TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE ANTI-XENOPHOBIC RURAL-BASED UNIVERSITY CAMPUS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Xenophobic attacks can have devastating effects at universities if efforts are not made to prevent their occurrence or to effectively manage them when experienced. All this can affect the process of internationalisation at higher education institutions in South Africa. In an effort to build a deep understanding of the nature, character and extent of "xenophobia" at the University of Venda (UNIVEN), a multidisciplinary team carried out a study. It sought to obtain the perspectives of both South African citizens and non-nationals in order to use the results to develop a well-informed anti-xenophobia programme. This was part of a broader strategy for appreciating and promoting diversity and social cohesion within the framework of the university's transformation thrust. A mixed methods approach was used, taking into account critical discourse analysis and infusing elements of participant observation. A semi-structured interview guide was used during five focus group discussions held to collect data from 28 members of the University community. Three groups comprised of non-South Africans. The remaining two consisted of South African citizens. All the groups confirmed that they had observed or experienced non-violent manifestations of xenophobia, in particular in lecture halls, residential areas, sport fields and the University library. Both local and international focus groups (71.4%) confirmed that separate social and academic groups existed on campus. This study confirmed that there were pockets of xenophobic tendencies among both staff and students. Thus, introduction of an anti-xenophobia programme was necessary because it was likely to positively contribute to the university's efforts geared towards creating an enabling working and learning environment.

Keywords: xenophobia, discrimination, internationalisation of higher education, non-nationals, South Africa

INTRODUCTION

In 2001, South Africa hosted the "United Nations World Conference against Racism and Xenophobia". The declaration of that conference drew inspiration from the struggle of the people of South Africa against apartheid and set out a programme of action to combat racism

and xenophobia (United Nations 2008). In spite of genuine efforts to implement the programme of action in South Africa, in May and June 2008 horrendous, violent xenophobic attacks virtually shattered the country (Ndifonka 2008). A new wave of xenophobic violence unsettled the country in 2015 (Mbovu 2015). Given the worsening socio-political conditions in the country, it is possible that similar xenophobic attacks will resurface in the future.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2010) defines xenophobia as "a deep antipathy or morbid fear of foreigners". According to Harris (2002, 169–184), it also denotes "hatred, fear and dislike of strangers or foreigners". In general, xenophobia is a feeling or perception based on socially constructed images and ideas, and not on rational or objective facts (Williams 2008). Consequently, this perception reduces complex social and cultural phenomena to simplistic "we" (the locals) and "them" (*makwerekwere).* The latter is a common derogatory term used in South Africa to refer to foreigners. In the South African context, "xenophobia" refers to violent actions against foreigners as well as negative social representations of immigrants, refugees and migrants (Harris 2001; De la Hunt 2002). Foreign nationals include, in broad terms, all non-South African residents within the country (Centre for Human Rights (CHR) 2009). In this study, xenophobia should be understood in the wider sense, to include non-violent discrimination against non-South African nationals. Xenophobia infringes basic human rights and threatens internationalisation of South African higher education (Algotsson 2000; Williams 2008). In recent years, the issue in the international dimension of higher education has become more prominent on the agenda of many governments, tertiary institutions, student organizations and accreditation agencies. This has created a huge impact on the core business of the higher education institutions and many misconceptions still exist among students and sometimes, staff about the presence of foreigner nationals in the society.

South Africans' negative attitudes towards non-nationals are largely oriented towards other "Black" Africans (hence the often used label, Afrophobia), although there are increasing reports of discrimination towards new arrivals from the Indian sub-continent (Landau, Ramjathan-Keogh and Singh 2005). Migrants in communities that are characterized by high levels of tension often live in fear for their lives. This often results in the migrants moving from one informal settlement to another in search of what they consider a more stable environment. Disturbingly. it is also believed that officials in various government departments or institutions perpetuate xenophobia. This usually happens through the officials denying non-nationals access to services. The officials' actions originate from the conviction that non-nationals are taking resources meant for South Africans. At times, the xenophobia manifests in the form of government officials making derogatory statements towards the non-South Africans (Williams 2008).

