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STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES OF QUALITY EDUCATION AT A SELECTED SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the perspectives of undergraduate students in the TME (Technology and Mathematics Education) department within the Faculty of Education at a South African higher education institution regarding the quality of education they receive. Quality education is vital for equipping students with the knowledge and skills necessary for their academic and professional growth. The research was framed by the Octet of Quality Theoretical Framework in Higher Education developed by Zaki and Rashidi. A qualitative case study approach was employed on ten Technology and Mathematics Education (TME) students to gather rich and in-depth data that would offer profound insights into the experiences of the students. Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews, and the interview responses were subjected to thematic content analysis. The primary findings of the study revealed several challenges, including limited access to resources as well as student support and involvement in curriculum. These challenges can hinder the attainment of quality education. In conclusion, it is evident that both students and academics require support to ensure the delivery of quality education. To bridge the gap in achieving quality education, this paper suggests that students' perspectives on quality education are multifaceted and necessitate focused attention from higher education institutions. By addressing these multifaceted concerns, institutions can take substantial steps toward enhancing the overall quality of education for their students.

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Introduction.

Quality education is a multifaceted undertaking, one that is influenced by various factors, including national or institutional standards and contextual differences. Different authors have approached this term from diverse perspectives, often leading to varying interpretations. Heystek and Minnaar (2015) argued that the concept of quality education is intricately tied to national or institutional

standards, as universities employ distinct benchmarks to gauge the quality of their educational offerings. Conversely, Brockerhoff, Huisman, and Laufer (2015) contend that the definition of quality education remains elusive as long as obstacles persist on the path to education.

The impetus for this research was sparked by a series of student protests at universities. These protests encompassed a wide range of demands, including the call for quality education. Notably, there has been limited investigation into discerning the precise meaning students attach to the term quality education (Tshishonga, 2019). As highlighted by Jones and Dlamini (2016), the South African higher education landscape has witnessed significant reforms and transformation efforts to address historical inequalities and create a more inclusive and equitable system. These efforts have direct implications for how students perceive the quality of their education. Furthermore, the study conducted by Govender and Mkhize (2016) underscores the significance of the context in which South African universities operate. Factors such as funding, infrastructure, and the socio-economic backgrounds of students have a substantial impact on the perception of education quality. These contextual factors influence students' access to resources, the quality of facilities, and the overall educational experience (Govender & Mkhize, 2016). These research findings highlight the intricate relationship between the South African higher education context and students' perspectives on quality education. It underscores the importance of considering the unique challenges and opportunities in South Africa when assessing and enhancing the quality of education in selected universities. It was against this background that this paper had a main question to be answered: *To what extent is the quality of education received by undergraduate TME students affecting their studies, and academic attainment thereof? Hence, the section below on literature review uncovers propositions made by authors across the entire countries of the world, as means to address the question asked.*

Literature Review.

Empirical Literature.

Access to resources.

Quality education plays a crucial role in the development of individuals and societies. However, in many countries, including South Africa, limited resources pose significant challenges to achieving educational excellence. This literature review explores student perspectives regarding quality education within the context of a selected South African university, highlighting the impact of limited resources on learning experiences. Limited resources encompass a broad range of factors influencing the quality of education. According to Johnson and Park (2017), financial constraints can lead to insufficient infrastructure, outdated technologies, inadequate learning materials, and limited access to academic support services. Additionally, human resources, such as competent teaching staff and administrative personnel are often affected by budget restrictions, which can compromise the quality of teaching and student support (Mashaba et al., 2019). Research indicates that students' perceptions of the impact of limited resources on the quality of education are vital for understanding the dynamics of the educational system. Within the precincts of quality education, Dube (2018) examined the perspectives of students at a South African university, highlighting their concerns about overcrowded classrooms, outdated textbooks, and the lack of access to computers and the internet. These limited resources were found to hinder students' ability to actively engage in the learning process and develop necessary skills.

Furthermore, inadequate library resources have been identified as a significant issue affecting students' access to relevant study materials. Nkosi and Ngobese (2016) uncovered university students' dissatisfaction with the limited availability of required textbooks and suggested that it hampers students' ability to complete coursework and assignments effectively. The limited resources in a university can have adverse effects on student's academic performance and overall well-being. In this instance, Mhlongo (2019) found a correlation between limited resources and lower academic achievement among students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Moreover, the study revealed elevated stress levels due to increased competition and limited access to academic resources. Concerning the claims above with regards to lack of educational resources, Makena and Mpahla (2022) contend that for learning processes to be regarded as functional, it becomes a vital stance that the availability of resources be considered a core utility to enhance teaching-learning processes. thereby accommodating learners in their diverse barriers.

