

RE-EVALUATING PERVASIVE ACADEMIC EXCLUSION IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: CHALLENGING THE NORM(ALISED)

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ABSTRACT

The pervasive issue of academic exclusion within South African higher education institutions is a deeply concerning matter. This phenomenon has resulted in a significant number of students prematurely discontinuing their degree programmes. In this article, we argue that academic exclusion remains largely unchallenged and has been normalised, despite its far-reaching implications, and therefore needs to be re-evaluated. Our inquiry centres on two key questions: What are the underlying reasons for academic exclusion in higher education, and how are these exclusion rules communicated to students, taking into account the support they receive? These questions serve as a foundation for a critical examination of the current state of academic exclusion and the proposal of alternative approaches to supporting academically struggling students throughout their educational journey. Drawing on Nancy Fraser's concept of the participation parity framework, this qualitative study employed a combination of desktop research and open-ended questionnaires to collect data from six excluded students. Content and thematic analyses are employed to analyse the collected data. The study's findings highlight the inadequacy of current support mechanisms for students and the diverse, often unplanned paths they contemplate after exclusion. Given this, the article advances and, therefore, instigates the conversations on and accentuates the importance of re-evaluating and revising academic exclusion policies within higher education institutions. It argues that students should receive comprehensive support throughout their academic journey and throughout their career trajectories within these institutions. While this study seeks to initiate round-the-table discussions on academic

exclusion rules and re-evaluation thereof, it calls for further system-wide research to explore mechanisms for supporting academically challenged students before they face academic exclusion, and to delve deeper into this critical issue's impact on students, their families, society, the economy, and related areas within higher education institutions.

Keywords: Academic exclusion/ involuntary attrition; injustices; participation parity; access and success; higher education institution.

INTRODUCTION

Academic exclusion of students from the university based on institutional rules and regulations remains one of the under-researched and uncontested areas. Few studies have examined the academic exclusion of students in higher education institutions (HEIs) (Van den Berg 2017; Makhafola, Maoba and Batisai 2022; Masutha 2022), yet insufficient arguments have been made about the need to re-evaluate such practices. In South Africa, academic exclusion, known as involuntary attrition or “pushed dropouts” (Masutha 2022), has persistently plagued higher education institutions from the era of apartheid to the present democratic times (Smit 2012; Du Plooy and Zilindile, 2014; Jevons and Lindsay 2018). While it is acknowledged that academic exclusion in South Africa has historical links with the apartheid system and racial inequalities (Menon 2014; Gallo 2020; Boughey 2012), this practice continues to raise concerns. It is against this backdrop that this article aims to make an argument against academic exclusion, which remains largely unchallenged and normalised, despite its far-reaching implications.

For instance, at the start of the academic year 2023, numerous students from the University of Pretoria (UP), University of Cape Town (UCT), and other institutions faced possible academic exclusions due to dismal academic performance, with the looming prospect of joining the ranks of the unemployed or becoming mere statistics (Ndhlovu, 2023). Some of the students facing academic exclusion are from three universities that comprise both historically white and historically black institutions, and are the focal point of this article. As we noted earlier, this article asks: What are the underlying reasons for academic exclusion in higher education, and how are these exclusion rules communicated to students, considering the support they receive? The following sub-questions seek to advance the main research question posed herein:

- What are the prevalent commonalities in relation to the academic exclusion of students in higher education institutions?
- Who are the academically excluded students in higher education institutions?
- What are the underlying reasons for academic exclusions of students in higher education?
- How are academic exclusion rules communicated to students?

- How effective is the provision of academic support for student success?
- What are the prospects of academically excluded students?

Understanding Academic Exclusion

Though there could be various definitions of academic exclusion, Smit (2012) notes that it pertains to being barred by certain principles of higher education institutions from engaging in higher learning. Due to this global challenge, many students often struggle to realise their educational aspirations. Koen, Cele and Libhaber (2006) note that academic exclusion in higher education typically hinges on either a credit criterion (failing to pass 40% of courses), a major course criterion (not passing majors), a repeat-fail criterion (continuously failing courses), or a period-rule criterion (not showing sufficient progress over a specified period). Their study revealed that approximately 100,000 students in South Africa do not re-register in the subsequent year due to exclusion, often stemming from financial constraints or academic difficulties, and sometimes voluntary withdrawal. Moreover, between 2016 and 2017, approximately 3,324 students faced academic exclusion, with 1,359 of them having their exclusions waived and 777 being readmitted following successful appeals (Sioga, 2018).

