppressive ideology of the past. However, in the recent past, the social model has come under scrutiny from challengers. For instance, Bury (2000) alludes to the fact that, despite the most successful efforts to remove societal obstacles from the environment, some traces, limitations and certain realities of a biologically informed disability would still remain.

Literature Review

Prevalence of students with disability in developed countries

In developed countries such as the United States of America and Canada, persons with reported disabilities represented a small segment of the general population at postsecondary education level, averaging between 1.5% and 11% across North America (Harrison & Wolforth, 2012; Fichten, Ferraro, Asuncion, Chwojka, Barile, Nguyen, Klomp & Wolforth, 2009). Prevalence rates varied greatly depending upon the size and type of the institution, with higher rates of enrolment reported in colleges and distance education institutions (Fichten et al., 2009).

Disablers to inclusive education in higher education

At present, a number of studies on the education of learners with disabilities in higher education have been conducted, including that of Riddell, Tinklin and Wilson (2004). The purpose of their study was to investigate the impact of multiple policy innovations on the participation and experiences of disabled students in higher education in Scotland and England between 2001 and 2003. Emerging from Riddell et al.'s (2004) research study were the following findings: (i) most institutions had staffing and structures in places to develop policy and provision for disabled students; and. (ii) educational provisions for persons with disabilities have supportive policies in a number of areas including admissions, infrastructure and some strategic plans.

However, there was an apparent gap between policy and practice, with students encountering barriers to choice of institution and subject, access to the physical environment and to the curriculum (Riddell et al., 2004).

Riddell et al. (2004) observe that depending on their particular impairment, most of the students experienced barriers to accessing education as it relates to the physical environment or teaching and learning at some point during their studies. Some students found that adjustments to teaching practices were difficult to obtain. Even where students had received formal agreements to provide 'reasonable adjustments' as demanded by law, such as handouts in advance of lectures, they often found themselves in the difficult position of repeatedly having to ask for these, usually unsuccessfully.

Lourens (2015), in his thesis, focused on the lived experiences of higher education for students with a visual impairment in South Africa. The study's findings described the challenges related to the transition from school. In addition, participants discussed complex social interactions with non-disabled peers, in which the latter reportedly offered help, and avoided or stared at participants, leaving them feeling 'not seen'. Third, within the learning environment, the participants were sometimes confronted with unwilling lecturers, a lack of communication amongst important role-players, late course material and/or headaches and muscle tension from the effort of reading with limited sight.

Related to Lourens' (2015) study above is Maguvhe (2015), pitched within a South African context, who focused on factors that limited the participation of the visually

impaired learners in mathematics and science education. The study revealed that teacher motivation and mentorship in mathematics and science methodologies and the use of tools for learner empowerment were lacking. It further revealed that teachers lacked the requisite skills in special education to harness learner potential in mathematics and science. This situation necessitates government action in teacher training and development.

Similar to Lourens (2015), Ntombela and Soobrayen (2013) contextualised their study within South Africa particularly at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. In their study, they explored the nature of access challenges faced by students with visual disabilities at the Edgewood campus. The findings showed that although access had improved for students with disabilities in this institution, there were still systemic barriers that limited the participation of students with visual disabilities in the academic programmes.

In general, Gronlund, Lim and Larsson (2010) observed that in developing countries there existed many obstacles in the process of implementing inclusive education. In conducting this study, an in-depth case study of two developing countries – Bangladesh and Tanzania – were reviewed. The findings showed that obstacles to effective use of Assistive Technologies for inclusive education (IE) came from three different levels – school, national and network. In a related study, Majinge and Stilwell (2014) focused on SwVI in a different context. They studied library services provision for people with visual impairments and in wheelchairs in academic libraries in Tanzania. The findings show that academic libraries provide services to people with visual impairments and in wheelchairs but these services are not inclusive or universal.

Methodology

A qualitative research methodology with a Hermeneutic Phenomenological approach guided the study. The focus was to illuminate particulars and seemingly trivial aspects within experiences of SwVI with a goal of constructing meaning and achieving a sense of understanding (Simui, 2018). In addition, Langdridge (2007) argues that our experiences can be best understood through stories we tell of that experience. To understand the life world we need to explore the stories people tell of their experiences, often with the help of some specific hermeneutic.

Research design

Hermeneutic Phenomenology research design was applied to study the lived experiences of SwVI as postulated in Martin Heidegger's thesis on '*Being* and *Time',* further expanded by Van Manen's four reflective thematic areas on lived experiences as follows: (i) lived space – Spatiality; (ii) lived body – Corporeality; (iii) lived time – Temporality; and (iv) lived human relation – Relationality (Van Manen, 2007).

Sample size and selection criteria

Seven participants were purposively sampled based on Van Manen's (2007) inclusion and exclusion criteria as follows:

(i) Lived with a visual impairment (Corporeality)

(ii) Lived with a visual impairment for more than a year in the university (Temporality)
(iii) Lived with the visual impairment in the target university (Spatiality)
(iv) Lived with a visual impairment while studying with others in a university (Relationality)

Below is a table summarising profiles of the seven participants whose real names are replaced with pseudonyms for ethical reasons. Equally, participants' descriptors, such as programme, year of study, age, sex, marital and employment status, were purposively included for the purpose of better understanding of the phenomenon at hand as well as possible replication of the study by other researchers.

Table 1: Participants' profiles (names of participants are pseudonyms)

Name	Programme	Year of study	Age	Sex	Martial status	Employment status
Brid	B Ed Special	Year 2	25	F	Unmarried	Unemployed
Charm	B Ed Special	Year 3	38	M	Married	Employed
Frey	B Ed Special	Year 2	28	M	Unmarried	Unemployed
Joe	B Ed Special	Year 4	27	M	Unmarried	Unemployed
Steel	B Ed Special	Year 2	36	M	Unmarried	Employed
Tau	B Ed Special	Year 2	28	M	Unmarried	Unemployed
Tom	PhD candidate	Year 1	48	M	Married	Employed

Research tools

In this study, the researcher used the following research tools, namely: Unstructured Interviews schedule, Focus Group Discussions guide and Observation guide. Use of multiple tools strengthened the validity and reliability of the study findings as evidence was collaborated and triangulated from different viewpoints.

Data-generation procedure

Data-generation procedure assumed a four-step approach as follows:

(i) Shadowing and unstructured interview techniques applied to a PhD student with visual impairment (SwVI)
(ii) Two undergraduate SwVs purposively engaged and interviewed separately While one of the two participants happened to be the only SwVI under the distance-learning mode, the other one was in his fourth and final year at regular study mode
(iii) Three second-year SwVIs volunteered to be interviewed on their lived experiences within the university
(iv) A focus group discussion of three SwVIs composed of a female with albinism, a male student with low vision (SwLV) and a blind student

Analysis and interpretation

The analysis of data in this study was concurrently done throughout the data-gathering process using Inductive Data Analysis. Field notes and interview transcriptions were reviewed from time to time to identify the emerging themes or patterns. The data were coded accordingly from the sources reviewed and across each site case. The data were then analysed thematically and the identified themes were cross-checked by the participants for validation purposes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Trustworthiness

In this study Guba's (1981) four criteria of trustworthiness were applied. The four elements are: (i) credibility; (ii) transferability; (iii) dependability; and (iv) confirmability. For instance, to enhance rigour and enrich the analysis, a variety of strategies were employed including critical reflexivity, attention to negative (exceptional) cases, communicative validation and peer review (Charmaz, 2006).

Ethical considerations

In carrying out this study, ethical issues as guided by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000), such as written consents from all participants, were followed. Pseudonyms were assigned in place of actual names to assure confidentiality and privacy. The pseudonyms given were as follows: Tom, Joe, Steel, Charm, Brid, Tau and Frey. In addition, the ethics committee cleared the research proposal as provided for in the university regulations. The ethical clearance reference for this study was REF. HSSREC: 2018-May-014.

Findings and Discussion

Disablers to learning experienced by SwVI

Emerging from the SwVI lived experiences were thirteen (13) disablers identified as detrimental to their success at university level. These were: (i) negative attitudes; (ii) absence of IE policy; (iii) inaccessible learning environment; (iv) inaccessible learning materials; (v) exclusive assessment system; (vi) exclusive pedagogy; (vii) absence of mobility; (viii) absence of financial support; (ix) exclusive sanitary facilities; and (x) absence of landmarks. Others were: (xi) limited institutional support staff; (xii) inadequate assistive learning devices; and (xiii) limited partners.

Negative attitudes (Corporeality)

In the area of negative attitudes, which are linked to Corporeality according to Van Manen (2007), there were many incidences where these were manifested. For example, Brid reported a number of sighted students having bullied her based on her albinism condition. She painfully recounted how in the past she had been given demeaning and offensive labels:

> They call me all sorts of names. Aaaaah!!!!! At *ka chitangwa nalesa* [God's creation]. *Ka mwabi* [albino] … not in my class but *kuma* ruins [old residencies for the male students] when I am visiting the shopping complex. This time, I have learnt to ignore and move on. It is their nature. They do not know what they are doing. (Brid, 26-01-2017)

Brid, cited incidents where sighted students bullied her based on her albinism condition [corporeality]. She painfully recounted how in the past she had been called demeaning and offensive language. This state of affairs described above point to lack of human rights enforcement by the duty bearers. Equally, Tau had his moments when a sighted peer could not provide support to him due to suspected negative attitudes:

> There was a day I was going to another hostel and I asked for directions. The persons just pointed but then I quickly told him that I had a visual impairment and so could not see properly. He did not care. He just pointed and left me stranded. I felt it was an attitude problem. (Tau, 26-01-2017)

The identified presence of negative attitudes in this study is common to many settings as noted by Mutanga and Walker (2017); Chhabra, Srivastava and Srivastava (2010) and Hess (2010). In the U.K., students with a visual impairment have been reported to be at risk of social exclusion and of being stigmatised for their impairment (Hess, 2010). In addition, Chhabra et al. (2010) revealed that many regular teachers feel unprepared and fearful of working with learners with disabilities in regular classes – hence their display of frustration, anger and negative attitudes towards inclusive education.

Thurston (2014) describes discomfort experienced by students with disabilities generated by peers outside their network of friends. Equally, Dart, Nkanotsang, Chizwe and Kowa (2010) reported that the students experienced low self-esteem, loneliness and a lack of acceptance from their fellow students, which consequently contributed to poor academic performance. Negative attitudes appear to influence nearly all the other disabling factors reported above. Where the attitudes are negative, there is likely to be limited financial support, and limited peer, family and staff support as well. This then entails that for SwVI to progress and realise their potential, the need for positive attitudes becomes paramount. It is for this reason that a number of researchers rank negative attitudes top amongst other barriers to inclusion. For instance, McDougall, DeWit, King, Mille and Killip (2004) contend that negative peer attitudes are commonly considered to be a major barrier to full social inclusion of disabled students in schools.

Exclusive policy

A number of cited lived disablers by SwVI pointed to the lack of institutional inclusive policy. The first case is that of Tom who was denied admission to the university on three occasions, despite having met the admission criteria. However, his sheer determination helped him get admitted on the fourth attempt. The second case is that of Bri who was bullied countless times within the university grounds without any recourse to intervention.

The third and final case is that of Steel, who was forced to repeat a year because of the institution's failure to provide assessment materials in Braille. Clearly, all three cases illustrated above point to the need for an inclusive policy to guide practice. In addition, Bri and Frey argued that their school Dean had come up with a rule that all front seats in classrooms were reserved for learners with special educational needs. However, "other people do not care even with such a policy".

In developed countries, a number of studies on the education of learners with disabilities in higher education have established the presence of inclusive policies. For example, Riddell et al.'s (2004) study established that most institutions had staffing and structures in places to develop policy and provision for disabled students. Even where an inclusive policy is available, there are instances where a disjuncture between policy and practice prevails (Mosia & Phasha, 2017). In this regard, Read et al. (2003) argue that education that does not accommodate student diversity perpetuates inequality in society and violates human rights of persons with disabilities.

Inaccessible learning environment (Spatiality)

In terms of accessibility linked to the concept of 'Spatiality' according to Van Manen (2007), Steel described the university as not being accessible. In his words:

> The environment is not accessible. You need to climb a number of stairs to access services. Roads are not well planned. No landmarks! For me to walk alone is very challenging.
>
> (Steel, 20-01-2017)

Steel's lived experience regarding accessibility was collaborated by others' experiences as demonstrated by Charm who painfully remembered his experience as well:

> I remember one time; I bumped into a metal pole when I was surveying the university premises. I happened to be alone. Such an experience made me fear to move alone. I anticipated that there could be many other poles like that. (Charm, 26-01-2017)

In addition, Joe's expressed sentiments were equally re-echoed by Steel who observed that:

> The place here has TOO MUCH STEPS! [Amplified voice]. Those steps become a hindrance to my mobility. On the other hand, the issue of the buildings being scattered all over is also another challenge. This is because, you find that I am required to attend a lecture in school of education and may be the following lecture is to be taken in the library basement. That becomes a challenge for me to move from one end to the other.
>
> (Steel, 20-01-2017)

The complications that resulted from Inaccessible Learning Environment included avoidable life-threatening accidents cited by SwVI. For instance, Joe recalled how one day he injured himself within the university premises:

> There was a day, I happen to be with a friend busy chatting and he forgot to alert me that we were approaching a staircase. I injured myself badly. Now, I was asking myself, imagine I had injured myself with someone! What if I was alone? I had my leg twisted. Again, the other time I was going to town. I was with a course mate. As I was about to board a bus, there was a deep drainage. He forgot to alert me of the presence of the drainage. I ended up in a drainage, and it was rain season and I injured myself again. This time it was my hand.
>
> (Joe, 26-01-2017)

Like the cited incidences above, Gelbar, Madaus, Lombardi, Faggella-Luby and Dukes (2015) reported experiences where students with disabilities faced challenges such as inaccessible buildings, rigid curricula and negative attitudes of staff and lecturers. Similarly, Banda-Chalwe, Nitz and De Jonge (2013) contended that accessibility to premises, facilities and services was a right of people with disabilities. To this extent, inaccessibility of the physical environment is a violation of that right. Further, Swain and French (2008) observed that exclusion was the denial of rights and responsibilities of an individual expressed in oppression, which shaped the personal and collective experiences and expectations of people with disabilities.

Inaccessible learning materials

What was clear was that instructional materials given to SwVI were not accessible. "I was given modules in hardcopy format, obviously for use, when I am totally blind! What a puzzle!" (Steel, 20-01-2017). In addition, Steel observed that the library was not a friendly place:

> I remember it was just one single day when I visited the library when I got my student card. After the student card issuance, I wanted to read some of books found there. Unfortunately, I could not find any books or modules in Braille. All of them are hard copies. That stated to me clearly in my mind that the library here is not helpful to people with visual impairment especially the blind. (Steel, 20-01-2017)

All of the seven SwVI consulted had not used the library for learning purposes as it had study materials in inaccessible formats. Whereas academic libraries are expected to provide services to students with visual impairments, Majinge and Stilwell (2014) noted that their services were not inclusive or universal.

Exclusive assessment system

Some students reported challenges at assessment stage. For instance, Steel recounted:

> … when the results came out, I only managed to pass in two of the three courses that I had registered for. On the other one, they wrote None Examined (NE). But, that was unfortunate because I had sat for that examination too. Evidence was there but the results were not available. That forced me to re-enter the same course the following year. It is devastating because, once results get lost and I have a mobility challenge, I cannot manage to follow them up on my own. (Steel, 20-01-2017)

Exclusive pedagogy

The teaching methodologies or pedagogy adopted by most lecturers were exclusive to SwVI. For example, Joe observed that most of the teaching staff took a hasty-teaching approach, without taking cognisance of the needs of SwVI into account. He argued:

> My own experience has been that lecturers rush against time. In a space of one hour we cover a lot of content. They even tell our friends the sighted to write their notes in short forms … This becomes a challenge to us who are using Braille. Especially that I am not all that fast in terms of Braille compounded by the speedy-rush lecturing, makes the whole experience very challenging. (Joe, 20-01-2017)

Tom reflected on his experiences in other universities within Sub-Saharan Africa where teaching staff had adapted their methodologies to meet the needs of SwVI, contrary to the approach followed at the University of Zambia:

> We do not bother to ask the question 'how can I help you?' All we do is to teach using whatever means available to everyone even when some of those teaching strategies are not friendly to learners with disabilities. For instance, it is common to hear: *See* the diagram on the board. *Copy* the notes on the board. Can you *see here* what they are doing?
> (Tom, 04-01-2017)

In other words, the teaching approaches adopted by some of the teaching staff at the University of Zambia were exclusive and not inclusive to the needs of SwVI. Such an approach, if not checked, contributed to low numbers of SwVI being able to progress and realise their potential in the long run. This is consistent with Matlosa and Matobo's (2007) findings in Lesotho on the visually- and hearing-impaired students. Their study showed that access for students with visual impairments to science-related programmes was constrained by Mathematics and Statistics requirements, insufficient resources and lecturers' lack of understanding about the students' disability and support needs. Matlosa and Matobo's (2007) findings are consistent with Simui, Thompson, Mundende, Mwewa, Kakana, Chishiba and Namangala's (2017) study, which noted the presence of unfriendly instructional materials at the University of Zambia as a threat to academic success of distance students in general and SwVI in particular.

Limited financial support (Relationality)

Limited financial support was reported to be a barrier to entry into university education. For instance, Tom, in his first year and first semester, could not register on time, owing to the lack of financial resources. His sighted course mates, on the other hand, were already six weeks into the syllabus after the registration window had closed. Only sheer determination enabled Tom to eventually register, progress and complete his studies. Tom's lived experience is similar to that of Steel. Like Tom, Steel was an in-service student when he first joined the University of Zambia. Steel observed:

> I always spend more than my colleagues who are sighted. For instance, on food, I have a guide whom I accommodate and feed. Therefore, I have to spend more than a K1 000 [$100] every residential [period of 2 weeks]. (Steel, 20-01-2017)

From Steel's extract above, it is clear that the cost of living is higher for the SwVI compared to the non-VI students. The challenging part of the indirect costs of the education of SwVI, such as the cost of a guide, purchase of a white cane and JAWS software is that SwVI and their families are forced to shoulder such costs, even if they are living in abject poverty. This becomes a barrier, even when their tuition fees are fully taken care of by government and other well-wishers. The finding on the cost element is consistent with that of Emong and Eron (2016) who argued that the monetary value of the basic requirements for blind students exceeded the financial support they received from the university (Emong & Eron, 2016). In addition, the financial demands on SwVI is compounded by their chronic poverty status (Trani & Loeb, 2012).

Exclusive sanitary facilities (Spatiality)

Tau had issues with the communal sanitary facilities within the hostels. He observed that the they were in a poor state. He argued: "I fail to see whether the communal toilet or bathroom is clean. I just go there without realising that the room is unclean." Unlike Tau, with low vision, the rest of the SwVI were much more affected by the poor hygiene levels in communal sanitary facilities around campus, a situation they described as "pathetic" and requiring urgent attention.

Absence of orientation and mobility (Spatiality)

Reflecting on unforgettable nasty experiences in the university, Tom remembered a day when he fell into a ditch:

> I remember there was a time I needed to attend a lecture. I had just come in the university … there was no one to escort me … I decided to start off and take a risk. I started quite well … I found myself hammering flowers. Someone asked, where I was going, whom I told 'Maths lab'. He later volunteered to show me the direction. That man just left after some few steps and gave verbal directions to me to go 'straight' whatever 'straight' meant. Now, I crossed but I did not know that where I was going there was a ditch. Two women stood afar off and they were saying '*eyeeee, bala ponena muchilindi*' [Ooh! He is going to fall into a ditch]. At the time I heard them, I had already lifted my leg. I found myself in a ditch. The only good thing was that I fell sat. I did not fell portrait. Then, one of the two women said, '*wamona, efwo nachilalanda*' [you see, this is what I told you that he was going to fall into a ditch!] However, I wondered, they saw me coming toward a ditch, but decided not to warn me! That is how I went back to my room. I could not attend that lecture.
>
> (Tom, 04-01-2017)

Why is it easy for a sighted student to watch disabled students (perhaps a course mate) fall in a ditch without offering support? Could it be a sign of a negative attitude or lack

of education? Tom's lived experience is a reminder of the need to embrace orientation and mobility (O&M) by all stakeholders, given the many barriers that exist in and around the university.

Absence of landmarks (Spatiality)

The earlier reported challenge of uncovered ditches and dangerous obstacles displayed all over the university premises was compounded by the lack of landmarks, as observed by Charm, Tom and Steel. For instance, Steel concluded that:

> The university has no landmarks. The area is too vast. For us to move around and get to know places where we are there must be some landmarks. Therefore, I think it is a very big challenge. (Steel, 20-01-2017)

Going by the lived experiences of SwVI, the need for O&M appear to be linked to landmarks. In other words, as SwVI are oriented to their university surroundings, such an initiative would be meaningful when coupled with the presence of permanent landmarks. At the University of Zambia, both O&M and the presence of permanent landmarks were missing, leaving SwVI vulnerable and exposed to all sorts of avoidable accidents.

Limited institutional support staff (Relationality)

Institutional staff support covers both academic and non-academic support offered to SwVI in order to learn effectively. The staff support was affected by the attitudes and values staff had towards SwVI. Take the experience of Tom as an example:

> A problem came up … even after fighting those battles. I only knew Braille and there was no lecturer who knew Braille to support me. When assignments or tests were given, I would write in Braille and there was no one who could transcribe from Braille to text language for lecturers to read. (Tom, 04-01-2017)

The experience above brings to mind the challenge of staff competencies as far as Braille education is concerned. In addition, the University did not have support staff engaged to act as guides and provide Mobility and Orientation services to SwVI. Thus, SwVI were left at the mercy of their sighted peers to progress in their academic endeavours. This finding is similar to Emong and Eron's (2016) findings, where students reported that their university had found it challenging to transcribe Brailled works into print. Consequently, the examinations blind students took were not Brailled. I feel this is unethical. Affected students also reported that it was unethical on the part of the university. It made SwVI feel that their former secondary school was better than their university in understanding their disability as it had Brailled their examination papers for them (Emong & Eron, 2016).

Limited assistive learning devices

At the time SwVI entered university, they had expectations. For example, SwVI expected to find assistive learning devices (ALDs) within the university. To the contrary, the university was ill equipped with such tools as observed by Steel:

> When I came here [University of Zambia], I thought I would be provided with Orientation and Mobility support, by helping me with a white cane and then orient me on the infrastructure. Sadly, I was not oriented. (Steel, 20-01-2017)

As was noted earlier, the bulk of the ALDs used by SwVI were owned by individual students. It was clear that the use of white canes, eyeglasses, computers, JAWS software, voice recorders, magnifying lenses, scanners and embossers enhance the learning experiences of SwVI to realise their potential. Therefore, there is need for the university to invest in this area as well.

Consistent with the findings of this study, Maguvhe (2015), revealed that blind and partially sighted learners find it difficult to pursue mathematics and science subjects because learning support devices are limited and teachers are not capacitated to create a conducive learning environment for SwVI. It is clear that the use of white canes, eyeglasses, computers, JAWS software, voice recorders, magnifying lenses, scanners and embossers enhance the learning experiences of SwVI to realise their potential (Simui, Kasonde-Ngandu & Nyaruwata, 2017).

Limited partnerships (Relationality)

Partners played a significant role in the provision of the much-needed resources in the education of SwVI at university level. At the university, very few partners dedicated to support SwVI existed, as alluded to by Tom:

> We need partners to come on board and join hands with the university, given the amount of resources needed to address the needs of students with visual impairments. Currently, very few Visual Impaired focused partners exist, if any. (Tom, 04-01-2017)

The University of Zambia, being a state-owned university, was open to partners interested in investing in the higher education sector, specifically in the area of SwVI. Thus, more partners were welcome to partner with the university in the provision of quality education for SwVI.

