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The influence of gender, age and race on attrition in distance education: reality construction through the lens of a deficit model

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Abstract

Literature shows that online students are more likely to prematurely discontinue online courses and qualifications than campus-based students (Patterson & McFadden, 2009). This problem still exists despite a plethora of support interventions to address attrition in distance education (DE). While there is a proliferation of studies on attrition, there is limited research which focused on attrition at an honours level within the DE institutions in South Africa. This case study was anchored in a qualitative design and deficit model and explored students' experiences of factors influencing attrition in honours courses in DE. Two questions guided the investigation: (a) What experiences do dropouts encounter prior to discontinuing online courses? (b) How can DE institutions support online students to prevent attrition? This was a two-stage data-generation process in which, first, two lists of dropouts who discontinued their studies in an Advanced Communication Research (ACR) course, from 2011 to 2016, were sourced from the University of South Africa's ICT department. Second, 16 dropouts were sampled purposively and through a snowballing approach. Although numerous studies have linked age, gender and race to attrition in higher education, this study divulged that attrition in DE institutions is determined by various circumstances within both students' and institutions' contexts. To address attrition, preventive and remedial strategies are essential, and institutions and families alike must provide emotional, financial and academic support. These approaches will help DE institutions to achieve increased retention and a success rate which enable them to secure funding, while students may benefit from completing a course or a programme.

Keywords: Students of colour, deficit theory, dropout, distance education, student attrition, higher education institutions

Introduction

While every institution of higher learning strives to achieve an increased student success rate, South Africa, as Netanda, Mamabolo and Themane, (2019) observed, has the lowest success rate and highest attrition rate in comparison with other universities across the global higher education village (Letseka & Maile, 2008). The Council for Higher Education released a report in 2013, which shared that 91% of students who are furthering their studies through non-contact-based institutions do not complete their qualification programmes. This stresses the extent to which student attrition amongst students of colour is a concern in the South African university system, particularly the DE context. The Council on Higher Education's (2013) report found that, on average, the qualification completion rate, in higher education institutions, for students of colour was 50% less compared to that of white students.

It is therefore of a great significance to inquire as to whether race contributes to attrition in higher education system, and to determine a responsive measure to this pervasive challenge. Generally, student attrition from higher education institutions remains a vital research phenomenon that remains worthy of scholars' attention. Over a considerable amount of time, the dropout rate in the higher education sector has, growingly, become a serious concern, affecting, inter alia, governments, learners, institutions of higher learning and policy makers. Tas, Selvitopu, Bora and Demirkaya (2013, p. 1562) contend that this universal challenge has

intensely penetrated the entire global academic village, which as O'Keeffe (2013, p. 605) observed is predominant in terms of the tertiary education system. Different socio-economic variables have had causative effects on student attrition in institutions of higher learning. Students' financial status, race, gender and poverty are a few examples of such socio-economic variables that are documented in the literature on student attrition (Murray, 2014). However, studies that focused on age, race and gender as factors that lead to attrition in the context of open distance and e-learning are still scant in the literature. To deal with the problem, effective preventive measures need to be developed and implemented. Unfortunately, the existing measures to address the attrition rate have, until now, not been effective. Mgwebi, Kruger, Maoto and Letsoalo (2017) postulate that valuable measures need scholars' involvement, proficiency, capability and policy makers' powers to make decisions. A considerable number of studies have been conducted in response to the invasion of the student attrition phenomenon in the education sector, in terms of both the high school and higher education domains, in response to the degree to which the rate negatively affects students and society at large. This qualitative study used the deficit model to examine students' experiences, focusing on attributes leading to dropout to determine appropriate measures to address attrition.

A review of literature uncovered that a longitudinal explanatory investigation on student attrition has been conducted by Jennison and Johnson (2004) to establish the correlation between student retention and alcohol abuse. Their examination is a good example of preceding research that was done to stimulate and help with policy development in the higher education system in relation to heavy alcohol consumption.

