

# Addressing Student Dropout Rates at South African Universities

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## Abstract

The excitement of a South African University acceptance is shortlived, for many students, as the challenges faced is often overwhelming, resulting in many dropping out in their first year of study. This has negatively impacted on the desired national norm of an 80% success rate targeted by the Department of Higher Education and Training. This study aims to explore ways in which the dropout rates can be reduced thereby increasing the throughput levels of universities in South Africa. A qualitative study was conducted to identify the challenges students encounter that lead to the high dropout rates. Students who had previously dropped out from universities in South Africa were interviewed in order to examine their perceptions of how dropping out of university could have been avoided. Snowball sampling, a type of purposive sampling was used in this study. The findings indicate incorrect career choice, inadequate academic support and insufficient funding as being primary factors that led to the drop out of students. One of the recommendations this study makes is that university departments must align their support programmes with modules that have a high failure rate to help students cope.

**Keywords:** dropout, student, academic support, university, throughput.

## Introduction

The ever increasing number of students who drop out of university remains a

major area of concern among Higher Education administrators. This intractable challenge has been the focus of many scholars globally. In response to this, student retention strategies have been adopted in a bid to remedy the situation. However, the problems and challenges persist year in and year out.

Pocock (2012) in his research on student attrition in an engineering faculty in South Africa explains the various terminologies used to describe students who do not return to university. Among these are ‘dropout’ which he deems as having a negative connotation because of its use in common phraseology; ‘attrition’, which from an engineering perspective implies the chipping of particles from a large piece of material, usually as either a deliberate action of a grinding mill or through incidental and unwanted collisions between materials; and ‘leaving without graduating’ which he deemed as being a more ‘forgiving’ term. In a more recent study by Larsen *et al.* (2013), the term ‘dropout’ is said to be commonly used to describe situations where a student leaves the university study without having obtained a formal degree. Furthermore, from a student’s perspective the terms used to describe ‘dropout’ are: departure, withdrawal, academic failure and non-continuance. From an institutional perspective the term ‘student attrition’ is commonly applied to ‘dropout’ (Jones 2008:1). However, taking these distinctions taken into cognisance, this article uses the words ‘dropout’ and ‘attrition’ interchangeably.

In South Africa, recent reports (Monama 2013; Smith 2013) indicate that 5% of black and coloured students graduate from university. This demands the need for a more strategic and innovative approach to address the problem of dropout, especially amongst previously disadvantaged groups. It is unfortunate that a reactive approach has to be taken, considering that the issue of student retention is a challenge encountered by universities globally, for example, Victoria University in Australia attrition rates were around 25% for the period between 1994–2003 (Gabb & Cao 2006); University of Leeds 8,6%; University of Edinburgh 22.0% (Johnston 2005). Fisher & Engemann (2009) state that Ontario’s universities had an attrition rate of 43% between 1998-2003.

In a study conducted by Pillay & Ngcobo (2010:234), stress factors such as accommodation issues; financial difficulties in addition to the academic demands made it difficult for students to progress through to the next year. The study further revealed that one in eight students believed they

had not made the right choice of study. This was as a result of very limited information being made available at the point of their career choice. Du Plessis & Gerber (2012) also looked into the proficiency of the medium of instruction which in many cases is English which students could not cope with, as this impacted on their reading and processing skills. These are just some challenges students face which can be associated with their reasons for dropping out of university.

As a pre-emptive measure to maintain healthy throughput levels at universities, this study explores the determinants of student attrition within the context of the South African Higher Education landscape. Subsequently concrete remedies are proposed in light of this problem. Whilst the problem of attrition is not unique to South Africa, some of the circumstances that forms the catalyst for the problem are unique. Previous research is evaluated against similar scenarios in South Africa to provide a framework of understanding this epidemic that plagues our universities.

## **Scanning the South African Higher Education Landscape**

In order to provide the study with a comprehensive perspective on student attrition from a South African viewpoint, previous literature and research conducted in the area of student attrition is examined in order to understand more specifically the nature of the problems experienced at individual and institutional level.