Conclusion

In conclusion, SwVI are faced with a host of disablers on a daily basis which hinder their progress through their academic journey at higher education level. Whereas resources are limited in universities such as the University of Zambia, SwVI carry with them unexploited resources that administrators, managers and teaching staff can tap into and use to devise innovative ways to combat exclusion. To this effect, it is clear that solutions to the challenges encountered in the process of implementing inclusive education lie with the excluded persons. If only they can be engaged and consulted in the decision-making process, institutions are bound make a breakthrough to a multitude of challenges encountered when implementing inclusive education in institutions of higher learning.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the current study, the researchers' recommendations to the university and other similar higher learning institutions are as follows:

(i) Develop and implement an inclusive policy, given that the university has no tailor-made policy on inclusive education.
(ii) Involve SwVI in decision-making process affecting their academic progression.
(iii) Introduce an Orientation and Mobility programme for SwVI within the university curriculum for SwVI to become independent.
(iv) Improve on the accessibility to the learning environment and content.
(v) Build capacity amongst staff to support SwVI.
(vi) Build capacity amongst non-visually impaired students to support SwVI.
(vii) Provide access to suitable technology. Such tools could include white canes, talking watches, voice recorders, embossers and elevators, amongst others.

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Research article

Kinds of Support Offered by the Disability Unit to Students with Disabilities at Institutions of Higher Learning in South Africa: A Case Study of the University of Venda

Tshifhiwa Mbuvha*

Abstract

More and more tertiary institutions are now focusing on the mainstreaming and inclusion of students with disabilities. Some higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa have established so-called Disability Units (DUs) to offer specialised services to students with disabilities, to facilitate access and integration of these students at their institutions. For many students with disabilities, the DU services are the first point of contact. These units work to facilitate access and ensure participation in the university for students with disabilities. This involves making "reasonable adjustments" and providing support for students with disabilities to ensure full participation and equal opportunities. Students with disabilities who will need support and alternative arrangements range from students with hearing impairments, visual impairments, physical impairments, health impairments (such as chronic illness), learning impairments, or psychiatric disabilities. Although universities, both locally and internationally, may systematise support in slightly different ways, many universities follow similar trends to accommodate and support students with specific disabilities as per their needs. Appropriate support systems in teaching and learning are vital in ensuring equal access for students with disabilities. The commitment of the institution to facilitating support and participation depends on its willingness to change admission, curricular and assessment procedures, as well as physical accessibility of the institution. We have seen from the literature that support for students with disabilities varies from country to country (Lane, 2017; Mantsha, 2016). We followed a qualitative research approach and adopted a case study research design to understand the phenomenon of student support better. We used classroom observations, document analysis and focus group interviews to collect data. Ten students with disabilities participated in the study. The study found that the DU of the university played an important role in supporting their studies. However, the students did not receive adequate additional support from their lecturers such as tutorials and differentiation of the curriculum. Shortage of learning materials specifically adapted for students with disabilities was mentioned as a weakness. The study recommends that lecturers should be trained on how to teach and support students with disabilities as this will enhance the quality of teaching and learning for these students. Other recommendations include that the DU should establish an online interactive portal for its registered students to increase communication between students and the university.

Keywords

disability; educational support; higher education institutions; inclusive education

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Introduction

In the past two to three decades, there has been a large influx of students with disabilities into institutions of higher education worldwide (Crous, 2004). In South Africa, information on the intake of students with disabilities was not recorded in the past three decades as services of this kind were not institutionalised. More and more tertiary institutions are now focusing on the mainstreaming and inclusion of students with disabilities. Some HEIs in South Africa have established so-called Disability Units (DUs) to offer specialised services to students with disabilities, to facilitate access and integration of these students at their institutions (Mayat & Amosun, 2011).

For many students with disabilities, the DU is the first point of contact. These units work to facilitate access and ensure participation in the university for students with disabilities. This involves making "reasonable adjustments" and providing support for students with disabilities to ensure full participation and equal opportunities. Students with disabilities who will need support and alternative arrangements range from those with hearing impairments, visual impairments, physical impairments, health impairments (such as chronic illness), learning impairments, to psychiatric disabilities (Crous, 2004).

Although universities, both locally and internationally, may systematise support in slightly different ways, many universities follow similar trends to accommodate and support students with specific disabilities as per their needs. Cheausuwantavee and Cheausuwantavee (2012) argue that appropriate support systems in teaching and learning are vital in ensuring equal access for students with disabilities. The commitment of the institution to facilitating support and participation depends on its willingness to change admission, curricular and assessment procedures, as well as physical accessibility of the institution. We have seen from the literature that support for students with disabilities varies from country to country (Lane, 2017; Mantsha, 2016).

In South Africa, the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg seems to be ahead in supporting students with disabilities (University of the Witwatersrand, 2010). Besides their outstanding Assistive Technology services, some of their best practices include continual quality checks of scanned or edited student material, continually looking at adding to or improving their services and technology or adaptive devices, and annual evaluation forms to be filled out by their Disability Unit students. Moreover, what is quite impressive is the sensitisation and empowering of their students. For instance, the Disability Unit hosts teaching workshops to sensitise and educate university lecturers about teaching disabled students, organises a disability awareness week to create awareness amongst the University population, encourages Disability Unit students to introduce themselves to and liaise with their lecturers (using a letter of accommodation as a starting tool), and encourages Disability Unit students to attend various university workshops (e.g. CV-writing workshops) to aid them in their personal development.

From my experience, Wits is currently using the Higher Education Disability Services Association (HEDSA) as a forum for benchmarking best practices for DUs in South Africa. Many services available at Wits are now available in other universities as well, though it must be borne in mind that services differ from institution to institution.

Several studies have identified the types of services provided in postsecondary institutions (Tagayuna, Stodden, Chang, Zeleznik & Whelley, 2005; Pingry, 2007; Michail, 2010), and these are summarised below.

Students with disabilities encounter more academic, attitudinal, and physical barriers while attending lectures than students without disabilities. Specifically, they are more likely than their non-disabled peers to have difficulty in the following areas: study/test skills, note-taking, listening comprehension, organisation skills, social skills, self-esteem, and reading/writing deficits (Pingry, Markward & French, 2012). Students also have concerns about the ability of the institutions to modify classroom environments to meet their needs. In this regard, students with physical disabilities, especially those who use wheelchairs, have considerable difficulty negotiating many campus environments/ classroom accommodations.

Classroom accommodation allows for student physical accessibility. Accommodation provided may include preferential seating, accessible seating, table-top desks, lap boards, and requests to academic departments for a class to be relocated to an accessible location. This was emphasised by Greyling (2008) when she stated that lecturers needed to consider external environmental conditions such as well-circulated ventilation for students with asthma, extra space in the classroom to manoeuvre wheelchairs, the desk size and level, and the seat itself to ease writing, especially for those using laptops to write notes. Accommodation may also provide students with disabilities the option to take frequent breaks or the ability to stand up or lie down during class (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2005; Mole, 2012; Pingry, 2007).

Most buildings that were built prior to 1994 are not easily accessible to those with disabilities and institutions are building ramps and lifts to make the buildings more accessible. According to the social model, a building should be designed in a way that it is accommodating of people with different abilities. The social model sees the disabling practices of society as the cause of disability rather than the individual with the impairment (Oliver, 1998; Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1996). Where society puts up barriers, like stairs for wheelchair users or exam time constraints for people with learning difficulties, it produces disability. If educational institutions design spaces, lectures or activities to incorporate people with impairments, then these people will not be disabled but included. Thus, unsafe environments for students with disabilities are deliberate in this model according to Becker, Martin, Wajeeh, Ward and Shern (2002).

Reasonable accommodation includes accessible residences for students with disabilities. This is only a problem in the old buildings which were built before the enforcement of the building regulations. For the inaccessible buildings, students who need assistance in the performance of activities of daily living are afforded the opportunity to participate in training to improve their knowledge and skills in independent living. They are empowered by the responsibility which they share with the residential administrative team for hiring, training, scheduling, managing, and evaluating personal attendant staff. In my university, not all residences are accessible and that leaves students with disabilities with limited choices in terms of where to stay. Ultimately, there are residences for students with disabilities or where

a certain category of disability is dominant. The new approach (Social Model) to service provision requires providers to change their approach. Instead of looking at students with disabilities and seeing a deficit that needs to be accounted for by providing accommodation and negotiating different treatment (Medical Model), they are now looking at the campus and learning environments as factors for disablement. They need to be knowledgeable about physical, instructional and curriculum barriers (Mole, 2012).

Transportation services should provide accessible university transportation to students with disabilities through the university disability office (Pingry, 2007). I have seen the importance of adaptation of university transport as part of supporting students with disabilities. In many instances, students with physical disabilities, especially those who use wheelchairs, are likely to be excluded from educational tours because university transport has not been adapted to their needs. Educational tours also include Work Intergrated Learning (WIL) which is compulsory for all students.

In terms of adaptations, Mole (2012) argues that a key tool for implementing Social Model approaches to disability service provision is the concept of Universal Design (UD). UD is an architectural paradigm that provides seven principles of design. She further says, the design of products and environments should be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialised design.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an educational approach to teaching, learning, and assessment that allows us to respond effectively to individual student differences (Wilson, 2017). This idea takes UD in the physical space to a teaching and learning level. UDL concepts have become more common in higher education. At its core, UDL encompasses three principles that lecturers should abide by in order to provide students with multiple means of representation, expression and engagement. This means that, to the extent possible, lecturers should provide content or materials in multiple formats, give students multiple ways to show what they know, and use multiple methods of motivating students (Kelly, 2014). Wilson (2017) adds that UDL acknowledges the unfairness of using one teaching approach, one form of assessment, or one type of curriculum that tends to privilege one type of student.

By incorporating UDL into lecturing, higher education lecturers can create learning space and online learning environments that are more inclusive of all students. UDL strategies often include but also go well beyond accommodations for students with disabilities, which become part of a larger strategy to meet all students' learning needs by providing materials in multiple formats (Pacansky-Brock, 2013). For example, captioned videos support not only students who are deaf and hard of hearing, but also English Language students. Many students value having access to multiple formats, as demonstrated in a study of community college students. When gathering information about students' preferences for consuming course content, Pacansky-Brock found that 40 per cent chose to read the lecture, 15 per cent listened to the lecture, 30 per cent did both (often at the same time), and 15 per cent toggled between reading and listening throughout the semester (Pacansky-Brock, 2013).

Studies (Pingry, 2007; Dell, Newton & Petroff, 2011) argue that accommodating students with learning disabilities provides them with the option to receive alternative format tests or assignments. Examples of alternative format testing or assignments may include an essay examination as a substitute for a multiple-choice examination, or a written paper as a substitute for an oral presentation. Alternative service includes converting study material into a more accessible format, scanning and editing of material, and conversion into Braille and electronic format (Moon, Todd, Morton & Ivey, 2012). If altering the test format fundamentally alters the nature of the course, this accommodation is not appropriate. In this regard, academics need to be trained on how to modify tests by not compromising the quality of the test. For example, if the test has a map that needs to be labelled, the question should be framed in such a way that it gives the same answer for both sighted and blind students (Mole, 2012).

Vogel, Leyser, Wyland and Brulle (1999) find that most faculties had no or very limited training around disabilities, and almost half indicated that they had limited knowledge and skills to provide requested educational support for students with disabilities. Interestingly, despite the limited knowledge base, a large majority of faculty expressed a supportive attitude towards students with disabilities by indicating their overall willingness (behavioural intent) to facilitate needed classroom accommodation in their courses. In fact, almost three-quarters of the faculty indicated that the average time they spent in accommodating disabled students was less than 30 minutes per week. It might be argued, therefore, that the limited time spent in accommodating disabled students is all that is necessary to meet the needs of students who requested such adaptations.

Where UDL is not implemented, there will be a need to provide distraction-reduced testing environments to students who have significant difficulty with concentration, or are highly distractible, or to avoid employing test strategies that may be distracting to those around them (Crous, 2004). Pingry et al. (2012) suggest that students with disabilities may greatly benefit from settings that minimise extraneous stimuli, and this may be especially true for students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and mental disorders. Some students with physical disabilities may need a separate room to lie down or stand up to manage pain or muscular conditions. In my institution, we provide separate venues for tests and exams, and these venues are fully accessible.

Distraction-reduced testing accommodation allows students with disabilities to have an extended amount of time to complete tests. Extended time is recommended for students whose performance is compromised by a physical or cognitive disability that causes significantly slower reading, writing, recalling or organising. Students may be eligible to receive time and a half, double time, triple time or unlimited time. Not all students with disabilities need extra time. Bell (2013) states that students with hearing impairments are often eligible for additional time during assessment/examination periods. These arrangements may include extra reading time (usually 10 to 15 minutes per hour). In my institution, students get this kind of support. In most cases, they are given fifteen minutes per hour. From my experience extended time has its own challenges in that some students may require more than the postulated time depending on the type of disability.

Pingry et al. (2012) conclude that students whose disabilities fluctuate (depression, chronic fatigue syndrome, diabetes) may request a test date or an assignment date change so that they can complete the assignment/test when interference from their condition is minimal (Pingry, 2007). Students are expected to complete the assignment and tests within a reasonable amount of time from the test date and to notify the lecturer of the request in a timely manner. I think this still requires some training for academics to show them how to be flexible with regard to due dates for assignments and tests given to students with disabilities. The practice in HEIs is that if students miss test dates, they should apply for a special test provided they have a medical report or evidence for the absenteeism.

When looking at the support offered by the Disability Unit, one cannot ignore the use of Assistive Technology. Assistive Technology is available to students to maximise their ability to effectively complete course requirements. Dell et al. (2011) define Assistive Technology as any item, piece of equipment, or product system, modified or customised to increase functional capabilities of students with disabilities. Some of the adaptive resources and services include adaptive computers, tape recorders, talking calculators, sound amplification systems, television enlargers, voice synthesisers, specialised gym equipment, calculators or keyboards with large buttons, switches, and technology assessments and evaluations. Text conversion is also classified under this category. Text conversion includes the provision of textbooks and other course materials in an alternative format such as electronic/audio text, enlarged text, Braille, and raised graphics.

I have noted that e-learning is gaining momentum in HEIs nationally and internationally. Kahiigi (2013) defines e-learning as any learning method that uses Information Communication Technology (ICT) to support students in achieving their learning outcomes. Kahiigi comments that e-learning and disability in higher education is evaluating current practice and exploring the tools, methods and approaches available for improving access to online learning.

Most people working within the higher education sector understand the importance of making e-learning accessible to students with disabilities, yet it is not always clear exactly how this should be accomplished (Seale, 2013). Seale mentions lecturers, professors, classroom designers, learning technologists, student support services, staff developers, and senior managers and administrators as the key stakeholders that should be involved in e-learning. UNIVEN has state-of-the-art Adapted Technology laboratories within the DU.

One of the most prominent findings that emerged from Giangreco, Prelock and Turnbull, (2010) was that classroom assistants were in close proximity on an ongoing basis to students with disabilities. Evidence of this is seen in by (i) the classroom assistant maintaining physical contact with the student (e.g. shoulder, back, arms, hands) or the student's wheelchair; and (ii) the classroom assistant sitting in a chair immediately next to the students. This accommodation applies to students who require an in-class assistant or an assistant at the campus library to complete course requirements. Classroom assistants may include a scribe, reader, lab assistant, library assistant or mobility assistant. A library assistant for students with disabilities is available at UNIVEN and there is a special designated area

where students can access adapted technology. Classroom assistants should be provided with competency-based training that includes ongoing, classroom-based supervision by academics.

Classroom assistants can also include tutor and study skills assistance. This service provides one-to-one weekly, biweekly or, as needed, appointments with the learning disabilities specialist to work on strategies for test preparation, test-taking, reading comprehension, written expression, organisation, goal setting and achieving, and problem solving/crisis management (Peña, 2014). UNIVEN is using mentoring and tutoring systems to support students with disabilities.

A note-taker service is another form of classroom assistance. Faculty members may provide students with a copy of their personal lecture notes. When faculty members are unable to provide notes, the DU or the professor should recruit individual note takers – ideally, teacher assistants or other students in the classes. Faculty members are notified of students' eligibility for note takers in the form of accommodation agreements, which are mailed or student delivered. Requests for this service must be supported by appropriate professional and reasonably current documentation.

Interpreting services are available to students who have a documented profound hearing loss or deafness. These services are available in the classroom and for university-sponsored events that require an interpreter. Bell (2013) argues that registered students with a hearing impairment at Stellenbosch University do not make use of the South African Sign Language (SASL) but this changed in 2017 when the 2016 Language Policy of Stellenbosch University included Sign Language as a medium of communication for deaf students who have Sign Language as their language of learning. Since 2017, there are two SASL interpreters for two deaf students who use SASL as the language of learning (Muller, 2017). My observation is that students with deafness find it difficult to access HEIs in South Africa because of their poor matric results. To improve the situation, the Limpopo Department of Education is offering training on SASL to special school educators. At present, students who are accessing HEIs are those with profound hearing loss and who have attended regular classrooms.

Counselling services are also an important part of academic support and classroom assistance in HEI settings. This service includes student participation in individual counselling and/or support groups provided by the university disability office. Support groups are available to students with ADHD, learning disabilities and students with mental disorders (Greyling, 2008). These support groups meet on a regular basis and provide students with support, social interaction and problem-solving strategies.

Physical therapy and sports training services provide students whose disabilities significantly limit the effective utilisation of the fitness and recreational resources and programmes which are otherwise available to students, with an opportunity for strength development, physical conditioning and functional training. Through participation in different sporting codes, students with severe physical disabilities are afforded an opportunity

to maximise their functional potential, relieve stress and increase their tolerance relative to the rigorous demands of campus life through the milieu of adaptive exercises. Participation of students with disabilities in different sporting activities is decreasing at UNIVEN. The reason behind this might be lack of staff members who are knowledgeable about different sporting activities that students with disabilities can participate in. Physical therapists and graduate assistants aid students in developing and implementing personal exercise programmes, particularly for developing and maintaining a range of motions, strength and conditioning. Staff can also assist students with a transfer of skills, for example, getting back into a wheelchair from the floor, manual wheelchair skills, and gait training with or without Assistive Technology (Fuller, Healey, Bradley & Hall, 2004). Supplemental to the active therapy programme, a limited number of physical agents is available for the treatment of acute and chronic musculoskeletal injuries and dysfunction.

There is a critical lack of funds to support students with disabilities in higher education in South Africa, both for the individual student and the institutions. Institutions are currently not meeting their human rights responsibilities because of the high financial cost of supporting students with disabilities. NSFAS is currently the only state funding body in South Africa and, therefore, very few students can access higher education and succeed in their studies (CHE, 2005). NSFAS guidelines are formalised and geared towards the payment of Assistive Technology. The revised NSFAS guidelines do fund human support (scribes, sign-language interpreters and note takers, etc.) to the same value per year that they fund Assistive Technology for students who need these. Intensive lobbying by HEDSA enabled this broader view of support to students, instead of the narrow view that assistance only comes in the form of Assistive Technology.

Methodology

Since we sought to explore the phenomenological experience of how students with disabilities see the educational support they receive from this university, we followed an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This approach helped us understand the experiences from the perception of the students themselves, based on a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity (Smith & Osborne, 2008; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Thus, rather than looking at generalising the findings (as is the case with quantitative studies), or attempting to produce an objective record of a phenomenon or observation, within this paradigm we adopted an idiographic and hermeneutic mode of inquiry, where we focused on the importance of bringing to the fore their in-depth experiences (Kidd & Kaczmareck, 2010; Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005), whilst at the same time attempting to make meaning out of their lived experiences through own interpretation (Smith & Osborne, 2008).

Sampling

To elicit in-depth data from an insider perspective of the educational support offered to students with disabilities, we purposively selected only a small number (10) students (Creswell, 2013). A purposive sampling strategy allowed us to find only a defined group

(students with disabilities) for whom the research problem was relevant and of personal significance. In addition, the strategy allowed us to address (i) interpretative concerns (degree of similarity or variation that can be contained in the analysis of the phenomenon), and (ii) pragmatic considerations (ease or difficulty of contacting potential participants, and relative rarity of the phenomenon) (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Moreover, this small number helped us: (i) to do an in-depth analysis of those students who were educationally supported; (ii) to gauge the richness of the individual cases, within the focus group; and (iii) to take advantage of an opportunity to examine similarities and differences between individuals, whilst keeping the amount of qualitative data within reasonable limits.

Data collection

The study used three methods of data collection: observations, focus group interviews, and document analysis.

Observations

We spent some periods in lecture halls where students with disabilities attended lectures to observe how they were supported during these. We began by planning and having informal discussions with the lecturers of the respective modules to explain the project and to familiarise ourselves with the lecture halls and the library. Also, these informational discussions were meant to clarify any misunderstanding of the project. Secondly, it was to encourage the students to feel free to talk. During these visits we observed a variety of activities, including the learning environment (classrooms, toilets, sporting facilities, etc). After the informal discussions, we made formal appointments to visit the classrooms for observation of lessons and interviews with two teachers in each of the four schools. We adopted the participant-observer stance because it enabled us to see how things were organised, prioritised, and how lecturers related to all students in the lecture halls throughout the University. The approach also helped us to become acquainted with their cultural nuances, which assisted us a great deal in easing tensions and making the research process easier and better. Three lessons were observed with each lecturer, and after every observation we engaged the lecturers in unpacking some of the engagements we noted during the lessons and in the physical environment.

Focus group interviews

We used the research questions to guide the interview process. Thus, although the research questions were established prior to the interview sessions, we allowed the participants the latitude to supply the depth and breadth of information they were willing to divulge with very minimal interruptions. This form of interviewing enabled us and the participants to engage in a constructive dialogue whereby initial questions were modified in the light of their responses. This also allowed us to probe interesting and important areas that arose, whilst we kept their interest and concerns in mind (Smith & Osborne, 2008).

Document analysis

The document analysis entails a scrutiny of relevant documents, which can be a valuable source of information (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smith, 2004). Document analysis involved looking at national and institutional policies on disability, the teaching and learning policy, assessment policy, tutoring and mentoring policy, learning materials and timetables. Creswell (2013) points out that one of the limitations of using documents is incompleteness of many reports, statistical records and historical documents, with gaps in the database that cannot be filled in any other way, as well as bias in documents not intended for research. Nevertheless, I used the documents to verify the data collected through focus group interviews and observations. A combination of procedures enabled me to validate and cross-check the findings. Since each data source has its own strengths and weaknesses, the strength of one procedure can compensate for the weakness of another (Patton, 2002).

Data analysis

We used a model of observation to generate the data. The model followed Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theoretical framework. We started by doing a pre-observation conference where we first discussed teaching and learning for students with disabilities with the lecturers and students in the sample. This was then followed by the actual observation and finally a post-observation conference where the observed lessons were discussed. The lessons were video recorded for reflective deliberations. More specifically we observed: first, whether the physical environment was conducive for learning or not. Second, how the curriculum was adapted and differentiated to make the lecture rooms more inclusionary. Third, we wanted to see if lecturers paid any individual attention to those students who experienced barriers to learning.

We used the IPA framework to understand how students with disabilities are supported. Analysing qualitative material using the IPA framework was quite an inspiring activity, although fraught with complexities, and was time-consuming (Smith & Osborne, 2008; Smith, et al., 2009). It allowed us to move between the emic and etic perspectives (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). We achieved the latter by looking at the data through a psychological lens, interpreting it with the application of psychological concepts and theories which we found helpful to illuminate the understanding of how the students with disabilities experienced educational support. But, to guard against any form of reductionism, we allowed the data to talk to us. On the other hand, by looking at data from an outsider's perspective, we had a chance to develop a theoretical understanding.

