

## **Final individual project report**

**Participant's Name: Prudence Zikhali**

**Institution: University of Zululand**

**Project title: Factors that contribute to first year students drop out at the University of Zululand**

**Programme advisor: Amanda Hlengwa (Rhodes University)**

**Date of submission: 25 June 2019**

### **Problem statement**

All over South African universities and colleges the students are dropping out; this particular study narrows down the focus and concentrate at the University of Zululand. The students drop out affect the image of the university; it also affects the families of the students who are dropping out of varsity, as we all know that education is a long term investment which parents invest on, when sending their children to varsity. The sad thing is that when students drop out, the money the parents have invested in their education goes to waste if the students don't get the chance to finish their education and secure employment so that they can help sustaining their families. The bursaries also make a loss when students they are funding drop out. Although the factors contributing to student drop out have been investigated by different scholars globally, and the findings on this subject matter seem to be correlating. Other studies have shown the improvement in reducing the high rate of student drop out in universities such as Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Stellenbosch, University of Pretoria (UP) and University of Kwa-Zulu Natal (UKZN), to mention a few however, the case is not so with the University of Zululand (UNIZULU student records, 2017). Despite the strides made by the University of Zululand to remedy the situation thereby increasing throughput level, failure has been spotted at UNIZULU through the number of students dropping out especially at first year level. As much as the subject matter has been studied a lot, the gap of high first year drop out is still spotted at UNIZULU.

### **Aims and objectives of the study**

To investigate the factors that contribute to student dropping out at the University of Zululand, study the effects of student drop out to the society, to contribute theoretically to the body of knowledge and further explore remedies that will contribute in reducing the student dropout thereby increasing throughput levels at the University of Zululand. **The research objectives** examined in this study are:

- To identify different factors that contributes to student drop out at the University of Zululand.
- To study the effects that student drop out at University of Zululand has to the society.
- To explore the ways in which dropout rates can be reduced that will supplement programs in place at the University of Zululand.

## **Research Questions**

- What are the factors that contribute to student drop out at the University of Zululand?
- Does students drop out at the University of Zululand have effects to the society?
- Are the programs in place for minimizing student drop out at the University of Zululand effective?

## **Hypothesis**

The following hypotheses were derived from the objectives above:

- There is a correlation between the students' experiences at the University of Zululand and the students drop out.
- There is a correlation between the students' perceptions about the outlook of the University and the students' experiences in as far as student drop out are concerned.
- There is a correlation between students' experiences at the University of Zululand and the students' perspectives on the current operational programs as far as student drop out is concerned.

## **Literature Review**

According to recent information released by Higher Education South Africa (HESA) (2014), a Section 21 company representing all 23 public universities and Technikons in South Africa, the dropout rate has escalated alarmingly in recent years, and is hitting highs of up to 35% at some universities, with the bulk of those leaving being first-year students. According to Edu Loan (2009), The Human Sciences Research Council's (HSRC) recent study of about 34 000 students showed that of this amount, only 14 000 students graduated, with some 20 000 dropping out of their courses, most of them being either in their first year or midway through their second year of study. Scott et al. (2007) argued that poor success is a complex and multi-layered one which is shaped by issues such as the lack of preparedness of students and staff; the nature and organisation of teaching and learning at higher education institutions; the conceptualisation of the educational process, particularly in terms of the appropriateness of content and assessment methods and its relationship with different institutional cultures; the extent or lack of professionalization of academic staff; the nature and extent of funding; and the role that system differentiation might have in addressing under-preparedness.