It is crucial to foreground the wave of xenophobic violence that swept across many parts of South Africa in 2008. The xenophobic attacks took place over a few days in early May 2008. They resulted in the death of more than 60 people and left more than 48 000 people injured, including both non-citizens and citizens. Hundreds of thousands of people were displaced and there was considerable loss of revenue, which amounted to millions of Rands. Consequently, thousands of non-nationals decided to return to the hardships they initially fled from in their home countries, instead of dying in a foreign land (Jost et al. 2012). This decision confirmed that xenophobia was real and needed to be addressed as a matter of urgency. Because South Africa is a regional economic and political powerhouse, it has continued to offer opportunities for other nationals who increasingly immigrated over the years (Jaynes 2008). Moreover, the growing demand for skilled labour and entrepreneurs heightens the country's reliance on people born and educated outside the country. Although most foreign nationals, refugees and asylum seekers enter the country lawfully, they also face hostilities from South Africans (Bhamjee and Klaaren 2004). Xenophobia must also be understood in relation to the high levels of violence that persist within contemporary South Africa. Although it represents a new manifestation of violence, xenophobia also reflects continuities with other forms, targets and perpetrators of violence in the society (Williams 2008). Jaynes (2008, 8) described the 2008 xenophobic attacks in the following way, "like a boxer that has received an almighty blow to the head, South Africans have been stumbling around, punch-drunk, to make sense of something that caught the country by complete surprise". The fact that xenophobic tendencies are a world-wide phenomenon cannot be questioned. Increasingly, resentful feeling of labour immigrants by the citizens, in particular, is worsening in many parts of the world. Campbell (2003) argued that this attitude emanated from a combination of nationalism and economic factors. Taking into account a comparative study of ten countries, Hjerm (2010) concluded that levels of nationalist sentiment and xenophobia decreased with increasing levels of education. This was the case despite substantial differences among educational systems in the countries. Licata and Klein (2002) contended that the European Union's creation of the status of "Citizen of the Union" was a major factor that helped meet certain conditions, which increased intolerance towards resident foreigners. Xenophobic beliefs may arise out of erroneous inductive inferences and stereotyped classification methods. Through a study of history and contemporary expressions of xenophobia in the United States, Yakushko (2009) explained this phenomenon as a concept that described a socially observable negative phenomenon. At both national and international levels, xenophobia was commonly explained as a result of the conviction that non-nationals threatened citizens' access to employment, grants, and social services (Mattes et al. 2002). However, no type of competition for opportunities can justify use of violence.

In South Africa, the Immigration Act 13 of 2002 and the Refugees Act 130 of 1998 established the legal regime applicable to migrant communities (Palmary 2002). Temporary residents (including workers, students and tourists), were classified as those who entered and legally stayed in the country for specific, limited periods of time (Fynn 2010). The Bill of Rights, which is entrenched in Chapter 2 of South Africa's Constitution, protects asylum seekers and refugees. The latter group of non-South Africans are mainly forced immigrants who are seeking refuge from political persecution. The Refugees Act provides for the mandatory issuing of asylum seeker permits to any person seeking such status. One becomes an officially recognised refugee after successfully applying for asylum and enjoys privileges far exceeding what international law requires. They enjoy fundamental rights such as the rights to work and study, health, physical security and can in principle, receive social benefits in South Africa (South African Constitution 1998).

Palmary (2002) reveals that there is a widespread belief that the number of non-South Africans has increased markedly in recent years. Apart from refugees, asylum seekers, skilled people on work permits and those in the country as students, there are migrant populations of naturalised as citizens or accepted as permanent residents. There are also many undocumented migrants residing in the country (Crush and Williams 2001; Landau, Ramjathan-Keogh and Singh 2005). Moreover, the use (especially in the media) of unsubstantiated figures for migration exacerbates the perception that the number of non-South Africans in the country is alarming.

