

What Access? Lived Experiences of International Post-graduate Students from Africa Studying in a South African University

Vitallis Chikoko¹, Daisy Pillay², Kathleen J Pithouse-Morgan³, Pholoho Morojele⁴ and Inbanathan Naicker⁵

University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa, P bag X03 Ashwood 3605

E-mail: ¹<chikokov@ukzn.ac.za>, ²<Pillaygv@ukzn.ac.za>,

³<Pithousemorgan@ukzn.ac.za>, ⁴<Morojele@ukzn.ac.za>, ⁵<Naicker1@ukzn.ac.za>

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ABSTRACT This paper reports on a study that investigated lived experiences of international post-graduate students from African countries in one School of a South African university. The researchers saw a knowledge gap regarding how much the institution 'knew' about these students' experiences and sought to address the question: What can be learnt from these experiences regarding *access* to the institution? The study adopted a qualitative research approach involving two in-depth focus group interviews with the students, one at the beginning of the academic year and the other six months later. Data were analysed at two complimentary stages. First data were categorized into two, namely responses about institutional support and those about social and academic experiences. Second, data were further broken down into emerging sub-categories out of which meanings were made. Key observations from the study include that the support sectors of the university were perceived as inefficient and ineffective, academic staff performance was experienced as very good, the university's curricula were viewed as needing fine-tuning, and overall, in seeking to integrate with the institution, some students were more resilient than others. It was concluded that the apparent lack of cohesion between the sectors of the university was inhibitive to student integration. Therefore integrative and epistemological access was under threat.

INTRODUCTION

The socio-politico-economic hardships in many African countries today have, among other effects, seen an increased amount of human mobility from what the migrator perceives as less secure, less economically promising contexts to more secure and viable ones. Student mobility is one significant pillar of this trend. As the biggest economy on the African continent, South Africa has become one of the most viable destinations for students seeking to enter universities therein. In the same vein, as part of its vision, the university we studied seeks to become a leader in African scholarship. The university is proud to be academic home to many international students. It is one of the largest universities in South Africa with a student enrolment of about 45 000 students. This university has declared itself a research-led institution. Its vision

includes the advancement of African scholarship. Naturally, the bulk of such students originate from African countries hence the focus of this study. In the simplest of understandings of the term 'access', we can safely argue that the university under study provided access to international students. But drawing from our experiences of teaching post-graduate international students, we argue that *access* should entail much more than mere enrolment in an institution. A deeper meaning of *access* should encompass the extent to which a student socially and academically integrates with the institution. In this context, in order to provide such access, it is our view that an institution must *know who the international student is*. As we worked on this paper, the following incident in one South African university was reported:

.....a female exchange student ...was attacked and stabbed five times in an attempted robbery of her laptop and belongings. This incident took place in a vacant lecture room..... Some [students] who were in the vicinity, gave chase, recovered her belongings and then took her to a nearby hospital. She was treated and discharged. The student has returned home to....

Address for correspondence:
Dr. Vitallis Chikoko
University of KwaZulu-Natal,
Durban, South Africa,
P. bag X03 Ashwood 3605
Telephone: +27 31 260 2639
Fax: +27 31 260 7003
E-mail: chikokov@ukzn.ac.za

The University's Risk Management Service together with the South African Police Service is investigating the matter. The perpetrator has not yet been identified.

Security measures are in place to protect staff and students across the University's campuses. However, the University has many access points and is very much part of the wider community – this means that extra vigilance is required, particularly at night. Students are urged to take care of their belongings which include laptops, wallets and cellphones. Be aware of your surroundings and avoid working in deserted lecture theatres and unlocked offices (UKZN CR Communiqué, 5 November 2012).

The researchers commend the institution for reporting this sad incident and its apparent efforts to address such ills. We contend that many crucial student experiences, good or bad, remain unreported and that the more knowledge an institution has about its students' experiences therein, the better positioned it is likely to be to enable them to succeed. This occurrence galvanised our view that student access is much more nuanced than mere provision of a place to study. The researchers thus became convinced it was worth embarking on the journey whose objective was to interrogate how a group of international students in one University School experienced life in their institution. In seeking to contribute some knowledge to this matter, they sought to answer two critical questions: What are the lived experiences of post-graduate international students in one School of the selected university? What can we learn from these experiences regarding access to the institution?

