



International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research
Vol. 24, No. 11, pp. 464-487, November 2025
<https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.24.11.22>
Received Jul 18, 2025; Revised Sept 21, 2025; Accepted Oct 22, 2025

Evaluating the Influence of Socio-Cultural and Economic Factors on Underprivileged Students' Experiences at a Rural South African University

Obert Matarirano*  and Cuthbert Muza 
Walter Sisulu University
Mthatha, South Africa

Abstract. This study delved into the effects of socio-cultural and economic structures on the university experiences of South African students. Employing a qualitative research approach, the study examined students' narratives from a rural, historically disadvantaged institution at their undergraduate level. Guided by a social realist framework, the study analysed how structural and cultural factors shape students' academic progress and learning journeys. The study found that societal expectations, cultural values, family dynamics, and economic constraints significantly shaped students' decisions, expectations, and approaches to study. While these factors could enable and constrain academic learning, understanding their impact is essential for developing targeted interventions to enhance student progress and well-being in South African higher education. Furthermore, the research highlights persistent disparities in access to resources, such as learning materials and digital tools, faced by students from different socio-economic backgrounds, which hinder their success. The study calls for inclusive strategies and interventions that promote equity, inclusion and sustainable learning opportunities.

Keywords: student experiences; socio-cultural factors; economic factors; historically disadvantaged institutions; student success

1. Introduction

Higher Education in South Africa is confronted with the persistent challenge of low student success and throughput rates (Mafenya, 2014; Ngqulu, 2018). In response, several South African universities have established standalone departments dedicated to student success, whereas this function was previously housed within the teaching and learning units. A crucial step in addressing this challenge is understanding student experiences, which directly shape their academic outcomes (Maniriho, 2024). This paper contributes to ongoing strategies

*Corresponding author: Obert Matarirano; leonah005@gmail.com

aimed at improving student success. By examining student experiences, universities can gain a deeper insight into the obstacles students face and develop tailored interventions to address them. Utilisation of tailor-made interventions that respond to student needs would reduce student alienation (Mann, 2001), foster engagement in the learning process, and provide evidence to inform policies and procedures.

Despite policies such as the Education White Paper of 1997 and the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) 2001, which sought to expand access to higher education, student success remains low (Mafenya, 2014; Ngqulu, 2018). Much of the existing research in South African higher education is concentrated on historically advantaged institutions (HAIs) and urban higher education institutions (Faloye & Ajayi, 2021; Joubert & Sibanda, 2022; Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 2021; Moosa & Langsford, 2021; Naicker et al., 2022; Van Zyl et al., 2020; Xulu-Gama & Hadebe, 2022).

On the contrary, studies on rural, historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs) are scarce. Kerr and Luescher (2018) corroborate this bias, noting that the literature predominantly focuses on urban and HAIs, offering limited insight into the realities of rural HDIs. Consequently, there is insufficient understanding of how socio-cultural and economic structures influence student experiences within these contexts. Therefore, focusing on HDI is critical in addressing societal imbalances rooted in historical injustices (Matarirano & Musaigwa, 2025). Despite their national importance, HDIs continue to face structural inequalities such as underfunding, limited infrastructure and rural locations, which undermine their capacity to achieve academic excellence (Mathipa-Mdakane, 2025). Addressing these disparities is essential for advancing equity in higher education and unlocking the full potential of all institutions.

The Department of Higher Education and Training's White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (2013) underscore the need to confront historical inequalities rooted in race, socio-economic status and geographic location to promote social justice and equitable access to quality education (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013). One important avenue for this redress is engaging with students' lived experiences directly affected by these societal challenges.

HDIs remain a space of contestation and a vehicle for addressing historical inequalities. Examining them, therefore, aligns directly with national policy commitments. However, the lack of contextualised understanding constrains the design of meaningful interventions to enhance student performance. This paper considers students' experiences from a South African rural HDI perspective. It utilised the social realist framework to examine the student experiences and assess the influence of socio-cultural and economic structures on their academic journeys. Narratives from students pursuing commercial programmes within the selected HEI were used for analysis.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

The study examined how socio-cultural and economic factors shaped the academic experiences of university students in South Africa. It assessed the impact of the family's socio-economic status on students' access to resources and their academic performance. In addition, it explored the role of family dynamics, including their beliefs, expectations and motivations in shaping students' academic experiences.

1.2 Research Questions

- i. What role do socio-cultural factors play in explaining students' university experiences?
- ii. Do pre-university expectations play a role in the experiences of students at university?
- iii. To what extent do economic factors influence students' expectations of the university?
- iv. What roles do family dynamics play in explaining the experiences of students?

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it contributes to a deeper understanding of the factors that shape students' university experiences. Examining socio-cultural influences highlights how values, traditions, and social environments impact students' adjustment, engagement, and sense of belonging at university. Examining pre-university expectations provides insights into how initial perceptions and aspirations influence students' satisfaction, academic motivation, and overall experiences. Exploring the role of economic factors further reveals how financial circumstances affect students' expectations, opportunities, and participation in university life. Additionally, considering family dynamics underscores the importance of familial support, background, and obligations in shaping student experiences.

Overall, the findings of this research will be valuable to higher education institutions, policymakers, and student support services, as they can inform the design of interventions, policies, and programmes aimed at improving student well-being, retention, and academic success. It also adds to the body of knowledge on the nature of students' university experiences within diverse contexts.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

Margaret Archer's Social Realist theory claims that human experiences emerge from the interplay of mechanisms over time, examining the relationship between people and social structures (Archer, 1995). The social structures comprise structure and culture. Structures organise relationships and distribute access to goods, whilst culture comprises logical relationships between propositions, which people seek to maintain or modify the world, and encompasses beliefs, values, and concepts.

Central to the theory is the concept of agency, which shapes the experiences of individuals. Individuals possess agency, which enables them to act independently in making choices. The choices are, however, constrained or enabled by social structures. As such, in exercising their agentic powers, individuals must navigate social structures and exercise their agency within specific contexts. The experiences result from the underlying causal processes that arise from the interplay between structures, cultures, and agency (Archer, 2000; Boughey & McKenna, 2021).

In higher education (HE), agency is the capacity of individuals, including students, to act intentionally, make choices, exercise autonomy, and influence their own learning and decision-making processes (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). According to Case (2015), human experiences occur in a context that has been conditioned by the effects of structure and culture, which offer constraints and enablers for exercising human agency. The interplay between structure and culture shapes human agency, influencing personal identities and learning experiences (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Processes such as poverty produce cycles of exclusion, cultural norms influence classroom participation, and familial expectations influence participation and programme selection.

The social realist framework guided the coding and interpretation of the narratives from students. Structures, including socio-economic status and institutional resources, and cultural norms, such as familial expectations and respect for elders, were identified as factors influencing student experiences. In addition, the agentic powers of students influenced how they responded to the constraints and enablers, by adapting study strategies, selecting degree programmes or resisting pressures.