Whilst adopting these techniques, we were cognisant of the fact that within the phenomenological paradigm there are no prescriptive methods for data analysis, since IPA studies are generally context-specific and subject to the research objectives. This allowed us to be inductive (Smith et al., 2009) as we allowed for movement from what is unique to a participant to what is shared amongst the participants of the focus group. We also moved from the description of the experience to an interpretation of the experience and strove for commitment to understanding the viewpoints of the different participants in the focus group. Finally, we focused on personal meaning-making within the group.

Within these guidelines, we based our data analysis and interpretation on a seven-step analysis comprising: (i) transcription; (ii) reading and re-reading; (iii) initial noting; (iv) developing emergent themes; (v) searching for connections across emergent themes; (vi) analysing subsequent cases; and (vii) looking for patterns across cases (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), which we briefly outline hereunder.

During the initial step audio recordings were transcribed and textual data were analysed. But, before the actual transcription, we listened to the audio recording of the interview session repeatedly. This enabled us to immerse ourselves in the data and it helped us recall the atmosphere of the interview and the setting in which it was conducted. Field notes we made during the interview sessions were equally incorporated in the transcription process (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Findings and Discussion

The participants were asked to share their experiences on the support offered by their institution/DU. The overall impression was that the services offered by the DUs are well received by students and positive comments about DUs (with some exceptions) were received. Six students with various disabilities agreed that the DU was giving them academic support to succeed in their studies. This was clearly stipulated in the UNIVEN Disability policy draft (2013) in Section 6(e), which stipulates that the DU provides a number of services including computer facilities, Brailled exam papers and notes, and lending Assistive Technology to students with disabilities. The policy further states that the existing levels of service will be maintained within resource constraints and subject to annual reviews.

UNIVEN Disability policy draft (2013) was affirmed by the following statements:

> Our university built us a DU that supports us with materials. For instance, they converted my materials from sight to braille. I access the computer whenever I want, during the day. And also, the university understands that I can't stay in a double room, so they gave me a single room. (Participant 8)

Participant 3 commended the DU for the support they give by saying:

> DU offers certain devices to all disabled students.

This was further confirmed by Participant 5 when she said:

> I was grateful this year. The DU offered me a pebble handheld magnifier to read any font size that I want to read. So, it makes things easier. They also gave me a PlexiTalk to enable me to record my lecturers. I can play the recorder before I sleep or before I go to the library. I can also make notes of everything that was done in class. I don't rely on other students to get information for me.

Similar comments were uttered by Participant 2:

> The DU is certainly working. They offered me a purple reader, something that I use when studying, like when I can't see the font size. This eases my studies.

Although the service offered by DU is commendable, the early closing times of the lab are a problem to students with disabilities. This was evident in the words of Participant 10:

> I think the Disability Unit offers good service, but my problem is that the lab closes too early. Sometimes you will find that we have many classes during the day, and when you want to go to the lab it's closed. I suggest that the lab times be revised to allow students to do their work. Sometimes it becomes difficult when you want to finish your assignment which is due the next day.

The participants pointed out that there were only two adapted labs on the campus, one in the library and another one in the DU, but they all close at the same time. Participant 1 added that:

> Also the closing time of our library section is not appropriate. The library closes the same time as the lab. They both close at the same time at 16:45. So if the library section can function during the normal library hours it would make the work of many disabled students easier.

Students were then asked to comment on the additional support they would want the institution to offer. They had to identify the gaps in the support offered by DU in relation to their disability needs. Literature showed that "Nothing about us without us" (Fotim, 2011). The participants commented that they needed extra classes in difficult courses, mostly those that involved calculations. Participant 2 shared his experiences:

> Eh, for me because some of us are doing courses like economics, accounting, and they involve a lot of calculation and numbers, I just feel that they should have additional classes for people like us because you can't see what the lecturer is writing on the board, even when we're seated in the front row; it is just a waste of time, really. They must schedule additional classes for us so that they can help us, so that we feel accommodated. What happens to most of us now is that we must rely on our friends or colleagues. Most of the time you have to beg them.

Consultation of lecturers by students with disabilities was raised as another problem that HEIs should also look at. Students with visual impairments cannot access offices as there are no office numbers in Braille. Participant 8 added:

> Ok, let me not complain and say it straight. The offices of our lecturers must be identifiable, ma'am. I don't want to ask someone to read the name on your office, ma'am Mbuvha. I must do it myself. They must write their names also in braille so that I can go to the lecturer any time I want.

Teaching and learning was also identified by Participant 5 as a problem that needs attention:

> Eh, as a history student when you get to the lecture hall, the lecturer will just teach, maybe write some notes on the board and she will say, there are prescribed books, you must go to the library and get them. Ok, as a good student I go there, but only to be told that the books are only three in the library and that they have all been taken. So, you must wait for two weeks for the books to come back. The assignment might be due tomorrow and when you go back to your lecturer to ask for extension maybe she will agree. If she agrees, you go back to the library get the book and you find that the book is scratched, marked and there are pen marks all over the book, so it makes it difficult for you to scan and read the book. So I'd like to suggest that possibly the library should hand over some books to the DU.

Participant 2:

> I think at the beginning of the year you should compile all the books we will need during the first semester and second semesters. Then these books are requested from the library so that when the students want a chapter from the book as prescribed by the lecturer, they get it from here and everything is done here. In this ways, the book will be safe there won't be any torn pages and stuff like that.

Participant 1 added:

> … Or the books should be kept in our library section in the library, since we're the only ones who are allowed to get in there. Knowing that there are students who can't see, our colleagues will not mark these books or tear the pages. They'll keep the books clean at all times.

Participant 5 suggested the following:

> I was suggesting that DU should compile the prescribed books we are going to need. Maybe the students must submit their course outlines to the DSU so that these prescribed books can be brought down here, because sometimes even though they can take it to the books to the lab in the library, you will find that you will have to scan them out in the library and bring them here and it is time-consuming. But when these books are around here I can come to a staff member in the DU and say I need this book and he or she will be able to go take it and scan it.

Participant 8 added:

> … still on the issue of books, it seems to be a big issue all along. I mean the disabled students have been here for more than two decades now, so I think that the DU must not delete the books that have been scanned. The books must be there in the system so that the other students can get the materials. It is also easier that way rather than students scanning the same book every year. If such books are saved, it'll be easier for the students to get them.

Participant 2 suggested the following:

> You can also ask the library if possible to ask the publisher to deliver the books with software, link the books (the book in a software format) so that it will be easy for the DSC to access the book without taking the physical copy.

On the question of learning materials, Participant 8 concluded that:

> Because of the use of braille books, I depend more on DU to be more friendly. I take the book there and they are able to braille it. I don't know, maybe our library does not have good ties with the braille service, but what we experienced in my special school is that they had a machine which was able to braille books and they were even brailing books for some schools. I don't know if the university can stretch further and buy that kind of machine and hire a person to braille books because ma'am, blind people find it difficult to access information. I can read a novel if the DU can braille a novel for me.

The participants were asked to comment on the following statement: "Students feel their lives are micro-managed by support services, rather than having service providers focus on individual needs. Student needs must be determined by the students themselves, rather than administrators." Participant 1 responded, by stating the following:

> I think that statement is true; our life and needs are being macro-managed because if a person is going to stipulate what I should do without knowing what I'm going through with my disability, it can be futile at the end of the day because whatever they bring or produce, if it is not consistent or in line with the kind of disability I'm having, at the end of the day whatever they do will be nothing. But if I'm the one who is providing the information to them, telling them what I'm experiencing and I know what can help me, I think I'd become more productive.

It is worth noting that the participants anonymously agree that students are responsible for their learning needs. Participant 8 added that:

> … we as disabled people we are not stagnant, we are not rigid, meaning that if I use braille, I can't just use braille all the time. At some point I might prefer interning; at another I might prefer software. So, as a student, I need to have some space of informing the administrator that today I want to listen and the administrator must try his or her best to give me that device.

The study found that students with disabilities appreciate the academic support offered by the University of Venda DU, and students stated that the support had an impact on their performance. These findings are consistent with those reported by Troiano, Liefeld and Trachtenberg (2010). Troiano et al. (2010) investigated the way 262 students with LD related to their academic support centre, as well as student achievement. Their results showed that students who consistently attended academic support centre appointments had higher rates of success than those who did not attend or who did not attend consistently.

In England, Vouroutzidou, (2011) found that, even though the majority of the students expressed a general satisfaction with the services they receive from the institution, there were some complaints about the DU and about some other members of staff. It was found that complaints were related to the bureaucratisation of the disability services. I think that educational support should be the responsibility of all structures of the university, not just those people appointed in a specialised disability support office. CHE (2005) stresses that the whole campus is responsible for fostering a diverse campus climate and for addressing the students' diverse needs. It should not be the responsibility of the DU alone, although the crucial role they play is appreciated. All the participants spoke highly of the DU and the commitment of the staff. Staff at the DU seem to play a significant role in advocating for students' needs in university services and facilitating communication between the faculty and students with disabilities.

South African researchers (Crous, 2005; CHE, 2005; Greyling, 2008; FOTIM, 2011) found that in many instances, DUs are still playing a pioneering role in terms of academic support for students with disabilities. They found that support offered to students with disabilities may differ from university to university and the support offered might be somewhat similar. However, a flexible design of support will ensure that individual differences and needs are accommodated and support is provided. Results from these studies confirm that HEIs are practising the Social Model of service provision to make all aspects of university life accessible from the onset.

Conclusion

The study found that the DU of the university played an important role in supporting their studies. However, the students did not receive adequate additional support from their lecturers such as tutorials and differentiation of the curriculum. Shortage of learning materials specifically adapted for students with disabilities was mentioned as a weakness. The study recommends that lecturers should be trained on how to teach and support students with disabilities as this will enhance the quality of teaching and learning for students with disabilities. Other recommendations include that the DU should establish an online interactive portal for its registered students to increase communication between students and the university.

I view the present investigation as a preliminary attempt to develop a comprehensive model of inclusive education in higher education in South Africa. Our findings, though not transportable to novel contexts, highlight chronic and cumulative adversity students with disabilities are faced with. These adversities so far lack clear-cut solutions. Medical and diagnostic constructs have not provided adequate answers either (Mole, 2012).

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Research article

Diversity Includes Disability: Experiences of Resilience in a University Residence

Princess Thulile Duma*

Abstract

The provision of residence accommodation is a persistent challenge that is faced by universities across the globe. However, suitable accommodation for students with disabilities is an even greater challenge that is exacerbated by the absence of appropriately designed, maintained and managed residences. In particular, the adverse impact on wheelchair users and students whose disabilities require specific design adaptations is acute. This article will focus on the experiences of students with disabilities in university residences. The study on which this article is based employed a phenomenological theoretical approach with 'resilience' as the conceptual framework. The findings reveal that many stressors impacted students with disabilities in university residences and that these stressors potentially hampered their performance. However, these students developed personal attributes and ways of responding to the stressors they encountered, and many devised social networks utilisation to address their challenges and navigate institutional barriers. A particular focus was that embracing diversity is crucial for all operations at universities to counteract the discrimination and stigmatisation that are often experienced by students with disabilities.

Keywords

access; accommodation; belonging; diversity; resilience; students with disabilities

Introduction: Residence Accommodation in South African Universities

The massification of higher education globally has substantially widened access for all types of students, particularly students with disabilities. This has resulted in a significant increase in the numbers of students with disabilities who have enrolled at universities (Kim & Lee, 2016; Timmerman & Mulvihill, 2015), and it has required the intensification of specifically adapted academic and accommodation facilities at universities (Mugume & Luescher, 2015; Odundo, Origa, Nyandega & Ngaruiya, 2015).

One important provision for students at universities is appropriate residence accommodation (Ajayi, Nwosu & Ajani, 2015; Gilson & Dymond, 2010; Najib, Yusof & Sani, 2012). A number of studies on student residences (Abdullahi, Yusoff & Gwamna, 2017; Kim & Lee, 2016) show that students' performance is highly dependent on the physical and non-physical facilities that the institution provides. However, the literature has shown

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that many institutions fail to meet residence accommodation obligations and that this has resulted in poor academic performance and high attrition rates by affected students (Abdullahi et al., 2017).

Residence issues are a perennial problem for universities and frequently surface in demands by protesting students (Mugume & Luescher, 2015; Odundo et al., 2015; Yakaboski & Birnbaum, 2013). Students' demands have highlighted issues such as the poor management of residences, a lack of basic facilities, the distance of residences from teaching venues, and rules that compel students to remove their belongings during recess periods (Ajayi et al., 2015; Egwunyenga, 2009; Oke, Aigbavboa & Raphiri, 2017). In South Africa, similar problems led to the establishment of a ministerial committee in 2012, to investigate the extent of the problems arising from the unsatisfactory state of student residences at some universities (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2015). The committee's report emphasises the importance of well-managed residences and notes that students who are accommodated in residences with good facilities tend to perform better than those who live off-campus or in residences with a poor infrastructure. Moreover, the committee drew attention to suitable accommodation for students with disabilities. While universities in general had adequately managed and functioning residences, the committee found little effort had been channelled into making residence accommodation suitable for students with disabilities. For example, a small percentage of residences provided access for wheelchair users or had suitably adapted toilets or bathrooms, and most universities did not have accommodation policies for physically challenged students. Van der Merwe (2017, p. 2) cites an interview with a young activist for people with disabilities who attested to the poor state of residence accommodation:

> If you don't have the necessary survival skills it is very hard. You are in a residence, you have never cooked, ironed, made your bed by yourself, and you must do these things on top of the struggles with your academic work, all without the necessary support. You feel useless, like you want to quit.

South Africa has comprehensive legislation on promoting accessibility and inclusivity for people with disabilities. For example, universities are required by law to provide proper housing for students with disabilities (DHET, 2015) and student residences are expected to be conducive to academic activities outside the classroom (Egwunyenga, 2009). However, most universities have struggled to establish residences that accommodate the various needs of students with disabilities (Dunn & Dunkel, 2013; Mugume & Luescher, 2015). In some cases, universities have turned to public–private partnerships for assistance, although these initiatives have not been without setbacks (McBride, 2017; Mugume & Luescher, 2015; Taylor, 2017). Studies have shown that finances and a lack of the availability of land have been major challenges in the quest to provide suitable accommodation for diverse student bodies. Most universities prefer to accommodate students with disabilities on campus for safety and for easier access to central facilities such as libraries and lecture rooms, but the conversion of outdated buildings and residences is costly and thus highly challenging.

The DHET (2013) estimates that the South African university student population will reach 1.6 million by 2030. In anticipation of the concomitant student accommodation requirements, the DHET expects that universities will have provided at least 400 000 additional beds by that time. Commentators see this as a positive development, provided that residence accommodation meets universal design standards such as user-friendly access for all students regardless of their disability status (Powell, 2013; Watchorn, Larkin, Ang & Hitch, 2013). It is with this initiative in mind that this article considers the resilience factor that students with disabilities possess. It also explores how this impacts their experiences of university residence life. The guiding question that the study asked was: "How do students with disabilities overcome the challenges they experience in university residences?"

Overview of the Literature on Residence Problems for Students with Disabilities

The literature on students with disabilities in the higher education context mainly refers to the accommodation of students in classrooms, laboratories and libraries (Chiwandire & Vincent, 2017; Matshedisho, 2010) as these students continue to experience physical access and attitudinal barriers to their participation in lectures, laboratories and practical training (Lyner-Cleophas, Swart, Chataika & Bell, 2014; Tugli, Zungu, Ramakuela, Goon & Anyanwu, 2013). The cited studies point out that poorly designed teaching and learning infrastructure can cause both academic and social exclusion of students with disabilities.

In response to widespread concern about the provision of inadequate and unsuitable facilities for students with disabilities in university residences, a growing body of literature has explored this issue (Ajayi et al., 2015). Various studies point out that students with disabilities face challenges such as manoeuvring through multi-level buildings or accessing common rooms and cooking facilities (Timmerman & Mulvihill, 2015).

Apart from infrastructural issues that students with disabilities may encounter, the assignment of roommates can also give rise to problems (Egwunyenga, 2009; Payne, 2017). Because residences are 'a home from home' for students, there is an expectation that roommates should live in harmony and mutual respect and that they should accept each other as members of a 'family'. Residence committees thus commonly organise inter-residential activities to build relationships. However, it often happens that students with disabilities feel discriminated against or excluded (Gilson & Dymond, 2010; Lourens, 2015). Tolman (2017, p. 532) stresses the importance of residence life for all students, noting that it shapes their behaviours and that their academic success hinges on it because "… at the heart of this residential experience are social interactions and the feeling of belonging to the campus community". Depending on their specific disabilities, students may need assistance from a roommate or other students. Potential roommates for students with disabilities therefore need to be identified and supported. Some universities have made progress in embracing diversity through initiatives such as the Listen, Live and Learn (LLL) project at Stellenbosch University that encourages social cohesion and enables all participants to plan and work together as members of the student community (Smorenburg & Dunn, 2014).

However, studies have also noted that students with disabilities may be exposed to exploitation such as being made to pay for assistance given by other students. More disturbingly, in some instances their assistance extended to the demand for sexual favours. For example, Lourens (2015) reported serious instances of abuse experienced by blind students in the higher education context.

A particular problem that is exposed in research studies is that residence managers frequently lack understanding of the social consequences of being disabled, which distorts their perception of persons with disabilities. Therefore, in conjunction with the many shortcomings in the design of buildings, ignorance on the part of university authorities may equally affect the services provided to students with disabilities. According to Matshedisho (2010, p. 743), there seems to be confusion as to whose responsibility it is to deal with students with disabilities, and the consequence is "that assistance to these students is treated as an act of benevolence". Against this backdrop, the acquisition of competency skills and the ongoing development of residential staff are important if the welfare of students living in residences is taken seriously. Dunn and Dunkel (2013) suggest that residential staff needs to acquire specific administrative, communicative and foundational knowledge in line with international standards.

Theoretical Approach

A key issue in disability research is "to put insider experience at the centre of how we understand and think about disability issues" (Swartz, 2014, p. 2). In its philosophical positioning towards students with disabilities, this study therefore adopted a phenomenological approach by focusing on the lived experiences of students with disabilities and drawing meaning from their narratives (Groenewald, 2004; Van Manen, 2007). This approach was appropriate for an exploration of how students with disabilities understood and made meaning of their experiences in a university residence and for addressing the research question that queried what it meant to be a student with a physical disability living in a university residence.

Conceptual Framework: Resilience

Resilience is defined as "the potential to exhibit resourcefulness by using internal and external resources in response to different contextual and developmental challenges" (Pooley & Cohen, 2010, p. 30). Resilience thus refers to the ways in which individuals or groups achieve successful outcomes despite challenging circumstances. Resilience has been scientifically measured using various scales to determine factors such as inner strength, competence, optimism, flexibility, coping effectively when faced with adversity, minimising the impact of stressful life events, and enhancing protective factors such as social support (Abiola & Udofia, 2011). In academic contexts, resilience has been associated with self-efficacy beliefs and adaptive help-seeking (Bandura, 1993). In this study, resilience was identified by the participants themselves when they illuminated the ways in which they responded to the challenges of residence life.

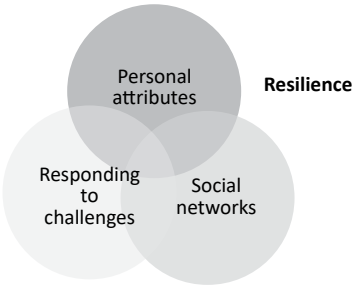

Figure 1: Conceptual framework – resilience factors

The concept of resilience can be clustered into three broad areas: (1) personal attributes (e.g. self-efficacy beliefs); (2) ways in which the student responds to challenges (e.g. with optimism and flexibility); and (3) the extent to which the student has a network of supportive peers, family and others (e.g. a disability representative). These three concepts were found to be interlinked as they all contributed to the resilience of students with disabilities who lived in a university residence.

Methodology for Understanding the Lived Experiences of Students with Disabilities

Phenomenology as a research methodology has two main components: '*epoché*', which refers to the process in which the researcher attempts to open herself to the interviewees' experiences in a pre-reflective way; and 'reduction', which is the process in which the researcher reflects on the experiences of the study participants for the purpose of meaning-making and analysis (Van Manen, 2007). The tool that was used to enter into the lived experiences of the participants was semi-structured interviews. The students were thus able to share their authentic experiences of university residences with the researcher, who subsequently reflected on the interview transcripts to interpret and make sense of the students' lived experiences through "delineating units of meaning" and "clustering of units of meaning to form themes" (Groenewald, 2004). The units of meaning and clustering of these units illuminated the resilience indicators as identified in the literature through the students' experiences as communicated during the interviews.

Sampling

In light of the small number of students with disabilities enrolled at the university under study, the sample comprised three wheelchair users and four students with dwarfism. Of the seven participants, only one was a male. In the absence of a Disability Unit at the university, the students were identified with the assistance of the Student Counselling unit. Consent was obtained from all seven participating students. It is acknowledged that disability takes many different forms, but students with other forms of disability did not form part of this study.

Data Collection and Analysis

A semi-structured interview was conducted with each of the participating students. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and the interview transcripts were then studied and coded to reveal both the common themes emerging across the seven interviews and the differences amongst the students' experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are important in a research study involving marginalised communities (Danaher, Cook, Danaher, Coombes & Danaher, 2013). Permission to conduct the study was granted by the University and an informed consent form was signed by each participant. Extreme care was taken to respect the rights of the participants and to conduct the interviews at a location and time that were most convenient for them. Conducting most of the interviews in the residences further enhanced the researcher's ability to be present in their lived worlds. The consent form was formulated to inform the participants of the purpose of the study and it explicitly indicated their rights, such as the right to withdraw from the study at any time should they feel uncomfortable.

Data Analysis

Based on the literature review, the research data were grouped into three broad themes as evidence of resilience: (1) personal factors; (2) ways of responding to challenges; and (3) the availability and utilisation of social networks.

Optimism, self-efficacy beliefs and competence

A student's experiences of residence life are strongly influenced by his or her background (Kumpfer, 1995). The students who had experienced independence before (e.g. they had been in a boarding school) were more likely to cope as they had a more positive attitude and enjoyed residence life. The participants' responses highlighted the importance of optimism for successful adaptation to living in a residence. One student explained:

> As much as university life is challenging, it is quite a good experience where you live with strangers, learning to understand and coping with different characters. I never thought living in a residence will be like a normal life. People in the residence are receptive. It exposes you in different ways and [you] enjoy being a young person. (Student 1)

Another student commented on how self-efficacy belief enabled a positive and optimistic outlook:

> I was not scared to come to the university especially staying in the residence but I had that concern that it will not be the same as in the special school, since there we all had some sort of disability. But I had told myself that I would cope with whatever I encountered. I am now fine, because I have friends as well. (Student 2)

A sense of self-efficacy is important in adapting to a challenging environment as it encourages perseverance and self-worth (Bandura, 1993; Bergen, 2013). This is also an important attitude in developing one's independence as one grows into adulthood.

