Towards a conceptual framework for understanding student dropout from HEIs

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Abstract
Higher education institutions (HEIs) within South Africa, in particular, have experienced a high rate of student dropout within undergraduate programmes. Reasons for such a high dropout rate, as contained in the extant literature suggest that the majority of students drop out because of biographical and financial reasons. The international literature suggests that student dropout is located within the discourse of students’ experience of higher education. This article reports on an institutional study on student dropout at a South African HEI with a view to exploring, through a fine-grained analysis, the issues that researchers need to conceptualise when researching student dropout. Through the analysis of data generated by the mixed methods approach, the article presents a conceptual framework for exploring personal, biographical and institutional issues impacting on student dropout. Through this framework, new insights on this phenomenon are illuminated and one such illumination relating to insidious institutional violence is presented.

Keywords: student dropout within Higher Education, student throughput, conceptual framework for student dropout

INTRODUCTION
Consistent with the transformation agenda, the South African higher education sector had its transformation charter, one aspect being improved access for previously disadvantaged population groups. While the literature on access to higher education institutions (HEIs) is quite expansive and suggests that the transformation agenda for improved access for previously disadvantaged population groups has largely been met, a growing body of literature suggests an increasing trend in student dropout from HEIs. Several factors have been identified as reasons for the high rate of student dropout. Some of the literature suggests that several trends are emerging with respect to student dropout, including the relationships between poor school background, poverty and lack of adequate finance (Letseka et al. 2010). If these trends are to be considered seriously, then the transformation agenda for increasing participation of previously disadvantage communities in higher education seems to have suffered a setback. This can be seen both in terms of developing a highly educated dominant
population as well as being a financial burden on the state and parents or caregivers because the desired results of the transformation agenda are not being met. My scepticism of the reliability of these trends is located in the methodologies used in studies conducted and the response rates of participants where, for example, in a student retention and graduate destination study across seven universities within South Africa, a response rate of 16 per cent was recorded and assertions of trends were made based on this low participation rate (HSRC 2007). Further, the trends established through these survey type studies tend to be used to verify commonly held assumptions about student dropout and the factors contributing to high rate of student dropout.

In this article, I report on a fine-grained analysis of one HEI where student dropout has been explored through the mixed methods approach deeply located within an institutional cultural context. Through this analysis, a conceptual framework for exploring and understanding student dropout within higher education is developed. In developing this conceptual framework, and mining through the vast amount of data produced through this study, it becomes apparent that students’ negative experiences during their studies are increasingly the reason for dropping out of university. These experiences are varied and range from poor school background, poor financial resources to support their studies, to programme choices and negative curriculum experiences. These emerging findings within the South African context are consistent with the international literature where the focus of attention is on student experience, academic and social integration and moment point analysis (Tinto 2006).

What is currently known about student dropout in South Africa and abroad?

Existing research in the area of student dropout and retention within South Africa (HSRC 2007) suggests that 15 per cent of students of a cohort graduate in the minimum study period. The dropouts are largely amongst black students and the commonly held views about the reasons for the high rate of student dropout have been confirmed by this study. These reasons include finance, poor school preparation and inadequate teaching and support at HEIs. The limitation of this study lies in the methodology of conducting a survey with a 16 per cent response rate across eight public HEIs. The extrapolation from this methodology does not allow the researcher to explore institutionally the issues that need to be understood in order to address some of the concerns illuminated by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) study (2007). This article alludes to the need for a deeper and an alternate analysis to understand, within the confines of a particular institution and its efforts of improving retention, how and why student dropout and academic exclusion continue to exist at alarming rates.

The improved access to HEIs for previously disadvantaged population groups within South Africa has not been met with its associated improved success and graduation rates (DoE 1997). On the contrary, it is generally acknowledged that progression and retention rates at South African HEIs currently rank amongst the
lowest in the world (Letsaka and Maile 2008), with graduation rates for white students being more than double those for black students (ibid.). According to recent reports by the HSRC, as many as 40 per cent of students drop out of university in their first year of study (University World News 2008), with graduation rates being in the region of only 15 per cent (Letseka and Maile 2008). The increased access associated with low graduation rates suggests that equity of access has not translated into observable equity of outcomes, signalling the need for urgent institutional efforts designed to increase the throughput rates of students (DoE 2008).