A Brief Exploration of the Notion of Access

The concern for access and equity in education has been a worldwide preoccupation for a long time (UNESCO 1998; UNESCO 2009; Akoojee and Nkomo 2012). To illustrate further, Dhunpath and Vithal (2012: 4) report that:

The Conference of Ministers of Education of European Member States of UNESCO on Access to Higher Education held in Vienna as far back as 1967 reaffirmed the importance of higher education for economic, social, and cultural development globally, but articulated concerns about the capacity of institutions to accommodate the rapidly increasing and rapidly diversifying student population in Europe.

Dhunpath and Vithal cite another example of Ireland which in 2008 launched its 'National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2008-2013'. This plan aimed at addressing social, economic and educational issues that connived to prevent some students particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds from fully benefiting from education. Today, we see a rapidly diversifying student population in South Africa. Such diversity, in this case involving international students, brings with it the need for greater investment in developing deep and sustained understanding of these students on the part of the host institutions. But what is access?

McKenna (2012), drawing from Morrow (2007) identifies two kinds of access namely physical and epistemological access. Physical access, which in the South African context is informed by the drive to address past inequalities, concerns itself with students physically entering an institution and therefore to do with issues such as rules for admission, finances, accommodation and so on. Epistemological access (EA) is to do with access to knowledge. 'EA is learning how to become a participant in academic practice', (Hlalele 2010: 100). EA is about 'access to knowledge....and is what the game is about' (Morrow 2007 quoted by McKenna 2012: 57).

In this paper the researchers argue that in order for a student to become a participant in academic practice, they must have integrated or at least be in the process of integrating with the institution in which they are enrolled. Thus the virtual space between physical access and active participation in academic practice (epistemological access) on the part of the student, which we hazard to call integrative access, is the focus of this paper. These forms of access that feature post physical access, to borrow Bourgey's (2012: 65) words while writing on a different subject, 'should not be understood as being distinct from each other or having any marked transition from one to the other'.

The researchers' literature search has unearthed a substantial amount of knowledge on student integration to which they now turn.

Perspectives on Student Behaviour in Institutions

Koen (2007) reports on three perspectives. The first relates to a branch of psychology to do

with the impact of 'forces' and environmental influences. This perspective contends that student actions are shaped by their experiences and level of involvement in institutional affairs. Kurt Lewin is the main proponent of this perspective. Lewin (1936) expressed this perspective through an equation as follows: $B=f(P \times E)$. This means that behaviour (B) is a function (f) of a person's (P) interaction with his or her environment (E). Thus Lewin's theory is that 'any decision (act or behaviour) is influenced by environmental experiences (psychological forces, commitments and goals) and that these experiences cause the behaviour in question' (Koen 2007: 22).

According to Koen, this perspective positions the university as a social institution which impacts on the student's behaviour as the two interact. The perspective presents testable hypotheses or propositions such as:

- ♦ a student will seek social affiliation with an institution, involving learning the prevailing norms, values and attitudes in order increase his or her chances to succeed, OR
- ♦ a student will drop out because he or she has not adequately adapted to the institutional environment.

The second perspective emanates from the influence of development and organizational theories that seek to understand how institutions of higher education can assist students grow. The theory is that congruence between an individual's values, interests, needs and abilities and those of an organisation is crucial to retention and student success (see Holland 1985). This means therefore that the organisation plays an important role in the interactions there in. Also, this perspective contends that student outcomes depend on situational factors in their environment in and outside the university. This is represented by an 'input-environment-output' (I-E-O) formulation (Koen 2007). This suggests that student affairs and related divisions play an important role in student learning and should therefore actively participate in efforts to promote organisational fit.

The third perspective, deriving from Emile Durkheim's (1952) functionalism, relates to 'the relationship between organisational goals on the one hand, and organisational means on the other, and incorporates the view that successfully functioning within an institution implies adapting to its rules' (Koen 2007: 23). Informed by this functionalist perspective, most retention

models argue that retention and success are achieved when the student has been 'acculturated/enculturated/assimilated' and functionally integrated.

An important point for the three perspectives is that the socialisation process constitutes an institutional responsibility. Because particular institutional forces promote student success, it is therefore important for institutions to pay attention to 'economic, organisational, and sociological factors to optimise student success' (Koen 2007: 24). Also, these perspectives suggest that organizational characteristics have a significant influence on student success. Further, managing change and maintaining systems requires that an organisation promotes cohesion and functions cohesively.