Coping effectively when faced with adversity

Students with disabilities face challenges on a daily basis. These challenges range from access to bathing facilities to access to laundry facilities and life-supporting necessities such as regular meals. Poorly designed residence infrastructure makes it difficult for students with disabilities to access essential facilities, which was a point that was elucidated by one of the participants:

> The kitchen is on a floor above [my room] which is accessed through stairs and there is only one café which caters for all students in the university. This is outside the block and there are no shelters leading to it in case of rainy weather. When I first came here in my first year, I got sick because my daily diet was bread and 'vetkoekies'. I had a serious constipation problem and I had to see the doctor. My main challenge, I was in a boarding school before and meals were prepared for us and at home I do not cook at all. This forced me to do an illegal thing of cooking in the room. Stoves are prohibited in the residence but under these circumstances, it is the only way to survive. (Student 3)

The student's disclosure that she resorted to cooking in her bedroom despite the risks illustrated flexibility as a characteristic of resilience. It also elucidated risk-taking as an element for survival. This finding is also in line with DHET (2015) where it was found that malnutrition is a concern for some students living in university residences.

Many of the challenges experienced by the participants were common to most students, but some affected students with disabilities in particular because of the nature of their disability. Their coping strategies, the adaptation period, and the required skills to survive were therefore also different. Nonetheless, all the participants showed resilience and were able to cope in their respective environments, which is a finding that corroborated a finding by Bergan (2013).

It was found that strategies to reduce stress were essential and that devising flexible methods to solve problems alleviated the impact of adversities. One student demonstrated admirable resilience in her flexible response to the challenge of finding a quiet space and a suitable time to study:

> Our computer laboratory is just a study hall since computers have never worked in that laboratory. We bring our own laptops and that is why having a security [guard] is important. Studying in the residence is not easy; students make noise and it becomes difficult to concentrate. Our computer laboratory is noisy sometimes as other students use it for group meetings. There is a lack of control in that space. I prefer to study from midnight when it is mostly quiet. It is easy for me that way because I attend [classes] in the evening. I do not have to wake up early in the morning. I mostly do my group projects in the computer laboratory during the day [as] it is quite convenient. (Student 4)

Adaptive help-seeking and social networks

Resilience is associated with a supportive social environment, the ability to effectively utilise social networks and social media, and the willingness to access these. The participants also acknowledged the significant role played by their roommates, management officials, and other supportive people in their lives. The findings showed that resilience was about negotiating their space with others. The participants first had to understand their own capabilities and then they had to make others aware of their strengths, and thus they could work collaboratively with others to achieve positive outcomes. Supportive social networks helped them to buffer their stressors and enabled them to navigate difficult conditions in their respective residences.

One student explained how he called on his social network to help him solve his laundry problem:

> When I came here I was seriously worried about how I would get my laundry done. The first two weeks at the beginning of the year was tough. My cousin used to come and fetch it to do it at his house in the men's hostel nearby, until a student counsellor referred me to a person who would do it. It was a great relief, and in that case I have not encountered any [further] problems. I can now concentrate on other things. (Student 5)

He further explained how he and his roommate had come to an effective working arrangement, to the point where official assistance became unnecessary:

> My muscles are weak which gives me a challenge in doing some of the things in the room. My roommate is like a brother to me, he completely understands my condition and allows me to do things on my own. He only assists me when I need help. We have an arrangement: he volunteered to prepare meals so we put money together for our groceries. The university offered to give me someone to assist in this regard; however, I prefer this arrangement I have with my roommate. (Student 5)

Another study participant also explained how her roommate was important for her emotional and academic well-being:

> I wish I could stay with the same person next year. We click like that; we share responsibilities in the room and our personalities complement each other. We have fun together and when it's study time, we focus on our studies. We respect each other's space. (Student 6)

However, not all the participants had positive relationships with their roommates. One student described some of the difficulties she encountered in this regard:

> My roommate and I had a similar disability and thus we could not assist each other. For instance, a simple thing like opening and closing windows was a challenge and we relied on a next-door roommate to assist us or we used a chair to stand on. That came with other risks as my roommate fell off the chair. My roommate had a personality challenge which affected our relationship. We spent most of the time not speaking as she was very moody.

> When she cleaned she would clean just her side of the room, which was very strange. The worst part was that she would bring her friends to the room or play her music loudly when she knew it was my test week. It was difficult for me to concentrate. I decided to spend more time in my [other] friend's room to avoid her. She was a senior student and treated me as if she was a landlord and I was a tenant in her property. (Student 7)

Distress was thus caused by a roommate and the residence managers who did not understand the difficulties that two similarly disabled but differently aged students would experience when sharing a room. However, the more junior student was able to draw on her social network for support and peace.

Positive adaptation like the example above calls for both emotional and social intelligence, which are forms of intelligence that ultimately shape behaviour and attitude (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000). Clearly, life in a residence is not only difficult for students with disabilities, but it also requires continuous harmony, mutual assistance and sharing. Unfortunately, these did not always happen for the participating students.

Even resilient people have bad days

The literature often depicts resilience as a simple, stable trajectory (Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick & Yehuda, 2014), but because resilience is a dynamic process (Luthar et al., 2000) it is natural that there will be times when students experience difficulties and feel overwhelmed or isolated. Without consistent support a student may regress, withdraw or drop out, as was the case with Student 3:

> I was living on a floor with non-disabled students. It was not easy at all, as I felt different from everybody. As much as no one said anything bad, I could feel that some students had unanswered questions about me. The worst part was that the chairperson of the students with disabilities did not have my contact. I was not added on their social media list. I was left out of all engagements of students with disabilities. They normally go door to door when they organise meetings or workshops but since I was on another floor I was not informed.

A shortcoming of the resilience theory is that it does not take into account that students with disabilities may at times feel excluded or depressed or wish to give up. As Student 3 indicated, careless exclusion on the part of the institution can cause an otherwise resilient student, who might normally cope well with difficulties, to feel marginalised and excluded.

One respondent encountered serious and ultimately intolerable disrespect as fellow residents exhibited her disability on social media:

> I couldn't take it; it was so humiliating [that] I decided to drop out. I reported the matter but people had already seen my pictures on Facebook. My performance dropped terribly after that incident. When I came back after two years, I decided I would never stay in the residence. I now stay in the township. It is not easy, but I have peace of mind. (Student 7)

Student 7 was mocked and challenged to the point where she dropped out, but she showed enormous strength of character and resilience by making the difficult decision to continue with her studies.

Conclusion

This study focused on the lived experiences of students with disabilities in university residences and revealed that improvements in residence accommodation are of paramount importance if the principle of inclusivity in tertiary education is to be taken seriously. How students with disabilities overcame the difficulties they experienced was addressed through the resilience lens, and it was revealed that resilience supported these students to build on their strengths and to mitigate most potentially harmful consequences of residence life. However, the resilience of these students was often challenged, and the findings thus suggest that even resilient students may temporarily or permanently regress and succumb to adversity, depending on the severity of the challenges they experience.

The study established the importance of incorporating universal design standards for residence accommodation that will support and affirm diversity. Only through appropriate provisioning will students with disabilities be fully incorporated into university and residence life. The findings further highlight the need for residence managers to be trained in the social model of disability so that they will understand the resilience and capabilities of students with disabilities. An inevitable recommendation emanating from the study is thus that residence managers need to be more vigilant in preventing negative experiences for students with disabilities which, in some instances, were caused by poor communication. All members of residence communities at universities need empathy. Thus, knowledge and understanding of diversity in all university residences is a requirement so that role-players will understand the potential impact that their actions may have on vulnerable others.

Moreover, the study revealed several areas in which practices pertaining to university residences and the position of students with disabilities failed to comply with legislation. The study thus revealed undeniably that much work needs to done to support and affirm the presence of students with disabilities in residences and at universities in general. Further research is needed on the issue of non-compliance with legislative directions and on the root causes of incompatibility and difficulties in residence relationships. Given the daily challenges that students with disabilities face and overcome in higher education settings, they have much to offer as fully-fledged members of a diverse community of learners.

It is acknowledged that the study did not look at the role technology could play in safeguarding the lives of resident students, thus further studies are required to explore the use of advanced technology as a means of improving the lives of students who live in residences.

Conflict of Interest

I have no affiliation with any organisation or entity with financial or non-financial interest in the subject matter discussed in this article.

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Research article

The Best that I Can Be: A Case for a Strengths-Based Approach during the First-Year Experience

Henry D. Mason*

Abstract

More South African research is needed that examines the application of positive psychology to assist students in navigating the stressful first-year experience by identifying, developing and applying signature strengths. This article reports on a mixed methods study that investigated the efficacy of a strengths-based development programme presented to a sample of 55 first-year university students (mean age = 19.77, SD = 1.50, female = 60%). Quantitative data were collected in a pre- and post-intervention manner using the Personal Growth Initiative Scale, the Subjective Happiness Scale, the Satisfaction with Life Scale and the Strengths Use and Deficit Improvement Questionnaire. Qualitative data were collected in individual semi-structured interviews (n = 12, age range = 18-22). Significant changes between the pre- and post-test scores emerged when comparing the quantitative data. The qualitative analysis pointed to aspects that participants regarded as beneficial to the efficacy of the strengths-based programme. Collectively, the data integration suggested that the intervention had a positive impact on participants' sense of well-being and contributed to enhancing the first-year experience. Limitations and areas for further research conclude the discussion.

Keywords

first-year experience; positive psychology; strengths use; well-being

Introduction

In the late 1990s a paradigm shift occurred in the field of psychology with the conceptualisation and introduction of positive psychology (PP) (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). PP refers to a multi-level (individual, group, organisation and society) and multi-domain (personal life, education and work) perspective that focuses on the advancement of the good life (increasing positive emotions), engaged life (more significant commitment to important activities and goal pursuit, e.g. meaningful work), and the meaningful life (dedication to a goal or aspiration beyond the self and the trivial) (Wissing, Potgieter, Guse, Khumalo & Nel, 2014). Internationally, PP has gained popularity in the education context through the subfield of positive education (Seligman, 2011; Seligman & Adler, 2018).

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Positive education emphasises individual strengths and personal motivation to promote active learning for the 21st century (Seligman & Adler, 2018). Positive education-based programmes and interventions have yielded encouraging results in international school settings (Adler, Seligman, Tetlock & Duckworth, 2016). The application of positive education-based interventions may also prove beneficial in higher education contexts.

Higher education is widely regarded as stressful for students (Mason, 2017). Research has indicated that the first-year experience (FYE) is typically fraught with numerous developmental, academic and psychological challenges amongst other things (Scott, 2018). The stressful nature of the FYE can negatively impinge on students' levels of well-being and exacerbate un-wellness (Anderson, 2016; De Villiers, 2014). This, in turn, can lead to burnout, dropout and lack of academic success amongst student populations (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014; Scott, 2018).

One of the responsibilities of student affairs services is to assist students in dealing effectively with the challenges associated with the FYE (Scott, 2018). However, many develomental and support initiatives are articulated from deficit-based perspectives (Boughey & McKenna, 2016). Hence, student affairs services often emphasise what is wrong with students (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014) to the exclusion of drawing on their strengths and talents to concretise a sense of resilience, agency and realistic hope for the future (Bowers & Lopez, 2010; Cilliers, 2014). The former is particularly relevant when considering that students present with unique journeys that are significantly influenced by a wide range of issues including their histories and the context within which they find themselves.

A strengths-based focus serves as the antithesis of a deficit-based approach and aims to assist students in addressing challenges from the vantage point of their unique perspectives (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The concept of strengths, which forms the bedrock of PP and positive education, refers to pre-existing capacities that predispose persons to particular ways of thinking, feeling and behaving (Linley, 2008).

International research has reported on the positive and empowering effects of strengths-based approaches in higher education settings (Bowers & Lopez, 2010; Yeager, Fisher & Shearon, 2010). For example, PP interventions in higher education have been associated with higher levels of engagement, better academic performance and greater community involvement (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011; Yeager et al., 2010).

Notwithstanding reported benefits, few South African studies have considered the potential value of PP and strengths-based university intervention programmes (Chigeza, De Kock, Roos & Wissing, 2018; De Villiers, 2014; Seligman & Adler, 2018). Moreover, the South African literature on the topic of applying PP to FYE intervention programmes is almost non-existent (Chigeza et al., 2018; Cilliers, 2014; Melato, 2014). Research on strengths-based intervention programmes is also needed to assess its impact and efficacy in enhancing well-being amongst student populations (De Villiers, 2014; Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005). Moreover, developing needs-driven programmes to focus on empowering students within the South African higher education context is warranted (Chigeza et al., 2018; Melato, 2014).

In light of these arguments, PP appears to be a promising approach to assist students, especially during the FYE, to draw on their own, unique strengths in navigating the labyrinth of university stressors (Wissing et al., 2014). Consequently, a strengths-based developmental programme ('the Programme') was developed and presented to a group of first-year students at a South African university. The Programme was aimed at assisting participants in enhancing strengths use and well-being to deal effectively with challenges during the FYE.

This article reports on a mixed methods study that empirically evaluated the efficacy of the Programme amongst a sample of first-year students at a South African university. The following two research questions guided the study: What was the effect of the Programme on participants' well-being and use of strengths? What aspects of the Programme did participants experience as beneficial and could inform and direct further programme development?

It will be argued that strengths-based programmes can enhance students' levels of well-being in the face of challenges experienced during the FYE. As a conceptual contribution, this article offers guidelines on developing a strengths-based programme for first-year students.

The article commences with a review of the literature and a discussion of the Programme. Then, the research method is presented. Next, the findings from the mixed methods study are discussed. In conclusion, the key findings are summarised.

Literature Review

To position this article within the current body of knowledge, this literature review discusses the concepts of strengths and the strengths approach, after which the FYE is discussed.

A strengths approach

The field of PP focuses on what is best about people (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The concept of strengths is a fundamental pillar of PP (Linley, 2008). The central thesis advocated by proponents of the strengths approach is that all humans possess a combination of talents, knowledge and skills that they are naturally good at (Wissing et al., 2014).

Conceptualisations of strengths have been proposed by Clifton and colleagues (Clifton & Harter, 2003; Hodges & Clifton, 2004), Peterson and Seligman (2004) and Linley (2008). The study being reported on is based on the conceptualisation of strengths that was set forth by Peterson and Seligman (2004).

Peterson and Seligman (2004) argue that strengths are stable yet malleable capacities and virtues that induce people to act in certain ways. Within this conceptualisation, Dahlsgaard, Peterson and Seligman (2005) distinguish between six virtues (wisdom, courage, love, justice, temperance and transcendence) that are divided into 24 strengths (cf. Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

The Values in Action Inventory of Strengths Survey (VIA survey) was subsequently developed to assist persons in identifying their unique strength profiles (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The 24 strengths can be described in the rank order in which they

are realised and used by persons. While some strengths may remain unrealised, realised strengths can serve to invigorate persons with stamina, optimism and resilience (Dahlsgaard et al., 2005; Wissing et al., 2014).

An increased interest in PP interventions that focus on the development of strengths has emerged in recent years. The concept of a PP intervention refers to a series of intentional activities, such as a psychoeducational programme, aimed at fostering positive thoughts, feelings and behaviours (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Rashid, 2015).

There is consensus amongst researchers that strengths-based interventions ought to focus on three general phases, namely (1) assisting persons in discovering their strengths; (2) integrating strengths through reflection and discussions; and (3) assisting persons in consciously using their strengths in daily life (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Clifton & Harter, 2003; Quinlan, Swain & Vella-Brodrick, 2012). Empirical data suggest that strengths-based interventions can help participants to enhance general levels of well-being, optimism and resilience (Seligman et al., 2005), reduce indicators of psychological distress, such as depression and anxiety (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009), and boost performance within organisational and higher education settings (Adler et al., 2016; Bowers & Lopez, 2010; Clifton & Harter, 2003; Durlak et al., 2011).

In light of the above arguments, a strengths-based approach seems particularly fitting for assisting students in navigating the stressful FYE.

The first-year experience

The South African higher education system is characterised by high dropout and low success (DHET, 2017). Alienation and a lack of epistemic access are two major factors that have contributed to the low retention and high dropout rates amongst South African students (CHE, 2017). Regarding alienation, students have expressed concern that they feel estranged from the higher education context (Scott, 2018). Whereas access to higher education has increased in the recent past, it has not always been accompanied by the mechanisms and support required for success (Scott, 2017).

In this regard, Morrow (2009) refers to epistemic access: the capacity to augment physical admission to university with the skills, knowledge and support to access academic knowledge. The key to epistemic access is adequate preparation (Scott, 2017). However, a significant proportion of South African university students come from disadvantaged schools, are not first-language English speakers, experience socioeconomic challenges and are first-generation students (Scott, 2017). It is against this backdrop that adequate support during the FYE is paramount (Nyar, 2018).

FYE programmes focus on supporting students during their first year of university, thereby championing the realisation of their educational goals (Scott, 2018). Additionally, FYE programmes aim to bridge the articulation gap between students' expectations of university and reality when they enter university (Nyar, 2018). Examples of FYE programmes are awareness and orientation campaigns (Wilson-Strydom, 2015), academic literacy support (Jaffer & Garraway, 2016), social engagement (Nelson & Low, 2011) and offering generic psychoeducational support programmes (Jama, 2018).

To date, there has not been much research on the value of a strengths-based FYE programme for students (Chigeza et al., 2018; Melato, 2014). Not only can such programmes enhance students' well-being, but they can also contribute to social engagement and assist in developing problem-solving skills – both areas that deserve attention amongst first-year students (Nyar, 2018; Scott, 2018; Yeager et al., 2010). The significance of this article lies not only in evaluating the efficacy of the Programme, but also in offering detailed information on a strengths-based programme that can be tailored to diverse settings.

The Strengths-Based Student Development Programme

The overarching goals of the Programme were to assist students in creating awareness of their unique strengths, applying these strengths to address stressors amidst the FYE, and identifying avenues for further development of existing strengths while simultaneously cultivating new strengths. The Programme was presented over a 12-week timeframe comprising one two-hour contact session per week. It consisted of five interwoven phases, namely pre-assessment, discovery, intervention, action and post-assessment. An overview of the Programme is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Overview of the Programme

Phase	Weeks	Focus	Interventions	Source
1. Pre-assessment	One	Pre-assessment	• Three good things	• Seligman et al., 2005
2. Discovery	Two to four	Discover strengths	• Three good things • Strength introductions • VIA survey • Gratitude visit	• Seligman et al., 2005 • Biswas-Diener, 2010 • Peterson & Seligman, 2004 • Seligman et al., 2005
3. Intervention	Five to six	Goal setting	• Three good things • Goal setting • Identify signature strengths	• Seligman et al., 2005 • Lock & Latham, 2002 • Biswas-Diener, 2010
4. Action and accountability	Seven to eleven	Goal striving	• Three good things • Goal striving • PP movies • Best Self assignment	• Seligman et al., 2005 • Biswas-Diener, 2010 • Niemiec & Wedding, 2014 • King, 2001
5. Post-assessment	Twelve	Post-assessment	• Three good things	• Seligman et al., 2005

Every contact session commenced with participants completing the Three Good Things exercise. Specifically, participants were instructed to write down three things that had gone well for them during the past week and then explain why those things happened. Fredrickson (2004) and Seligman et al. (2005) reported positive effects of the Three Good Things exercise on participants' level of well-being.

In the course of week 1, all participants completed the quantitative measures (see section on data collection) and a brief overview of the Programme was provided. Next, the discovery phase of the Programme was presented.

During the discovery phase (weeks 2 to 4) participants first engaged in strengths-based introductions. Biswas-Diener (2010) explains that strength introductions afford participants the opportunity to tell a short story about a time when they used their strengths to great effect. The strength introductions set the stage for owning and appreciating strengths (Biswas-Diener, 2010). Additionally, participants worked in groups of six to eight and established expectations and rules for engagement.

All participants completed the VIA survey to identify their main character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Once they had received feedback on the VIA survey, reflective group discussions were facilitated. Examples of reflective questions were: What are your thoughts, feelings and perspectives on your VIA results? Do these results confirm what you know about yourself? Do the results surprise you? The purpose of the reflective discussion was to assist participants in developing a deeper understanding and appreciation of their strengths and to serve as a primer for the next phase, namely the intervention phase.

Lastly, participants were encouraged to conduct a gratitude visit in week 4 of the Programme. More precisely, they were instructed to write and deliver a letter of gratitude to a person to whom they were grateful, but whom they had never thanked appropriately. Previous research reported beneficial effects of the gratitude visit on participants' reported levels of well-being (Seligman et al., 2005).

The central tasks that were completed during the intervention phase (weeks 5 and 6) included identifying stressors and challenges that students experience within the higher education context, exploring how strengths could assist them in addressing challenges, and delving into specific ways and strategies on how strengths could help in addressing stressors and concerns. In addition, participants were supported in identifying their top five signature strengths. These were then used as guiding principles and values to set one academic and one personal goal. The learning during this phase was strengthened with group discussions and designing and presenting posters. The literature suggests that people who align their goals with signature strengths tend to report higher levels of life satisfaction and positivity (Quinlan et al., 2012; Rashid, 2015).

During phase four of the Programme, namely the action and accountability phase (weeks 7 to 11), participants actively engaged in goal-striving (Quinlan et al., 2012). The remaining contact sessions were used to follow up on participants' goal-striving progression and challenges that were experienced, celebrate positive happenings and offer social support to fellow students. This was based on literature indicating that people tend to be more successful in achieving goals when goal-striving strategies are encouraged through social support and accountability (Locke & Latham, 2002).

During this phase, participants also watched and reflected on two strengths-based films, namely *The Pursuit of Happyness* (Smith & Mucciono, 2006), and *The Fault in our Stars* (Godfrey & Boone, 2014). Participants were requested to watch the films and to focus on

identifying underlying strengths expressed by the main characters. The inclusion of the films in the Programme also served as inspiration and to facilitate a deeper appreciation of the value of strengths as resources in dealing with challenges in novel ways (Niemiec & Wedding, 2014).

There was no contact session in week 11, but participants spent time completing the Best Self assignment (King, 2001). In this assignment, participants were requested to visualise themselves at some point in the future and imagine the best versions of themselves. Then they were instructed to write down the details of this best possible version of themselves, what activities and goals they would be engaged in and the strengths that they would exhibit and need to develop. Lastly, participants were requested to create a personal development plan to embody the best possible version of themselves in the future. There is strong empirical evidence that supports the beneficial effects of the Best Self assignment on enhancing well-being and strengths (King, 2001; Meevissen, Peters & Alberts, 2011). The facilitator of the Programme read and offered constructive feedback on the Best Self assignment.

The post-intervention assessment was completed in week 12. Arrangements were made for individual consultation sessions, if required, following completion of the Programme.

Research Method

Research design

A sequential explanatory mixed methods research design was adopted to conduct this study (Creswell, 2014). First, a quasi-experimental one-group-before-and-after research design was used to evaluate the efficacy of the Programme using quantitative data (Creswell, 2014). Then, qualitative data were analysed to shed light on the aspects of the Programme that participants regarded as essential and beneficial (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2011). Finally, the two strands of data were integrated to explain the findings (Creswell, 2014).

Research context

The study was conducted at a large South African residential university. The student population is diverse and resembles the broader South African demographics (Statistics South Africa, 2016). For practical reasons such as logistical constraints, challenges in gaining access to students and limited research funding, data were collected from only one of the specific university's nine campuses.

Sample

A nonprobability convenient and voluntary sample of 55 first-year South African students participated in the study (men = 22, women = 33, mean age = 19.77, age range = 18-23, SD = 1.50) (Creswell, 2014). All participants were enrolled for the first year of academic studies and registered for a student development programme at the mentioned South

African university. An open invitation to participate in the study was sent to all students in the specific group. All identified students agreed to participate in the quantitative phase of the study; a total of 12 students agreed to participate in the qualitative phase of the study (men = 4, women = 8, age range = 18-22).