Although Archer's Social Realist theory is sometimes critiqued for its abstractness and difficulties in balancing structure and agency, its adoption provided a comprehensive view of how students' choices are shaped and constrained by the wider socio-cultural and economic structures. The framework was particularly relevant in a South African HDI where family expectations, cultural norms and resource limitations interact to influence learning experiences (Case, 2015). By utilising the structure-culture-agency interplay, the analysis explained emerging challenges and coping strategies reported in the HDI context.

2. Literature Review

Whilst there is a multitude of social structures that play a part in shaping student experiences, the paper limits these to socio-cultural and economic-related structures. These structures are identified according to family dynamics, cultural and social expectations, and economic factors.

2.1 Cultural and Economic Factors

Mkhize and Ramrathan (2021) emphasize the critical role of cultural repertoires in shaping students' experiences within the university setting. Cultural orientations, defined as a range of behaviours, practices, and expressions rooted in shared beliefs and values, significantly impact students' academic and social

interactions. Cultural backgrounds can shape how students interact with lecturers and peers. In most African cultures, it is expected that younger individuals respect older individuals, inhibiting them from voicing their opinions or challenging the ideas of lecturers. This may negatively impact their engagements with lecturers and other stakeholders (Mkhize & Ramrathan, 2021).

University cultures have a direct effect on the experiences of students. The protests around South African universities, such as the 'Rhodes Must Fall', are a consequence of university cultures that do not align with the black students. As a result, students demanded transformation of institutional culture and curriculum (Luckett, 2016). One of the key issues is the use of language, which is based on Western ideologies, ignoring the local knowledge systems (Boughey & McKenna, 2021; Luckett, 2016).

In her study, Luckett (2016) indicates that colonial culture within universities was one of the factors behind the ire of the protests. Whilst the university environment mirrors the cultures of white students, most black students are excluded from the university cultures (Luckett, 2016). As a result, the black students feel that their home languages, cultures, histories, and identities are devalued by the university culture, leading to feelings of powerlessness and loss of ownership of the learning process (Mann, 2001).

In South African universities, socio-economic-related burdens are heavier on black students. Luckett (2016) argues that most black students are 'subjects' who have no access to material resources and depend on the government for study funding (Luckett, 2016). To some extent, these challenges result in a huge difference in academic performance between black students and other races in South Africa, where black students perform significantly worse than their white counterparts (Boughey & McKenna, 2021).

The Institute for Research and Development on Inclusion and Society [IRIS] Center (2012) argues that students from a lower socio-economic status (SES), who are primarily black in South Africa, are most likely to miss lectures, have lower language skills, and have lower-order thinking. Because of the challenges they face, they have problems with focusing on their academic studies, remaining engaged, attending classes, and completing learning activities, which would eventually lower academic performance (The IRIS Center, 2012).

2.2 Family Dynamics

Motsabi et al. (2020) underscore the crucial role of family support and peer networks in shaping student experiences and enhancing academic persistence. Family support, especially for first-generation students, is crucial in explaining their experiences (Motsabi et al., 2020; Van Zyl, 2016).

2.2.1 Financial Support

The financial support of families is directly linked to the family's socio-economic status. The SES of families plays a considerable role in providing capital, which enhances student experiences. The family's SES comprises the household's income, education and occupation (The IRIS Center, 2012). SES significantly

affects students' access to higher education and their experiences during studies. Students from low SES families often face additional challenges, such as financial constraints and limited access to resources, that affect their university studies (Ashwin et al., 2018; Van Zyl, 2016). Financial constraints and socio-economic disparities are highlighted as key issues affecting students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds (Motsabi et al., 2020; Ravhuhali et al., 2022; Van Zyl, 2016). Students from low-income families often face additional pressures and challenges that can hinder their academic success (Ravhuhali et al., 2022).

Financial constraints can also limit access to educational resources and support systems (Van Zyl, 2016). Students from low SES face numerous challenges, such as inadequate housing and issues related to food insecurity (Kerr & Luescher, 2018; Ravhuhali et al., 2022). Food insecurity leads to hunger, which Mansvelt et al. (2022) claim affects students' academic performance and overall well-being, stressing the physical and psychological impacts of such socio-economic barriers.

The effect of financial resources extends beyond accommodation, food and amenities. It also impacts the accessibility of resources required for learning (Ravhuhali et al., 2022). Students from higher SES families have better access to resources, including technology and exposure to digital skills, which are critical in today's learning environments. They demonstrate higher computer knowledge and highly engage with technology.

On the other hand, students from a lower SES have poor access to technology and have lower levels of digital knowledge (Faloye & Ajayi, 2021), negatively affecting their learning experiences. Black students from disadvantaged social backgrounds are usually from the lower SES and lack the prerequisites for digital technology. The digital divide, as noted by Faloye and Ajayi (2021), exacerbates these challenges, as students from low-income backgrounds may lack basic computer skills, access to technology, and reliable internet connectivity, hindering their ability to engage with technology-driven learning fully.

2.2.2 Cultural Capital

In addition to financial support provided by families, their socio-economic realities affect the well-being and integration of students (Motsabi et al., 2020; Van Zyl, 2016). Families provide emotional support, which influences students' experiences and resilience. Students who feel supported by their families tend to be more resilient to university challenges and have positive university experiences (Motsabi et al., 2020; Ravhuhali et al., 2022). Support from families is crucial, particularly for first-generation students, who often face the complexities of higher education without prior family experience or support.

Familial encouragement and support are necessary to help these students navigate the university's challenges (Motsabi et al., 2020; Ravhuhali et al., 2022). In addition, family structures, including higher expectations, can motivate students and cause stress due to fear of failure. The family commitments weigh some students down and affect their ability to cope with academic demands (Bengesai et al., 2022). However, some students use their family's situations as

intrinsic motivation to succeed in their studies and this motive assists them to cope with the socio-economic demands of university life (Ravhuhali et al., 2022). Motivation is critical for students' success, but lower SES families often lack the advantages associated with those from higher SES families, such as prior experience with university life and supportive home environments (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Students from lower SES families may not receive the same family guidance and support level, affecting their preparedness for university life. This lack of support can hinder their connectedness to the broader world and the university experience (Boughey & McKenna, 2021).

The educational background of the parents or household members significantly impacts students' preparedness for university life. Parents with higher education levels are more likely to provide the "cultural capital" contributing to high educational achievement and proper guidance in subject choice and university preparedness (Kerr & Luescher, 2018; Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014). Academic support and guidance from families make transitioning for students to university life easier as they understand the expectations of higher education and are better prepared for it (Ravhuhali et al., 2022).

