

Editorial: Student Access, Throughput and Dropout in Higher Education in South Africa: A New Take on an Old Challenge

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This special issue of *Alternation* attempts to bring to the fore a nuanced exploration of student access, throughput, academic support and dropout to a fine-grained analysis of this deeply concerning state of affairs within higher education. Low student throughput and high dropout rates is a worldwide concern with several theoretical explanations and interventions, but with little success in improvement. Perhaps it is now an opportune moment to review what we know about student access, throughput and dropout from undergraduate to postgraduate level and to re-visit this concern through other lenses. This volume of *Alternation* aims to do just that. Through the range of papers, various vantage points of exploration are presented to open up spaces for re-imaging possibilities in addressing this serious concern of higher education efficiency.

The volume commences with a contextualizing article by **Labby Ramrathan and Daisy Pillay** presenting the status of the gains and challenges of student access into university studies, the current blame based socio-economic and socio-political discourses that have influenced the debates on student throughput, academic support and student dropout. The contextualizing article then argues for a re-imaging of the current blame based discourse to a more humanizing discourse. This argument is developed through an institutional case study of a higher education institution in KwaZulu-Natal¹, thereby pointing to a need for more nuanced exploration

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within institutions to understand the complexities and multilayered realities experienced by students across the board, that impact on their studies within higher education. This advocates a student centred discourse that offers fresh insights into these complexities which the remainder of the papers in this volume attest to achieving.

Ted Sommerville and **Veena Singaram's** paper presents a longitudinal study on the assessment performance of medical students across their five-year curriculum. The study examined a host of factors, largely within the ambit of biographical characteristics that impacted on the assessment scores of students. Using a mixed methods approach, they delineate four statistically significant factors from their initial set of nine, across the five years, that wield independent influence on students' academic performance. These four influences comprise of students matric marks, the high school they attended, their previous higher education experience and the sequence of tests across the years.

In contrast, to Somerville and Singaram's approach, **Subethra Pather** and **Rajendra Pillay** adopt a different approach focusing on the first year student experience and academic performance of one particular student from a study comprising of eight students. Their paper provides a deep grained analysis of how the student mediates both the academic and social structures evident at the case study university. In addition, the authors unpack the role of habitus and social capital in the manner in which the student experiences university life and his academic performance.

Dudu Mzindle's paper on the voice of student dropout, argues from the standpoint that the persisting discourses on the socio-economic and the academic under-preparedness of students accessing higher education is inadequate to address the continued challenge of student dropout in HE. She argues for the need to deeply examine what she terms the 'confounding factors and breaking point factors' that impact on student dropout and that greater attention must be given to the confounding factors in light of both students and institutions. She uses a tracer study methodology accessing students who have dropped out, to present the participants' reasons for their drop out with a specific focus of highlighting how these additional factors (and not only those of finance and academic performance) have merit for the dropout discourse.

Padhma Moodley and **Jesika Singh**, similar to Dudu, fashion their paper in the climate of the throughput and dropout rates discourses that has

been prevailing in SA higher education context. They likewise, reject a quantitative analysis in preference of a qualitative study which accesses students who have dropped out from HEIs. Their participants share through the instrument of interviews, their perceptions of how dropping out of university could have been prevented citing their reasons for dropping out: incorrect career choice, inadequate academic support and insufficient funding. Their study illuminates the need for departments to recognise poor performance and introduce academic support programmes for modules with a high failure rate.

Samu Mgonezulu and Labby Ramrathan's paper locates itself within the realm of academic monitoring and support in the undergraduate programme. They focus on academic support which has been provided to 'at risk' students. They access the experiences of 'at risk' students within the STAR programme at the school of teacher education in the case study institution using interviews and focus group discussions. Their findings prompt them to argue that process factors in the underperformance of students need to be examined in depth for their influence on student outcomes.

Zilungile Sosibo locates her paper in academic literacy (AL), an area which speaks to the discourse on students gaining epistemological access to HE crafting her article using scaffolding theory. She begins her argument by acknowledging the expansive literature on second-language students' poor academic literacy (AL) and its link to poor through put and dropout. She maintains that there is a need to share intervention strategies which enhance students AL amongst higher education institutions. Her paper thus reports on the challenges related to AL which students in both different disciplines and at various levels of study face at one case study University of Technology. She then further presents the intervention strategies that AL lecturers and those teaching literacy-related subjects employ in promoting students' learning.

Nicholas Munro and Michael Samuel present an entirely innovative gaze amongst the deficit grand narratives of failure and dropout amongst African students in higher education. In their paper on African students who excel in the higher education environment in one particular institution, they report on a study that examined exceptional academic achievement in African students. Utilising creative data generation methods of auto-photography and photo-elicitation, they select 3 participants for this paper to explain how these

participants excelled in an academic environment and the process of ‘who they were becoming’. The value of Munro and Samuel’s paper lie in the theorization of the concepts of ‘retro[pro]spectivity’ and ‘co-regulation of learning’ in explaining exceptional academic achievement among African students.

Whilst much of the focus on dropout and associated poor academic outcomes have focused on the undergraduate sector in higher education, **Bheki Khoza** and **Sadhana Manik** fashion a paper which has resonance with postgraduate throughput and dropout in a higher education landscape that promotes equity of access at the possible expense of equity of outcomes for postgraduate research students. Using the lens of student experiences, they hone in on the digital knowledge and skills challenges facing postgraduate students for whom research is a key component and digital competence is essential. Their study highlights the notion of ‘digital technology refugees’ in PG higher education and it reports that students required various forms of digital support across all their years of study.

Keeping with the thread of postgraduate study is **Suriamurthee Maistry** who zooms in on the doctoral degree as a requirement for local university teaching. He locates his paper in the arena of mid- and late-career academics who are under duress to complete a PhD, but opt to change focus from their discipline to researching their own teaching practice, by undertaking a PhD in Education. He thus chooses to examine how these students with little or no formal education qualification or with limited formal knowledge of educational theory and methods negotiate their experience at PhD level. In addition, he uses self-study methodology to critically reflect on his own practice as a PhD supervisor of this unique cohort. His paper is salient in illuminating some of the particular challenges which novice education PhD students encounter in making the cross-over to Education from their specialist disciplines.

The final article by **Sadhana Manik** provides an overview of some of the discussions related to selected discourses within student access and success in SA higher education, by undertaking a review of the recent local literature with the aim of highlighting the progress made towards understanding these phenomena and the gaps in knowledge that still require more research for greater understanding in the pursuit of achieving student success in South African public higher education institutions.

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