

‘You cannot talk about us without us’: A Voice from Student Dropout

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Abstract

Student dropout from higher education continues to bedevil the success of the South African higher education system despite its gains made in transforming this important sector from the ills of apartheid. The common discourses on student dropout in South Africa relates to the socio-economic and the academic under-preparedness of students accessing higher education. A continued focus on these dominant discourses may lead to a state of stagnation as have been seen in the decade long tracking of the efficiency of the higher education system in terms of student throughput. Hence a deeper understanding of the issues is needed.

In this paper I argue that there are confounding factors and breaking point factors associated with student dropout, and that we need to pay more attention to the confounding factors to understand their implications for students and institutions. Through a tracer study of students who dropped out, I present students’ account of their reasons for their drop out of university with a view to showing how these factors could be substantial factors beyond the finance and academic performance factors that are commonly shown to affect student throughput.

Keywords: student dropout, student isolation, stereotyping, academic performance, institutional conflicts

Introduction

The issue of student dropout in higher education is varied and complex, and forms part of the on-going engagement relating to student access, throughput,

retention and attrition. The complexity associated with student dropout can be seen through the on-going attempts across the globe to understand and address this concern (Tinto 2012; Abu-Oda 2015; Ahmet 2000; Neal 2009; Kronick & Hargis 1998), but with little success. Several complex models have been developed through research and insight, (for example, Tinto Student Integration Model) showing various dimensions to student dropout, and further confirming the complexity. This issue has gained prominence within the South African higher education system in the last decade, largely in response to higher education transformation reviews. The alarming rate (Ramrathan 2013: 210) at which students' dropout from university is a cause for concern, especially as it has the potential to reverse the transformational gains of opening access to previously denied population groups. Attempts have been made to prevent student dropout in South African higher education institutions (HEIs). These interventions include student-centered learning, identifying students at risk, providing academic support to students and defining graduate attributes in teaching and learning, to try and avert the situation; but the problem still persists. The persistent low throughput rate in HEIs (Ramrathan 2013:201) still warrants further investigation. This paper, then, argues for a refocus of our gaze into the issues related to student dropout. I argue that, through the lens of students, deeper issues - such as stereotyping; traditional belief systems and institutional conflicts if not attended to - can lead to students making a decision to drop out of the university. Similar vantage points of entry into student dropout have been previously studied. For example, Dreyer (2010) explored student dropout from distance education programmes. He found that the non-completion of students was similar to those of distance higher education institutions worldwide, and that time was a principal factor.

In a study by Munsaka (2009), on causes of dropout at the level of high school education, the results revealed that dropping out of school is a complex phenomenon that is influenced by numerous factors including the socio-economic status of parents, family composition and the level of parents' education. Furthermore, he argues that we need to understand the learners in context, suggesting that contextual issues rather than academic issues are the contributing factors to student dropout. In this paper I attempt to present an analysis of students' understanding of student dropout with a view to illuminating the contextual issues that they face as they engage in higher education studies. A purposive sampling of Bachelor of Education

students registered at a higher education institution in KwaZulu-Natal formed the sample group through which the students' voices on student dropout were captured.

Literature

A number of studies have been conducted on the issue of student retention and dropout. Students who are at risk encounter a number of challenges ranging from personal, transport, poor academic background, curriculum demands; negative student experiences, study skills management, entry requirements, and labeling, to mention a few (Munsaka 2009; Ogude Kilfoil & Du Plessis 2012; Ramrathan 2013; Tinto 1975; Tinto 1993). Tinto (2012) cited the importance of identifying students who are likely to drop out. He argues that if institutions are unable to retain students, this represents a failure of those institutions to serve society and the personal development of individuals. A study (Bracey 2006) on dropout rates revealed that fifty percent of students in minority groups never walk across the stage for a diploma, and one third of all student cohort dropout alludes to this kind of failure, especially towards underprivileged and minority groupings.

These kinds of statistics attest to the fact that there is still much that needs to be done with regard to student dropout. Reporting on statistics and interventions without student contextual understanding is, perhaps, why the on-going research on student dropout remains complex with no noticeable changes over the years. For example, one study on student dropout revealed that students drop out because they do not take advantage of the help networks open to them (Gordon 2002), suggesting that while interventions are available to students, they are not accessing them. This finding points to another area of exploration in student dropout, that of student identity and its influence on student dropout, to which this paper contributes.

Gender difference, as a student identity issue, has been explored in student dropout studies. Gordon (2002), for example, revealed that more male students drop out as compared to female students. Ozturk *et al.* (2009) study revealed that social loneliness was most prevalent in boys compared to girls, and this contributed to more males dropping out of higher education studies. Hence students' construction of their identity and what their needs are is another important vantage point of entry into the student dropout

debates. Tinto (1975) alludes to this in his student integration model where he argues that students need social integration into the university environment for greater retention possibilities.