A report compiled by Moeketsi & Maile (2008) for the the Human Sciences Research Council, revealed that in 2005, the Department of Education reported that of the 120 000 students who enrolled in higher education in 2000, 36 000 (30%) dropped out in their first year of study. A further 24 000 (20%) dropped out during their second and third year. Of the remaining 60 000, 22% graduated within the specified three-year duration for a generic Bachelors degree. This dropout cost the National Treasury R4.5 billion in grants and subsidies to higher education institutions without a return on the investment. The report further claims that at some institutions the dropout rates are as high as 80%. It estimated that one in three university students and one in two technikon students dropped out between 2000 and 2004.

In 2010 the Council on Higher Education (CHE) published a report: *Access and throughput in S.A. Higher Education: Three case studies*, which

detail the dropout rates of three universities in South Africa. One of the participating universities reported that of the cohort that started in 2000, 6.8% had left by the end of the year. This had increased to 11.8% by the second year and 17.3% by the third (CHE 2010). This university also reported a 20% dropout of undergraduate students in contact programmes. The second university in the report shows that between 2001 and 2004, there was an increase in the number of students dropping out of university with an average attrition rate in undergraduate programmes reaching 22.7% in 2003/4. Overall, in 2005 the dropout rate stood at 50% of the total number of students enrolled nationally.

The 2000 cohort study conducted by the Department of Education (DoE) presents an even more disturbing overall picture. By the end of 2004 (that is, five years after entering), only 30% of the total first-time entering student intake into the sector had graduated. 56% of the intake had left their original institutions without graduating, and 14% were still in the system (Scott *et al.* 2007). The contrast of attrition rates of students in relation to the requirement of the Department of Higher Education, which call for the total university enrolment to rise from 900,000 in 2011 to 1.5 million by 2030 (DHET 2012:x), intensifies the issue of attrition. The National Development Plan (NDP) supports this with a target of 1.62 million enrolments for 2030. Furthermore, the plan calls for 400,000 graduates a year by that date. With an already rapidly increasing number of students dropping out of university, these figures point to a grim outlook of what the future holds for universities and students in terms of dropouts.

## **Retention Strategies**

The empirical evidence in literature suggests remedial action which is hoped will reduce student attrition rates at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Quinn (2013) in her research for the European Union suggests a holistic approach to retention is necessary: one which acknowledges all six factors (socio-cultural, structural, policy, institutional, personal and learning factors) leading to dropout and their inter-relationships. Nationally, higher education policy must be supported by policies to tackle wider socioeconomic and cultural inequalities. Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski (2011) identify research on optimism and individual strengths, and a focus of the positive psychology movement as areas to pursue in student retention strategies. The issue of

student attrition can be compared to the common cold where there are a number of remedies, each fashioned to suit the contextual circumstances, but offers no real 'cure'. It is anticipated to increase on a year-to-year basis and the severity to increase exponentially if no proper action is taken.

In response to the high attrition rates at South African universities, Ogude, Kilfoil & Du Plessis (2012) explore an institutional model for improving student retention and success at the University of Pretoria. This model was developed by the Steering Committee for Student Success which adopted a two-pronged process as a platform for an integrated institutional-wide approach, a research informed methodology using a developmental research paradigm (Richey & Klein 2005) and a systems theory as applied to management (Charlton & Andras 2003). The following is an adaptation of the key problem areas considered and explored by the committee:

A systemic approach to first year experience and student success which required the support and engagement of the university, faculties; support departments, students, high schools and external experts to design a system-wide process to improve the undergraduate (more specifically the first-year) experience.

The process dimension and link to mainstream academic activities where student success initiatives should address the entire student life-cycle from pre-registration to graduation with a focus on the first year and also align with the institutional strategic drivers of excellence diversity, sustainability and relevance. This included locating a specific focus within the faculty to embed student initiatives and rally the support of academic staff and students.

The link of the model to academic disciplines and involvement of academic staff focussed on modules that presented difficulties for students which inadvertently impacted negatively on pass and throughput rates. These were prioritised for intervention. Attention was drawn to the improvement of curricula, pedagogy and assessment.

Addressing diverse student sub-groups and key performance indicators which address the large numbers of students with diverse academic abilities that engage in high impact modules. Ogude *et al.* (2012) maintains that these students receive comprehensive academic, psychosocial, financial and other support using proven high impact practices which includes supplemental instruction; tutoring; peer mentoring, academic advising and psychological counselling.