• In other studies, reasons for high student dropout from HEIs seem to be located within students’ experience discourse suggesting that students’ negative experiences of higher education are the root cause of student dropout. For example, the points at which a high dropout rate occurs, according to Gouws and Van der Merwe (2004), are between registration and tuition; between tuition and admission to examination; between admission to examination and writing the examinations; and between writing examinations and re-registering. At each of these points of potential student dropout, students have reported varying experiences that led to their dropping out, including: negative experiences with systems and processes; engagement with university staff; negative lecture experiences; financial difficulties; and academic staffs’ effectiveness. Lecturers are expected to nurture students; play a mentoring role; and be involved in establishing learning communities to ensure student retention. These expectations from lecturers have been noted in earlier studies by authors such as Walker (2000) and Wolfe (1996).

• Time and correctness of the delivery system focus on when programmes are offered and how the delivery methods resonate with students’ needs and availability.

• Course material relevancy and correctness highlight the quality of course materials in terms of their fitness for purpose.

Taking a different approach to researching the dropout phenomenon, Zepke and Leach (2005) employed a review approach to exploring student dropout. They gathered information from institutional databases, library databases and the internet on student retention. They also used a mixture of studies deliberately in order to depict different results on the same topic. A significant finding of this review revealed that institutions pay a great amount of attention to students’ study experiences in terms of maintaining their identity in their respective cultures; retaining their social networks outside the institution; along with valuing the students’ cultural capital and their preferred learning experiences.

Other studies on student dropout related to students’ study experiences have made several recommendations on how to create and promote retention opportunities. Rendon, Jalomo and Nora (2000), for example, feel that institutions must assist students in discovering and comparing similarities between their culture and various other cultures without the risk of culture loss or culture shock. Crissman
Ishler (2005) advises that lecturers should acknowledge the diverse backgrounds of students especially when they are in their first year of study. She further advises that the stereotyping of the ‘traditional student’ be avoided as today’s student is very diverse and very different from the ‘traditional’ student. According to Crissman Ishler (ibid.), the ‘traditional’ first year student is often stereotyped to be 18 years of age; possibly living away from home in some cases; and enrolled on a full-time basis with financial dependence on their parents. She refutes this stereotype by stating that today’s students may be of varied ages, genders, race groups and may be working to support dependents other than their spouses. Added to this, physical and mental health, academic preparedness, and alcohol and drug abuse are potential factors for students either dropping out or succeeding.

What seems to emerge from these studies on student dropout is that if viewed through the students’ lens, then student dropout is seen to be largely as a result of students’ negative experiences of campus life. If viewed through the lens of the institutions, then student dropout is seen to be largely as a result of external background factors. Viewed through the South African lens, the literature suggests a race-based, apartheid blamed socio-political and socio-economic perspective to student dropout. This analysis of the literature review suggests that these lenses are essential to holistically understand the phenomenon of student dropout within the context of a transforming nation. The conceptual framework proposed by the article attempts to include both the institutional factors and the students’ background in understanding student dropout from HEIs.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In attempting to do a fine-grained analysis of student dropout within higher education and to understand its dynamics within institutional interventions, it was deemed most appropriate to approach this study through the mixed methods approach. This approach (Cresswell 2007) allows the researcher to explore through quantitative analysis the current status of student dropout and to attempt to explain qualitatively the emerging findings from the quantitative analysis. The quantitative analysis took the form of a database analysis of the 2009 graduating cohort of students and tracked the original cohort’s progress since they first registered across all faculties in the institution. Patterns of completion time and dropout were explored. A random, computer-selected sample of 30 per cent of students who had dropped out of university in each of the faculties was selected for telephonic interviews and biographical analysis.

