

The Attitude and Effects of Students Towards Cultural Diversity: A Case of University of Limpopo

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Abstract: The paper investigates the attitude and effects of students towards cultural diversity in the University of Limpopo, Turfloop Campus. During the apartheid regime, blacks were discriminated against by white people and they were segregated in relation to education. The 1994 elections in South Africa implied transformation that expected to see the South Africans, including all students in all universities trying to make democracy work. This includes all the university employees making a way for non-racial institution where students from different culture to be expected to work together. To achieve these objectives, the researcher utilized a face to face interview as a method of collecting data because it allows the respondents to give much information. The results show that cultural diversity has an effect on the performance of the students in the university. Furthermore, the paper reveals that cultural diversity is also influenced by religion, language, disabilities, albinism and homosexuality. The paper concludes that students in the University of Limpopo discriminate other people's culture to due cultural differences in respect of race, gender and language. The researcher recommends that the university policies such as familiarization of different culture should be implemented and adhered to in the university. Other policies must be followed like those amended in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Section 16), which states that everyone has the right to freedom of expression which include academic freedom and freedom of scientific research and Section 15 which states that everyone has a right to freedom of religion, belief and opinion.

Keywords: Culture, Cultural diversity, Discrimination, Diversity

1. Introduction

Researchers over the years has begun to provide important guidance in understanding how to achieve diversity while improving the social and learning environments for students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds (Harper & Badsha, 2000). In current institutional environments, the students of different cultures and backgrounds have to work together, and be able to interact and communicate on a daily basis (Sales, 2010). This can be exciting and interesting. Yet it also brings about frustration and uncertainty at times, Turfloop Campus consists of multiplicity of cultures in one environment/setting, as most students are discriminated against. University of Limpopo is cultural diverse on its own which includes Tsonga, Pedi, Venda, Zulu, Xhosa and international students. It is therefore essential for any institution to continuously seek ways to embrace and address the challenge of cultural diversity (Berry & Sam, 2013). According to Sales (2010) institutions have to find a balance between these differences of cultural diversity. Ababaw and Tilahun (2007) stated that students can benefit from their diversity because they can be able to solve

their problems better and their communication can improve. It is vital for institution such as university of Limpopo to fully understand the differences and the diverse culture within the University.

Hawkins and Heater (2001) mentioned that one key to enacting diverse learning environment lies in understanding and developing programs and policies to improve the campus climate for racial/ethnic diversity, which involve understanding the environment from the perspective of different backgrounds. This will create the opportunity to improve in terms of race relations and realizing the educational benefits of diverse learning environment for students (Hawkins & Heather, 2001). This study focuses on the attitude and effects of students towards cultural diversity in the University of Limpopo Turfloop Campus. The study is of importance because some students feel left out as most students turn to group themselves accordingly with regard to their cultures while some other students such as the disabled, Albinos, Gays and Lesbians are discriminated and stigmatized. As a matter of fact, cultural diversity affects all students in the universities either socially or emotionally.

2. Theoretical Framework

This section consists of information needed for the pre-understanding of the subject and an explanation of the theories related to this study. The theory includes Hofstede's cultural dimensions. The concepts chosen have been derived from theories relevant to the topic of this study. Hofstede's first cultural typology was developed from his research on the difference of culture conducted from 116,000 surveys questionnaires in 53 countries and was published in 1980. From this cross-cultural study Hofstede developed four dimensions of national cultures: consisting of power distance, masculinity/femininity, individualism/collectivism and uncertainty avoidance. These dimensions apply to the differences in behaviour and attitudes of individuals (Hofstede, 2001:29). The research in this paper is based on individualism and collectivism theory.

2.1 Individualism

Individualism is defined how individuals value the importance of their own interest and concerns for their immediate family (Hofstede, 2001). Countries with high individualism believe that the individual is the most important unit and are more likely to focus on their own achievements and to take responsibility for their own actions. Three factors that are highly valued are personal time, challenges with the purpose of developing the individual and freedom to adopt their own approach to work related tasks (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010:92). The level of individuality within organizations depends on the size, history, educational level, and culture of the organization (Hofstede, 2001:213).

2.2 Collectivism

Collectivism is the opposite of individualism and is most common in the eastern world where strong relationships are to be prioritized. People tend to integrate into groups where the concern of the whole group is valued rather than the individual itself. They have common goals and perceptions and will protect each other throughout their lifetime in exchange of loyalty (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010:91).