Ogude *et al.* (2012) stresses the importance for the support of institutional leadership, collaboration between all stakeholders for collective impact and the flexibility of the model to accommodate faculty priorities and the alignment to the strategic intent of the university to ensure success at all levels. This model, in retrospect, depicts the institution's attempt in retaining students; however, this is just one part of the situation.

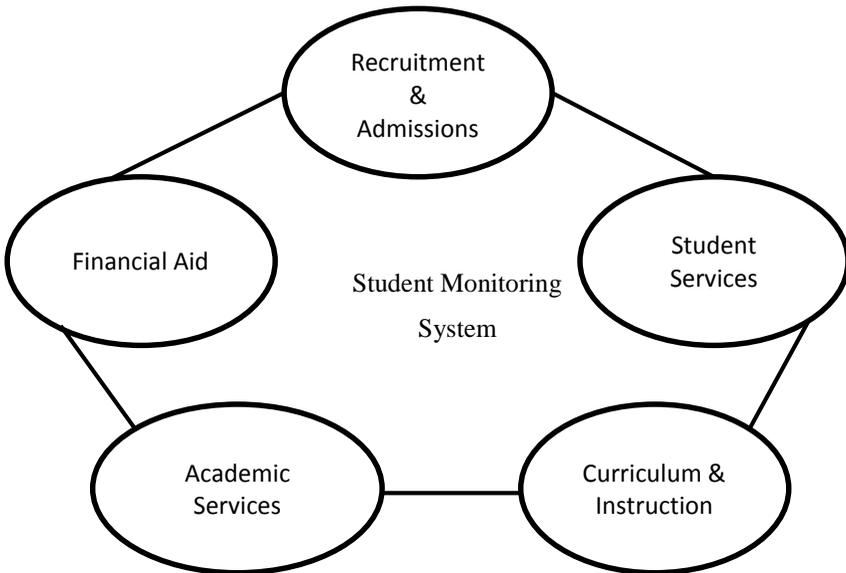
Pocock (2012) advises of an academic support programme to reduce student attrition through additional study skills assistance and peer instruction where a reportedly 15% increase in retention rates has been observed. A further recommendation by Moeketsi & Mgutshini (2014) for the student's lack of preparedness is the introduction of a student support programme – Assisted Passage to Success (APTS). The aims of the programme are to equip students with skills for higher institution learning, including specific competencies that support them in improving their skills for study. This programme will be directed at first year students who require guidance to overcome the challenges of university life. They highlight that the massification of higher education must be simultaneously accompanied by the provision of appropriate and adequate support for all students.

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

Student retention models are complex because of the number of inter-related variables that impact on student retention/dropout. It is also associated with a set of causal factors that researchers have studied extensively (Chacon, Spicer & Valbuena 2012). A popular model explaining student retention is that of Vincent Tinto whose model focuses on student integration. It is based on three spheres: cultural, social and academic, which have become the bases for many other theories and models. Tinto's model emphasises academic integration and social integration which depend on input variables of the student, the family environment and the institution (Chacon *et al.* 2012). Whilst these are relevant and important variables that impact on student retention at higher education institutions, his model does not include other reasons why students drop out, such as finances, poor academic performance, lack of family or social/emotional encouragement and difficult personal adjustment (De Witz, Woolsey & Walsh 2009).

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.



**Figure 1: Five Components of the Student Retention Framework (Swail 1995)**

### ***Component 1: Financial Aid***

Swail (1995) identifies this as a critical part of the framework in order to improve on student retention. For students from low-income backgrounds, many of whom are students of disadvantaged backgrounds; finances are the most crucial factor with regard to retention. In South Africa, the introduction of the National Student Financial Aid and Scheme (NSFAS) grant to assist students has been redeveloped in 2012 to increase its efficacy in student funding. The new model enables NSFAS to identify potentially eligible

students from grade 9 by providing learners with information on the availability of student financial aid whilst at the same time provide career guidance and relevant information on studying at university (Ministerial Statement on Student Funding 2012). The fund stipulates that students who qualify for loans will receive the Full Cost of Study (FCS) as defined by the means test to cover tuition, residence fees, meals and transport and private accommodation, where applicable.

