

## Perspectives on Contributory Factors to Student Success in Higher Education at a University in South Africa



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### ABSTRACT

Over time, many students that enroll in programmes at the university end up dropping out without completing their studies. This trend is worrisome as it points to a defeat of the objectives of entering and graduating from the university. Therefore, this study explored the perspectives of contributory factors to student success in higher education at a South African University. The study addressed one objective namely, participants' understanding of factors that contribute to student success in higher education. To address this objective, a qualitative case study design located in the interpretive paradigm was employed to generate data through a semi-structured interview from twelve participants purposively selected from undergraduate and postgraduate students. Of these twelve participants, four represented First Time Entering (FTEN) students, four (4) second year and third year respectively and four (4) postgraduate students across two faculties, namely the Faculty of Education and School Development and Faculty of Economics and Information Technology Systems, Komani campus, Walter Sisulu University, South Africa. The data was analysed thematically. The results revealed the following themes, namely, no student left behind, the need for an enabling environment, students as partners, data-informed practices, assessment for sustainability, and a multi-dimensional approach for success. With these findings, the study concludes that addressing the needs of all students collectively, creating an enabling environment, involving students as partners, the use of data-informed practices, and assessment for sustainability among others all impact students' success in higher education. Thus, as part of the contribution to the body of knowledge, these findings highlight factors that contribute to the debate on students' success in higher education.

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### INTRODUCTION

Student success does not happen by accident. It is the product of a deliberate, structured, systematic, and coordinated course of action involving many stakeholders.<sup>1</sup> Evidence from research has revealed

<sup>1</sup> Vincent Tinto, "Tinto's South Africa Lectures," *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 2, no. 2 (December 2014), 5-28. <https://doi.org/10.14426/jsaa.v2i2.66>.

that among the challenges faced by higher education is the voice of students, and as such, this is the last group that is informed about higher education, choices, outcomes, and processes.<sup>2</sup> It is time for higher education institutions to understand how students think, behave and learn.<sup>3</sup> Some of the many pre-university experiences that students have necessitated involve a different approach when it comes to academic preparation, attitudes toward university readiness, family and peer support, and motivation to learn.

Most of these aforementioned experiences are documented as systemic and entrenched in the South African education system as a result of the apartheid education system. The vast majority of students entering university today come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, are first-generation students and belong to a racial group that is at high risk of dropping out. The past disparities in South African education systems have never been more visible than in the COVID-19 era.<sup>4</sup>

In the context of student success, the difference between students with high-end computers and those who do not have enough to eat has created inequity in success. Hence, given the high rate of students who drop out, retention continues to be a prevalent issue within higher learning.

Although a high percentage of student dropouts may reflect the institution's failure to promote students' progress or respond to their needs, universities have spent a significant amount of money and other resources to improve students' chances of success.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, universities have found themselves in a bind in terms of delivery of teaching and student support services, with potentially disastrous consequences for their students' learning and post-graduation prospects as a result of the implementation of infection control measures such as social distancing and movement and social interaction restrictions.<sup>6</sup>

Besides, the outbreak of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has exacerbated the challenges of students' success in relation to the quality of instruction in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs, hereafter) due to the challenges associated with transitioning to online teaching and learning as well as assessment.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, this has created avenues for scholars to reflect on the scholarship of students' success through an in-depth exploration of multiple aspects of the current teaching and learning policy, academic student support practices, and current structures that exist to support students' success.<sup>8</sup>

Several studies have concluded that psychological factors are critical to success in the university setting at South African HEIs, which include but are not limited to domestic violence,

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<sup>2</sup> Marian Mahat and Leo Goedegebuure, "Strategic Positioning in Higher Education: Reshaping Perspectives," 2016, 223–44, <https://doi.org/10.1108/S2056-37522016000002011>.

<sup>3</sup> Ellen Hazelkorn, Hamish Coates, and Alexander C. McCormick, *Research Handbook on Quality, Performance and Accountability in Higher Education*, *Research Handbook on Quality, Performance and Accountability in Higher Education*, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781785369759>; George D. Kuh, *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter*, *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter*, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Francois Cleophas, "Covid-19 Pandemic Highlights Challenges of Online Teaching and Learning," *The Mail & Guardian*, 2020, <https://mg.co.za/education/2020-08-06-covid-19-pandemic-highlights-challenges-of-online-teaching-and-learning/>.

<sup>5</sup> Mahat and Goedegebuure, "Strategic Positioning in Higher Education: Reshaping Perspectives."

<sup>6</sup> Rille Raaper and Chris Brown, "The Covid-19 Pandemic and the Dissolution of the University Campus: Implications for Student Support Practice," *Journal of Professional Capital and Community* 5, no. 3–4 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPC-06-2020-0032>.

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Bovill, "Student–Staff Partnerships in Learning and Teaching: An Overview of Current Practice and Discourse," *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 43, no. 4 (October 2, 2019): 385–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03098265.2019.1660628>.

