Re-Imagining and Expanding the Discourse of Student Access, Throughput and DropOut within the South African Higher Education Context

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Abstract

The enrolment in higher education has been steadily increasing since democracy however, there is a growing concern with respect to the efficiency of the public higher education system, largely attributed to the high dropout rates, low throughput rates and increased time-to-completion trends. Interventions to mediate this have been extensive including access development programmes, foundation programmes, academic support programmes and student services. However, the intervention discourses to address throughput and 'underpreparedness' is now entering its second decade with little evidence to show that any substantive improvements have occurred. This paper, therefore, argues for a re-imagining of the current discourses, based on an institutional case study of a public higher education, to an expanding discourse that includes a humanizing discourse from students' perspectives.

Keywords: humanizing discourse, students' perspectives

Introduction

The vital statistics provided by the Council for Higher Education (CHE)

(2013) shows clearly that the enrolment in higher education has been steadily increasing since democracy, recoding a total enrolment of just under 950 000 in 2011 from 450 000 in 1994. The indication is that the South African public higher education system is a healthy growing system. There is, however, an increasingly growing concern with respect to the efficiency of the public higher education system, largely attributed to the high dropout rates, low throughput rates and increased time-to-completion trends. Several studies (CHE 2013; HSRC 2008) have been done to establish the reasons for this low efficiency, many of which are linked to apartheid blamed, socio-political and socio-economic discourses that view the students as the problem. Interventions to mediate this student blame discourse have been extensive and wide ranging. These interventions included access development programmes, foundation programmes, academic support programmes and student services. The most recent in the intervention discourse is the proposed introduction of a flexible undergraduate curriculum (CHE 2013), in which up to a year of additional study space for support modules is added to the undergraduate curriculum to assist students within their study programme. Students can, however, exit the study programme a year earlier if they do not need such interventions and this is the 'flexibility' in this intervention strategy. The intervention discourses to address throughput and underpreparedness is now entering its second decade with little evidence to show that any substantive improvements have occurred. This paper, therefore, argues for a re-imagining of the current discourses, based on an institutional case study of a public higher education, to an expanding discourse that includes a humanizing discourse from students' perspectives.

The increased access to Higher Education Institutions within South Africa has not been met with its associated improved success and graduation rates (Department of Education 1997; CHE 2013), potentially working against the transformation agenda and with enormous cost implications. It is generally acknowledged that progression and retention rates at South African Universities rank amongst the lowest in the world (Letseka & Maile 2008); with graduation rates for white students being more than double that of black students (Letseka & Maile 2008; CHE 2013). This is despite the country apportioning the largest slice of its national budget to education. According to a report by the Human Science Research Council, as many as 40% of students drop out of university in their first year of study (University World

News 2008), with the graduation rate being in the region of only 15% (DHET 2013). These statistics are not very different from those released more recently by the Council for Higher Education (2013). The increased access with low graduation rates suggest that the equity of access has not translated into observable equity of outcomes and sustained over a long period of time, signaling a need to re-imagine and expand the discourses and debates on higher education efficiency with respect to student enrolment, throughput and graduation.

The demand for places in public higher education institutions in South Africa, and in most developing world contexts, far exceeds the actual number of places available. Several reasons have been advanced for this mismatch between demand and availability. These include, amongst others, opening up of access to previously denied population groups (as is the case in South Africa post-apartheid) (Cloete *et al.* 2000), development demands that requires a more global knowledge economy (Barnet 2013), employment opportunities and competition for jobs (Burke & Johnston 2004; Oyaziwo *et al.* 2012), and aspiration towards a technologically advanced society (Forde 2001; Adams 2012). In the face of this high demand for spaces within higher education institutions, is a serious concern for the student dropout. South African research studies suggest that less than one sixth of the students that enrolled in their undergraduate study programme complete and graduate from their programme within the minimum study period (HSRC 2008). These concerns have serious implications for the efficiency of higher education, and more especially within a transformational agenda. Several discourses have emerged across the world that attempt to explain this student dropout concern. These include, amongst others a race based socio-political discourse where the ills of past political policies and actions (as in the case of South Africa) have been blamed for the lack of infrastructural capacity to prepare students for higher education studies; a student poverty discourse focusing on lack of economic capital to support students in their higher education studies while promoting positive discrimination to increase participation of students from low socio economic sectors of the population (as in the case of India); and an academic discourse of student potential, or lack thereof, to engage in higher education studies. These discourses adopt a student deficit lens and the students are seen as the source of the problem.

