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Exploring Inequality in South African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) through Vignettes

Abstract

Vignettes, as a research method, presents short hypothetical stories to individuals to elicit their views on a particular topic. A review of the literature indicates that although vignettes have successfully gleaned detailed data on phenomena, few research studies have employed this valuable method in higher education institutions' (HEIs) contexts globally. This paper provides findings from a qualitative study that generated data through vignettes to understand students' perceptions of (dis)advantage. Twenty-four honours students from five faculties at one HEI in South Africa participated in the study. Findings indicate that vignettes more effectively glean rich qualitative data on sensitive or complex topics than other research methods. The method can prompt open discussions on topics usually regarded as sensitive by the participants because it helps them to reflect on their own lived experiences of (dis)advantage in HEIs. More importantly, this study shows that vignettes reveal the hidden and unexpected of what constitutes (dis)advantage, for example, low-income students have certain advantages that contributed to their success. This finding has direct implications for the design of interventions at HEIs aimed at reducing inequality.

Keywords: vignettes, research method, higher education, inequality and disadvantage, South Africa

Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) use various research methods to investigate pressing issues such as inclusivity and inequality in diverse contexts. The use of vignettes to generate rich data is one of these methods. The vignettes take the form of short hypothetical or fictional stories dealing with a particular phenomenon (O'Dell et al., 2012). Vignettes are widely used in qualitative research in various fields including public health, social sciences, and anthropology (Sampson & Johannessen, 2020). However, few studies have used vignettes to do research in higher education globally (Stravakou & Lozgka, 2018). In order to contribute to the existing gap in the literature on this topic, this paper explores the use of vignettes method to investigate the inequality of students in accessing, participating, and succeeding in higher education. The paper is organised in four sections. The following section presents a brief background of inequality in South African higher education then an evaluation of literature on the use of vignettes globally follows. Afterwards, a section on how vignettes were constructed and applied for this research is presented. The paper concludes by a presentation of findings and a discussion.

Inequality of access to and success in South African higher education

South Africa is still grappling with inequality in higher education. The Department of Education (1997) have implemented policies to promote inclusive higher education by increasing the enrollment of historically excluded groups and offering financial and academic support. As evident through the violence and looting in July 2021 in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng Provinces and the #FeesMustFall activism in 2015, inequality and poverty in South African society and higher education persist. In 2018, enrolment rates at HEIs were: Black African students (19%), Coloured students (15%), Indian students (46%), and White students (55%). As reported by the Council on Higher Education (2020), based on 2018 statistics Black African students had the lowest success rate (75%), Coloured students (79%), Indian students (80%) and White students (86%). These statistics suggest that the interventions implemented to address inequality have not achieved what policy intended to do.

A review of the literature, however, shows that regardless of policy using the above racial categories in planning and monitoring of its interventions, inequality has become class rather than race based (Spaull, 2019). Furthermore, disadvantage is manifested in a complex intersection of factors ranging from poor schooling to inadequate finances for university expenses such as tuition, transport, accommodation and living expenses in addition to being underprepared for university education (Gore & Walker, 2020; Ruswa & Gore, 2021). Although the disadvantages students face in HEIs have been well documented, the advantages low-income students enjoy have not been given the same level of attention. The few studies that have been done point to limited advantages of low-income students. For example, the socio-economic hardships they have had to overcome which have made them resilient is mentioned as a valuable outcome (Marshal & Case, 2010; Mkwanzani & Wilson-Strydom, 2018). Failure to acknowledge the advantages that students have leads to a tendency to view them through a deficit lens and to focus on their limitations. This is problematic in that it reproduces inequality as policymakers, HEIs management and university teachers often view disadvantage as a norm resulting in inadequate attention on addressing disadvantage (Mathebula, 2019; Smit, 2012).

The study reported in this paper aimed to investigate the meaning of “historically disadvantaged” a term employed by South African higher education policy for interventions meant to address inequality (Department of Education, 1997). Regardless of disadvantage being frequently used, the term has not been defined in policy documents resulting in some HEIs lacking clarity on what it is exactly and the consequent ineffective interventions (Gore & Walker, 2020). The research questions addressed in this paper are:

- What are students’ perceptions of their (dis)advantage in accessing and succeeding in higher education institutions?
- How are vignettes useful in exploring advantage among the low-income students?

Learning from the advantages that the low-income groups have is a significant way of informing policy and practice in HEIs to effectively addresses inequality (Mathebula, 2019).

