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The registration conundrum: A sociological perception into the experiences of first-year students at the University of Venda in South Africa



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ABSTRACT

First-year students confront various difficulties when they move to higher education, especially in South African universities, which have a heterogeneous socio-economic environment. This study examined the "registration conundrum" students encounter while investigating the sociological factors affecting their experiences during this crucial beginning stage. A mixed-methods approach was used to record the depth and breadth of first-year students' experiences, integrating qualitative interviews with quantitative questionnaires. Ten first-year University of Venda students participated in the study, which provided detailed information about the participants' emotional and personal experiences during the registration procedure. Purposive sampling was used to choose the participants. Findings indicated that inadequate access to resources, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and socio-economic inequality significantly heightened stress and anxiety levels among students, leading to delayed academic engagement. The study also emphasized how race, gender, and class intersect to influence students' registration experiences and how those experiences affect their academic achievement and social integration. According to the research, to improve educational equity and accessibility, higher education institutions must implement inclusive and flexible registration procedures that consider the particular difficulties faced by first-year students. In addition to illuminating the subtleties of student experiences, this sociological viewpoint advocates for legislative changes meant to enhance South Africa's higher education system. The study complied with ethical standards for privacy, anonymity, informed consent, confidentiality, and harm avoidance.

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Introduction

Entering University marks a significant transition in the lives of many students, filled with excitement, challenges, and a myriad of new experiences (Volstad, 2020). At the University of Venda, the first-year student experience is shaped by academic pressures and social, cultural, and economic factors that influence their journey (Mulaudzi, 2023). This article employs a sociological lens to explore the unique challenges faced by first-year students, from the adjustment to campus life to the navigation of social networks and cultural expectations. (Beattie, 2018). University is a time of transition, exploration, and personal growth. For many first-year students, it represents a new chapter in their lives, full of challenges and opportunities (O'Shea, 2024). However, the journey to higher education can be challenging for some students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds or marginalized communities (Scanlon, 2019).

The University of California and the University of Michigan have shown that first-year students often struggle with isolation and homesickness (Rakestraw, 2024). These studies reveal that social networks are vital in helping students navigate their new

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surroundings (Mishra, 2020). The experiences of first-year students vary significantly based on factors such as socio-economic status, cultural background, and prior educational experiences, as noted in research from Harvard University (Chang, Wang, Mancini, McGrath-Mahrer, & Orama de Jesus, 2020)

Moreover, the impact of campus resources, such as orientation programs and peer mentoring, has been extensively documented (Hamilton, Boman, Rubin, & Sahota, 2019). Institutions like the University of Florida have found that effective orientation programs can significantly enhance students' sense of belonging and academic success (Chan et al., 2020). By examining these sociological perspectives, this study aims to contribute a deeper understanding of the first-year experience and inform strategies institutions can implement to support their students better (Kahu, Picton, & Nelson, 2020).

By examining these experiences, researchers can gain deeper insights into how societal structures and dynamics are crucial in shaping incoming students' educational trajectories and overall well-being. As researchers delve into the lived realities of first-year students at the University of Venda, we aim to highlight the importance of understanding their perspectives within the broader context of social integration and support systems in higher education. Through a sociological lens, researchers examined the lived experiences of University of Venda first-year students in this study. This article seeks to bring attention to individuals' difficulties and their methods to get past them by looking at how poverty, language hurdles, and cultural norms affect their academic achievement, social integration, and general well-being. This article seeks to foster better empathy and understanding among the larger university community by highlighting how social institutions and cultural expectations impact first-year students' experiences.