<sup>8</sup> Catherine Bovill and C.J. Bulley, "A Model of Active Student Participation in Curriculum Design: Exploring Desirability and Possibility," in *Improving Student Learning (ISL) 18: Global Theories and Local Practices: Institutional, Disciplinary and Cultural Variations.*, ed. Rust C (Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Educational Development, 2011), 176–88.

intimate partner violence (IPV), rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, research on first-year university students has revealed that, regardless of their home or educational background, a sense of confusion, loss, and fear was significantly heightened at the start of the pandemic.<sup>10</sup> The fact that the higher education sector is confronted with the reality of having to immediately change its delivery model with fewer resources while ensuring that students who are suddenly located remotely can still participate in university education, is a monumental task.<sup>11</sup>

As a result, these brief overviews of the contextual challenges related to student success highlight the critical need for research on realistic strategies to support students' success. Accordingly, this paper investigated the ideal activities that could be used to ensure student success, student interpretations of student success, and who should be involved in the university's student success agenda. As such, one goal is addressed: participants' understanding of factors that contribute to student success in higher education.

To address this objective, the paper, located in the interpretive paradigm employed a qualitative case study designed to explore undergraduate and postgraduate students' perspectives on factors that contribute to students' success. This article presents a review of related literature on classic frameworks for Student-Institutional Engagements.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *A Brief Overview of Classic Frameworks For Student-Institutional Engagements*

Students' contribution to higher education quality procedures has progressed from providing feedback to guide internal practices to governments introducing policy documents to facilitate students' inclusion in different aspects of institutional governance.<sup>12</sup> However, the authors furthermore state that It is not always clear what the impact of students' involvement in the broader scheme of things is as there is not a lot of evidence to show what the impact of students' contributions is on a broader scale. As argued by some scholars; teachers, researchers, parents, and adults have spoken too presumptuously on behalf of young people, whose perspectives they often misunderstand and, in many contexts, disregard. There are some scholars as well, like Rudduck, Chaplin and Wallace, who have urged caution but such warnings go unnoticed or unheeded.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, it is an undeniable fact that students' views are sought more often and more urgently than ever before, "usually via teacher-generated questionnaires, increasingly (and ironically) administered by fellow students. What both have in common is fear and the attendant desire to control. Students' voice is sought primarily through insistent imperatives of accountability rather than enduring commitments to the democratic agency. However, some contexts, have valued student perceptions to capacitate and alert them of the shortcomings of their current performance and possible ways of addressing the deficiencies.

Spady proposed and described one of the classic theoretical models that focused on university dropouts, which considered academic and social systems as co-existing in a university.<sup>14</sup> He viewed the concept of social integration as an integral part of ensuring student success, despite the fact that he

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<sup>9</sup> Sadhana Manik, "As a Person You Need Help Every Now and Then: Accessing Students Support Needs in a Higher Education Environment," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 29, no. 3 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.20853/29-3-491>.

<sup>10</sup> Manik, "As a Person You Need Help Every Now and Then: Accessing Students Support Needs in a Higher Education Environment."

<sup>11</sup> David Carless, "Feedback Loops and the Longer-Term: Towards Feedback Spirals," *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 44, no. 5 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2018.1531108>.

<sup>12</sup> Alison Cook-Sather, Catherine Bovill, and Peter Felten, *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching: A Guide for Faculty* (John Wiley and Sons, 2014), <https://www.wiley.com/en-us/Engaging+Students+as+Partners+in+Learning+and+Teaching%3A+A+Guide+for+Faculty-p-9781118836064>.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Rudduck, Roland Chaplain, and Gwen Wallace, "Reviewing the Conditions of Learning in School.," in *School Improvement: What Can Pupils Tell Us?*, ed. Jean Rudduck, Roland Chaplain, and Gwen Wallace (Routledge, 1996), 170–76.

<sup>14</sup> William G. Spady, "Dropouts from Higher Education: An Interdisciplinary Review and Synthesis," *Interchange* 1, no. 1 (April 1970): 64–85, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02214313>.

was addressing the university dropout challenge. However, after Spady's research work on higher-level university dropouts, he began to consider the student-institution interaction as one of the issues involved in the problem.

His work was concerned with the various definitions of the concept of dropout and discusses two operational definitions: (1) "anyone leaving a college at which he is registered" and (2) "those who never received a degree from any college", suggesting that (1) was much easier to handle than (2). However, after Spady's model was made public, the lack of interaction between students and institutions was identified and considered one of the issues involved in the student success agenda.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the model of student-institution integration was extended and further discussed by Tinto and later partly refined and used to explain the process of dropout by extension student success, and even to anticipate such events. The model continues to be the subject of numerous studies and analyses, some extensions and refinements, as well as some criticisms. Tinto's model is still widely used as a reference model for addressing dropouts, providing educational institutions with a way of organizing and directing both the study and the analysis of the problem, with the goal of solving it.

The model also discusses at length the need for a multi-dimensional approach to addressing the fracture system that does not balance the student voice and institutional strategic direction as part of empowering students and providing them with the opportunity to give feedback.<sup>16</sup>

It is such studies that have led the researcher to consider the most recent framework to structure the current study. The Students as Agents Theoretical framework is interconnected with students' voices but is more focused on giving students responsibility and ownership of their learning.<sup>17</sup>

### ***The Study in Context: Walter Sisulu University (WSU), Komani Campus***

WSU has four campuses, each led by a Campus Rector, and operates under a divisional governance and management system. Mthatha, Butterworth, Buffalo City, and Komani are the four campuses, each with multiple delivery sites. The delivery locations are as follows: Cambridge Street, Buffalo City Stadium, Heritage Building, College Street, Chiselhurst Site, Potsdam Site, Ibika Site in Butterworth and in Mthatha Nelson Mandela Drive, Zamukulungisa Heights, and Nkululekweni. Whittlesea and Grey Street as Komani sites.