Data collection and procedure

Quantitative data collection

A variety of quantitative measures was used to assess well-being and strengths use of participants in a pre- and-post-intervention format. Specific measures to evaluate well-being included the Personal Growth Initiative Scale (PGI) (Robitschek, 1998), the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) (Lyubomirsky & Leper, 1999), and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener, Emmons, Larson & Griffin, 1985). In addition, the Strengths Use and Deficit Improvement Questionnaire (SUDIQ) (Van Woerkom, Mostert, Els, Bakker, De Beer & Rothmann, 2016) was used to assess participants' use of strengths. Additionally, participants self-reported on demographic variables. These measures are described next.

- *Personal Growth Initiative Scale*

The PGIS is an empirical measure of a person's motivation to engage in self-change and personal learning. For this study, the PGIS provided evidence on how motivated participants were to attend the Programme. The PGIS comprises nine items (e.g. "I take charge of my life" and "I have a plan for making my life more balanced") that are rated on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) (Robitschek, 1998). Robitschek (1998) reported acceptable to good internal consistency coefficients ranging from 0.78 to 0.80. Mason (forthcoming) reported an internal consistency value of 0.76 on the PGIS amongst a sample (N = 235) of South African university students.

- *Subjective Happiness Scale*

The SHS comprises four items and presents as a sound psychometric measure ($\alpha = 0.79$-0.94) of well-being (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). Respondents rate four items on Likert scales, each ranging from 1 to 7 (e.g. "In general, I consider myself: (1) not a very happy person, to (7) a very happy person.") Total scores are summed and divided by four; hence, total scores can vary between 1 (low) and 7 (high) (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). Mason (forthcoming) reported an internal consistency value of 0.72 on the SHS amongst a sample of South African university students (N = 235).

- *The Satisfaction with Life Scale*

The SWLS is a 5-item measure of a person's subjective evaluation of life satisfaction (e.g. "In most ways my life is close to my ideal") (Diener et al., 1985). Participants respond to a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha coefficients indicate that the measure is psychometrically sound in international and South African contexts ($\alpha = 0.67$-0.87) (Diener et al., 1985; Wissing, Wissing, Du Toit & Temane, 2008).

- *Strengths Use and Deficit Improvement Questionnaire*

In its original format the SUDIQ has four subscales (Van Woerkom et al., 2016). However, only the Strengths Use Behaviour (SUB) subscale was adapted to measure strengths use in this study. The SUDIQ was developed for use in organisational contexts. Hence, the items were adapted for use in the university context. For example, the item "I use my strengths at work" was adapted to "I use my strengths when performing tasks" (Stander & Mostert, 2013). Participants are requested to indicate responses on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (almost never) to 6 (almost always). The SUDIQ and SUB subscales present with excellent psychometric properties within a South African setting ($\alpha = 0.93$-0.96) (Stander & Mostert, 2013; Van Woerkom et al., 2016).

Qualitative data collection

Qualitative data were collected using individual semi-structured interviews. The interviews, each approximately an hour in duration, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The following five broad interview questions guided the interview process: How do you enact signature strengths in your daily life? What was your experience of the Programme? What did you learn from the Programme and what could you do more of in your daily life? What was good about the Programme? What was not good about the Programme?

Additional probing questions (e.g. "Can you provide an example from your own experience to illustrate your response?"), requests for additional information (e.g. "You raised an interesting point, please tell me more") and probing techniques (e.g. summarising and reflecting on participants' responses) were used to illuminate participants' lived experiences. Probing questions were not purposefully leading, but instead focused on allowing participants to offer an account of their qualitative understanding and experience of attending the Programme.

Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Painter (2006) explain that saturation is typically reached in an exploratory study featuring a homogeneous sample, such as this study, after 6-8 sampling units are collected or when the new material does not add new insights to the qualitative interpretation. In this study, data saturation was reached after completing nine interviews. However, because 12 participants had agreed to take part in the interview process, all were included in the data analysis process.

Data analysis

Quantitative data analysis

Descriptive (mean, standard deviation and percentages) and inferential statistics (paired sample *t*-test and Cohen's *d* for effect size) were used to analyse the quantitative data (Cohen, 1992; Field, 2013). The internal consistency of the measuring instruments was calculated using Cronbach's alpha (Field, 2013). The software programme SPSS version 25 was used to facilitate the quantitative data analysis process.

Qualitative data analysis

The software programme Atlas.ti, version 7 was used to manage the qualitative data analysis process. Thematic analysis, consisting of five interrelated steps, namely (1) familiarisation, (2) inducing themes, (3) coding, (4) elaboration and (5) interpretation and checking, served as a guide to analyse the interview transcriptions qualitatively (Henning et al., 2011).

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) guidelines for qualitative research were adopted to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. The following measures were implemented to strengthen the trustworthiness: memo writing, immersion in the data, using an audit trail, and fully describing the research method and procedure. Using verbatim quotes to substantiate the qualitative interpretation contributed to ensuring the rigour of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Research ethics

The university where data were collected granted permission to conduct the study (Ref. #: 2014/07/004). All participants gave individual written informed consent. Identifying information (e.g. surnames, names and student numbers) was treated confidentially and the quantitative and qualitative data were anonymised prior to the data analysis. No course credit or financial benefits were offered for participation.

Results and Discussion

The results from the empirical study are discussed in the following sections. Firstly, the quantitative results are presented, and then the qualitative findings are discussed. Lastly, an integrated perspective of the findings is presented.

Quantitative results

A comparison between the pre- and post-Programme scores is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Paired *t*-test results

Scale	N	M	SD	*df*	*t*-value	*p*-value	Effect size (*d*)	Cronbach's alpha
PGIS								
Pre-test	55	38.73	7.15	54				
Post-test	55	41.60	5.11	54	3.41	0.0012★★	0.46	0.77
SHS								
Pre-test	55	4.34	1.17	54				
Post-test	55	4.88	1.01	54	2.55	0.0137★	0.49	0.72
SWLS								
Pre-test	55	22.93	7.34	54				
Post-test	55	25.42	5.48	54	2.70	0.0193★	0.38	0.86
SUB								
Pre-test	55	25.20	5.11	54				
Post-test	55	30.70	3.42	54	7.16	0.0002★★	1.26	0.84

Note: PGIS – Personal Growth Initiative Scale; SHS – Subjective Happiness Scale; SWLS – Satisfaction with Life Scale; SUB – Strengths Use Behaviour; ★$p < 0.05$ – statistically significant; ★★$p < 0.01$ – statistically significant

As is evident in Table 2, the quantitative measures presented with acceptable to good internal consistencies (Field, 2013). There were significant differences between pre- and post-Programme scores. Regarding the specific quantitative scales, a statistically significant change was detected between the pre- and post-test scores on the PGIS ($t(54) = 3.41$, $p < 0.01$). This implies that participants' reported scores on the PGIS were significantly higher following participation in the Programme.

The PGIS serves as an operational measure to assess people's intrapersonal skills regarding the intention to change, grow and embrace ongoing learning (Robitschek, 1998). Thus, it can be inferred that participants' willingness to engage in self-change and personal development was enhanced through their participation in the Programme. The effect size for this analysis was found to represent a medium effect ($d = 0.46$) (Cohen, 1992). An effect size of 0.46 suggests that, amongst other things, if 100 students had to attend the Programme, 17 more students would have a favourable outcome compared to if they had received a control treatment (Cohen, 1992; Field, 2013).

Positive changes were detected between the two well-being measures, namely SHS ($t(54) = 2.55$, $p < 0.05$) and SWLS ($t(54) = 2.70$, $p < 0.05$). Based on the results from the SHS, it can be deduced that participants reported significantly more positive affect following the Programme (Fredrickson, 1999). However, while the SHS offers an indication of the frequency of subjectively evaluated positive affect, it does not indicate the sources (Diener, 2013). Qualitative data could shed more light on the features of the Programme that proved to enhance well-being.

The result from the SWLS indicates that participants experienced greater life satisfaction after attending the Programme. This result is important when considering that the FYE is particularly stressful and can negatively impinge on students' sense of belonging, academic performance and psychological functioning (Nyar, 2018; Scott, 2018).

Higher levels of well-being, as assessed via the SHS and SWLS, are associated with creative problem-solving, resourcefulness and goal achievement (Diener, 2013). According to Fredrickson's (2004) broaden and build perspective, the experience of positive emotions and life satisfaction is a necessary condition to create a resilient and flourishing life, even in the face of challenges. Thus, these positive outcomes suggest that participants may be better prepared to address the challenges posed during the FYE compared to if they did not attend the Programme.

Notwithstanding the statistically significant results, the effect size analyses indicated medium effects on the SHS ($d = 0.49$) and SWLS ($d = 0.38$). When considering a counterfactual scenario, the effect sizes suggest that there is a 64% chance that a person picked at random from a treatment group (e.g. attended the Programme) will have a higher score than a person picked who did not attend the Programme. Furthermore, to have one more favourable outcome in the treatment group compared to the control group, eight people would have to attend and complete the Programme (Cohen, 1992; Field, 2013).

Regarding the pre-and post-assessment assessment comparison on the SUB, the *t*-test was found to be statistically significant ($t(54) = 7.16$, $p < 0.01$). Thus, participants reported notable positive changes in the use of strengths after attending the Programme. Research has linked strength use with higher levels of well-being, lower incidence of psychological

distress, and better academic performance (Seligman et al., 2005). Consequently, it could be expected that participants would be better able to address academic-related challenges after attending the Programme. Qualitative data could offer a more nuanced perspective on students' experiences.

The effect size for the analysis on the SUB ($d = 1.26$) was found to exceed Cohen's (1992) convention for a large effect ($d = 0.80$). This finding implies that, amongst other things, 90% of a treatment group would be above the mean of a control group. Additionally, an estimated 50% of students who attend the Programme would experience a positive outcome compared to if they failed to attend the Programme (Cohen, 1992; Field, 2013).

Qualitative findings

After the quantitative phase of the study, a central question emerged, namely 'What aspects of the Programme did participants find beneficial?' It was with this question in mind that I approached the qualitative data. Through thematic analysis, four themes emerged: (1) a broadened horizon, (2) social support, (3) accountability and (4) mindset.

Table 3 serves as a summative index of the four themes. The frequency of participants' references to the particular themes is also displayed in Table 3.

Counting codes in qualitative research is controversial (Hannah & Lautsch, 2011). In this article, the decision to count qualitative codes was related to the purpose of the qualitative phase of the mixed methods study, namely to explore aspects of the Programme that participants regarded as beneficial. Consequently, it was deemed relevant to indicate that the aspects contributing value to the Programme were steeped in a rigorous and dispassionate analysis of the qualitative, while, at the same time, not losing sight of the participants' rich lived experiences.

Table 3: Major themes and frequencies of responses

Themes	Female participants *n* (% of N)	Male participants *n* (% of N)	Total N (100%)
A broadened horizon	6 (50%)	4 (33%)	10 (83%)
Social support	6 (50%)	3 (25%)	9 (75%)
Accountability	5 (42%)	4 (33%)	9 (75%)
Mind-set	8 (67%)	3 (25%)	11 (92%)
Note: '% of N' means gender percentage of the row frequency of responses.			

In the next section, the qualitative themes are discussed. Due to space limitations, only selected verbatim quotes are included to substantiate the interpretations. The frequency of responses to a specific theme is indicated. For example, 6/12 indicates that 50% of participants referred to a specific thematic idea. The referencing system in parenthesis denotes participant number (e.g. P#1 for Participant 1), gender (m = male, f = female) and age (e.g. 18 denotes 18 years of age) and is indicated as follows (P#1, f, 19).

Qualitative themes

The qualitative analysis suggested that four factors contributed to the efficacy of the Programme: (1) broadened horizons, (2) social support, (3) accountability and (4) mindset. These four themes are now discussed.

The first theme, broadened horizons, was endorsed by 83% of the qualitative sample. This theme captured the notion that participants' worldviews were expanded through their participation in the Programme.

Participant 4, a 20-year-old woman, reflected on how her worldview was broadened: *"… through this programme, I have been taken so far out of my comfort zone that I doubt I will ever find my way back … it is a good thing … my understanding of myself and others have stretched beyond what I imagined. I now view myself as a more enlightened person."*

Another participant added, *"I have learned that people are more than their weaknesses. We all have strengths and talents. By developing strengths, we can overcome struggles and be stronger people"* (P#7, f, 19).

Participant 11 agreed and voiced the opinion that "*The three right things* [reference to the Three Good Things exercise] *was very nice … made me see difficulties in life through optimistic eyes*" (P#11, m, 20).

These qualitative references to personal growth are consistent with literature regarding the development of strengths. Specifically, Seligman (2011) explains that awareness of strengths can have a positive effect on a person's sense of self. Others have noted that the development of strengths can invigorate people with harmonious energy, enhance engagement and dedication in the pursuit of important goals, and inspire personal development (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Thus, the qualitative data suggest that raising awareness regarding strengths challenged participants to incorporate a novel and empowering view of themselves: *"… because I have come to understand another dimension of myself, I can do better in future"* (P#1, f, 19).

The second theme, social support, indicated that the majority of participants (75%) developed significant insight into their strengths based on meaningful connections with other participants in the Programme. One participant explained as follows: *"… working in groups and discussing these issues … helped me to understand strengths from many angles"* (P#10, m, 19).

Developmental psychologists have indicated that establishing meaningful interpersonal connections is a vital developmental task amongst persons in the late adolescent and young adulthood stage – students in their first year of university often fall within this age bracket (Arnett, 2000; Nelson & Low, 2011). Moreover, group-based discussions appeared to have assisted participants in establishing a network of social support, as Participant 6, a 22-year-old woman, explained: *"… the group sessions helped us to discuss problems we were facing … like how difficult it is to make friends, or dealing with difficult subjects …"* The social interaction around the PP films was also regarded as beneficial: "*Analysing the movies helped me to learn more about my life and stress … enjoyed sharing the deeper aspects of the movie with my group …*

made me feel part of the group" (P#7, f, 19). The importance of social interaction and support in developing strengths has been well-documented in the extant literature (Dahslgaard et al., 2005; Durlak et al., 2011; Lewin & Mawoyo, 2011).

The literature on the FYE indicates that students often struggle with feelings of social isolation and dealing with demanding academic content (Nyar, 2018; Scott, 2018). Not only did the Programme assist students by adopting a strengths-based view (*"… I feel more confident to solve problems because I now know what my strengths are and how to use them …"* P#11, m, 20), but it also connected participants to a network of other students who share similar challenges amidst the FYE (*"… knowing that other students experience the same stress that I do, makes me feel that it's okay to worry …"* P#4, f, 20). Consequently, creating an affirmative space where students could discuss strengths in the context of FYE challenges emerged as an essential feature of the Programme that may contribute to its efficacy.

A third theme that emerged from the qualitative analysis (9/12) was accountability. During the first contact session (see Table 3), participants engaged in group activities and developed and presented expectations for participation in the Programme. The majority of the groups highlighted accountability as a critical element in their lists of expectations. The qualitative analysis echoed participants' sentiments expressed in their expectations. The following quote substantiates this interpretation: *"I never missed a session because I knew my group members counted on me. They needed me to be there … we were a team and I had a duty"* (P#9, m, 18).

Nelson and Low (2011) relate accountability to self-management. They explain that self-management embodies a set of emotional skills in managing personal performance healthily and productively (Nelson & Low, 2011). Not only is self-management related to agency and a significant predictor of academic success, but also features as a critical element of epistemic access (Morrow, 2009; Nelson & Low, 2011). Thus, the emphasis on accountability from a peer versus an authoritarian perspective was indicated as an element that contributed to the efficacy of the Programme.

The fourth theme was entitled 'mindsets'. The majority of participants (11/12) explained that the Programme assisted in changing their view of university life from one of fear and uncertainty (*"When I arrived at university, I felt overwhelmed and uncertain. All I was thinking was 'I can't do this.' I was afraid"*, P#6, f, 22), to one of challenge (*"University is difficult, but after these classes* [reference to the Programme] *I know I can deal with the pressure … I have discovered strengths that I didn't know existed … feel happy"* P#2, f, 20). Dweck's (2006) theory of mindsets appears helpful in explaining participants' perspectives.

Dweck (2006) differentiates between a fixed mindset (entity theory of intelligence) and a growth mindset (incremental theory of intelligence). Persons who adopt a fixed mindset assume that they have limited skills, talents and abilities. Additionally, they hold on to the view that they lack the ability to engage in self-directed change. In contrast, persons who act from the perspective of a growth mindset espouse the notion that they can develop the capacities, such as strengths, required to address problems and pursue noteworthy life goals (Dweck, 2006).

According to the participants, the Programme facilitated a shift from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset. The following quote bears this out: *"The biggest change for me was the trust that I can develop and become a better version of myself"* (P#8, m, 20). Thus, the shift from a reactive and fear-based mindset to a proactive and engaged view of life assisted participants in navigating the challenges associated with the FYE: *"Being the best that I can be, is how I now approach stressors at university … I can overcome difficulties by using my strengths … and developing strengths"* (P#10, m, 19).

Integration of quantitative and qualitative data

Mixed methods research designs aim to integrate quantitative and qualitative data to provide a more nuanced answer to a research question (Creswell, 2014). This article reports an investigation into the efficacy of the Programme in enhancing strengths use and well-being amongst participating first-year students.

The quantitative data indicated that the Programme served as an efficacious approach to assist first-year students in enhancing self-change behaviours focused on personal growth, well-being and strengths use (see Table 2). The findings were statistically significant and presented with medium effect sizes on the PGIS ($t = 3.41$, $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.46$), SHS ($t = 2.55$, $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.49$) and SWLS ($t = 2.70$, $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.38$). However, the effect size on strengths use ($d = 1.26$) was interpreted as large, indicating a significant practical effect (Cohen, 1992).

Qualitative data were collected and analysed to explore what aspects of the Programme participants found beneficial. Four themes emerged following the analysis (see Table 3). Collectively, the qualitative data suggested that raising awareness regarding strengths within a social support structure, and accompanied by peer accountability, assisted participants in understanding that strengths are not static, but instead that strengths are dynamic capacities that can be developed to address challenges that could occur as part of the FYE. Participant 5, an 18-year-old woman, captured the essence of this argument by stating, *"[M]y top strength* [on the VIA survey] *was creativity … creativity means I can find new ways of dealing with problems."* In a follow-up question from the interviewer ("Can you give an example of how creativity has assisted you in dealing with a problem at university?"), she responded, *"Being creative stops me from being stuck. I have options. Problems, like the workload, bad relationships, or tests and exams … I approach them as opportunities to develop my strengths. They make me stronger … it's like the quote: 'I am the master of my soul and king of my ship.'"*

In conclusion: the quantitative data indicated that the Programme achieved the aim of enhancing well-being and encouraging strengths use. The qualitative illuminated the aspects that contributed towards the efficacy of the Programme.

Conclusion

This article reported on a mixed methods study on the efficacy of a strengths-based development programme ('the Programme'). The quantitative data indicated statistically significant changes between pre- and post-Programme scores. The effect size analyses pointed to medium effects on some of the quantitative scales (PGIS, SHS and SWLS).

However, a significant impact ($d = 1.26$) was calculated regarding strengths use. The quantitative findings indicated that the Programme was efficacious in enhancing well-being and strengths use. The qualitative analysis suggested that a focus on strengths and personal development, social support and accountability, and an emphasis on empowering mindsets are essential aspects to include in psycho-educational stress-management programmes.

This study offers noteworthy contributions to the field. First, it has addressed a primarily overlooked area in the Southern African literature, namely adopting a strengths-based approach to supporting students during the FYE within the higher education context. Second, based on the gap in the literature, the Programme was developed. Detailed information on the Programme was provided. This strengths-based programme can be adapted and tailored to diverse contexts, based on students' needs. Third, the mixed methods evaluation indicates that the Programme could assist university students in adopting empowering mindsets in the face of challenges. Fourth, the article sets the tone for further use and application of PP and strengths-based approaches within the student affairs and FYE contexts.

Notwithstanding the positive findings, the study had some limitations. First, this was a cross-sectional study that focused on a small sample at one university in South Africa. Hence, the external validity of the study does not allow for generalisation of findings. It is recommended that future studies adopt a longitudinal design and include more extensive and diverse samples from various contexts to enhance generalisability. Furthermore, due to the quasi-experimental nature of the quantitative phase of the study, causality cannot be inferred. More empirically sound causal inferences could have been drawn if a true experimental study, comprising control and experimental groups, were conducted. A third limitation is that the study was conducted principally from a positivistic perspective to assess the efficacy of the Programme. Thus, the nuanced complexities that surround the FYE were not explored. The qualitative component of the study focused exclusively on aspects of the Programme that participants found beneficial. Hence, the qualitative phase of the study did not take structural or cultural aspects outside of participants' experiences during the Programme into account. It is, therefore, strongly advised that further qualitative research be conducted to offer a more in-depth exploration of first-year students' journeys and experiences, as well as the influence of diverse contexts and histories on their experiences. Moreover, research is needed that explores the assumptions of approaches such as PP with an African context critically.

Despite the noted limitations, the data presented in this article offer a strong case for further research to explore the use of strengths-based approaches amongst first-year university students. It is hoped that this study could serve as a catalyst for further practice-based research to assist students in developing their strengths to become the best that they can be.

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Research article

The Relationships Between First-Year Students' Sense of Purpose and Meaning in Life, Mental Health and Academic Performance

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Abstract

The research explored the relationships that exist between first-year students' sense of purpose and meaning in life, mental health and academic performance enrolled for courses with at-risk subjects at a higher education institution. Empirical data was obtained from 269 participants (18-22 years = 60.97%, female = 55.80%) who completed the Purpose in Life test and Mental Health Screening Questionnaire that assessed their sense of purpose and meaning in life and mental health. The average mark in four subjects during their mid-year examination denoted their academic performance. The results suggested that students were still exploring the nature of their sense of purpose and meaning in life (M = 109.21, SD = 21.05) and that small, significant relationships existed between their sense of purpose and meaning in life and mental health. These findings suggested that student practitioners should consider developing interventions to enhance first-year students' identification of their purpose and meaning in life that may inherently also aid their identity development. Likewise, practitioners should consider strengthening and/or developing interventions in critical mental health areas like depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress and alcohol use behaviour.

Keywords

academic performance; first-year student; Management Sciences; meaning in life; mental health; student development

Introduction

The focus in South African higher education (SAHE) has shifted from elitism to mass opportunity (Fraser & Killen, 2003; Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007; White Paper, 2013). Consequently, the student population has diversified and higher education institutions (HEIs) must accommodate and address the needs of students coming from diverse backgrounds and varying levels of preparedness for the demands of higher education (HE) (De Jager & Van Lingen, 2012; Reddy, 2006; Scott et al., 2007).

There is a myriad of factors that influence students' success at university, like their academic and social preparedness; their motivation and approach to studying; their experience in the university system; the teaching strategies employed by educators;

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interaction between them and the HEI academic and social systems (e.g. levels of engagement and disengagement); cultural expectations; psychosocial factors and their socioeconomic status (Fraser & Killen, 2003; Mason, 2017; Scott et al., 2007).

First-year students may face additional challenges like moving to a new area or country; separation from their family and existing friends; managing the transition from high school and home to university life; experiencing a range of different cultures; communicating in a language they are not fluent in; meeting unfamiliar modes of learning, teaching and assessment; managing changed financial circumstances; balancing study with employment or being a parent and/or carer; and making the transition from home to the HEI local health providers and support services (Aldiabat, Matini & Le Navenec, 2014; Student mental wellbeing …, 2015). Consequently, first-year students may be at risk of higher levels of stress and the development of psychiatric symptoms (Aldiabat et al., 2014).

