Unpacking Challenges within South African Institutions of Higher Learning in Addressing Student Grievances: A Literature Review

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How to cite
Boboyi, A., & Kang'ethe, S. M. (2024). Unpacking challenges within South African institutions of higher learning in addressing student grievances: A literature review. *Journal of Culture and Values in Education*, 7(2), 215-229.
https://doi.org/10.46303/jcve.2024.20

ABSTRACT

The persistent episodes of violence have been a thorn in the flesh of many South African institutions of higher learning. This predicament has tarnished the reputation of these institutions and compromised the overall quality of education provided. Employing a qualitative narrative literature review as the methodology and the theory of anomie, this paper examines and delineates the challenges confronted by higher learning institutions in addressing student grievances. The findings reveal many factors motivating student grievances and subsequent campus protests. These factors encompass administrative and managerial deficiencies in handling student grievances, inadequacies in managing student financial challenges, distorted perceptions among students regarding their rights and responsibilities, and substandard student accommodation and learning facilities. The discourse presented herein aspires to influence a transformation in the operational frameworks of higher learning institutions. The researchers envisage that their insights will diminish instances of violence and catalyse policy shifts to mitigate student exclusion.

KEYWORDS

Student protests; vandalism; student exclusion; student grievances; #FeesMustFall.

INTRODUCTION

Since the advent of democracy and the liberation of Black South Africans from the apartheid regime, transformative movements such as the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), inspired by the South African Student Organisation (SASO), have significantly shaped the landscape of democratisation and the realisation of student rights in numerous South African institutions of higher learning (Naidoo, 2015). However, this positive trajectory has been marred by persistent challenges, as evidenced by recurrent student violence and vandalism within these academic institutions (Connelly, 2014; Koen et al., 2006). Presently, higher education institutions grapple with escalating student protests, often escalating into violence (Kelley, 2018), with destructive consequences such as fatalities, posing a serious threat to academic continuity (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2011).

The literature indicates that these deleterious behaviours stem from multifaceted factors, including institutional and management shortcomings, students' distorted perception of their rights overshadowing their responsibilities, a prevalence of disengaged students on campuses, and external pressures to enhance inclusivity in education for disadvantaged students (Cross & Atinde, 2015). Tragically, the repercussions extend beyond academic disruption, tarnishing the institution's reputation and jeopardising students' qualifications and careers due to a loss of trust in potential employers (Choeu, 2019).

This paper asserts that certain higher learning institutions exhibit managerial and administrative deficiencies in addressing student grievances. This demonstrates a failure to recognise students as crucial stakeholders in academic and curriculum development (Onivehu, 2021). Some institutions persist in an outdated approach that perceives students as passive, uninformed, and incapable decision-makers, fostering feelings of grievance and disregard among students, potentially fuelling their inclination toward violent behaviours (Nair, 2019).

Regrettably, a prevalent issue in South African higher learning institutions involves students adopting a negligent attitude towards education, skipping classes, feigning illness, and neglecting the transformative potential of education in shaping their future, often leading to disruptive protests with harmful consequences (Tyler & Trinkner, 2017). Paradoxically, evidence suggests that various societal stakeholders may covertly influence students to advocate for more inclusive institutions, exemplified by movements like #FeesMustFall in 2015 and 2016, which raised awareness and facilitated access to education for students from low-income households (Langa et al., 2017; Luescher et al., 2017).

While acknowledging the positive impact of such movements, the paper critically assesses the substantial financial costs incurred due to wanton vandalism during protests, cautioning against celebrating these events without considering their broader implications (Lukman et al., 2019). Additionally, the paper raises concerns about institutional administrators' potential clandestine incitement of student protests, highlighting suspicions that some administrators manipulate student leadership to advance their agendas (Posner & Kouzes, 2018).

The recurring state of violence in South African universities remains a pressing concern, detrimentally affecting academic progression and the successful implementation of academic calendars (Naicker, 2016). The interventions by these institutions to address this challenge are hampered by various factors, including institutional gaps, distorted student perceptions of rights and responsibilities, student defiance, and suspicions of external influences from trade unions. Both universities and communities must acknowledge the substantial losses incurred due to student vandalism. This paper aims to shed light on the landscape of student unrest in select higher learning institutions, unveiling its deleterious outcomes and offering constructive insights.