**SELECTED FINDINGS OF THE MIXED METHODS ANALYSIS**

Mining the data produced from the database analysis of student throughput across the years of study from first entry into their respective programmes, revealed some patterns that are associated with student dropout related to faculty distribution. These patterns, which are not unexpected, especially in those faculties that offer generic
degrees like Bachelor of Science or Bachelor of Social Sciences, suggest that the rate of graduation in minimum time is extremely low in these faculties (approximately a third or less of the students registered) as compared to faculties that are profession related, except Engineering (see Table 1).

Table 1: Institutional stats on student throughput in undergraduate programmes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>No. registered</th>
<th>No. grad in min. time</th>
<th>No. excluded</th>
<th>No. dropped out</th>
<th>Currently registered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>428</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>607</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Sciences</td>
<td>407</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>2 022</td>
<td>630</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>433</td>
<td>603</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>454</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management Studies</td>
<td>1 633</td>
<td>565</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>281</td>
<td>646</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science &amp; Agriculture</td>
<td>1 216</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>473</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>6 973</td>
<td>2 333 (33%)</td>
<td>327 (5%)</td>
<td>1 277 (18%)</td>
<td>2 260 (32%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further analysis of the student institutional statistics revealed that the dropout rate is relatively high with approximately one in four students either dropping out of study or being academically excluded. Further scrutiny of the student dropout statistics revealed, again not unexpectedly, that the highest dropout levels are in the first year of study (see Table 2). Just more than half of the students who drop out of their studies do so in their first year of study with relatively high levels of dropout being reported in subsequent years of study.

Table 2: Student dropout statistics by year of study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>Year of registration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1st year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Sciences</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management Studies</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science and Agriculture</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data produced from the biographical records of a random, computer-generated sample of 30 per cent of students who had dropped out of university suggested that there are no emerging patterns with respect to students’ school backgrounds, socio-economic and race factors as indicated by previous studies in this field. This does not mean that these factors are not part of the reason for student dropout. Rather, there are several factors that contribute to student dropout, including school background and socio-economic factors, but that there is no clear link between these factors and student dropout. The data suggest that students who dropped out of university study came from across the school background spectrum within South Africa in terms of race categories, socio-economic groups and geographical settings.

Emerging findings from interviews with students who dropped out of university:

- Programme and subject choices contributed to student dropout – students were either not adequately informed of the subject choices or they were given very little choice in what subjects they could choose. Access to their choice of programmes and courses was reported more frequently as a reason for their dropping out of university. In addition some students indicated that there was clearly a mismatch between what they learnt in school and what subjects they had taken or were asked to take.

- Finances played out in two distinct ways. Some students reported lack of financial support for their studies as being the reason for dropping out of their studies, while the need to have a full-time job but a lack of opportunity to study part-time formed another financial reason for dropping out of university.

- Several other reasons were given by students for dropping out of university studies, including personal circumstances and problems, transport, poor academic background, demands of the curriculum, negative student experiences as they engaged with university staff, study skills management, entry requirements and labelling.

In attempting to map the range of issues associated with student dropout and to explore and understand their respective dynamics, the following conceptual framework was developed as a tool to guide this exploration. This conceptual framework was developed by integrating a methodological orientation that would inform a fine-grained analysis of student dropout with a conceptual mapping of the factors that would potentially influence students to drop out of university studies. This would be influenced by the institutional policy context of access and student throughput management systems (see Figure 1).
The two centrally located circles direct the methodological approach to understanding student dropout. The first circle directs a quantitative analysis of student dropout in terms of patterns, trends and expectations (or predictability), while the second circle directs a qualitative analysis focusing on understanding how the identified factors influence student dropout deeply located within an individualistic gaze. Linking the two circles invites a mixed methods approach to understanding student dropout either from an explanatory perspective of explaining particular patterns that may emerge through a quantitative analysis of this phenomenon or an exploratory perspective to establish the extent to which a particular factor or group of factors influences student dropout.

Each of the two circles is segmented, firstly in terms of factors that are broadly categorised as institutionally related and personal or situational factors and secondly in terms of discrete sub-categories naming the factors that have been identified as potential factors that could influence student dropout. By segmenting the circles in this manner, the researcher can determine contributing factors and breaking point factors to student dropout. Doing this analysis, it may be more possible to isolate and address particular issues that institutions can have control over as well as provide knowledge on what students can expect to experience as students of higher learning.