The Status of Debates on Student Access, Throughput and Dropout within the South African Higher Education Context

As previously stated, the demand for places in public higher education institutions in South Africa, and in most developing world contexts, far exceeds the actual number of places available. Access into higher education within the South African context has largely been related to socio-political transformation from the ills of apartheid and transition into democracy, human rights and social-justice system of governance (Cloete *et al.* 2000; Bunting 2002). Historically, access to higher education was largely the privilege of the White population group, with some institutions being reserved for African, Indian and the coloured population groups respectively during the apartheid era. If students of different race groups wanted to access higher education institutions that were reserved for specific racial groups other than their own, they required governmental approval (Bunting 2002). Slowly, with the dismantling of apartheid through protest and sanctions, access into higher education altered to a situation where racial quotas became the discourse in higher education enrolment. Recently access quotas extended within racial groups with more recent emphasis now being focused on marginalized communities (related to geography rather than politically marginalization). Through this process students from outlying regions where the level of development, both, in the lives of communities and in the educational opportunities that are available to them, have emerged as the target group for higher education enrolment. Out of this recognition, institutional marketing for student recruitment as well as admission into university programmes for those located in geographically marginalized communities are being increasingly targeted by institutions of higher learning. The implications are that the student profile in higher education are being more complexly diversified with the main vectors of diversity expanding from race, economics and academic to include geography and school types (quintile rankings of schools based on infrastructural provisioning and poverty levels). Hence, while access figures into higher education has exceeded the transformational goal set in the early 2000's in terms of a race-based focus, the emerging focus on access is now on going beyond the race-based focus into nuances associated with opportunities and social justice, bringing about a new set of variables that needs to be identified and engaged with in addition to programmes of actions for intervention

through a social redress lens.

A further issue with access into higher education is related to the increase in demands and constraints in higher education capacity. In South Africa, approximately 17% of those who complete grade 12 school education have opportunities to access higher education across the 23 public funded institutions, while many more access the growing private higher education sector. The targeted enrolment as indicated in the National Plan for Higher Education (Lewin & Mawoyo 2014; Department of Education 2001) was 20% in 2001. In 2015 we have not yet achieved this target. The latest audited statistics indicate that in 2011, 931 817 students were enrolled in higher education across the public universities, growing from 495 000 in 1994. While the number of students accessing public higher education has substantially increased, the capacity has not increased commensurately. Hence a further discourse on supply and demand for higher education within a structural capacity focus needs to emerge, to not only address the increasing demand overall for higher education, but also to consider the impact of low throughput with higher demand for new admissions. In this respect, one needs to explore how selection criteria for admissions into programmes of study become an exclusion process.

With respect to throughput across university programmes, the current statistics are alarming and continues to trend in its current forms despite substantial interventions both systemically and institutionally. National studies in this area suggest that one in six students registered within South African higher education, graduate in minimum study time (Letseka *et al.* 2010) and that the student dropout rate is unacceptably high (Letseka & Maile 2008). Most recent statistics produced by the Department of Higher Education suggests that the average graduation rate across the 23 public higher education institutions within South Africa is 15% for undergraduate programmes (Department of Higher Education 2013). In response to this noted low graduation rate, several interventions have been made, both, by the state and by institutions. The responses included financial support to students in the form of bursaries and study loans and to institutions in the form of funding for programme support through access programmes, academic support programmes and foundational programmes. The most recent proposal by the Council for Higher Education (2013) is for a flexible undergraduate curriculum structure that allows for flexible exit from a degree programme based on whether the student needs additional academic support

at transitional points across the qualification. The proposal is to add an additional academic year to the three or four year study programme to cater for the additional academic support.

The interventions thus far suggest that the problem is located within the school education system and with the students and that higher education institutions must do something to rectify the low preparation for higher education. This deficit discourse has prevailed, even internationally where, for example, models of student integration (Tinto 1996) have been developed to keep students in higher education. However, through this paper, the gaze shifts from a student deficit discourse to a more humanitarian discourse based on a discourse of 'student experiences': not just of higher education experience, but inclusive of students' personal and environmental experiences that necessitate different decision- making.

