CREATING CONDITIONS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

**Social justice
perspectives from a
South African university**

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13

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT WITHIN DIVERSE CONTEXTS

A KEY CONDITION FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the importance of engagement with and across diversity as a key condition for student success. The chapter discusses engagement as an established, albeit critiqued, notion not only in South Africa but across the globe. It draws on data from the South African Survey of Student Engagement's (SASSE) one indicator ('Discussion with Diverse Others') which focuses on the Stellenbosch University students' engagement with and across diversity during 2016 and 2018. This data from Stellenbosch University (SU), compared to data from other comparable institutions in South Africa, suggests that students engage more frequently across perceived diversity. Diversity being a strategic focus of SU, the findings suggest that many initiatives that foster diversity engagement are likely to play a role in bringing this about.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AS A VERSATILE AND DYNAMIC CONCEPT ACROSS THE GLOBE

A robust body of research from higher education across developed and developing countries supports the assertion that student engagement in educationally intentional activities and institutions' deliberate design of opportunities to advance engagement are linked to favourable outcomes, not only at academic, but also personal, social and institutional level (Kuh 2009; Kuh, Ikenberry, Jankowski, Cain, Ewell, Hutchings & Kinzie 2015; Seidman 2012; Strydom, Kuh & Loots 2017; Trowler 2010a, 2010b; Trowler & Trowler 2010). The complex and dynamic correlation of engagement with student success has been highlighted not only in studies from the USA and the UK, but also South Africa, where stronger engagement was found to correlate with improved student success (Schreiber & Yu 2012; Strydom et al. 2017).

PART FOUR • STUDENT ENGAGEMENT, GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES AND EMPLOYABILITY

Student engagement has received considerable attention in the USA, where the concept was developed by Astin (1984) and Kuh (2009) and further developed by a range of researchers who have adjusted the framework and concepts for South Africa (Strydom et al. 2017), Canada (Norrie & Conway 2014), China (Zhang 2013); Ireland and the UK (Trowler 2010a, 2010b), and Australia and New Zealand (Coates 2005; Leach 2014; Tippin 2014). The notion that student engagement is a highly versatile construct and very useful for higher education and student success in a variety of forms has become widely accepted across the world.

A sound body of knowledge that documents the versatility of the concept has developed, not only for issues around student success but also for institutional success (Trowler 2010a, 2010b), teaching and learning and quality assurance (Strydom et al. 2017), institutional ranking (McMahon & Portelli 2012), persistence and retention (Kuh 2009), citizenship and democracy development (Biesta 2007), participation, and co-curricular development, to name a few.

With increasing pressure on institutions to succeed and to facilitate the development of aspirational, insightful, reflective and responsive graduate attributes, to satisfy stakeholders and to strive for higher ranking, student engagement is one very valuable measure that can assist institutions in designing, planning, reviewing, assessing and monitoring their overall student living and learning experience and the concomitant academic success (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges & Hayek 2006; Schreiber 2014).

Student engagement has inspired practical, theoretical, structural and policy related domains and offers a range of possibilities for higher education to intentionally affect thinking about student success of researchers, academics, management and student affairs practitioners. In addition, the student engagement literature offers cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional guidance for developing opportunities that can shift the entire institution towards becoming an engaged one (Schreiber 2014; Strydom et al. 2017).

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: INTERPRETATIONS AND CRITIQUES

Student engagement has become a useful lens through which to explore institutional and student success and offers an operationalisable measure of these issues. On the one hand, student engagement is defined as student participation in activities, both in and outside the classroom, which lead to positive academic outcomes (Coates 2005; Harper & Quaye 2009; Kuh 2009; Trowler & Trowler 2010), and on the other hand, as the institution's attempt to involve and empower students to shape their learning experiences, which is an emphasis often used amongst UK

CHAPTER 13 • STUDENT ENGAGEMENT WITHIN DIVERSE CONTEXTS

researchers (Klemenčič, Bergan & Primožič 2015; Trowler & Trowler 2010). According to Zepke (2015:1311), in narrow terms engagement is a set of student and institutional behaviours and, viewed holistically, it can be described as a “socio-cultural ecosystem” that links teaching, personal background and community with a broader understanding of learning.