At the continental level, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and African Union (AU) Convention Governing Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa are relevant and clarify the respect non-nationals residing in a foreign country should enjoy. Also, although the SADC framework for migration does not explicitly spell out human rights issues, it makes reference to rights and freedoms enshrined in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and International Labour Organisation (ILO) Conventions (CHR 2009).

In an attempt to ensure that all members of its community enjoyed the rights specified above, the University of Venda (UNIVEN) entrenched in its institutional transformation plan measures designed to promote social cohesion. Prior to this, UNIVEN had made significant attempts to curb xenophobic tendencies and discrimination. Of significant note was the establishment of an anti-xenophobia team. The latter is now integrated into the institution's transformation task team focusing on how best to take advantage of the rich diversity at the university. Internationalisation, which is entrenched in the institution's strategic plan, is a high priority issue. The presence of more than 100 international academic staff members and

approximately 500 international students eloquently highlights its international character. Their diverse backgrounds contribute to building a wide range of skills and knowledge pool at the university. It is important to ensure that the working environment enables them to work freely. The meaningful contributions of the international staff and students to the development of UNIVEN and particularly to its process of internationalisation can only be sustained in an environment devoid of discrimination, violence and segregation that might encapsulate xenophobic undertones. Manifestations of xenophobia would threaten the success of the process of internationalisation through reducing international student and staff numbers. Ultimately, it might adversely impact on the institutional standing of the University. Thus, diversity must be promoted because it is a critical driver of intercultural and international skills acquisition (Williams 2008).

The anti-xenophobia work at UNIVEN was initiated to mitigate any foreseeable risk and to take advantage of all the attributes that diversity offers. This necessitated carrying out a study on this matter. The study originated from the realisation that most previous studies on xenophobia were conducted in non-university settings. The Fals-Borda (2001) notion that knowledge construction should improve practice and therefore, requires the critical consciousness of education stakeholders was adopted in the current study. Three sets of activities which Hall (cited in Reid 2004) highlighted, namely research, education and action were combined in the study. Specifically, this research sought to build an understanding of the underlying dynamics and develop an institutional strategy for managing diversity. Although this study was carried out in one university setting, the findings are of interest to the entire higher education sector. This is due to the fact that xenophobia poses significant risks to the South African higher education sector in general and in particular, the process of internationalisation.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

As already alluded to, this study was carried out at UNIVEN, which is located in Thohoyandou town of South Africa. The university's Global Positioning System coordinates are 22.9°S, 30.4°E. It is found in Thulamela Municipality, Vhembe District of Limpopo Province in South Africa. The University lies 175 km to the north of Polokwane, which is the capital city of Limpopo Province. It is in close proximity to the borders of Botswana, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. Furthermore, it is about 160 km from Beitbridge border post which South Africa shares with Zimbabwe. Beitbridge is particularly significant because it is the principal gateway to the rest of Africa.

The University of Venda started operating in 1982. It was established to mainly cater for

the then homeland of Venda. Today, it is the only University in Vhembe District, which covers an area of 21 000 km^2 and is home to approximately two million people. Since its establishment, UNIVEN has experienced considerable growth and change. In 2002, the Department of Education (DoE) mandated that the institution transform itself into a comprehensive university, which would offer academic, applied sciences and technology-oriented and vocational programmes. It is strategically located, mainly because of its close proximity to international students from Botswana, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. Currently, there are about 14 000 students registered for degrees in eight Schools. The Schools are Agriculture, Education, Environmental Sciences, Health Sciences, Human and Social Sciences, Law, Management Sciences, and Mathematical and Natural Sciences.