Tinto's Student Integration Model (SIM)

As reported by Koen (2007: 25) this model derives from Tinto's (1975, 1987a, 1987b, 1988, 1991, 1993, 1998, 2002) contribution to studies that seek to explain retention as an item of student success. The essence of the SIM is that students who strongly identify with the internal features of an institution will succeed while those who do not will leave. The key message is that an institution that invests in student welfare will reap the reward of good throughput. Giddens (1990) refers to this identity one needs to have with the institution, as 'ontological security'. Thaver (2010) refers to the same as 'feeling at home'. Tinto's approach seeks to ask how well students are integrated into the academic and social systems of their institution. As construed by Durkheim (1952), integration is achieved when collective affiliation and commonality in sentiments are high, that is when an individual is guided and disciplined by shared norms (Koen 2007). For Durkheim, the role of the institution (in our case the university) is 'to inculcate sufficient homogeneity with respect to shared norms, values and beliefs so as to create social solidarity among groups' (Koen 2007: 25). Tinto uses the notion of integration in the same way, as the extent to which one shares the norms, attitudes and values of peers and academics. To Tinto, the absence of integration leads to student drop out (failure), institutional rejection and individualism. In this connection, Tinto hypothesises that the capacity of an institution to bond students together is crucial to student integration

and success. Koen (2007: 26) reports that to measure this, Tinto develops specific research constructs that set out to determine the following:

- ♦ the relationship between different sets of students (student-student influences);
- ♦ the relationship between academics and students (academic-student influences);
- ♦ the relationship between pre-university factors, student goals, commitments, motivations and university success;
- ♦ the relationship between the quality of student experiences and meeting the standards of the institution (structural integration); and
- ♦ the relationship between an individual's identification and the beliefs, values and norms in the academic system (normative integration).

Student-student influences and academic-student influences together largely account for Tinto's construct of 'social integration', while structural and normative integration combine to largely account for the 'academic integration' construct. To Koen (2007: 26), the core of Tinto's theory is encapsulated in the following two propositions:

- ♦ The greater the level of academic integration, the stronger the desire to succeed.
- ♦ The greater the level of social integration, the stronger the commitment to stay at the institution.

METHOD

The researchers adopted a qualitative approach, seeking to gain some deep understanding of the lived experiences in the university, of the particular group of post-graduate students (Honours, Masters and PhD) who volunteered to participate in this study. They purposively selected one School in the university on the grounds of its accessibility to them and on knowledge that it had a number of international students. The researchers then gathered information from the university's International Students' Office regarding names of all international post-graduate students in the School. All registered international post-graduate students in the selected School as at the beginning of the 2011 academic year were invited for the interviews. Out of this process, a total of 14 students participated in the study.

Two-hour long whole group interviews were conducted: one at the beginning of 2011 and

the second six months later. Through this timing the researchers hoped to capture initial experiences as well as the more matured ones after students had hopefully integrated with the institution. The interviews focused on three broad areas: why the students settled for this university; experiences of institutional support; and social and academic experiences. However, for purposes of this paper the researchers concentrated on the last two areas. Data were analysed at two complimentary stages. The first involved grouping responses into two broad categories namely those to do with experiences about institutional support; and those about social and academic experiences. At the second stage data were further broken down into emerging sub-themes through which meanings were made.

RESULTS

Having found no major differences between the participating students' initial and later experiences, the researchers hereunder present what they found to be some of the 'cutting edge' issues that emerged from the two interviews.

The International Students' Office

According to the website of the institution in question, the International Student Office is a front line office. It seeks to continuously add value and make a difference to the lives of all people that it comes into contact with. The International Students Office at the campus of the students interviewed operates only twice a week due to smaller student numbers compared to the other campuses. Below some responses are presented regarding how the participating students experienced the services of this office. One feeling was that the office was not responding to students' needs in time:

I think our international students' office is just that room there. You go there to submit your documents they tell you to go and make copies somewhere else, there is no equipment there. They come here on Tuesday and Thursdays may be half day or not at all. We don't get responses from them in time.

Another experience was that the office at another campus was much better.

My own experience is that the[another campus of the university] office is much better than the one here. For every problem I have

to go to.....[that campus] and they get it sorted faster than here.

Yet another response cited an initiative which the office should have taken and run with but it did not.

I think this office is supposed to stand for us or link us to the administration when we have difficulties. But I don't think this office has really been doing that. I even remember I actually championed the matter about our inability to speak[the dominant indigenous language of the area], that we are even ready as international students to pay somebody to teach us if they could organize this for us. He (officer) would ask me to produce a list of interested students. I produced a list of 15 students but that story has long died.