2.3 Other Factors

Personal factors such as any individual student's previous experiences, characteristics, cultural identity, aspirations, and transitions significantly influence student success and well-being. Previous educational experiences are central to preparing students for university studies (Kerr & Luescher, 2018). The poor quality of most public schools makes the transition to university difficult, and many students who enroll in universities are underprepared (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014). This under-preparedness is commonly associated with students from under-resourced schools (Kerr & Luescher, 2018).

Areas of preparedness are mainly related to academic literacy, which includes language, literacy and numeracy skills (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014). Academic literacy influences writing proficiency, ability to utilise information and communication technologies (ICTs), academic writing and understanding how to use academic resources effectively (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014). Underprepared students feel alienated and face difficulties navigating the university environment (Kerr & Luescher, 2018).

High schools operate differently from universities, making students' transition to university difficult, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. They struggle with critical and analytical thinking (Dos Reis et al., 2019). There is also a massive jump in assessment where surface questioning is suddenly replaced by questions requiring in-depth analytical and critical thinking (Dos Reis et al., 2019). University life has autonomy and students may struggle to adjust to an environment where their work is not closely monitored. Dos Reis et al. (2019) argue that students struggle to work independently and manage their time.

Their SES influences the social integration of students. Low SES students may struggle to integrate because they feel they do not belong (Van Zyl, 2016). In

addition, students from low SES do not have confidence in their English language, affecting their social integration (Mkhize & Ramrathan, 2021). Cultural symbols and backgrounds shared by students enable students to overcome the language barrier (Mkhize & Ramrathan, 2021).

3. Methodology

The study examined the experiences of selected master's students during their undergraduate studies and attempted to assess the influence of socio-cultural and economic structures on their experiences. The following sections outline the methods followed in the study.

3.1 Research Paradigm

The study followed the critical realism research paradigm, which distinguishes between the real and observable worlds, mediated by senses, theories, and interpretations (Bhaskar, 2008). CR emphasises explanation over description by uncovering underlying mechanisms and structures that generate observed events and experiences (Sayer, 2000). While it strives for objectivity in research, it acknowledges the inherent subjectivity of researchers in choosing research questions and interpreting findings (Bryman & Bell, 2016).

3.2 Research Approach

Critical realism often employs retrodution as the research approach. Retrodution is a form of inference where the researcher moves from observation of a phenomenon to the underlying mechanisms that could have led to the phenomenon (Mukumbang et al., 2021). It involves moving from empirical data to positing the conditions that could have led to their emergence. A researcher asks questions such as 'What must the world be like for this to be possible?' in the context of an understanding that a deeper level of reality exists and that this layer of reality involves a constant interplay of mechanisms (Boughey & McKenna, 2021).

By recognizing causal mechanisms and lived experiences, CR and retrodution enable analysis of surface patterns alongside deeper social, cultural, and economic structures influencing students' experiences (Mukumbang et al., 2021; Stutchbury, 2022). This study explored students' university experiences, including the likely cause of the identified experiences.

3.3 Research Design

This study followed a qualitative research design, which is associated with the critical realism paradigm and retrodution research approach. A narrative inquiry research strategy was used, where participants were interviewed to share their experiences. The data was collected at one point, so the study was cross-sectional.

3.4 Sampling, Instruments and Data Collection

A non-probability sampling approach was used to select the participants for the study. The participants included postgraduate students within a commercial faculty at the selected HEI. They were selected using the convenience sampling technique, referred to as availability sampling by Saunders et al. (2019). Semi-structured virtual interviews, using the MS Teams platform, were used to collect

data, where participants narrated their university experiences from the time they enrolled for undergraduate studies to the time of interview. Semi-structured interviews were used because of their increased flexibility, and the ability to elicit detailed contextual and insightful qualitative data, probing deeper into participant responses and adapting the conversation as needed (Danageuzian et al., 2025). The virtual approach was considered more appropriate as participants are expected to study from anywhere around the world at the time of the interviews.

Whilst retrospective accounts, which the study used, may be subject to recall bias, postgraduate students were selected as they could reflect critically on their undergraduate experiences with the benefit of hindsight. To mitigate bias, the narratives across multiple participants were compared, identifying recurring patterns that show shared experiences rather than isolated memories. Throughout the research process, the respondents' anonymity was maintained by not recording their names. Instead, numerical codes were assigned to represent participants' identities. The characteristics of the participants are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of participants

Participant	Gender	Programme	Participation status
P1	Female	Public Administration	Completed
P2	Male	Public Administration	Withdrew
P3	Female	Public Administration	Completed
P4	Male	Public Administration	Completed
P5	Female	Economics	Completed
P6	Female	Economics	Completed
P7	Female	Economics	Completed
P8	Female	Economics	Completed
P9	Male	Economics	Withdrew
P10	Female	Public Administration	Withdrew
P11	Female	Economics	Completed
P12	Male	Economics	Completed

Note: Of the 12 invited, nine completed interviews and three withdrew.

A total of 21 students were invited via email to participate in the study. Nine declined, leaving 12 available, of whom nine completed the interviews and three withdrew. The sample comprised seven female and two male students, with six enrolled in Economics and three in Public Administration. All participants were Black Africans. Although all participants were master's students, they were considered heterogeneous as they varied in their academic programmes, motivations, and lived experiences. Whilst a sample size of nine participants was smaller than some recommendations (Saunders et al., 2019), Guest et al., (2006) found thematic saturation to occur between 6 and 12 interviews. This makes the nine participants sufficient for this study.

3.5 Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis informed by retroductive reasoning, which moves from empirical data to deeper explanations by identifying patterns within a conceptual framework (Saunders et al., 2019). The process followed a primarily inductive approach, allowing themes to emerge from the narratives while being guided by concepts from literature. Interview transcripts were read multiple times, with sections manually colour-coded to capture recurring patterns.

The initial codes were iteratively compared, clustered and refined into broader themes including socio-cultural influences and economic constraints. Narratives were treated as both data and analytical tools, enabling the preservation of participants' lived experiences while examining similarities and differences in how students responded to social structures. The analysis was guided by Archer's social realist framework, focusing on the interplay of structure, culture, and agency in shaping experiences and coping strategies within the HDI context.

To ensure trustworthiness, several strategies were applied. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation, member checking, and the inclusion of multiple participant perspectives. Dependability was supported by the consistent use of structured interview guides, audio recordings, and verbatim transcripts, supplemented by inter-coder checks and a code-recode process to confirm consistency. Transferability was facilitated through detailed descriptions of the study context.

The researchers' backgrounds as academics at an HDI offered valuable contextual insights and carried the risk of bias. This was managed through reflexivity during data collection and analysis, and by grounding interpretations in participants' verbatim transcripts to ensure that findings reflected students' voices rather than the researcher's assumptions. These strategies enhanced confirmability by providing a transparent link between the data and the study's interpretations.