### ***Component 2: Recruitment and Admissions***

Swail (1995) advises, from an institutional perspective, how an institution chooses its prospective students and what financial aid it offers is the crux of institutional business. Institutions must be cognizant of the institution-student fit. He further identifies three categories under the classification of recruitment and admissions which includes student identification, admissions and orientation. Several universities in South Africa, worried that continuing high failure rates among students will erode their global competitiveness, have raised admission requirements from 2011 (Makoni 2010). According to a snap survey of 12 universities conducted by the national weekly newspaper *The Sunday Times* in August 2010, eight have considered tighter admission requirements, believing that poor student pass rates are partly attributable to lax selection criteria. Swail (1995) prompts institutions to utilise a number of assessment and evaluation practices in the admissions office to determine the extent of student-institution congruence. He warns against the regular point system which by no means is the only measure of students aptitude or ability.

### ***Component 3: Academic Services***

The focus of academic services in terms of student retention should be based on providing supplementary support to students, in addition to class contact. He divides this component into six categories: academic advising, supplementary instruction, tutoring and mentoring, research opportunities, pre-university programming and bridging programmes. To be effective it is important that the university provides proper guidance that answers to the needs of the students (Swail 1995:20).

#### ***Component 4: Curriculum and Instruction***

The ongoing development of curricula and teaching and learning practices are two important factors that are fundamental to student retention (Swail 1995). A recent proposal by the Council on Higher Education (2013) reveals that a curriculum structure can be either enabling or constraining in relation to key goals. Given South Africa's inequalities and development needs, it is essential that the curriculum structure should as far as possible enable students' underlying potential to be realised, always provided that the quality of the qualification is maintained (CHE 2013). Furthermore, the CHE has identified structural obstacles which prevent the realisation of the educational goals of the government:

The articulation gap between secondary and higher education  
Transitions within the curriculum

South African higher education curricula have historically had a modular structure of courses and units, with varying levels of cohesion. Modularity facilitates flexibility in curriculum design. Therefore, South African curricula lend themselves to adaptation for different purposes and levels of preparedness (CHE 2013).

#### ***Component 5: Student Services***

Tinto's model of integration highlights the need for social integration which is echoed by Swail. The role of student services should incorporate this as well as other issues students face on campus. Swail (1995) advises the atmosphere and climate (a collective contribution of the practices of administrative staff members, faculty members, support staff and other students) of the university is reflected by how the institution treats and supports students.

### **Methodology**

Edmonds & Kennedy (2013:112) state that research under the qualitative method is often used to explore the 'how' and 'why' of systems and human behaviour and what governs these behaviours. A qualitative research

approach suited this study as it provided an opportunity to interpret the behaviour of the students within the context of their experience. Swails (1995) retention model provided a framework which helped guide the primary objective in the study in order to understand the students reasoning for dropping out of university. His theory identified five components or categories which was financial aid, recruitment and admissions, curriculum and instruction, academic services and student services. These formed categories in the qualitative approach used in this study. Through the phenomenological lens, this study set out to explore the perceptions, perspectives and understanding of why students drop out of university. This was done through the use of in-depth interviews. Utilising this rich data, the researchers then set out to explore viable and practical solutions to problems and challenges raised during the study.

Purposive sampling, a form of non-probability sampling, was used to identify specific students who had dropped out of university. These students were able to identify other students who had also dropped out of university (a snowball sample is built from the subjects suggested by previous subjects) (Baker 1999:141), thereby providing this study with a sample of fifteen participants from various universities in South Africa. Some of the interviews were carried out telephonically whilst the others were conducted in a neutral environment. A semi-structured interview schedule made up of 25 questions was used to guide the interview process. Leading questions such as ‘Did you drop out of university because of financial difficulties?’ were avoided as they would have skewed the responses received. Instead, areas such as academic and social integration and individual factors which provided a framework for each participant were explored first. Thereafter, the key question ‘Why did you drop out of university’ was asked. The order in which these questions were asked was very important to extract data-rich responses from the participants. The responses were recorded and transcribed immediately after each interview.