WSU has a student population of around 27,000 and a staff component of approximately 2,000. Spanning over 1,000 km in the province of the Eastern Cape, WSU is ideally positioned to deliver a wide range of educational and development opportunities.

As one of the South African universities, WSU is located in one of the underdeveloped provinces mainly catering to students from quintile 1-3 schools. Resultantly, the institution still experiences challenges in terms of student dropout and throughput rates. While these issues appear to be widespread and systemic in the South African context, to some degree they are indicative of societal challenges.<sup>18</sup> The position at WSU is further compromised by the socio-economic and secondary educational backgrounds of most of the students. The National Benchmark Tests (NBTs) demonstrated consistently for three years (2017 – 2019) that most WSU students (over 95%) have low competencies in academic literacies and that they will struggle with language and academic writing skills during their studies. While advances are being made in the retention and successful preservation of students in the higher education sector in general, it is also an axiom that the education sector still faces many challenges with issues of student retention and success.<sup>19</sup>

The Komani Campus does not have university-owned residences; the campus relies on Privately Owned Student Accommodation (POSA) and is largely rural, with a population of less than

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<sup>15</sup> Bovill, "Student-Staff Partnerships in Learning and Teaching: An Overview of Current Practice and Discourse."

<sup>16</sup> Carless, "Feedback Loops and the Longer-Term: Towards Feedback Spirals," 705-714.

<sup>17</sup> Manik, "As a Person You Need Help Every Now and Then: Accessing Students Support Needs in a Higher Education Environment."

<sup>18</sup> Bovill, "Student-Staff Partnerships in Learning and Teaching: An Overview of Current Practice and Discourse."

<sup>19</sup> Bovill and Bulley, "A Model of Active Student Participation in Curriculum Design: Exploring Desirability and Possibility."

3000 students, most of whom are first-generation and predominantly black students with over 90% of them eligible for National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). The campus has at least two faculties and has the smallest student population at WSU to date. The campus is the only one that has managed to establish a Student Success Committee.

### ***Student Success Committee: The case of the Komani campus***

In 2020 the campus established the Student Success Committee (SSC), with the aim of responding to some challenges affecting student success at the campus, but also to provide strategic direction on the activities aimed at assisting students. An integrated academic and social development approach was adopted headed by the dean of one of the faculties. However, because the committee was still in its infant stage, the focus was mainly on orientation planning and largely on First Time Entering students (FTENS).

However, the overall agenda of providing intervention to students of the campus to ensure the attainment of both campus and institutional objectives was still on the periphery of the committee imperatives. Among the objectives of the establishment of the committee was the pursuit of programmes that will fit into the broader academic project of the Komani Campus by creating a conducive environment for academic pursuit through the development of an appropriate academic culture for its students, placing students at the centre of all its activities to ensure a lifelong experience of success in every aspect of their student lives, further extending into their world of work.<sup>20</sup>

The committee viewed and continues to view the true measure of student success as how well students are prepared to achieve their current and future academic, personal, and professional goals through the development of knowledge, a sense of responsibility and self-reliance, and a connection to the college and the wider community.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, the committee acknowledges that students and administrators do not always agree on what success looks like and this disconnect can cause malalignment on how and what support is provided to students in the way they need to be supported.<sup>22</sup> While staff, both academic and academic support, tend to center student success around degree completion,<sup>23</sup> students often want much more than a degree.<sup>24</sup> As a result, students define success as a holistic sense of fulfillment rather than academic excellence and progress toward graduation.

According to Layton, students want to be strong candidates for careers in their chosen fields, emerge as competent and trustworthy adults, have no regrets about their time, and make their mentors and family members proud.<sup>25</sup> Student retention research demonstrates the importance of creating a more supportive mainstream environment for students rather than through access programs, emphasizing the importance of a focus on student engagement.<sup>26</sup>

It is against this background that the committee adopted a framework that is informed by the fact that solutions to the challenges facing student success must also be understood as multi-dimensional.<sup>27</sup> Consistently, the committee comprised of representatives from the students'

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<sup>20</sup> Carless, "Feedback Loops and the Longer-Term: Towards Feedback Spirals."

<sup>21</sup> Bovill and Bulley, "A Model of Active Student Participation in Curriculum Design: Exploring Desirability and Possibility."

<sup>22</sup> Makala Qonda, "Peer-Assisted Learning Programme: Supporting Students in High-Risk Subjects at the Mechanical Engineering Department at Walter Sisulu University," *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 5, no. 2 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v5i2.2700>.

<sup>23</sup> Bovill and Bulley, "A Model of Active Student Participation in Curriculum Design: Exploring Desirability and Possibility."

<sup>24</sup> Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten, *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching: A Guide for Faculty*.

<sup>25</sup> Delia M. Layton, "The Role of the Tutorial System in Enabling Students' Academic Success.," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 29 (2015): 198-210.

<sup>26</sup> Moeketsi Letseka et al., *Student Retention and Graduate Destinations: Higher Education and Labour Market Access and Success* (HRSC Press, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> Carless, "Feedback Loops and the Longer-Term: Towards Feedback Spirals." 705-714.

representative council, academic developers, support staff, and academics including heads of departments and deans of faculties.