3. Understanding the Concept of Cultural Diversity within Institutions

According to Kottack (2011) the major goal of understanding cultural diversity is to promote its

importance among human beings. Wambui (2013) argues that understanding diversity create an environment that is inclusive, harmonious and promote the good reputation of the institutions. Cultural diversity is about recognizing and understanding differences among others within societies or institutions. Auluck (2005) sees diversity as providing sufficient scope for the individual to express his or her uniqueness. It is the freedom to be differently (Abera, 2010). Diversity manifests itself in the form of race, ethnicity, gender, religious, sexual orientation, age and disability (Barabino, Jacobs & Maggio, 2001). Cultural diversity is a term used to imply that an environment contains people from many different culture and background and they are considered to be diverse because every single individual is unique and different (Bindu, 2015). It is rare for society to be cultural uniform. As the society developed and become more complex, different cultural traditions appear. The more complex society, the more likely its culture will be internally varied and diverse (Giddens, 2006:46).

Bitzer (2004) argues that diversity enriches people's lives. Much as the biological diversity of an ecosystem increases its stability and productivity, cultural diversity brings together the resources and talents of many people for the shared benefit of all (Bitzer, 2004). Sadly, the differences among us have historically formed the basis of fear, bigotry, and even violence. Yet consider how dull life would be if we all looked alike, thought alike, and acted alike! By learning to recognize our similarities and appreciate our differences, together we can overcome prejudice and intolerance and work towards a more peaceful and productive world. As well as the more obvious cultural differences that exist between people, such as language and traditions, there are also significant variations in the way societies organise themselves, in their shared conception of morality, and in the ways they interact with their environment.

4. Manifestation of Cultural Diversity

Cultural diversity manifests itself in the form of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, age and disability (Barabino, Jacobs & Maggio, 2001). The population of the world is collectively referred to as the human race (Booyesen, 2007). If all people of the world were to perceive themselves as one this discussion on racial diversity would not be necessary (Booyesen, 2007). However, genes, social background and tradition classify people into racial

group. Gender refers to the differences in terms of sex at birth. It is further manifested by the existence of male and female role in the society and in the workplace. Sexual orientation is perhaps one of the most misunderstanding manifestations of diversity in the history of mankind (Chuah, 2013). Chuah (2013), further explains that this misunderstanding has led to untold suffering for homosexual people. Sexual orientation is a right in terms of the South African Constitution. However, some section of South African society still believes that being homosexual is an act that may be corrected. According to Sales (2010) disability refers to the existing of prolonged mental or physical limitations. Physical inability may for example manifest itself in an individual who cannot walk, see or hear. It is very important to emphasize that disability does not mean inability.

5. Policy and Legislative Imperatives

The 1994 first democratic elections ushered in a new vision and a multitude of new legislation aimed at bringing about social and economic transformation and laying the foundations for democratization. As stated by Nelson Mandela, the new vision entails a nation building process, respect and protection of minorities, accommodation of those wishing to retain their cultural identity, i.e. unity and diversity (President Nelson Mandela, September 1997). The broad aim of the Constitution is to create and nurture a non-racial and non-discriminatory society where all people can recognize each other's differences while at the same time live in peace and harmony. A lot of developmental structures have been put in place to promote, monitor and deal with issues of diversity and the enforcement of human rights. These include the Constitutional Court, the Human Rights Commission (HRC) and the Commission for Gender Equity. The Constitutional Court intervenes in all constitutional matters involving the interpretation, protection and enforcement of the Constitution. The HRC investigates human rights violations and monitors how the government protects human rights.

6. Diversity Curriculum

According to Goduka (1999:97) the social, educational, cultural, linguistic, religious and racial diversity of South African society is finding expression within South African institutions of higher education. Consequently, diversity issues have become part of the education debate and pose new challenges to South African tertiary institutions

(Grace & Gravestock, 2009). Most institutions are attempting to respond to these challenges within the context of a transformation process which impacts on every aspect of academic life from student access and support. Cloete, Muller, Makgoba and Ekong (1997:215) stated that diversity is addressed in faculties such as Arts, Education and Social Sciences, mostly as a component of broader academic programs and courses. An example of these includes the Cultural Diversity and Gender Awareness modules. While these programs play a role in promoting or advancing diversity knowledge by developing in students and understanding of the complexities of diversity in society.

6.1 Cultural Diversity in Higher Education

Chuah (2013) believes that higher education institutions could play an important role as site where issues of tolerance, inclusion, access, and structural inequities could be addressed effectively. However, dominating the American diversity discourses was the assumption that these issues could be addressed within the framework of multiculturalism, still seen as part of a progressive politics (Brief, 2008). This is a highly contested assumption within the South African context where multiculturalism has been part of a strong legacy of reactionary politics in education. In South Africa, both multiculturalism and diversity, particularly cultural diversity, have connotations and historical associations with apartheid that cannot be ignored (Colalla & Dipboye, 2012). By emphasizing cultural, linguistic, race and social diversity as justification to its racially exclusionist policies, the apartheid regime has left a negative connotation to diversity and difference (Harper & Badsha, 2000). Harper and Badsha (2000:16) also indicated that there is an emergent realization that, if we are to embark upon an organized national campus diversity initiative, we will need to rework, rediscover, redefine and hopefully find sufficient consensus on what we understand by diversity and diversity initiatives within our own South African context. This has made diversity a highly contested issue in South Africa. Diversity has been traditionally associated with race, gender and culture. Recent literature on diversity has widened the scope of diversity to embrace various characteristics such as age and physical traits, sexual orientation, ethnic and religious background, socio-economic status, birthplace and hometown, social and political affiliations, seniority and experience, education and training and so forth (Dike, 2013).

