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Students and Institutional Preparedness for Educational Encounters: Views of the Margin

Kehdinga George Fomunyam

Abstract

Higher education in South Africa has been plagued by a number of challenges, which different universities have been struggling to handle for the past two decades. Primarily amongst these challenges are student and institutional preparedness for education encounters. The level of preparedness by both the student and the institution determines the kind of educational encounters they have. This chapter explores this phenomenon within a university in South Africa to understand the level of student and institutional preparedness and articulate a pathway for better educational encounters. Designed as a qualitative case study, data was generated using semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires. The data generated was coded and categorised into themes. These themes were social and cultural capital, cognitive skills, educational architecture and institutional culture. These themes revealed that students lack sufficient social and cultural capital needed for knowledge construction in teaching and learning. They also lacked basic cognitive skills required to decipher the knowledge codes within the disciplines which they belong. The findings also reveal that universities lacked a functional institutional culture, which makes for better educational encounters. The educational architecture was also seen as dysfunctional and disabling as many students found it difficult to navigate their way through it.

Keywords: students, universities, preparedness, educational encounters, support

1. Introduction

The twenty-first-century higher education landscape in the world in general and in South Africa in particular is a very complex one, plagued by a variety of challenges and opportunities. The level of preparedness by both students and the university determines the kind of educational encounters students will have and how such encounters will shape their educational journeys. Students' preparedness for higher education is seen as one of the main factors affecting first-year attrition or study success. Cloete [1] argues that "from assessments of the South African system by the Harvard panel on Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative –South Africa, the World Bank and the Centre for Higher Education Trust, South African higher education system could be characterised as low participation with high attrition rates, with insufficient capacity for adequate skills production" (p. 3). This points to the challenges the South African higher education landscape is facing and

how these have persisted for over 20 years after the end of apartheid. Fomunyan [2] concurs with this by arguing that about 40 percent of students who enter higher education institutions in South Africa end up dropping out and only about 15 percent complete their degree in the minimum completion time. Though the reasons for this vary from context to context, Lemmens [3] argues that the major reason can be attributed to the level of student and institutional preparedness. How prepared both the student and the institution are for the educational encounter is likely to determine the level of student performance in the classroom and the ultimate completion of the programmes.

Monnapula-Mapesela [4] argues that in South Africa, student under-preparedness has become a dominant learning-related cause of the poor performance patterns in higher education. He further states that “surprisingly and of concern, is the fact that still no single university in South Africa, inclusive of those that admit only the cream of the crop, can safely deny students’ unpreparedness, high dropout rates, poor throughput, low success rates despite innumerable academic support structures in place, as amongst some of the challenges that confront the country’s higher education” ([4], p. 256). Student under-preparedness is therefore a widely recognised issue in South African higher education though the reasons for under-preparedness vary from student to student. The contextual nature of student preparedness in South Africa can be understood as influenced to a greater extent by the political history of the country so that its subtle effects are still being felt within all sectors of education. The fact also remains that the level of social, political and economic capital possessed by different students, which in itself is the result of the socio-economic status of their families, has actually played a major role in the kind of learners being produced and ultimately applying to universities.

Institutional preparedness, as stated above, must also be considered. Manik [5], Cloete [1] and Fomunyan [2] argue that most South African institutions are still grappling with transformation, making them strategically underprepared for the quality of students being ushered into the higher education system. Most universities in South Africa by and large are still being influenced by the culture inherited from apartheid; they fail to attract and retain the best academics and researchers who find more remunerative work elsewhere. Within higher education there is the enormous differentiation between institutions—the abiding differences between historically white universities and historically black universities, and the under-resourced nature of some of these universities makes it increasingly difficult for underprepared students to succeed. Therefore, South African higher education appears caught between the disabling legacies of the past and the structural pressures of the present. The danger is that these twin forces become excuses for inaction—to throw up one’s hands and point fingers at apartheid or neoliberalism.

Students’ access, preparedness and success are widely debated issues in South African higher education institutions, student under-preparedness being articulated as the dominant learning-related cause of the poor performance patterns in higher education, largely blamed on systemic faults of the school sector (Du [6]). This level of under-preparedness magnified the widening of access to the larger population, particularly to non-first-language English-speaking students. This is often done with the expectation that universities will intensify support for students in a number of ways, including financial, accommodation, food, health, academic and career advising, life and academic skills and literacies, counselling and performance monitoring, and through referrals to various support programmes [7]. The under-preparedness of the university goes a long way to magnify the under-preparedness of students, thereby creating the perfect ground for poor educational encounters and tensions within the classroom.