### **Conceptualizing The Inclusion of Students' Voice for Student Success: Students as Change Agents Conceptual Model**

The study adopted the Students as Change Agents Model as a useful model to conceptualize the inclusion of students' voices for student success in higher education. The model was developed by Dunne et.al, for students as change agents (Figure 1).<sup>28</sup> The model identifies four elements that underpin it: students as evaluators of their higher education experience, students as decision-makers, students as partners - co-creators, and students as change agents.<sup>29</sup> According to the model, the change agent concept involves students taking responsibility for engaging in evidence-informed change, promoting reflection and review at the departmental and institutional levels.<sup>30</sup>

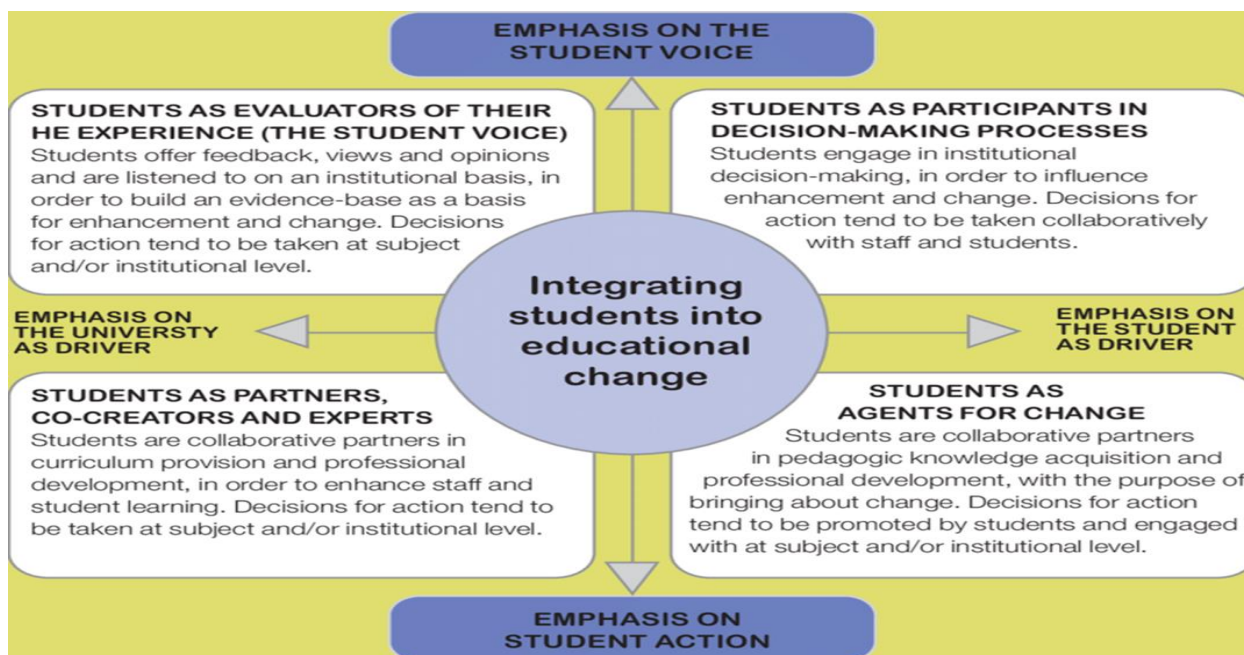


Figure 1. *Students as Change Agents Model by Dunne, et.al.,*

Students as evaluators of their own educational experience offer feedback and views and students engage in institutional opinions and are listened to in decision-making to influence institutional basis, in order to build an enhancement and change.<sup>31</sup> This might also include processes through which the institution and external bodies listen to the student's voice to drive change.<sup>32</sup> In the context of student success, decisions for evidence-based activities become a basis for action and are taken collaboratively by all those involved in the student success project mainly for enhancement and change in the learning and teaching academic enterprise. The decisions are meant to be actioned as the students evaluate and share their inputs; actions taken, whether at the department level or institutional level. However, Dunne et.al., argue that there is a distinction between institutions that listen to students' voices and institutions that allow students to generate their own ideas, problem-solving solutions, and change.<sup>33</sup> This causation also proposes that student voice, as it is positioned as important to quality

<sup>28</sup> Elisabeth Dunne et al., *Students as Change Agents: New Ways of Engaging with Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* (Exeter: ESCalate, University of Exeter, 2011), <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/14767>.

<sup>29</sup> Dunne et al. *Students as Change Agents: New Ways of Engaging with Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*.

<sup>30</sup> Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten, *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching: A Guide for Faculty*.

<sup>31</sup> Layton, "The Role of the Tutorial System in Enabling Students' Academic Success."

<sup>32</sup> Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten, *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching: A Guide for Faculty*.