4. Findings and Discussion

To understand the experiences of participants and the antecedents of these experiences, the results were presented using the social realist's structure-culture-agency framework. The experiences of the participants were diverse, a similar argument to that of Ashwin et al. (2018), implying the complexity of understanding student experiences. The findings provide valuable insights into how the broader social structures influence students' university experiences. By examining the data through the lens of social realism, we draw connections between the findings and the existing literature. The different students' experiences could be observed in the different preconceived notions and study habits.

4.1 Social Structures

The social structure themes were categorised into economic opportunities and career goals, socio-economic status of families, and institutional resource limitations.

4.1.1 Economic Opportunities and Career Goals

Economic opportunities were one of the major influencers of decisions related to higher education, playing a significant role in explaining the experiences of students. Most participants indicated that their ultimate goal of pursuing HE qualifications was to secure financial independence by creating a competitive edge in the market. Higher education was viewed as a gateway to secure a bright future, breaking the cycle of poverty. The following are some selected responses from participants, indicating economic opportunities as a driver for pursuing HE:

"I wanted to get better job opportunities." Participant 1

"I went to the university to ensure that at least I stand good chances to compete in a competitive economy where you need to have qualifications to get the job." Participant 4

"... so, it was basically for you to be successful in life." Participant 6

"..... needed to further my studies if I was going to achieve the goals that I set for myself. And also, if I have my own family, they can have a better life than I had in the past " Participant 7

"Nowadays, when you look for employment, they need a degree, so basically it's what is needed if you want to work and maybe get some job and income." Participant 11

"..... another reason it's for employment reasons." Participant 12

These experiences illustrate the influence of societal norms around educational attainment, which create perceptions that a university degree is essential for employment. In addition to a need for financial independence for themselves and their families, the gaps in the labour market influenced the experiences of some participants. Participant 3 shared

"Since I am an employee of the public sector, I noticed that there's a gap and a lack of knowing how to do things when it comes to service delivery. That is when I got interested in public management."

Similarly, Participant 5 indicated

"I saw a gap in the industry in both public and private sectors. There was a gap in lack of knowledge and skilled managers in terms of strategic planning, costing. So, I thought, let me just skip into the gap and take the opportunity."

These experiences illustrate a gap between societal expectations and the reality of graduate employment, reflecting the impact of economic factors on career trajectories.

The narratives from participants show that the overarching motivation for higher education qualifications is the desire for better job prospects and job security. Career goals, according to the participants of the study, were the primary driver for undertaking HE studies, with terms such as increased skills, competitive edge, and better salaries used to describe student ambitions. Higher qualifications are used as a tool for achieving a better life, and possessing a degree is perceived as

conferring a status and recognised place in society. Lack of educational qualifications would spell a troubled future, and students who earn an HE qualification are likely to earn higher income, hold higher status jobs, and enjoy a better life (Kurt, 2015; Payne, 2023).

The participants' views are supported in literature which suggests that possession of a university qualification enhances employment opportunities (Ashwin et al., 2018; Ntini & Kappo-Abidemi, 2025). These studies claim that unemployment levels among university graduates are significantly lower than those of non-graduates in South Africa. Ntini and Kappo-Abidemi (2025) argue that higher levels of education are associated with increased chances of employment as well as access to better job opportunities and higher-paying positions.

4.1.2 Socio-Economic Status of Families

The fear of failure and the expectations to take care of the family influenced their choices and experiences. Most familial expectations are influenced by their socio-economic statuses. Several families from low SES believe that students would need to assist other family members when they complete their studies (Motsabi et al., 2020). Participant 4's choice of study was driven by the need to change their family's socio-economic status, increase the likelihood of passing the programme in record time and secure employment. It is an African cultural expectation that children will care for their elders and dependent siblings (Matsiale & Chale, 2024), and such expectations influenced participants' experiences. This expectation emerged as a common theme among participants. The following quote corroborates this claim.

"..... I enrol in a course that will quickly give me a job so that I can look after my family in terms of support, financial support and otherwise."

Participant 4

In addition to shaping experiences through expectations linked to economic status, families also provide the resources necessary for learning. Meaningful learning requires access to current academic materials such as textbooks in both print and electronic format, as well as ICTs. Socio-economic status influences access to monetary resources, which, in turn, influences access to adequate accommodation, food, learning resources, and sanitation, exposing students to harsh learning conditions (Kerr & Luescher, 2018; Mkhize & Ramrathan, 2021; Ravhuhali et al., 2022; Van Zyl, 2016). Participants indicated that the lack of resources negatively impacted their learning experiences. The following quotations reveal the participants' feelings regarding financial resources.

"Not getting learning material made life difficult. "The funding I had only allowed us to The allowance was not enough" Participant 6

"There were times I could not even afford transport to campus, and I had to miss some classes because of that." Participant 7

"I belonged to the NSFAS [National Student Financial Aid Scheme] group but we were not receiving monies on time." Participant 12

These extracts show the constraints that financial challenges placed on the learning experiences of the participants. Limited funding made it difficult to afford essential study materials and missed classes, disrupting their studies. The lack of resources, such as access to technology and other material support, was testament to the significance of families' socio-economic status. Resource limitations manifest in the inability to obtain recent academic materials and digital tools, translating into poorer learning experiences and performance (Eposi & Matarirano, 2025). In the current age of technology, inadequate ICTs deprive students of opportunities to develop hard and soft skills, which are critical to their lives beyond university (Akwei et al., 2017).

Hard skills refer to concrete, teachable tasks whilst soft skills involve behavioural, social and personal abilities. ICTs are enablers for learning, permitting students to access electronic learning material, attend virtual classes, communicate and collaborate with other students. The significance of ICTs is widely cited as one of the key enablers to learning (Akwei et al., 2017; Naicker et al., 2022). Unfortunately, most African students have inadequate ICT resources (Faloye & Ajayi, 2021; Matarirano et al., 2021), negatively affecting their experiences - this resonated with the students interviewed in this study.

Lack of proper accommodation, food, and ICTs (Akwei et al., 2017; Kerr & Luescher, 2018; Mansvelt et al., 2022; Ravhuhali et al., 2022) negatively affect students' learning experiences and academic performance. A lack of financial resources has ripple effects, often leading to poor academic performance (Nekhubvi et al., 2025), which exerts pressure on students, especially those being funded, as they risk losing the funding. This pressure on students is compounded by familial expectations that students will assume financial responsibility for their families.

Van Zyl (2016) argues that students from families with low socio-economic backgrounds are likely to struggle with making friends and experience anxiety about their financial situations, negatively affecting their experiences. Mansvelt et al. (2022) introduced the concept of hunger of the mind, which refers to the psychological and emotional aspects of hunger, such as stress and anxiety associated with food insecurity. These issues illustrate the indirect effects of a lack of financial resources, which eventually influence students' academic performance.

