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Non-monetary Poverty: Addressing Issues of Student Deprivation in South African Higher Education

Abstract

South African higher education experiences low outcomes regardless of the significant financial investments made into the sector to address student poverty through financial aid. Concerning is that more than half of the low-income students who receive funding from the government do not graduate which points to the presence of other deprivations that are not financial. Despite the well documented adverse impacts of multidimensional poverty and non-monetary deprivations, there has been limited research on it in South African higher education. This study fills in this knowledge gap by exploring non-monetary deprivation and ways of addressing multidimensional poverty without necessarily increasing funding. The study uses the Capabilities Approach to argue for universities to give attention to non-monetary deprivation in their interventions aimed to address multidimensional student poverty. The study employed a sequential-mixed methodology that collected data using four focus group discussions, followed by an online survey that collected quantitative and qualitative data using a questionnaire. A total of 2306 undergraduate students who were selected from one university using a simple random sampling technique completed the questionnaire. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data. This paper only focuses on the data from the qualitative survey, which indicates that non-monetary deprivation is manifesting in the following dimensions: being able to live stress-free lives, dignity, participation, self-determination and motivation, social networks and being safe and secure. The study recommends that universities should consider reducing the effects of the non-material deprivations, such as mental health in order for students to flourish in higher education.

Keywords: poverty, non-monetary deprivation, multidimensional poverty, student wellbeing, higher education, Capabilities Approach, South Africa

Introduction

South African higher education experiences low outcomes for various reasons, one of them being student poverty. Low outcomes in the country's higher education are concerning since attaining a degree gives the students from poor socio-economic backgrounds a better chance for social mobility through securing employment. For example, unemployment for graduates was 2,7% compared to 38,2% of those with matric qualifications and 51,5% without matric qualifications in the third quarter of 2022 (Statista, 2023). Although poverty is globally understood to be multidimensional (Alkire et al., 2020), the dominant approaches employed in the countries' higher education have been mainly financial through the government offering financial support to low-income students. Alongside that, much of the research on student

poverty has focused mainly on financial deprivation despite its multidimensionality and the role non-monetary deprivation plays in impoverishing students. This study investigates non-monetary poverty among students in South African higher education.

Counting on the potential higher education have in improving the lives of students, the South African higher education instituted a policy through the White Paper 1997 to fund the low-income students (Department of Education, 1997). The implementation of this policy saw significant investment being spent on funding students through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). Together with that, the country adopted a free-higher education regime for the low-income students in 2018 with its expenditure of the Gross Domestic Product increasing from 1,5% in 2017/2018 to 2,2% in 2021/2022 (Khuluvhe & Netshifhefhe, 2021, p. 6). Simultaneously, the number of students who received financial support increased from 426 263 in 2020 to 427 851 in 2022 (NSFAS, 2021). While this enabled students who could not have accessed higher education to be enrolled, NSFAS has not been able to fund all qualifying students and support them with financial resources for their living expenses. Due to limited financial resources, higher education might not be able to fund all the qualifying students adequately, which implies the need to find ways of reducing poverty that are not financial. Of concern also is the low graduate rate of NSFAS beneficiaries, which was 46% in 2015 (Wildschut et al., 2018). The low completion rate among NSFAS students points out to the presence of other deprivations that are non-monetary constraining students from graduating.

Student poverty is recognised globally as multidimensional since students experience multiple deprivations in their lives. A study by White, Imperiale and Perera (2016) in the general population established that multidimensional poverty affects mental health through absence of social networks, stress and worry, failure to participate in leisure activities, being unsafe, absence self-determination, lack of respect and recognition. In the same vein, Bray et al. (2019) found out that individuals with multidimensional poverty experience prejudice, stigma and blame, disrespect and are often not recognised. Research conducted in South African higher education on multidimensional poverty shows that students experience deprivation in the dimensions of basic needs, living conditions, participation, and psychological wellbeing with lack of finances precipitating deprivation in the other dimensions (Ruswa & Gore, 2021; 2022). However, Naidoo and van Schalkwyk (2021) reveal that support from friends and family members, and aspirations are instrumental for persistence, self-determination and autonomy of the poor students. Irrespective of these studies suggesting poverty on students, there is still limited knowledge in this area within South African higher education.