<sup>33</sup> Dunne et al., *Students as Change Agents: New Ways of Engaging with Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*.

enhancement, should not be limited to a "consumer panel", which treats the university as a business and the student as a customer rather than co-partners in the system evaluation.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, the component of students as participants in the model puts emphasis on the institutional commitment to work towards greater student involvement in changes to teaching, learning, and institutional development.<sup>35</sup> The model, in relation to student success, would imply involvement which is evident through well-established participation discussion in the committee throughout the entire institutional system in its most participatory form.<sup>36</sup>

The concept of students as partners also puts emphasis on active student engagement as co-creators and experts in their own spaces.<sup>37</sup> This includes student involvement in institutional development, such as student training staff in the use of new technologies, designing curricula and resources, negotiating assessment processes and practices, writing examination questions, and assigning homework, as well as redesigning module provision and delivery and producing induction material for new student cohorts.<sup>38</sup>

Lastly, students as change agents necessitate a shift from institution-driven agendas and activities to student-driven agendas and activities. Students become actively involved in the institution's and their subject areas' change processes, frequently taking on leadership roles. Students as change agents imply that they are collaborative partners in the acquisition of pedagogical knowledge and professional development with the goal of bringing about change.<sup>39</sup> As a result, students tend to promote and engage in action decisions. Involving students in governance structures also provides opportunities to contribute to quality in the form of transformation of the South African higher education system, which, occurs through democratic human engagement.

Students as partners: Students are encouraged to think of themselves as active and productive participants in a collaborative learning venture rather than passive consumers. Students must be willing and able to challenge established ways of thinking and doing in order to participate in this venture.<sup>40</sup>

According to Mudehwe-Gonhovi, Galloway, and Moyo, contributing to knowledge creation through dialogic pedagogy is a liberating experience for students.<sup>41</sup> According to Dunne et al., student-led research on the learning and teaching environment fosters valuable employability skills and contributes significantly to institutional engagement. It creates a space for students and faculty to collaborate on shared educational goals.<sup>42</sup> This component of the model proposes that students, along with academic and professional staff, become active participants with valuable expertise to contribute to shaping learning, teaching, assessment, governance, and the work of the University.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study, located in the interpretive paradigm, employed a qualitative case study design. The sole aim of the interpretive paradigm in an inquiry is to understand the views of participants with the purpose of interpreting the same.<sup>43</sup> Thus, the researchers sought to understand participants' views on

<sup>34</sup> Kuh, *High-Impact Educ. Pract. What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, Why They Matter*.

<sup>35</sup> Cook-Sather et al., *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching: A Guide for Faculty*.

<sup>36</sup> Kuh, *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*; Layton, "The role of the tutorial system in enabling students' academic success."

<sup>37</sup> Layton, "The Role of the Tutorial System in Enabling Students' Academic Success."

<sup>38</sup> Manik, "As a Person You Need Help Every Now and Then: Accessing Students Support Needs in a Higher Education Environment."

<sup>39</sup> Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten, *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching: A Guide for Faculty*.

<sup>40</sup> Leanne Coombe et al., "Students as Partners in Action: Evaluating a University-Wide Initiative," *International Journal for Students as Partners* 2, no. 2 (December 4, 2018): 85–95, <https://doi.org/10.15173/ijpsap.v2i2.3576>.

<sup>41</sup> Florence Rutendo Mudehwe-Gonhovi, Greta Galloway, and Georges Pius Moyo, "Dialogic Pedagogical Innovation: Creating Liberating Learning Practices for First Year University Students," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 32, no. 5 (October 2018): 140–57, <https://doi.org/10.20853/32-5-2111>.

<sup>42</sup> Dunne et al., *Students as Change Agents: New Ways of Engaging with Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Kivunja and Ahmed Bawa Kuyini, "Understanding and Applying Research Paradigms in Educational Contexts," *International Journal of Higher Education* 6, no. 5 (September 5, 2017): 26, <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v6n5p26>.

factors that contribute to students' success whilst studying. The researchers also used an explanatory research design. Subsequently, a phenomenological approach for this study was used to establish a wider social justice framework that sought to privilege the voices of these students.<sup>44</sup> This was critical to adopt as phenomenological research operates within an interpretive paradigm and "seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it."<sup>45</sup>

Participants in the study were selected through purposive sampling. According to Padgett, purposive sampling refers to the thoughtful selection of specific individuals, events, or settings because they are in a position to provide the required information that cannot be obtained elsewhere and through any means.<sup>46</sup> "The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth" as declared by Patton.<sup>47</sup>

Twelve (12) participants were selected from undergraduate and postgraduate students. Four (4) of the total participants represents FTEN students four (4) from second- and third-year level and four (4), postgraduate students, across two faculties, that is, the Faculty of Education and School Improvement and the Faculty of Economics and Information Systems, WSU Komani Campus. For equitable gender representation, two (2) males and (2) females in each category of the participants were selected for the study. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as a method since this is considered compatible with the phenomenological approach, allowing participants to talk about a subject in their own way using their own words. For example, what are some of the challenges faced by FTENs? What is your understanding of student success? How can the student learning experience be improved at the university? Why is the student voice important in the higher education space? Considering the lockdown restrictions level as some of the limitations of the study, Microsoft Teams was used to carry out the interviews. To obtain clarity and understanding, probing questions were asked. The correctness, validity, and reliability of the information were crucial to the study as there were recommendations to be developed at the end of the study which could be used as solutions to the challenges identified.

### Data collection instruments

In this study, focus groups were utilized as a research technique that collects data through group interaction and one of the main advantages of this technique is that participant interaction assists to weed out false or extreme views, thus providing a quality control mechanism. The value of every research is determined by the credibility of its findings. Hence, credibility in this study was achieved through triangulation. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as a method since this is considered compatible with the phenomenological approach, allowing participants to talk about a subject in their own way using their own words.