Garraway (2017) contends that the primary group vulnerable to experiencing academic exclusions within higher education institutions is those who face marginalisation due to disparate access to various material resources, hindering their ability to access and navigate their higher education journeys effectively. Smit (2012) asserts that academic exclusion impedes students' participation in advanced learning, often obstructing the realisation of their personal aspirations. Du Plooy and Zilindile (2014) expand the definition of academic exclusion, suggesting that it should include not only physical enrollment issues but also incorporate financial exclusion and related perspectives. This perspective is also evident in the study by Batisai, Makhafola, and Maoba (2022), which primarily examines gender inequality, illustrating how it has perpetuated what they term the “gendered exclusion of academics worldwide.”

In his context, Masutha (2022) labels academically excluded students as “pushed dropouts”, who are often marginalised in higher education. He contends that such a practice exemplifies a double standard in how marginalised students are perceived, where their success is celebrated as evidence of a field of fair and equal opportunity, while their failures are attributed to personal shortcomings, leading to punitive measures, which in this case is academic exclusion.

It should be acknowledged that academic exclusion often intersects with financial exclusion, particularly for students receiving external or private funding, such as those supported by the National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). If these students fail to meet the minimum credit requirements for the subsequent year of their studies, their funding is withdrawn. Similarly, students who are not reliant on external funding, comparable to NSFAS, and have their own financial resources can also face academic exclusion. The minimum requirements are typically outlined in various admission documents at each higher education institution. Additionally, a significant proportion of students owe universities substantial amounts of money, and they must settle their debts before registering, or they risk being excluded even if they have performed well academically (Ndlovu, 2023).

Hendrick Makaneta, the chairperson of the Foundation for Education and Social Justice Africa, emphasises the differential impact of academic and financial exclusion on students. He states,

“Academic and financial exclusion affect students differently. Some are devastated as they are the only ones in their families who have gone to university, and their families are relying on them to at least obtain a qualification to escape the poverty trap” (Ndlovu, 2023).

Given these considerations, this article argues against academic exclusion, which essentially refers to the practice of compelling students to discontinue their diploma and degree programmes before completion or graduation. Such academically excluded students, as shown throughout this article, are primarily those who have not performed well academically and have not passed the minimum required courses or modules to meet the minimum credit requirements for further enrollment in their degree programmes (Koen et al., 2006).

Unjust academic exclusion in higher education: unchallenged norm

Sayed (2003) argued that South Africa's higher education policies aimed to alleviate exclusionary practices by increasing student participation in both historically advantaged and historically disadvantaged higher education institutions. Sayed (2003) argued that the biggest challenge is that while participation is increasing, it has often underplayed what students are being provided access to, such as resources.

In one of our articles, we argued that the higher education sector, through its internal structures, cultures, practices, and external relations with wider society, continues to serve as a potent mechanism of social exclusion and injustice (Ravhuhali, Mboweni and Nendauni, 2022). One prevalent form of injustice in higher education involves students' exclusion from academic

programmes due to failure to meet the requirements for progression to the next level of study or degree. These exclusion rules are typically documented in booklets or on university websites, expecting students to read and comprehend the provided materials. Consequently, students who fail to meet the prescribed academic criteria required to advance to the subsequent level of their studies face a heightened risk of academic exclusion.

The National Planning Commission (NPC) (2011) acknowledges that South Africa's differentiated university education system has led to an unsettling level of education, inadequate to address the demands and needs of all students. It is widely acknowledged that most universities in South Africa still harbour historical injustices and misconceptions (NPC, 2011). This is supported by Muswede (2017) who contends that South African universities find themselves in a predicament where their relevance to the new social order depends significantly on how strongly they uphold the ideals of a post-colonial developmental state in the face of conflicting aspirations. Such ideals can be linked to the National Plan for Higher Education (2001:26), which explicitly states that institutions should ensure they do not retain students who lack a reasonable chance of academic success. As Suoranta and FitzSimmons (2017), assess, universities are now taking precautions or playing it safe due to the government's greater ability to impose its will, thereby applying exclusion rules without due consideration for students' well-being and aspirations. Additionally, Nesane et al. (2023) argue that the harsh and forceful exclusion of students from academic activities has strengthened prejudiced and intolerant attitudes towards such students in higher education institutions. We contend that while the National Plan for Higher Education (2001) may appear to justify unchallenged academic exclusion practices and has become widely accepted as the norm, it remains perplexing that institutions of higher learning persist in maintaining and normalising the status quo, given their pivotal roles as knowledge creators and citizenries.