Using vignettes in higher education enquiry

A review of literature shows that there are some studies that have employed vignettes in education. For instance, vignettes have been used to investigate equality in education in the US (Campbell, 1996), students' educational experiences in English and German universities (Kandemir & Budd, 2018), and school principals' values in Greek schools (Stravakou & Lozgka, 2018). The common characteristics of vignettes from the above mentioned studies is that the method focus on a certain research problem and simplify the issues being studied. Furthermore, vignettes explore actions presented in the stories, shed light on people's judgements on an issue, and elicit perceptions that are less personal on sensitive topics (Campbell, 1996). The story in the vignettes demonstrates the behaviour of a particular character or presents a situation within a context making it possible for the researcher to assess the participants' comments on the issues presented in the vignettes (Kandemir & Budd, 2018). When the stories "represent real" life situations, vignettes can generate detailed and honest accounts of a phenomenon as the researcher gains the trust of the participants so that they view him/her as part of the group (Sampson & Johannessen, 2020, p. 58).

After presenting the short stories, participants are asked to describe how they reacted to a given scenario. The fact that the vignettes provide some distance from reality gives the students the confidence to share their own experience and freely express their opinions (Stravakou & Lozgka, 2018). First benefit of using vignettes is that they encourage openness and minimise socially correct responses. Second benefit is that vignettes can generate data on research topics that the participants find sensitive because the method offers participants the opportunity to decide whether to disclose personal information or simply to comment on the stories (Sampson & Johannessen, 2020). Another benefit of using the vignettes is that they offer researchers the flexibility to focus on different aspects of the problem under study (O'Dell et al., 2012). The method also makes it possible to generate not only normative perceptions, but also stigmatised or deviant perceptions (Campbell, 1996). In some cases, however, vignettes can generate erroneous data because the participants' experiences might not resonate with the experience depicted in the vignette (Kandemir & Budd, 2018). The method can also encourage participants to give responses that are socially accepted (Stravakou & Lozgka, 2018). Despite its detractions, this method offers strong benefits and deserves to be employed in higher education in South African.

Research methodology

A qualitative methodology was adopted for the study using vignettes to gather data regarding students' views on the meaning of (dis)advantage in HEIs. Twenty-four volunteers were recruited at one South African HEI using a convenience sampling technique. Participants were drawn from five departments in the five university's faculties. The participants were diverse with regard to their socio-economic status, race, gender and schooling backgrounds. Vignettes, in the form of short stories, were developed based on literature from South African higher education depicting students' varying opportunities to access and succeed in HEIs. Campbell (1996) outlines three essential criteria that should be met when developing

the short stories, namely: a research problem, plausibility and pertinence. The criteria were all met when the short stories that presented scenarios of (dis)advantage were developed.

The data generation process involved requesting each of the participants to read three short stories. This was followed by individual interviews with open-ended questions exploring to what extent, and how students depicted in the short stories were (dis)advantaged. The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed before being thematically analysed with the help of NVivo 12, a qualitative software. The analysis process involved identifying text with similar meaning before combining the text to form subthemes. The subthemes were subsequently merged into themes (presented in the findings sections).

Findings

Vignettes can elicit detailed responses to the interview questions, encourage participants to reveal sensitive information, and offer flexible platforms to make judgements on complex topics. The following sections represent the final themes.

Vignettes stimulates detailed responses to the interview questions

Based on the findings, it was evident that vignettes prompted participants to discuss disadvantage in detail. Participants went beyond identifying the different forms of disadvantage to providing possible coping mechanisms without the researcher prompting them to do so. One of the participants stated that:

*I felt like **Lerato** [female, black and low income] is disadvantaged, firstly she lives off campus and can't afford to go to campus every day. She lives in a neighbourhood that is noisy, she doesn't have the type of friends that she needs to study with. I feel like that's what is happening with most of the students. I would, however, tell her to not drop out of school and study full time. Even though it's very difficult, you learn to find the balance, like for her, when they pass out at one in the morning, you learn to study at night, you have to adapt or die. She has to find a way because she is very disadvantaged because even if she drops out of school and finds a full-time job she is still going to be in the same environment. (**Lebo**, female, low-income, black, Honours in Political sciences)*

Besides the stimulation the vignettes offered, the detailed responses given by the participants could derive from the presented scenarios related to the students' own lives and experiences. Aspects that emerged from the data were: accommodation that was not conducive to study, lack of funding for travel to and from the campus, lack of social networks for academic support, failure to adjust to university environment, and thoughts about dropping out from the university.

Vignettes encourage participants to open up when discussing sensitive information

The findings indicate that the vignettes encouraged participants to openly discuss issues. Participants might not have been comfortable to open up if other research methods had been used. One example is race, a sensitive topic in the South African context. Participants gave uncensored responses with regard to race and disadvantage. Concerning the persistence of disadvantage among the black students, one participant noted:

*In the ways that **Lerato** cannot come to university, I don't think that it is a white man's fault [and apartheid] of her being disadvantaged because its 20 years since 1994. Since then the government could have built even a railway station, if it was like that. From the townships, poor people could come and study, and I don't think it's a white man's fault. **Lerato** situation could be a white person as well and I could also say she is disadvantaged. The government could have done something to improve the situation. I hope I'm right and I'm not wrong but that's what I feel [laughs].* (**Henrick**, white, male, middleclass, Honours in Agricultural Economics)

Blame for the limited progress made in redressing disadvantage is laid at the door of the ineffective policies and corruption of post-apartheid administrations. The vignettes thus encouraged the participants to comment freely on sensitive issues.