Literature review

Challenges faced by first-year students during the registration process in South Africa

Restricted information availability

According to Brinkman and Smith (2021), many first-year students rely on various sources of information, including university websites, orientation programs, and peer advice. However, if these sources are not easily accessible or lack crucial details regarding registration procedures, students may find themselves confused or misinformed. This inconsistency led to delays and frustration in completing the registration process on time. Moreover, the effectiveness of communication from the University's administration also plays a vital role (McCaffery, 2018). If important announcements are made via channels students do not regularly check (like emails or specific portals), they might miss essential deadlines, forms, or requirements. This gap stresses students who are already adjusting to a new environment. According to Collins and Halverson (2018), many processes have moved online in today's digital age. However, not all students may have the necessary technological access or skills to navigate online registration systems. Issues such as poor internet connectivity or familiarity with digital platforms can significantly hinder students' ability to complete their registration efficiently (Hasan & Khan, 2020).

Language limitations

According to Aizawa, Rose, Thompson, and Curle (2023), English may not be the first language for many first-year students. This led to challenges in understanding registration materials, forms, and instructions provided by the University. Students who struggle to comprehend essential information make mistakes in their registration or miss important deadlines, affecting their academic journey from the outset (Chew & Cerbin, 2021). Moreover, Mahlangu (2018) stated that language barriers impede effective communication between students and university staff. When students cannot express their questions or concerns clearly, it leads to frustration and a feeling of isolation. This issue also extends to peer interactions, where first-year students feel excluded in group discussions or activities due to language differences. According to Toro, Camacho-Minuche, Pinza-Tapia, and Paredes (2019), although the University offers resources and support in multiple languages, the materials are not always adequately promoted or accessible. If language support services are limited or hard to find, students do not seek help when needed, compounding their difficulties during registration.

Socio-Economic and Cultural factors that contribute to challenges

Fewer possibilities for education

According to Ngwenya (2023), limited educational opportunities significantly impact first-year students at the University of Venda, creating a multifaceted challenge that intertwines socio-economic and cultural factors. Many students enter University with varying levels of preparedness due to disparities in their prior educational experiences (Abdous, 2019). Those from under-resourced schools often lack access to quality teaching, essential learning materials, and extracurricular support, leading to knowledge and skills gaps. This educational inequality affects academic performance and diminishes students' confidence and motivation, making the transition to university life more daunting. Walker, McLean, and Mukwando (2022) indicated that socio-economic factors play a crucial role in the challenges faced by these students. Many first-year students come from low-income backgrounds, which limits their ability to afford necessary resources such as textbooks, technology, and transportation. Financial stress leads to increased anxiety and distraction, further hindering their academic success.

Additionally, the student must balance part-time work with their studies to support themselves or their families, leaving them with less time and energy to focus on their education. Rivas, Hale, and Burke (2019) stated that culturally, students may also experience challenges related to their identity and belonging. Those from marginalized communities might struggle to navigate a predominantly different cultural environment, which can lead to feelings of isolation and alienation (Chang, 2020).

Financial limitations

Lavhelani, Ndebele, and Ravhuhali (2020) stated that financial constraints significantly impact first-year students at the University of Venda, influencing their academic performance, social integration, and overall university experience. Many students come from backgrounds with limited financial resources, which creates a barrier to accessing essential educational materials, such as textbooks and technology. This lack of resources can hinder their ability to keep up with coursework and fully engage in their studies, leading to increased stress and lower academic performance. Moreover, Alsubaie et al. (2019) state that financial constraints affect students' social lives. Many first-year students seek to establish connections and friendships, but the inability to participate in social activities due to financial limitations leads to isolation and exclusion. This social aspect is crucial for adapting to university life, and without it, students may struggle to find support networks that are vital for their well-being (Liu, Ping, & Gao, 2019). According to Lima, Nel, and Setwaba (2022), cultural and financial challenges also create a sense of stigma or shame among students, particularly in a diverse environment like the University of Venda, where peer comparisons are common. Students feel pressured to maintain a specific image or lifestyle that aligns with their peers, exacerbating their financial stress. Additionally, cultural expectations regarding education and success can further intensify the pressure on students to perform well academically despite their financial hardships (Mistry & Elenbaas, 2021).

The registration process impacts students.