Student dropout from higher education is a related issue to student throughput. A great concern is that almost a quarter of the students drop out from university in their first year of their study. These concerns have serious implications for the efficiency of higher education, and more especially within a transformational agenda. In South Africa, the reasons advanced for the relatively high student dropout from higher education have largely been linked to a blame discourse attached to the socio-political situation characterizing the South African political transition. However, the blame discourse is slowly being overshadowed by a discourse on students' experiences pointing to student departure and re-entry at later stages of their lives (Manik 2014). In the international domain and increasing entry into the South African field of inquiry is the student engagement discourse where surveys of student engagement (e.g. the SASSE survey) are being administered to explore issues, trends and patterns associated with how students are engaging within higher education institutions.

Having presented this status of debates on student access, throughput and dropout, the next section of this paper presents some key findings of an institutional case study to support the main argument being made, i.e. a re-imagining and expanding of the discourses on student access, throughput and dropout from higher education within the South African context.

Methodology
Our empirically based article draws evidence from an institutional case study

methodology located within an exploratory mixed method approach (Cresswell 2007). Drawing on the methodological critique of existing studies within the South African context, where research on student dropout have largely been through surveys, database analysis and secondary data sources, this empirical institutional case study attempted to get deeper insight into the phenomenon of student dropout by exploring the range of variables that could account for student dropout.

The choice of an exploratory mixed method approach, enabled us to examine the trends and extent to which student dropout exists, and the possible reasons for such trends and patterns, located within the daily practices, policies and interventions of that institution, all of which will be influenced differently across different institutions.

The case study institution is located within KwaZulu-Natal Province and is considered as one of the largest contact higher education institutions in South Africa. This means that the majority of its forty three thousand students attend face-to-face lectures. It has a diverse student population, including a significant number of international students, both from within and beyond its African borders. The university, through a merger between a historically White well-resourced institution and a historically Indian university, is a multi-campus institution having a two tiered governance structure, the senior executive structure and a College structure. Its academic programmes are located within the four Colleges, each College being led by a Deputy Vice Chancellor and Head of College. The institution is amongst the top five institutions within the country and is located within the top 400 institutions in two of the world ranking systems that rank higher education institutions. The institution is governed by several institutional policies and its vision and mission is located within its 2012 to 2016 strategic plan. With respect to student throughput management, the institution has a well-developed student support and retention policy that identifies, tracks, supports and monitors students' progress through their academic study programme. This support programme is located within the institution's Teaching and Learning Office under the leadership of the Deputy Vice Chancellor of Teaching and Learning. At the College level, College Deans of Teaching and Learning lead and manage College support for students.

The institution has several student support programmes, including academic counseling, career counseling, access to and support by traditional healers, language development support, skills training and School-based

academic development officers. The identification, tracking and monitoring system within the case study institution uses the analogy of a traffic light signal. A student who has completed progression requirements into the next semester of study would receive a green code. Students that do not meet progression requirements would be labeled orange and can receive several risk warnings. Students who, after receiving several risk warnings are then labeled red, meaning that they are to be academically excluded from their study programme. Students who have been identified as 'at-risk' are tracked and they are required to undergo identified interventions, managed through the School-based academic coordinator to improve their status. The 'at-risk' students are monitored through these intervention programmes and if students do improve their academic performance, their status changes back to green. If they have not improved, they will remain with an orange label and given another risk warning followed by probationary conditions. For students who do not meet their probationary requirements, their status changes to red and they are considered for academic exclusion. The student has an opportunity to appeal against this exclusion. The appeal is first considered at the College level and subsequently at the institutional level where several decisions can be made.

Data for this study was produced in 2010, 2011 and 2013, tracing the cohort from first year registration to the final year of study in each of the undergraduate qualifications offered at the case study institution. The empirical evidence is drawn from three vantage points that span across the higher education students' experiences, namely; a tracer element tracing students that dropped out of study, institutional statistics on student drop out and institutional support through academic development programmes. The empirical evidence is, therefore, presented in three parts, the analysis thereof and its contribution to the re-imagining of the student dropout discourse.

The quantitative analysis took the form of an institutional database analysis of the 2009, 2011 and 2013 graduating cohorts of students and tracked the original cohort's registration since first registration across all faculties in the institution. Patterns on completion time and dropout were explored.

The qualitative analysis took the form of several approaches. A random sample, computer selected, of thirty percent of students that had dropped out of university in each of the faculties were selected for telephonic interviews and biographical analysis as a tracer study dimension to the study. This was about exploring factors and reasons for student dropout, and what

had happened to students subsequent to them dropping out from the case study institution. Five Academic coordinators (one from each of five faculties) who provide academic support to the students identified as 'at-risk' were interviewed to explore what support they provided to students, what issues students were dealing with during their studies, and the reasons why they believe students were dropping out from university.