4.1.3 Institutional Resource Limitations

The limitation of resources within the selected institution was another structural factor that influenced the experiences of participants. They decried the unavailability of resources to enhance their learning experiences. The major limitation was the lack of up-to-date study materials. Participants 3 and 5 had the following to say:

".. have to look for study materials around and material that is very old." Participant 3

" .. it was lack of resources, ... library was not really up to scratch" Participant 5

These extracts show that a lack of up-to-date learning resources was a barrier to learning. Outdated content and limited access to reference materials forced students to rely heavily on the lecturer's knowledge, restricting their ability to remain current with new academic developments. Lack of institutional resources, particularly in underprivileged HDIs, has been referenced in the literature. Resource limitations have led to overcrowding, and insufficient infrastructure, resulting in challenges to provide adequate study materials (Mlambo et al., 2024; Mlambo & Mpanza, 2024; Mulaudzi, 2024).

The drive towards universal access for all and massification of HE, which is often driven by policy goals without much consideration for expanding infrastructure, has contributed to these significant challenges (Mlambo et al., 2021; Mlambo & Mpanza, 2024), which directly affect students' experiences. Many HEIs face infrastructural decay, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate facilities, all of which negatively impact students' experiences (Mlambo & Mpanza, 2024).

4.2 Cultural Structures

Based on the student narratives, cultural structures were categorised into three domains: societal expectations and dominant narratives, cultural attitudes towards education, norms of respect and authority, and familial beliefs and role models.

4.2.1 Societal Expectations and Narratives

Societal expectations influence the decisions and expectations of participants (Grunwald & Spillan, 2025; Malach-Pines & Kaspi-Baruch, 2008). Social narratives and cultural values played a significant role in shaping the experiences of participants. These narratives create expectations and norms that influence the students' choices, academic engagement, and perceptions of success. Participant 4 indicated

"My were pursuing the very same ... programme ... and they couldn't complete it."

These experiences illustrate the impact of societal narratives on expectations, which in turn affect decisions made. Because of such narratives, the Participant ended up selecting a programme that was not their first preference.

4.2.2 Cultural Values Regarding Education and Authority in Learning

Cultural values regarding education also influenced participants' decisions, study approaches and perceptions of learning. Many African cultures believe that children should financially take care of their families (Matsiale & Chale, 2024) after attaining university qualifications. Participant 4 shared

"I take calculated risks ... I decided to go for the qualification that would be easy to complete on time so that I could go back and look after my family."

Another cultural value is the respect shown to older people. Because of the cultural beliefs that children should not question elders, the engagements between students and lecturers are muted. Participant 4 conveyed

"When we joined the university, we have a culture that children should not question elders."

This was perpetuated by some lecturers who used their position to instil fear in students. Participant 4 continued

"Some lecturers told usbecause they are responsible for our marks. This made us feel that we could not challenge or question things in class."

Participants reported that cultural expectations shaped their experiences, with family obligations influencing study choices and norms of respect for elders discouraging them from questioning lecturers, a dynamic reinforced by lecturer authority that left students fearful of challenging ideas in class.

Previous studies have also found that cultural values, attitudes, and social expectations influence students' perceptions of education and academic success. The cultural background of students influences their academic and social integration (Mkhize & Ramrathan, 2021; Naidoo & van Schalkwyk, 2021). Those from similar cultural groups share common values and experiences, influencing their academic success. The emphasis on achieving high marks and the observed importance placed on assessment marks, reflects broader cultural norms surrounding students' academic success.

Societal expectations and narratives influence student experiences and expectations as well as their programme selection (Kurt, 2015). Hierarchical dynamics reflect societal norms around respect for authority figures (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014). Students often lack the courage to challenge the approaches utilised by lecturers, which at times diminishes their desire to engage in deep learning. Emphasis on motivational and relatable teaching aligns with broader cultural values of mentorship and inspiration in education. Cultural familiarity shapes individual study experiences.

4.2.3 Familial Beliefs and Role Models

Familial beliefs and their cultural values influenced the participants' choices of field of study, expectations and motivations. The significance of these beliefs and values emerged as a common theme among participants. Families played a major role in shaping expectations and motivating students to pursue HE studies. The following quotes corroborate this claim.

"I grew up in an environment where I was told that education was the key to success." Participant 6

"..... because our parents usually tell us that they did not get this opportunity in their past." Participant 7

Family members who attended or were attending university shaped expectations and, at times, acted as role models. Participant 5 highlighted

"My mom had an influence on me because she was"

Participant 7 revealed

"I could say my family influenced my decision,, my main motivation was my older sister. And also like to continue through her"

footsteps. And the...I wanted to change the situation and improve my background."

In the same context, Participant 6 shared

"I could say, my first motivation or my true drive was my family I was told that education was key to success."

In addition to motivating students, university experiences of family members shaped the choices and expectations of HE. Participant 4 avoided pursuing programmes they were interested in due to observing the challenges faced by family members in pursuing their programme of choice. They indicated

"...., because my were pursuing the very same, and they couldn't complete it."

Participants described family as a major influence on their educational choices. Parents emphasised the value of education, while siblings and relatives often acted as role models. For some, higher education was a route to improve family circumstances, though negative family experiences also discouraged certain programme choices.

Literature also emphasises the significance of families in shaping student experiences (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014; Motsabi et al., 2020; Naidoo & van Schalkwyk, 2021; Van Zyl, 2016). Family values, beliefs and expectations play a fundamental role in influencing these experiences (Mkhize & Ramrathan, 2021; Naidoo & van Schalkwyk, 2021; Van Zyl, 2016). Most families view education as a gateway to success and an escape from the chains of poverty (Naidoo & van Schalkwyk, 2021).

The familial expectations act as both enablers and constraints to positive student experiences. They are considered enablers because they keep students grounded, as they always have to remember the primary reason for pursuing higher education. However, the expectations may also act as burdens and students may feel overwhelmed, leading to stress, which could lead to unpleasant experiences. The familial expectations also influence the course choices, leading students to select programmes they feel they will easily complete and get employed to assist their families financially, as indicated by Participant 4.

Family dynamics and close social network influences are evident in Participant 7's decision-making, where an older sibling's success in higher education inspired their own pursuit of university studies. This aligns with the claim by Motsabi et al. (2020) that family dynamics provide role models for students, especially in families where they are not first-generation students. The successes and challenges of family members who attended universities influence the decisions about pursuing higher qualifications and the selection of programmes. This observation means that first-generation students lack family influence on their decisions and have to depend on external parties such as peers, high school teachers, and other community members.