A key outcome for HE students is the development of purpose and meaning (PAM) in life (for this study 'purpose' and 'meaning' are regarded as an interwoven concept and used interchangeably) (Braskamp, Trautvetter & Ward, 2008; Chickering & Stamm, 2002). Whilst meaning in life is a complex construct and may not be defined in a general way, it is thought to be an inherent striving to find meaning in life and that life has meaning under all circumstances, including unfavourable situations (Frankl, 2006). Consequently, it is possible to find meaning in adversity through the attitude that individuals adopt when they are facing inevitable suffering (Frankl, 2006).

HE plays an active role in aiding students' identity development since identities are formed through challenges, crises, life events and values students experience throughout their HE years (Chickering & Stamm, 2002; Higbee, 1996; Reisser, 1995; Scialdoni, 2009). Identity development entails the development of PAM and involves educational and vocational planning, making lifestyle choices, exercising intentionality daily, persistence despite obstacles and a growing ability to unify various goals within the scope of a larger more meaningful purpose (Chickering & Stamm, 2002; Higbee, 1996).

Therefore, meaning in life becomes a "web of connections, understandings, and interpretations" that may not only assist students to comprehend their experiences, but also help them to formulate plans towards realising their desired futures (Steger, 2012, p. 165). However, students' ability to experience a sense of PAM involves their efficacy in coping with daily stresses, misfortunes and negative affect (Wong, 2012).

Makola and Van den Berg (2008b) reported a significant positive relationship between first-year students' sense of PAM and their academic performance. Research demonstrated students' level of PAM as positively linked to their better adjustment to university; more effective study strategies; better class attendance; better time management; perseverance and study completion (Makola, 2014; Makola & Van den Berg, 2010). Tinto (1993) identified students' intentions and commitment as key to their perseverance and success. Ultimately, a sense of PAM is associated with students having a better understanding of the application potential for what they have learnt; a higher level of exploring life directions; a regard for education as a gateway to their independence and bringing about positive change in the world (Henderson-King & Mitchell, 2011).

Hence, international research has indicated an upward trend over the last few decades in the quantity and severity of mental health problems presented by HE students (Del Pilar, 2009; Garlow et al., 2008; Gencoz & Or, 2006; Wang, Lee & Wahid, 2013). These studies demonstrated significant levels of depressive symptoms, suicide ideation, suicide attempts, anxiety, anger, and alcohol and drug use in students. Research on the mental health of SAHE students is limited. However, a study by Pillay, Edwards, Gambu and Dhlomo (2002) showed an increase in depression amongst university student populations. Depressive symptoms are linked to poorer academic performance and additional mental health problems amongst those affected (Aldiabat et al., 2014).

A sense of PAM in life is deemed as a core component of mental health, and has been shown to be positively correlated to students' well-being, resiliency and social attitudes and is thought to be advantageous to their overall growth and development (Henderson-King & Mitchell, 2011; Kleftaras & Psarra, 2012; Mason, 2014; Mokalo & Van den Berg, 2008b; Molasso, 2006; Steger, 2012). A lack or low level of meaning is related to a series of negative behaviours and mental health problems, such as alcohol and drug use, boredom proneness, depression, suicide ideation, disengagement and risky behaviours (Kleftaras & Psarra, 2012; Schulenberg & Melton, 2010; Steger, Frazier, Oishi & Kaler, 2006) with clear implications for HE students' sense of PAM and academic success.

Purpose of the Study

A sense of PAM in life appears to be a valuable construct for HE. However, studies about meaning in life in the SAHE sector is still limited (Makola & Van den Berg, 2008a, 2008b; Makola, 2014; Mason, 2014, 2017; Nell, 2014). The study explored how a sense of PAM, mental health and academic performance of first-year students at a HEI enrolled for courses in management sciences with at-risk subjects related to one another. The core constructs explored were: a sense of PAM in life as the extent to which participants have found meaning in life; mental health as the absence or the presence of minimal symptoms of depression, anxiety and substance use; and academic performance as the average mark that the participants obtained in four identified subjects during their mid-year examination.

Method

Research design

To provide a basic familiarity, a quantitative exploratory design was used to investigate and describe the relationships between students' sense of PAM in life, mental health and academic performance (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Neuman, 1997).

Participants

Students enrolled for at-risk first-year courses were asked to volunteer to participate in the study. Subsequently, a convenient sample of 269 male and female students participated during the second semester. An overview of the participant characteristics is included in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant characteristics of students enrolled for at-risk first-year courses

Category		N	%
Gender	Female	150	55.80
	Male	119	44.20
Age group (years)	18-22	164	60.97
	23-27	37	13.75
	>27	2	0.74
	Not stated	66	24.45
Accommodation	Residence (on/off campus)	68	25.30
	Private	201	74.70

Research instruments

A brief demographic questionnaire was developed to gather participants' age, gender and residential status (research has shown that residential accommodation is correlated to lower levels of psychological distress in HE students (Wang et al., 2013). All items were developed to allow participants to respond using selected response scales so that participants' identities were protected and for appropriate and ease of documentation.

The Purpose in Life (PIL) test (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1969), which is based on Viktor Frankl's theory of meaning, was selected to assess participants' sense of PAM in life. It is regarded as a primary measure of meaning and is commonly used in research studies with diverse study populations (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1969; Schulenberg & Melton, 2010). The PIL is an attitude scale that measured the degree to which individuals experienced a sense of PAM in life. The 20 items on the PIL are scored on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (feelings of no purpose) to 7 (the greatest feelings of purpose in life). Scores range from a low of 20 to a high of 140 and are categorised into three ranges: a lack of clear purpose and meaning (score range: 20-91); somewhat uncertain purpose and meaning (score range: 92-112) and presence of definite purpose and meaning (score range: 113-140). Molasso (2006) had reported that the PIL demonstrates good reliability and validity according to the split-half (.87-.92) and test-retest method (.79-.83).

The Mental Health Screening Questionnaire (MHSQ) was used to assess aspects of the participants' mental health and was adapted from the Psychiatric Diagnostic Screening Questionnaire (PDSQ) (Zimmerman, 2002). The PDSQ is a brief self-report questionnaire that screens for symptoms of DSM-IV Axis I disorders most commonly encountered amongst individuals 18 years of age and older (Zimmerman & Chelminski, 2006). The PDSQ has proven itself to be effective, convenient and reliable (Sheeran & Zimmerman, 2004; Zimmerman & Chelminski, 2006). The MHSQ consists of the PDSQ major depression (MDD), post-traumatic stress (PTSD), panic (PD), social anxiety (SP), generalised anxiety (GAD), alcohol abuse/dependence (AAD) and drug abuse/dependence (DAD) subscales. The entire instrument comprises 74 items, each with a yes/no answer format.

Ethics

The applicability of the PIL and MHSQ with student populations in group contexts was established and permission was obtained from the developers to utilise the questionnaires. Thereafter, permission was sought from the HEI Ethical Committee to conduct the study and approval was received. The language of the PIL and MHSQ was adapted since most participants were second-language English speakers. Permission was obtained from the course department at the HEI to recruit first-year students for the study. The researcher was present at the time of data collection to clarify any matter and was assisted by a multilingual psychologist to address any language issues, to act as a translator (if required) and to ensure the psychological safety of all participants. Although the researcher's presence may be regarded as a conflict of interest, this was counteracted by the presence of the psychologist and subject lecturers who were monitoring what transpired. Detailed information about the study; assurances on confidentiality; voluntarily participation and withdrawal; together with the scope of the research, data collection and analysis were provided in an open forum. Only students who agreed to participate in the study were asked to complete the questionnaires and the questionnaires (in English) were completed in class after written permission was obtained from all volunteers.

Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) (Version 22) assisted with the data analyses. Descriptive statistics were calculated to provide an overview of the participants' characteristics. A reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) was calculated for the PIL. Reliability coefficients were not calculated for the MHSQ subscales due to the categorical nature of the data. Pearson r coefficients were calculated to determine relationships between the PIL, MHSQ and the participants' academic performance. T-tests were used to observe differences between the participants' demographic characteristics, PAM in life, mental health and academic performance.

Results and Discussion

A Cronbach's alpha of .89 was calculated for the PIL that represented good internal consistency. The PIL mean group score was calculated as 109.21 (SD = 21.05) and interpreted in the sense that the participants' PAM was somewhat uncertain. The result is in line with Chickering's developmental theory that held that students are still in a process of developing that PAM (Reisser, 1995).

The means and standard deviations on the MHSQ subscales and the cut-off scores on each subscale are included in Table 2.

Table 2: Means and standard deviations

Subscales	N	M (SD)	Cut-off score
MDD	269	6.93 (4.02)	9
PTSD	269	4.37 (3.39)	5
PD	269	2.02 (2.02)	4
SP	269	6.09 (3.94)	4
AAD	269	0.78 (1.39)	1
DAD	269	0.20 (0.79)	1
GAD	269	4.36 (3.05)	7

The mean group measures on the major depression, post-traumatic stress, panic, alcohol abuse/dependence, drug abuse/dependence and generalised anxiety were subclinical. At the group level, this finding suggested the participants' psychological health and adaptive coping. Although the mean group measure on the social anxiety subscale exceeded the recommended cut-off value that suggested a follow-up clinical interview, the measure was interpreted in the sense that the participants might have felt anxious because of the nature of the task and that they might have feared negative judgement.

Inspection of the individual measures on the MHSQ subscales indicated a significant number of participants who exceeded the recommended cut-off scores on the various subscales. The number and percentage of participants on the major depression, post-traumatic stress, panic, social anxiety, alcohol abuse/dependence, drug abuse/dependence and generalised anxiety subscales that were indicated for follow-up is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Numbers of participants recommended for follow-up

Subscales	N (%)
MDD	72 (26.77)
PTSD	113 (42.01)
PD	63 (23.42)
SP	182 (67.66)
AAD	86 (31.97)
DAD	22 (8.18)
GAD	62 (23.05)

Zimmerman (2002) indicated the MHSQ cut-off values to be more sensitive than specific and to be interpreted in a flexible way. Therefore, the cut-off values were not used to assign a diagnosis or treatment, but rather to inform decisions about whether a more comprehensive clinical screening should be undertaken (Zimmerman, 2002). The high levels of symptoms present on the subscales is consistent with previous research that indicated that not only globally, but also locally, there is an increase in mental health problems amongst students (Del Pilar, 2009; Garlow et al., 2008; Gencoz & Or, 2006;

Pillay et al., 2002). The recommendation for follow-up was most prominent regarding post-traumatic stress, alcohol abuse/dependency and major depression. Generally, research shows a prevalence rate of 16.67% amongst South Africans suffering from anxiety, depression and substance use problems (Herman et al., 2009). Alarmingly, the psychological distress may be related to contemporary South Africans' challenges to deal with political uncertainty, social transition, crime and economic stress (Health24, 2017). Since no cut-off values on the MHSQ were available for South African populations, the results were interpreted with caution, however, being cognisant of the emerging trend of mental health problems amongst HE students (Pillay et al., 2002). The correlations between the PIL and MHSQ are included in Table 4.

Table 4: Correlations between PIL and MHSQ

	PIL	MDD	PTSD	PD	SP	AAD	DAD
MDD	-.340**						
PTSD	-.100	.495**					
PD	-.124*	.446**	.459**				
SP	-.097	.307**	.245**	.378**			
AAD	-.085	.122*	.144*	.208**	.129*		
DAD	-.073	.117	.159**	.120*	.065	.371**	
GAD	-.192**	.541**	.427**	.531**	.503**	.084	.082
*p<.05, two tailed **p<.01, two tailed							

Small significant negative correlations were found between the participants' sense of PAM in life and the presence of symptoms of major depression, panic and generalised anxiety. Empirical studies support positive associations between psychological distress and lower meaning in life, and between high meaning in life, psychological well-being and the ability to cope effectively with stressful life events (Marsh, Smith, Piek & Saunders, 2003). At the group level, the significant negative correlations between the measure on the PIL and the presence of symptoms of major depression, panic and generalised anxiety concurred with these studies, and were interpreted in the sense that the participants' sense of PAM in life was positively related to their adaptive psychological coping. However, on an individual level it was apparent that a significant percentage of the participants might have been psychologically distressed (see Table 3).

An average score of 59.66% (SD = 7.14) was calculated for the participants' academic performance in the mid-year examination. At the group level, a non-significant relationship was found between the participants' sense of PAM and their academic performance. The correlations between the participants' sense of PAM and their academic performance are included in Table 5.

Table 5: Correlations between academic performance and meaning

	PIL	N	%	SD
Subject A	.020	244	59.58	9.54
Subject B	.125	231	58.64	6.64
Subject C	.038	247	63.51	10.40
Subject D	.003	235	58.73	13.54
Subject mean	.054	239	59.66	7.14
*p<.05, two tailed **p<.01, two tailed				

The female participants reported a higher sense of PAM on the PIL (M = 110.36; SD = 20.11) than the male participants (M = 107.85; SD = 22.22). Both these measures were interpreted as a somewhat uncertain sense of PAM. T-tests revealed the difference between the PAM of the genders as non-significant.

Significant differences were found between the genders concerning the prevalence of symptoms on the post-traumatic, alcohol abuse/dependency, drug abuse/dependency and generalised anxiety on the MHSQ subscales. The means, standard deviations and p-values for the differences between the genders is included in Table 6.

Table 6: Means and standard deviations for differences between the male and female participants

Subscale	Females M (SD)	Males M (SD)	p-value
PTSD	4.80 (3.36)	3.84 (3.34)	.020
AAD	.414 (1.05)	1.27 (1.63)	.000
DAD	.046 (0.24)	.414 (1.14)	.000
GAD	4.72 (3.17)	3.87 (2.83)	.023

The female participants reported more symptoms than the male participants on the post-traumatic stress and generalised anxiety subscales. The male participants reported more symptoms than the female participants on the substance (alcohol and drugs) abuse/dependency subscales. Alcohol and drug use were indicated as particularly prevalent amongst rural-based first-year university students (Pillay & Naidoo, 2010). The high prevalence rate was related to the students' developmental level, the vulnerabilities and challenges associated with being a first-year student in relation to ways of dealing with stress and social situations (Pillay & Ngcobo, 2010). It is also possible that the female participants might have been socialised differently from the male participants (Afifi, 2007; Needham & Hill, 2010) and that they might have had a higher tendency to internalise psychological distress than males who might have had a higher tendency to externalise psychological distress in the form of alcohol and drug use (Afifi, 2007; Needham & Hill, 2010). The literature shows a distinct relationship between meaninglessness and alcohol and/or drug use (Asagba & Marshall, 2016). For this study, a non-significant statistical correlation was found between the participants' sense of PAM and the presence of symptoms on the alcohol and/or drug abuse/dependency subscales (see Table 4).

The difference between the genders on the post-traumatic stress subscale may be interpreted in the sense that the female participants might have been more vulnerable regarding exposure (including secondary exposure) to gender-based violence (e.g. physical violence and rape) than the male participants (Dunkle et al., 2004). Research substantiated the experience of high levels of gender-based violence amongst South African females (Maluleke, 2018). This interpretation may account for the higher incidence of reported post-traumatic stress symptoms in the female population. However, this finding should be investigated further before any final conclusions can be drawn.

A significant difference was found concerning the prevalence of symptoms reported on the alcohol abuse/dependency subscale between the participants who resided in a residence ($M = .338$, $SD = .84$) and those who resided in private accommodation ($M = .935$, $SD = 1.51$). Students who resided in a residence reported fewer symptoms than those in private accommodation. This result is supported by the Wang et al. (2013) study, and it may suggest that the accommodation affiliated with the HEI offered a more structured environment with a higher level of peer support, that had culminated into a higher sense of connectedness to the HEI and the cultivation of prosocial behaviour. Such an environment may thus play a role in mitigating first-year students' alcohol/drug use and/or dependency behaviour. However, this finding should be investigated further before any final conclusions can be made.

Limitations and Future Directions

The research project had certain limitations that should be taken into consideration when interpreting the results. The representativeness of the sample posed a limitation on the study. A relatively small, convenient sample was used from a specific subject area from a HEI, implying that the conclusions drawn may not be generalised to other students and other HEIs. Research instruments that have been validated for the South African context could not be found. As such, the cultural fairness of the PIL and MHSQ was not established for the South African student populations. Likewise, the cut-off values for the MHSQ subscales were not determined for South African student populations and could be more sensitive than specific. Future work using mixed methods would allow for richer descriptions of the relationships between students' meaning in life, mental health and academic performance.

Conclusion

The study revealed that the participants had a somewhat uncertain sense of purpose and meaning in life, suggesting that they were still exploring these aspects. The study also revealed significant positive relationships between the participants' sense of purpose and meaning in life and mental health; differences between the genders with respect to the prevalence of symptoms reported for mental health conditions; and differences between participants who were residing in residence accommodation and those who did not, concerning the prevalence of symptoms reported for alcohol use/dependency behaviour.

These findings have practical implications. While HEIs' focus and main priority is the academic or intellectual development of its students, there are claims that HE has been neglecting its students' inner development (Dalton & Crosby, 2006; Marklein, 2007).

Young people in contemporary South Africa dwell in an increasingly volatile, uncertain and complex world which poses definite challenges to their identity construction as individuals and as a collective, their capacity to establish healthy interpersonal relationships and their ability to develop purpose and meaning (Côté, 2018). It was clear from the results that students' sense of purpose and meaning played a role in their mental health, whereas the literature study indicated that students' mental health is linked to prosocial attitudes and behaviour, and resilience. As such, HEIs may be underestimating the role that a sense of purpose and meaning may play in students' development and growth and ultimately their success.

Moreover, the results offer insight into strategies and programmes that may support and develop first-year students. For example, there is a need for interventions to develop first-year students' sense of purpose and meaning whilst fostering their identity construction and resilience that may enable them to advance despite adversity and to live meaningful lives; a need to strengthen and/or develop interventions in critical mental health areas (e.g. programmes focusing on depression and anxiety, post-traumatic stress and alcohol use behaviour) and a need to strengthen or establish gender-based psychosocial programmes. Furthermore, it is clear that residence accommodation and the student development work that takes place in residence systems may play a critical role in first-year students' social attitudes and behaviour that depicts residence life during the first year of study to be an effective strategy to support students' transition into and integration with university life. However, cognisance should be taken that the proposed intervention strategies should be part of a range of holistic student development programmes intentionally designed to enhance students' likelihood to succeed. Besides the infrastructure requirements at an institutional level for this to happen, the will and capacity of practitioners (and mainstream staff) to drive and implement such interventions need to be in place.

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Research article

Campus Politics and Intra-Party Vote Buying in Ghana: How Political Mentorship Could Destruct

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Abstract

Elections in fledgling democracies are punctuated by perceived and observed cases of vote buying otherwise also called electoral clientelism – regarded as a major threat to democratic consolidation. Notions of vote buying are variously captured in the burgeoning literature on democracy, but the ongoing scholarly discussions have failed to engage some growing contemporary trends that also contribute significantly to sustaining the culture of vote buying in intra-party, local and national elections. In our analysis of recent intra-party elections in Ghana, we argue that vote buying has become more complex and more pronounced – and the proliferation of the phenomenon is aided by student campus politics (particularly at the various tertiary institutions), which directly feed into national politics. Following this stance, the article concludes with a recommendation that further empirical research be conducted by scholars and policymakers to fully examine the reinforcing role of campus politics in electoral clientelism during intra-party elections and, by extension, national elections.

Keywords

campus politics; clientelism; political party; student politics; vote buying

Introduction

For decades, the drive towards democratic maturity in developing and transition countries has been characterised by notions of vote buying (Cheeseman, 2015). Post-Cold War Africa has witnessed enormous political transformation, particularly in terms of democratisation. Most polities in the continent have adopted the practice of secret balloting, electorates have continuously received some forms of civic education, electoral laws have criminalised vote buying, elections appear to be free and fair, and thus electoral institutions and processes are getting stronger with time (Cheeseman, 2015; Adejumobi, 2007). Consequently, authoritarian and patrimonial regimes have hitherto slowly paved the way for some democratic processes.

Like many other African states, vote buying is a common trait of Ghana's electoral democracy. Though being hailed as a consolidating democracy, largely by the international

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community and other domestic optimists, some pessimists are concerned about the deepening role and the complex dynamics of electoral clientelism in the country. Seven successive peaceful elections in Ghana since the beginning of the country's Fourth Republic in 1992, have largely erased the pain of a chequered and tumultuous political era which preceded Ghana's Fourth Republic. Democracy thus appears to be more rooted in Ghana relative to most parts of Africa. The political landscape in Ghana has been transformed through some innovative constitutional reviews; effective electoral management and reforms; elite consensus building; growing civil society activism; and expanding media participation – culminating in massive citizen participation in political activities across the country (Linberg, 2003; Frempong, 2008; Osei, 2015). Political parties now have codes of conduct that seek to, amongst others, instil fair and peaceful elections (Frempong, 2008). Parties have also contributed to a general improvement in voter turnout. From 29% in 1992, voter turnout in general elections in Ghana is on the average 70%, a phenomenon which implies Ghanaians are politically active, alive to their civic responsibilities, and committed to the course of democracy (Frempong, 2008). Despite the relative successes attained in Ghana's push towards democratic consolidation, successive elections in the country appear to have been marred by practices of vote buying (Cheeseman, 2015).

Discussions of vote buying and other electoral malpractices in Ghana and across Africa are amply captured in most of the literature on politics in Africa (Bayart, 1993; Lindberg, 2003; Adejumobi, 2007; Cammack, 2007; Frempong, 2008; Robinson, 2013; Cheeseman, 2015). However, these works concentrate on national or interparty elections, with little attention to relatively new but crucial issues such as intra-party elections and their reinforcing relationship with student campus politics, which has emboldened electoral clientelism in national elections.

Drawing on qualitative data from existing literature, personal observations, and print and electronic media discourses, we argue that partisan relations and transactions between campus student unions and national political parties promote vote buying mostly in intra-party elections, which further manifests in national elections. Mugume and Luescher (2015, 2017) indicate that resource transactions from parties to student leaders promote clientelistic politics on the campuses of some universities in Africa, while Ichino and Nathan (2013) opine that intra-party elections in Ghana are characterised by perverse vote buying. Our qualitative analysis of recent elections of political party representatives, parliamentary and presidential aspirants in Ghana, resonates with the findings of Mugume and Luescher (2015, 2017) and Ichino and Nathan (2013). The evidence further establishes that material distribution in student politics (campus politics) reinforces and contributes greatly to contemporary vote buying amongst party elites[1] in their internal party elections,

1 Party elites here refer to holders of various party positions, who are trained in democratic practices and are being charged by their respective parties to, amongst other things, educate the masses on matters including electoral rights of citizens. In Ghana, the largely ineffective nature of institutions such as the National Commission on Civic Education (NCCE) and the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ), with regard to their mandates – to educate citizens on their civil rights – has given room for political parties to carry out such exercises. In this case, parties' civic education of the masses rather represents political campaigns.

which replays in national politics. This level of electoral clientelism is understudied, but is nonetheless an important subject for scholars and policymakers in the discourse and practice of democracy in Africa. This is because parties represent the masses at the national level and thus largely contribute to democratic attitudes and practices. They aggregate the policy aspirations of the masses, which means the political behaviour of parties and their supporters regarding the choice of leaders is of critical importance to democratic entrenchment (Nathan, 2016; Jensen & Justesen, 2014). Also, most political leaders in Ghana today were nurtured (a trend which continues to manifest) through campus politics and partisan relations with political parties (Gyampo, 2013). Yet, the resource distribution between politicians and students promotes vote-buying instincts in student leaders (Mugume & Luescher, 2015, 2017), who carry the same attitude into party and national politics.