Key Findings of the Institutional Case Study: Findings on Student Throughput

Table 1: Graduation, Throughput and Dropout of First Entry Students Reported as at May 2013

	Degree Programme	Cohort Year	First Entry Enrollment	Graduated In Min. Time (Grad On Reporting Date)	Academic Exclusion	Currently Studying	Changed Qualification	Dropped Out
TOTAL enrolment across undergraduate programmes	3 yr prog	2010	6064	1204 (19.8%)	357 (5.9%)	2410	704	1310 (21.6%)
		2009	5147	910 (17.7%)	383 (7.4%)	2146	672	1027 (19.9%)
		2007	3923	916 (23.3%)	255 (6.5%)	83	539	803 (20.5%)
	4 yr prog	2009	2074	878 (42.3%)	97 (4.7%)	565	231	303 (14.6%)
		2008	1756	768 (43.7%)	73 (4.2%)	515	142	285 (16.2%)
		2006	1508	522 (34.6%)	100 (6.6%)	22	181	262 (17.3%)

Finding 1: DropOut across the Racial Groups are Persistently High and Points to a Larger Discourse on Student Dropout

Consistent with other national studies on student throughput (Council for Higher Education 2013; HSRC 2008; Letseka & Maile 2008), approximately a third of the students graduate in the minimum time to completion of degree. There are, however, differences between three year programmes and four year programmes suggesting that students registering for four year programmes, which are largely profession related programmes, fare better on graduation rates. As there are no differences in the provision of academic support across three and four year degree programmes, academic support would therefore not be considered as an influential factor in the differences of graduation rates. Further, reasons for a higher throughput and graduation rate related to four year programmes could include curriculum matters that account for an extended engagement in a focused area of study, greater maturity as students spend more time in a higher education environment and the development of professional conduct. Table 1 suggests that graduation in minimum time rates for four-year undergraduate programmes is almost twice as much that of three-year undergraduate programmes. The graduation rates across the three year reporting cohorts show no substantial changes. They range between 17% and 24% for three year undergraduate programmes and between 34% and 44% for the four year undergraduate programmes. Despite the substantial intervention in academic support, the graduation rates have not changed substantially. In fact, for the three year programmes, the graduation rates decreased across the reporting period, while for the four year programmes, there was a substantial jump in graduation from the 2006 cohort to the 2008 and 2009 cohorts. There is, however, a decrease in the number of graduates in minimum time from the 2008 to the 2009 cohort, suggesting that there may not necessarily be an upward trend in graduating rates. Rather, the substantial jump of almost 10% in graduating rate between the 2006 and 2008 cohort could relate to contextual issues which includes institutional merger and resultant changes, access and selection processes and programme rationalization.

The dropout statistics are equally of concern. There seems to be a slight increase in dropout across the three year programmes over the three reporting cohorts and a slight decrease in dropout across the four year programmes over the three reporting cohorts. These slight variations on

student dropout rates across the reporting cohorts could be attributed to student enrolment numbers that have increased over the reporting years. Of concern is that there has not been any noticeable decrease in student dropout rates across the three reporting cohorts despite the advanced student monitoring and support system in place and offered to students. The prevailing discourse explaining student dropout within South African universities have largely been based on socio-political, biographical factors (Hay & Marais 2004; Letseka & Mallie 2008; HSRC 2008; Department of Higher Education 2013). Hence a further analysis of student dropout in terms of student biographies is presented to explore any noticeable trends related to student biography. The most commonly available data on student biography as captured within institutions' database are race and gender, and for the purpose of this paper a race-based analysis is presented.