Methodology

This paper draws from data produced through a tracer study methodology, tracing the students who have dropped out from the Bachelor of Education programme offered at a higher education institution in KwaZulu-Natal. Students who had dropped out from the Bachelor of Education qualification over a period of five years were the targeted population to explore reasons for dropping out of university. Tracer studies are useful in establishing pathways and reasons for taking such pathways of individuals who have experienced a particular phenomenon (Ramrathan *et al.* 2009). In this case, the Bachelor of Education students who have left a particular higher education institution over the last five years formed the tracer study group. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews from a sample of ten students who dropped out in the BEd programme in the last five years. As statistical generalisation was not the intention of this paper, a small sample that would provide deep qualitative responses to the reasons for dropout was sought. Several studies have been conducted on student dropout, most of which have reported in broad terms the socio-political and economic reasons for the phenomenon. Some studies have reported on the academic concerns about university study preparedness concerns that are linked to student dropout. While the overt reasons for dropping out of university seem clear within the South African context, there are some studies that point to a more intricate analysis of confounding factors and breaking point-factors (Ramrathan 2013). In order to access a deeper analysis of student dropout, the most appropriate approach would be through a qualitative study of students who have dropped out. Hence the tracer study design provided that opportunity. The convenience sampling of 10 students who have dropped out formed a suitable sample size to provide a deeper, richer account of why students drop out from university, from a student perspective.

The School of Education provided the researcher with the names of the students, after permission was sought from the ethical clearance unit. The limitations of tracer studies are the challenges of making contact with those

who have left the institution. As such, the first ten students who were reachable formed the sample for the data production. Four female and six male students were traced, one of whom did not want to participate in the study. Interviews were done over the phone. Critical theory and an interpretivist stance to understanding the data were used in the analysis process.

Findings Emerging from the Data

Findings through the tracer study revealed that finance was the predominant reason for dropping out of the university. Most of the sampled participants experienced repeated failure, which caused them to drop out of the university. These two generic reasons for student drop out have been accounted for in the vast number of literature on student dropout. It is expected if students fail repeatedly, they cannot continue without seeking institutional permission to continue. The repeated failure of modules also has a financial impact on students as they would be required to pay for their repeated attempts, exacerbating their financial burdens. However, with deeper engagement with the participants, the reasons for failure or dropout from university extend beyond finance and academic failures. Participants revealed that deeper issues of isolation such as stereotyping (STR), traditional belief systems (TBS) and institutional conflict (IC) are some of the confounding reasons for dropping out of university, with repeated failures and finances being the breaking point factors leading to departure from the university.

Figure 1 captures the relationship between the confounding factors and breaking point factors in student dropout from university.

I will use each of the confounding factors to develop a narrative to explore how students felt about being singled out which resulted in their decisions to dropout. One respondent could not be interviewed because he did not want to cooperate and after several attempt were made, he was eliminated from the sample.

Stereotyping of Students by Others

Stereotyping appears in two forms. The first is related to stereotyping of the individual based on physical appearance. *Respondent 4 left the institution in 2013. He said other students developed a stereotype against him because he*

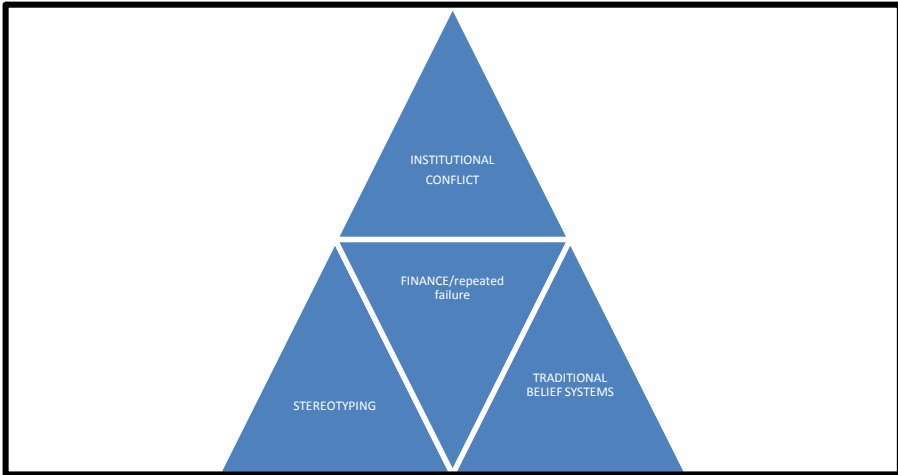


Figure 1: Factors of Student dropout

had tattoos and other students thought that he was a criminal. He also said he was discriminated against to the extent that during group work, no one was keen to have him in their group; it was only when they had failed to get enough members, that other students invited him to their group. He said that failing certain courses became an excuse for him to withdraw from university. This isolation by fellow students precipitated the onset of dropping out of university. This student struggled with the isolation as a result of stereotyping by fellow students to the extent that it affected his academic performance and he used his academic failure and financial hardship as reasons for dropping out, while the actual cause was due to isolation from his being stereotyped in a particular way that was neither inviting nor inclusive.