While academic exclusion is not limited to any racial or ethnic group, it disproportionately affects black or African students, given the historical injustices they have endured in the past. This was echoed by Ndima (2023), who expresses concern that despite black students continuing to bear the burden of struggle, humiliation, and exclusion, nearly three decades into the democratic era, there seems to be a lack of urgency in addressing this critical issue as a prominent topic of public discourse. Similar sentiments were shared by Sayed (2003, p.3), who indicated that the biggest challenge is the need for the government to be mindful of how inclusion policies result "in new forms of exclusion" which may exacerbate inequities, albeit in different forms.

Unforeseen Circumstances and the so-called "Progressed Learner" Question

In numerous instances, academic exclusion occurs when a student fails to meet the requisite due to various reasons such as illnesses, psychological and emotional challenges, including the loss of a loved one, stress, and depression, among others. Students facing academic setbacks due to these reasons, and who can provide evidence thereof, are in a more favourable position to receive leniency and an opportunity to re-enrol in the following year. Conversely, those unable to substantiate their reasons for academic underperformance often find themselves subject to the exclusion policy. This highlights the reality that students in higher education are consistently subjected to “normalised” and stringent academic exclusion policies, uniformly applied across higher education spaces, often with insufficient consideration for the individual aspirations and plans of students.

Furthermore, it appears that HEIs may lack awareness of the diverse student population they host, including what is commonly referred to as “progressed learners” (DBE, 2013), as noted by Juan, Reddy, and Hannan (n.d). Progressed learners, as defined by the DBE (2013), are students who, despite not meeting the promotion criteria, progress to the next grade. Therefore, progression is defined as “the advancement of a learner from one grade to the next, excluding Grade R, even if the learner has not fulfilled all the promotion requirements” (DBE, 2013: xi). This implies that, despite the presence of some academic support programmes, these students may require additional support, given their disadvantaged backgrounds. This is mainly because, to achieve a bachelor's pass or matric exemption, several extra classes were required during their matriculation years. It is important to note that being a progressed learner does not necessarily imply academic incapability. However, it is equally important to consider research by Lam et al. (2013), which argues that grade progression in African schools may indicate a system failing certain groups of South African students.

Theoretical Foundation of the Paper

In this article, we utilised Nancy Fraser’s (2009) Participation parity as a theoretical foundation. Participation parity is based on the understanding that social justice is achieved when all members of society can fully participate in all institutionalised value patterns and can deliberate on all processes affecting their well-being in society. Hargreaves, Buchanan, and Quick (2021) emphasize that participation is fundamental to successful schooling and social justice, involving sharing, partaking, and contributing to what an individual desires to be a part of (Hargreaves et al., 2021). Similarly, Fraser (2009, 2019) defines the Parity of Participation as comprising three core concepts: equal distribution, recognition of status, and political voice and representation. Fraser (ibid) argues that equitable resource distribution ensures that all sectors of society, living

at an equally high standard, have access to the same facilities and similar opportunities to amass wealth. However, present governments worldwide are market-driven and far from redistributing wealth fairly and equitably (ibid., 2009); therefore, they segregate individuals for efficiency and risk mitigation, effectively constructing distinct life courses for each group.

Accordingly, Fraser's (2009) Parity of Participation also encompasses the concept of recognition of status. Recognition of status involves institutionalised patterns of cultural value that designate certain actors as inferior, excluded, wholly other, or invisible, positioning them as less than full participants in social interaction. This renders some students less capable as they endure institutional misrecognition and subordination, constituting violations of social justice.

Furthermore, Fraser (2008) argues that justice necessitates institutionalised patterns of cultural value that express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunities for achieving social esteem. The critical question arises regarding whether academically excluded students have equal access to the best teachers and sufficient resources to excel in their studies.

Additionally, Fraser's (2009) Parity of Participation incorporates political voice and representation as one of its core concepts. While political voice and representation entail all sectors of society actively participating in wealth distribution and defining status, it is closely intertwined with enabling students to have a voice in their own learning. This should include, among other aspects, determining what and how they should learn and how they should receive support to succeed in their studies. When they are not performing well academically, they should be afforded opportunities to offer suggestions on how they can receive support.

We have thus far established the context in which the problem of this article emanates from, and we have extensively explored the meaning associated with academic exclusion by incorporating various scholars on early literature pertaining to this subject. In the ensuing section we present the methods of this inquiry.