According to Participant 12, their expectations were influenced by what their teachers told them to expect at university. The university experiences of participants' household members also influenced students' university expectations and perceptions. Participant 4 expected university studies to be extremely challenging based on the accounts shared by family members who attended university. These arguments relate to the claims by Mkhize and Ramrathan (2021) and Van Zyl (2016) that family backgrounds, cultural capital and educational levels shape students' academic experiences.

Students from families with higher educational attainment often receive better support which facilitates smoother integration into university life and performance. Those from families with low literacy levels lack exposure to academic culture, affecting their confidence and ability to navigate university expectations (Mkhize & Ramrathan, 2021; Van Zyl, 2016). Because of a lack of cultural capital, Participant 5 walked into the university totally clueless about what to expect.

4.3 Agency

The experiences of students are an outcome of the interaction between social and cultural structures and the exercise of their agency powers. The social structures, such as socio-economic status, as well as cultural structures, such as familial beliefs, influenced the decisions they took as well as their coping with challenges. The influences of the social structures are portrayed in the following quote:

"I wanted to do, but after noticing that some capable people were struggling to complete, I decided was a safer option." Participant 4

Some students approach historically challenging courses with determination, whilst others avoid entirely challenging programmes by exercising their agency. The cultural values were expressed in participants' emphasis on self-directed learning as indicated in the following quotes:

"I had to make my own notes on the side for me to understand, get the textbook, go to the lecture hall, then come back and make notes on my side for me to better understand and push myself." Participant 5

"I always wanted to figure things out myself and get to a test, and that's when I would know if I needed to go back and learn more." Participant 8

"The only thing that I knew was that when you go to university, you push yourself." Participant 11

These experiences reflect the broader cultural values regarding academic success and individual responsibility for learning outcomes. The findings show the mediating effect of agency on social structure and cultural values. While socio-cultural factors influence personal choices, the choices, in turn, affect the way they react to university challenges, such as study approaches. Because of the social and cultural structures, students had to choose university programmes that aligned with their expectations, adopt approaches that suited them best, and navigate factors that affected their resilience, motivation, and coping strategies.

As such, students draw on their social and cultural backgrounds to respond to institutional constraints (Boateng et al., 2025; Fouché, 2025; Naudé & Breshears, 2025). Mogashana et al. (2023) demonstrated that socio-cultural structures affect student choices and how they respond to challenges and shape their reactions within the socio-cultural contexts. Students' backgrounds, identities, and cultural capital influence how they engage with learning and respond to university challenges (Fouché, 2025). Therefore, the choices students make regarding programmes to pursue and study approaches to adopt are shaped by socio-cultural expectations such as the cultural values attached to education and familial responsibility. The interplay between structure, culture, and agency indicates the significance of understanding educational experiences within broader socio-cultural contexts.

4.4 Summary

Guided by the social realist framework, the analysis shows how social structures, cultures, and agency intersect to shape the experiences of students. Whilst the structures and agency were discussed separately, it is their interplay that influenced these experiences. The adoption of study approaches by students, for example, could be linked to their family's socio-economic status, coupled with their familial beliefs, cultural values and cultural capital.

Structural conditions, such as socio-economic status and resource availability, constrained students' opportunities, while cultural norms, including respect for elders and familial expectations, shaped how they responded to academic challenges. Within these constraints, students exercised their agency by adopting coping strategies such as self-directed learning and pragmatic programme choices. These interactions generated mechanisms such as muted participation, and inequality reproduction that explain the recurring challenges and resilience patterns observed among students at the HDI.

5. Recommendations for Improving the Learning Experiences of Underprivileged Students

Socio-cultural and economic factors significantly shape students' learning experiences, particularly within historically disadvantaged institutions. Students from low socio-economic backgrounds often lack financial resources, cultural capital, and access to adequate material support, whilst also carrying heavy familial expectations. Without intervention, these constraints perpetuate inequality, hinder academic success and reproduce cycles of poverty. Universities, therefore, need to adopt targeted and actionable strategies to support the underprivileged students. The following strategies could be employed by HDIs to improve the learning experiences of underprivileged students.

5.1 Strengthening School-University Linkages

Universities should build stronger partnerships with high schools in disadvantaged communities. Senior students or alumni could conduct outreach visits to share their experiences, explain university expectations and introduce learners to available support systems. This early exposure would assist

prospective students in building realistic expectations and ease their transition into higher education.

5.2 Enhancing Orientation and Support Systems

Orientation should not be limited to a once-off event at the start of the students' academic journeys. Instead, HDIs should establish ongoing induction programmes where students are continually reminded of available academic, financial, and psychosocial support services. Dedicated mentorship schemes, such as pairing first-year students with their senior peers, can provide practical guidance and emotional support.

5.3 Engaging Families as Partners

Since familial expectations strongly shape students' decisions and experiences, universities should create platforms for families to engage constructively with students' academic life. Regular community events or family information sessions help align expectations, reduce pressure on students, and strengthen emotional support networks.

5.4 Expanding Financial Support Mechanisms

Financial insecurity remains the greatest constraint to positive experiences. Universities should strive to build strong industry and alumni relations to diversify their funding. Industry partners can contribute through corporate social responsibility initiatives, while alumni can be mobilised to establish bursary funds and scholarships. In addition, regular university-led fundraising campaigns could provide emergency relief for students facing immediate financial distress. These initiatives would directly address the socio-cultural and economic constraints faced by students in HDIs, creating more equitable conditions for success and reducing the risk of dropout among underprivileged learners.

6. Implications for Policymakers and Institutional Administrators

The findings of this study highlight the need for more holistic approaches to widening epistemological access in HE. While enrolment has expanded, students from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly those attending HDIs, continue to face inadequate infrastructure, limited financial support and insufficient cultural capital. These conditions negatively influence their learning experiences and increase the risk of exclusion or dropout. Policymakers should therefore revise funding formulas to address historical backlogs at HDIs, ensure adequate resources for teaching and student support, and promote equitable distribution of resources across the sector.

At the institutional level, administrators must mitigate structural and cultural barriers by promoting humanising pedagogies that encourage engagement and reduce hierarchical power dynamics in classrooms. Practical strategies such as staff development and anonymous electronic participation platforms can enhance student engagement. Furthermore, extended orientation and peer mentorship schemes should be strengthened to provide moral support and create family-like networks that ease student adjustment and foster belonging. Combined, these

approaches can enhance participation and improve student experiences and success in HE.

6.1 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The study has several limitations. It was confined to commerce programmes within a single HDI, with a small sample derived through convenience sampling. Participation was further restricted by digital access, as students without smartphones, computers, or reliable internet were excluded, and those who seldom checked university email may have missed the invitation. These factors limit the external validity of the findings for the wider faculty, the selected HDI, and other higher education institutions (HEIs).