Despite having been deliberated on for many decades, the subject of student attrition in higher education terrain continues to receive scholars' attention, renewed interest and remains one of the leading academic discourses. The purpose of such endeavours has been to enhance the understanding of the student attrition phenomenon, principally in terms of those attributes which cause it, the students' behavioural patterns and attitudes that usually result in them withdrawing from their studies, the duration it takes to transpire, and the process that it undertakes. This article pursued to answer the following research questions: What experiences do dropouts encounter prior to leaving the course prematurely? How can institutions of higher learning support students to prevent students from leaving the course? The Council on Higher Education's (2013) report found that, on average, the qualification completion rate, in higher education institutions, for students of colour was 50% less compared to that of white students.

At Unisa, the ACR course is used to epitomise a distance education subject that is used in this article as a case subject. An online system known as "Moodle", which has replaced the previous system called "Jrouter", is used by the students to send assignments and portfolios to the university, and to receive the associated feedback from academics. The Moodle system enables academics to assess scripts online and to offer feedback to them instantly. The term "attrition", as per Lee and Choi's (2011, p. 603) observation, must be redefined and it must be grounded in an appropriate definition that is case-focused and contextualised. Undertaking this investigation at honours level was significant within the practical context in which the attrition takes place to enable a response to be given to the previous research.

Study Aim

The aim of this study was two-fold: first, to explore and understand students' experiences of socioeconomic variables, specifically the age, gender and race to determine their causative effect on attrition on a course, and second, to solicit dropouts' views regarding the support interventions that could be used to address the attrition in distance education and provide distance education institutions with strategies to address attrition in a course in distance education.

Research Questions

The study seeks to address the following broad questions: What experiences did dropouts have in relation to age, gender and race prior to leaving the course prematurely? How can distance education institutions support students whose learning experiences are affected by age, gender

and race? These research questions are formulated and framed around the notion held in the deficit theory that poor academic achievement and attrition are due to certain learning deficiencies for students of colour. Thus, to determine if learning deficiencies indeed exist, and whether they are because of age, gender and race, the deficit theory is the suitable lens to guide the investigation.

Problem Statement and Significance of the Study

A high attrition rate, as Park and Choi (2009) observed, is a general concern to open and distance learning institutions. The University of South Africa, which delivers distance education to students in over 120 countries, has experienced attrition by 219 students in the Advanced Research course offered in the Department of Communication Science as part of an honour's qualification programme. The list of dropouts between 2011 and 2016 was requested by the researcher to study the reasons which account for attrition from the course. Attrition is a well-established research subject in the field of education and remains an interesting topic of academic discourse even in this era, because despite support measures suggested to address it, it persists to exist. This study assessed the influence of age, gender and race, and limited its focus on challenges that were in the students' contexts, dictating the researcher to use the deficit theory, which blames students for their poor academic performance and reasons for attrition rather than the reasons from contexts of academic institutions. Studying the cause effect relationship between age and attrition, gender and attrition, as well as race and attrition have resulted in a mixture of complementary and contradictory viewpoints, making attrition to be a complex research issue to deal with. The study conducted by Willging and Johnson (2009) found no cause-effect relationship between sociodemographic factors (age, gender and ethnic background) and attrition. Otu, Ehiane, Maapola-Thobejane and Olumoye (2023) assert that gender roles in the discourse of households in South Africa have a serious bearing on the lives of female students. Contrary to this assertion by Out et al (2023), a study done at the National Open University reported, amongst other findings, that older, employed male students are at higher risk to drop out (Yasmin, 2013) than women. These contradicting findings of preceding studies highlight the existence of the relationship between gender and attrition. In addition, the context in which attrition is studied is important in research. Within the scope of distance education, the Council for Higher Education shared the report of its investigation carried out in 2013 in South Africa that 91% students who are furthering their studies through non-contact-based institution do not complete their qualification programmes. A key question to ask is: Why are there so many attritions in distance education? Bruton and Robles-Piña (2009) examined the literature on cultural deficit thinking and inferred that cultural deficit thinking may have a role in the academic performance ratio between Hispanic and white students, which was found to be a high attrition percentage for secondary school learners. The important question to pose is: Why are many non-white students performing badly in comparison with white students? Is it something to do with race? In the South African context, specifically in distance education, on a course level, does race contribute to the attrition rate? From the deficit theoretical perspective, is the challenge emanating in the students' context? From a methodological point of view, socio-economic variables such as age, race and gender in attrition from institutions of higher learning (Murray, 2014) have been dominantly studied using a quantitative methodology (Tinto, 2012).