## **Data Analysis**

Thematic and content analysis was carried out on the responses elicited from the interview process. A process of coding was used to connect the data and to show how one concept influenced another (for example, the relation of

individual challenges students face was connected to their ability to integrate academically). The method outlined by Sarantakos (1998:315) was used to analyse the data: data reduction - the stage where the data are coded, summarised and categorised in order to identify important issues of the aspects being researched; data organisation - the process of assembling the information around certain themes and presenting the results and interpretation; identification of patterns, trends and explanations which leads to conclusions which can be tested through more data collection, reduction, organisation and interpretation. The responses were categorised to generate major and minor categories. This process allowed for elimination of irrelevant data. Once the categories were determined, it was possible to identify major themes that developed from the study.

## **Results and Discussion**

The results of the study are reported according to the major themes that emerged from the study. This study sought to identify the reasons why students drop out of university in a bid to reduce the dropout rates which is a challenge for universities globally. Table 1 expresses the quantifiable data of this study which was primarily the demographics of the students.

**Table 1: Demographics of Students Interviewed**

	<b>Race Group</b>		<b>Gender</b>		<b>Province</b>	<b>Year of study</b>		
	<i>Black</i>	<i>Indian</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>KZN</i>	<i>Y1</i>	<i>Y2</i>	<i>Y3</i>
	10	5	6	9	15	8	3	4
<b>Total</b>	N = 15		N = 15		N = 15	N = 15		

A combination of factors at the individual level and at the academic level was cited by many of the participants for dropping out of university. The following themes emerged from the data which are significant towards the formulation of sound and practical strategies to reduce the dropout rates at universities:

Affordability  
Lack of Academic Support  
Lack of Career Guidance  
Lack of Self-discipline and Commitment  
First Generation Students

### ***Affordability***

In many studies, financial factors influenced students' attrition rates in higher education institutions. This study was no different. Institutions' attempts to rectify this problem are somewhat restricted bearing in mind the limited financial resources that are available. All of the participants interviewed expressed unaffordability as being one of the reasons they dropped out of university. One participant expressed the '*exorbitant cost for books was unbearable*'. Another cited '*high tuition fees which became higher when I failed a course*', as being the main reason for dropping out of university. Another participant who was registered for a BCom Degree in Accounting and who had successfully passed two years without failing a module stated that: '*We were not poor enough to qualify for university funding or exemptions*'. There was a participant who claimed '*I am not black enough to qualify for any form of funding. I have tried many avenues*'. Another participant who had previously qualified for the Rectors Award, which covered his tuition and accommodation fees in previous years, had to leave because he could not afford his third year fees. He had an impeccable academic record, however, his desire to complete his studies were halted by a lack of funding.

Manik (2014:152) maintains there is usually a combination of factors that leads to a student's departure. In her study, she found that a lack of finance coupled with other factors was the most cited reason for students dropping out at the University of KwaZulu Natal. Many parents are unable to meet the financial demands of university which forces the need for financial aid. Another study conducted by Moeketsi & Mgutshini (2014) revealed a major reason students discontinue their studies is because of a lack of finances. More specifically, students drop out because of the inability to fund tuition and books (Bangura 2006). In his study, Pocock (2012) examines the leaving rates in an engineering faculty at the University of KwaZulu Natal.

According to his findings, the breakdown of year of first entry to the university for part of his sample was: 27% left within or after their first year of entry; 39% left within or after 2 years of study with 34% spending between 3 and 9 years at university. From the 176 students interviewed, 84 (48%) students expressed financial difficulty as their reasons for leaving, a further 26% of students found the workload too hard or material too difficult to handle.

The determinants in his research were classified as academic factors (lack of counselling and advising influenced students to leave their programmes without graduating) and social factors (private social circumstances; how faculty deals with students; outside accommodation issues; relationships outside the classroom and living far from family).