The retrospective design, in which postgraduate students reflected on their undergraduate experiences, raises the risk of recall bias and may not fully capture real-time challenges. Although credibility was strengthened through member checking and inter-coder checks, reliance on retrospective narratives may have introduced researcher bias. In addition, overlaps across questions on cultural factors, family dynamics, and pre-university expectations complicated the separation of specific influences. Finally, the analysis placed greater emphasis on socio-cultural and economic constraints, with limited attention to institutional policies and practices. Future studies should adopt multi-site and multi-faculty designs, including those of both historically disadvantaged and advantaged universities, and employ longitudinal approaches to capture the complexity of student experiences better.

7. Conclusion

The data analysis has revealed that students' learning experiences and consequently their academic performance are influenced by personal agency which, in turn, is constrained or enabled by a multitude of social structures, including family dynamics, societal expectations, and the broader socio-cultural and economic factors. These factors collectively contribute to the dynamic and multifaceted nature of the university journey, exerting profound influences on students' academic trajectories in their educational endeavours. Family dynamics, including family beliefs, expectations, and socio-economic status, were found to have the biggest impact on students' learning experiences and academic achievement. Family structures influence students' expectations, motivations, financial and cultural capital required for university life.

Students from a higher socio-economic status are more likely to have the cultural and financial resources, making their academic journey bearable. However, students from poor family backgrounds, who lack the financial and cultural capital to succeed in higher education, struggle to adjust to their university journeys. Whilst the family situations cannot be changed overnight, society, through universities and schools, can play a critical role in providing cultural capital that prepares and supports their university journeys. Through their social responsibility duties, universities can provide guidance to high school students by visiting them and providing insights. This can be done by working with senior university students who can work as mentors for high school students.

8. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

9. Acknowledgments

The authors wish to acknowledge the use of Grammarly to help improve the language and grammar of the paper. ChatGPT was also used to enhance the flow of the article and search for related articles.

10. References

- Akwei, C., Amoako, I., & Damoah, I. S. (2017). The role of technology innovation in shaping student learning experience in higher education. *International Conference on Education, Proceedings Development & Innovation*, 62–72. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339252778>
- Archer, M. S. (1995). *Realist social theory: The morphogenetic approach*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511557675>
- Archer, M. S. (2000). *Being human: The problem of agency*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511488733>
- Ashwin, P., Carpentier, V., Marshall, D., & Mccowan, T. (2018). *What have we learned about pathways to the public good from South African undergraduate education?* <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331638906>
- Bengesai, A. V., Paideya, V., Naidoo, P., & Mkhonza, S. (2022). Student perceptions on their transition experiences at a South African university offering a first-year experience programme. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 10(2). <https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v10i2.4084>
- Bhaskar, R. (2008). *A realist theory of science*. Routledge. https://uberty.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Roy_Bhaskar_A_Realist_Theory_of_Science.pdf
- Boateng, A., Mensah, F. J., Boateng, S., Pillay, P., Chibisa, A., & Mahaye, N. (2025). Developmental path to generalized entitlement in a South African Higher Education Institution. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 24(3), 191–215. <https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.24.3.10>
- Boughey, C., & McKenna, S. (2021). *Understanding higher education: Alternative perspectives*. African Minds. <http://dx.doi.org/10.47622/9781928502210>
- Bryman, A., & Bell, E. (2016). *Business research methods* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press. [https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=N2zQCgAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=Bryman,+A.,+%26+Bell,+E.+\(2016\).+Business+research+methods+\(4th+ed.\).+Oxford+University+Press.&ots=dqNtKSHank&sig=QmEVmcjr01YwH7JNpzE2k-l8AtM](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=N2zQCgAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=Bryman,+A.,+%26+Bell,+E.+(2016).+Business+research+methods+(4th+ed.).+Oxford+University+Press.&ots=dqNtKSHank&sig=QmEVmcjr01YwH7JNpzE2k-l8AtM)
- Case, J. M. (2015). A social realist perspective on student learning in higher education: the morphogenesis of agency. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 34(5), 841–852. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2015.1011095>
- Danageuzian, H., Barakat, L. B., & El Hage, F. (2025). Designing an education for sustainable development (ESD) curriculum: insights from a semi-structured interview study in Lebanon. *Environmental Education Research*, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2025.2489783>
- Department of Higher Education and Training. (2013). *White paper for post-school education and training: Building an expanded, effective and integrated post-school system*. www.dhet.gov.za
- Dos Reis, K., Venter, A., & McGhie, V. (2019). Are high school teachers and university academics on the same page? A case of the university readiness of business

- education learners at two schools and two universities. *Journal of Education (South Africa)*, 76, 166–184. <https://doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i76a09>
- Eposi, E., & Matarirano, O. (2025). Social reproduction and financial barriers in a South African higher education. *Reviews of Management Sciences*, 7(1), 39–58. <https://doi.org/10.53909/rms.07.01.0265>
- Faloye, S. T., & Ajayi, N. (2021). Understanding the impact of the digital divide on South African students in higher educational institutions. *African Journal of Science, Technology, Innovation and Development*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20421338.2021.1983118>
- Fouché, I. (2025). From recipients to contributors: reimagining curriculum for enhanced student agency. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2025.2528820>
- Grunwald, G., Kara, A., & Spillan, J. (2025). Gender influence on business students' expectations for sustainability transformations in higher education: a cross-national study. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSHE-03-2024-0189>
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough?: An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59–82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903>
- Joubert, M., & Sibanda, B. (2022). Whose language is it anyway? Students' sense of belonging and role of English for higher education in the multilingual, South African context. *South African Journal of Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.20853/36-6-5442>
- Kasese-Hara, M., & Mugambi, J. I. (2021). Experiences of African international students in a South African university – A qualitative study. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 35(4). <https://doi.org/10.20853/35-4-4065>
- Kerr, P., & Luescher, T. (2018). Students' experiences of university life beyond the curriculum. In P. Ashwin & J. Case (Eds.), *Higher Education Pathways: South African Undergraduate Education and the Public Good* (pp. 216–231). African Minds. <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11910/13693>
- Kurt, I. (2015). Education and social reproduction in schools. *European Journal of Social Sciences Education and Research*, 5(1), 223–226. <https://doi.org/10.26417/ejser.v5i1.p223-226>
- Lewin, T., & Mawoyo, M. (2014). *Student access and success: Issues and interventions in South African universities*. The South African Institute for Advancement. https://www.inyathelo.org.za/images/researchreports/summary_student_access_success.pdf
- Luckett, K. (2016). Curriculum contestation in a post-colonial context: a view from the South. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 21(4), 415–428. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2016.1155547>
- Mafenya, P. N. (2014). Increasing undergraduate throughput and success rate through mobile technologies: A South African distance learning case study. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 5(14), 428–434. <https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n14p428>
- Malach-Pines, A., & Kaspi-Baruch, O. (2008). The role of culture and gender in the choice of a career in management. *Career Development International*, 13(4), 306–319. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13620430810880808>
- Maniriho, A. (2024). Satisfaction and academic performance of undergraduate economics students. *Cogent Education*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2024.2326707>