The 'international' character of the office was also questioned.

.....Then I finally concluded that the international students' office or the international nature of the office is not for students that come from outside South Africa. They are referring to South Africans that want to go and study for a semester or so outside South Africa. It is not for us.

One bland response was that the office was far from serving its purpose.

I don't mean to be hard on them. The reality is that, that office is as good as non-existent. It is not really serving its purpose in this university.

Housing

Some of participant students had accommodation on campus while others were off campus but in university residences. Regarding housing, one concern was that the Student Representative Council (SRC) on this campus was in charge of housing matters.

I think the SRC is the one in control because you go to the Housing Department with a query and you are told: 'We don't know, it's the SRC'. Everything it's SRC.

Another sentiment expressed was to do with delays experienced in being allocated a room.

I got my room after three days and my friend who came after me slept in my room because there was no room for him. He got his room maybe after two days.

A student who was returning to the university for further studies after a few years away saw a difference for the worse.

I finished my Masters, went back home and came back three years later. The quality of services, of campus environment, it is going down. The people who are in the system do not realize those changes but once you have been there and you go out and come back you can see it.the housing department is the poorest in performance compared to what was being done four or five years ago.

The Language-culture Factor

All the participants reported that the majority of the people in the city, preferred, perhaps naturally and therefore understandably to communicate in their mother tongue which they coming from outside South Africa did not speak. One tricky matter was that because these international students were black, the local black people who they inevitably had to interact with expected them to speak the local indigenous language. Here is what one participant had to say in this regard:

I came with a very poor English background. But I found that living without speaking(the dominant indigenous language of the province) is the most challenging experience in this university. I went to(local town) to buy groceries. I took a taxi back but could not even stop a taxi in order to disembark. I tried to use my very poor English. They all looked at me, seemingly saying 'haibo'(how come) but you are black!

Another experience was that with some indigenous African people, it did not matter which language one used to speak to them they would still respond in their mother tongue.

And the problem is the language. You know that if you speak to aperson he or she will respond in his or her language regardless of which language you are using. They like their language so much.

Still related to language but deeper into culture and race, one experienced a strongly divided class.

My PGCE [Post-graduate Certificate in Education] class was like it was already structured. You find that Indians are seated at one place, we the blacks are seated at one place and whites at one place. For you to break those structures it was very difficult. Where I come from we do not do things like that. Among ourselves as blacks we were then further structured.

Now we are forced to move to those who come from other countries and we form a brotherhood- from Burundi, Rwanda, those are the people associate with.

But some participants had developed survival skills by attempting to speak the indigenous language. Here is what one had to say:

I enteredoffice and said 'sawubona, ngidinga usizo lwako' (I need your help). She was very happy that I was trying to speak(the language). She helped me with the registration process and took me from office to office. Within a day all my registration was done, because of just a few..... words [of the indigenous language]. If you can't speak, it will be tough.

Comparing with the situation back home, one participant felt that there was nothing amiss about local people using their language and demanding it from foreigners around.

I know there are so many challenges I face but I can't really complain. You see we have so many graduates in(his country) that are drivers, that sell tomatoes, shoes or do other menial jobs. So before I even came here I already knew about things that happen here. I knew about xenophobia, about racism etc. But then I said to myself it is better to face xenophobia and racism in another country than to face these same things in your own country. So when a Zulu person blames me for not speaking his/her language, I say yes, what do I expect. In (own country) a French speaker will blame me for not being able to speak French forgetting that we are a bilingual country.

Sharing the same sentiment as the one immediately above, one participant applauded the pride local people had of their culture. Here is what s/he had to say:

Another experience I have gained is how to be proud of one's culture. We are talking of our brothers and sisters who like their language. I have been trying to understand how to go back to my roots or what we have lost. Here we see them embracing the little that is left of their culture. Back home we have come to a point where we are even losing our mother tongue. So language is one of the powerful things about South Africa.

Curriculum

Regarding the curriculum, a concern was raised about the apparent lack of synch between the university's (and perhaps South African)

undergraduate and Honours expectations. One participant said:

In ...(own country) we do four-year undergraduate degrees. I did research and I wrote a dissertation. But here what we do in Honours is not even comparable to my undergraduate dissertation. When I finished PGCE I applied for Masters and they said I don't qualify. I said God I have done research, I know all these things, why don't you give me like a module or something to prepare me. This is something that should be looked into.