Quantitative and qualitative research paradigms were adopted in this study. In order to devise workable and effective strategies for countering xenophobia and promoting diversity, it is crucial to have a good sense of the extent of the problem and how it manifests itself on campus. In doing so the research was conducted by selecting focus group discussions focusing on a set of questions that sought responses on personal experiences and observations with respect to xenophobia in and around the university. Identities of the respondents were not recorded and the participants were assured that the information they provided would be kept confidential. Twenty-eight people, organised into five focus groups, participated in the study. Separate focus group discussions were organised for international and South African students. Staff members were mixed between the groups but they were in the minority. There were three groups of international students and another two for South Africans. The focus groups were conducted for three days and focused on discussing the following questions:

a.   What are the signs and extent of xenophobia at UNIVEN and surrounding communities?
b.   What must be done and by whom to eliminate xenophobia at this university and surrounding communities?
c.   How can the benefits of cultural diversity at the UNIVEN campus be maximised?

Initially, there were mixed reactions to the study. Some participants were of the view that the research would not change the situation and therefore, it wasted their time. In order to allay their fears, at the beginning of the focus group discussions it was explained that they were free to disengage at any time should they feel that it was of no value to them. The FGD groups dwelt on the same questions. Facilitators in the FGDs monitored the flow of discussions in their assigned groups and managed time, in addition to moderating the discussions. Two FGDs were conducted with the same respondents to ensure reliability of the data collected. Facilitators also

checked the consistency of the instrument used with the objectives of the study to ensure data validity.

There were 12 female participants in the study with the rest being males. Even though the participants were informed that they could disengage from the study at any stage when they felt like doing so, none left. The results of the FGDs were coded and analysed using the content analysis technique, for recurring themes.

Content analysis refers to the gathering and analysis of textual content (Struwig and Stead 2007). Common themes from the various discussions are examined. This information gives the common factors that are relevant to the objectives of the study. Central to content analysis is that the many words of the text are classified into considerably fewer content categories. It is assumed that the words mentioned most often reflect the greatest concern. Typically, the collected raw data are not immediately available for analysis. In this regard, the raw data require some sort of organizing and processing before it can be analyzed.

RESULTS

The participants observed and experienced a wide range of realms or spheres of xenophobia. Xenophobic experiences were reported to be taking place in academic and social platforms where students and staff interacted on a daily basis in and around the campus. They indicated that xenophobia was evident in lecture halls, with both students and lecturers being the perpetrators. In addition to this, it was revealed that xenophobia was common in the halls of residence, social settings such as parties and other gatherings, and public places during sporting events and other activities on campus. As shown in Table 1, both local and international groups (71.4%) confirmed that separate social and academic groups existed. It was alleged that examples of xenophobia included separate handling of examination scripts, a tendency to form social and academic groupings of international and local students. Some students (25%) were of the view that resource allocation was skewed in favour of local students. Also, when there were misunderstandings between international and local students, authorities acted in a xenophobic manner, often taking sides with locals. Additionally, they indicated that this extended to allocation of rooms in the halls of residence. In support of this assertion, an international student expressed the following sentiment:

"Room allocation is done to favour the local students and even funding activities like NSFAS."

However, the local students group (21.4%) held the perception that international students were favoured and that is why they performed better.

NATURE OF XENOPHOBIA EXPERIENCES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VENDA

Xenophobia experiences at UNIVEN were said to be expressed in many ways. The majority of the respondents (71.4%) confirmed that separate social and academic groups of international and South African students existed on campus, especially when assigned tasks to carry out in and out of lecture halls. About 42.8 per cent of the focus groups confirmed that sometimes support staff tended to use local languages to address persons they knew fully well did not speak or understand these languages. Most local students were reluctant or refused outright to share rooms with international students. Many of the student groups (64.2%) said they had witnessed or experienced hate speech, in particular name calling. A quarter of the respondents reported that local students at times attributed the higher marks that international students got to use of witchcraft. They explained that many of the foreign students who performed well must have bewitched others. One respondent expressed this view as follows:

> "There are negative perceptions towards foreigners' good performance, with South African students explaining this in relation to use of muti and lecturers feeling pity for foreigners because the latter suffer in their home countries."

In general, hostility and violence (42.8%) were common as evidenced by locals and foreigners not tolerating each other, for example, in events such as parties, friendships, use of vernacular language and during sporting events. The respondents alleged that resource allocation was skewed towards international citizens, for example room allocation and funding of activities. Local students (21.4%) believe that international students received special treatment when rooms were allocated and even during marking of assignments, tests and examinations.