### Data analysis

Data generated from the focus group discussions were analysed through a thematic approach.<sup>48</sup> This technique of data analysis entails six stages, namely, familiarizing with the data, then generating initial codes, thereafter themes are searched for, reviewed, defined, and named as well as producing the report as outlined by Nowell et al.<sup>49</sup> The above-outlined stages were followed strictly in analysing the data

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<sup>44</sup> Hazelkorn, Coates, and McCormick, *Research Handbook on Quality, Performance and Accountability in Higher Education*.

<sup>45</sup> Layton, "The Role of the Tutorial System in Enabling Students' Academic Success."

<sup>46</sup> Deborah Padgett, "Choosing the Right Qualitative Approach(ES)," in *Qualitative and Mixed Methods in Public Health* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2014), 29–46, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483384511.N2>.

<sup>47</sup> Michael Quinn Patton, "Two Decades of Developments in Qualitative Inquiry," *Qualitative Social Work* 1, no. 3 (September 15, 2002): 261–83, 264. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325002001003636>.

<sup>48</sup> Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (January 2006): 77–101, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>.

<sup>49</sup> Lorelli S. Nowell et al., "Thematic Analysis," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16, no. 1 (December 2, 2017): 160940691773384, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>.

generated through focus group discussions from both undergraduate and postgraduate students that participated in the study.

## **FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

The study revealed at least six themes that have a bearing on the success of student success in higher education, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. The themes include no student left behind, the need for an enabling environment, students as partners, data-informed practices, assessment for sustainability and a multi-dimensional approach to success.

### **Theme 1: No Student left Behind: The Whole Student and All Students**

Among the issues raised by the participants was a need to not only address the whole student but all students, at all levels. This implied that there is a need to scaffold students' success support approach that will respond to both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

*"The Committee needs to also look at how it finds our issues challenging us (postgraduate students) and find ways of responding to those" (P5)*

*"The focus seems to only be on new students, ever since I got here it has been about FTENs, FTENs and as such I got support when I was doing my first year but after that, I don't remember a programme that supported me...." (P8)*

*"There is an assumption that when a student is in level two, that student is mature enough or does not need academic nor social support, I think the committee should look into that as well as part of defining what student success should be or look like" (P7)*

Findings from the analyses of the comments above reveal the need for support for students. However, the only support provided seems to focus only on undergraduates, leaving postgraduate students to fend for themselves. This is evident in the comment of P8. But also worthy of note is that even that support is only provided for undergraduates at the first-time entry level as occasioned in the comments of P8 and P7.

### **Theme 2: The need for an enabling learning environment**

The participants in the study outline the need for an enabling learning university environment. This they expressed in their various comments below.

*"I think when you get into lecture halls there must be that feeling that you are now in an institution of higher learning .."(P9)*

*"When there are resources that are meant to help you learn you get motivated, even a dissent chair, room library motivates one to succeed... (P10)*

*"Activities that enable us to learn and grow intellectually defines student success for me.... Or is an enabler for one to succeed academically "(P12)*

*Some of our lectures still treat us like we are high school kids and are judgmental of what we do, from the way we dress up to our relationships... (P4)*

From the excerpts above, it is indicative that the learning environment plays a key role in students' success as stressed across all comments. The learning environment may contribute to the success of students as can be seen. During the pandemic, students who prefer to study in the library or work in groups need to consider other study methods to cater to their needs to improve their motivation.

### **Theme 3: Students As Partners**

The feeling that the university does not allow students to have a voice was a matter that participants raised sharply.

*“The university needs to recognize that we are now adults, and our voice matters and some of the decisions that are taken are inconsiderate of our background, challenges, and financial status.”*

This poses concern as academic student support activities that the university has are meant to help the student's ability to progress through a learning experience and help them with socioemotional, academic, and financial factors, among others. Considering that these issues affected them, they should be given enough time to inform the university as to how this can be done. The principles that inform this suggestion are underpinned in student-staff interaction, cooperation between students, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task, high expectations of students, and lastly, respect for diverse talents and ways of learning.<sup>50</sup>

Some participants, especially continuing and postgraduate participants expressed that engaging students as partners is a powerful idea if the institution is transforming the learning experiences of students. The theory recognizes that the focus is on when institutions go beyond listening to the student's voice and engage students as co-learners, co-researchers, co-inquirers, co-developers, and co-designers. The partnership is a specific form of student engagement with very high levels of active student participation.

### **Theme 4: Data-Informed Practices FTENs**

FTENs group expressed that data-informed practice can assist the student success agenda. Amongst undergraduate students from the groups, key themes identified included fear and disconnection, a sense of a new geography of campus life as an issue that affects them, and someone indicating the level of computer knowledge.

*“we were given laptops, I have never touched a laptop and lockdown regulation don't allow certain things – how do I do practical using computer....”(P4)*

Guidelines typically include attendance, grading, assignments, advising, tutoring, and classroom behavior policies and procedures. Admissions policies, required assessments, and program completion requirements should all be outlined in institutional guidelines.