An overview of the literature

This section synthesises diverse experiences of violence in institutions of higher learning, particularly in South Africa. An overview of the literature from variegated sources and the theory of anomie the study is presented below:

The history and prevalence of student protests in South Africa

Since the attainment of independence in African countries, the overarching goal of education has been to reshape these countries and rectify the lingering impacts of colonialism (Fomunyam, 2017). Fomunyam (2017) states that education aimed to rectify the colonial legacy in Ghana and Kenya, fostering a new paradigm characterised by equality, mutual benefit, and active participation. However, the pursuit of these ideals has encountered myriad challenges, spanning from issues of accessibility to funding constraints (Akoojee & Nkomo, 2007; Yende, 2021).

Unfortunately, the higher education sector in South Africa, designed to address historical inequalities, has grappled with a crisis in recent years, notably marked by recurrent student protests. These protests have transformed campuses into arenas of violent clashes between students and law enforcement (Bawa, 2019). Historically, the roots of the current predicament can be traced back to the apartheid era when the populace, including students, vehemently opposed the unequal education system amid severe economic disenfranchisement among the Black population (Hlatshwayo & Fomunyam, 2019). Tragically, history records instances where mass protests resulted in substantial casualties, such as the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 and the Soweto uprising in 1976, both marked by violence and loss of life (Lodge, 2011; Muswede, 2017).

Taking a historical perspective, the contemporary wave of student unrest, symbolised by #FeesMustFall, originated in October 2015 as a response to proposed national fee increases for the 2016 academic year at South African public universities (Mavunga, 2019). The protests, initially ignited at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), swiftly spread to all government-funded universities, reflecting students' discontent with various aspects of higher education. Notably, preceding #FeesMustFall, the #RhodesMustFall protests erupted in 2016, driven by students' dissatisfaction with symbols of colonialism, exemplified by the presence of Cecil John Rhodes' statue at the University of Cape Town (Holmes & Loehwing, 2016; Mavunga, 2019).

The underlying factors fuelling student unrest encompass issues of exclusion, insufficient transformation efforts, and inadequate communication between students and institutional leaders. These factors tarnish the institutions' image and disrupt their normal functioning. Therefore, institutional management must be receptive to student grievances, recognising students as pivotal stakeholders in higher education institutions. This paper underscores the imperative for proactive engagement with student concerns to foster a more harmonious and productive academic environment.

Theoretical framework

Historically, Emile Durkheim initially identified the concept of anomie, with Robert Merton later advancing and expanding upon Durkheim's ideas (Deflem, 2017). As conceptualised by Durkheim, Anomie denotes a breakdown in social norms and values, indicative of a lack of social cohesiveness and solidarity amid rapid societal change. In essence, anomie entails mental disorientation arising from conflicting societal norms (Parales Quenza, 2009). It epitomises a failure to adhere to established rules, disobeying laws, and a reluctance to assume responsibility for one's actions. This phenomenon is notably illustrated by protesting students engaging in destructive behaviours such as property damage, road blockades, and rendering educational institutions ungovernable (Boren, 2019).

Moreover, the consequences of anomie, characterised by an illusion and neglect of responsibility, are evident in acts of vandalism within educational premises, such as libraries and lecture venues, which are essential for facilitating learning (Jacobsz, 2015). Due to mechanical solidarity, Durkheim posited that establishing shared standards and values and a collective conscience was more achievable in pre-modern cultures (Sohrabi, 2019). However, in contemporary society, influenced by democratic ideals, modernisation, and globalisation accentuating individual rights, there appears to be a decline in the bonds of social control, with citizens displaying a reluctance to shoulder responsibilities. This is exemplified by the behaviour of protesting students, who lack adherence to societal norms.

Durkheim attributed effective social control in the past to institutions like schools and religion. Despite the challenges faced by educational institutions, it seems that student protests are fuelled by perceived gaps in education that hinder their right to learn in a safe and conducive environment (Marishane, 2017). The researchers posit that aggression and violence are ineffective solutions to problems; addressing shared concerns and rectifying apparent gaps is essential.

Building on this perspective, Smith and Bohm (2008) assert that feelings of isolation, or anomie, are linked to criminal behaviour. Deviation and criminality are more likely when individuals are not adequately socialised into society's shared norms and values, especially during rapid societal change (Smith & Bohm, 2008). This hypothesis is deemed instructive and relevant to the study as it elucidates the origins of deviant behaviour. Merton (2020) further expanded on this notion, proposing that dissatisfaction with one's life stems from conflicting beliefs about pursuing happiness. Instances of unclear societal norms and values contribute to

individuals losing their bearings. Consequently, the many gaps within educational institutions catalyse student protests, violence, and aggressive behaviours.