Theoretical Framework

For the theoretical framework to guide the selection of the research design and data analysis, as Grant and Osanloo (2014) assert, it is of a paramount significance to interweave the research problem, purpose, importance and research questions it seeks to answer.

Deficit theory

The deficit theory, Bartram (2013, p. 7) argues, offers a theoretical framework for analysing the needs of the students by concentrating on their problems and challenges which emanate from their differing backgrounds. The deficit theory has been extensively utilised in a range of fields of study and disciplines such as social work (Roer-Strier, Strier, Este, Shimoni &

Clark, 2005), education (Mastropieri, Scruggs & Berkeley, 2007), language (Johnston & Morrison, 2007; Ramos-Sanchez & Cuadrado Gordillo, 2004), as well as in psychology (McLean, Stuart, Coltheart & Castles, 2011). According to the deficit theory, student attrition is attributed to the variety of challenges and weaknesses that exist in the students' contexts. In other words, students are the ones to whom blame can be directed. In the Republic of South Africa in which there are various cultures and racial and ethnic groups, students furthering their studies in tertiary academic institutions are from different backgrounds, comprising factors such as economic constraints, family living and environmental conditions, customs and norms, and lifestyles. The focus of this article was on the issues of gender, race and age, delving into the question of whether they have an influence on student dropout in a DE environment. Due to the variances in their circumstances, students at tertiary academic institutions often respond differently to different educational spaces. Subsequently, it has become fundamental for institutions of higher learning to support members of the student body to minimise the student attrition rate. The deficit model offers a framework in which it was possible to discuss student support within the DE landscape.

The concept "attrition" is an elusive term to define. The plethora of meanings attached to this concept varies from one context to another. For various authors, the term refers to the acts of "departure" (University of Washington, 2016; Botha, 2016), "attrition" (Sanders, Daly & Fitzgerald, 2016; Herman, 2011; Manik, 2015), "noncompletion" (Forsyth & Furlong, 2003), "leaver" (University of Washington, 2016), "withdrawal" (Dekker, Pechenizkiy & Vleeshouwers, 2009), "failure" (Valencia, 2012), and, to a great extent, "dropout" (Reisel & Brekke, 2009; Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2008; Dekker et al., 2009; Spady, 1970). Attrition, according to Grebennikov and Shah (2012), refers to the percentage of students who, in the coming year, decide not to continue studying at the same institution. Student attrition, in Jennison and Johnson's (2004) observation, continues to be an electrifying and challenging topic for college administrators to study. Despite available intervention programmes which were suggested in previous research to address it, this problem has been occurring for decades.

Quite a lot of studies have tried to profoundly deal with the student attrition at an undergraduate level. However, up to this epoch, efforts to address the issue, with the focus on postgraduate students, have been insufficient. While a few studies that have previously been conducted have examined the grounds leading to attrition, the majority of them were oriented towards the application of models of research that have been utilised to address this colossal concern. A big volume of models and theoretical frameworks have been established to guide research which are focused on this research subject. Several documented research reports have relooked at and refined this issue and advanced on the basis that the recent research has been ineffective in addressing the problem, and that orthodox theories suggested in this regard failed to be compatible with the existing attrition challenges experienced in the higher education domain.