George Kuh is ubiquitously quoted as defining engagement as the “time and energy students devote to educationally purposeful activities *and* the institutional effort to offer opportunities for engagement and to entice students to engage with the institution” (Kuh 2001:15).

Coates (2005) lists the following key aspects of comprehensive engagement:

- Active and collaborative learning
- Participation in challenging academic activities
- Formative communication with academic staff
- Involvement in enriching educational experiences
- Feeling legitimate and supported by university learning communities.

The Australian engagement concepts include aspects of work-integrated learning as a valuable aspect of student engagement for student success (Coates 2005).

According to Trowler (2010b:3), engagement is “concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institution intended to optimise their student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and their performance and regulation of the institution”. It is a complex term with different historical roots and different emphases. Mann (2001) juxtaposes the concept with ‘alienation’ and thus foregrounds aspects such as belonging, being part of and feeling at home, and moves the perhaps structural-instrumental aspect of engagement towards an ontological and deeper engagement that includes the personal experience and personal-affective sense-making.

Harper and Quaye (2009) argue that engagement is more than a measure of points of contact or frequency of behaviours; it involves feelings, sense making and a particular sense of being and quality of being, a view that is also emphasised by Mann (2001). According to Harper and Quaye (2009) it entails behavioural engagement (attendance, involvement), emotional engagement (having affective responses such as interest, enjoyment and belonging), and cognitive engagement (such as interest in learning, and applying one’s mind beyond the immediate academic questions). The aspect of social and personal subjective experience is foregrounded.

PART FOUR • STUDENT ENGAGEMENT, GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES AND EMPLOYABILITY

As a broad and dynamic concept, student engagement has been taken up across the world and has invoked debates and critiques. Zepke (2015, 2017) and Khan (2013) discuss how engagement literature and research are dominated by outcome studies and neglects theorising about engagement. Engagement, according to Zepke (2015, 2017), appears to be constructed in utilitarian notions and neglects aspects of self-critique and “purpose, knowledge and values that transcend powerful political discourses in neo-liberal times” (Zepke 2017:433). Research and discourse around engagement is critiqued for its alignment with outcomes and value-add, focusing on success, retention, employability and institutional ranking, guided by causality thinking and permeated by values of effectiveness, efficiency and tangible outcomes (Macfarlane & Tomlinson 2017). Some of the broader critiques levelled against neo-liberalism in higher education, especially performativity, efficiency, reductionism and links to employability and economic returns, are also brought to weigh on engagement discourse and research (Macfarlane & Tomlinson 2017).

Trowler (2017) expands the conceptualisation of engagement and discusses different forms of engagement ranging from congruent engagement via non-engagement to oppositional engagement. While essentially oppositional to the status quo, notions of oppositional engagement are based on attachment, activity and a re-definition of what compliant and socially adjusted behaviours constitute (Trowler & Schreiber 2020).

Some engagement literature conflates student experience with student satisfaction, perhaps because of the “nebulous and contentious” conceptual fuzziness (Macfarlane & Tomlinson 2017:89) which is critiqued by Brown and Carasso (2013) and Schreiber (2013) who alert scholars to the risk of constructing students as clients and organising educational settings on quasi-market and competitive lines.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa has used engagement notions, research, literature and data widely, and has also made efforts to adjust institutional practices and culture to South African higher education realities in an effort to make higher education a more efficient tool to advance the national development goals.

Student engagement in South Africa is prolifically researched and has been made accessible by a team of enthusiastic researchers at the University of the Free State (UFS), led by Francois Strydom. In 2007, UFS was the first South African university that used the SASSE,¹ which is based on the National Survey of Student

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¹ <https://www.ufs.ac.za/sasse>

CHAPTER 13 • STUDENT ENGAGEMENT WITHIN DIVERSE CONTEXTS

Engagement (NSSE), developed at the University of Indiana² and adjusted to the South African context.