*I came from X, I don't know anyone here and my field is excellent but was only attended to after 2 months....” (P3)*

*I am cluster phobic only my roommate is aware and understands, my residence does not accommodate such issues ..”(P9)*

*We struggle during registration, it took me five months to adjust to this environment because no clear guidelines were stipulated ... remember I was not part of the orientation because I was still waiting for my admission letter (P2)*

*I was part of orientation, but the time allocated to ask the question was not enough, I needed to know more... (P5)”*

From the analyses of the comments above, it is glaring that there is no clear data-informed policy on how to attend to students' needs. This is evident in how students' concerns are attended to.

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<sup>50</sup> Hazelkorn, Coates, and McCormick, *Research Handbook on Quality, Performance and Accountability in Higher Education*.

For instance, the comment from P3 highlights the extent of delays experienced before being attended to. On the other hand, the challenge encountered by P9 was not given attention due to a lack of provision. In all, the lack of clear guidelines on what is required contributed to different delays encountered by students.

Gathering data on students' academic, nonacademic, and personal characteristics and then tailoring institutional services to best serve them is a good idea. Lotkowski, Robbins, and Noeth agree and point out that if only academic factors are addressed, students may be at a higher risk of dropping out.<sup>51</sup>

### **Theme 5: Assessment for Sustainability**

Assessment and student success outline a common-sense approach that is both thoughtful and practical, and empowers teachers and students to discover, strive for and achieve their true potential. This was one of the key elements identified by participants in work-integrated learning as a key form of assessment. These they exemplified in the comments below.

*“Educational tours for some of us is very important, especially if we want to be relevant to the companies, we will be working for....” (P12)*

*“I am a postgraduate and I only got to know about what my qualification is costly about when I was doing my third year and looking for practicals.... (P8)*

*“I think if during orientation the companies that we will work for can at least be part of the program so that we can have an idea of what to expect” (P7)*

*“I was part of promoting student success all the programmes should have a practical component” (P10)*

*“Multiple choice questions all the time I don't think they assist us, other than guessing and hope you get it right ... assessment that is more practical for me personally really does it ..”(P1)*

According to the comments above, there is a need to incorporate the workplace as part of the learning environment. As a result, researching additional educational elements that cohesively link the overall academic experience may inform institutional actions that facilitate the development of supportive environments for students.

### **Theme 6: Towards a Multi-dimensional Approach for Student Success**

The participant pointed out that there is no one size fits all, and no one department can help all the students. This, they expressed in the comments below.

*“..... We are coming from different backgrounds and the cant be a one size fits all approach...” (P4)*

From the excerpt above, it is evident that the variability of background demands a multi-dimensional approach to responding to students' needs. Hence, the application of one approach will yield no result, thus, causing hindrances to student success.

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

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<sup>51</sup> Veronica A Lotkowski, Steven B Robbins, and Richard J Noeth, *The Role of Academic and Non-Academic Factors in Improving College Retention ACT POLICY REPORT* (Iowa City, IA: ACT Policy Report, 2004), [www.act.org/research/policy/index.html](http://www.act.org/research/policy/index.html).

The discussion is presented according to the six themes that emerged in the study, namely, no student left behind, the need for enabling environment, students as partners, data-informed practices, assessment for sustainability and a multi-dimensional approach for success.

### **Theme 1: No Student left Behind: The Whole Student and All Students**

The study found the need to scaffold students' success support approach that will respond to both undergraduate and postgraduate students. The results have clearly indicated that student success requires more than just knowledge or mastery of a collection of cognitive strategies. A wider and more mindful approach coordinated advising function to respond to both undergraduates and postgraduates and intentional planning reform is required. As suggested by Coombe et al., innovative practices like design thinking place the student at the center while testing and iterating into scalable, feasible, impactful interventions.<sup>52</sup> To realize the espoused student success vision, higher education institutions must find ways to collaborate with feeder schools to ensure that students have the opportunity to develop university-readiness attributes during their final few years of high school, allowing for a smooth transition and retention.

### **Theme 2: The need for an enabling learning environment**

The study also found that learning spaces play a significant role in student success and retention. This is because students face both academic and psycho-social issues that create additional barriers to their success. Therefore, both non-academic and academic factors related to student success must be constructively aligned.<sup>53</sup> As a result, participants lauded the Student Success Committee (SSC), a structured developmental education program that identifies, focuses on, and addresses students' academic and non-academic factors that can positively affect student success and retention. This means that academic success is also dependent on a set of supplementary skills and characteristics known as "academic enablers." Universities must find ways to collaborate with feeder schools to ensure that all young people can develop these skills during their final years of high school and their first year of university. Students' ability to find a sense of belonging on campus; the identification and connection of purpose to the student's course of study, skills gained, and post-college aspirations; and, finally, the question of how student success can be measured.

### **Theme 3: Students as Partners**

Furthermore, the study revealed that the current trajectory in relation to student success and retention in the higher education space suggests that students be viewed as enablers that will help in new ways of learning, knowing, and realizing self-determination in the learning and teaching space.<sup>54</sup> Student-staff interaction, cooperation between students, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task, high expectations of students, and lastly, respect for diverse talents and ways of learning.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, there is a need for the university structures to promote integrated students' success structures in order to decompose the fundamental systemic barriers to student success. As such, Covid-19 should be viewed as an opportunity for re-positioning how people have been involved and view students in the process ultimately reimagining them as change agents in the student success agenda.