### ***Lack of Academic Support***

The responses from participants to a series of questions pertaining to their academic performance and integration revealed that there is a lack of academic support. The following are few of the responses which were categorised to support the conclusion that there was a serious lack of academic support at some institutions. Furthermore, the meaning of these responses is not a straightforward matter of external or internal reference, but also 'depends on the local and broader discursive system in which the utterance is embedded (Wetherell & Potter 1988:169):

*S3 – 'Content was very difficult to understand which made me doubt my capabilities'. S4- 'it was difficult to determine what the lecturer required in the assessments'*

*S7- 'Lecturers were not open enough to help us through understanding difficult content' .*

*S9- 'Too large classes made it difficult to interact with the lecturer. Even having the slides available on Moodle did not help much'.*

*S10- 'The tuts were not to the same standard as how questions would appear in a test or exam. I felt we needed higher quality material and more past tests to go over'*

*S11- 'In class they taught us how to cook mutton curry but expected us to make breyani in the exams. Accounting is already*

*difficult as it is, we either needed better lecturers or ones that could make us understand difficult concepts'*

*S12- 'assessments were not properly guided; I did not know what the lecturer expected when for example answering a question in an assignment'*

*S13- 'sometimes it was easier reading from the text book than listening to the lecturers with their foreign accents which made understanding information very difficult'.*

*S14 - 'I was terrified to approach my lecturers because I felt they were far too aloof. The tuts did not help either. It's as if they wanted us to fail'*

*S15- 'I was scared to ask the lecturer to simplify certain things as it would make me look stupid'.*

Many of the participants interviewed displayed the inability to integrate academically. For this reason, Bitzer (2009:226) advises that the successful academic and social integration of students in higher education remains important with regard to study commitment, study success and preventing early student departure. It is important to examine the context of pre-existing conditions of the student to understand the depth of their responses. For instance, the response from student 3 (S3) was in essence a revelation of the gap that exists between grade twelve and the first year of university which universities should cater for through extended programmes. Similarly the response from student 7 (S7) pointed towards the reliance on a lecturer which was indicative of the students mind-set based on primary and secondary schooling which depended on the teacher to engage in the student, however at tertiary level, the dynamics of the learning system changes as tutorials are included to act as support mechanisms which are designed to engage the student further into the subject matter. Seven of the fifteen participants who were first year students expressed dissatisfaction with the ways in which lectures were conducted. They felt they were boring and uninteresting. The absence of adequate academic support that addresses the needs of students creates an atmosphere within the institution of a poorly organised structure that contributes to high attrition rates. Student attrition rates at higher education institutions are used to measure the internal efficiency of such institutions (Ghanboosi 2013). Willcoxson *et al.* (2010) found that later-in-the-year withdrawals or attrition may be more influenced

by consideration of institutional factors relating to the quality of interactions with academic and administrative staff, feedback processes, teaching quality, course advice and university policies and facilities.

### ***Lack of Career Guidance***

Of the fifteen participants interviewed, twelve maintained that they were not properly advised about their career choices and also cited this as one of the many reasons for dropping out.

*S2- 'at school I aspired to be an accountant. I got straight A's for Accounting and Maths and thought this [career] was for me but I think I needed to know more about this career. The level of accounting at school is very different from what is taught at university'.*

*S3- 'My parents directed me in this career choice, they kept saying to me that I would be the first engineer in the family. I regret my choice'.*

*S5- 'I chose this so I could be with my friends and not feel alone on campus'.*

*S6- 'I should have changed my degree in the second semester but I still continued thinking I would grow to like this field. I know its cost my family but this is what they wanted for me'.*

*S7- 'I was told that university would not be easy, but I did not know it would make me reach a point that I actually began to hate what I was doing'.*

*S8- 'my father told me that I would make the family proud to be attending such a prestigious university because no one else attended university in my family but I guess this degree was far too difficult for me'.*

*S9- 'in the first month I knew I was in the wrong place. I began to lose hope every day because I was not interested in Sports Science anymore'.*

*S10- 'if only I listened to my inner voice and chose differently'.*

*S11- 'My cousin managed this course and I thought I could do it too but obviously I made a big mistake with this course'.*

*S12- 'my choice was a very costly mistake. But at least I know what's not for me'.*

*S13- 'You know you hear of a successful this and that and you think, aah! I can do that but you soon learn that it's all glorified and just not for you'.*