The second form of stereotyping appears in the form of academic ability. The majority of the participants interviewed indicated that they dropped out because of repeated failure of mandatory modules. In most programmes offered at the selected higher education institution, there are mandatory modules that students need to pass in order to progress further in their study programme. Students interviewed indicated that they could not progress further with their study because that could not pass the mandatory

modules despite repeating them. They believed that they were prevented from progressing by the institution based on the belief that they are not capable of passing the mandatory modules.

Students said they dropped out because they could not pass all their courses in first year of study. They could not proceed to the next level because they failed a mandatory course repeatedly. Some of them said that they came back to repeat the failed courses and they failed again. Furthermore, they said that they could not continue because they failed the same course for the third and fourth time and finances could not allow them to repeat continuously.

The reasons for failing mandatory modules were not explored in depth, but is certainly an area worthy of exploration. Several assertions could be made, but need to be explored in greater detail. For example, why were such modules regarded as mandatory? Would labelling a module as mandatory give an impression of a gate-keeper's process or does this mandatory module have competences that are necessary for further engagement in the study programme? By labelling a module as mandatory, what levels of fear are instilled in students and what additional stress is placed on students for further progression? These are some of the concerns raised on mandatory modules which need further exploration. Nevertheless, the impact of the labelling of modules suggests that students are stereotyped academically based on their ability whether or not they are able to pass a mandatory module. Those that repeatedly fail a mandatory module are stereotyped as not being academically able to progress through the rest of the study programme, pointing to lack of students' competence without exploring the effects of labelling a module as mandatory or the need for such mandatory modules. The secondary effects of repeating mandatory modules is added financial burden which students could not afford, hence their departure from university and thus were considered as a student dropout.

Institutional Conflict and its Effects on Students

Once students are admitted into a programme and university, they have certain expectations of being a student. They rely on information presented to

them in the various forms of communication, including that of oral communications with university staff, both administrative and academic. When students do not get what they were promised or that the process of attending to their request is met with unfavourable attitudes and actions of staff, students lose interest in their study programme to the extent that it contributes to their decision to drop out from university.

Respondent 9, for example, had a Diploma qualification and Trade Test from a Further Education and Training (FET) College. He said he dropped out because he had found a job. He started looking for a job when he received empty promises from the School of Education. He was told that he will be credited for some of the courses he had already done after registration, and that did not happen. He said there was a lot of duplication in what he studied at FTE College.

In this situation, the conflict within the institution is a potential area of exploration leading to a deeper understanding of students' needs, students' experiences with university staff and of programme quality to promote student retention. In the case of respondent 9, two contributory factors led to the student making a decision to drop out of university. The first is the unprofessional conduct relating to credit accumulation from past studies resulting in him not getting the promised credit. The implication (which points to the second issue) is that he was repeating the things that he had done in his past study programme. He felt that he was wasting his time and therefore sought work focusing on earning rather than wasting money by taking modules that he has already previously studied. The qualifications framework with the South African higher education system allows for credit transfer, but recognition of these credits obtained in past studies has become a major obstacle for the students. The resultant duplication of learning may have consequences, some of which may lead to students dropping out of university, as in the case with respondent 9.

Traditional Belief Systems

University contexts within South Africa have largely been influenced by Western ideology. The recognition of traditional belief in the life of students

is increasingly penetrating institutional practices. Students do, however, feel that their traditional beliefs are marginalised within the context of higher education. Those that are directly affected by their traditional belief systems sometimes sacrifice their academic study programme to attend to issues, practices, concerns and illness related to African indigenous belief systems.

One interesting case was that of a student whose performance was pleasing but still dropped out of university in her final year of study. The reason for her dropout is not quite clear, but had to do with traditional sickness. This was the information communicated by her mother.

This is a classic example of the fact that some students have good financial and academic performance but nevertheless they dropout, suggesting that personal issues do have a substantial influence in student dropout. This student had an illness related to metaphysical issues and was impacting on her university study. This factor is not unique among black South Africans. One student (Respondent 4) said that *the University need to take the issue of indigenous knowledge seriously because he also had challenges that he thought needed traditional healers*. Some Universities (like University of KwaZulu- Natal) do have the services of a traditional healer (Isangoma) at a clinic, which assists students who have problems, which require indigenous and traditional understanding of student sicknesses and challenges.