Table 2: Racial Distribution of Student Dropout

	Degree Programme	Cohort Year	Total Dropout	African	Coloured	Indian	White
TOTAL	3 yr prog	2010	1310 (6044) (21.6%)	807 (3780) (21.3%)	48 (134) (35.8%)	349 (1717) (20.3%)	104 (413) (25.2%)
		2009	1027 (5138) (20.0%)	634 (3004) (21.1%)	29 (135) (21.5%)	290 (1645) (17.6%)	74 (348) (21.35%)
		2007	803 (3923) (20.4%)	444 (2223) (20%)	28 (112) (25%)	203 (1093) (18.6%)	125 (385) (32.5%)

4 yr prog	2009	303 (2074) (14.6%)	144 (932) (15.5%)	21 (208) (10.1%)	109 (834) (13.1%)	29 (100) (29%)
	2008	285 (1756) (15.0%)	127 (850) (14.9%)	7 (35) (20%)	88 (700) (12.6%)	33 (160) (20.6%)
	2006	262 (1544) (17.1%)	96 (561) (17.1%)	11 (52) (21.2%)	99 (650) (15.2%)	56 (244) (23%)

There is some degree of differences amongst the different race groups in terms of dropout rates which could be attributed to enrolment numbers. Race groups with lower student enrolment numbers tend to have fluctuating dropout rates, most noticeably amongst the Coloured and White population groups. Of concern is that within and across the race group the rate of student dropout across the three reporting cohorts are relatively stable. The highest head count of dropout is amongst the African students, yet proportionately across the three reporting years, the dropout is range bound. Indian students have the lowest dropout rate, followed by African students. Dropout across all racial groups in four-year programmes is substantially lower than in three-year programmes. Overall, across the three reporting years, student dropout has not shown any substantial improvement despite the substantial student monitoring and support services offered by the university. The race base analysis of student dropout as evident in Table 2 suggests that dropout across the race groups are consistently high and, therefore, a race-based focus on student dropout should be re-imagined on broader factors impacting on students across the race divide.

Finding 2: Students' Academic Performance are Influenced by a Range of Confounding Factors often not Related to The Academic Capacity of the Student

Through telephonic interviews with students that dropped out of university, it became clear that there are numerous reasons among most of the students which impacted upon their decision to leave university. Some students

revealed that at times a combination of reasons had a ripple, cumulative effect in leading them to drop out, while there was a single reason for others (such as relocation). A lack of finance was cited as a singular reason as well as in combination with other factors leading to drop out. The trigger point for the majority of students, marking their decision to drop out, was poor academic performance. While some of the reasons for students' dropping out from university were overt, probing through other questions, illuminated 'masked' factors that were the drivers informing students' decision to drop out from university. The cumulative factors became overbearing and the breaking point factor at the point of dropout was largely poor academic performance.

On introspection, poor academic performance may not necessarily be the main reason for dropping out as indicated in other studies within the South African context (Letseka & Maile 2008). Rather, poor academic performance may be the result of the confounding factors in the students' lives that prevented the student from doing well academically. Two examples are presented as strong evidence for this assertion. The first relates to career choice and the second to student migration issues.

Students, wanting to pursue higher education studies in KwaZulu-Natal, unlike their counterparts in other provinces of South Africa, apply through the Central Applications Office for admission into a particular programme. The application process, while it may seem quite ordinary, subtly forces students to make appropriate choices in their application forms. Students can make up to six programme and institutional choices in the central application form. Being centrally controlled, a potential student can only make a single application which is then considered by the different disciplines and institutions based on the choices made by the potential student. Based on the choices that they make, they are either accepted or declined admission.

With the high competition for access into a university in South Africa, and the limited number of spaces available within higher education institutions, students have to make strategic decisions of their ranked choices. This is because, in high demand programmes, only first choice is considered in the selection process. This means that if a student wanted to do Pharmacy, for example, and ranked Pharmacy as a third choice in his/her central application, s/he may not be selected into the Pharmacy programme if there was a large number of applicants for Pharmacy and that the Pharmacy

Discipline only considered students that had made Pharmacy as their first choice.

While initially being accepted and allowed entrance to university, some students articulated the position that the degree they had chosen was not a field that they were passionate about. For example, Amanda (a pseudonym, white female, and 22 years old) stated: '*I decided to quit because I did not have an interest in what I was studying. I spent a year in Business Studies in 2006. I spent the first semester of 2007 in B.Sc. … I lost interest'.* At times this realisation occurred only in the final year of their study, very late in the academic programme. The participant revealed that the selection that was made during registration was not the result of her own decision, but rather that of the module/programme coordinator, who would inform students that their initial choice was unavailable suggested an alternative route. This alternative was not a preference of the student, but they felt obligated to accept what was being offered to them if they wished to pursue a course of study in a higher education institution. This subtle, coercive way of enrolment forces students to make decisions on their study programme, the effects of which are only later realized, both by the student as well as by the institution. In this case, the need to be accepted into the university was a more powerful force than a personal choice of a programme, suggesting that forces within the institution led to the student's decision to quit studies.

