

A Deep Dive into the Multi-Pronged Nature of Student Engagement

Authors : Rosaline Govender, Shubnam Rambharos

Abstract : Universities are, to a certain extent, the source of under-preparedness ideologically, structurally, and pedagogically, particularly since organizational cultures often alienate students by failing to enable epistemological access. This is evident in the unsustainably low graduation rates that characterize South African higher education, which indicate that under 30% graduate in minimum time, under two-thirds graduate within 6 years, and one-third have not graduated after 10 years. Although the statistics for the Faculty of Accounting and Informatics at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) in South Africa have improved significantly from 2019 to 2021, the graduation (32%), throughput (50%), and dropout rates (16%) are still a matter for concern as the graduation rates, in particular, are quite similar to the national statistics. For our students to succeed, higher education should take a multi-pronged approach to ensure student success, and student engagement is one of the ways to support our students. Student engagement depends not only on students' teaching and learning experiences but, more importantly, on their social and academic integration, their sense of belonging, and their emotional connections in the institution. Such experiences need to challenge students academically and engage their intellect, grow their communication skills, build self-discipline, and promote confidence. The aim of this mixed methods study is to explore the multi-pronged nature of student success within the Faculty of Accounting and Informatics at DUT and focuses on the enabling and constraining factors of student success. The sources of data were the Mid-year student experience survey (N=60), the Hambisa Student Survey (N=85), and semi structured focus group interviews with first, second, and third year students of the Faculty of Accounting and Informatics Hambisa program. The Hambisa ("Moving forward") focus area is part of the Siyaphumelela 2.0 project at DUT and seeks to understand the multiple challenges that are impacting student success which create a large "middle" cohort of students that are stuck in transition within academic programs. Using the lens of the sociocultural influences on student engagement framework, we conducted a thematic analysis of the two surveys and focus group interviews. Preliminary findings indicate that living conditions, choice of program, access to resources, motivation, institutional support, infrastructure, and pedagogical practices impact student engagement and, thus, student success. It is envisaged that the findings from this project will assist the university in being better prepared to enable student success.

Keywords : social and academic integration, socio-cultural influences, student engagement, student success

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