The Council on Higher Education [7] stated that for many South African universities, the dawn of democracy resulted in policy-driven higher numbers of previously disadvantaged students in university studies. In spite of this apparent improvement, enough was not done to ensure the continuous access and subsequent success of these students. Universities are expected to set measures in place which would address the imbalances of the past and ensure that those with limited social, political, economic and cultural capital are empowered enough to co-construct knowledge effectively within the higher education landscape. Roman and Dison [8] arguing in this light point out that universities need to address the “general lack of academic preparedness, multilingual needs in English-medium settings, large class sizes and inadequate curriculum design” (p. 30). The challenge for higher education institutions is not only dealing with the level of preparedness and increasing the diversity of the student population but also involves the provision of quality education. The Council on Higher Education [9] confirms the under-preparedness of universities in South Africa to deal with structural challenges affecting students when it argued that “student experiences posit that the existing cohort of students is not necessarily underprepared, and that failure to succeed lies more in systemic weaknesses in higher education” (p. 10). Therefore, there is a need for universities to fully understand students’ thinking to deliver educational practices that will allow them to achieve their full potential while bearing in mind that learning takes place on the basis of social activity.

The Department of Higher Education and Training [10] posits that universities in South Africa are supposed to provide citizens with high-level skills for the labour market, be centres of research excellence, since they are (or are supposed to be) the dominant producers of new knowledge, or find new applications for existing knowledge in order to keep South Africa independent, inventive and able to stave off intellectual subordination to developed, post-industrial countries. The white paper concludes that universities are also supposed to be responsible for social justice and for creating equity and the equitable conditions to reverse the damaging effects of apartheid. The inability of most universities in South Africa as pointed out by Chetty and Pather [11] has resulted in poor throughput rates because institutions are not adequately prepared for its mission or purpose. Student and institutional preparedness must therefore be understood as key drivers of throughput and educational encounters.

Educational encounters within the classroom powered by both student and institutional preparedness determine how students perform in the university. The first-year experience is critical in influencing high dropout rates and low throughput rates. To tackle this challenge, institutions must address and enhance their academic capabilities as universities, and specifically academics, and rigorously conceptualise and design high-quality academic development programmes to support academics and students. However, to understand this complex challenge of student and institutional preparedness, it is critical to look at marginalised students who possess what is needed to succeed within the institution. By exploring their views and those of the academics teaching them, a concrete understanding is what is needed regarding the level of preparedness by both the students and the institution and what can be done to enhance such preparedness to ensure better educational encounters in the classroom. This description of the current situation in South Africa provides the background for this study.

2. Methodological proclivities

This research was designed and conducted as a qualitative case study. Fomunyan [12] defines qualitative research as research which seeks not only depth but also the

complexity of the phenomenon in an attempt to unearth both the particularities and peculiarities (“the what” and “the how”) of the phenomenon so as to enhance understanding or develop a theory. In this case, qualitative research sought to explore student and institutional preparedness for educational engagements and encounters. Since the focus of the research was seeking or exploring student and institutional preparedness, the case study approach was engaged. Elman, Gerring and Mahoney [13] argue that case study research explores complex problems whose core is difficult to find or whose root cause is difficult to explain. Explaining such a complex problem, therefore, would require focus on that particular issue and investigation using several instruments or exploring it from different angles. The case study approach offered the opportunity of studying student and institutional preparedness for educational encounters. The case here is the university and the unit of exploration is students and staff. The university under study is a university of technology in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. The high student dropout and low-throughput rates within the university are a direct result of student and institutional preparedness. Most of the students within the university possibly failed to gain admission into other universities before settling for the University of Technology. To generate data from these participants, two approaches were used: the open-ended questionnaire and the interview. The open-ended questionnaire was administered to students, and the interview was done with lecturers. The open-ended questionnaire was administered after 5 weeks of lectures, while the interview was done at the end of the semester creating a space of about 7 weeks in between the interviews. The open-ended questionnaires were administered to students to explore their level of preparedness. Fomunyam [14] argues that open-ended questionnaires consist of open-ended questions delivered to respondents with the aim of generating a particular kind of information. The open-ended questionnaire gives the participants the opportunity of expressing themselves and providing all the details they think are important. The questions are not limiting in any way. The open-ended questionnaire was administered to first-year students. About 624 first year students from 3 faculties completed the questionnaire. The lecturer’s interviews were conducted with the six lecturers (two each from the three faculties) teaching the first-year students. Each interview lasted for 1 hour with the researcher using tape recorders to capture the interview. The researcher obtained permission from the university to conduct the research, and every participant (both the students and the lecturers) understood their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time. The lecturers signed a consent form before the interview was conducted, while the students understood that by completing the questionnaire, they were by default giving consent; those who were uncomfortable participating simply had to refuse filling the questionnaire or fail to return it. The data generated from these two sources were coded and categorised into themes. These themes speak to students and institutional preparedness for educational encounters.