Student engagement is focused on “supporting and developing the talented students of South Africa through the use of evidence” via “deeply contextualised measures that were globally benchmarked” (Strydom et al. 2017:xiii). Emphasis was and still is on counter-balancing the “obsession with rankings by refocusing the quality of higher education debate on students and their learning” (Strydom et al. 2017:xiii). In view of the sluggish improvement of the student success rate over the past 15 years (DHET 2019), the discussions around chronic low performance of the higher education sector welcomed the new ideas of student engagement. Engagement did not only promise to lift the academic performance of students, but also offered a new institutional and higher education framework based on evidence and benchmarked with comparable institutions and countries, which promised to yield not only student and institutional academic successes, but also overall student social and personal development.

Strydom et al. (2017) provide a systemic perspective on student engagement in South Africa based on the 2014 SASSE data, collected from 12 306 undergraduate students at nine institutions in South Africa. The findings are significant and reveal that engagement research offers actionable data for the improvement of undergraduate education outcomes (Strydom et al. 2017). The engagement research in South Africa has played a key role in the shift towards data-driven decision-making to influence the improvement of the higher education sector.

DISCUSSION OF SASSE'S DIVERSITY INDICATOR: 'DISCUSSIONS WITH DIVERSE OTHERS'

Universities offer students the opportunity to engage across and with diversity and difference, however one may conceptualise this engagement across and with diversity and difference. Research into the ‘value’ of engaging with difference is conclusive in that it holds the potential to expand students’ cognitive fluidity, accelerate identity development, advance critical thinking, and deepen democracy competencies, amongst many other advantages (Pascarella & Terenzini 2005; Strydom et al. 2017).

The indicator of engagement of the SASSE survey assesses the frequency with which students engage with people of different race, economic status, religion and political background. This indicator seeks to assess to what extent and frequency students engage with peers who are ‘different’ by asking the question: “During the current

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² <http://nsse.indiana.edu/>

PART FOUR • STUDENT ENGAGEMENT, GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES AND EMPLOYABILITY

academic year, about how often have you had discussions with people from the following groups: People of a race or ethnicity other than your own? People from an economic background other than your own? People with religious beliefs other than your own? People with political views other than your own?"

This question on the engagement with peers who are different appears to be premised on reductionist notions of 'difference'. By exploring the notion of difference as used in this context, I ask the converse: Are peers of the same race the same? Asking students to assess peers on 'difference' of religion, race, economic status or political views essentialises these markers and suggests fixed and rigid concepts. For instance, religiosity is an emerging and fluid concept, and may not be a fixed marker. Similarly, political views shift and change, and while difference may be a feature in one context, similarity and commonality may be much more pronounced in another context. Hence difference may appear at a particular time and place, while shifting and morphing within a short time.

Another concern is that through this assessment of frequency of discussion with diverse others, students are asked to assess their peers through the lens of 'difference'. It is a reductionist position to view 'the other' on criteria of race, religion, economic status and political affiliation. It reduces these markers to fixed notions and binary categories rather than affirming the fluidity of these concepts, especially at this developmental stage. My concern is also that quantifying the engagement with diverse others into how often one has had discussions neglects the quality of this engagement, the depth of engagement, and the meaning this engagement may have had.

The quantification of the contact and discussion across difference is a simplistic measure of the depth of experience of living in a pluralist, multicultural society. Diversity is not a 'moment' or 'skill' or 'behaviour', but should be re-conceptualised as a milieu where multiculturalism and diversity are part of living and learning in a pluralist context (Schreiber 2018). Researchers emphasise the importance of interpretation and meaning-making in diverse contacts and of dialogue about the complexity of diversity (Leibowitz, Rohleder, Bozalek, Carolissen & Swartz 2007).

The SASSE assessment of discussion with peers who are different neglects aspects of complexity and nuance, and homogenises 'race' and 'ethnicity'. For instance, being 'black African' is a simplistic descriptor of multiple cultures and identities, and reduces the relevance of language and rurality. Being 'white' may not be a 'common' or 'shared' identity, language, culture or history. These are simplistic notions which don't reflect the nuanced understanding of difference or diversity that prevails in South Africa or at SU.