METHODOLOGY

A combination of explorative qualitative (De Vos et al., 2011) and desktop design approaches was employed, utilising an interpretive perspective to comprehend the reasons for the academic exclusion of students in higher education, the communication of academic exclusion rules to students, and the type of support provided to them. Data was primarily collected from the websites of four (4) higher education institutions, and six (6) academically excluded students from three universities, which comprise both historically white and historically black institutions. Nendauni (2020) suggests that in cases where there are no fixed sample size guidelines, a larger sample is advisable; however, even a small sample can be valuable if the topic has not been extensively studied. Given the limited research that makes strong arguments against excluding students in South Africa, it is anticipated that this study will generate sufficient interest to justify the use of a small sample. Though no intention was made to compare what is entailed in those exclusion rules as the purpose was to examine if there are any commonalities in the academic exclusion of students. Moreover, six (6) academically excluded students who participated in the study were voluntarily requested to sign the consent form. They completed an open-ended questionnaire, which was pre-tested for validity purposes.

The decision to employ open-ended questionnaires was rooted in their capacity to allow participants to freely communicate their feelings without prompts from the interviewers (Baxter and Babbie, 2004; De Vos et al. 2011).

Regarding the use of desk research, we considered it one of the more popular research types currently, as it provides data from various sources, such as published reports, accessible online, in public libraries, websites, and previous surveys. While the focus of our article is not on institutional academic exclusion rule documents, we gathered and summarised these documents to enhance the overall effectiveness of the study. We only examined extracts from a few institutional documents with publicly available academic exclusion rules online. It is essential to note that the use of publicly available documents limited the depth of insight into institutional policies; consequently, the findings from this study may not be generalisable beyond the institutions studied. The sample for this study was deemed sufficient, as the qualitative data collected were complemented by information on academic exclusion rules available on webpages from institutions where the students were registered, to initiate round-table discussions on academic exclusion rules and re-evaluation thereof.

Thematic and content analysis were both utilised to analyse data derived from the open-ended questionnaires. Data analysis involved familiarising the researchers with the data,

generating initial codes, searching for themes, and reviewing them. The subsequent steps included defining the themes and commencing the interpretative writing process.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the article. These findings are presented in accordance with themes and sub-themes, along with accompanying discussions. The themes include: *the prevalent commonalities in relation to the academic exclusion of students in higher education institutions; Educational background of academically excluded students in the context of this study; underlying reasons for academic exclusions of students in higher education; dissemination and Communication of academic exclusions rules by key stakeholders (university and student representatives); provision of academic support for student's academic success; and pondering uncertain future realities grappling with emotional and mental depression.* The initial part presents excerpts from university rules and regulations concerning academic exclusion.

Findings from the Universities Rules and Regulations on Academic Exclusion

THEME 1: The prevalent commonalities in relation to the academic exclusion of students in higher education institutions

We examined prevalent commonalities related to the academic exclusion of students in higher education institutions, as illustrated in extracts A-D. Extract A comprises two paragraphs, specifically paragraphs 1 and 2, while Extract D has three paragraphs. These extracts were randomly sampled based on their accessibility on institutional web pages, without a specific order. It should be noted that these extracts do not represent the entirety of the information available on the web pages; however, for the purpose of this article, we have focused on only four. According to institutional rules, academic exclusion requires students to obtain permission from the executive deans to continue their studies. Institution B defines its exclusion rules as “liberal”, suggesting they are designed in the student’s best interests. This prompts a critical examination of the extent to which academic exclusion aligns with students’ best interests. The term “liberal” poses interpretational challenges as it can be perceived differently by different individuals, varying based on context and time. Institution D outlines the purpose of academic exclusion by stipulating that “students who continue in the system without satisfactory progress limits and/or deny space to new University entrants... negatively affect the throughput rate and

diminish subsidy earnings based on teaching output units.... cause a strain on already depleted resources”

Below are some of the extracts from the sampled institutions:

“Students who have not been promoted to the following year of study for any two years of study will not be permitted to continue with that programme and will academically be excluded except with the special permission of the Executive Dean. The Executive Dean may stipulate conditions for students to continue with their studies” (Institution A, P-1)

“Exclusion rules are liberal. For example, a general Bachelor of Arts (BA) or any three-year programme requires you to have passed a minimum of five out of eight courses in your first year to be permitted to continue. Exclusion rules are also designed with the interests of the student in mind: If you continuously struggle to meet the minimum requirements it would be unethical for us to allow you to pay for courses you cannot pass.” (Institution A, P-2)

“Rules for exclusion are laid out in the Faculty Handbooks ensure that you find the correct degree and read with careful thought and consideration. The language in the handbook may be formal, however, it is well structured to make sure you find the necessary information for each degree “(Institution B, P-1)

When students are to be excluded, they are often sent a message similar but not limited to the following which is from one of the institutions of higher learning in South Africa:

“We have noted that you do not meet the academic requirement to continue with your studies next year. This is since: You do not have sufficient module credits to comply with the HEMIS requirements for readmission to our university”. (See the rules for readmission in Part 1[General] of the University Calendar under the heading “Readmission after unsuccessful studies”).)