3. Findings

The data generated from both the interviews and the open-ended questionnaires were coded and categorised into themes. Two themes, social and cultural capitals and cognitive skills, emerged with regard to student preparedness, while another two themes emerged with regard to institutional preparedness, educational architecture and institutional culture.

3.1 Social and cultural capitals

The level of social and cultural capitals a student possesses determines how ready he or she is for educational encounters in the classroom. Since educational encounters

are built on the basis of this capital, the more a student possesses, the more prepared or ready the student is for educational encounters. One of the participants pointed out that “most of the students lack the experiences and know-how needed to co-construct knowledge in the classroom. This makes teaching and learning extremely difficult because the teaching has to be the all-knowing in the classroom while students become passive recipients waiting to be filled”. Another participant added that “this place is not easy. I was lost the first time I came here I felt like going back home. I was so lost. Cause imagine from primary to high school I have never been in a class with someone who is not Xhosa. And when especially I was interested in other races, whites and, you see I was so I was completely lost. I didn’t know what to do, like I just watched them take my bags and I was like yoh I’m not going to cope in this institution. I’ve never seen it like this, many white and Indian people in my entire life [laughing]. So it was a difficult experience for me. And again had to communicate in English, of which I wasn’t used at all speaking English”. The feeling of awe in the student puts him in a compromising position in the classroom. Students can barely find their way around understanding the dynamics of the institution and talk less of coming to terms with the racial diversity of the nation amongst other things. These begin to hamper the educational encounters students have in the classroom. The idea of under-preparedness was further supported by another participant who pointed out that “In high school, my teachers would explain some of the things in school when we don’t understand what they are saying in English. But here we are taught using English. At times I don’t understand half of the things the lecturer is saying. I have to go back and ask my friends. It is too much”. Another participant further added that “You know; it’s very hard to understand some of this Indian or white people when they speak. And then you speak and don’t know some of the words in English. You just stop there of say it in Zulu and they don’t understand what you are saying. This has really affected my studies (sighs). I failed four of my test”. The lack of social and cultural capitals amongst the students determines the kind of educational encounters they have in the classroom. The lack of capital inhibits their development of commensurate agency which is needed for critical engagement in higher education. The level of student preparedness for educational encounters is a direct function of the capital he or she possesses, and the encounters in turn determine the kind of performance they produce and whether or not they eventually graduate.

3.2 Cognitive skills

Skills are vital for every educational endeavour, and it becomes particularly critical in the higher education arena where students are expected to perform a variety of tasks using several cognitive skills. To succeed in the higher education landscape especially for students with low levels of social and cultural capitals, there is a need for a variety of skills like note taking, writing, critical thinking, adaptability, creativity, listening, time management, networking, leadership, presentation and resilience, amongst others. Speaking about the importance of this, one of the participants pointed out that “Some of this students don’t even know how to listen in class or take notes. They are distracted for more than half of the class. Some show of very late and hardly ever understand the lesson. At the end when they fail an assignment and you ask them to redo it, some of them just give up or simply want to give up. This makes the chances of their success very slim”. Another participant added that “the lectures are too tiring and some of the lecturers just leave you to do all the work. Managing everything is very difficult. I don’t have any friends, and I am yet to understand life in this city which very different from where I come from. People here don’t care. At times I wake up when the bus for school has left already and I have to wait for the next one which is in two hours maybe and misses my classes. I need help”.

The lack of basic cognitive skills with which to navigate through teaching and learning determines the kind of educational encounters students have in the classroom. Some students lack the skills necessary to make constructive engagements not only with the content being discussed in the class but also outside the classroom. Speaking on this one of the participants pointed out that “the teachers are so fast in ways that I can’t hear most of what they are saying. At times I would get notes from my friends and at times they would refused to give or tell me they didn’t write. Lecturers want us to do presentations, use computers and power points and stuff. I am still trying to learn those things”. A variety of cognitive skills are needed to successfully navigate the higher education landscape. The lack of vital cognitive skills is amongst the reasons for poor educational encounters which make for success in academics.