CHAPTER 13 • STUDENT ENGAGEMENT WITHIN DIVERSE CONTEXTS

The SASSE questions on diversity omit nuances on a variety of other spectrums which neglect these and reduce the pluralist student experience to the four differences of race, religion, economic and political background. Areas of sexual orientation and gender spectrum, disability and age, rurality and urban lived experiences and different styles of being in the world are neglected.

Furthermore, engagement as constructed in the SASSE category of ‘Discussion with Diverse Others’, and perhaps also other SASSE indicators, reduces the texture and varied depth, style and levels of engagement of students (Leibowitz et al. 2007). A range of avenues, levels, styles and dynamic interplay of engagement is required, especially when engaging across, with and about difference and diversity. Some of these aspects are lost in the current form of the SASSE.

Despite these conceptual concerns and issues around the reductionist nature of this question in the SASSE, the scores for this indicator may still reveal a number of interesting findings and are discussed in the section below.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AT STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY

This chapter is based on the SASSE data collected during 2016 and 2018 at SU. The specific data relevant to this chapter is described further on but it is sufficient here to offer an overview of SU engagement data as it compares to other comparable³ universities in South Africa. The SU SASSE data from 2016 and 2018 have a very similar profile to the data of universities SU is compared to. Comparable universities are traditional universities in South Africa of similar shape and size. Overall, students at SU appear to have similar behaviour and attitude patterns as reflected in their self-report measures on academic challenge, learning with peers, experiences with staff, and their experience of the campus environment (the four themes of the SASSE).

THE STUDY**Research setting**

The research setting of this study was SU, which is a medium-sized residential research university, ranking amongst the top universities in Africa (THE 2019). SU is

3 ‘Comparable’ here means that the SU data is compared to data from universities in South Africa that have similar size, shape and student profile. SU’s 2016 data is compared to three other comparable universities and the 2018 data is compared to four other comparable South African universities, which are historically advantaged universities, residential, urban, mid-sized and research focused, with similar size, shape and student profile. This comparability measure is defined by the University of the Free State (<http://sasse.ufs.ac.za>).

PART FOUR • STUDENT ENGAGEMENT, GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES AND EMPLOYABILITY

a wealthy, successful, historically advantaged institution with a troubled past, having generated the political masterminds of apartheid and having accumulated its wealth during the apartheid regime.

However, over the past two decades the university has made substantive and dramatic steps towards system transformation via a range of pervasive interventions, including changes in student demographics, language of teaching and learning, residence placements, systemic curriculum renewal and a variety of other significant changes which foreground diversity, access and student success.

Currently, over 30 000 students (more or less 40% in postgraduate studies and 60% undergraduate) study in 10 faculties. About 15% are international students and around 25% stay in well-resourced university residences. Enrolment criteria are stringent while student fees are below the national average. SU draws from the highest performing school-leavers and the admission plans are based firmly on transformation agendas. The student body is diverse and is made up of 56% white,⁴ 19% coloured,⁵ 21% black African and 3% Indian students (DHET 2019). There are 56% female and 3.2% disabled students (self-disclosed registered disability), and 17% receive government bursaries via the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS).

The research instrument: SASSE (South African Survey of Student Engagement)

The study from which the data was drawn for this chapter used the 2016 and 2018 SASSE online questionnaire as administered by UFS in South Africa. The tool is a derivative of the NSSE which originated in the USA and is used across a wide range of countries (SASSE Annual Report 2015).

The SASSE has been contextualised to the South African context and since 2007 it has been used by 21 of the 27 universities in South Africa. It is an online, self-report questionnaire with 41 questions which students answer with 'never', 'sometimes', 'often' or 'always' (Strydom et al. 2017). The data analysis is performed by UFS which generates user-friendly reports for the participating institutions.

The tool has high internal consistency and reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.7886$) (SASSE Annual Report 2015). For this chapter, the indicator of 'Discussions with diverse others' is used, and for this item, Cronbach's α is 0.816 (SASSE Annual Report 2015).