Stress and anxiety

Glaessgen, MacGregor, Cornelius-White, Hornberger, and Baumann (2018) indicated that the registration process can be overwhelming, especially for first-year students unfamiliar with university systems. High levels of stress and anxiety lead to difficulties in concentration and decreased motivation, which are crucial for academic success. When students are preoccupied with worries about registration, they struggle to focus on their studies, resulting in lower grades and a lack of academic achievement (Ladejo, 2023). Moreover, social integration is vital for a positive university experience, as it helps students build networks and friendships. However, stress and anxiety during registration isolate students, making them less likely to participate in social activities or seek connections with peers (Thomas, Orme, & Kerrigan, 2020). This isolation led to feelings of loneliness and disconnect, further exacerbating their stress levels and impacting their overall well-being (Butnaru, 2023).

Theoretical framework

Transition Theory

Transition theory, developed by Schlossberg (1981), provides a framework for understanding how individuals cope with change and navigate new environments, making it particularly useful for analyzing the experiences of first-year students at the University of Venda during the registration process. According to Schlossberg, transitions can be categorized into three components: the situation, the self, and the support system. In the context of this study, the situation refers to the registration process itself, a significant and often stressful life event for first-year students. Many students face unexpected challenges such as long delays, technical issues, or inadequate guidance, significantly affecting their ability to navigate university life successfully. These difficulties create a heightened sense of uncertainty, leading to frustration and anxiety, key markers of a problematic transition (Andrews & Dorsey, 2023).

Furthermore, from a self-perspective, transition theory emphasizes the personal resources and coping mechanisms individuals bring to the situation. First-year students at the University of Venda likely enter the registration process with varying levels of preparedness and personal resilience. Some may possess prior experience with bureaucratic systems or a higher degree of social capital, enabling them to handle challenges more effectively. Others may be more vulnerable due to a lack of knowledge about university systems or insufficient social and emotional support, making the registration process especially difficult. How these students perceive their ability to overcome registration obstacles, and their sense of self-efficacy can help or hinder their transition to university life (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012). For example, students who feel overwhelmed or powerless may struggle to adapt, while those more confident in their problem-solving skills may view the process as a manageable challenge.

According to Giddens, Duneier, Appelbaum, and Carr (2021), the support system, a key element of transition theory, refers to the social, emotional, and institutional resources available to students during this transition. In the case of the University of Venda, the support system could include staff members who assist with registration, fellow students who share experiences and strategies, and family members who provide emotional encouragement. However, the study likely reveals that the University's support mechanisms are not always sufficient or adequate, particularly in addressing students' frustrations with registration difficulties (Henderson & Lee, 2023). The lack of clear communication, timely assistance, or accessible resources can exacerbate students' isolation and stress. Transition theory posits that a robust support system is crucial for mitigating the adverse effects of challenging transitions and promoting successful adaptation (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012).

The transition theory also emphasizes the importance of the degree of transition, meaning how the individual perceives dramatic or challenging change. For first-year students at the University of Venda, the registration process is a critical moment that symbolizes their entry into a new phase of life characterized by academic responsibilities and social integration. For some students, this moment may be a minor inconvenience. In contrast, for others, it represents a significant barrier to their academic journey, leading to feelings of alienation or a lack of belonging. Understanding this transition's emotional and psychological impact can help universities design more effective support systems that reduce stress and enhance student experience. Thus, applying transition theory to the analysis of the registration process allows for a deeper understanding of the challenges students face, ultimately providing insights into how to facilitate smoother transitions in higher education (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010).

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism, a sociological framework primarily developed by George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer, emphasizes the role of social interactions and symbols in shaping individual behavior and perceptions. By examining how first-year students, faculty, and fellow students engage with the University's administrative procedures, symbolic interactionism can be applied to the registration process at the University of Venda. Students encounter and internalize the University's norms, values, and expectations during the registration process, which is a crucial moment with symbolic meanings. For example, the students could interpret lengthy lines, technical difficulties, or unclear instructions as signs of institutional inefficiency. This could affect how they view the University overall and shape their early attitudes toward higher education (Brown & Green, 2022).

