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Stories of students identified as at-risk: insights into student retention and support at a South African University

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ABSTRACT

The perturbing phenomenon of wastage, (revealed through incidences of unsatisfactory levels of student retention, poor pass and completion rates and an increase in repetition rates) is a cause for concern for universities as it has a bearing on financial expenditure as well as institutional reputation. For purposes of this study, being at-risk is synonymous with being vulnerable. Student vulnerability is not a homogeneous phenomenon and therefore different student support structures, strategies and policies need to be devised for different issues and problems experienced by vulnerable students. The study argues that as long as effective and adequate institutional support is lacking, student vulnerability will continue to be a 'wastage' catalyst.

Through narrative research and an online survey, this study explores the stories and experiences of students who identified themselves in their own words, to be at risk. This study uses an *integrated approach* to expand the notion of vulnerability by combining three approaches: *Risk-Hazards* approach, (the causes and effects of identified risks/hazards); *Political Economy* approach, (how political and economic factors underscore susceptibility to a risk/hazard); and the *Resilience* approach (how individuals cope with stress).

Researching *with* vulnerable people uncovers the 'hidden' marginalised lives of individuals or groups whose voices are often absent from mainstream discourses. Although vulnerability is widely used as a conceptual idea in many fields in both the hard and social sciences, its use in the field of education, particularly in Higher Education (HE), is under-conceptualised. Framed within the conceptual theory of vulnerability, this study sought to determine how students in universities had experienced the phenomenon of being at-risk, why they felt they had been susceptible, and how they had coped with it. The study sought to determine how their narratives of vulnerability and being at risk could inform debates and policy on student support and retention in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

The study adopted a narrative research approach based on the foundation of socio-cultural theory, embedded within a qualitative research framework. A qualitative framework in the field of investigation necessitates a study of phenomena in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of and interpret these experiences in terms of the meaning that people bring to them. As such, the study explored the phenomenon of vulnerability through the lens of the lived experiences of self-identified, students at risk at a HEI in the Gauteng Province, in SA. The study espouses an interpretive post-positivist paradigm within a qualitative methods design that uses a multi-stage procedure, essential for collecting narrative and survey data.

Data are collected through narrative interviews with 13 self-identified, at-risk students from different faculties of the university, across different study levels.

The ethical challenges experienced indicate that the narrative researcher should be required to have had appropriate training with a support system in place for both them and their respondents. This is because sophisticated psycho-social skills and interventions are demanded by such research. Further, the evidence suggests that doctoral students' training reproduces the marginalisation of vulnerability through inadequately addressing ways of researching with vulnerable people.

The study argues that the support interventions at HEIs exclude a silent number of students who suffer various forms of less obvious, but nevertheless equally and if not more debilitating vulnerabilities. Such students are not supported through conventional support strategies and structures and therefore feel marginalised from mainstream support services. Students at academic risk negotiate, use facilities available to them in so far as they are aware of these, despite some levels of scepticism about the effectiveness of these facilities. Students facing other kinds of risk cope with their vulnerability through the relationships developed through friendship, family and religious support. Stress is based on the individual's perception and interpretation of demands placed on them and not the demands themselves. Stress management of students through mentorship, can contribute to retention and throughput.

Three major models are investigated in this study: student vulnerability, support and retention models. The three models invite this study to ask crucial questions to improve the throughput of students at-risk. However, one model considered in isolation cannot provide a holistic answer. As such an integrated model combining all three models that can be used to ameliorate vulnerabilities experienced at multiple levels of the institution was adopted. The study proposes an integrated model whereby institutions combine issues of student vulnerability, support, and retention into a single coherent policy and strategy.

Understanding individual student vulnerabilities in a university can provide insight into how the institutions, their systems, and organisation harbour their own vulnerabilities. A key aspect of introducing a systemic and systematic approach to support which flows top-down from management to first-year, can address such institutional vulnerability.

Keywords:

at-risk students, vulnerability, wastage, dropout, support, retention, narrative research