

# Black African Students' Social and Academic Identities in South African Universities Vis-à-Vis Student Drop Out: A Social Justice and Philosophical Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the factors that influence the decisions of university students such as complexities of the application process, geographical location and financial constraints. It also explores the reasons behind student dropout which include inadequate secondary education, burnout, lack of social support, experiences of racism, poor academic performance and university culture. The literature review identifies a gap in research on Black African university students, particularly their integration into the university system. Poverty, alienation, financial difficulties, a lack of readiness, racial background, racist experiences, university culture, language problems, and a curriculum that reflects colonial legacies are some of the causes that lead to student dropout. By applying Tinto's theoretical framework, the article provides insights into the challenges students face in South African universities. Tinto's theory of student departure posits an intricate interaction between academic and social elements which influence student retention and persistence in higher education. Success for students depend on social integration, which includes developing deep connections with classmates, lecturers, and academic staff. Participating in coursework, creating productive study habits, and utilizing academic support networks are all components of academic integration. Research conducted in South Africa has brought attention to the difficulties Black African students encounter in academic settings, including bias, discrimination, and unfavorable experiences. According to our research, the subpar higher ecosystem has a disproportionately negative impact on young people and students from working-class homes, failing to appropriately prepare them for higher education spaces. Furthermore, the education system in South Africa is perceived as unfamiliar and alienating for Black African students entering historically White universities, thereby perpetuating social inequalities.

## KEYWORDS

Black African Students, social and academic identities, South African higher education, student dropout, social justice perspectives

## INTRODUCTION

Black African students in South Africa often experience a shift in their social identities, which are influenced by a sense of cultural superiority. The phenomenon has been perpetuated by historically white universities in the country (Cele, 2023; Pietersen & Dube, 2024). These institutions impact various aspects of students' cultural identities including their heritage, language, customs, culture, self-esteem, and self-concept. To address and transform these dynamics, a social justice approach is necessary. The goal is to enhance the academic and social inclusivity of Black African students in higher education. Muswede (2017) highlights concerning statistics of South African higher education, noting that approximately 50% of students who enrol in higher education institutions leave within the first three years. Additionally, Letseka and Breier (2008) report that around 30% of these students drop out during their first year". This can be summarised more succinctly to say that high dropout rate poses a significant challenge to the goal of breaking the cycle of poverty, leading to disturbingly low success rates within the higher education system in South Africa (Africa) (Chiramba & Ndofirepi, 2023, p.71).

Given the perspective mentioned above, it becomes evident that there is a lack of access and equity in enacting social justice on a broader educational and societal scale. This suggests that significant changes are necessary in South Africa's higher education system. Tinto's theory of student departure is particularly relevant in understanding the dropout phenomenon at previously white dominated higher education institutions, as it emphasises the importance of fair support networks, especially those that cross racial boundaries or have social justice implications. Therefore, while students at risk of dropping out have an equal opportunity to succeed in college, the theory also emphasises the critical role of social and academic integration in student retention.

### Research Questions

The main research questions guiding this study are as follows:

How do socio-economic and racial factors influence the high student dropout rate and social and academic integration of Black African students in historically White South African universities?

In what ways does the existing university culture and curriculum, rooted in colonial perspectives, impact the academic persistence and lack of retention of Black African students in the South African higher education system?

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Foregrounding this work is based on Tinto's theory – the student departure and retention and its relationships it draws on between social and academic issues. This theory posits that students' success and continued enrolment are contingent upon their integration into both the academic and social realms of college life. A key aspect of this theory is the emphasis on social integration, which involves participation in extracurricular activities and forming meaningful relationships with students, teachers, and staff. Tinto also emphasizes the significance of

academic integration, which covers students' participation in their curriculum, efficient study methods, and availability of academic support systems.

The social justice theory of education, emphasises resolving injustices and promoting inclusivity in educational environments (Cele, 2023). This strategy fits with Tinto's paradigm and is especially pertinent in light of the high dropout rates among Black African students in South African higher education institutions. At its core, this paradigm is built on critical pedagogies which advocate for transforming educational practices to empower marginalised groups and challenge systematic inequalities (Aronson et al., 2020; Pietersen, 2023). Additionally, it highlights the importance of establishing equitable practices and integrating them into a curriculum that promotes diverse perspectives and cognitive complexity as key components of teaching for social justice (Dover, 2013; Steyn & Vanyoro, 2023).