6.2 Teaching Cultural Diverse Students

As the 21st Century opened, it is a good time to consider how cultural diversity which is viewed by many writers as being the collection of various cultures within a country and it affects higher education (Ely, Padavic & Thomas, 2012). South Africa, more than any other Country, is blessed with cultural diversity. It is beneficial to consider how massive institutions view their diverse populations (Dwyer, Richards & Chadwick, 2001). Educators are at a crucial time in this nation's history as a time when national policies concerning cultural diversity can truly affect the stability of the country's colleges and universities and should be planned accordingly (Grace & Gravestock, 2009).

7. Difficulties Faced by Students Living with Disabilities and Homosexual Students

Some students feel left out as most turn to group themselves accordingly. Cultural diversity affects most of the students in the university either social or emotionally. These challenges need not be overlooked by the institution as they significantly impact their effectiveness and productivity in academic development.

7.1 Students Living with Disabilities

According to the European Students Union Policy Paper (2003:11), in addressing the issue of disability equality in higher education, it is important to appreciate the varied opinions and perspectives on disability that exist within society. Attitudes are everything in addressing disability discrimination (Shih, Young & Pucher, 2016). Perspectives on disability vary within three standard sociological models. The medical model is characterized by labelling via diagnosis, focusing on the misfortune of the disabled person and seeking to cure the disability. The charity model is based on sympathy for the disabled person from the normal society, which provides services and support because they feel pity. Again the disability is the domain of the individual, associating disability with shame and low self-esteem. The social model is founded on the central belief that an individual with impairment is disabled by society, which creates and fosters attitudes that prevent people with different abilities from functioning equally within it. This model removes the emphasis from the disabled person and places the responsibility on

society to adapt for integration, rather than adapt to discrimination (European Student Union, 2003).

7.2 Homosexual Students

According to the European Students Union Policy Paper (2003:13), for generations, LGB (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual) people have been denied the opportunity to self define through a socially acceptable and legally reinforced barrier of discrimination. As a result, LGB people have been forced into silence, invisibility and conformity, an experience that contributes to the increased levels of low self-esteem, depression and suicide in the LGB community. It is only in the last generation that the Gay Rights Movement has been created and starting campaigning for liberation of gay people. Development of the lesbian and gay community has significantly contributed to the diversity within the society as a whole (European Students Union, 2003).

8. The Importance of Cultural Diversity in High Education

Socialising with someone of a different racial group or discussing racial issues contributes to the student's academic development, satisfaction with college, level of cultural awareness, and commitment to promoting racial understanding (Friess-Britt, Younger & Hall, 2010). Cultural diversity is very important because learning about other cultures help understand different aspects of the world (Flagg, 2002). Gilbert and Sutherland (2013) argues that learning to recognize our similarities and appreciate our differences, together we can overcome prejudice and intolerance and work towards a more peaceful and productive world. Knowing how to interact with other cultures on their own terms enhances every conversation and shows the way for mutual benefit (Goodman, 2011). Cultural awareness gives each of us the grace and the good manners to indicate that when we see a person we should honour them.

9. How Can Cultural Diversity be Improved to Enhance Student Academic Development?

Improving the cultural diversity require some fundamental institutional changes. Most basic is a conceptual shift in thinking about how diversity is central to the institution's overall priorities for teaching and learning, which also requires a change in how students are regarded or valued (Hurtado *et al.*, 1998).

The principles derived from the research can become central in campus initiatives to improve the climate for racial/ethnic diversity. It begins with an articulation of how diversity is central to education and continues with self-examination. Institutions can structure opportunities for increased interaction and involvement among students from diverse racial/ethnic groups. A limited number of examples of promising practices in "Enacting Diverse Learning Environments" attempt to realize the potential benefits of racially/ethnically diverse student environments and intentionally create opportunities for learning and interacting across communities of difference (Hurtado *et al.*, 1998).

10. Methods and Materials

The researcher used qualitative methods approach for data collection and analysis. The face to face interview is one of the reliable methods of collecting data because it allows all the respondents to give as much information as possible. The study adopted purposive sampling. Purposive sampling techniques involve selecting certain units or cases based on a specific purpose rather than randomly (Tashakkori & Teddie, 2009:173). Purposive sampling implies that not every element of the population has an opportunity for being included in the sample. Sample size of the study was 20 students from the University of Limpopo, including the students living with disabilities, albino, homosexual students and international students.