OR

“You do not meet the program-specific continuation criteria, i.e., that you have not complied with your programme’s relevant re-registration requirements and/or promotion and examination requirements, and you are therefore academically excluded” (see criteria for promotion and examination/re-registration in the University’s Calendar) (Institution C, P-1).

Moreover, institutions such as D justify such draconian exclusion rules as follows:

- To maintain a quality learning and teaching environment and to encourage academic throughput, students should be incentivised to perform academically, and non-performing students who are unlikely to meet minimum exit level requirements within the stipulated time cause a strain on already depleted resources.

- To increase access for poorly performing students who continue in the system without satisfactory progress limits and/or deny space to new University entrants.
- Financial viability: Poorly performing students negatively affect the throughput rate and diminish subsidy earnings based on teaching output units (Institution D, P-1)

Upon reviewing the extracts provided, it is appropriate to acknowledge that the application of the exclusion rules is pervasive, and these processes or regulations have become widely accepted and normalised within students' academic journeys. This stands in contrast to the emphasis by the United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] (2014) on the importance of students' participation through the provision of opportunities for them to actively engage in community life and exercise creativity in an environment characterised by dignity and freedom.

The rules and their articulation mirror what Fraser's (2009) call the recognition of status which involves institutionalised patterns of cultural value designating certain actors as inferior, excluded, wholly other, or invisible, positioning them as less than full participants in social interaction. For these institutions, the academic exclusion of students is justifiable even though it perpetuates a manifestation of behavioural attitudes that are normalised and considered liberal as noted by Bourdieu (1977). Importantly, this practice aligns with a general academic rule supported by institutional and legislative policy frameworks. This is evident in the usage of terms such as "liberal", "maintain a quality learning and teaching environment and to encourage academic throughput", "increase access for poorly performing students", and "financial viability" to justify the academic exclusion rules and the potential necessity for students to terminate their studies. This necessitates the need to look at the academically excluded students in the next section to argue for a re-evaluation of the academic exclusion of students.

Findings from Academically Excluded Students

THEME 2: Educational background of academically excluded students in the context of this study

Given the academic exclusion rules above, it is important to understand the context of excluded students sampled for this study. When the academically excluded students were asked to share their educational background, including whether they are First-generation (FG) students (the first in their family to attend university), four (4) of them indicated that they fall into the category of first-generation (FG) students. Conversely, López, Santelices and Taveras's (2023)

study supports this observation, revealing that first-generation (FG) students typically demonstrate poorer academic performance compared to their continuing-generation (CG) counterparts. López et al. (2023)'s study also highlights that FG students are less likely to persist and more susceptible to early departure from colleges and universities without obtaining a degree (López et al., 2023; Stebleton & Soria, 2012). Considering this, we agree with Motsabi, Diale, and Van Zyl (2020), who argue that higher education institutions should formulate inclusive policies, paying particular attention to the needs of FG students, which may involve engaging their parents in key activities such as orientation days.

Furthermore, the findings also show that some of the students were pursuing the degree, which was their first-choice programme of study. Moreover, academically excluded students were pursuing their first-choice degrees and were in their second, third, or fourth year of study. Again, this finding also indicates that the academic students were excluded halfway through the completion of their degree programme. This discovery contrasts slightly with the findings of Rooney and van Walbeek's (2015) research conducted at the University of Cape Town, which indicates that a higher proportion of underperforming students face academic exclusion in the first and second years of their academic pursuits, while other faculties, such as Commerce, exhibit a greater tendency to exclude more students in their third and subsequent years of study. In the next section, we looked at the underlying reasons for academic exclusions.

THEME 3: Underlying reasons for academic exclusions of students in higher education

Numerous reasons have arisen as to why students face academic exclusion. These encompass shortcomings in certain modules, failure to meet the requisite criteria for advancing to the subsequent level of study, and experiencing illness during the initial semester of the academic year. A range of factors contributing to student exclusion are detailed in sub-themes herein, including health-related matters, poor academic performance, and challenges in navigating disciplines and modules.

Sub-theme 3.1: Poor Academic Performance

The findings here indicate that some of the students are academically excluded based on their failure to do well in their results as noted by Students 1 and 2 herein who indicated thus:

“During my academic period of 2022, I had 5 modules to complete then I failed 3 and passed 2”
(Student 1).