4 The race descriptors are used by the South African higher education sector for reporting to government (DHET 2019).

5 Race terminology is only relevant in the South Africa context and due to the South Africa government reporting requirements.

CHAPTER 13 • STUDENT ENGAGEMENT WITHIN DIVERSE CONTEXTS

Data, scores and reporting

The data is collected online and UFS collates institutional data reports. The university scores are compared to 'comparable' institutions which have a similar profile of students, and similar size and shape. UFS selects these comparison universities. The Stellenbosch 2016 SASSE data was compared to three other comparable universities and the 2018 SASSE data was compared to four other comparable universities. This choice of comparison university depends on the participating institutions during that year.

The data sets from the institutions are compared and a detailed and user-friendly report is generated for each institution. Data is compared using significance levels of $p < 0.5$ (SASSE Annual Report 2015; SASSE SU Report 2016, 2018).

For this chapter, I used the data from one indicator of the 2016 and the 2018 SASSE surveys as provided by UFS in an institutional report for SU (SASSE SU Report 2016, 2018).

Participants

The participants in the 2016 and 2018 surveys were undergraduate students registered at SU. For the 2016 SASSE, $N = 985$ and for the 2018 SASSE, $N = 1\,005$, which constituted a participation rate of 4.9% for 2016 and 5% for 2018. This was deemed sufficient to generate reliable results. Table 13.1 provides descriptors of the SU participants, divided between first-year students (enrolled in first year of study) and senior students (enrolled in second, third and final year of study), based on self-report as provided by the participants. Table 13.1 also details the demographics of the participants of the 2016 and 2018 SASSE for SU.

TABLE 13.1 SASSE participant demographics, 2016 & 2018

	2018 N = 1 005		2016 N = 985	
	First-year students N = 289	Senior students (2nd & 3rd year) N = 716	First-year students N = 320	Senior students (2nd & 3rd year) N = 681
Male	80 (40%)	238 (45%)	125 (45%)	281 (46%)
Female	208 (56%)	474 (55%)	193 (55%)	393 (54%)
Black African	48 (17%)	111 (16%)	36 (12%)	87 (13%)
Coloured	54 (19%)	145 (20%)	41 (13%)	110 (16%)
Indian	14 (5%)	20 (3%)	5 (2%)	13 (2%)
Asian	1 (0%)	4 (1%)	3 (1%)	4 (1%)
White	167 (57%)	422 (59%)	195 (60%)	373 (55%)
Other	6 (2%)	17 (3%)	5 (2%)	15 (2%)

PART FOUR • STUDENT ENGAGEMENT, GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES AND EMPLOYABILITY

	2018 N = 1 005		2016 N = 985	
	First-year students N = 289	Senior students (2nd & 3rd year) N = 716	First-year students N = 320	Senior students (2nd & 3rd year) N = 681
International	24 (8%)	40 (5%)	13 (4%)	44 (7%)
University residence	159 (55%)	353 (48%)	196 (61%)	285 (42%)
First generation	128 (46%)	295 (40%)	147 (47%)	276 (41%)

Source: SASSE SU Report (2016, 2018)

Analysis

The data was analysed by the UFS SASSE office using statistical analysis. Engagement indicators are computed on a 60-point scale (never = 0, sometimes = 20, often = 40 and very often = 60). A score of 60 means a student responded at the top of the range (very often) and a score of 0 means the student never engaged in that particular way (SASSE SU Report 2016, 2018). Reports are done providing significance levels of $p < 0.5$ with effect size of 0.3 or less than 0.3 in magnitude. Reports are generated and provided to the institution, keeping the comparison universities confidential.

Limitations

The evidence presented here needs to be considered with caution. First, the comparison institutions are not equal but only similar. Hence the comparison of SU scores with comparative 'traditional' universities' scores is not entirely without problems. Reviewing the demographics of the students at the comparative institutions suggests that race and language demographics are different (SU has a relatively high diversity of race and language), and also the percentages of first-generation and of international students are different. However, the degree of difference is within what the SASSE office of UFS considers to be within reason and small enough to warrant meaningful comparison.