The article focuses on the attrition rate of students who were, at the time of conducting this investigation, at a comparatively low postgraduate level in the open and distance learning institutions. The investigation described in this article has been driven by the need to study the existing unproductive support models and frameworks which are in practice now. The all-embracing purpose of this article is to introduce the subject of student attrition and to reflect on the research void that the researcher wants to fill. Hence, a short, clear cut context of the research phenomenon under examination is presented. In addition, the article gives an outline of the contemporary state of the issue and an examination of research focused on attrition and support interventions.

Levels at which Attrition Occurs

Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2007) and CHE (2010) posit that most of the previous research that studied student attrition in institutions of higher learning concentrated on the attrition rate at undergraduate level, with fewer studies dealing with the attrition rate among postgraduate students. However, as noted by Kritzinger and Loock (2012), research which has dealt with the rate at which students drop out within the

postgraduate demarcation has failed to pay adequate attention to the attrition rate taking place at the lower postgraduate level. There are, however, studies which zoomed into courses within the educational level. For instance, in their study which investigated attrition rate in online courses, Lee and Choi (2011) revealed that the focus in most of the studies were on the manifestation of attrition at course level. Being different from what Lee and Choi (2011) divulged, the practical context in which the student attrition covered in this study was found to occur showed that 47.3% of students who were registered for an ACR course withdrew from their studies between 2011 and 2016 (Unisa, 2015). Whereas this article focused on the lower postgraduate level, due to it having received inadequate attention in the past (Kritzinger & Loock, 2012), the previous inquiries tended to study the student attrition rate at undergraduate level (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007); CHE, 2010). This study was also driven by Lee and Choi's (2011) observation and suggestion that future research, with a clear and consistent characterisation of the term "dropout", must be carried out to study the attrition in online courses.

Methodological Approach

This exploratory study was framed within the qualitative methodological design because a qualitative research design, as Creswell (2009) contends is more suitable for the study that seeks to address complex issues that received little attention. The study done by Yasmin (2013) recommended that there is a necessity to study attrition further, preferably using a qualitative approach, to enhance the understanding of the primary reasons for premature course attrition. In the same protuberant line of thought, and in view of the observation that many studies on attrition used a quantitative methodology, Patterson and McFadden (2009) offered, amongst other recommendations, that future research must be anchored in a qualitative design to study the reasons which account for attrition and barriers to learning. Thus, Yasmin's (2013) and Patterson and McFadden's (2009) recommendations as well as Creswell's (2009) assertion on the suitability of a qualitative methodology on a complex issue such as attrition were reasons for the choice of a qualitative methodology in this study.

Population

The research utilised the University of South Africa's ACR course to illustrate the pervasiveness of student attrition in the context of DE. DISA (2014) established that 37% of students who were enrolled in the course between 2010 and 2014 eventually withdrew from studying. The focus of the study was on lower postgraduate students who left studying the subject between 2011 and 2016. A total of 16 participants were selected purposively and interviewed, six of whom were subjected to the focus-group interviews, whilst interviews with the remaining ten was conducted telephonically.

Selection of a DE institution

Of the 25 universities existing within the South African university system, the University of South Africa was sampled purposively, since it is a typical DE institution for the study's intended purpose. From such a basis, a fitting case course could be utilised to prove the pervasiveness of student attrition in the higher education landscape, and key informants could give the information needed to study the phenomenon.

Selection of lower-postgraduate students

The study used the snowball sampling technique to find the right students who withdrew from their course. This sampling technique was deemed applicable because it was tricky to access such dropouts. Such students served as key informants, who could share their experiences of attributes that led to dropping out from their studies, and support interventions they would have liked to receive to thwart attrition from occurring. The criteria for the selection of students to be included in the study were based upon the ensuing measures of suitability: whether a student has (a) deregistered (cancelled) the subject for whatever reason; (b) failed to reregister the subject the following year; (c) never written or submitted the examination portfolio; (d) changed the subject (deregister and register for an different subject); or (e) left the institution to study at another institution.