Student involvement in the curriculum.

Student involvement in curriculum development and decision-making processes is a vital aspect of enhancing the quality of education in South African universities. As highlighted by Smith and Mbhele (2016), students' active participation in shaping curriculum not only empowers them but also ensures that the academic content is relevant and aligns with their career aspirations and academic goals. Such involvement fosters a sense of ownership over their education and contributes to the perception of a high-quality educational experience (Smith & Mbhele, 2016).

Moreover, Van der Merwe and Maasdorp (2016) underscores the importance of incorporating students' voices in the curriculum design process to create a learning environment that is responsive to their needs and interests. This collaborative approach between students and faculty can lead to a more student-centred education system, ultimately influencing their perceptions of the institution's commitment to providing a quality education (Van der Merwe & Maasdorp, 2016). This study, therefore, emphasizes the significant role of student involvement in curriculum development and how it contributes to students' perspectives of quality education within the context of South African universities.

Student support.

In the South African higher learning context, quality education is shaped best when functional support systems are put in place. As noted by scholarly research, academic success and student progression are attained comprehensive support services are rendered (Johnson & Naidoo, 2016) and this leads to overall satisfaction within the educational sphere. Concurrently is affirmed that when students are supported either individually or as groups, their diverse needs are well taken care of, and they feel within themselves that sense of belonging, thereby leading to a heightened throughput rate. Furthermore, as both teachers and learners are the ones directly involved in the schooling environment, to be demotivated is equated to a teacher-learner morale decline which might negatively affect academic attainment (Makena & Omodan, 2022).

Further than that, quality education in schools can also be influenced by well-structured and critical motivation factors inclusive of career guidance, academic advising, and counselling as outlined by Johnson & Naidoo (2016). Concurrently, Smith et al. (2018) emphasize that when an inclusive, yet supportive learning environment is observed, there is likely wood of an improved throughput rate in student progression. Upon prioritization of this stance, diverse students emanating from dissimilar backgrounds are at the acceptable exposure towards equitable support fostered for them all.

Theoretical Literature.

This study is embedded in the theoretical underpinnings of the Quality Education Theory by Zaki and Rashidi (2013). This theoretical framework comprehensively fosters elements that are regarded as contributors to excellence in education to aspects of academia, extending to experiences in education holistically. The framework then helps guide our investigation into how students at the South African University perceive the quality of education they receive. By exploring students Zaki and Rashidi (2013) contend that this framework encompasses diverse elements that help to reshape the culture of an organization. Examples of these elements might include support services for students, curriculum design, and pedagogical and assessment strategies. Within the context of this related framework, we aim to gain insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the University's educational practices and identify areas for potential improvement. Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on quality education in South African higher education institutions and provide actionable recommendations for enhancing the educational experience for students.

Methods and Materials.

Methodological Design.

This study utilizes a qualitative case study research approach to investigate the perspectives of students on quality education within a selected South African university. Qualitative research is employed due to its capacity to collect comprehensive and in-depth data, offering profound insights into participants' experiences, perceptions, and attitudes regarding a specific phenomenon (Zelcane & Pipere, 2023).

Population & Sampling.

The study's population comprises university undergraduate students at levels three and four. These groups have direct involvement in the educational system, making their perspectives crucial for understanding the quality of education provided by the selected South African university. The purposive sampling method was employed to select participants specifically from the TME department within the Faculty of Education, aiming to gather their unique insights into the quality of education offered by the university and subject them to thematic system analysis (Guetterman et al., 2018). The study sample comprised ten students nominated from levels three and four and this cohort was identified as relevant due to the experiences they had already attained in their previous years of enrolment in the TME department.

Research Instruments.