A large percentage of the students that had dropped out from the case study institution, had, in fact, enrolled subsequently at another institution. As with the capturing of institutional data at many HEIs, there is no distinction in the institution's data between students who had dropped out to transfer to another institution, short-term departure and re-entry at a later stage. Quite a high percentage (63%) of the students traced (n=26) indicated that while they left the case study institution, they either transferred to another HEI or engaged in a short-term departure and later re-entered higher education and completed their qualification at another institution. Thirty four per cent (n=14) left to work and 3% (n=1) chose not to work or continue higher education studies. For example, Meera (a pseudonym, Indian female, and 22 years old) was awarded a bursary to study and enrolled at the institution, but because she wanted to pursue Genetic Engineering, which was not offered there, she then had to transfer to another institution to pursue her interest. This departure from the institution would be regarded as student dropout,

only to establish through a tracer study that she, in fact, had transferred to another institution.

The short-term dropout from the case study institution is rather a concept of stop-out than student dropout, suggesting that student dropout should not be considered as a negative action on the part of the student, but rather a discourse of resilience and perseverance, despite the odds against them. Thus, in the case of the majority of students who exited the institution, they should not be classified as a loss to higher education since they were merely transferring between HEIs. It is thus imperative to understand from the students why they resorted to departure from one institution and transferring to another, which is not the focus of this study. Thus, institutional statistics at the case study institution could be presenting a worst-case scenario with regard to student departure. Alternatively, institutional retention issues, as alluded to by Tinto, could be at the heart of student departure.

Finding 3: Academic Support for Students Identified as 'At-Risk' is Inadequate for the Needs of Students

From interviews with academic co-ordinators provide academic support at the level of Schools within the university structure, it was found that there was a simplistic response in the form of academic support (study skills, time management and additional tutorials) and superficial counselling to students who were considered at-risk of failing despite the complexities with which students come into campus. The simplistic responses by the academic co-ordinators is either because of their lack of appropriate knowledge and training as academic co-ordinators to deal with complex student issues or that there are limited options available to academic co-ordinators. The following cases of students as reported by the academic co-ordinators allude to:

Case 1: *The one I can talk about is a student who was raped, and as a consequence of the rape her grades had fallen. She thought she was dealing with it, but she actually wasn't. She wasn't attending classes and she wasn't getting her DP's. So I sat with her, chatted with her and counselled her to the best of my ability, and I made an immediate appointment for her with student counselling. After student counselling, she came back to me, what I do after that is every two weeks she's got to come and see me. We'd talk about her*

results, you know, personal problems, social problems. I think in terms of her self-esteem, I've seen her grow through that.

The student's lack of connectedness and involvement (Scanlon, Rowling & Weber 2007) in her academic studies and unhappiness (Yorke 2000) may be attributed to personal trauma. According to Pithouse-Morgan *et al.* (2013), human interaction and relationships are fundamental to pedagogy and Kerka (2002) points out that *experiences of trauma can impede learning, including difficulty beginning new tasks ... inability to trust (especially those in power), fear of risk taking ... eroded self-esteem/confidence, inability to concentrate*. However while the excerpt points to the benefit of 'chatting and talking' and the presence of strategic relationships (with academic coordinator or peers) it does point to the need for the academic coordinator to be able to have the required expertise and knowledge to guide and support the student to ensure successful social and academic integration after their traumatic experiences/s which is not evident in the above.

Case 2: *A student came very distraught, her dad had passed away about two years ago of HIV/AIDS. They discovered about a year ago that her mom is HIV positive. Her mom and her live in the same house but she says they just can't see eye to eye. That kind of tension is causing enormous stress on her psychologically and emotionally. So with her we had an hour session of just talking through things making her realise... she blames herself by the way, and talking her through the process ...and with her as well I got the administrator to call student counselling immediately and to have them do the LEC 'Learner Evaluation Checklist'... we're just waiting for the results, because that happened recently.*

Research has shown that parents not only play a key role in children's primary and secondary education, but that they continue to play an important role in their offspring's college learning (Strage & Brandt 1999). Student's experiences of unhappiness and feelings of loneliness (Lawrence 2003; Yorke 2000) can be managed and supported through 'out of class support'. Higher education institutions need to be proactive in the kinds of support offered to students. The support needs to be inclusive and acknowledge diversity (Pather 2015) instead support in the above is misaligned to focus on Learner Evaluation.