Technique for Data Generation

Statistical data (databases) of dropouts who withdrew from an advanced research course

between 2011 and 2016 was requested from the university's ICT department. The specification of the timeframe (2011–2016) was imperative because qualitative data-collection techniques often become extensive and difficult to manage (Willig, 2013). The ICT department sourced out and provided the researcher with two lists of dropouts at the first stage of data collection. The first one had listed 127 dropouts who cancelled the registration of the course. The second list consisted of 92 dropouts who did not submit their examination portfolios. Thus, attrition as an operational definition was understood in this study as a premature discontinuation from a distance education course by either cancelling the registration of the course or failure to write or submit the examination portfolio. The specification of a range of years in which such attritions took place became imperative to yield data that can be well managed. The embedment of snowball (suggestions of dropout students by lecturers) and purposive sampling techniques (using only dropout students listed in database – i.e., statistical information) were adopted to maximise the accuracy, trustworthiness and transferability of the findings.

The second stage of the two-stage data-collection process included telephonic and focus-group interviews with dropouts. The essence of this data-collection approach was driven by the need to unmask relatively rich information, to ensure the enhanced integrity, trustworthiness and reliability of the findings divulged, and to corroborate the results derived from other methods which have, hitherto, been applied for generating data (Netanda, 2012; Miller, 2011). The amalgamation of the telephonic and focus-group interviews was used to complement and authenticate the findings which each method has divulged. In addition, it helped in improving the credibility of the overall findings, which were to be revealed by the investigation. Whatever research methodology one uses, the theoretical framework often prescribes the data-collection plan (Grant, 2013). Guided by the deficit theory, and the quest to establish if age, gender and race contribute to attrition in distance education, selection of participants ensured age, race and gender are diversified to make meaningful comparisons and interpretations of the findings.

Thematic Analysis

The discourse on methods to analyse qualitative data has matured in the literature, and incorporates, inter alia, content analysis, grounded theory and thematic analysis. This study adopted a thematic analytical method which, according to Clarke, Braun and Hayfield (2017), is most applicable for research questions on, amongst other research phenomena, participants' lived experience. The questions asked in this study and to which answers were sought were on students' lived experience on attrition from distance education institutions, and the types of support interventions necessary to address student attrition in the context of distance education environment, namely, (a) What experiences did dropouts have in relation to age, gender and race prior to leaving the course prematurely? and (b) How can distance education institutions support students whose learning experiences are affected by age, gender and race? Braun and Clarke (2006) identified two approaches associated with the thematic method to analyse qualitative data, namely, a theoretical (or top-down) approach which is guided by the research questions or an inductive (also known as the bottom-up) approach which is determined by data generated. This study used the theoretical approach that is based on the research questions, and the analysis was carried out with that in mind.

The data collected were transformed, verbatim, into written words, but only noteworthy replies, which gave answers to the research questions posed, were organised and structured to make the vital information concerned both extractible and understandable.

Ethical Principles

The principles of ethics considered in this study were upheld through what Guillemin and Gillam (2004, p. 263) refer to as procedural ethics. Such ethics of procedure require the use of a specific vetting method, through which the applicable research committees and directorates give authorisation to carry on with the inquiry using humans as participants. The following ethical guidelines were safeguarded throughout the study:

-The confidentiality and anonymity of participants were ensured.

-The accurateness and reliability of data were ensured.

-Ethical approval was applied for and obtained.

-A consent form and copies of the information sheet were organised and disseminated to participants.

-To preclude academic dishonesty, all sources used in the present study were acknowledged in texts and in the list of references.

Findings and Discussion

Demographic data

Demographic information of 16 participants, including nine females and seven males, was captured and presented in the table titled "Students' demographic information" to better understand if age, race and gender influence student attrition in DE institutions. The deficit model of education fitted into this study because it helps researcher to examine the students' contexts to determine if there are challenges that prevent them from producing good academic achievement or that may lead to attrition, particularly for students of colour. The deficit theory criticises victims (students) of colour, postulating that they have traits that prevent them from performing up to the academic standard compared to their white counterparts.