Furthermore, Nancy Fraser's tripartite concept of justice, which includes redistribution, acknowledgment, and representation is a philosophical tradition that contributes significantly to the theoretical foundations of social justice in education (Cazden, 2017; Vincent, 2020). This framework offers a comprehensive perspective for educators to analyse and resolve the complex issues of social injustice in their classrooms. It is furthermore argued that to promote a more equal educational environment, social justice pedagogy must question the existing status quo and inspire a desire for change (Postma, 2016; Bourn, 2021). As highlighted by Gerdin et al (2021), educators are urged to apply critical pedagogies in their teaching practices, which reflect on their methods and actively include students in discussions about social concerns. This approach supports, "the broader goal of promoting social justice within education systems by fostering learning environments that cater to the needs of all students, especially those from historically marginalised backgrounds, such as Black African students. By integrating the two previously mentioned theoretical frameworks into teaching practice, higher education institutions and educators can play a significant role in building a more just and equitable society"(Gerdin, 2021).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Black students in South Africa and their struggles in higher education institutions**

Higher education in South Africa faces several challenges, as highlighted by Swartz et al. (2018). The main issues include low time-to-completion rates, high student failure rates (55%) and significant disparity in the enrolment and graduation rates between white and black students (CHE, 2010). Although there were a substantial number of white youths (18–24 years old) attending universities in 2014, with 54% of white students compared to 15% of black students, the enrolment of black students in universities has nearly quadrupled since 1995 (Cele, 2023). However, Swartz et al. (2018), report that white students have a 50% higher completion rate than their black counterparts. Muswede (2017) emphasises that true emancipation loses its full meaning when educational freedom is restricted, as it involves removing all barriers for educated individuals. Therefore, any form of education that does not promote liberation is

unconstitutional and unfair at best in a country, such as South Africa (Pietersen & Plaatjies, 2023). According to Fourie (2020), higher education institutions face dropout rates at the level of addressing the direct influences and the socio-economic backgrounds. Fourie puts this more succinctly, addressing any of the indirect factors in isolation to address dropout numbers might not directly impact a student's intention to drop out or stay, but such actions might in some way impact those factors that have direct influences on students' intention to stay. Therefore, it seems important in addressing the dropout behaviour of students to keep in mind that it is not enough to address only direct and research-identified effects (as universities normally do); rather, institutions should also try to identify the indirect effects playing a role in students' dropout behaviour and address these too (Fourie, 2020, p.212)

Fourie's efforts to address student dropout rates are echoed by Safstrom (2011) who posits that liberation is based on the premise that all intelligence is equal. This suggests that education reinforces a hierarchical status quo, implying that no changes can disrupt the existing inequality. Conversely, Cornell and Kessi (2017) found that the needs of Black African students are overlooked, and white dominance is preserved in African education systems. As a result, it is still not clear whether higher education in Africa is truly or nominally emancipated.

### **Black students' integration and alienation in higher education institutions**

According to Cornell and Kessi (2017), Black African students believe that the South African academic system is inhospitable and unfriendly. Also, Breire et al. (2010) and Olya (2020) confirmed that Black African students have had bad experiences at universities. Swartz et al., 2018 identified specific unfavourable experiences, including racial stereotypes, unequal treatment by instructors, and racialised access to resources, student housing and financial stability regarding fee payments. More succinctly put, historically marginalised students often face additional barriers to accessing and succeeding in higher education. Insufficient or lack of funding stands to be one of the major barriers and can result in various challenges for these students (Andrews et al., 2022)

Institutions of higher learning need to understand how poverty-related challenges faced by students during their studies can negatively impact their academic performance at higher education institutions (Machika & Johnson, 2015; Singh, 2024). Research indicates that African students often experience stigma due to their low socioeconomic status, which affects their self-esteem and academic success at university (Trani et al., 2020). Similarly, Bojuwoye and Sylvester (2012) found that financial difficulties lead to anxiety and stress among African university students, harming their academic performance. The findings above were corroborated by Breire et al. (2010), who emphasized that poverty is a major obstacle for South African students of color and frequently results in their dropping out of college (Cele, 2024).