The framework includes a focus on student admission and throughput management as these two aspects have been found to influence student dropout. Incorrect subject,
programme or qualification choices have been found, both in data produced for this institutional study as well as in related literature (Letseka et al. 2010), to influence student dropout. For example, evidence from records of students who dropped out of university suggests that some were admitted into university Science Foundation programmes but could not access Science programmes. In some of these cases, the students attempted other programmes with devastating academic performance leading to their dropping out of university. Hence, this conceptual framework allows the researcher to explore access issues in student dropout.

Within a transformational agenda, student throughput management has become a feature in most HEIs. The reasons for this are varied and include funding concerns, curriculum concerns, teaching and learning concerns related to transformation and social justice concerns. Support structures and processes to support students’ academic, financial and personal needs are provided so that students do have a fair chance of succeeding within a higher education environment. The conceptual framework as proposed allows the researcher to explore institutional intervention programmes within the focus of student dropout. For example, institutions tend to focus more on target setting and less on starting points to achieve the set targets, a concern that also emerged from the analysis of development studies related to the Education for All world agenda (Lewin 2008). Hence, graduation rates, for example, become a target setting exercise without understanding clearly, for example, the nature of students, their educational backgrounds and their limitations; nonetheless, intervention programmes are designed that may be a mismatch to who the students are. This conceptual framework allows the researcher to explore such things as target setting and starting points in a much more fine-grained analysis that would inform student support as they progress through their study programme.

This conceptual framework on dropout could also allow the researcher to excavate institutional issues that may have contributed to student dropout. One such example lies in a conceptualisation that I call insidious institutional violence.

Exploring institutional violence in student dropout analysis using the conceptual framework

Using the lens of the conceptual framework on the data produced through the institutional research on student dropout, it is possible to conceptualise and explore a notion of insidious institutional violence against students. Drawing from the literature on gender violence and cohesive power, it becomes easy to conceptualise institutional violence as a subtle form of violence not easily recognised within a normative institutional discourse of power and control.

Higher education institutions operate in ways that not only question and transform power relations but also reproduce it. In the reproduction of power inequities many assumptions about teaching and learning are taken for granted which manifest in unequal relations. Norms of behaviour are deeply embedded within social practices, and are viewed as the ways things are, the way they always have been, and the way they will always be. Further, they function as institutional violence because
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they criminalise and victimise students, constructing them for who they ought to be. In using the term institutional violence in the higher education context, the article argues that violence operates in invisible and insidious ways through which academic decisions are upheld, for example, in admission and selection criteria, curriculum choice and pathways and teaching and assessment or in familiar ways of teaching and learning that are valued by academics and remain invisible in how they manifest in perpetuating student disaffection. The invisibility of such institutional violence allows for an egregious culture under the guise of teaching and learning.

Drawing from Bourdieu’s (1991) understanding of institutions, symbolic power and violence, the article argues that symbolic power operating within HEIs is a form of violence as it seeps into the climate and culture of the institution in ways that make certain thoughts, beliefs and actions about student throughput and success legitimate. Symbolic power ‘hides’ such power and makes the exercise of alternate ways of thinking about students difficult or untenable. Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic power helps in understanding institutional violence as the power within the higher education system which often works through individuals, including academics who have authority and uphold what are regarded as acceptable patterns of thoughts and ideas. This is not to argue that students do not have power but their power is minimised within a context where regulatory circumstances prevail giving enhanced status to academics who are supposed to carry out the policies and procedures of the universities. Symbolic power permits people to commit violence in the name of the institution they serve. Institutional violence can be seen as the discourses through which academics allow for exclusion and, drawing further from Bourdieu, use a ‘secret code’ which points to what academics must do. Institutional violence exerts its force in many ways. For instance, the university may make a decision about whom to exclude and when the students resist the power of the institution, their resistance is quelled by justifying the policies that are in place.