Table 1: Students' demographic information

TRAITS										
Gender	**9**	**Female**	**7**	**Male**						
Age	**2**	Less than 25 years	**3**	26-30	**6**	31-35	**4**	36-40	**1**	41 and above
Race	**9**	Black	**5**	White	**1**	Colored	**1**	Indian	-	-

Age and gender

A review of literature shows that the age variable, as Patterson and McFadden (2009) reported in their study, was found to have a significant impact on attrition in degree programmes offered in contact-based and non-contact-based academic institutions. Thus, the attrition issue, as influenced by the age variable, may be a concern for on-campus and distance education institutions alike. In this study the aim was to determine if age, gender and race have an influence on attrition in honours students in a DE institution. Many dropouts who partook in the study were females, aged between 31 and 35 when they dropped out of the ACR course between 2014 and 2016. This finding affirms the findings of previous research that age or sex, amongst other demographic variables, has a relationship with attrition (Gülşen, Aydın & Gizir, 2022). Participants in this study cited numerous grounds, including issues such as the unmanageable amount of work expected to successfully complete the ACR course, poor academic performance, demoralising remarks from lecturers regarding their assignments, and the unavailability of the lecturers. They viewed such attributes as being among the prime issues that had led to attrition. One woman (S1) said:

For me, I felt that it was like I was not ready. There were a lot of comments which I found very discouraging. I would sometimes receive feedback after a very long time. I would write emails and make calls to the lecturers but receive feedback after [only] three weeks.

The challenges leading to the high dropout rate was found, largely, to have been caused by the lecturers themselves, with one reason being their inaccessibility. Thus, this finding points a finger to the institutional contexts, implying that lecturers must be available to provide the academic support the students need. Lack of motivation was amongst the reasons contributing to a high attrition rate in the DE environment. Another female participant (S3) from the black community cited that studying when you are an adult woman is not easy.

I know the value of education, but honestly, it's not easy to strike a balance between studying, working and doing a whole lot of work at

home. I must take care of kids, cook for them, assist children with homework, clean the house, and wash clothes. So, I had very little time I devote for studying, and it affected my performance, and I got discouraged and left the module. It's hard to be a woman.

Premature discontinuation of a qualification could possibly be the best option in some students' circumstances if work and family responsibilities are deterring students from producing good academic performance (Patterson & McFadden, 2009). With this statement in mind, can dropping out from a programme be a good thing? Is it something students can be encouraged to do? Deficit thinking as a position held in deficit theory puts a blame to the students' manner of thinking, postulating that it contributes to their academic failures, due to challenges in their individual contexts, family, or community traits (McKay & Devlin, 2016). The expression of participant (S3) did not link attrition to deficit thinking. This became clear when the student indicated that she understands the value of education, and that could have been the reason why she is furthering her studies. However, the responsibilities the participant had at work, home and while studying were reflective of the student's inability to manage time, as she experienced challenges students face who are also parents or are married when studying, particularly females. However, struggling with family duties which eventually impact negatively on a student's academic performance reaffirms the deficit's philosophical stance that a student's context is the reason for poor academic performance and attrition. Stretching a feeling of demotivation further, and citing poor academic performance as a reason for attrition, a male student (S5) stated the following:

I failed the module three times, and I got demotivated to study further; then I decided to apply for a different qualification.

The deficit model also theorises that students of colour's motivation to study is low (Valencia, 1997, 2012). In trying to make sense of the student who got demotivated after failing the course three times, the type of dropout experienced in this scenario is a change of qualification which shows that the student knows the importance of education. The question worthy to be asked is: What motivates the student to study a new qualification? Attempts to answer this question is outside the parameters of the focus of this study. Nevertheless, it helps us enhance our understanding that students may lack motivation due to other factors such as negative feedback, unavailability of lecturers and poor academic performance. It's clear that the student failed the ARC course three times because he does not give himself sufficient time to learn. Tinto's (2015) study revealed that male students do not devote adequate time to perform academic tasks, and they eventually drop out. To deal with this behavioural pattern of not devoting enough time to study, preventive programmes aimed at motivating students must be put into place.