This study explores ways of reducing the non-monetary deprivation among students posing the following questions: *How does non-monetary deprivation affect students in South African higher education? How can universities reduce student poverty without necessarily increasing financial support to students?*

Research approach

The study adopted the Capabilities Approach as advanced by Sen (1999) on the ground of it being multidimensional and foregrounding the wellbeing of individuals. Through the Capability Approach, multidimensional poverty is assessed in the various dimensions that constitute students' wellbeing, in which students might experience deprivation. Henceforth multidimensional poverty is defined as a deprivation in one or

more dimensions of a student's wellbeing (Sen, 1999). Capabilities, functionings, agency and conversion factors are the key features of Capabilities Approach. Capabilities are the effective freedoms or opportunities students have to achieve in their lives at the university while functionings refers to the attainments students make from opportunities (capabilities) they have. Put differently, functionings are reflective of the achievements made or deprivations in respective dimension of students' wellbeing. Agency denotes the abilities of individuals to act (or choose not to) on what they believe (Robeyns, 2017). Conversion factors affect the opportunities students have and their agency in achieving their goals.

Although resources are central, the wellbeing of students cannot be achieved through income only, which suggests the multidimensionality of poverty (Anand et al., 2021). The Capabilities Approach therefore enables us to explore non-monetary poverty as we are able to determine whether and the extend students are deprived in the various dimensions of their wellbeing that are necessarily not financial.

The study employed a sequential-mixed methodology that began with focus group discussions, followed by an online survey that collected quantitative and qualitative data from students at one university in South Africa. The first stage involved gathering data through four focus group discussions, two with staff members and the other two with undergraduate students. The qualitative data from the focus group discussion were thematically analysed and were used to inform the development survey questionnaire.

The second stage involved a survey that gathered data using an online questionnaire, which had both closed-ended and open-ended questions. A total of 2306 undergraduate students completed the questionnaire, and the participants were drawn from different faculties using a simple random sampling technique. The participants were diverse based on gender, race, socio-economic background, field of study, year of study as well as their living on-campus or off-campus. This paper focuses only on the qualitative data generated from the questionnaire. The qualitative data were imported into QSR NVivo 12 software, before being coded using descriptive coding. The coded data were thematically analysed. Themes emerged in the process: being able to live stress-free lives, dignity, participation and confidence, self-determination and motivation and social networks, being safe and secure, and these formed the dimensions of deprivations (presented in the findings section).

Findings

Non-monetary deprivation emerged in the various dimensions of students' wellbeing that ranged from psychosocial factors to their participation in university activities. The following text briefly discusses the key themes.

Having a stress-free life

Students felt deprived in their mental wellbeing through stress, worry and anxiety arising from academic pressure as they struggled to manage their academic workload and perform well. One of the participants stated:

... to balance the pressure, you have on campus (workload) and other worries you have when you are off campus, can become almost impossible. This has also impacted on my health as I have been in and out of hospital for 'anxiety' and not eating healthy.
(Participant 1)

Although stress and anxiety were common to students, only a few of them indicated to have experienced extreme anxiety. Due to the under preparedness associated with poor schooling in the low-income schools, poor students lacked the skills needed to cope with their studies, contributing further to their stress, worry and anxiety. Clear from the extract is a symbiotic relationship between stress, worry and anxiety and the physical health of the students that was affected. Nevertheless, this deprivation is associated with financial deprivation when students were stressed about not affording study material, food, transport money and other basic needs.

Dignity

Deprivation was also experienced in the dimension defined as dignity through students experiencing shame and stigma.

It has become such a 'normal' to have stigma in our generation [...]. Students who are poor tend to shy away from others and be seen in events. (Participant 2)

While students tended to blame themselves for their deprivation, shame was reinforced by stereotypes that they were responsible for their poverty. Poor students, had low self-esteem, lacked confidence and were often intimidated by others at the same time had a low sense of belongingness to the university environment. One student observed:

... I just feel like some of us as students from rural areas take us a long time to adapt to the environment and the technology that is used by the university. We feel low self-esteem. (Participant 3)

The socio-economic backgrounds of the students were also a conversion factor preventing poor students to adjust and fit into the university environment.

Participation

Poor students did not take part in some academic, social and leisure resulting in them being deprived in the participation dimension. It was mentioned that:

Student poverty restrains and restricts students. They fail to enjoy their university moments. But of utmost importance they fail to participate in social and study activities that would give them exposure and open doors for them. (Participant 4)

While a sense of marginalisation did not come from cultural differences, students were ashamed to participate in certain sporting activities due to their low English proficiency or perception of having a different accent while speaking English. For some, however, living in off-campus accommodation constrained them from participating in the university social events since they were not able to pay transport fees to attend such events and lacked information about the activities. The low English language proficiency also resulted in students' low class participation making them lose confidence to speak in a large group.