Research aim and objectives

This article seeks to comprehensively analyse the obstacles South African institutions of higher learning encounter in addressing student grievances. To accomplish this overarching aim, the following specific objectives will be pursued:

1. To conduct a thorough literature review to examine and describe the challenges confronted by institutions of higher learning in effectively addressing student grievances.
2. To propose viable strategies to address and mitigate student grievances within the context of higher learning institutions.

METHODOLOGY

This article is rooted in the interpretive paradigm, as it provides a subjective account of the challenges faced by institutions of higher learning in addressing student grievances (Boboyi, 2024a). We used a narrative literature review methodology to analyse the challenges encountered by South African higher education institutions in addressing student grievances. Boboyi (2024b) states that a narrative literature review thoroughly synthesises and integrates current research on a particular topic. This method offers a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the identified issues (Boboyi, 2024b). A comprehensive review of scholarly databases, including PubMed, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar, was undertaken. The search terms employed encompassed a range of variations, namely "South African higher education," "student grievances," "challenges," and other pertinent keywords. The inclusion criteria of this study were designed to prioritise scholarly sources, including peer-reviewed articles, books, conference proceedings, and reports. The selected sources were limited to those published within the last decade to ensure the most up-to-date and relevant information. A thematic analysis was utilised to systematically classify and interpret the primary themes from the literature. The challenges South African higher learning institutions face in addressing student grievances are systematically organised, enabling a comprehensive examination of the various complex aspects of this issue. This study is based exclusively on existing literature, necessitating ethical considerations primarily centred around the appropriate citation and acknowledgement of the original authors' work. The comprehensive synthesis of existing knowledge was instrumental in establishing a solid foundation for the subsequent analysis and discussion of the identified issues.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The relevant findings from the literature are contextualised below to highlight the pitfalls of South African institutions of higher learning in addressing student grievances:

Weaker terrain of transformation

Regrettably, socio-economic inequities pervade many parts of South African society because of the systemic exclusion of blacks under colonisation and apartheid (Feagin, 2013). This has been the case in many institutions of learning in South Africa. However, efforts by the students and society to make education as inclusive as possible have prompted student protests, as evidenced in 2015 by the #FeesMustFall movement (Langa et al., 2017; Pillay, 2016). In addition, Badat (2010) indicates that class, racism, gender, institutional, regional discrimination, and inequality have inopportunely impacted South African higher education for a protracted period. This does not mean that the government of the day has not tried to redress these inequalities and inequities. This has been ongoing since 1994, although the battle is yet to be won (Sehoole & Adeyemo, 2016). Opportunely, there have been various institutional transformation projects since 1994 to redefine the purpose and goals of higher education; extensive policy research formulation, adoption, and implementation in governance, funding, academic structure and programmes, and quality assurance; enactment of new laws and regulations; and major restructuring and reconfiguration of the higher education institutional landscape and institutions are among these (Feagin, 2013). However, pockets of evidence suggest that corruption, incompetence, and management deficits in the South African government, particularly in some historically disadvantaged institutions of higher learning, have become commonplace, derailing progress and transformation in these institutions (Chapman & Lindner, 2016). This is why these institutions, among other factors, are still riddled with innumerable student unrest. Without a doubt, institutions of higher learning must have passionate administrators who share the same vision to enhance the status quo and promote excellence for the benefit of its stakeholders and the communities at large. This could be a reasonable strategy to prevent unneeded student discontent.

Exclusions

Despite government commitment to policy change to make South Africa a rainbow nation where resources are shared with equality and equity, it is inopportune that black families and their children are still economically disenfranchised (Gumede, 2008). This is manifested by stinking poverty and the inability to afford resources for modest learning while the children of the former apartheid families continue to enjoy luxurious learning in the usual, white-dominated institutions (Foster, 2012; Ruswa & Gore, 2022.). This level of economic exclusion makes students, usually from black families, protest to make learning conditions a level ground (Pillay, 2016). This state of addressing these exclusions prompted protests such as the #FeesMustFall movement (Langa et al., 2017). According to Mashayamombe and Nomvete (2021), 2015 was a watershed year for higher education in South Africa when most students skipped classes and staged protests by the government and university administration for the first time since apartheid ended (Langa, 2017). These scholars further assert that the goal was to compel these systems to deal with issues like exclusion students face at South African universities. The students, usually supported by other stakeholders such as the trade unions, agitated for the elimination of anticipated cost increases, decolonisation of course materials and

physical campus spaces, revision of language policy, and termination of the contract of cleaning services to permanently employ the localised people, were just some of the demands made (Nomvete & Mashayamombe, 2019).