*S14- 'My dad said this will be ok and he knew I did not like this field'.*

*S15- 'wrong option one. I should have rather chosen something that matched my personality'.*

The multiple perceptions of poor career choice reflected here is evident of the different reasons that lead to students making uninformed decisions about their careers. In many cases the participants mentioned either being coerced by a family member or a friend into registering for a certain degree programme. This ultimately led to many students dropping out in the first year of study. One participant who dropped out because of a poor decision in her career decided to attend another institution studying something completely different. This participant is currently enrolled for a Master's degree. However when the discourse is analysed it is evident that one cannot adopt a statistical approach which describes concrete facts or responses that point to society's larger structural processes but a more humanistic approach should be considered which is subject-centred that captures the participants deep meaning, inferences and experience. This pertains especially to the responses of students S3, S6, S9 and S7.

Moeketsi and Mgutshini's (2014) study found that students indicated that they had abandoned their study on realising that the assumed financial and career pathway benefits they had anticipated were no longer feasible. Manik (2014) echoes this in her findings which indicate that poor career guidance and no career guidance prior to and entry into university appeared to contribute to the students departure. She further iterates that students were unaware how to choose subjects or modules at university level or what their subject choices at school prepared them for at university.

### ***Lack of Self Discipline and Commitment***

In response to the following questions 'What challenges you experienced in the first three months of university?', 'how did you cope with the heavy

workloads?’ and ‘How did you fit in socially?’, many participants provided a wide range of responses ranging from: ‘*the workload was much higher than school and the test dates were very close together*’, ‘*waking up in the morning after studying and preparing for classes the night before*’, ‘*I did not have a life because I had so much of work to do which I was not ready for*’, ‘*adapting from high school to university lifestyle eg. Not having teachers in university that spoon-feed you as they would in school*’, ‘*the freedom of socialising whenever I could was bad for my studies because I did it all the time. I just could not draw the line*’, ‘*I drank every day because it’s what everyone in my group did. It was a nightmare to wake up for lectures the next day*’.

Many of the participants were unprepared for the demands of university both socially and academically. The inability to commit to their studies cost them their chance at a better life. The participants found the academic gap between high school and university far too wide to cope with. For this reason, many found it difficult to adapt. The new-found freedom of being away from home compounded other problems these participants were already trying to deal with.

Nel *et al.* (2009:975) alludes to various studies (Tinto 1993; Foxcroft & Stumpf 2005; Kivilu 2006) which have shown that students are increasingly underprepared for higher education studies. The gap between school and university does not only complicate the transition from school to university but also the level of academic success in the first year (Mumba Rollnick & White 2002; Nel 2006; Nel *et al.* 2009). In their study of six universities’ first year student attrition, Willcoxson, Cotter & Joy (2011) found that attrition in the first year seems to be based on personal factors such as the student’s inability to integrate into university social or academic systems, lack of goal commitment due to poor career choice and lack of academic preparedness.

### ***First Generation Students (FGSs)***

FGSs are defined either as students whose parents have no further education after high school (Dumais & Ward 2010) or as students of parents who have not graduated from a tertiary institution (Heymann & Carolissen 2011). Whilst there may be variations of the definitions of first generation

students, there is a rapid increase of first generation students in South African universities. When asked if other members of their family attended university, only four participants were able to confirm this. The balance of the participants was first generation students who lacked the moral support from their families to persevere through their challenges at university level. Their responses ranged from ‘*no-one in my family could explain to me what I was going to expect at university*’, ‘*sometimes I needed to talk to someone who could understand what I was going through but there was no one in my family who could help me. I felt very alone. They did not know how I felt and how it affected me*’, ‘*the pressure of everyone expecting wonders from me was far too much especially when no one else had done this in my family*’.

These responses provide a glimpse of what first generation students experience at various levels. The psychological pressures coupled with the demands of university makes it more difficult to cope and for this reason, many students drop out. In a study conducted by the HSRC, one of the factors contributing to a 40% drop out rate at university by first year students was first generation students (University World News 2008). Inkelas *et al.* (2007:405) highlights that first generation students can differ from other students in many ways. First generation students also appeared to be less academically prepared having lower math, and critical thinking skills than other students who have parents who completed university (Choy 2001).