Still on the undergraduate curriculum, one response queried the content of the educational foundations component of teacher education.

This is a Faculty of Education. Foundation modules like psychology, philosophy and comparative education must be taught. When I look at the Education Studies content, I do not find enough of this. I don't know.

But another response applauded the university's Master's degree as follows:

I wouldn't despise a graduate from[name of the university] because they offer a good Master's degree. I did three research modules last year. I feel that such a student is adequately equipped to do a PhD.

One response targeted the university's vision of advancing African scholarship.

I don't know how to put it, the premier university of African scholarship. I do not see examples being drawn from Africa. Everything seems to be related to UK, America and Australia.

Financial

Most participating students reported that overall the university system enabled them to generate some funds in order to look after themselves. Here is what one had to say in this regard:

I am looking at the good side of it. In (names his country) it is almost impossible for a student to be able to pay for his own tuition fees and accommodation, but I was able to do that for my Honours here without expecting anything from my parents. Now I am doing Master's and it's tuition-free. Why should I complain? This country is offering more than what my own country can offer me.

The fee remission policy of the university was also applauded. In this regard one participant said:

One good thing they have introduced is that of fee remission of full time Master's and PhD students. I am happy that this is available to every student regardless of citizenship. If you look at it, it's international students that are benefiting more because mostly they are the full time ones.

Student-Academic Staff Interaction

With regard to the general performance of academic staff and how they interacted with students, one participant expressed a huge surprise about how inviting these staff members were to him in sharp contrast to what he experienced back home.

Where I come from there is a distinct demarcation between the senior and the junior. In(country), if you are a professor or you have a PhD, you are up there. When I arrived here I saw that there is social integration between staff and students. You can easily walk into a professor's office just like you are walking into a classroom you interact with him and get out. I said to my mind: this is how it should be.

A PhD student participant commended the School's cohort supervision system. She responded as follows:

I am happy with the cohort system. Then it sort of defeated some of my friends' choice to go to Europe. When we communicate, some of them are always complaining. My closest friend says she books for an appointment with her supervisor and the supervisor writes to her and says: 'I am not ready for the meeting'. I said aha! You chose to go to....[different continent]! We don't have that here in South Africa especially here at[name of the university]. And she said, you are lucky, your fellow Africans can understand your situation.

Another participant also commended the same cohort system and said:

The cohort system is good because it makes the PhD journey not to be a lonely experience. My friends in (named continent) are all by themselves they don't even meet as students amongst themselves. Each student is in his or her apartment and then the library, just like that. I don't regret doing my PhD here in South Africa at[the university]. I am happy and will recommend people to come here.

Still on how enabling academic staff members were, one participant reported on how assignment deadlines were managed and said:

It was my first time to see students sometimes negotiating deadlines for assignments to be postponed and it would be accepted. They will renegotiate and it will still be accepted. As for the support by academics, I found them very helpful.

On the same note, other responses included the following:

I am doing my Master's degree. Lecturers are very helpful even if you go to them without appointment. They always attend to you.

Lecturing has been very good since I started my Honours. Supervision as well is very good. I would say it's 100% for my Specialisation.

Academic Level of Local Students

Some participants felt that the academic level of some local students were lower than they expected. One had the following to say in this regard:

The legacy of apartheid is still striking me. I am very sorry to observe this but the level of academic achievement among some of our South African fellows is not that high if I may put it that way. Sometimes I really feel like I want to help but it's too demanding, you don't know how to help at the end of the day.

In the same vein, one participant reported on how a local student colleague of him admired his workmanship:

I have a friend (local student) who came to me and said: 'I like the way you commit yourself to your studies and I wish I could do the same'. So in that respect I am happy that I am also a reflection of what they (local students) should look up to.

Learning Spaces

Most of our participants expressed great concern about noise in the campus library. Here is how one put it:

I assume that we all know the meaning of a library. Silence should be observed in the library but it has turned into a market place or a conference centre sort of. They should call the security if they cannot bring order. Personally I have not used the library for almost a year, I just walk in there and pick up books and go to my room.

Concern was also expressed regarding access to computer laboratories.

When I did my Honours we had a post-graduate LAN and you would go there and do your work very well. But now it has been colonized by post-graduate students. You go there and find them playing cards or on face book. Now I have learnt there is going to be research commons for Masters and PhD students. It is a good facility but my only worry with that is if it will not be well managed the undergraduates will still colonise it.