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary research instrument for this study due to their inherent flexibility in questioning, which allows participants to offer comprehensive and detailed responses, thus enabling a deeper elucidation of their experiences and viewpoints (Guetterman et al., 2018.). In total, ten students from a selected South African university were chosen to participate in these semi-structured interviews. The study involved a purposeful sample of ten undergraduate students from the TME department at a selected South African university to ensure diversity. Before conducting any interviews, informed consent was obtained from each participant. This approach was designed to encourage participants to respond freely to questions posed, thereby facilitating a more profound exploration of the complexity of students' perspectives on quality education.

One-on-one interviews were employed as the mode of data collection. This decision was guided by the recognition that such interviews provide an invaluable opportunity for engaging in in-depth conversations with participants. This depth of interaction typically leads to more detailed and nuanced responses compared to group interviews (Guetterman et al., 2018). One-on-one interviews afford a more intimate and personalized setting in which participants can share their thoughts, experiences, and opinions in a more candid and unrestricted manner, thereby allowing for a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the quality of education from the student's point of view.

This research instrument allowed for open-ended questions, encouraging participants to express their perspectives freely. A set of open-ended interview questions was prepared, addressing various aspects related to education quality. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or through online platforms based on participant preference and logistical considerations. Interviews were scheduled at times convenient for the participants. Detailed notes were also taken during the interviews to capture non-verbal cues and contextual information. The interviews were expected to last approximately 30 minutes for each visit, depending on the availability and accessibility of the study participants.

The study adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for participants' rights (Freedman, 2014). Any sensitive or potentially distressing content was approached with care, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were provided with a consent form outlining the study's purpose, their rights, and the confidentiality of their responses. Upon outlining all the necessary aspects of ethical considerations, each interview was recorded with the participant's consent to ensure an accurate account of their responses (Bhandari, 2022). All the collected data from both the recordings and field notes were transcribed for analysis. All data was anonymized, and participants' identities were kept confidential. Transcripts and related materials were securely stored in password-protected files. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes and patterns within the data. Coding was performed to categorize and organize participants' responses.

Upon completion of data analysis several treatment steps to ensure accuracy and confidentiality were undertaken (Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018). The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were reviewed for accuracy, and any personal identifiers were removed to maintain participants' confidentiality. The transcribed data was checked for completeness, clarity, and consistency. Any transcription errors or ambiguities were addressed to ensure the accuracy of the data. To protect the participants' identities, all identifying information was removed, and participants were assigned pseudonyms or unique identifiers.

Data collected were analyzed using thematic analysis. Researchers immersed themselves in the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts and notes. Accordingly, researchers gave themselves sufficient time to listen to the audio. This process was done to capture all recorded data as all aspects were considered essential to uncover the investigated problem. This process allowed for an initial understanding of the content and the identification of potential themes. Initial codes were generated by identifying recurring ideas, concepts, or phrases within the data. These codes were used to label and categorize relevant sections of the transcripts. Codes were organized into preliminary themes based on their related content. As opined by Polonsky and Waller (2019) themes represented patterns in participants' responses related to the quality of education. The themes were interpreted in the context of the research questions and the study's objective. Researchers looked for variations in the perspectives and experiences of the participants.

Discussions of Results.

Two main themes formulated by gathering similar and relevant codes and categories are discussed below as findings of this investigation: Access to resources and Student Involvement in Curriculum and Student Support.

Access to Resources.

Participants were questioned regarding the institution's efforts to ensure that quality education is provided. Participants claim that both students and staff have access to adequate technological support. Some put emphasis on the provision of internet and Wi-Fi coverage as one commendable support system. Mention is made about how lecturers use technology to conduct their lectures and about the library division's great ability to assist academics with the purchase of textbooks to keep content relevant for teaching and learning.

LC1 in his response, argued:

"Lecturers must give students more one-on-one support," Turn It In and other technological educational tools must be taught to students, and the computers in the research commons must undergo regular maintenance".

In agreement with the above statement, LC2 responded:

"Maintenance of the least available computers should be consistently done because there are plenty students enrolled in the program, as against the number of available computers."

LC 5 argued with a different opinion with regards to resource logistics:

"We are challenged because I just do not know why the university seems reluctant to purchase new learning resources."

Support for students facilitates their access to the education they get and helps to raise the standard of that education. Students seem to be of the view that efforts are being made by the institution to ensure that quality education is achieved in the sense that students who have illnesses and psychological problems have access to the clinic to get help. They are also of the view that for health and wellness, student affairs should have activities such as sports, drama, and music. This support seems to go a long way toward helping students achieve their objectives. One participant clearly emphasized the importance of the Peer Assistance Leaders (PALs) in their academic lives and how this program helps the students achieve better outcomes. Some mention is also made by one participant about similar support available for staff as well.