Vignettes offer flexible platforms to make judgements on complex topics

It seems clear that vignettes have the potential to untangle the complexity of inequality and also allow participants to provide insights into the different ways and the extent to which students are advantaged. The different scenarios presented in the vignettes prompted participants to provide reflective comments on their experiences which enabled them to reveal the unexpected. For example, one participant mentioned that:

I feel like I am advantaged, not in a sense that I have money. I feel like I am advantaged in the sense that the first years of my life, [...], people (relatives) took a liking in me and contributed to paying for my studies and paid for my schooling. [...] I eventually enrolled at this university even though I failed to come here for the first six months (due to lack of finances) before I got a bursary. [...] I appreciate my studies even more, I feel like it drives me and turned me into this person that I am a wonderful hardworking person. Sorry, I am getting a bit emotional [...sobs]. (**Palesa**, black, female, low income, Honours in Education)

After reading the vignettes, the participant related her lived experiences, revealing that she perceived herself as advantaged because the financial challenges she had faced had made her determined to work hard. This account demonstrates that advantage may be described as having a positive view about one's life and being motivated to work hard to improve one's life. Even the mere fact of having a bursary, despite its inadequacy of the amount of money offered, is construed as an advantage by low-income students.

Having aspirations and goals for one's education and future career as well as being able to work to achieve them was interpreted by the students as an advantage. All the participants indicated that they looked forward to secure well-paying jobs after graduating including teaching, being in business, farming, marketing and accounting. **Rufuno** provided the following account:

Firstly, I want to be a psychologist, I want to help people. I want to make money that satisfies me internally. [...]. The association that I am part of (charity organisation), we are already doing things that are I want to do in future. We are helping people, we are touching people's lives with our services. We get to go out in the community and help people, so I feel that right now I am in the right path. (**Rufuno**, black, female, low income, Honours in Psychology)

The extract shows that having aspirations such as graduating, securing a paying job, taking care of families and being concerned about local communities were interpreted by these students as an advantage. Resilience also emerged as identified

advantage by some low-income students. Most of the low-income students indicated that they had failed and repeated some modules in their first and second years as they had struggled to cope with university education. Despite the difficulties they encountered, the students were able to bounce back and graduate, which provides evidence of their resilience. Vignettes, therefore generated data that called in question the widely held perception that low-income students are solely disadvantaged. The vignettes unpacked some advantages the low-income students perceive having including: being committed to hard work, being motivated, being resilient, having high aspirations, having a bursary, and caring for other members of their family and communities.

Discussion

The findings indicate that vignettes are an effective method of data generation as they encourage participants to elaborate on how the scenarios presented relate to their own lives. Sampson and Johannessen (2020) contend that vignettes stimulate open engagement especially on sensitive topics because they are impersonal. Furthermore, findings illustrated that the method generated rich and unexpected responses. The finding is contrary to the assertion by Stravakou and Lozicka (2018) that the vignettes generate socially correct responses. While low-income students were disadvantaged in several ways because of their limited resources, the vignettes revealed that these students perceived working hard, thinking positively about their lives, being motivated to change their lives, and having a bursary even when it offered inadequate funding, as advantage. Mkwanzani and Wilson-Strydom (2018) explain that low-income students can set and attain high goals if they perceive aspirations as achievable and when the socio-economic conditions permit. More so, the results of this study demonstrated that being resilient is an advantage. The finding corresponds with Gore's (2020) study that showed that some low-income students can rebound after failing some modules contributing the students graduating (Gore, 2020). Equally interesting is the finding that caring about their families and being concerned about the welfare of their communities was considered as an advantage. This resonates with the aim of South African higher education to produce graduates who are not only employable, but also have good citizenship values (Department of Education, 1997). Thus, the vignettes allowed us to move from viewing students as having shortcomings to recognising the advantages that students from low-income groups perceive having that can enable them to be successful (Mathebula, 2019; Marshal & Case, 2010).

Conclusion

As evident from this study, vignettes are a valuable method that can be effectively employed to generate data for equality and inclusive higher education. Furthermore, this research confirms the value of bolstering vignettes with semi-structured interviews, to validate the data and reduce the possibility of generating erroneous data. The findings revealed the centrality of motivation, hard work and high aspirations to students from low-income communities who are driven by the lived experience of hardship. To that end, an obvious recommendation for HEIs would be to consider making full use of these forms of identified advantage by

offering peer social support programmes and institutional psychosocial interventions to boost students' resilience and their motivation to work hard towards achieving their aspirational goals.

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