Crotty & Lewis (2021). States that students' identities and expectations are significantly shaped by the symbolic interactions during registration, especially between students and university personnel. Symbolic interactionism holds that social interactions are how people form their sense of self. In this regard, how students perceive their standing in the academic community can be influenced by the treatment they receive from university personnel during registration. For instance, a student who receives understanding and unambiguous direction may feel encouraged and appreciated, strengthening their positive self-perception as a competent college student. On the other hand, a student who feels frustrated or unappreciated by staff members may internalize feelings of inferiority or alienation, resulting in a weakened sense of self-worth and belonging in the academic setting.

Furthermore, symbolic interactionism emphasizes how crucial group dynamics influence personal experiences. Students' interactions with one another, whether through advice-giving or sharing registration-related challenges, can result in a collective narrative about the registration process. These shared interpretations, formed through peer interactions, shape students' understanding of their challenges. For example, suppose students collectively view the registration process as disorganized or unfair. In that case, it can become a symbolic marker of their shared experience, potentially fostering a sense of solidarity and reinforcing a negative image of the institution. In this way, the collective construction of meaning around registration, through student conversations and shared experiences, can significantly impact the students' emotional responses to the process and subsequent engagement with the University.

Students' perceptions of their roles within the university system are further shaped by the symbols used in the registration process, such as forms, documents, and official titles (Lauer, 2022). According to symbolic interactionism, symbols are more than just tangible items; they also have social connotations that shape behavior. For instance, a first-year student's transition from high school to university life may be symbolized by completing paperwork or issuing an official student number. The symbolic meaning of being a "student" at the University of Venda is also influenced by the formalities and bureaucratic language used during registration. As students interact with these symbols, they come to internalize the expectations and regulations of the institution, which can either empower them as they successfully navigate the process or lead to frustration if they feel disconnected from or overwhelmed by these symbolic markers of institutional authority (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959).

Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection methods to comprehensively understand the registration experiences of first-year students at the University of Venda. The quantitative component involved administering a structured survey to capture statistical data on students' registration experiences. The survey entailed a sample of 10 participants from the University of Venda. This method allowed for the identification of common issues faced by the students, such as delays, technical problems, or dissatisfaction with the process. The qualitative aspect involved semi-structured interviews with a sample of 10 first-year students, offering in-depth insights into the personal and emotional experiences of the participants during registration. A mixed-methods approach was chosen to triangulate findings and provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of the registration conundrum (Creswell, 2014).

Data analysis was performed using thematic analysis for the qualitative data, allowing for the identification of recurring themes and patterns in the students' responses. Thematic analysis is instrumental in sociological research as it helps interpret complex social phenomena by recognizing and analyzing key themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize and categorize the survey responses for the quantitative data. Integrating both data sets facilitated a deeper analysis, combining the statistical trends from the surveys with the detailed, subjective experiences captured in the interviews, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings (Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2013).

The population for this study consisted of 10 first-year students from the University of Venda. The participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure they had direct experience with the registration process. This small sample size was chosen due to the study's exploratory nature and the aim to focus on individual experiences rather than generalizing across the entire student body. Although the sample size is limited, the rich qualitative data obtained provided valuable insights into the challenges faced by students and their perceptions of the registration process at the University of Venda (Patton, 2015).

Findings and discussion

Table 1: Participants Demographic information

Participant	Gender	Faculty	Home Language	Age	Racial Group
Participant A	Female	FHSSE	Sepedi	21	Black
Participant B	Female	FHSSE	Setswana	23	Black
Participant C	Male	FSEA	Sepedi	19	Black
Participant D	Female	FSEA	Tshivenda	18	Black
Participant E	Female	FSEA	Tshivenda	19	Black
Participant F	Female	FHSSE	Sepedi	21	Black
Participant G	Female	FHSSE	Xitsonga	24	Black
Participant H	Male	FSEA	Xitsonga	18	Black
Participant I	Male	FHS	Sepedi	19	Black
Participant J	Female	FCML	Tshivenda	19	Black