Student 2 alluded to what Student 1 indicated and added:

“The reason why I’m being excluded is that I was told that I’ve been affected by the N+2 rule which stops me from registering to further my studies” (Student 2)

Some of the reasons for academic exclusions are captured as follows:

“I am excluded because the university is saying did not meet the requirements” (Student 4).

“I am being excluded because I have not passed all my first-year modules” (Student 5)

“I didn’t pass some of my first year’s modules in my first year even last year” (Student 6)

The Post-Secondary Education and Training Policy acknowledges that education is the key to helping people find their way out of potential poverty and advancing equality of opportunity, both of which are integral to the advancement of social justice (DHET, 2013:5). Notwithstanding the Post-Secondary Education and Training Policy acknowledgment, the reasons provided by the students shed light on the various factors contributing to academic exclusion within the higher education institution. It becomes evident that academic performance, particularly failure to meet minimum requirements or pass required modules, plays a significant role in determining exclusion. Student 1's experience of failing three out of five modules exemplifies this, indicating a struggle to meet academic expectations. Additionally, Student 2's mention of the N+2 rule further underscores how institutional policies can impact students' ability to progress academically. Furthermore, the testimonies of Students 4, 5, and 6 highlight similar issues of not meeting requirements or failing to pass essential modules, suggesting a common thread among the reasons for academic exclusion. These findings underscore the importance of alternative academic support systems and interventions to address academic challenges and improve student success rates within higher education institutions.

Sub-theme 3.2.: Health-related matters

The reasons for academic exclusion for students 1 and 2 are different from the reasons provided by Students 3 and Student 4. Students 3 and 4 ‘s reasons are mainly health-related. Both students 3 and 4 had this to say:

“Because I was sick from May 2022 until now, I’m still in my treatment and it led to failure or not performing well in my studies” (Student 3)

“I have an eye problem “(Student 4)

Student 6 provided a different reason from what has been shared by students 2,3 and 4 in that there was an added responsibility of having to look after an ailing mother diagnosed with chronic illness.

“During the academic year while approaching the exam, my mother got diagnosed with a chronic disease and I had to leave the university to take care of her” (Student 6)

This indicates that there are a variety of unforeseen and interrelated circumstances that tend to interfere with and complicate the students’ academic journey in HEIs. While Students 3 and 4 attribute their academic struggles to illness they suffered as well as their family members, it would be beneficial to understand how the university's support systems responded to their situation and whether any accommodations were made for such kind of students. Student 6’s reasons can be linked to Jevons and Lindsay (2018) who highlighted that some of the students who are academically excluded in HEIs suffer from mental health challenges which include their ailing health and that of their close family members.

Sub-theme 3.3: Difficulties navigating through disciplines and modules

Some other reasons shared by academically excluded students are difficulties in navigating through disciplines and modules such as the lack of understanding of certain modules. Student 5 specifically mentioned experiencing difficulties in comprehending mathematical concepts in both Mathematics and Accounting. Student 5 expressed the following:

“It is not easy for me to understand numbers. Maths and Accounting are difficult for me to understand and apply” (Student 5)

This response is also echoed by students 1 and 2 who had this to say:

“I think it was a lack of understanding because the module I failed I studied them so hard” (Student 1)

“I failed to understand the module and I think if I had a tutor or a mentor maybe things would be different. I do not understand the lecturer” (Student 2)

The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training acknowledges the persistent and critical concern that students, having completed their basic education and being admitted to specific programmes of study, are not fully equipped to navigate post-secondary institutions, particularly universities. Therefore, the policy emphasizes the necessity for these institutions, especially universities, to offer comprehensive support to all students, utilising various strategies, including bridge or foundation programmes, mentoring programmes, and others

(DHET, 2013:6). Additionally, the South African Varsity Student (2015) reported that a significant proportion of university students come from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and often face challenges in understanding English as the language of instruction.

We argue that the students who require extended support are often the ones who end up facing academic exclusion from their universities. Thus, in addition to grappling with higher-level studies, they must also contend with a language of instruction that may not be entirely familiar to them, with instructors who may not be able to provide the personalised attention they need, such as explaining certain concepts in their native languages (S A varsity student, 2015). This, unfortunately, cannot be realised as higher education institutions remain exclusive and discriminatory as they continue to base academic exclusion on students' inability to meet certain requirements, particularly when assessments are not provided in their native language or a language they can easily comprehend (McKenna 2013).