These researchers consider changes in the institutions of higher learning imminent because around 25% of South African university students drop out each year due to social and economic exclusion (Koen et al., 2006). Despite incorporating student organisations into institutional decision-making processes in 1997, paradoxically, student protests are still increasing (Koen et al., 2006). The main worry among many low-income black students is not whether they will be accepted to college but rather whether they will succeed academically and have enough money to finish school (Koen et al., 2006). Additionally, the consequence of the institutional decision not to extend the study period after a certain allowable threshold of time to give space to other oncoming students heralds a source of worry for students who do not want to leave institutions of higher learning after failing or incurring enormous debts (Koen et al., 2006). Significantly, it should be debated how much time a student needs to be allowed into the system when the maximum time for learning a specific programme elapses. However, the student has not finished all their modules. How will that be compromised, noting that the oncoming students have their rights to space occupied by those who fail to finish their programmes timeously? Unequivocally, administering various kinds of exclusion is a complex problem in universities and colleges and largely contributes to frequent student protests. For this reason, it is in the best interest of students if universities can update their exclusion policy.

Deplorable student accommodation and learning facilities.

While one classic English adage states that "cleanliness is second to godliness" (Brown, 1858, p. 9), it is appalling to report that the findings in research conducted by Nkinyangi (1991) on student accommodation and deplorable learning venues are still a challenge even after the post-apartheid era. Painstakingly, pockets of evidence suggest that student accommodation and deplorable learning venues contribute largely to many student protests. This perniciously affects learning, especially for physically disabled students (Hong, 2015). Ideally, decent and modest accommodation remains a cornerstone of a healthy studying environment. It has an impact on mental health. To this end, the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) constituted a framework and guidelines on both on-campus and privately owned student accommodation that demands, among other aspects, a reasonable physical infrastructure, health and safety, furnishing and fittings, construction, repairs, and maintenance of student accommodations (Gopal & Van Niekerk, 2018; Verhetsel et al., 2017).

Inopportunely, in some institutions of higher learning, especially the black-dominated, the accommodation infrastructure is deplorable, with students' rooms being in a squalid state, usually due to poor execution of admission policies (Oladiran, 2013). This is because the number of students outmatches the space to the extent that it is not uncommon to find a room occupied by more than two students. Further, due to poor accommodation administration and neglect, cases of bona fide students corruptly attracting other non-resident students have not been

uncommon. This phenomenon is called Squatting (Spio-Kwofie et al., 2016). Suspicions abound that some students share their accommodation with non-residents, possibly for a fee or with their boyfriends/girlfriends (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Calder et al., 2016). Paradoxically, the top echelon administrators cannot escape the blame as they continue to over-admit students who outmatch the available space. The institutions are aware of these hiccups, yet they over-admit students. Institutions of higher learning must follow the accommodation policy appropriately.

Student finance management deficits

The government funds a share of South African students through the National Student Financial Aids Scheme (NSFAS). Evidence abounds that a recurrent problem in some institutions of higher learning is the delay in processing NSFAS allowances (Dibela, 2018). While the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) keeps releasing its funds timeously to allow for curriculum periodisation, most institutions delay processing the funds, making students stay unregistered without food and other life amenities for some time. Jackson (2002) indicates that this delay perfidiously affects the DHET's mission to provide efficient and effective financial support to students from disadvantaged backgrounds in a sustainable manner. This has profound implications for students' academic progression. Therefore, this level of discontent may make students prone to engage in protests whenever an opportunity presents itself. Although some students and other stakeholders erroneously blame DHET for not releasing NSFAS funds timeously, pockets of documented evidence, as well as information on the ground, suggest that it is the institutions of higher learning that fail to timeously submit requisite student progress records to the NSFAS that informs the government's decision on their qualification for funding (Yende, 2021).

Managerial, administrative hiccups

Unequivocally, management and administrative hiccups in many institutions of higher learning contribute significantly to students' discontentment and, therefore, raise their probability of engaging in protests (Chiliza et al., 2022). Regrettably, poor management manifests in many administrative tasks (Kezar & Eckel, 2002). For example, in some historically disadvantaged institutions, episodes of students queuing for NSFAS for several days starting as early as four o'clock in the morning have not been uncommon (Kholopane & Vandayar, 2014; Maphumulo, 2021). Such students may not be able to attend all their classes besides being in a state of starving or having to beg for food from other benevolent students. This is punitive and one of the factors that might easily incite student protests (Fomunyam, 2017). Painstakingly, in some institutions, cases of students having to move from office to office in vain, looking for tutors, lecturers, and administrators to attend to their queries have not been uncommon (Garland, 1993). Further, suspicions of corruption in most NSFAS offices abound (Edwin, 2016). Sadly, in some institutions, students painstakingly take too long to register due to institutional, systematic deficits, including alia include sluggish information Technology (IT) systems, inadequate number of IT officers coupled with poor morale to work, and sometimes a total

absence of officers on duty. Inopportunely, this environment can prompt and provoke students to flare up into protests.