### **Black African Students' Experiences of Poverty and Academic Failure at University**

Black African students attending universities in South Africa face several challenges, including financial constraints, transport problems, housing-related difficulties, and the burden of living far from home (Sennett, 2013; Pietersen & Dube, 2024). In other words, for individuals unable

to overcome financial hurdles, they are confronted with even more daunting challenges. These include but are not limited to increased dropout rates, diminished academic performance and focus, higher levels of student debt that may have lasting impacts on their future, restricted access to essential resources that can significantly influence their learning outcomes, heightened mental and emotional strain, limited employment opportunities, and fewer desirable educational pathways (Pascoe et al., 2020).

Similarly, a study by Machika and Johnson (2015) revealed that Black postgraduate students at a South African technological institution face challenges of poverty and poor academic performance. The results show that their socioeconomic backgrounds detrimentally impacted their university attendance. While being a university student and experiencing financial hardship are distinct issues, the situation becomes significantly more complex when considering additional demographic factors (Cele, 2023). Students from more impoverished origins are more likely to drop out than their more fortunate peers, according to Cameron and Greenland's (2019) findings.

The legacy of Apartheid has had a profound impact on South African higher education, particularly for certain student groups who have historically been marginalised. During the Apartheid era, African students faced significant discrimination and were denied access to high-quality education. The Bantu Education Act of 1953 institutionalised segregation in schools, resulting in black pupils receiving fewer resources and opportunities compared to their white counterparts. This history of discrimination continues to affect access and representation in higher education today. Bazana and Mogotsi (2017), highlight Matthews' (2017) important observation regarding the disparities that persist in historically white universities.

Matthews (2017) claims that cultural superiority sentiments, which have shaped the existing South African society and led to an ethnocentric White culture are responsible for certain inequities. The historically white colleges were originally designed with white students in mind, resulting in the social identity of Black African students being overshadowed by white culture (Belluigi & Thondhlana, 2022). Additionally, Cornell and Kessi (2015), report that testimonials from students at the University of Cape Town indicated that the institution favoured Whiteness, with its cultural practices giving precedence to the experiences of White students.

### **Black African Youth and Rural Schools in South Africa on their way to Higher Education Institutions**

Inadequate primary and secondary education has left many Black African youths unprepared for higher education (Pietersen & Dube, 2024). As a result, these students find the college environment unfamiliar and challenging. According to Kessi and Kiguwa (2015), working-class Black African students in poverty, are the direct victims of a subpar public school system, which has not effectively equipped them for postsecondary education (Pietersen, 2023). This can be summarised as follows, those students from rural areas face additional challenges in accessing

higher education due to socio-economic disparities, lack of quality educational infrastructure, and limited opportunities for academic preparation (Chiramba & Ndofirepi, 2023, p.58).

The perspective highlighted here is that socioeconomic status is the main driver of segregation in educational institutions. This segregation begins at school level, where African students are the majority in public or race-related schools, which is more about class than race. However, middle-class children go to private schools where white students predominate. These rural or township schools attended by African students often have inadequate facilities, lack basic amenities such as restrooms; and face significant challenges, including low teacher morale, poor educational outcomes, and a shortage of textbooks. Black African students encounter a distinct educational experience in South Africa when they enrol in historically white universities, despite the official end of Apartheid (Chetty, 2014; Killick & Foster, 2021). These experiences reflect the perception that, Despite the official abolition of apartheid, South Africa's educational system still functions as a catalyst for prejudices we still see in higher education spaces. These sentiments suggest that, even with the formal end of Apartheid, in South Africa, socioeconomic inequality and the “haves” and “have-nots” are still maintained and perpetuated in many ways through the education system (Cele, 2024).

Given the historically restrictive and segregated education policies of apartheid before 1994, concerns about student funding have become a central issue in South African higher education. The racial and geographic segregation of towns during the apartheid era resulted in the unequal distribution of educational resources, creating a significant gap between white and black communities. Black students, particularly those from townships and rural areas with underfunded schools, were the most disadvantaged. This disparity contributed to high dropout rates of Black students at university (Ndofirepi & Chiramba, 2023).

### **Race and Social Justice on Black African Students' Decision to Persist in South Africa's Higher Education Institutions**

Black African students attending South African colleges continue to face significant disadvantages because of their racial and ethnic background. Furthermore, studies on social justice education reveal that some Black African students are more likely than others to be shut out of educational contexts including higher education spaces. Expanding on the field of social justice education indicates that achieving social justice and equity in South African universities is contingent upon the decolonisation of the education system (Harwood et al., 2012; Hlatshwayo, 2022).