THEME 4: Dissemination and Communication of academic exclusion rules by key stakeholders (university and student representatives)

In an attempt to determine whether the exclusion rules were effectively communicated to students by universities, lecturers, and the Student Representative Council (SRC), the findings revealed that not all students were well-informed about the exclusion rules. The results would suggest that there is insufficient effort to effectively communicate the exclusion rules to students. The findings indicate that students received inadequate information from both their lecturers and the SRC. These communication gaps suggest that not all students within the university were sufficiently informed about the exclusion rules and their potential impact on their academic progress. The lack of adequate support and information provided to certain students in some of the historically white and historically black institutions may indicate that some of the students who are academically excluded were not afforded ample opportunity to know the implications of their academic failures and what it means to their academic programmes. Drawing on Nancy Fraser's (2009, 2019) concept of parity of participation, we argue that the lack of adequate support and dissemination of information to some students denies them access to the essential resources that enable them to engage in social interactions actively and equally within society.

THEME 5: Provision of academic support for students' academic success***Sub-theme 5.1: Lecturers' support and provision of tutoring and mentoring support classes***

The findings indicate that not all excluded students were supported by the respective lecturers in relation to the modules they were struggling with. Although students 1 and 3 indicated that they were provided with tutoring and mentoring support to excel in their studies, others, such as students 2, 4, and 5, stated that they were not provided with lecturers' as well as tutorial and mentoring support. Only students 3 and 6 indicated that they were supported, while students 1, 2, and 5 indicated that they were not provided with the necessary support for the modules they were struggling with. This is shown by Student 3 who said: "they even call me in their office and assist me with information for the module", while Student 6 also adds about the support from the lecturer as follows: "the lecture was providing some extra classes with his tutors". This, however, was not the case with student 1, who indicated that "the lecturer wasn't in class often and was always absent". In support of student 1, students 2 and 5 had this to say:

"As students, we were never given a tutor or someone to mentor us. The struggle was on ourselves. We didn't know where or whom to talk to if we were failing to understand during his lecture" (Student 2)

"I had back-to-back classes, and when I had time, I would not be able to find or access the lecturer" (Student 5)

The findings indicate that academically excluded adolescents often lack the necessary support to navigate their challenges, comprehend their circumstances, and reassess their future as noted by van den Berg (2017). Moodle (2016) suggests that to reduce academic exclusion, greater efforts are needed to improve student transitions and facilitate interaction throughout their academic journey. This could be done by the provision of tutorship and mentorship programmes. Additionally, diversification of effective teaching and learning methodologies by students' respective lecturers is crucial. This should be complemented by the implementation of constructive and supportive formative assessments, both early on and continuously throughout the course modules (Moodle 2016).

Sub-theme 5.2: SRC's role in supporting and assisting students who are facing academic exclusion

Some of the academically excluded students indicated that the SRC explained to them the exclusion rules but failed to assist them while excluded except that they were referred to the

teaching and learning centre for assistance. Student 5 indicated that SRC only notified them about the steps to be followed when appealing against academic exclusions. This is what students noted:

“They notify us of steps to take when we need assistance in appeals and being unblocked” (Student 5)

“They didn’t explain enough about this rule. The SRC is trying to refer me to official members of the institution who could help us” (Student 1)

“I am not getting any help from the SRC, when I tried to reach out to the person, I thought would help me, he never assisted me” (Student 2).

“They assisted me to register, and they were unable to help me to re-register when I was excluded” (Student 3)

“They must mobilise funds for us, they are trying to engage businesses for fundi” (Student 4)

“The SRC is referring me to teaching and learning centre offices to get assistance with the proof and reasons why you were excluded” (Student 6)

The National Plan for Higher Education (2001) proposes and emphasises the inclusion of academic development programmes as a fundamental element in a new funding formula, recognising their pivotal role in students’ success. Moreover, universities are expected to provide additional support to less academically prepared students, considering that some may be less equipped for the demands of higher education compared to their more privileged peers (NPC, 2011).

THEME 6: Pondering uncertain future realities

The students expressed a feeling of sadness about academic exclusion. Student 1 indicated that it is painful to be denied an opportunity to complete the degree, as it is the final year of study. Student 2 expressed sadness, as only one module remains to complete the degree. The sentiment is also shared by Student 6, who had this to say about academic exclusion: “I feel very sad, and I’m scared that I will lose my degree as it is my last hope.” The following are some of the comments from other students who are academically excluded:

“It is painful because it is blocking me from obtaining my degree since it is my last year” (Student 1)

“I am saddened by this situation, I am left with only one module, and if I were to finish my studies here, it was going to open doors for me, even with work opportunities” (Student 2)

“It makes me feel depressed because I want to see myself finishing my studies or degree” (Student 3)

“I feel so down and very much excluded from my study” (Student 4)

“It feels unfair as we should be given chances rather than being excluded without even a warning” (Student 5)