DISCUSSION

The first two items presented under the section on findings namely the international students office and housing, accompanied by the financial one can be classified under one umbrella term: institutional support. Findings suggest that to the participating international post-graduate students, the institutional support they experienced in this regard was far below their expectations. But the international students' office on another campus of the same institution was apparently much more effective than the one at the campus the researchers' studied. This suggests that the problems these students faced to do with this office might have been more localised than institution-wide. This in turn suggests a lack of the cohesion that is necessary for the smooth functioning of any organization (Koen 2007). Overall, despite having gained physical access, the students in question were not accessing what we have termed integrative access to be able to become active seekers and achievers of epistemological access. The literature reviewed above suggests that the socialisation process constitutes an institutional responsibility and that it is therefore crucial for institutions to attend to factors that optimize student success (Koen 2007). The researchers conclude that as far as the students consulted were concerned, the structural integration (Tinto cited by Koen 2007) as measured by the relationship between the quality of student experiences and meeting the standards of the institution, was not being achieved. It therefore seems that in this case the institution still had work to do by way of fulfilling its responsibility to help students gain integrative access.

Findings show that with regard to the financial aspect of students' experiences, the situation was different from what the researchers have in the preceding paragraph. Participating

students found the opportunities to teach or tutor as well as remission of fees arrangements in the university quite enabling. Drawing from Lewin (1936), that enabling environment would be a typical example of a 'force' or factor that promotes student success. Similarly when Koen (2007) talks of the need for institutions to attend to economic and other factors to optimise student success, this is a good example. One of the possible two hypotheses Koen draws out of Lewin's work, that a student will seek social affiliation with an institution, involving learning the prevailing norms, values and attitudes in order increase his or her chances to succeed is appropriate in this case because students felt supported. In this connection, the researchers applaud the institution for financial support to its students and argue that it seems it has gone some way in the students achieving integrative access and that it is likely to be going a long way in them attaining epistemological access.

It is in order to present another success story here. With regard to the research construct Tinto (see literature section above) has referred to as the relationship between academics and students (academic-student influences), findings reveal that the participating students found their academic staff to be quite enabling and accommodating. To some, the 'distance' between students and academic staff was so narrow they could not believe it was real especially comparing with where they came from. Again drawing from Giddens (1990) and Thavers (2010), the students felt ontologically secure and felt at home respectively. A collective affiliation and commonality in sentiments (Durkeim 1952) between the two stakeholders were seemingly high. There was social solidarity (Koen 2007) between these two groups therefore student integration was taking place in this regard. Students experienced sound research supervision to the extent that one participant rated academics' performance as 100% good. It can thus be argued that epistemological access was being achieved in this regard.

The researchers captured Tinto's 'student-student influences' research construct through two sub-sections in the 'findings' section above namely 'local students' academic performance' and 'learning spaces'. Some of the participants found many local students' academic levels of operation quite low and they attributed this, perhaps rightly so, to the apartheid system. In

their interactions with the local students, some participants experienced being admired by the former for their apparent academic prowess. In this reflection, although the international student may feel that this is fertile ground to assist and by so doing gain influence, the researchers fear that this scenario may potentially be a source of student-student conflict in the bigger scheme of things.

Regarding learning space, findings show that participants expressed deep concern about the apparent misbehavior particularly of undergraduate students. Worse still, participants' responses suggest that this was not a battle they were prepared to fight. They had practically ceased to utilise the library to the full for example. Thus integration among students was under severe threat. There was no integrative access to talk about. The researchers wonder whether the mileage reported to have been achieved regarding academic staff-student construct was not being torn to shreds by the apparent negative student-student relationships.

Moving on to what was referred to as the language-culture factor, findings reveal two main types of student. The one is a victim who finds him/herself immersed in an unkind social situation of having to live with a language not known to them. This is a student who has created a 'me' and 'them' culture between the speakers of the language he/she does not understand and him/herself. Drawing from Tinto's constructs, this is perhaps the student whose identification, beliefs and values may not be conducive to him achieving normative integration. To Thaver (2010) this student does not feel at home in the institution and to Koen (2007), with the immediate environment as well. To Giddens (1990), the student lacks ontological security. The student suffers disadvantage involving being expected to assume a new, strange and potentially alienating identity (McKenna 2004a; De Kadt and Mathonsi 2003). The researchers argue that the victim identity is most likely to be a major stumbling block towards the attaining of integrative access and worse still, epistemological access.