Student leadership manifests in many areas and levels: halls of residence, departmental, faculty, college, national, regional, and even continental. However, we focus on the link between Students' Representative Council (SRC) and National Union of Ghana Students' (NUGS) representations on the one hand, and elite clientelism at political party elections on the other hand. Due to the large number of students under their leadership compared to other campus positions, SRC and NUGS are the arenas where most political parties, through their campus offshoots, propagate parities' agendas. The article focuses on the two largest political parties – the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the main opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) – because they have alternated political power at least twice in Ghana's Fourth Republic, and have each developed campus links for many years. In addition, a survey by Africa Elections Project, AEP (2016) discovers that NPP and NDC practice electoral clientelism the most, not only in national elections but also at their respective party delegates' elections, particularly when in power. Therefore, narrowing the focus on these parties enables a detailed discussion, while drawing implications on other smaller parties to present a national picture.

To be sure, we do not attempt to establish a direct link between material inducement and vote outcome in general, as direct correlations are hard to establish due largely to people's unwillingness to provide accurate information on whether or not they vote based on material influence (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007). In recent times, some voters do consider other factors such as past records of politicians, even when attempts are made by the latter to 'buy' the former's choice at elections (Weghorst & Lindberg, 2011; Gadjanova, 2017). Also, we do not claim that campus distributive campaigns are the root causes of vote buying in intra-party and thus national elections, as the campus-party link is a latter development (especially from the 90s and 2000s competitive political period, up to today), and thus the campus-party link is younger than the long history of electoral politics in Ghana. Rather, we suggest that, evidently, student vote buying appears to replay within mainstream politics outside campus, as these same actors usually further perpetuate vote buying within the elite circles, starting at the level of party delegates elections, and invariably extending to national elections.

In the subsequent sections, we first discuss the existing theoretical debates on vote buying in the African context, which provides a background to the phenomenon of material inducement in elections in Ghana. The second section illustrates some manifestations of active in-party vote buying in Ghana, in particular, in 2018, during which Ghanaians witnessed perhaps one of the most materialistic intra-party delegates' elections. In the third section, we provide a brief evolutionary trajectory of student politics, while in the final part, we demonstrate that contemporary campus politics, which is being promoted by multipartism, has an informed role in intra-party voter behaviour, as it transfers the culture of vote buying to party levels and, by extension, to national elections.

A Theoretical Insight on Vote Buying in Africa

Scholarship on politics in Africa suggests that elections in the continent are mired by persistent clientelism and vote buying (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Lindberg, 2003; Robinson, 2013). Some scholars, however, contend that the characterisation of African elections as simply clientelistic, is predominantly a Western view, which is born out of uncritical comparison of African contexts with Western politics (Bratton & Mattes, 2001; Osei, 2012). Nonetheless, the bulk of the literature appears to converge on the notion of African elections as spaces of widespread vote buying (Robinson, 2013; Jensen & Justesen, 2014). We define vote buying as direct or indirect influencing or inducement of (potential) voters (individually or in groups), with material distribution, in favour of a particular candidate or a party, mostly in the lead-up to and during elections (Stokes, Dunning, Nazareno & Brusco, 2013; Nichter & Hidalgo, 2016). The buyers usually involve candidates themselves, or persons or groups close to them, who are willing to contribute to the victory of particular competitors or their respective political parties. The literature identifies many forms of vote buying; common amongst them direct payments to voters, donations of cash or items (e.g. food, building materials, etc.), promise of employment, social services, payment of cash or fees, award of contracts and provision of certain programmes upon a victory in an election (Lindberg, 2003; Nathan, 2016). Different polities or communities experience different vote-buying practices based on many variables, for example, the economic condition of the polity or community and the level of education or civic awareness of voters, but the influence of these conditions have equally provoked debates in scholarship (Robinson, 2013).

Generally, electoral clientelism in Africa is caused and reinforced by conditions of low productivity, high inequality and starkly hierarchical social relations (Wantchekon, 2003); low levels of economic development, cultural practices, small size of the public sector economy, low levels of educated voter population (Nathan, 2016; Jensen & Justesen, 2014); and the legacy of patrimonial colonial regimes – the tactics of resource distribution to cronies to divide and rule (Bayart, 1993; Mamdani,1996).

The economic factor has however gained more prominence in most of the contemporary literature. For example, Adejumobi (2007) argues that in poor countries patronage networks and outright bribing of electorates constitute major instruments for electoral victory and the maintenance of power by the political elite. This impedes the establishment and maintenance of complex and robust democratic institutions, thus

affecting the quality of political institutions (Linberg, 2003; Cammack, 2007). The majority leader in Ghana's Parliament, Osei-Kyei Mensah Bonsu, laments that "… very soon many institutions of government, especially parliament, would be taken over by people with fat wallets …" (Kyei-Mensah-Bonsu, 2018, para. 2). In addition, electoral clientelism inhibits the competition abilities and chances of smaller political parties that are mostly under-resourced (Gueye, 1996; Kumado, 1996).

Nonetheless, the real problem appears to arise from the spread and sustenance of elite electoral clientelism within political parties. As the poverty levels of most African countries continue to decline, more citizens become educated and the culture of voter inducement increasingly criticised (Lindberg, 2010; Lawson & Greene, 2014), the practice of vote buying is expected to decline, as occurred in some established democracies such as the U.S.A. and the U.K. (Stokes et al., 2013). Contrarily, this electoral fraud remains an active part of African politics. Lindberg and Morrison (2008), for instance, suggest that electoral clientelism is common in young African democracies, due in part to the growing intensity of political competition – as clientelistic rewards are used to change the opinions of particularly 'swing voters'. Where elections are competitive and voters expect gifts, candidates engage in a two-pronged strategy: affirm their own status through public displays of wealth, and undermine opponents' rewards by matching inducements or encouraging voters to break reciprocity norms. As a result, neither side's gifts are sufficient for a win (Lindberg & Morrison, 2008; Gadjanova, 2017). Therefore, parties are forced to pursue different linkage mechanisms to voters, including defining and targeting broader constituencies through policy proposals (Gadjanova, 2017). Some scholars also argue that vote buying persists amidst growing democratisation due in part to the perceived and evidential weaknesses and manipulations of the rule of law coupled with underdeveloped political party structures in Africa (Carothers, 2006, 2007; Adejumobi, 2007; LeBas, 2011).

Political Parties and Vote Buying in Ghana

Cheeseman, Lynch and Willis (2016) argue that democracy seems to be consolidating in Ghana relative to other African states. This is largely because Ghana has witnessed at least three peaceful power alternations since 1992, and in particular, the 2016 elections which resulted in a historic loss of power by a sitting president (John Mahama of the NDC) who had not served his second term as had happened in all the previous cases in the country's Fourth Republic. However, Cheeseman and his colleagues also observe that an apparent increase in voter education, plus a burgeoning middle class in Ghana, does not have a significant effect on the reduction or eradication of vote buying, as the practice remains a main characteristic of Ghana's electoral democracy. This view is shared by other scholars (Linberg, 2003; Frempong, 2008; Cheeseman et al., 2016; Gadjanova, 2017). Yet, these studies mostly focus on national elections, with little attention to vote-buying dynamics in intra-party elections, and why party elites seem to develop a penchant for (re)distributive politics. Perhaps the most important and lucid work on vote buying in intra-party elections in Ghana, is by Nahomi Ichino and Noah Nathan. Ichino and Nathan (2013) stress that pervasive clientelism and patronage, rather than policy-centered competition, characterises in-party elections in Ghana.

Election of political party executives is amongst the topics that create enormous controversies across the country. In the early days of Ghana's Fourth Republic (from 1992), the choice of party executives and aspirants was characterised by hand-picking of some contestants ahead of others by political 'godfathers', ethnicity and tribalism, ballot snatching, physical violence and vote rigging amongst others (Carbone, 2003). While most of these issues remain relevant as they still influence interparty and intra-party leadership elections to various degrees (Osei, 2012), the phenomenon of intra-party vote buying has rather gained more attention from stakeholders and political commentators who protest through various media outlets. Like other multi-party contexts in Africa (Lindberg, 2003; Robinson, 2013), Gyampo (2018, para 11) notes that vote buying is not a new phenomenon in Ghana:

> Since 1992, elections in Ghana, particularly internal party elections and national ones, have been saddled with vote-buying in a manner that confers legitimacy on corrupt practices after elections, undermines the sovereign will of the people, and hinders the selection of competent people to lead political parties.

One of the several measures to tackle in-party electoral frauds in Ghana was to expand the Electoral College to increase the scope of the electorate (from national executives to include constituency and zonal or community-level executives), who partake in the elections of national, regional and constituency party executives. This decision was made largely to minimise the influence of powerful party individuals who could, as it were, easily 'buy' delegates' votes or dictate the choice of a particular candidate to the few privileged party members who took part in party elections (Carbone, 2003). Thus, expanding the Electoral College was to tackle issues such as in-party electoral clientelism (Apreku-Danquah, 2017).

The expansion of the Electoral College, however, appears not to address concerns of voter inducement in party delegates' elections. As Asante (2018) notes, the expansion of the franchise comes with corresponding expansion and innovation in the dimension of vote buying. Asante indicates that during Rawlings' time (1993-2000), vote-buying materials were mainly T-shirts and, in some cases, flat-screen TVs. To Asante, even the expansion of the Electoral College, which can take up to 6 000 or more delegates at a single party leadership election, has not weakened the ability of contestants to distribute materials to all or target delegates to solicit their votes. As Stokes et al. (2013, p. 290) aptly contend, "democratization lies not in the expansion of the franchise but in its increasingly free exercise". Therefore, the expansion of party voters' register does not correlate with free and fair elections.

A survey conducted by Africa Elections Project (AEP) shows that all political parties in Ghana are guilty of vote buying – the majority of party supporters and, by extension, Ghanaians engage in the act either directly or indirectly, which depicts the perverse nature of the phenomenon in society (AEP, 2016). However, the study singles out the two largest political parties that have alternated power at least twice in Ghana's Fourth Republic – the ruling NPP and the largest opposition NDC – as being the guiltiest of perpetual electoral clientelism at their respective party delegates elections particularly when in power. This

resonates with scholars such as Linberg and Bayart who have argued that incumbent parties or parties that control state coffers tend to display opulence in distributive politics, especially in Africa where state laws and constitutions, as well as party guidelines and structures could be, and in many cases have been, hijacked by some 'big men'. As the NPP and NDC have had access to state resources in turns, politicians' quest to control power or get their close associates to handle party positions for the continued flow of trusted networks, incentivises active vote buying. The 2018 party executive elections in the NPP and the 2018-2019 executives and flagbearer elections in the NDC, revealed widespread vote buying as defined in the literature.

The NPP national delegates' congress at Koforidua Technical University in the Eastern region of Ghana was not without copious cases of alleged vote buying. The exercise, which was to elect party national executives to steer the party's agenda for 'victory 2020', witnessed various kinds of voter inducement, including direct distribution of cash to delegate voters. Perhaps the biggest instance surrounded the action of an aspirant for the position of the party's national chairman, who purchased and promised to distribute buses to all 275 constituencies supposedly for party business. Around the elections, Freddie Blay had displayed a queue of buses, promising to hand over one bus to each constituency after the delegates' voting. Though this decision could aid party business, as Blay and his close networks had argued, the gesture raised concerns about the timing of the buses – re-echoing the views of Stokes et al. (2013) and Nichter and Hidalgo (2016). The timing of the buses suggests a clear move to materially induce constituency executives to vote for the then acting national chairman, against a four-time loser, Stephen Ntim. According to Gyampo (2018, paras. 2-3) the timing of such a gesture was meant to sway voters:

> … although Freddie Blay's ongoing process to procure 275 buses for the party is 'not a big deal', the gesture could well be construed as vote-buying because the delivery of the buses has started too close to the party's conference to elect national officers, scheduled for July 7 … if someone means well for their party and decides to procure vehicles to help the party … it shouldn't be a big deal but the timing is what really would raise qualms and eyebrows.

Like many other political analysts and commentators, Gyampo stresses that if the buses had come in 2014, 2015, 2016 or any time before or after the elections, or even had not been withheld from beneficiaries until after the delegates elections, one would have conceived Blay's gesture as a move in genuine support of the party's growth.

The main opposition NDC also exhibited an open display of vote buying during its constituency, regional and national executives' elections, as delegate voters were being given cash and other packages (e.g. parcels of food and handkerchiefs) branded with candidates' images just before or while voting was taking place. For instance, a candidate for the Greater Accra regional chairmanship, Emmanuel Ashie Moore, started his campaign with the distribution of free computers, scanners and printers to constituencies. According to Ashie Moore, the move was to equip constituency offices for effective communications (Morre, 2018). However, in line with the previous views, the timing of such items could qualify Ashie Moore's gesture as a vote-buying attempt.

While there exists vote buying in each of the party's delegates congresses, the practice becomes more pronounced when one is in power (AEP, 2016), largely for two reasons. First, incumbent parties in Africa mostly use normal government service delivery as conduits to seek voter support. Thus, government appointees, in their mandates to perform state-sanctioned duties, appear to citizens as though it is out of the former's benevolence, and hence should be rewarded with votes (Linberg, 2003). At the party level therefore, networks of party clienteles usually acquire wealth and cash, amongst others, through awards of contracts and committee allowances, with which they attempt to lure party delegates to vote for them or their favourites in party elections to ensure a continuum in their wealth acquisition. Second, once a party wins power, it is often believed that a certain crop of party executives did an efficient job in barring any inefficiencies in the opposition's camp. Thus, some party 'big men' favour some candidates for party leadership and would usually pump in resources in support of such candidates' campaign to retain them in office (AEP, 2016). This support usually tilts the field of competition in favour of the preferred candidate, which usually generates conflicts and apathy, and sometimes leads to defection of losers and their support base.

Asare (2018) blames the proliferation of intra-party and, by extension, national elections, on the non-regulation of party funding. Although Section 33 of the Representation of the People Law of the 1992 constitution of Ghana criminalises vote buying and other instances of electoral misconduct,[2] political parties do not follow the directive in most cases. Part III of the Political Parties Law (Act 574 of 2000) also sought to control party funding but appears rather vague, as it does not put a ceiling on party spending but rather focuses on who has the right to sponsor party activities, in which case only citizens of Ghana do (Political Parties Law, Act 574, 2000). Consequently, Asare's proposition does not apply and cannot be applied under the current dispensation. After all, if the law does not concretely hold one accountable in matters of vote buying in national elections, little change is expected concerning same or similar acts at party levels. Asare opines that unchecked party funding is the predominant channel for the pervasiveness of vote buying, as individuals and groups can spend any amount of resources without any restrictions. According to him, the constitution should put a ceiling on funds and the value of materials being donated for party activities, as is being done in some matured democracies. This, in his view, would cripple the upsurge of "political entrepreneurship" in the country. Citing the US as an example, Asare (2018, para. 7) reveals:

> I spent years of my life in the United States and I am very active in the politics over there, but there is a ceiling on how much an individual can contribute to party. I supported Obama in 2008, but I was only able to contribute 2 400 dollars to his campaign, that is the maximum. Even if I wanted to contribute more, I couldn't.

Though it is usually difficult to conclude and researchers have failed to provide concrete evidence indicating that material inducements have direct influence on vote outcome, the vastly uneven and opaque grounds created by party electoral frauds have negative

2 The 1992 Constitution of the Republic of Ghana.

implications for democratic consolidation. While legal reforms and correspondent strict adherence to electoral laws would sanitise intra-party democratic processes, as happens elsewhere (Stokes et al., 2013), we suggest that elite consensus against 'electoral entrepreneurship' is also crucially needed to address electoral clientelism (Osei, 2015). According to Kyei-Mensah-Bonsu (2018), the success, effectiveness and prestige of any institution rest on its orderly functioning and the extent to which it adheres to standards of discipline, dignity and decorum. He acknowledges that it takes time to build credible and durable political institutions and credible democratic attitude, but believes that after more than 25 years of Ghana's Fourth Republic, the quality and credibility of institutions should manifest more positively than it presently appears.

'Pre-Multi-Party' Student Politics and Activism

Before the establishment of universities in Africa, there existed some sorts of pan-African student activism. However, the earliest known student political groups and movements did not start in the African continent but in the metropolitan cities in Europe. For instance, the following student unions were founded in London: the Union of African descent (UAD 1917), the Gold Coast Students' Union (GCSU 1924), the Nigerian Progress Union (NPU 1924), and the West African Students' Union (WASU 1925). Such activisms were mostly for student welfare (e.g. accommodation, scholarships, and against racial discrimination), but pan-African student activism was later tailored towards the political independence of continental Africa. The movements started amongst pioneer African students who were privileged to travel abroad for higher education. The most prominent of the groups was WASU, as it was able to canvass massive support from students of West African descent, which later led to their vociferous anti-colonial campaigns back in Africa and especially within the West African region. WASU was able to export the independence struggle back home in Africa and successfully linked diaspora activities with agitations in Africa. One of its first leaders was Kwame Nkrumah who later became the first president of post-colonial Ghana. The focus on independence struggle, particularly, became more pronounced after World War II when many more students from the colonies gained scholarships to study abroad while several university colleges were established in the colonies amidst the global wave of self-determination. Since then, student representation has been part of the governance structures of universities and higher institutions across Africa (Oanda, 2016a, p. 63).

Right from Ghana's independence to the period before its Fourth Republic (1992 to date), student politics existed with a focus similar to the initial activisms by pioneer African students abroad. The pioneer student activist group in the country, the National Union of Ghana Students (NUGS), clashed with, advised and agitated for and against several programmes by successive governments both civilian and military. NUGS' politics started from the University College of Ghana (now University of Ghana) which was the first tertiary institution to be established in the country and spread to other latter campuses such as Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology and University of Cape Coast. Like their predecessors, NUGS was more concerned with student welfare (e.g. security, academic freedom, fees etc.). Yet, through several protests and agitations, the union also

promoted some political tolerance under the then authoritarian governments, thus transforming the political landscape and contributing to multi-party democracy from the early 1990s (Gyampo, 2013). There was scarcely partisanship amongst NUGS' operations and within campus politics, as there were no opportunities under authoritarian regimes for any mobilising of students for political power by barely existing opposition parties (Finlay, 1968).

Student Politics and Multipartism

While Oanda, Finlay and Gyampo reveal the existence of formidable student politics dating back to the pre-independence era, Mugume (2015) and Luescher-Mamashela and Mugume (2014) suggest that student politics became more institutionalised later, especially in response to multi-party politics in Africa. With the surge of post-Cold War multi-party democracy across Africa, a period Samuel Huntington describes as "democracy's third wave" (Huntington, 1991), student politics have increasingly been influenced by different political parties, thus the glaring manifestation of partisanship and the acceptance of same in campus politics in most parts of the African continent (Gyampo, Debrah & Aggrey-Darkoh, 2016). Although some countries such as Tanzania and South Africa have enacted legislations that prohibit political party influence in student politics (Oanda, 2016b), the practice appears to be gaining more roots largely because parties believe in the organisational capacities of young people who are mostly in higher educational institutions – and who would always, by varied means, utilise their exuberance to mobilise support for political parties (Paalo, 2017). This non-compliance with legislative prescriptions could be understood within the assertion that the judiciary in most African settings is usually not independent enough, and thus ineffective to prosecute perpetrators (Klopp & Zuern, 2007). Therefore, the hitherto 'non-partisan' task of student leaders to advance welfare agendas of students through negotiations with university and national authorities is eroding (Gyampo, 2013). This is because most student agitations are being tagged with the agenda of a certain political colouration depending on the identity of organisers and participants, media partners and the leanings of political leaders who support or criticise such agitations.

In Ghana, the most popular and top-ranked tertiary institutions, including University of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, University of Cape Coast and University for Development Studies, have always been fertile grounds for partisan manifestations in student politics (Gyampo, 2013). Being the leading universities in the country, these institutions attract most of the influential, brilliant and vibrant groups of students who political parties believe can be used to campaign, vigorously broadcast parties' visions, and to canvass grassroots support for political power (Bob-Milliar, 2012; Gyampo, 2013; Paalo 2017). As such, most political parties found and sustain student unions on campuses to promote the agendas of their respective parties. This is more so with the dominant incumbent NPP and the main opposition NDC who pride themselves on campus offshoots in the names of TESCON and TEIN respectively. The two main parties have been able to sustain their student mentees' unions for many years largely because, as parties that have alternately controlled government conffers and, being composed of wealthy individuals, they provide more resources for student mobilisations.

Gyampo (2013) argues that Ghana's accolade as a relatively successful democracy in Africa cannot be mentioned without acknowledging the contribution of student activism throughout the country's Fourth Republic. Through campus politics, student groups have transformed the country's multi-party democracy – giving a positive new phase to political participation. Since the inception of multi-party democracy, which runs for close to three decades now, student leaders and activists have developed cordial relations with politicians at the national level and especially within party ranks, unlike their predecessors who had strained relations with the then authoritarian regimes that censored and repressed student activities (Finlay, 1968). With the surge in a multi-party system, however, politicians in Africa see universities as critical outposts for building vibrant political clients to wrestle political power (Oanda, 2016b). Mugume and Luescher (2017) contend that the recruitment of student cadres seems to be the most important function of party-political involvement in student politics as parties scramble for numerical strength of membership in fledgling democracies in Africa.

This change of political atmosphere, which involves unprecedented student participation, was assumed to promote leadership development, as young people through campus politics get mentored politically and can contribute to issues of national governance. Both student leaders and their political links, have argued that campus politics feed directly into national politics as the nurturing begins from the campuses. Thus, when, for instance, the University of Ghana decided to ban partisan politics on its campus in 2012, a conglomerate of student leaders vigorously kicked against the move, calling it an impediment to the development of the country's democratic practice and the grooming of future political leaders. Ludwig Hlodze, the president of a group calling itself the Inter-Party Youth Committee, protested in a statement, that:

> The decision by the University of Ghana to disallow the operation of political parties on campus amounts to the stifling of the country's human resource and capital, because the University serves as a nursing ground for many political ambitions. (Hlodze, 2012, para. 2)

This stance re-echoes Mugume's view that the relationship between political parties and students could have some positive effects in terms of moulding future leaders with democratic instincts, as well as offering general leadership training to students. Yet, this leadership training appears rather to be clouded by patron-client relations, which replays at various levels in state politics.

Student Politics, Multipartism and Vote Buying

Despite the (potential) positive impacts, student–party relations in most African countries have revealed a common trend in contemporary times. Mugume and Luescher (2017) aptly point to a reciprocal relationship between political parties and student leaders, using the case of Uganda. The latter generally receives items from the former, which are meant to directly influence student voters during campus campaigns and elections, and this distributive link continues after campus campaigns and even after graduation. In this regard, Mugume and Luescher (2015) posit that student–party relations later enhance clientelistic

national politics. To corroborate this view from a nuanced angle, evidence from Ghana led us to contend that student–party relations promote vote-buying instincts and practices that are mostly exhibited in intra-party elections and, by extension, in national elections. Student leaders mostly rather project the political party agenda ahead of national politics or policies, ostensibly because party politics automatically leads to national politics. Thus, student leaders in such a relation are highly compromised as they usually have future political ambitions linked to their affiliated parties. They may sacrifice the students' interests in order to maintain their good reputation in the party or to portray a good image of their respective parties to the student body on campus (Mugume, 2015). This suggests a shift in the mandates of student leaders from mainstream student affairs to a vertical responsibility to and an association with their political mentors.