In relation to the volume of work involved, one student responded as follows:

I registered for the Advanced Research module, not knowing that it has a lot of work. It needs more time, and I did not have that time. I work[ed], and I was registered [for] another module. So, I felt I must just cancel the Advanced Research module, otherwise I was going to fail it. It really needs time.

The deficit model's doctrine that students tend to drop out due to causes arising within the personal context is partly supported by the findings made in the above respect. The student's complaint that the ACR module required more time than had previously been anticipated reveals that the student needed to have time management skills. The indication that the student had also registered for another module implies that there is a need to offer students guidance prior to registering for modules so that they know that registering for many modules will demand more time, will require them to work hard, and may possibly affect their academic performance.

When asked if age, race and gender were determining factors of attrition, the majority of the participants stated that age, gender and race did not have an influence on attrition. However, the married female participants, most of whom are black, aged 31 and above, indicated that marriage presents challenges that sometimes deprive them

of an adequate time to study as they must look after their kids and partners as well as doing homes chores. Although most female participants stated that gender and age does not have an impact on the student attrition rate in DE institutions, marriage appears to be an intended consequence of aging. It is generally for elder people. In their study, Morison and Cowley (2017) found that traditional expectations of family and childcare and lack of support can eventually overwhelm most female students. From the deficit theoretical perspective, looking after kids and husbands and being concerned with doing home chores are reflective that gender and age play a role in one's conduct in relation to learning. This finding supports what previous research has documented. For instance, Mampaey and Huisman (2022) argue that deficit narratives cast an aspersion on women from ethnic minorities who lack, inter alia, the technical skills required to perform well academically. It also shows that the challenges emanate from the students' contexts. This finding was in contradiction to the ones unmasked by Hovdhaugen et al. (2013) in their study which investigated the relationship between age and the student dropout rate. Hovdhaugen et al. (2013) reported that older students usually drop out of their studies due to financial restraints. The finding by Hovdhaugen et al. (2013) further supports the deficit theory's argument that the challenges are in the students' contexts. Contrary to the findings uncovered in this inquiry, although closely allied to it, Murray (2014) conducted an ideal comparable study which revealed that student attrition in universities often relates to age, gender and financial circumstances. The likelihood for students aged 25 years and older to drop out was greater than it was for those who were aged 21 years or younger (Di Pietro & Cutillo, 2008).

Race

The generation of demographic information was also grounded in the deficit theory, which was used in this study as a lens to study the attrition phenomenon. Many of the participants from the black community, both males and females, expressed that the ACR module, compared with other modules in the honours programme, is the most difficult course. This could mean a lack of study skills and a need to change the pedagogical approach. White students cited a change of qualification and institution as their reasons for attrition. The deficit theory, as Valencia (1997) and (2012, p. 8) argue, is premised in the philosophical assumption that students of colour (from the black student community) have some learning challenges emanating from their personal spaces, which often make them drop out. Every racial group has its own culture. Thus, when dealing with race as an aspect of focal point, culture becomes a feature of the discourse. A study conducted by Bruton and Robles-Piña (2009) to assess the literature that points out that cultural deficit thinking may be a determining factor of academic performance ratio between Hispanic and white students, has revealed a high attrition percentage for secondary school learners. Most recently, a plethora of research gives a description of poverty as a systemic problem linking racial/gender exploitation (Payne, 2012). Mastropieri et al. (2007) and HRPULSE (2013, p. 1) contend that in the South African higher education terrain, many students from black communities are the ones who tend to be the victims of attrition. Payne's (1996) framework to understand poverty, built on deficit-thinking principle, argues that students of colour are usually in a culture of poverty that prevent them from surviving in the middle-class society. In the same vein, this study established that the most students who withdrew from the ACR course between 2011 and 2016 were from the black community. However, such a finding does not confirm the deficit theory's hypothesis that attrition is determined by students' learning deficiencies and home-based challenges. Some factors contributing to dropout such as, the lecturers' dispiriting feedback and their relative unreachability, have exposed that attrition can also be caused by factors originating from the institutional contexts. Thus, waging a war against attrition demands a holistic approach in which students' personal and institutional contexts are considered.