## **University dropouts**

(The Southern African Region Association: 2008), notes that South Africa's university dropout rate is 60%. Students most adversely affected come from poor families. The majority of the respondents highlighted the most common reasons for this high dropout rate as: pregnancy, finding campus life too boring and structured; social and personal problems, having to care for sick relatives and peer pressure. Dr Hendrik van Broekhuizen (a lead education economics researcher of the Stellenbosch University) noted that the majority of South African students do not experience success in higher education and dropout before they complete their studies according to their study findings broken down by race. He further asserted that the completion rate for white students was vastly higher, at 71.6%. Black students had a 53.5% completion

rate and coloured students a 53.8% completion rate. Asian students came in at 62.1%. It is important to remember though that access is skewed by race – their study found that of those who obtained university exemption, 93% of white students entered into undergraduate degree studies, versus 75% of black students. Van Broekhuizen attributed the imbalance to poverty and also educational overwhelm for students who come from a disadvantaged schooling background. Worse still, the graduation rate was below 5% in the 20 – 24 years age group among black students. One of the factors that has repeatedly been identified as one of the major contributory cause of high failure and dropout rates among black South Africans is their low academic literacy in the language of learning (Hibbert: 2014).

### **South Africa**

According to Mtshali (2015) more than 85% of all undergraduate students enrolled at South Africa's historically black universities fail their studies and drop out. The reason to mention this is that the University of Zululand where the study is conducted is one of those historically black universities. The failure rate for Master's students is 80% and for doctoral students 88%. These figures were contained in the South African Government's Department of Higher Education and Training's annual statistical report which looked at the "size and shape of post-school education and training in South Africa."

### **Survival of the fittest and university dropouts**

The orientation of this study is derived from the Darwin's survival of the fittest theory and Swail's theory on retention. According to Van Zyl (2015), many thought that the high rates of drop-outs, was merely a form of "academic Darwinism", which places emphasis on the survival of the fittest students. Academic Darwinism encompasses the undertaking of doing whatever it takes to ensure pedagogic success. Like the theory of evolution and natural selection proposed by 19th century naturalist Charles Darwin, academic Darwinism says that students who drop-out are merely not strong enough and that those who make it through worked harder, meaning students who drop out of their studies do not have the required characteristics to survive at the university, it could be the social life at the university, it could be academic pressure maybe it is too much for that particular student or it could be that the student is failing to adapt in the varsity environment. According to academic Darwinism the students who will survive at the university and complete their studies are the students who have the required characteristics, meaning these students they have all or most of the resources that are required like the study material, they can easily adapt to the varsity life, they are willing to socialize with both their peers and lecturers.

### **Swail's Theory on Retention**

A retention model developed by Swail (1995:21) is a comprehensive framework which comprises of five components – financial aid, recruitment and admissions, curriculum and instruction, academic services and student services. These are generally major departments in most institutions (Swail, 1995). The fifth component curriculum and instruction was added because of the direct impact it has on student retention. Swail (1995) stresses the importance for practitioners to understand the relationship between the framework's components. He

highlights the ability of the campus departments to work together toward common goals and focus on students' needs hence it is employed in this study because of its relevance.

### **Research Methods**

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches will be used in order to gather data and present data and to solicit the necessary information for the study. According to Wyse (2011) quantitative research is used to quantify the problem by way of generating numerical data or data that can be transformed into useable statistics. In this study, partly, the adopted approach will “quantify attitudes, opinions, behaviours, and other defined variables; and generalise results from a larger sample population”. Primary data will be obtained from the field, while secondary data will be obtained from available literature. The deductive and inductive nature of this study design enables the research outcome to complement each other approaches. The instrument to be used to collect data will be questionnaires because of its ability to capture the complexities of the issues under study using only a small sample of the population (Neuman, 2006). The questionnaire will guarantee a high participation and response rate as it will be administered personally to respondents for completion and will also be collected personally by the researcher, will need less energy and time to administer, and the majority of the questions in the questionnaire will have both structured and close-ended questions which will ease the process of response comparison on each and every item.

The interviews were also chosen as a data collection instrument, specifically for the key informants at the University, parents/care givers of the students. Through this technique the researcher ought to attain the in-depth perspectives of the respondents on the student drop out and subsequently enable the study to formulate strategies and model that will enhance and intensify this phenomenon. The findings will be generalized to the entire population at the University of Zululand. The target population are the first year students who were registered with the university in the year 2017 and 2018 respectively. To ensure that the sample was representative of the study the stratified random sampling will be used because it allows the population to be divided into categories, thereafter selects randomly the final subjects proportionally from the different subgroups or strata (Black, 2012).