3.3 Educational architecture

The data also revealed that not only are students ill-prepared for educational encounters, but the institution is ill-prepared as well. The data reveal that the university was littered with poor educational architecture which did little to ensure that students got the best educational experience. Such educational architecture informed the kind of educational encounters students had in the class. One of the participants pointed out that “as a lecturer you have about 120 students in a class which is probably supposed to conductively accommodate 80. It is impossible to engage such a large number of students for a lecture spanning 90 minutes. At the end, the lecturer and one of two students become participants in the knowledge construction process while the others remain passive listeners”. Another participant added that “institutional structures are very unfriendly. They just expect you to know everything. They forget you doing this for the first time. You stand in queue for more than two hours just to get a form signed or to pick a group or submit an assignment and stuff. it’s very annoying”. The educational architecture within the universities determines the kind of experiences students have in the class and the kind of engagements and encounters that ensue. Another participant added that “the classes are not properly ventilated. We almost suffocate in class when it’s hot because we are always more than the class can contain and some students are always seating on the floor”. Another participant yet added that “the classes and overcrowded and yet there are no microphones in the classroom. The lecturer has to shout and some students are always fidgeting because they trying to ask their friends what is being said. These distractions impact the kind of educational encounters happening in the classroom”. If students cannot hear or participate in the knowledge construction process happening in the classroom, then they cannot own the knowledge constructed, meaning no meaningful learning actually takes place. Another participant further added that “the university lack basic educational or teaching and learning facilities like projectors in the classrooms, white boards or responsive boards, enough computers in student’s LANs, enough lecturers and administrative staff to handle the student population. For example, some posts have been vacant in this institution for a year, some two years and some even three, all of which are vital positions requiring key personal to hold them”. The educational architecture of the institution points to the level of preparedness by the institution for educational encounters in the classroom. Poor planning or preparation leads to poor encounters which hamper throughput rates and cause wanton failure and increases dropout rates.

3.4 Institutional culture

Institutional culture influences everything happening in and around the university campus from the way lecturers teach to the way students are welcomed

and treated and the way they are made to feel within the university. Institutional culture is at the epicentre of higher education and would directly and indirectly influence the educational encounters students have in the classroom as well as determine whether or not the university is ready to receive the diverse student body, which represents the diversity within the nation. Speaking about the culture of the institution and the role it plays in the education of the students, one of the participants pointed out that “the university has a culture of throwing the students into the proverbial deep end to either swim or sink. This is done in a variety of ways, from hiring mentors who themselves lack enough social capital to assist their peers in their educational endeavours, to providing support which addresses the kind of help the university think students need rather than provided targeted support to students when they need them”. Another participant pointed out that “there is general culture of resistance to change around the university. The old staff who have been there for years won’t give the new and younger staff members the opportunity to innovate. They lord it over them and stifle them to stay within the culture of under-productiveness and conformity to the statuesque”. Though institutional culture cannot be seen, it is experienced all over the university campus. Universities of technology all over South Africa have the culture of focusing more on technical know-how and pattern development rather than research focused on better ways of teaching and learning. This makes teaching and learning unresponsive to the new demands in teaching and learning and the diversity evident in the classroom. Confirming this, one of the participants pointed out that “the way some lecturers were teaching five or ten years ago, is still the same way they are teaching now. There is no difference in their philosophy and the pedagogy. They see all students as the same”. Another added that “universities of technologies are often seen as the place for the not so bright who have been rejected by other mainstream universities. As such the problem is the quality of student and no matter what you do, most of them will still fail and drop out. This cultural and capital deficiency approach to viewing students already creates a block in the teaching and learning process because the lecturer can never give their best”. Institutional culture therefore presents a significant challenge to the educational encounters happening within the university and by and large shapes the direction of such encounters and how students experience such encounters.

4. Discussion

From the findings it is clear that social and cultural capitals, cognitive skills, educational architecture and institutional culture are important factors influencing student and institutional preparedness for educational encounters. Harker, Mahar and Wilkes [15] argue that when students shift or switch from one social field to another (leaving home or local community to the university as is the case with most of the students), they may experience difficulties transferring capitals between fields. This was the case for some of the participants of this study as they strived to develop more capital to tap into in the knowledge construction process. Since capital is the basis of knowledge construction, their ability to construct knowledge is hampered by their inability to develop or possess the right kind of capital. Tzanakis [16] argues that cultural capital is especially transferred by family and education, be it formal or informal, and may be institutionalised or engaged with nominally like group meetings, mentoring programmes, extended programmes and foundation programmes, amongst others. Capital is the primary cause for educational encounters and relative positions within the educational ladder. Levina and Arriaga [17] add that cultural capital can exist or be incorporated in three

forms, the embodied, the objectified and the institutionalised states, of which the objectified and the institutionalised indicate the possession of cultural artefacts and educational credentials. The embodied state is critical to an individual because it involves an ability to decipher the “cultural codes” which are composed of material cultural objects, for example, writings, paintings and monuments. Preparedness for educational encounters for both the student and the institution is hampered by capital. The kind of capital required for the students to construct knowledge is missing, and the cultural codes around the university which makes for its culture and architecture also present a challenge in itself for students and the drive for better educational encounters in the classroom.