The second caveat is about the value of the evidence as specifically useful to intra-institutional interpretations and meaning-making, rather than as absolute value or purely in comparison with other institutions. There is no simple link between evidence and practice and each institution needs to interpret the data relevant to time and place, perhaps as detailed as faculty and department level. A subtle understanding of local student culture is important to guide meaningful interpretation and to shape effective interventions. This data in this study may be a feature of student activism during 2016 and 2017 which was particularly high in South Africa and at SU, and

CHAPTER 13 • STUDENT ENGAGEMENT WITHIN DIVERSE CONTEXTS

the data may show that activism has increased engagement across diversity, not that diversity engagement is an ‘absolute’ feature of SU student life.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS: COMPARING SU SCORES TO OTHER COMPARABLE UNIVERSITIES

This chapter focuses on exploring the meaning of engagement across diversity for SU. For this chapter, only the scores of one indicator – ‘Discussions with diverse others’ – are presented and discussed as I was particularly interested in the aspect of diversity, relationships across diversity and this university’s position in this regard.

There is some variation in the other engagement indicator scores when comparing SU student averages to other comparable universities, not only in 2016 but also in 2018. These are not the focus of this chapter and are thus not discussed.

Comparing SU’s mean scores of the indicator ‘Discussion with diverse others’ reveals that SU was scoring significantly higher than the comparison group of universities for both 2016 and 2018 for first-year students, as well as for senior students.

The indicator ‘Discussion with diverse others’ was explored based on the question: “During the current academic year, about how often have you had discussions with people from the following groups?” They could choose an answer from the following:

- a. People of a race or ethnicity other than your own
- b. People from an economic background other than your own
- c. People with religious beliefs other than your own
- d. People with political views other than your own.

Table 13.2 below contains the comparison of SU’s mean scores on ‘Discussion with diverse others’ and the comparison scores at significance levels of $p < 0.5$ for 2016 and 2018.

TABLE 13.2 Comparison of SU mean score with comparable universities

Indicator	2018		2016	
	First-year mean	Senior mean	First-year mean	Senior mean
Discussion with diverse others				
Mean score SU	3.20	3.15	3.27	3.19
Mean score comparison university	3.00	3.00	3.07	3.06
Significance levels	Significant at $p < 0.5$	Significant at $p < 0.5$	Significant at $p < 0.5$	Significant at $p < 0.5$

PART FOUR • STUDENT ENGAGEMENT, GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES AND EMPLOYABILITY

Indicator	2018		2016	
	First-year mean	Senior mean	First-year mean	Senior mean
Discussion with diverse others	SU students' average was significantly higher than comparison universities ($p < 0.5$) with an effect size less than 0.3 in magnitude	SU students' average was significantly higher than comparison universities ($p < 0.5$) with an effect size less than 0.3 in magnitude	SU students' average was significantly higher than comparison universities ($p < 0.5$) with an effect size less than 0.3 in magnitude	SU students' average was significantly higher than comparison universities ($p < 0.5$) with an effect size less than 0.3 in magnitude

Source: SASSE SU Report (2016, 2018)

The findings suggest that the SU students' score on 'Discussions with diverse others', using the descriptors of race, religion, economic status and political views, were significantly higher than the scores of comparable institutions across South Africa. The SU students' score was significantly higher (at $p < 0.5$) for the first-year group as well as senior student group, for the year 2016 and 2018.

DISCUSSION

Engagement with diverse others is of critical importance for student success at SU. Engagement with and across diversity is not only valued at this university, but also across South Africa as a graduate attribute and for the development of the psycho-social fabric of the country. The assessment around engaging with diverse others is a complex issue as there is no single conceptualisation or theory that illustrates it. The SASSE assesses self-report on discussion with diverse others as part of engagement practices of students and understands this indicator as a high-impact practice (SASSE Annual Report 2015; SASSE SU Report 2016, 2017; Strydom et al. 2017).