Students' illusions of their rights vis-a-vis their responsibility

Many students suffer from learning illusions that, among other things, manifest in bunking classes, copying assignments from one another, plagiarising other people's work, and using other illicit methodologies to seek passing favours from their lecturers (Anney & Mosha, 2015; Fadipe & Bakenne, 2020). These illusions give students a sense of entitlement to many aspects of the institution without delving into their responsibilities. Observably, when some of these things that students believe they are entitled to are not forthcoming, such as the phenomenon of lecturers failing to indicate the specific domains from which exams will be taken or the so-called scope, they feel offended, and this becomes one of the grounds that can spark them to engage in protests. Paradoxically, many students think that institutions should not charge fees. This is evident during the 2015 #FeesMustFall episode (Langa et al., 2017; Pillay, 2016). Perhaps another serious hiccup is that some students attending classes and doing assignments without registering for some modules have not been uncommon. Such students would be denied writing examinations, which becomes a source of problems that can flare protests. Further, cases of student fraternity demanding to be allowed to sit for the exams without a satisfactory formative mark or 40% of their continuous assessment, the so-called "DP" in many South African institutions, have not been uncommon. The administration's failure to grant their plea could easily result in student protests.

The way forward and strategies

Given the prevailing circumstances, the following strategies are proposed to address the underlying causes identified in the existing literature. By adopting a holistic approach, these strategies seek to enhance student satisfaction and minimise the occurrence of grievances that may escalate into protests. The successful implementation of these strategies necessitates a collaborative effort among institutional leadership, government entities, and student representatives to achieve comprehensive and sustainable improvements:

1. **Comprehensive transformation oversight:**
   - **Objective:** Enhance transparency and curb corruption in transformation initiatives.
   - **Strategy:** Establish an independent oversight committee to monitor and evaluate the progress of institutional transformation projects, ensuring adherence to policies and principles.

2. **Inclusive policies to combat exclusions:**
   - **Objective:** Mitigate economic exclusion and promote inclusivity.
   - **Strategy:** Develop and implement policies that address economic disparities, including a thorough review of financial aid disbursement processes and measures to support poor students.

3. **Enhanced student accommodation services:**

- **Objective:** Improve living conditions and reduce accommodation-related grievances.
- **Strategy:** Invest in infrastructure development, strictly enforce accommodation policies, and ensure adequate resources for on-campus and privately owned student residences. Prioritise the mental well-being of students in accommodation planning.

4. **Efficient student finance management:**
- **Objective:** Streamline financial aid processes to prevent delays and dissatisfaction.
- **Strategy:** Implement robust systems for processing and disbursing financial aid, improve communication between institutions and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), and provide support services to help students navigate funding challenges.

5. **Administrative excellence and IT infrastructure upgrade:**
- **Objective:** Enhance administrative efficiency and reduce bureaucratic hurdles.
- **Strategy:** Invest in upgrading information technology (IT) infrastructure, streamline administrative processes, and provide adequate training and resources for administrative staff. Address corruption concerns through strict oversight and disciplinary measures.

6. **Promotion of responsible student behaviour:**
- **Objective:** Foster a culture of responsibility among students.
- **Strategy:** Implement educational programs emphasising academic integrity, responsibility, and the reciprocal nature of rights and responsibilities. Develop clear communication channels to manage student expectations and regularly dialogue with student bodies to address concerns proactively.

CONCLUSION

Unequivocally, violence in many institutions of higher learning in ubiquitous corners of the globe, with South Africa notwithstanding, is a cankerworm that needs to be annihilated. Inopportunely, the quagmire derails the implementation of the curriculum through students failing examinations, student protests, vandalism, and their refusal to be assessed, therefore denting the image of their institutions. More so, the students inculcate fear among the institutional administrators and instructors, sometimes making the institutions ungovernable. Since these researchers believe that the student's behaviour reflects what happens in their social and community backgrounds, the government must provide a platform for discussions between different stakeholders, such as the alumni, with parents in the middle.

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