Is there sufficient space with the curriculum of study programmes for students to attend to their traditional belief systems that impact their lives? How can students exit their study programme and re-enter it when they have addressed and resolved their issues related to their traditional indigenous belief systems? These are some deep questions that need exploration within the higher education framework. Students feel compelled to pay less attention to the academic programme when faced with traditional issues, leading to possible failure or even dropout from university, as in the case of one of the respondents who dropped out of university in her final year of study. Academic ability was not the reason for dropping out. Her ability to negotiate between the demands of higher education and that of her traditional belief systems was the determining factor of her continuance of study. Was she able to suspend her academic study to pay sufficient attention to her traditional belief issues and then re-enter her academic programme at a later stage? Are students aware of this possibility of suspension of study programme with the possibility of re-entering and continuing from where they left off? Deeper insight into this possibility or potential spaces of

conflict with the student needs to be elicited to understand how higher education institutions can support the students faced with traditional indigenous issues.

Discussion

One way of understanding the complex lives of students and university education is to see the problem of student dropout in terms of dispositions. These dispositions that relate to the reasons for dropout, as gleaned from the participants, can be categorised into the following dispositions as identified by Garland (1994);

Situational dispositions: Problems arise from students' own life circumstances, such as changing employment situation or family obligations. (Respondent 1).

Dispositional dispositions: Personal problems that influence the students' persistent behavior such as motivation. (Respondent 7).

Institutional disposition: Difficulties that student encounter with the institution such as lack of support services. (Respondent 9).

Epistemological disposition: Difficulties faced by students in relation to course content. (Respondents 2, 3, 4, 6 8).

The four dispositions are from the perspective of students' account of their experiences while in higher education. While the epistemological disposition as expressed by students may suggest that students are struggling with the course content, the deeper exploration suggests that this is the manifestation of the compounding factors that students face in their higher education studies whilst at university. Students fail their modules, and some repeatedly, which ultimately lead them into financial difficulties in sustaining their studies. Some students are blocked from continuing because of repeated failures by course rules and regulations and therefore drop out from university. A lack of interest due to prior study of subject content resulting from the institution not giving them due recognition for credit transfers, or

time away from lectures to attend to personal issues like indigenous traditional matters that affect their well-being also results in dropout. Hence the face of student drop out from university studies is academic failures. Some would continue to argue that the students cannot cope with the academic demands of the study programme, but the students' accounts suggest otherwise.

The other three dispositions, therefore form the basis for academic departures from university. Each of the other dispositions has their own set of complexities and are largely situational in nature. Distractions are part of one's life and the extent of the distraction may have severe implications for continuance of study. For example, the stereotyping of students based on the physical characteristics could be considered a dispositional disposition. In the case of the student who had tattoos; why and how this individual made the decision to cover parts of his body with tattoos is not considered. Perhaps low morale and lack of motivation in that individual prompted him to cover parts of his body with tattoos and this gave him symbolic hope to develop his motivational levels. But in attending to one disposition, this study has faced another disposition, that of being alienated from peer engagement in the study programme, a disposition that he was not able to bear, resulting in him dropping out of university.

Situational dispositions amongst students relate to the personal circumstances that the student may find him or herself in. As in the case of the student who had to deal with traditional matters, her academic studies did not matter as much as her need to attend to her personal traditional issues. Her decision to drop out of university in her last year of study attests to the gravity of the situational disposition in the life of this student. Hence, the effects on a students' study programme is dependent upon the nature and extent of the situational disposition in which a student finds him/herself.

Institutional dispositions are a serious concern amongst students. Considering the struggle that students experience in accessing higher education and having achieved access success, the further problems that they face within the institution are at times so severe that students decide to depart from higher education. The nurturing atmosphere that is so prevalent in the recruitment drive is almost lost once the student is registered. Students are sometimes left to the mercy of the institution's personnel, sometimes making the students believe that their rights are a privilege, as in the case of the

respondent who was not given course credits despite being promised these credits at the point of recruitment.

Drawing from the above discussion it can be seen that student voices on student dropout can bring a different gaze beyond that of the breaking point factors such as finance and academic performance in the discourse of student dropout. Delving into the complexities of students' lives reveals a hidden discourse of various dispositions that sometimes accumulate leading to students dropping out of university.

Conclusion

This paper sought to transcend the dominant discourse of student dropout by exploring this phenomenon through the lens of students who dropped out of university. Through a tracer study methodology, the ten respondents, when probed through a telephonic semi-structured interview process, revealed more complex discourses that contributed to a final decision of dropping out of university. These complex discourses form the confounding factors in student dropout, manifesting through the breaking point factors of student finance and academic performance. Hence this paper argues for a more detailed exploration of these confounding factors with a view to influencing how higher education institutions could address these dispositions, allowing for students to complete their study programmes, even if it is beyond the minimum study period for a study programme.

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