In the context of university education, undergraduates make up the bulk of the customers (Mara Cubillo et al., 2016). Additionally, according to Mazarrol (2017), student contentment is a fleeting attitude.

Student Support and Involvement in Curriculum.

Student participation in curriculum development is crucial for improving educational quality. It modifies power dynamics, allows voiceless voices to be heard, and boosts students' perseverance and achievement. Students are the primary customers in university education, and their involvement fosters shared accountability between teachers and students. It is essential to discuss the type of knowledge students will learn from the curriculum, engage them actively in their education, and understand the nature of teaching. This involves familiarity with curriculum orientations and proper pedagogical and pedagogical approaches. By involving students in curriculum development, institutions can increase

their educational quality. The question that was asked was based on student involvement in the curriculum. One of the participants believed that they should be involved in the curriculum development process to increase the quality in education.

In this instance, LC6 commented:

“The first thing that needs to be done is to involve us in curriculum design because we are the ones who are going to be engaged.”

Students should actively contribute to the process of knowledge development. Undergraduates are the main clients in the context of university education (Mara Cubillo, 2016). The other participant concurred with this statement.

LC 9 also shared own views:

“Involving students in curriculum creation fosters a sense of shared accountability between teachers and students. By giving them more responsibility, instructors are encouraging students to enter the course prepared and educated about the material.”

It is important to bring up the type of knowledge-what kind of knowledge will the students learn from the curriculum-when discussing curriculum-related concerns. How will we engage the students actively in their education, in addition to the nature of learning? The nature of teaching must also be discussed, including how it will be done, the techniques that will be employed, and the activities that will be developed to aid students in internalizing the material.

The findings discussed above are in line with the Quality Education Theory by Zaki and Rashidi (2013) as the theory articulates that an organizational culture becomes viable and functional when a variety of elements are administered and with consideration of the voice for the recipients concerned. When elements like support services for students, curriculum design, and pedagogical and assessment strategies are well noted, the organization is reshaped with enhanced learner progression.

Conclusions.

In examining students' perspectives of quality education within a selected South African university, it becomes evident that several critical factors play a pivotal role in shaping their experiences. Limited access to resources, students' involvement in the curriculum, and the availability of student support services all hold significant importance. The intersection of these factors impacts the overall quality of education in the university and can significantly influence students' success and satisfaction. Limited access to resources is a formidable challenge faced by students in the South African university context. This constraint hinders their ability to fully engage with their studies and access essential materials. The literature suggests that universities in South Africa should prioritize the allocation of adequate resources to ensure equitable access to academic resources and infrastructure (Nyanda & Letseka, 2017). Furthermore, the availability of digital resources and e-learning platforms can play a crucial role in enhancing resource accessibility, especially considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education (Welman & Kruger, 2020). Universities should invest in expanding these digital resources and promoting digital literacy among students.

Students' involvement in the curriculum is another vital aspect that contributes to the quality of education. Active participation, engagement, and a sense of ownership of their learning experience can lead to more meaningful and effective education. The South African university can adopt pedagogical strategies that promote student-centred learning, such as problem-based learning, group discussions, and practical applications. Educators should also be encouraged to adopt inclusive teaching practices that cater to diverse student needs and backgrounds (Bawa, 2016). In this regard, a more inclusive and diverse curriculum can foster a sense of belonging among students and improve the overall quality of education. Student support services are essential for addressing the unique challenges faced by South African university students. The provision of academic advising, counseling, and career guidance is crucial in ensuring that students receive the support they need to succeed.

Students' perspectives of quality education in a South African university are shaped by limited resource access, their involvement in the curriculum, and the availability of student support services. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach, including resource allocation, curriculum redesign, and improving support services. By implementing these recommendations, the university can enhance the quality of education and better serve its diverse student body.

For future studies, the investigation could be undertaken on issues like student support services by extending the availability of professional counsellors, academic advisors, and career development

resources (Karp & Bork, 2016). Additionally, peer mentoring programs and student support groups can be established to create a sense of community and facilitate the sharing of experiences and advice among students (Motala, 2018).

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