When queried about their future, students presented various alternatives. Students 1 and 4 stated that they had no other options and were forced to discontinue their studies at the university. On the other hand, students 3 and 6 mentioned their intention to seek employment, while students 2 and 5 conveyed their interest in applying to other educational institutions. These responses suggest that academically excluded students face uncertain prospects and may struggle to achieve their goal of obtaining a degree, prompting them to explore various alternatives to find a viable path forward. Students’ comments are captured as follows:

“That is the hard or difficult question since I do not have any plans” (Student 1)

“I am planning to apply to other institutions to start over with a new degree because I can’t sit and do nothing with my future” (Student 2)

“My plan is to look for a job and try to make money so that I can apply for another degree in other colleges or universities” (Student 3)

“I have no choice but to drop out” (Student 4)

“I will try to apply elsewhere for a new course and study further” (Student 5)

“I am planning to find a job if possible so that I can take care of my siblings as there will be nothing to do” (Student 6)

One of the challenges faced by academically excluded students is trauma and negative emotions (van den Berg 2017). This is mainly attributed to the fact that these students must seek alternative educational and career pathways while grappling with adverse experiences and emotions like failure, disappointment, inadequacy, depression, anxiety, and anger (van den Berg 2017). The regrettable aspect of academic exclusion as Ndimma (2023) highlights, is that institutions of higher education continue to disregard the fact that most students carry their future aspirations in their hearts and backpacks when they enroll in their degree programmes, hoping for a better life and an opportunity to alter their own and their families destinies. The sad reality for academically excluded students is that they encounter dashed future expectations and prospects and must confront the challenge of informing their parents and communities about their setbacks and the financial ramifications of their academic failures (Ndimma 2023; van den Berg 2017). This is observed by Harris, Eden and Blair (2000) who indicate that school exclusion contributes to persistent poverty as students drop out without obtaining their educational qualifications and struggle to secure suitable employment.

In their article, Nesane et al. (2023) make the case for the adoption of other, more compassionate regulations and policies that honor and recognise students' efforts in their academic journeys (p. 238).

Based on this, we contend that the primary objective of higher education institutions (HEIs) should be to support students, enabling them to actively participate in all activities that positively impact their academic progress, and ensure that the necessary conditions are in place for them to feel included, valued, and respected.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The National Development Plan (NDP) envisions an education system that contributes more to creating an inclusive society, providing equal opportunities, and assisting all South Africans in realising their full potential, especially those who have previously suffered from apartheid-era disadvantages (NPC, 2011). This vision could only come to fruition if all the students in our universities receive adequate support to complete their degree programmes. As argued elsewhere in this article, academic exclusion has significant implications for students, representing a form of injustice in higher education institutions, particularly now that such rules are normalised and uncontested. Undoubtedly, most of our students in HEIs are products of past discriminatory laws and are still part of an unreformed educational system that preaches freedom and basic rights without intending to foster their practice.

Given that exclusion criteria and academic exclusion policies are applied frequently and that these procedures or guidelines are now considered normal, acceptable, and justifiable parts of students' academic lives, institutions of higher learning need to re-evaluate and disrupt such unjust academic rules to support the vast number of students who are academically excluded annually. There should be a great shift from funding-oriented to Ubuntu-oriented thinking and policies/rules that are tailored towards advancing academic citizenry, in which all students can attain academic success for their well-being and that of their families. Apart from that, higher education institutions should formulate inclusive policies tailored to support all students, which should involve parents in key academic activities, including orientations. Moreover, concerted efforts have to be taken to ensure that such rules are communicated effectively during the orientation, first-year experience programmes, as well as during the first week of the academic calendar. Since it emerged that some of the underlying reasons for academic exclusions of students in higher education included poor academic performance and difficulties navigating through disciplines and modules, academics/university teachers should embrace the ethics of care in engaging with students to understand the challenges that they face.

Although the study could not conclusively determine that students are not provided with academic support during their academic journey, it would be important to recommend that the effectiveness of such academic support be examined, and whether there are alternative methods that could be used to support students. Given that the prospects of academically excluded students look bleak and full of uncertainty, this article recommends that such students be provided with mental health support programmes. In conclusion, we contend that the academic exclusion of students in our HEIs cannot be simply justified through institutional rules and policies but needs to be re-evaluated. We further implore various stakeholders to amplify their voices in finding ways to support academically excluded students in higher education and express grave concern about the normalisation of endemic and uncontested academic exclusion. Lastly, further system-wide studies are recommended to explore mechanisms for supporting academically challenged students before they face academic exclusion, and to delve deeper into this critical issue's impact on students, their families, society, the economy, and related areas within higher education institutions.

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