Case 3: *The student was from the Congo and he did not have a lot of family here. His main problem was also financial. He was living at 'Res' that was also far away from campus. So it was not really about TIME*

management, he had a whole different set of problems. I am not able to help out with financial problems, but what I did was I went over the same kind of timetabling issues. Also when I could, I hired him as an SI (supplement instruction) leader). If students come to me with actual psychological problems, I then very quickly phone student counselling…obviously at the moment I have a grip… I am not qualified for this.

Experiences of loneliness associated with being foreigner is a growing concern and much literature on transition studies reveals that for students to successfully transition, they need to develop a sense of belonging and connection with new peer groups and the wider academic community. However, a further layer of complexity is attributed to socio-economic circumstances – students are adversely influenced by their financial constraints – and engaging in part-time employment does impact on their level of social integration and commitment to the institution (Pather 2015:258). According to her doctoral research Pather (2015) found that students' academic and social integration was influenced by their limited economic capital. It is apparent from the above that whilst the co-ordinator attempts to assist, she does acknowledge that she is not qualified to do so which brings to the forefront questions centering on an academic co-ordinator's roles, qualifications and abilities.

Drawing from these three case studies issues of isolation and loneliness influence students' experiences of life at university, and while achieving educational goals is a primary focus (Pather 2015) actions by academic coordinators are primarily provided to advance students' educational goals rather than their emotional and social needs.

Discussion and Conclusion

It is evident from this institutional case study that dropout across the racial groups were persistently high over the given period of years despite a range of academic support endeavours being in existence. Furthermore, academic support for students identified as 'at-risk' appeared to be inadequate for the needs of students. This also stemmed from the finding that university students' academic performance is influenced by a range of factors largely unrelated to the academic capacity of the student but impacting upon it. Hence, there is a need to re-imagine and expand the discourse on dropout.

While studies show (Thomas 1981) that the amount institutions make available in financial grants and loans increases black students' probability of graduation, Harro (1996) has observed that the cycle of socialisation in which stereotypical conceptions about different student groupings- in this instance 'at risk students', initiated across different levels of the university, have dangerous and damaging consequences. He adds that this normalizing practice sets different social identities in opposition by means of affirming one social identity at the expense of disparaging the other: successful students versus at-risk of failing/dropping out students. This formulaic approach that casts students who are perceived to be 'academically' in a different position locates them in opposition and inequitably in relationships and left unchanged – they are strengthened at a personal level (through peers, academics), at institutional level (school, university policies and practices) and in society in general (Hardiman & Jackson 2000). Students' stories suggest a conception of themselves as 'at risk' of failing as belonging to a different, unsuccessful student group – a Student at Risk. Being a foreign student presents an added layer of opposition and complexity within dominant discourses within South Africa and in South African higher education institutions that seems to generate anxiety (Pithouse-Morgan *et al.* 2013). So the challenge for us as a university community is, how can we re-imagine this normalizing discourse of 'at risk' and how do we re-imagine and then re-fashion our pedagogic settings and practices in ways that counteract the negative and devaluing societal constructions of deficit.

Clearly, having presented the findings from a multi-perspectival lens, this institutional case study offers a counter-narrative to the hegemonic blame based socio-political discourse, focusing solely on the higher education student. Moving from a fixed deficit stance opens up our sense making to multiple ways in which underperformance and ultimate dropout from university studies, may be understood. In attempting to explain such findings, we framed our analysis and discussion within a humanizing discourse perspective which rejects the objective scientific method as a way of studying people. Very simply argued, 'while the objective view asks 'what is this person like?' the humanistic perspective prioritises understanding people's subjectivity, and asks ', 'what is it like to be this person?' We find this helpful in making sense of the multiple forces and factors students have to negotiate daily when studying in a higher education institution. In the institutional case study and in other sustained engagement globally,

addressing student throughput issues with no apparent resolution, suggests that the search for an objective, universal truth or grand narrative has been futile. Our research findings and discussion points to what Higgs (2011) describes as the 'construction of plurality, pragmatism and judiciousness' as an alternate discourse. Thus, a more pluralistic, pragmatic and judicious (Higgs 2011) approach to understanding student throughput and dropout is needed. This pluralistic, pragmatic and judicious approach, informs our choice in adopting a humanistic approach that looks beyond universal reasoning to individual reasoning that is textured, layered and discursive.

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