10.1 Data Collection

Data gathering is the precise, systematic gathering of information relevant to the research sub-problems, using methods such as interviews, questionnaires observation, focus group discussions, narratives and case histories (Burns & Groves, 2013). Two sources of data were identified for this study namely, face to face interview which are referred to as a primary source of data and documentation as a secondary data to investigate the attitude and effects of students towards cultural diversity in the University of Limpopo.

10.2 Data Analysis

Data analysis is a process where one transforms data collected with the aim of gaining useful information and coming up with the conclusion (World Bank, 2012). Data analysis involves reducing data

collected into a manageable data proportions and identifying patterns and themes in the data (Mouton, 2006). Since the researcher used a single method for data collection, a single data analysis method was adopted. The researcher used thematic analysis method.

11. Results and Discussion

The results here under presented involves perception from the disabled, gays and lesbians also suffer from discrimination so the researchers saw a need in helping them overcome discrimination at the University Campus. Researchers thought that students would benefit from the study because discrimination also has a great negative impact in their studies and social life.

11.1 The Responses from the Students

The total number of the students expected to participate in the posed question in the form of interview guide was twenty, including the students living disabilities, albino, homosexual students and international students. The researcher collected data from twenty participants which are ten males and ten females. The equal distribution of gender has been done in order to eliminate biases in the study and meet the requirement of gender equality. Twenty students were interviewed in the project which accumulates 100% of the respondents.

11.1.1 Students Perception on Cultural Diversity in the University of Limpopo

From the students interviewed, the majority of them indicated that Turfloop Campus is culturally diverse hence it comprises of multiple cultures in one environment and allows students to learn other cultures. This statement is supported by Giddens (2006:46) who said that cultural diversity is a term used to mean that a group contains people from many different cultures and backgrounds and they are considered to be diverse because every single individual is unique and different. One of the responded commented that:

"Turfloop Campus is culturally diverse because it consist of multiplicity of cultures in one setting and this allows students to see a need for studying in the University as it is culturally diverse on its own which includes, Tsongas, Pedi's, Venda's, Zulu's, Tswana's, the disabled and the albinos and many more other cultures"

11.1.2 Effects of Discrimination towards Students

From the students interviewed, majority of them experienced the two types of effects of discrimination such as emotional and social effects. Discrimination is bad and result in emotional effects such as low self esteem, lack of confidence, feeling unwanted, insecurity, becoming withdrawn, depression/stress, anxiety, sudden change in behaviour, lack of co-operation. Social effects such as isolation, lack of friends, becoming withdrawn, unrecognized as an individual, feel like a stranger and inability to build relationships.

11.1.3 Effect of Discrimination towards Students Performance

Majority of the students interviewed mentioned that the way students discriminate against others can have a great impact on their level of performance so as a result, they do not allow to be discriminated because they know their purpose of being in the university. They also mentioned that it is very hard to cope in the academic when lectures are involved in discrimination. They indicated that when they are discriminated in class, it can lead to poor concentration and poor listening skills which can result in failure.

11.1.4 Students Level of Access to Housing as Compared to Other Students Different from Them

The in-depth interviews that were conducted, the respondents had a lot to say with regards to the issue of housing more special the residence access. The majority of the students believe that housing in the University of Limpopo are accommodative and that students do have access to the residences. Some of the respondents remarked that:

"Whites and international students" are considered first when it comes to allocation of rooms while blacks are treated differently. Students have equal access to housing because the procedure that the housing department implemented does not discriminate other cultures because students have to apply and queue to get rooms"

12. Conclusion and Recommendations

Cultural diversity continues to be an issue in the South African Universities since students tends to misinterpret the term diversity. The fact still remains that every individual has his/her own views about cultural diversity especially discrimination. The paper has been compiled with the aim of investigating the attitude and effect of students towards

cultural diversity in the University of Limpopo. The results show that indeed University of Limpopo is diverse because it consists of multiplicity of culture in one setting, there are also lecturers from different backgrounds which gives students a chance to cope well. Furthermore, the study also found that the university is trying its best to ensure that the issue of fairness in the distribution and allocation of resources as outline in the university policy are followed. The failure to address the issue of discrimination would continue affecting the student's development in academics. Therefore, it is recommended that the university should hold annual celebration of diversity whereby students wear their cultural clothes and celebrate their differences. The awareness and familiarization on other people's culture would somehow reduce discrimination in the university. The study was just an eye opener to the universities policy makers and other stakeholders. It is now their responsibility to look into the researches ideas and recommendations for possible ways of enhancing the attitude and effects of students towards cultural diversity in the Universities.

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