Tracing the experience of students from the application phase to graduation, it would be possible to investigate this phenomenon of insidious institutional violence as is evident from the data produced through this institutional study and with a gaze of organising and intellectualising about the data that alludes to notions of systemic violence.

For example, the evidence for such a devastating claim lies in the following extrapolations:

- **Coerced admissions of first entry students:** Within KwaZulu-Natal, for all students wishing to access higher education at any the four institutions located in the province, a central admissions application is the only path to apply for places. In this application process, students have to indicate their choice of study programme and institution of learning in a six-level hierarchy. In order to do this, the students need to make strategic decisions that will enable them to be considered for places and therefore construct the hierarchy. Some faculties and institutions only consider the students’ first three choices, and in high demand qualifications, only their first choice is considered. Herein lies the
institutional violence. The forced hierarchical decision that potential students need to make in the application process often disadvantages the students in accessing a programme of their choice. Students are then left to the mercy of what is available to them, including programme direction within a qualification and module choice based on classroom limits. The application process thus becomes a point of institutional violence relating to decision making and admissions. The interview data from students who had dropped out alludes to such issues of wrong choices suggesting that the students had made an incorrect choice and a subtle acceptance of this error, when, in fact, these students were coerced into making such study choices through the application process.

- **Symbolic vs actual achievements of transformation:** Clearly, the intention of the university was to meet the access transformation agenda of higher education. Opening up access through access and foundation programmes, financial support and active marketing increased the participation of students from the previously disadvantaged black population group. However, while this transformation agenda was realised symbolically, the actual achievements of this transformation gesture became a concern for the institution, compelling it to introduce throughput management policies and systems in place to achieve transformational success. This meant that students who were accepted into the university programmes and who were identified as underperforming from the university’s perspective, were burdened with additional development needs, labelling and monitoring. This kind of burden could be construed as a form of institutional violence against students. Bourdieu’s (1991) notion of symbolic violence creeps in by making, for example, foundation or extended programmes a culture of an institution in order to address the consequential issue of increased access and low graduation rates. The thoughts, beliefs and actions of those in power are legitimised through programmes like approved foundation programmes, access programmes and support programmes.

- **Individual vs group achievements:** The data and analysis thereof suggests that there are no clear patterns or trends in student dropout related to student background. Rather, there are emerging patterns related to programmatic issues. Two things emerged from this analysis. Firstly, the university needs to move away from viewing students as particular groupings, like rural students or students from disadvantaged home backgrounds, and begin to view students as individuals influenced by a range of factors that makes each one unique. Group labelling perpetuates group identities and students who are historically from these identity groupings subtly promote an acceptance of this discourse. Secondly, the institution needs to move away from viewing students in terms of their experience in general to a more programmatic gaze that influences individual students’ experiences within faculties, programmes, modules and staff. In this analysis institutional violence is evident in the programmatic experiences of students as students are affected differently by things like negative lecturer experiences, lecture load, curriculum restrictions and group
categorisation as evidenced from interviews with students that have dropped out from university. Rules of pathways to qualifications, assessment tasks constructed by academics and the unequal relations between staff and students are examples of practices that are viewed as the ways things are, the way they always have been, and the way they will be. Further, these taken for granted ways of being, functions as institutional violence because they criminalise and victimise students, constructing them for who they ought to be.

These three examples demonstrate the credibility of exploring insidious institutional violence as a reality within HEIs that contributes to student dropout. These kinds of analysis, of making familiar data unfamiliar through conceptual mapping, necessitate a review of how student dropout rates are explored, conceptualised, and understood, pushing us away from a discourse of self-pity as a transforming nation.

**CONCLUSION**

This article set out to explore student dropout from an HEI using a mixed methods case study design. In exploring the issues around student dropout, a conceptual framework was developed to guide the analysis. Using this conceptual framework, the article demonstrated how conceptual mapping allowed me to demonstrate alternate discourses on student dropout by shifting my gaze from a race-based, apartheid blamed discourse to a student experience discourse. Through this shift in discourse, the conceptual framework allowed me to conceptualise insidious institutional violence relating to student dropout with a view to opening up research opportunities with a fresh lens directed by the conceptual framework on student dropout.

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