As illustrated above, in both years, SU's scores on engaging with diversity in terms of the score on students' discussion with diverse others were significantly higher than those of the comparative universities. Overall, indeed, students at SU may engage with peers of different race, religion, economic status or political views more often than students at comparative institutions. SU has a substantial range of race, ethnicity, languages, religions, socio-economic status, 'first-generation' students, students from a broad spectrum of political parties, students with disabilities, students who identify across the gender spectrum, mature and returning students, on- and off-campus students living in private and university-owned residences, as well as a sizeable group of international students, both from the continent as well as overseas. SU also has a considerable population of white and coloured students, partly due to

CHAPTER 13 • STUDENT ENGAGEMENT WITHIN DIVERSE CONTEXTS

its location in the Western Cape, which in itself offers great opportunity for engagement with diverse others, but also strengthens SU's ability to attract students from diverse backgrounds.

The comparatively high score on this SASSE indicator may indeed reflect that students at SU engage with different others more frequently than at comparative universities in South Africa. It is possible that especially during the run-up to the 2016-2017 unrest, students found themselves in highly diverse groups, debating political issues from a variety of positions. The events before and during the student unrests of 2016-2017 may also have contributed to the comparatively high score on this SASSE indicator.

The scores may also have been influenced by the unique interpretations of students of what constitutes 'difference'. Students at SU may have a more categorical and absolute understanding, a less nuanced and fluid understanding of difference and may thus have 'seen' difference – 'spotted' difference – more acutely than other students.

The scores for both the first-year and the senior students were comparatively high, suggesting that students who enrol at SU bring a certain appetite for discussion with diverse others, perhaps a skill, keenness, and readiness to engage with peers who appear different from themselves and maintain this level until their final year of undergraduate study.

SU has a number of interventions and programmes that intentionally promote engagement across and with diversity. One such example is the residential experience of the Listen, Live and Learn communities (Dunn-Coetzee & Fourie-Malherbe 2017; Schreiber 2018) – see Chapter 9. This is a residential placement of diverse students (self-identified diversity on a variety of indicators) who seek to live and learn in university houses (small residences of up to 13 students) with one another and plan to engage with diversity. Research on these experiences suggests that students emerge from these residential experiences with a heightened awareness and competencies regarding diversity.

Another example of how SU heightens the opportunity to engage with diverse others is the residential cluster system which groups together residences that are 'different', such as pairing male and female residences, or pairing residences with private student wards (see Chapter 11). The overall SU residence policy is focused on placing students into residences based on high diversity, which includes placing students from different parts of South Africa, different languages and race, different 'first-generation' status and different economic backgrounds in close proximity (double rooms or corridors).

PART FOUR • STUDENT ENGAGEMENT, GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES AND EMPLOYABILITY

The new (2016) Language Policy at SU may also have had a significant impact on diversity. Since the implementation of this language policy (which now enables learning in English and Afrikaans, where earlier only Afrikaans was possible in some courses) a wider pool of students is enrolling at SU and broader diversity is enabled.

Another important structural change is the establishment of the Equality Unit and the strengthening of the Transformation Office and the Disability Unit at SU, and significant increase in funding for financially needy students. These structural changes promote diversity amongst students and create more opportunity for engagement across diversity.

The periods before, during and after the student of 2015-2016 and 2017 have also seen the implementation of broad student conversations (formal and informal, structured and semi-structured engagements about contentious issues that inspired student unrest), not only driven by the SRC of 2016 and 2017 but also hosted by the residences, the Centre for Leadership and Structures and the Centre for Student Counselling and Development. These intentional interventions created spaces for engagement across and with diversity.

Antonio, Chang, Hakuta, Kenny, Levin and Milem (2004) distinguish structural diversity – the numbers of diverse students measured on any indicator in a group or class – as not being a sufficient condition for engagement with and across diversity. They assert that meaningful diversity experiences are promoted when ‘informal interactional diversity’ is enabled by orchestrating opportunities for such engagements in primarily out-of-class experiences (in residences, clubs, etc.).