The total sample size for the study was calculated using a sample size calculator. Using the Raosoft sample size calculator online (@<http://www.raosoft.com/samplesize.html>) and based on the estimated population of 16 118 registered students at the University of Zululand, at a standard error margin of 10%, a confidence level of 90%, and a 50% response distribution, a sample size of 68 was derived. The total for the study was therefore 68 respondents (n=68) (48 first year students who dropped from the university previously, 8 key informants, 6 parents and 6 care givers). The participants of the study were randomly selected. Quantitative data will be analysed using the software package used for statistical analysis IBM SPSS (Statistical Packaging for the Social Sciences) (version 24). The analysed data will be presented using frequency tables, graphs, and percentages. Descriptive statistics techniques will also be used which include the following: Scree plot, bar charts, and the tabulation of results for easy interpretation of responses provided. In addition, the study will also use inferential statistics and utilized factor analysis, bivariate correlation, as basic tools to obtain simple correlations and differences in means. The qualitative data attained in a form of transcripts and silent

features which will be in a critical and coherent form will be coded into themes and the findings interpreted. The narrative data analysis will also be employed for interview responses.

### **Research setting**

The study is conducted at the University of Zululand (UNIZULU) which is located within the UMhlatuze Municipality, the fastest growing industrial hub and employer in northern KwaZulu-Natal. The University of Zululand is the only university in the north of the UThukela River and can be easily found 1.4km south east of the R102 road when travelling from Durban or by using the Global Positioning Satellite co-ordinates -28.858208, 31.840889. University of Zululand is a comprehensive University offering approximately 252 accredited degree, diploma and certificate courses across its Faculties of Arts; Education; Science and Agriculture; and Commerce, Administration and Law at the Kwa-Dlangezwa and Richards Bay campuses. The University student population is 16 118 inclusive of 14 819 undergraduates and 1 576 postgraduate students. The University has 101 international students majority of which come from Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, Zimbabwe and other neighbouring African countries with the remainder from countries in Asia, South America, Australia and Oceania.

### **Ethical Consideration**

In order to ensure that the study upholds the ethical status, the rights to anonymity, self-determination, informed consent and confidentiality was observed. Ethical clearance certificate to conduct research was obtained from the University. Respondents' consent was obtained before they completed the questionnaires and they were informed of their rights to voluntarily consent or decline to participate and to withdraw at any time without penalty. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, the procedures that would be used to collect data, and assured that no potential risks or costs will be involved. The researcher ensured the avoidance of all forms of dishonesty by recording truthfully the answers of those subjects who could not read or write. Manipulation of data was not done as the researcher applied SPSS 24 for data analysis. The open-ended questions were analysed by the researcher and checked by statistician for confirmation of credibility.

### **Validity**

The questions were informed by the information gathered during the literature review to guarantee that they were true reflection of what could be factors that contribute to student drop out at the University of Zululand and possible suggestions. Content validity additionally ensures the uniformity in administering the questionnaires. Questionnaires distributed were easily understandable as they were formulated in a simple and clear language. All the questionnaires were completed by the respondents in the presence of the researcher, and this was done to avoid respondents from giving other people, who are not eligible to participate, to complete questionnaires on their behalf. As a result more questions were generated and added into the questionnaire in order to ensure higher representativeness. Some of the questions were rephrased if the need of clarifications arose and more appropriate alternative response choices were added to the closed ended questions to deliver for detailed data analysis (Burns & Grove, 1993). External validity was ensured. Burns and Grove (1993) comprehend the external validity as the degree to which the study results can be generalized beyond the sample used. The study

was therefore justified to generalize the findings of the entire population of the study. The threat to the external validity was easy to judge if the number of persons who will be approached and refuse, for whatsoever reasons, to participate in the research study is protected. Burns and Grove (1993) complement the later assumption by asserting that: “As the percentage of those who decline to participate increases, external validity decreases”.

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