According to Dunne et al., the advantage for students as partners includes increased engagement with learning and enhancement activities and transformed thinking about teaching and learning.<sup>56</sup> The student views themselves as a student success agency by developing awareness of student support activities for new students and through this, a wider academic learning community will be reached and be aware of student academic support available to them.

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<sup>52</sup> Coombe et al., "Students as Partners in Action: Evaluating a University-Wide Initiative."

<sup>53</sup> Wally Morrow, *Learning to Teach in South Africa*. (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2007).

<sup>54</sup> Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten, *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching: A Guide for Faculty*.

<sup>55</sup> Hazelkorn, Coates, and McCormick, *Research Handbook on Quality, Performance and Accountability in Higher Education*.

<sup>56</sup> Dunne et al., *Students as Change Agents: New Ways of Engaging with Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*.

The most common type of partnership is one in which students actively participate in their learning. This can only be considered a partnership if students are given a significant amount of autonomy, independence, and choice. The institution should all the while keep the student at the center of curriculum construction, teaching, and academic support services allowing the institution to serve the whole student.

#### **Theme 4: Data-Informed Practices First-Time Entering Students (FTENS)**

The study also revealed that institutions must commit to disaggregating data so that differences between subgroups can be identified and addressed appropriately with cultural or other context sensitivity. Transfer students, first-generation students, and part-time students, for example, are likely to differ. When data is not disaggregated, there is the risk of reinforcing bias or washing out differences between groups, resulting in missed opportunities. Gathering data on students' academic, nonacademic, and personal characteristics and then tailoring institutional services to best serve them. Lotkowski, Robbins, and Noeth agree and point out that if only academic factors are addressed, students may be at a higher risk of dropping out.<sup>57</sup>

#### **Theme 5: Assessment for Sustainability**

Assessments and their procedures can also have an impact on students' motivation and ability to succeed in higher education institutions, particularly for students with disabilities. For such students, the online environment can be stressful because most of their needs are not met. Learning environments, as well as on and off-campus spaces, are conducive and progressive to student success. Tinto defined student matriculation as a continuous process of interactions between a student and the academic and social systems present in a university.<sup>58</sup> While faculty-student interactions are related to students' academic goals and outcomes, student development is influenced by a variety of overlapping institutional efforts that are not related to course-related connections with faculty.<sup>59</sup> Hence, constructive alignment on assessment for sustainability is critical for student success.

#### **Theme 6: Towards a Multi-dimensional Approach for Student Success**

The study revealed that a more multi-dimensional approach in a form of a systems thinking approach needs to be adopted. Systems thinking suggests an intentional, systematic, and coordinated course of action framework for student success.<sup>60</sup> Meadows argues that a system is an interconnected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves something, suggesting that a system must consist of three components: elements, interconnections, and purpose.<sup>61</sup> In this view and context, the goal of education systems should always be at the forefront, making their students successful and considering that all stakeholders are part of the process and members of the system, both before students start their education and during their education.

This approach influences student success. This view will however mean problematizing student success philosophical view(s) and misconceptions that suggest whose responsibility student success is as well as when and where it should be done. It thus invites elements such as policies and processes, academic practices, administrative processes, and support services, to be set up in such a way that the implicit purpose of the system is to ensure efficient and effective student success.<sup>62</sup> Advancement in HE regards partnership as a relationship in which all involved are actively engaged and stand to gain

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<sup>57</sup> Lotkowski, Robbins, and Noeth, *The Role of Academic and Non-Academic Factors in Improving College Retention ACT POLICY REPORT*.

<sup>58</sup> Vincent Tinto, "Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research," *Review of Educational Research* 45, no. 1 (March 30, 1975): 89–125, <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543045001089>.

<sup>59</sup> Kuh, *High-Impact Educ. Pract. What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, Why They Matter*.

<sup>60</sup> Valerie Hall, "A Tale of Two Narratives: Student Voice—What Lies before Us?," *Oxford Review of Education* 43, no. 2 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2016.1264379>.

<sup>61</sup> Donella H. Meadows, *Thinking in Systems*, ed. Diana Wright (Sterling, VA: Earthscan, 2009), 11-16.

<sup>62</sup> Hall, "A Tale of Two Narratives: Student Voice—What Lies before Us?"

from the process of learning and working together. Subsequently suggesting that there is an equality of opportunity, as such any structural or cultural barriers that prevent collaboration are challenged and resolved.

## CONCLUSION

Regardless of how student voices are included - whether through surveys or by empowering students to be change agents - what matters is how those voices are used to impact the quality of the educational experience. Returning to the model created by Dunne, et.al., it is critical that a diverse range of student voices be represented in all four quadrants. It is also critical that each quadrant contains a diverse range of student voices. A variety of student voices shape how these large-scale interventions support and develop students. Different channels of communication with students allow more student voices to be heard. In addition to students' voices, scaled practices also require data analytics to help understand the behaviors of our students and how technology can be leveraged to create individualized support for them. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education now could start from scratch, free of the constraints imposed by cultural norms on teaching and learning. There is a continuum of student participation in curriculum design, that is protected by formal legislation but there are other opportunities for students to get involved such as pedagogical planning, students as researchers and strategic developers in a post-COVID19 education climate, beginning a review of current opportunities for students to participate in teaching and learning provision, ensuring that they are rigorous, involve closed loops, and have a significant impact on students' experiences.

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