## **Recommendations**

The recommendations made here are in accordance with the challenges experienced and highlighted by participants in this study:

### ***Lack of Affordability***

The primary responsibility of whether a student can afford to attend a higher education institution rests with the individual; however, both the government and the institution should play a more integral role given the inequalities of the past. The government’s NSFAS scheme to fund students is inadequate to cover the expenses of students who are deserving of financial aid. In order to generate funds:

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An annual tax should be imposed on all major organisations which will contribute to the scheme.

The country's lottery system can be used to include an additional draw where the proceeds are purely for educational development. Also a portion of the unclaimed winnings of the lotteries should contribute to the scheme.

Penalties and fines imposed on businesses for unfair business practices and government officials for maladministration, these funds can then be channelled into this scheme.

It is hoped that these strategies to generate additional revenue will significantly improve the financial crises faced by students. Higher education institutions could incentivise students who achieve distinctions in their modules by discounting these from the students account.

### ***Lack of Academic Support***

Supplementary support from every department within the institution is important for the retention of students. Each department within the higher education institution must provide a contingency plan to provide supplementary support to students at risk. These departments must align their support programmes with modules that have a high failure rate in order to help students cope academically. Students' performance and progress should be carefully monitored at all levels. Peer groups could be encouraged to foster learning amongst students. The introduction of bridging programmes in every programme can make accommodation for students at risk and for first generation students who find academic integration challenging. Improving on lecture delivery methods by making it more exciting, interesting and motivating will keep students engaged in class. The use of social networking technologies plays a pivotal role in maintaining contact with the student in the face of large classes.

### ***Lack of Career Guidance***

Whilst traditional admission practices at institutions incorporate some level of student assessment to verify institutional fit, a similar assessment must be designed to determine student's suitability to a particular field. Open days at

higher education institutions are a feeble attempt from the institution to assist with a student's career choice given the restricted time frames and given that these open days are attended by grade 12's. However, inviting students from grade 10 and each year subsequent to that, open days at the institution will help direct the student to make a more informed decision about their career. HEIs should host road shows at feeder schools to help promote successful programmes and assist in career choice. Furthermore, collaboration with industry and providing students more internship opportunities could potentially guide students in making the right career choice.

### ***Self-Discipline and Commitment***

Successful social and academic integration of the student at HEI's is mutually beneficial to the institution and the student. For this reason building an environment that is pluralistic and supportive of the students' needs will ease the process of integration. Providing students with study timeframes will assist with their planning and possibly improve on their academic performance. HEI's should revamp their orientation programmes annually. This will give them a chance to address other emerging issues that may negatively impact on the students' social and academic integration. It is recommended that summer bridging programs or transition programs could potentially decrease the issue of adaptation to college or university life. These programs in essence would provide a glimpse of college life and how to cope with academic pressure before they are required to attend university.

### ***First Generation Students (FGS)***

There are many FGSs in South Africa given its previous political dispensation which restricted university attendance. In order to assist FGSs, additional programmes should be introduced to help ease the transition process into HEIs. Also, career guidance strategies should be focussed on FGSs to reduce the first year dropout syndrome. If a FGS is identified as an at-risk student, then measures to prevent premature departure from the HEI could include a change in the degree programme that the student is registered for. This study further recommends that HEI funding should be preferential to FGSs given previous social inequalities.

## **Conclusion**

The study clearly illustrates a variety of reasons why students leave HEI's prior to graduating. The affordability to attend a HEI remains a key reason amongst students for not completing their studies. Having to deal with other problems such as a lack of academic support and the lack of career guidance exacerbate the situation students are often faced with. The pressure of being a first generation student is an additional burden which this study shows was often detrimental to the student. Solutions to this problem are multi-layered with no immediate solutions. Broad generic, vague and ineffective attempts to provide a solution tend to lack the specificity of the issue and fail to penetrate the core of the problem. This study also confirms that students who drop out of HEIs do so because of a multiplicity of challenges experienced. The challenges of attrition and strategies of retention must be looked at contextually, where each challenge is evaluated based on an institution's individual circumstances. Commitment from both the student and the institution is paramount if the various strategies proposed can be effectively implemented.

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