Conclusions and Directions for Future Research

This was a qualitative study that was theoretically framed within the deficit model to gain insights into attrition from an honours course within the distance education terrain. It

investigated the issue using the University of South Africa as a case study and the ACR module as a case course, purposively selected by virtue of being an ideal online honours course in a distance education institution. Thus, transferability of findings for application in other higher education contexts should be exercised with caution. However, they remain pivotal in the discourse on attrition in distance education as attrition remains a global challenge in the worldwide education system. The study investigated if age, gender and race as sociodemographic variables contribute to the attrition rate in a distance education online honours course. To the above end, the following research questions informed the study: What experiences did dropouts have in relation to age, gender and race prior to leaving the course prematurely? How can distance education institutions support students whose learning experiences are affected by age, gender and race? While the deficit theory's philosophical assumption is that students' circumstances cause attrition, the findings of this study suggest that attrition in a DE terrain can be attributed to a variety of challenges emanating not only from within the students' personal space but also from the institutional context, blaming the institution and lecturers for contributing to the premature discontinuation from the online ACR course. Findings of this study support previous research that students of colour are mostly the ones dropping out from higher education institutions as compared to their white counterparts. An institutional attempt to deal with attrition of students of colour from an online honours course must be channelled to identify their needs and develop support programmes that will preclude premature attrition. In addition, continuous remedial support interventions such as analysis of reasons for attrition with dropouts must be done to refine existing support intervention strategies as different students drop out because of different reasons. Lecturers must understand the background of students of colour and the impact their cultures may have on their attitudes towards education as well as their academic achievement. The learning environment must be made conducive by eradicating the dominance of race and exerting suppressive power over another ethnic group to preclude attrition that may occur due to racism and other forms of mistreatments. Thus, DE institutions must ensure equal status and rights for students of all races. Studies on whether age, gender and race influence attrition in DE must adopt a holistic approach that also assess other factors such as marriage, financial background, generational poverty, teaching and learning pedagogy, and cultural deficit thinking amongst students.

To minimise the attrition rate, both students and lecturers need support interventions so that they can perform better in teaching and learning. Academic institutions must continuously hold lecturers accountable for failing in their duties, including being unavailable when students need to consult with them. Academics must also be trained on how assess students' academic activities, while also motivating them to perform better. This will address the culture of discouraging feedback and may potentially reduce attrition and promote the retention and success rate. Moreover, the study infers that any actions to address the attrition issue in a DE environment must consider offering personal interventions for students at an early stage after registration, focusing on factors such as promoting self-confidence and self-directedness, imparting skills on the ability to manage time, offering various study options, and mature age support. Age, gender and race must be considered for identifying potential at-risk students, and support programmes for older, employed and married students must be put into place to help them complete the course and ultimately the qualification programme. It is of paramount importance to develop and implement training programmes for both students and lecturers on such aspects as time management, to enable the older, married and employed students, particularly students of colour, to ensure a more effective balance between their study workload, employment duties and home chores. Clearly, student dropout from DE is a complex phenomenon requiring further exploration to be able to determine the causes accounting for premature attrition, in the context of increased technological advancement. Thus, future research on online distance education courses may investigate pedagogical approaches suitable to respond to the needs of older and married students

coming from the black community. The focal points may include using other theoretical frameworks with an amalgamation of methodological approaches to complement the findings and to create a higher possibility of generalising results in other contexts.

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