The other constructs his identity, values and norms as a victor. S/he goes out of his/her way to learn the dominant language of the new space in which s/he now leaves. Drawing from Tinto's constructs, one important pre-university factor to this student is knowledge of and preparedness for the 'foreign turf' by way of the new

institution in which s/he is to enroll. Such preparedness then rears the motivation to work towards integration with the new institution. As the student navigates through this process and gain acceptance, they begin to feel at home (Thaver 2010) and ontologically secure (Giddens 1990). It can be argued here that the victor identity is most likely to result in such a student achieving integrative access and in the process, epistemological access.

In the two identities of victor or victim, the researchers see Lewin's (1936) equation $B=f(P \times E)$ (Behaviour is a function of a person's interaction with their environment) in action. But unlike the literature which has tended to emphasise the role of an institution in helping the student to integrate, it can be seen the important role the student must play as well-to become a victor or victim. As rightly argued by Kioko (2010) the notion of disadvantage is not the problem of the student alone. It must be looked at as a social justice matter as well. This suggests that while the student, particularly the post-graduate one in this case, has to invest in seeking to integrate with the institution, the latter must, among other efforts invest in building capacity in the student to seek integration. In this regard, the institution we studied should be doing much more in this regard.

Responses in the curriculum area revealed two key issues. The one relates to an apparent disharmony between expectations at the institution and those experienced by some of the participants in their home countries with the former being perceived as having lower expectations. On the surface this may sound as a simple matter of one having to 'do as the Romans do when there' but given the increased student mobility we referred to at the beginning of this paper, it seems that calling for some regional harmonisation of qualifications without compromising national imperatives cannot be over-emphasised. In the literature we learn from Tinto's SIM model that the greater the level of academic integration, the stronger the chances for a student to succeed in the institution.

The other key issue is to do with some of the participating students challenging the achievability of the university's vision of building strength in African scholarship. While the students sought to identify with this vision, they seemingly did not find the goings-on by way of curriculum content and examples being appro-

appropriate in that regard. On this matter, the participants are seen having fairly progressed towards integrating with the institution by way of thinking about and questioning the viability of the means towards the vision. It is the researchers' view that this is a wake-up call on the part of the institution.

CONCLUSION

In this study, the knowledge gap was found regarding how international students experienced academic and social life in one University School. In navigating through literature about student access some space between physical and epistemological access needing exploration, a space which can be called integrative access was observed. From the evidence presented and examined the researchers conclude that the institution studied, at least in the experiences of participants, was excelling in the areas of academic staff-student relationships in which research supervision is encapsulated, and financial support. In the curriculum area, the apparent difference in benchmarks and those of other countries in the region is inhibitive to student mobility. It is also concluded that the institution was perceived as performing dismally in support sectors such as the international students' office and student housing. Given the two preceding conclusions, the researchers argue that there was lack of cohesion in the various sectors of this institution. As a result the achievement of integrative and in turn epistemological access was under threat. Against this background, some students become more resilient than others. While the student has a role to play in seeking to bond with the institution, the role of the institution in this regard, as literature suggests, cannot be over-emphasised.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The gravity of the issues and concerns raised by the participants in this study points to a need for bigger studies involving more students and other stakeholders. This study has broadened perspectives from international students in other Schools of the same institution, local students and all sectors to do with student affairs. But given that South African universities are a major destination for students from many African countries, a comprehensive na-

tional study involving all institutions of higher learning is necessary.

Because language is quintessential to humanity, it is crucial that every student develops at least basic competence in the language of the community in which their university is situated. The University of KwaZulu-Natal has broken the ground in this regard by requiring every undergraduate student to pass a module of isi-Zulu as from 2014. The researchers recommend that other institutions of higher learning in South Africa adopt this strategy in ways appropriate to their respective situations.

Undergraduate and post-graduate curricula expectations seem to widely vary among countries in the Southern African region. As argued from some studies, a regularisation of such expectations is necessary without compromising individual national imperative as well as sound educational standards. The researchers believe that this is not only good for education but even for economics.

The current near-one way mobility of students from many African countries to South Africa is not economically and socially sustainable. While student exchange programmes are very popular in South Africa, the current trend is mainly one of South African students going to Europe and America. A paradigm shift where South African students visit other African countries is not only necessary but very doable.

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