Figure 1 reveals that most respondents (85%) believed that the Directorate of Student Affairs should ensure that students are allocated rooms in the halls of residence without taking into account individuals' nationalities. For xenophobia to be effectively countered, the Students Representative Council (SRC) and the UNIVEN International Student Union (UNISU) should play more active and significant roles. Furthermore, extra-curricular activities should be organised such that they partly served as anti-xenophobia campaigns. The campaigns must be sustained and well-advertised in order to create awareness in the entire university and invite wide participation. It was suggested that anti-xenophobia and "Ubuntu" should be a module in the curriculum for all undergraduate students. Alternatively, it could be infused as a topic in the English and Communication Skills module, which all first-year students were taking. The respondents argued that this would promote the adoption of attitudes and behaviours that were consistent with being humane and African. Some respondents (42.4%) believed that change should start with the academic staff and members of management. In addition, students should be treated fairly regardless of their nationality.
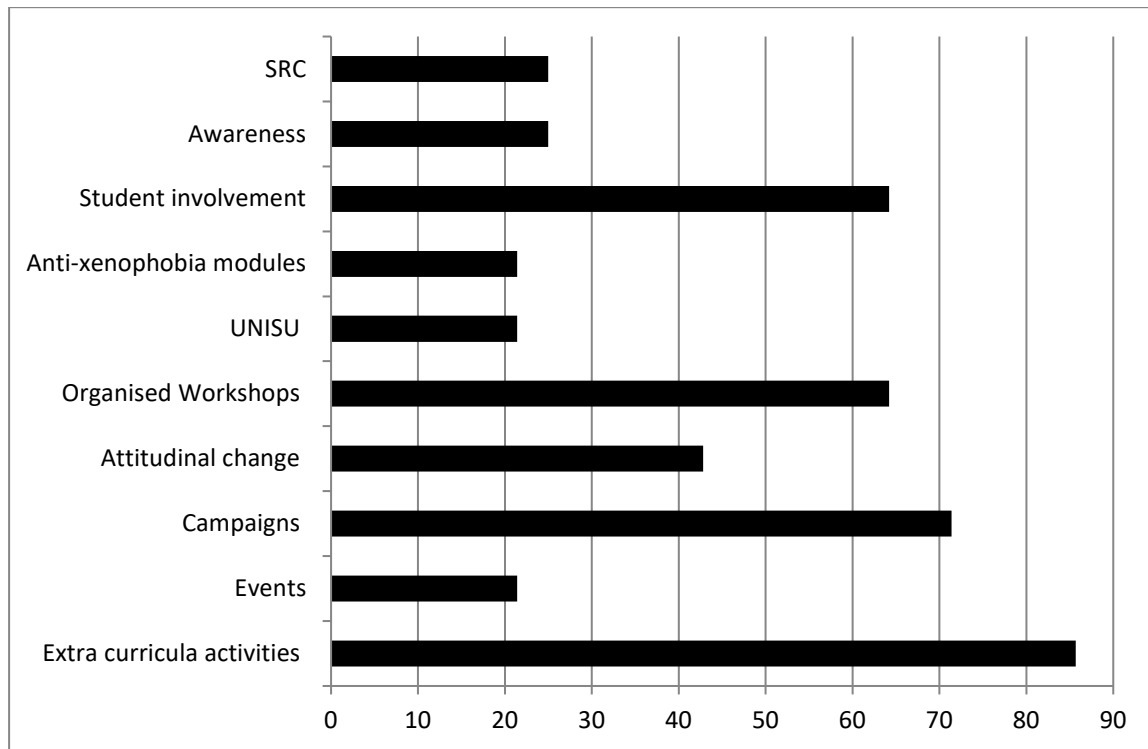
Figure 1: Coordinated activities that can help in solving xenophobic tendencies