In a broad relation to the reservations raised earlier by Mugume and Luescher, university leaderships, policy think tanks and academics in Ghana have also raised serious concerns that politicians and political parties tend to promote clientelistic politics amongst students. For instance, five student leaders assembled by Joy FM's "Super Morning Show", unanimously agreed that political parties influence the elections of student leaders across the country.[3] There is a trend of direct funding of student campaigns and other aspects of campus politics by politicians, with no clear lines of accountability. It may sound ideal for student leader aspirants to receive resource support for their campus campaigns, but the act by politicians to provide leader candidates with cash and other materials for direct distribution to student voters in return for the latter's votes, can be described as *sowing seeds of electoral clientelism from below*. This is because the leaderships and frontlines of most political parties in the country tend to be dominated by these student leaders, 'mentored' from campus. Most high-profile politicians in Ghana's Fourth Republic, including leaders in parliament, ministers and major party executives, have come from the ranks of campus politics, and it is this same group of people who partake in party delegates' elections that are characterised by evidential materialism.

Campaigners for various SCR and NUGS positions mostly start with, or are forced by prevailing circumstances to start with a vote-buying mentality. They believe that success in campus elections hinges on some forms of favours that should be handed out to student voters. These could include cash, study materials, food or foodstuffs, busing of students from hostels on the voting day, like what occurs in intra-party and national elections. Although candidates always communicate their policy initiatives to voters, manifestos are usually less important compared to material inducements, especially when elections draw closer and competitions heat up. A renowned anti-corruption lawyer, Ace Ankomah, who has on many occasions openly called public attention to the link between student resource misappropriation and national corruption, narrated his research on one of the university campuses. According to him, the events in these elections are just a replay of what happens in our National politics, meaning that both campus and national politics reinforce each other – money changing hands, would-be student-leaders distributing branded T-shirts to

3 Joyonline.com, 'Student leaders confess to political influences but…', 21 April 2016.

student voters, sponsoring entertainment programmes, giving out cash to students in order to buy their votes, sponsoring birthday parties, sponsoring morning porridge breakfast, etc. These practices, according to Ace Ankomah, regularly occur during SRC elections on university campuses. "I witnessed an SRC presidential aspirant dishing out one thousand, two thousand, three thousand and up to five thousand Ghana cedis to people in halls of residences to share among themselves …" (Ankomah, 2016, para. 9). In Ankomah's (2016, paras. 10, 13) interaction with some SRC aspirants, one of them narrates:

> I have done all that I need to do. They tell me that I am a good material for the SRC presidential position. They tell me, I have a great vision, a good message and articulate them well but without money, I will make a very little impact in the elections … With this, all that I need to do is to spread the cash and they will vote for me. It works perfectly.

This electoral clientelism has persisted over the years in changing dynamics, and is being fuelled by political parties who mostly want their presence felt on campuses through (potential) student leaders, and hence would provide clientelistic goods to their favourite candidates for onward distribution to student voters. In his research as student journalist on the University of Ghana campus, Amewor (2016, paras. 2-3) observes the following two issues:

> Some political parties of the nation are unculturally participating in some SRC Elections by providing funds, student-based political supports and other necessary amenities to the SRC Executive portfolio aspirants. It is loudly whispered that each party constructively selects its aspirant based on criteria known to God-knows-who, and supports him/her to victory. If it becomes so, the party will then have an indirect 'rulership' of that institution for the said academic year. This is all done out of the light of view of the entire student populace. It is not supposed to be so.
>
> SRC Elections are meant for the students, from the students and by the students. All sources of funds, advertisements, strategies et cetera for the campaigns are supposed to come from the minds, pockets and brains of the Hopefuls. This cannot but serve as an effective means of testing the competence and effectiveness of the Hopefuls for the portfolios being aspired for.

It is important to note, however, that not all student leaders or aspirants are politically affiliated, directly receive distributive resources from parties, or readily venture into cleintelistic politics on campus, as indicated by the 2016 NUGS president, Michael Paa Kwesi-Adu. Kwesi-Adu (2016, para. 6) states:

> Let's say you are contesting for a position, political parties may not come directly to you so you the leader may not have a direct relationship with that political party; maybe Davis, Romeo and Andrew are supporting you and belong to party K, so they may pass it through Davis, … so if we are talking about political influence in the student leadership it may not be a direct influence, it would be a sort of indirect influence that the political parties have on the student leadership when it come to the election of student leaders.

Therefore, scarcely does any round of student elections pass without material transactions and inducements from political party mentors to their student mentees. As this practice goes on unchecked, largely due to the lack of political will to stop political parties' influence on campuses, and the fear of political victimisation on the part of university authorities to stop partisanship amongst students, campus vote buying and attendant frauds become the norms and are being transported through party to national elections. In this case, it is not the poor uneducated voter in the rural area as argued by most scholars, but elites and informed voters whose votes are very costly but must be bought because such is the game. Therefore, though intra-party elections may previously have had some forms of vote buying, contemporary partisan mentorship of campus politicians has strongly contributed to the pervasiveness of the situation.

Consequently, the partisan politicisation of student politics hinders probity and accountability amongst students on campuses. This is similar to how the politicisation of certain crucial issues amongst political parties in Ghana has not yielded positive results in the fight against corruption. It is a common practice on campuses to find that student leaders sometimes squander funds meant for student affairs and go unprosecuted, and any student or group of students that raises the alarm on such malfeasances is being tagged as politically witch-hunting the accused. In most of the universities across the country, each year passes with accusations of gargantuan misappropriation of student funds by student leaders, through various means (e.g. contract bloating, non-existent purchases, etc.). However, supposed investigations into such issues do not only always free the culprits, but in some cases the petitioners may be tagged with political colours and victimised based on whose party is in power. This situation kills the culture of crime reporting amongst citizens in general. Interestingly, some university authorities or individuals in charge of tackling student corruption through existing guidelines may also not fully follow up on such petitions for fear of political tagging and victimisation from political leaders towards whom student leaders have leanings. In 2007, the then NUGs president, William Yamoah, lamented that student leaders were partly to blame for politically supervised corruption in the country. Yamoah (2007, paras. 1-2) indicates:

> The level of dishonesty demonstrated by aspirants for leadership in student politics had given the impression that politics was all about money … competence, which used to be the criterion for electing student leaders, had now been relegated to the background. The future of this country is bleak unless student leaders change their attitude.

With such corruption with impunity, most young aspiring political leaders unleash such practices at their political party levels and subsequently when in government. This sustains elite vote buying in party elections because it is a (near) political crime to speak against electoral frauds by party members. This would be conceived as speaking against the broader party's agenda and would project the party to the world as being clientelistic, thus exposing it to public and, worst of all, to opposition parties' criticism. Hence well-meaning party officials would keep mute in order not to be painted as enemies to their own party. The few

who may bravely condemn their internal party vote buying usually lose favour from most of the party's top hierarchy and are always being vilified or sidelined.

Apart from what happens on campuses between student leaders and their political mentors, two other broad issues also ensure the continued relationship between campus partisan politics and mainstream political landscape 'out there'. First, the distributive politics by politicians during intra-party and national elections is usually through vibrant youth leaders from the various campuses, who mostly do not only (attempt to) buy votes by distributing cash and items to voters in local communities, but also use such engagements as means to project their future political agendas in their communities and constituencies. Second, these young aids to politicians are usually in charge of defending and/or propagating the activities of their 'big men', including in most cases justifying or denying instances of direct vote-buying attempts by their top political links. Amongst many examples, one instance could be drawn from the January 2019 Ayawaso West Wuogon Constituency by-elections. While government projects were barely visible in the constituency prior to campaigns and elections, the NPP government appeared to suddenly and calculatedly sanction road projects, and active road construction was going on across the constituency, just around the elections. This was conceived by many, including constituents, as vote-buying tactics, as several petitions for projects had fallen on deaf ears until just prior to elections. Reacting to this, a student leader, Abdullah Matin, of the University of Ghana NPP student branch (TESCON-UG), vehemently denied all allegations, insisting that road constructions were genuine government projects, and that the timing was only coincidental with the by-elections (Abdullah, 2019, para. 4). This suggests a direct relationship between campuses and partisan politics, and before student leaders emerge from campus, they are already being 'baptised' into the political culture on how to win elections.

Discussions and Conclusion

We have demonstrated that campus politics contributes to, reinforces and is reinforced by intra-party vote buying in Ghana, and thus this subject should be given significant attention in scholarship and in policy circles. The current concentration on electoral clientelism in national elections leaves out some important, related issues such as the link between campus politics and internal party politics that further shapes the character and approach in general elections. Intra-party elite vote buying keeps soaring with each round of party delegates' elections in Ghana, in particular within the NPP and NDC, who have monopolised the political landscape in Ghana's Fourth Republic. What is more critical is the fact that delegate voters are usually graduates of the various tertiary institutions in the country, who become party executives and partake in the choices of party leadership through routine elections. As Mugume (2015) notes, significant numbers of students become members of political parties whereby student leaders are most likely not only to be ordinary party members after graduation, but front-line party leaders as well. Political parties use the student guild elections to recruit new members, and in most cases distribute vote-buying materials to aspiring student leaders during campus elections.

Thus, this group of students usually identifies with political parties even before leaving campus, which should not be an issue when analysed on its own merit. However, the promotion of material inducement in party elections by these graduate mentees and their political mentors reveals a reinforcing condition between campus and the mainstream political realm, which plays out in national elections, as it is parties that contest in national elections. As most campus leaders receive material and other support from politicians and political parties with the support of student partisan groupings on campuses, these leaders all over the country form networks of young political leaders from campuses straight into the national arena. But partisan support for student leaders breeds some forms of corrupt practices with impunity as entrenched partisan positions prevent corrupt students from being concretely sanctioned for resource misappropriation on campuses.

It is generally hard to state emphatically that campus vote buying has a direct link to in-party vote buying, thus to national elections. However, given the evidence presented in this article, coupled with the fact that most of these graduate mentees seem to exhibit attributes of 'bad' politics including 'conscience-free' distributive politics, it is tenable to argue that such attributes are cultivated from campus politics and reflect the generally compromised system in Ghana. Therefore, much as other factors may sustain vote-buying instincts and practices amongst parties, the party–campus alliance is also mentoring leaders whose major approach to winning elections is by inducing voters with clientele materials, a practice which can neither sustain nor consolidate Ghana's democracy.

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On campus

IASAS Student Leader Global Summit 2019

Lisa Bardill Moscaritolo,* Rozanne Engel** & Tonia Overmeyer***

Leadership and mental health came under the spotlight when more than 50 student leaders from all over the world met at Stellenbosch University (SU) from 23 to 26 June 2019 for the International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS) Student Leader Global Summit. It was the first time that SU hosted this global summit for student leaders.

IASAS is a non-profit organisation that was founded in Belgium in 2013. It is a worldwide association of university professionals working in the area of student affairs and services. IASAS has more than 1 400 individual, institutional and association members representing over 90 countries on five continents.

The fourth IASAS Student Leader Global Summit (SLGS) welcomed 45 students from 14 countries across the world. The SLGS provides a global platform for improving multi- and intercultural communication and understanding amongst students. The goal of the summits is to bring student leaders from different parts of the world together to discuss student governance, leadership, social justice and other topics of shared interest.

With this year's summit focusing on leadership, mental health and well-being, participants discussed the what, why and how to cultivate behaviours, and develop skills and campaigns that enhance and support mental well-being in general and in their specific communities.

During the opening session on Monday, 24 June 2019, Dr Birgit Schreiber (Vice-President of IASAS) from South Africa, along with Dr Lisa Bardill Moscaritolo (IASAS General Secretary) from the United States, and Damian Medina (IASAS Social Media Coordinator) from China, shared some insights into the initiatives and outcomes regarding mental health and well-being support at their respective universities. Students gave feedback and asked questions on their presentations and later discussed the topic further in groups.

The issue of mental health and well-being had already been a highly suggested topic of discussion during the first summit, which was held in Montreal, Canada, in March 2016. Exploring this topic in more detail provided for a rich discussion.

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In her opening comments, Dr Schreiber, Senior Student Affairs Director at SU at the time, reminded the students how important the summit was in helping to prepare future leaders of the world. "This is a coming together of international students from various countries and multiple regions of the world. It is very important that we come together and develop shared and sustainable solutions that work for everyone, locally relevant and globally sustainable. It is very important that we speak about leadership in a context of collaboration and cooperation," said Schreiber.

Over the course of the summit, students also had the opportunity to connect with other student leaders and to have group discussions, where they explored their own understanding of leadership and gained insight into mental wellness, meditation, and the role that student leaders play within an ecosystem of support. They also built collaborations and teams, identified resources and strategies that support mental well-being, engaged collaboratively across their differences, and developed a micro-campaign suited to their unique context. This affirmed the importance of developing relevant and impactful interventions at local level.

As professionals, we are helping students to be successful not only in the classroom, but also outside of the classroom. The opportunity for students to gain from this experience and to apply it at their universities is at the heart of the SLGS. Many of the students stay in contact through a What's App group and share successes on the ideas they implemented on their campuses, topics around mental health and well-being, as well as the difficult times they may be facing as leaders. The supportive nature of the messages demonstrates the strong community created in just three days.

The next Student Leader Global Summit in 2020 will be on Sustainability at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia, at the end of June 2020. For more information on upcoming events and the next SLGS, visit the IASAS website at http://iasas.global/http-2018-student-leader-global-summit/

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Book review

Jansen, Jonathan D. (Ed.) (2019). *Decolonisation in Universities: The Politics of Knowledge*. Johannesburg, South Africa: Wits University Press.

Reviewed by Vicki Trowler*

In my day job as a researcher of higher education, one of the topics I have studied and written about is student engagement. Engagement of, and by, students is now universally held to be central to student success (Trowler, 2010) and all of us working in this arena grapple with ways to facilitate this. Kahu and Nelson (2018) argue that an alignment of institutional and student factors unlocks student engagement, and thus learning. Specifically, when the curriculum is aligned with students' interests, experiences and "future selves", students will engage on an emotional level, so learning can take place. Preparing slides ahead of an undergraduate lecture, I sit staring at my computer screen, wondering as does every other lecturer preparing to teach, how best to make the material engaging, accessible, relevant. How do we best speak to not just the students' past, current and "future selves", but also their possible selves, subverting the predictions of "differential outcomes" that doom students from certain backgrounds (categorised by "race", ethnicity, gender, social class, disability status, geography and the other cleavages to which inequality clings persistently) to lesser attainment?

Questions of social justice arise in all contexts, but persist perniciously in South African higher education 25 years after the transition to democracy. These concerns, while never absent during that time, nonetheless ruptured forth during the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall (and other associated) movements in 2015, wrenching attention onto injustices not only of redistribution (#FeesMustFall) but also of recognition (#RhodesMustFall) (Fraser, 2008; Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Those students did not draw their inspiration from the Mandelas or the Mbekis, but from the Bikos, the Cabrals, the Fanons, and with that they returned to public consciousness the discourse of decolonisation. As noted by Jansen in the introduction to this volume, this term had not enjoyed significant currency in South Africa up to that time – its roots lay elsewhere on the African continent and beyond, in a time predating their birth (and possibly the birth of their parents). Yet within months, it was a term that shaped the discourse from Twitter to Senior Leadership Group agendas and curriculum working groups at Higher Education Institutions across the country.

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Numerous discussions have been undertaken since then as to what exactly, in this place, at this time, it is understood to mean; how that translates into a programme of action for "transforming" institutions; what that means for staffing, for students, for curriculum … with, as yet, no single emergent consensus. And then, into the fray, dropped this edited collection. Given my research and personal interests, I welcomed the opportunity to immerse myself in this volume not only because of the content, but also because of the expertise and authority of the contributing authors. Representing a diversity of views on decolonisation, or more accurately the need for and means of decolonisation at this moment in this place, this collection is edited and introduced by Professor Jonathan Jansen, whose earlier analysis of South African vice-chancellors to the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall (and associated) movements has been reviewed previously in this journal (Trowler, 2018).

The collection is organised dialectically, with the first two chapters (authored by Mahmood Mamdani and Lesley le Grange, respectively) presenting the case for decolonisation. This is followed, antithetically, by three chapters (authored in turn by Jonathan Jansen, Lis Lange, and Ursula Hoadley and Jaamia Galant), which consider constraints, problems and the politics around the decolonisation agenda. As synthesis, the following sections consider the process of "doing decolonisation" (three chapters, authored by Jess Auerbach, Crain Soudien, and Yusuf Sayed, Tarryn de Kock and Shireen Motala) and "reimagining colonial inheritances" (four chapters, by Brenda Schmahmann, André Keet, Piet Naudé, and Achille Mbembe, respectively) before concluding with an afterword by Grant Parker. The focus of the book, as is made explicit in the subtitle, is on Knowledge – what knowledge, whose knowledge, and how that knowledge is constructed, conceived, accessed and rendered – and how such knowledge might translate into curriculum.

The chapter by Mamdani, originally presented as an invited lecture at the University of Cape Town (UCT), locates the discussion within two competing drives – for "excellence", or for "relevance" – which Mamdani frames as a false dichotomy, illustrated by the juxtaposed trajectories of two institutions (Makarere and Dar es Salaam) and two scholars (Mazrui and Rodney). Arguing that theory requires reference points, Mamdani calls for new and multiple reference points, beyond Europe and the West, forged authentically in conversations with the global and the local, the public intellectual and the scholar, excellence and relevance – recognising that these are both components of the same pursuit of knowledge.

Mamdani appears himself as a character in other chapters' discussions of attempts to retool curriculum since 1994 – the so-called "Mamdani Affair" at UCT where his radical proposal for a compulsory first-year "Introduction to Africa" course was subsequently diluted and reframed, illustrating both that the impetus to recurriculate is not new, but that the institutional context in which this takes place constrains the possibilities for doing so. Lange refers to this, in her chapter, as "institutional curriculum", in opposition to "academic curriculum". At issue, she notes, was a question of epistemology: not only what constituted valid knowledge, but how that was defined and whose knowledge was deemed valid. She positions a protesting student with a poster calling for recognition as the essence of the impetus behind the current calls for decolonisation.

Hoadley and Galant pick up on the tension between the "who" and the "what" in contestations around curriculum, using the work of Bernstein to consider the visit (and subsequent debates) of Professor Raju to UCT. They distil Raju's position, and by extension a significant thrust driving the decolonisation agenda, as being about the "who" rather than the "what" – whose voices, presence, recognition or authority are excluded from curriculum, even when criteria for inclusion are (at least on the face of it) met.

This question of identity emerges in a number of the contributions – the lack of recognition in the existing (colonial) curriculum of the identity and essence of the students being taught and their contextual location in South Africa, as well as the epistemicide of indigenous knowledge. This raises the difficulty, mooted by Mamdani, of imagining the decolonial from within coloniality – to quote Audre Lorde, "… the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change." The centrality of discourse, and language, is foregrounded here in a number of contributions – the need to construct knowledge, and curriculum, through indigenous languages (with the examples of Kiswahili and Afrikaans cited, as well as the work of Neville Alexander's National Language Project). This, however, is a long-term project, and requires sustained systemic support which, in a global neoliberal context in which English has emerged as the de facto lingua franca, may seem wishful.

It is necessary to note at this point that none of the contributors are opposed to decolonisation – or rather, that none of them are in favour of a curriculum that remains static and unresponsive to context, whether or not they believe that the current impetus for decolonisation as embodied in the Fallist movements will be successful, or sustained, or most appropriate to the needs for the current context. The most optimistic voice in the collection may be Mbembe's, while the most pessimistic voice in this regard is Jansen, whose argument considers the successive knowledge regimes which have shaped the higher education curriculum landscape in South Africa, noting how each in turn is supplanted but how each successive knowledge regime retains vestiges of those that preceded it – thus, there can neither be a "clean break" with the past nor can there be a replacement that will not itself, in turn, be supplanted by something else. The "decolonial moment", he argues, will pass because it does not engage fully with the complexities of the educational context, and because the sheer weight of institutional inertia largely results in innovative practices snapping back into old ways of being and doing.

And that, perhaps, is the most glaring omission in this collection: the lack of a persuasive theory of change. While convincing arguments are presented for the need for decolonisation, and in some cases instances presented of ways in which decolonisation could be said to be underway, these case studies are limited and isolated. Indeed, as Sayed, De Kock and Motala note in their chapter, decolonisation requires an "eco-systems" approach (though unfortunately no further details of how this might sustainably happen are provided) rather than intervening at a single point in the system.

Mamdani notes that theory emerges from comparison, and knowledge through classification and ordering, inevitably using one's own position as a reference point. This process of engagement invokes resonances with processes such as those alluded to in the

Sayed, De Kock and Motala chapter of curriculum co-construction, a frequent subject in the literature on student engagement or student partnerships. Sayed, De Kock and Motala propose an "eco-systems approach". If we were to take this further and consider engagement in its fullest sense – engagement of and by not just students but also civil society at all levels – might we not make some progress towards an emerging consensus about what knowledge and whose knowledge should be instantiated in curriculum, and what form this might take? Drawing in a range of voices representing diverse perspectives may be of benefit – and this collection represents a valuable step in this process.

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Prof. Sophie Kasonde-Ng'andu, an Associate Professor, finished her first degree in 1976 at the University of Zambia in Educational Psychology. Followed by a Master's in Educational Psychology and Measurement at the Teachers College in New York. She also did Special Education at the University of London. Thereafter, she did a joint PhD programme between Leiden and the University of Zambia. She has published extensively in educational psychology, special education, and inclusive education amongst others. She has made a significant contributon to the development and growth of special education at Policy and Practice in Zambia and beyond through capacity building, research and publication. Furthermore, she has served the University of Zambia in various portfolios amongst which as Assistant Dean Postgraduate and as Head of Department.

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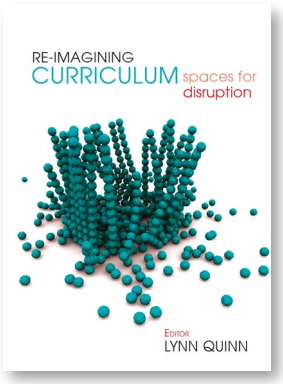

Re-imagining Curriculum: Spaces for disruption
by Lynn Quinn (Ed.) (2019)

The book argues that academics, academic developers and academic leaders need to undertake curriculum work in their institutions that has the potential to disrupt common sense notions about curriculum and create spaces for engagement with scholarly concepts and theories, to re-imagine curricula for the changing times. Now, more than ever in the history of higher education, curriculum practices and processes need to be shared; the findings of research undertaken on curriculum need to be disseminated to inform curriculum work. We hope the book will enable readers to look beyond their contextual difficulties and constraints, to find spaces where they can dream, and begin to implement, innovative and creative solutions to what may seem like intractable challenges or difficulties.

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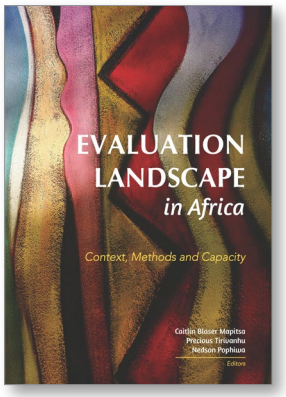

Evaluation Landscape in Africa: Context, Methods and Capacity
by Caitlin Blaser Mapitsa, Precious Tirivanhu & Nedson Popiwa (Eds.) (2019)

This book explores the discourse on evaluation in Africa and answers these questions: What is the purpose of evaluation in the region, based on the evaluations currently being conducted? What is the professional background of evaluators in Africa? What methods are used in evaluations in the region? What is the status of evaluation capacity development in the region? How is the quality of evaluations being conducted in Africa? The book looks at the evaluation field in its entirety. It does not focus on practice, but includes considerations for the evaluation sector that apply to evaluation commissioners, programme beneficiaries, donors, capacity builders, and the entire constellation of stakeholders working on improving development practice. It hopes to promote a data-driven approach to the evaluation sector to help strengthen engagement and practice.

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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:

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- 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.
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- **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.
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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.

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☐ 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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