- Mann, S. J. (2001). Alternative perspectives on the student experience: Alienation and engagement. *Studies in Higher Education*, 26(1), 7–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0307507002003068>
- Mansvelt, N., Schenck, R., & Soji, Z. (2022). Students' conceptualizations of student hunger. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 36(5), 219–239. <https://doi.org/10.20853/36-5-4725>
- Matarirano, O., Gqokonqana, O., & Yeboah, A. (2021). Students' responses to multi-modal emergency remote learning during COVID-19 in a South African higher institution. *Research in Social Sciences and Technology*, 6(2), 199–218. <https://doi.org/10.46303/ressat.2021.19>
- Matarirano, O., & MUSAIGWA, M. (2025). Digital inequalities in South African higher education: A multi-level students' perspective. In N. R. Jere, G. Mwansa, M. Ranga, A. M. Gamundani, & P. B. Maoneke (Eds.), *Digital inequality in a developing context: A multifaceted approach* (pp. 19–44). AOSIS. <https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2025.BK494>
- Mathipa-Mdakane, M. (2025). *Fostering research excellence in historically disadvantaged institutions: Policy interventions [Policy brief]*. www.hsrc.ac.za
- Matsiale, C. M., & Chale, J. K. (2024). The complexity and uncertainty of elderly care within the African Kinship System: A contribution to medical anthropology. *International Journal for Research Trends in Social Science & Humanities*, 2(5), 387–401. <https://doi.org/10.61463/ijrtssh.vol.2.issue5.112>
- Mkhize, J. S., & Ramrathan, L. (2021). Cultural signals in understanding first-year student engagement: How can universities become more culturally sensitive? The case of a rural South African university. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 35(3), 107–125. <https://doi.org/10.20853/35-3-3878>
- Mlambo, D. N., Saul, T., & Buys, T. (2024). South African higher education 30 years into democracy (1994–2024): Challenges, opportunities, and future prospects. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 13(3), 10–17. <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v13n3p10>
- Mlambo, V. H., Mlambo, D. N., & Adetiba, T. C. (2021). Expansion of higher education in South Africa: Problems and possibilities. *Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology*, 12(1–2), 30–40. <https://doi.org/10.31901/24566764.2021/12.1-2.363>
- Mlambo, V. H., & Mpanza, S. (2024). Exploring the challenges in higher education in South Africa: A comprehensive literature review. *Alustath Journal for Human and Social Sciences*, 63(3), 22–40. <https://doi.org/10.36473/ujhss.v62i4.2261>
- Mogashana, D., Basitere, M., & Ndeto Ivala, E. (2023). Harnessing student agency for easier transition and success: The role of life coaching. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v11i1.4206>
- Moosa, M., & Langsford, D. (2021). "I haven't had the fun that is portrayed": First-year student expectations and experiences of starting at university. *Journal of Education (South Africa)*, 83, 127–145. <https://doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i83a07>
- Motsabi, S., Diale, B. M., & Van Zyl, A. (2020). The role of social support in the persistence of first-year first-generation African students in a higher education institution in South Africa. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 34(4). <https://doi.org/10.20853/34-4-3486>
- Mukumbang, F. C., Kabongo, E. M., & Eastwood, J. G. (2021). Examining the application of retroductive theorizing in realist-informed studies. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211053516>
- Mulaudzi, L. (2024). Evaluating impact: South Africa's e-education white paper on digital equity and post-COVID education leadership. *Cogent Education*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2024.2415749>

- Naicker, A., Singh, E., & van Genugten, T. (2022). Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL): Preparedness and experiences of South African students. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 59(5), 499–510. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2021.1895867>
- Naidoo, L., & van Schalkwyk, I. (2021). Pathways to academic success of disadvantaged undergraduate university students from a high-risk community in the Western Cape. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 35(4), 180–204. <https://doi.org/10.20853/35-4-4175>
- Naudé, L., & Breshears, D. (2025). It has given us a title: Identity-transitions in first-generation students at a South African university. *Journal of Education*, 97, 86–108. <https://doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i97a05>
- Nekhubvi, V., Sinthumule, O., Zitha, I., Mukhodobwane, R., & Mulaudzi, T. (2025). Effects of students' socio-economic status on academic performance: a case of first-year students at a South African university. *International Journal of Business Ecosystem & Strategy* (2687-2293), 7(2), 414–421. <https://doi.org/10.36096/ijbes.v7i2.758>
- Ngqulu, N. (2018). *Investigating the adoption and the application of learning analytics in South African Higher Education Institutions (Heis)*. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/373861080>
- Ntini, P., & Kappo-Abidemi, C. (2025). The synergy between educational qualification levels and youth employability: The case of Kanyamazane, Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 24(3), 758–784. <https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.24.3.36>
- Payne, S. S. C. (2023). Equalization or reproduction? “Some college” and the social function of higher education. *Sociology of Education*, 96(2), 104–128. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380407221134809>
- Ravhuhali, F., Nendauni, L., Sikhwari, T. D., Lavhelani, N. P., Dama, N. G., Matodzi, T., & Manyage, T. (2022). A self-determination theoretical approach into survival strategies of on-campus and off-campus students from low-income families. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 36(3), 231–248. <https://doi.org/10.20853/36-3-4658>
- Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2019). *Research methods for business students* (Eighth). Pearson. <https://www.pearson.com/se/Nordics-Higher-Education/subject-catalogue/business-and-management/Research-methods-for-business-students-8e-saunders.html>
- Sayer, A. (2000). *Realism and social science*. Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446218730>
- Stutchbury, K. (2022). Critical realism: an explanatory framework for small-scale qualitative studies or an ‘unhelpful edifice’? *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 45(2), 113–128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2022>
- The IRIS Center. (2012). *Classroom diversity: An introduction to student differences*. <https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/div/cresource/q2/p06/#content>
- Van Zyl, A. (2016). The contours of inequality: The links between socio-economic status of students and other variables at the University of Johannesburg. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 4(1). <https://doi.org/10.14426/jsaa.v4i1.141>
- Van Zyl, A., Dampier, G., & Ngwenya, N. (2020). Effective institutional intervention where it makes the biggest difference to student success: The University of Johannesburg (UJ) Integrated Student Success Initiative (ISSI). *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 8(2). <https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v8i2.4448>
- Xulu-Gama, N., & Hadebe, S. (2022). Language of instruction: A critical aspect of epistemological access to higher education in South Africa. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 36(5). <https://doi.org/10.20853/36-5-4788>