As shown in Figure 2, most of the participants (85.7%) in the current study believed that UNIVEN should promote cultural diversity. This may be achieved through organising cultural shows, musical exhibitions, dances, wearing of traditional attire and using the concept of photo voice to educate the university community. The rich diversity on campus must be taken advantage of to build the institution's profile and reputation.
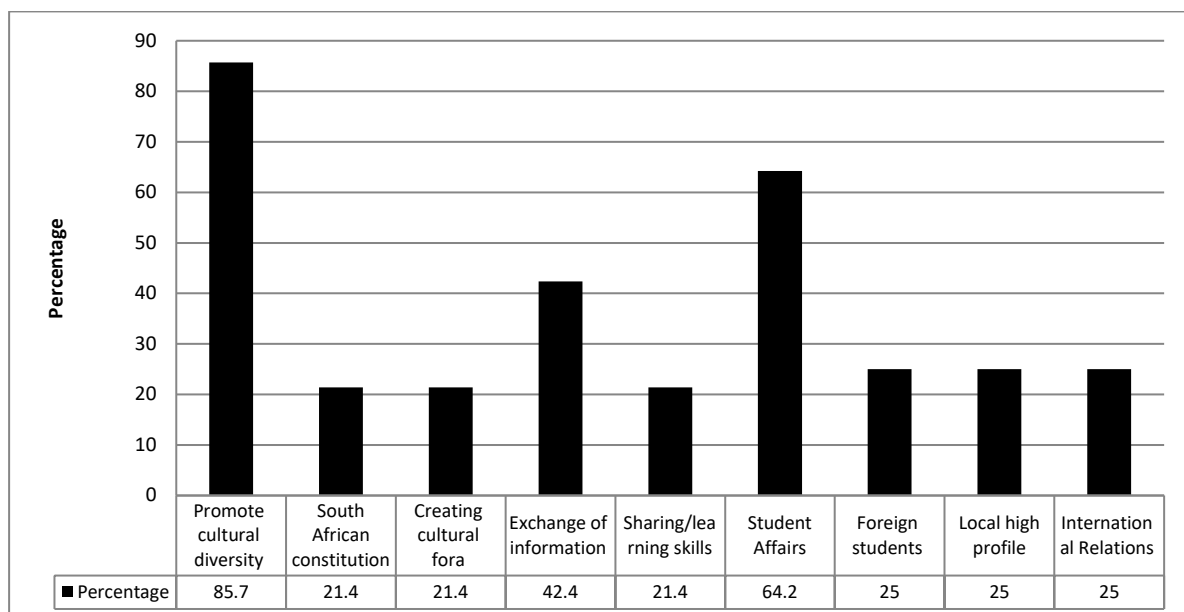

	Promote cultural diversity	South African constitution	Creating cultural fora	Exchange of information	Sharing/learning skills	Student Affairs	Foreign students	Local high profile	International Relations
■ Percentage	85.7	21.4	21.4	42.4	21.4	64.2	25	25	25

Figure 2: Factors that should be considered in harnessing cultural diversity to the benefits of the University of Venda community

About 25 per cent of the research participants believed that the Directorate of International Relations and UNISU should work together to organise regular on-campus discussions focusing on the benefits of cultural diversity. For approximately 42.8 per cent of the FGDs, it was possible to eradicate xenophobia on campus through staff and students exchange of information on individual culture.