Self-determination and motivation

Deprivation was also evident in the self-determination and motivation dimension as some poor students felt hopeless. Hopelessness was associated with the students' perception that they did not have control over their lives: One student mentioned:

University is difficult. You think you have it under control, then you lose it. [...] I am on the edge of giving up. [...] (Participant 5)

Deprivation in the dimension is driven by the absence of support structures such as family members and friends, which contributed to low motivation, poor performance and their ultimate drop-out. Hopelessness was also reported by some students who thought that they were trapped in poverty. On that note, one of the students explained:

Student poverty goes as deep as affecting the physiological health of students and [...] it is like a magnet that keeps pulling you back into poverty. The more you try to get out, the more it pulls you back. (Participant 6)

Apparent is the lack of agency for the students to work towards achieving their goals. However, some students seemed to be resilient and persevered with their studies being motivated by example of poor students who had graduated and secured employment under similar deprivations.

Social networks

Despite social networks being pivotal for the wellbeing of students, some students reported being deprived in this dimension on the account of lacking social relationships with peers for academic and social support. Whereas others reported not receiving information about the social activities happening at the campus, some students felt isolated:

... we tend to isolate ourselves because we feel we are not competent enough, and it's not even easy trying to explain all that pain we feel with someone who has never experienced all of that and it somehow becomes a burden and then all of that reflects on the studies-low marks. It even leads to depression. (Participant 7)

Isolation was partly attributed to shame, stigma and low self-esteem and the students not fitting into the social networks. Although students viewed social clubs as crucial in establishing networks with others, some did not have sufficient information about where and how they can join these social groups. This was especially prominent for students living in off-campus accommodation who constituted the majority of the poor students.

Being safe and secure

Some off-campus students were concerned about their safety during evenings because of the fear of being mugged and sexually assaulted when walking from the library to their off-campus accommodation since they could not afford hiring private and safe transport. Besides, their concern of being physically harmed, students were generally insecure about their lives:

Being a poor student is a very sad situation to be in because you feel insecure about almost everything. The worst thing is always being worried about what others think about you and the situation you are living in. (Participant 8)

Concern on what others think was related to low self-esteem. Deprivation in the other dimensions increased uncertainty and insecurity of the students constraining their ability to plan, concentrate on their studies and pursue their aspirations.

Reflections and recommendation

Most of the explored dimensions, that is living stress-free lives, dignity, and self-determination are linked to the mental health of the students, suggesting an association of multidimensional poverty and mental health (White, Imperiale & Perera, 2016). Equally significant is that non-monetary poverty results from financial deprivation.

Although inadequate in explaining poverty, finances are required to a certain threshold for students not to be deprived in the other dimensions of their wellbeing (Therborn, 2013). Clear also is the effect of intergenerational poverty where the socio-economic backgrounds of the students, that is low-income, living in rural geographical locations and poor schooling, contributed to non-monetary poverty.

This means that increasing funding alone for the students might not address some of the non-monetary deprivations as these are rooted in the socio-economic backgrounds of the students. A dimension that featured in this study but not clear in previous studies on multidimensional poverty in South African higher education (Ruswa & Gore, 2021; 2022) is the self-determination and motivation when some students experienced hopelessness and lost agency to complete their studies.

To put it succinctly, non-monetary poverty affects students mostly in the dimensions related to the mental wellbeing of students. This means that the universities should promote the mental health of all the students through, for instance making all the social events free at the campus and accessible to all the students. Coupled with that, the universities should consider putting in place structures to identify students experiencing mental health challenges for example, early warning systems where students at risk are identified. Unlike waiting for students to approach the clinic for mental health support before intervening, universities should take a proactive approach, market the services and offer counselling services to many affected students. Regarding participation, information about the social events at the campus should be availed through official online communication platforms as some of the poor students cannot afford data for social media. As language was one of the reasons why students did not participate in university activities (accents that bring shame), universities should help students with language mastery. To promote resilience and perseverance, universities should influence motivation and empower students to believe in themselves and their abilities to complete their studies. Simultaneously, universities should consider implementing programmes where final year students who have circumvented the hardships share their experiences with first year poor students to motivate them to persevere with their studies.

Finally, affordable transport should be made available to ensure the safety of students when they travel late from the campus to their respective accommodations. As there is a strong link between financial poverty and mental health deprivation, universities ought to make it easy for the poor students to access funding as the extreme poor students are worried and experience shame due to their overall state of lack.

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