Bourdieu [18] expounds on the interconnectedness of culture, architecture and capital in the educational experience by arguing that learning is sponsored by “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is as principles of generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor” (p. 72). This means that there are a variety of forces at play influencing educational encounters and institutions and the powers that must take action and responsibility to ensure that these forces are dealt with. The multifaceted nature of the forces at play determine preparedness and how successful or unsuccessful educational encounters are for the students attending the university. The more capital and cognitive skills the student possesses, the more they are predisposed to succeed. Within the context of the findings, it is clear that both the educational architecture and institutional culture of the higher education institutions in South Africa are ill-prepared for educational encounters with students. The right kind of architecture and culture would improve the quality of educational encounters and make for better student performance.

Manik [5] argues that both students and universities are often underprepared for higher education, and universities often need to do more to assist underprepared students as well as transform themselves to become better-prepared institutions so as to foster better educational encounters. Lewin and Mayoyo [19] add to this by arguing there are several factors influencing access and success at university, and these are complex and multidimensional. To them, student preparedness is influenced by schooling background, socio-economic status, race and gender and the social context of learning, student and staff ratio, pedagogy, language and literacy. With the participants articulating these as issues influencing or affecting their educational experience, institutions need to take these factors into consideration if throughput rates must increase, and the educational architecture and the institutional culture must be revisited to pave way for new and better facilities which would ensure that the right kind of educational encounters are garnered. Heymann and Carolissen [20] confirm this when they argue that students must be understood as having “real challenges” and in need of institutional support, but they caution that a patronising attitude should be avoided in classifying students according to categories which will lead to labelling: being “pathologised as problematic” for their specific needs. Sosibo and Katiya [21] further buttress this when they argue that institutions need to provide specialised support especially the acquisition of skills and recognise that students may be struggling with critical skills in English such as speaking, reading and writing. This means that universities need to support students to develop cognitive skills as a way of giving them a wide variety of tools with which to navigate their way in the higher education sector. They continue that

“under-preparedness refers to the state of students who are in general not academically ready, especially in areas such as reading and writing, and particularly in the language of learning and teaching, which in most cases is English” (p. 274). And this under-preparedness of both students and the university can be improved by considering two key factors which Prinsloo [22] names as timing and appropriateness. In order to be able to provide timeliness and appropriate academic support, institutions need to be able to identify students who need such support at an early stage so as to track and monitor their progress and to evaluate the effectiveness of support systems and programmes offered.

5. Conclusion

Student and institutional preparedness for educational encounters is a product of a variety of issues. How these issues are addressed will determine whether or not a student’s educational experience improves. From the findings, it is clear that social and cultural capitals, cognitive skills, educational architecture and institutional culture are amongst some of the drivers of educational encounters for students in the classroom. The effects of such encounters are heavily dependent on the levels of preparedness and the drivers that determine such a level. Institutions must therefore recognise the fact that not only are students underprepared but universities themselves are becoming increasingly underprepared as access increases and throughput rates are low. With this in mind, this chapter makes four key recommendations for better educational encounters in the classroom. Firstly, universities need to recognise their capacity and work to improve such capacity in the wake of massification as a way of improving throughput rates especially because they would continuously attract students of similar background or with similar challenges. Secondly, educational encounters are a direct product of work between both the university and students, and specialised support should be tailored and provided to students who need them as a way of empowering them for an improved educational experience. Thirdly, students must strive to improve themselves and garner more capital as they navigate their way through the higher education landscape, for capital is the very currency of educational encounters, and such encounters determine whether or not students succeed and when students succeed. Finally, higher-education stakeholders need to theorise more deeply the ability of higher education institutions to accommodate a certain number of students as well as the ability of certain students to navigate their way through the higher education landscape as a mechanism to ensure that both the institution and the students coming to such institutions are ready for educational encounters in the classroom. This kind of educational encounters is more likely to produce meaningful transformation in both the student and the institution as well as improve throughput rates and guarantee public returns for South Africa’s investment in higher education.

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