Black African students, particularly those at historically white universities, often face significant challenges during their university experience. Domestic and international research indicates that first-year African students tend to have negative experiences which can discourage them from continuing their education. Despite various obstacles, such as coming from low-income families and receiving a sub-par high school education, these students enrol in universities (Bazana & Mogotsi, 2017; Olaya, 2020). However, they frequently feel disconnected from the tradition and culture of these institutions. To make their voices heard,

they resort to protests as a form of advocacy. This sense of exclusion from South African universities is the driving force behind these protests (Cele, 2024)

### **Black African Students' Social Integration in the Geographical Location of University Spaces**

According to Cele (2023), black African students face challenges due to racial dynamics within the geographic location of colleges. Universities situated in areas of historical tensions or inequality may reinforce racial prejudices and discrimination (Nyamnjoh, 2019). This can result in microaggressions, stereotyping, and racism, which detrimentally impact Black African students' social interactions, academic experiences, and general well-being (Pietersen & Dube, 2024). Black African students' social integration can be strongly impacted by the location of universities. Universities situated in regions with high levels of racial segregation or poor diversity may make it more difficult for students to make friends and interact with people from different cultures. (Mafico et al., 2023; Pietersen, 2024).

Black African students face difficulties as a result of resource inequalities based on the locations of universities. Fehintola (2021) suggests that universities located in financially disadvantaged or underinvested areas often lack sufficient infrastructure, research possibilities, library resources, and academic support services. These resource disparities can adversely affect the educational experiences academic achievements, and career prospects of Black African students.

### **Black Student Burnout in Higher Education Institutions and the impact it has on Student Dropout**

The strategies used by both public and private educational institutions to lower university student dropout rates should be the focus of research due to the numerous situation-specific elements that contribute to student dropout. One such factor is student fatigue (Maro, 2020; Nurmalitasari et al., 2023). Research has shown that student burnout can diminish the positive effects of student engagement in higher education and is associated with higher dropout rates among Black students. But research also indicates that exhaustion and engagement are important predictors of academic achievement and dropout risk (Bakker & Mostert, 2024).

There are several similarities between the academic, literary, educational contexts, and the workplace. In the literary context, workload can be compared to study expectations (Cele, 2024). This shows that when high cognitive demands are met with short deadlines, as is frequently the case in higher education institutions where a lot of Black African students may suffer from severe chronic stress, burnout may eventually emerge. Mohammed (2012) found that in student populations burnout syndrome, which is associated with psychological and mental suffering, has been connected to poor academic performance, school dropout, physical and psychological suffering, and suicide ideation.

Even though burnout and engagement are interdependent, it is reasonable to assume that student burnout will have a negative correlation with academic achievement and student engagement and a positive correlation with the outcomes of Black African students dropping out of higher educational institutions.

### RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Institutions of higher learning should establish comprehensive student support systems tailored to the diverse socioeconomic backgrounds of their students. These systems include academic assistance materials, mentorship programmes and financial aid schemes designed especially to encourage academic integration and lower time-to-completion rates. Universities can reduce dropout rates and increase overall retention by promoting social integration and ensuring equal access to resources, especially for students from underserved neighbourhoods.

To encourage emancipation and ensure the equitable recognition of students' intelligence across diverse backgrounds, educational institutions should prioritise updating their curricula and methods of instruction. This can be accomplished by adopting critical pedagogical frameworks that address curriculum-based disparities and challenge the historical hierarchy present in South African education. By openly discussing socioeconomic factors and promoting an environment of intellectual equality, institutions can contribute to dismantling social barriers and cultivating an inclusive academic community where all students have the opportunity to thrive.

### CONCLUSION

South African higher education is confronted with several challenges, including high student failure rates, extended time to -complete degrees, and a lack of diversity in both the student body and graduation rates. Among black and white students. To address these issues effectively, it is essential to consider both direct and indirect factors as well as the socio-economic backgrounds of students. Emancipation in education should aim to promote liberation by tackling these direct and indirect factors. For emancipation to occur in the context of student dropout rates at higher education institutions, it must be grounded in the belief that intelligence is equal among all individuals. Additionally, educational institutions should challenge the existing hierarchical status quo that perpetuates social inequality. By integrating these theoretical frameworks into educational practices, higher education institutions and educators can contribute to a more just and equitable society.

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