DISCUSSION

According to Crush and Ramachandran (2009), the impact of xenophobia is pernicious and overt, poisoning social interactions between locals and foreigners, licensing abuse and exploitation of migrants, and undermining the positive development outcomes of migration. The general consensus was that xenophobia existed in many forms and varied in magnitude of expression at UNIVEN. Both staff and students, irrespective of nationality, were xenophobic to an extent. These tendencies may not be so pronounced but are overtly capable of large-scale triggering violence if not addressed properly. Even though this was the case, many stakeholders preferred not to talk about it. This may be due to the fear of becoming a possible target. Some academic, administrative and support staff were said to be xenophobic presumably due to ignorance and lack of awareness of the implications of their actions. It was suggested that awareness creation and public education in the communities, and in workplaces, could be a critical antidote to the poison of xenophobia. This is in line with the Crush and Ramachandran (2009, 83) findings about the importance of combating xenophobia with public education and the need to send a strong message that an irrational prejudice and hostility towards non-nationals is not acceptable under any circumstances. The interventions should create conditions that would encourage continuous deliberations on xenophobic acts and attitudes, including unmasking the perpetrators. The participants believed that the University management, even though it had established an anti-xenophobia campaign team could do more by taking a lead in staging various outreach activities to the campus community through organized events, namely workshops, extra-curricular activities, and presentations by high profile speakers (including government officials) and activists. This would educate the communities where students and staff resided about the menace of xenophobia.

Name calling and labelling were said to be common within the external communities in which members of the university resided in. One respondent mentioned that when houses were burgled in the areas where foreigners lived, they were always the first suspects and were often verbally abused or attacked.

One insight from the study was that voluntary segregation and formation of small groups

based on nationality was common. Some international university community members preferred to be grouped together with people from their countries of origin. Others, in particular local students who yearned to be part of such groups in order to earn high marks in class work, saw this as xenophobic tendencies. Polek (2011) is of the view that the tendency to establish bonds with familiar people and coping with new situations was normal because this was an important element in the daily life of immigrants.

Some respondents in the focus group discussions complained that the University gave preferential treatment to foreign students, especially with respect to allocation of rooms in the halls of residence. They cited a case when South African students objected to Zimbabwean students on that country's Presidential scholarship who were accommodated at a nearby hotel to mitigate acute tension on campus. Yet, the University was simply fulfilling its obligations contained in the terms of agreement with the international funder, namely to provide accommodation and other services for beneficiaries of the scholarship programme. Many local students were not aware of the terms of this agreement. Thus, it was not surprising that they viewed the preferential allocation of rooms to the said group of scholarship recipients as unfair discrimination directed against local students. It is crucial that the SRC is privy to such decisions that affect the students' wellbeing.

The respondents believed that inclusion of topics related to combating xenophobia and promoting "ubuntu", an African concept that showcases "we are because you are" as a compulsory module in the undergraduate curriculum would go a long way in training and informing students about the value of social inclusion and ethics as well as being human and an African. The need for members of senior and executive management plus all categories of staff of the University to actively participate in the creation of a zero tolerance stance to xenophobia campus was evident.

Language is a powerful unifying force and can also constitute a serious rift of disintegration. Another output of the current study was the revelation that many staff members deliberately used Tshivenda, the predominant local language, even when they spoke to international students and staff they knew were not conversant with it. Some of the support staff members even became irate and hostile when they found out that the foreign nationals did not understand Tshivenda. Although arguments are made that South Africa has 11 national languages, one of which is Tshivenda, it is not easy to justify its use when conversing or serving those who did not understand it. Presumably, the University might help in this respect if it adopted a clear language policy that defines the preferred medium of instruction. To date, the results of this study have been discussed at the University's Senior Management Committee and informed recommendations to the Universities' Risk Management Committee. It is

envisaged that this will result in the implementation of the recommendations and result in a xenophobia-free atmosphere on campus.

CONCLUSION

Since 2008, South Africa has had to deal with waves of violent manifestations of xenophobia. Although for the past five years there were seemingly isolated incidents reported in both the electronic and print media, in 2015 there were renewed violent xenophobic attacks in some pockets of the main cities, particularly in Durban, Johannesburg and Pretoria. This study has shown various avenues by which students and staff have experienced xenophobic tendencies. It is also clear that it is not only the foreign students that are at the receiving end of some of these tendencies but it also affects local students especially when group formation in classrooms are based on nationality. The aim of all and sundry is to set up mechanisms that will prevent the tendencies and nip it in the bud at the very start. Xenophobia poses a very high risk to the process of internationalisation at South African universities, and it is of the upmost importance that suitable preventive action is taken.

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