The value of engaging with difference, engaging across difference, discussion with diverse others, diversity and living and learning in diverse contexts lies in positive social outcomes, beyond academic improvements (these being firmly established, see, for instance, Schreiber & Yu 2014). Antonio et al. (2004) found that the value of diversity, described as minority opinion and minority race and having racially diverse friends and classmates, contributed to students’ integrative complexity. Chang, Astin and Kim (2004:66) assert that “cross-racial interaction has positive effects on students’ intellectual, social and civic development”. These are the intentions of the programmes at SU that aim to promote engagement across diversity.

Gurin, Dey, Hutado and Gurin (2002:330) explored the impact of diversity on students’ cognitive and identity development and their findings support the claim that diversity “introduces relational discontinuities critical to identity construction and its subsequent role in fostering cognitive growth”. Diversity, according to Gurin et al. (2002), not only promotes academic performance through cognitive development, but also advances identity development.

CHAPTER 13 • STUDENT ENGAGEMENT WITHIN DIVERSE CONTEXTS

According to Kuh (2009:7), “diversity experiences teach students valuable things about themselves and others”. In other words, in this sense, diversity is located within an instrumentalist framework, viewing diversity through the lens of utility: diversity is value because it teaches something. However, diversity is not only a vehicle for self-advancement and identity development, or a vehicle for skills development or even a skill in and of itself, but it is also an intrinsic value. Discussion with diverse others is not an “appointment or engagement in the daily diary” (Krause 2005:8), but should be a way of being so that it is not viewed as an instrumentalist and utilitarian avenue towards greater skill development or enhanced academic performance. Diversity is a way of life, a value.

The questions that remain after discussion in this chapter are at least the following:

1. Does the data, suggesting that SU students have comparatively more discussions with diverse others, say much about the level and depth of engagement, or how this engagement impacts their identity, understanding and interpretations of the world?
2. Are the comparatively high scores on discussions with diverse others the result of organic factors, perhaps being situated in a diverse province, or do these scores indicate that students who enrol at SU have a particular appetite and readiness for diversity, or are they the result of intentional design and have they been influenced by the range of SU’s diversity-promoting programmes?
3. Given the comparatively high scores, is this an aspect that SU may want to utilise deliberately to advance institutional goals such as the development of graduate attributes, or is this an intrinsic value that SU has engendered, of which it can and should be proud?

Beyond the discussion on the risks of locating engagement discourse in the utilitarian domain, engagement and participation can be viewed as part of the emerging and related discourses of education for democracy (Klemenčič et al. 2015). This argument is aligned to the intrinsic value of discussion with diverse others as a contributing factor towards citizenship development and the advancement of students as agents of social justice.

Chang, Chang and Ledesma (2005:10-11, cited in Trowler & Trowler 2010:36) caution universities not to engage in “magical thinking” and wishing that purposeful engagement happens by coincidence. They alert universities to be intentional and deliberate in creating environments that are conducive to developing the very outcomes that are identified by the institution. Strange and Banning (2001) alert campuses to design opportunities, incentives and reinforcements intentionally to assist students in developing the kinds of capacities and experiences that advance everyone’s goals.

PART FOUR • STUDENT ENGAGEMENT, GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES AND EMPLOYABILITY

This is the kind of message that this chapter wants to echo: SU seems to have fertile ground for diversity discussions, conversations, engagements and relationships, and has already developed a range of intentional opportunities for engagement across diversity. Perhaps even more purposeful and intentional programmes need to be put in place so that this organic resource can be utilised more deliberately. Care needs to be taken to avoid making this a diversity 'event' or an instrument or tool of achieving a goal. Rather, diversity should be considered a value that is already in place and needs to be celebrated.

CONCLUSION

Diversity leads to more than improved academic outcomes. Institutions should aspire to creating more opportunities to live and learn in diverse contexts. SU does this and can do more. Although students organically engage across a diversity spectrum, much more can be achieved when students are enticed to leave homogenous groups and reach across diversity. As Harper and Quayle (2009) say, benefitting from diversity does not happen by accident.

Diversity engagement is not only a moral value, a human right and a transformation ideal, but according to the SASSE, engagement across diversity is also correlated with and contributes towards increased student success. Both are worthwhile causes.

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