

TAU PROJECT REPORT

Project Title: Tracking Students' Experiences Through Transitions at Sol Plaatje University

Name: Raymond Nkwenti Fru

Institution: Sol Plaatje University, Kimberley, South Africa

1. INTRODUCTION

A report from Statistics South Africa (2020) declared South Africa one of the most unequal countries in the world. This declaration has been corroborated by many other studies that have also linked such inequality to the discriminatory policies that underpinned the apartheid era in South Africa. In spite of the very liberal and progressive legislations adopted by the post-apartheid government of South Africa, high levels of inequality has continued to manifest unabated in almost every strata of society. This inequality could not be more prevalent than in the education system of South Africa. In this regard, Vally (2019) paints a picture of how South African suburbs like Sandton boast world-class institutions with top-of-art facilities, whilst adjacent Alexandra township schools are often victims of violence, poor infrastructure and a lack of resources. Whilst these variances can be visible in the very poor results from the dysfunctional schools and the reverse in more affluent schools, a much darker and nuanced side of the discourse could be seen in terms of how students experience learning and the learning environment within the context of these realities as well as the dynamics that inform the different experiences. In this light, Vally (2019) surmises that the socio-economic status of children is one of the most important factors influencing learner outcomes. It would not be out of place therefore to posit that in South Africa, factors such as parental wealth, place of birth and race are critical determining factors of a student's educational opportunities and experiences. A study conducted by Amnesty International (2020) determined that the situation as described above are further compounded by the multiple languages that exist in the country. In comparing with countries from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Amnesty International determined that 60% of teachers from South Africa work in schools with more than 10% of students whose first language is not the language of instruction compared to an OECD average of 21%. All these schooling factors play a role

of the kind of student that is entering Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and could ultimately affect their performance to complete their studies on time. The emergence of COVID-19 and its devastating effects around the globe has exacerbated the challenges for students at HEI with these Institutions undergoing unprecedented changes worldwide because of the pandemic. In South Africa, universities have been forced to switch to online teaching and learning as a way of mitigating the effects of the pandemic without considerable repercussion on the academic project. Therefore, covid-19 exposed the vulnerabilities of students in the face of challenges imposed by the pandemic.

AIM

Against this background, the aim of this project is to track students from Sol Plaatje University as they transition the university from entry to exit and to investigate their experiences thereof. The outcome of this project could inform university management to create or improve university structures to improve the student's experiences irrespective of their personal and/or collective socio-economic

2. APPROACH

Sol Plaatje University students (from all schools) will serve as research participants. The study will be conducted in a phased approach. The same group of students will be tracked throughout the different phases of university transition (transition into, through and out of university). Phase 1 is referred to 'transition into university' or 'induction' and will include first year students. Phase 2 is identified as 'transition through university' or 'development' and will involve second year students. Phase 3 has been identified as 'transition out of university' or 'becoming'. The research will make use of quota sampling which is a non-probability sampling technique. Particular strata within the population are selected, in this case, 20-25 participants per School resulting in 80-100 participants in total. By using quota sampling will ensure equal representation of all four Schools across the targeted research population. The 20-25 participants per school will be selected using self-selection sampling. All first year students in all the four Schools will be able to indicate their interest and willingness to partake in the research.

☐ Data collection

Multiple data collection methods will be used to add layers of meaning to participants' experiences and to provide opportunities for triangulation in order to validate the results and findings.

Questionnaire survey: To acquire biographic and demographic information from participants.

Semi-structured interviews: The primary data collection strategy.

Reflective journals:

Collage making

Participatory drawing

Data Analysis

The data collected using the different instruments will be triangulated and interpreted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis. This approach stipulates that six phases are required for an effective analysis of qualitative data. These phases are: familiarization with the data, coding of the data, generation of themes, review of themes, naming of the themes and reporting on the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006:15). In this regard, the investigators of this project will first immerse themselves into the data from the collage, participatory drawings, survey, interviews and reflective journals in order to familiarize themselves with it, after which they will code the data in order to generate themes. These themes will then be triangulated and reviewed to identify common and different categories from the datasets, which will enable the investigators to come up with a consolidated set of themes to guide the interpretation of the data.

3. ACHIEVEMENT AND CHALLENGES

The data collection and analysis process is in progress. So far, the following themes have emerged from the analysis of the semi structured interviews in relation to students experiences of induction.

- ☐ Residence/accommodation experiences
- ☐ Late registrations and orientation experiences
- ☐ Covert racial issues
- ☐ ICT experiences
- ☐ Language experiences

Further in terms of achievement could be the granting of ethical clearance at the second attempt as well as being able to obtain demographic data of the students from the registrar's office.

In terms of challenges, the first was the difficulty to obtain ethical clearance. The first submission to the Senate Research Ethics Committee (SREC) in December 2021 was rejected with major changes. This made it difficult for the team to start off the project on time as we had to rework the proposal as expected. Fortunately, we were able to obtain ethics clearance on the second attempt in February 2022. The next challenge was to recruit student participants for the project. The plan was to have a total of 100 students for the study, being 25 per school. However, students seem very reluctant to join the project after several strategies used. At this point, we have only managed to have 48 students which is 48% of our target number. It is the findings from this sample that will be reported at this first stage of the study.

4. CONTRIBUTION TO TRANSFORMATION

It should be noted that unlike many pre-1994 universities in South Africa that shoulder a great responsibility to transform on the basis of their contribution to the social inequalities of the past, the SPU as one of the only two post-1994 universities have no such historical baggage. This however does not exonerate the SPU from the discourses on transformation from a point of view that universities under the constitutional democratic dispensation are expected to mirror the ideal society we all are striving for. Therefore this project will aim to complement the transformation-oriented initiatives stipulated in legislations such as the constitution principles of human dignity, equality, freedom, non-racialism and non-sexism; the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 which recognises the need to redress past discrimination, ensure retrospectivity, equal access to higher education, promote the values of human dignity, equality and freedom. Additionally, as an institution, SPU has aligned itself to the above legislative prescripts by incorporating principles of social justice and inclusivity in to its vision statement and its strategic goals for 2020-2024. Therefore, by investigating the experiences of the students through transitions at SPU and producing evidence-based recommendations in that regard, this project will be contributing to the transformation goals of both SPU and the society at large.

5. REFERENCES

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2).

Stats SA. (2020). How unequal is South Africa? Department of Statistics South Africa: Republic of South Africa. Accessed 24 November 2021 from <http://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=12930>.

Vally, Z. (2019). Educational Inequality: The Dark Side Of SA's Education System. The Daily Vox. Accessed 24 November 2021, from <https://www.thedailyvox.co.za/educational-inequality-the-dark-side-of-sas-education-system-2/> .