The study involved 10 first-year students enrolled at the University of Venda, South Africa, during the 2024 academic year. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of student backgrounds. Of the 10 participants, 70% were female ($n = 7$), while 30% were male ($n = 3$). The students were predominantly from rural areas (100%) within South Africa. The average age of participants was 20 years, ranging from 18 to 24. Regarding racial demographics, 100% of the students identified as Black African. Regarding language preferences, participants spoke indigenous languages such as Tshivenda (30%), Sepedi (40%), Xitsonga (20%) and Setswana (10%). This demographic diversity provided a comprehensive view of first-year students' varied experiences during the University's registration process. The above information is fully shown in Table 1: Participants' Demographic information.

Table 2: Summary of Findings

Themes	Participants	Description
Theme1: Registration experiences	All	With an emphasis on convenience, effectiveness, and satisfaction, this subject examines students' general experiences and perceptions during registration.
Theme 2: Challenges and Obstacles during Registration Process	A, B, D, F & J	The theme tackled the obstacles and challenges students face during the registration process, like technical problems, unclear information, and lack of communication.
Theme 3: Effectiveness of Communication and Information Dissemination	G, B, I & H	Theme 3 evaluated how well information about registration procedures is delivered to students and its accessibility.
Theme 4: Expectations vs. Reality of the Registration Experience	A, C & E	Compared students' actual experiences with their original assumptions regarding the registration process.
Theme 5: Guidance and Preparation for First-Year Students	G, H & I	This theme examined the assistance and planning provided to first-year students so they can complete the registration procedure.
Theme 6: Support Services and Resources	H, C, E, D & G	Theme 6 focused on the availability and accessibility of resources and support services that assist students throughout registration.

Theme 1: Registration experiences

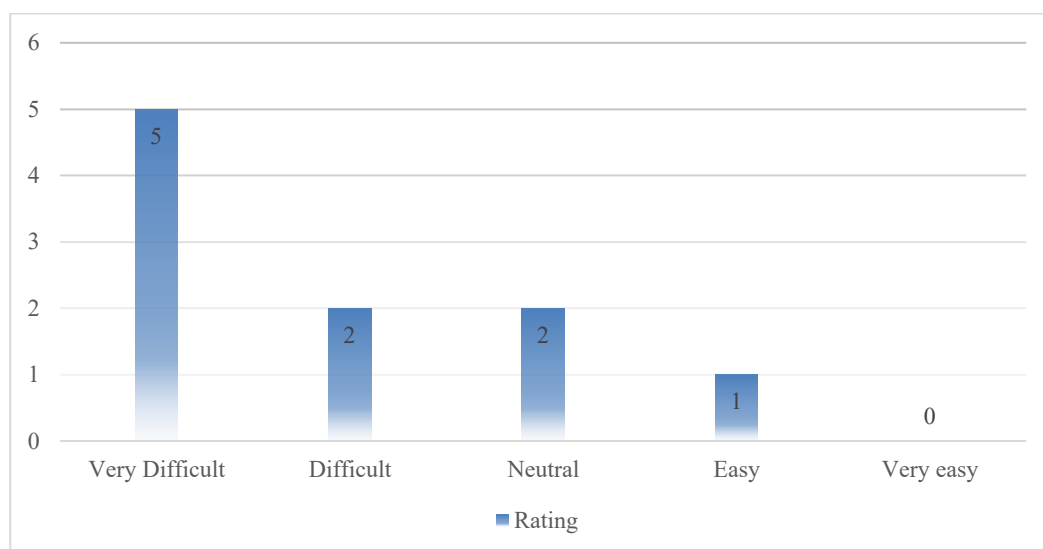


Figure 1: Overall rate of the registration process

The study's findings revealed first-year students' experiences with registration. According to the study, University of Venda students have a variety of experiences with the registration procedure. It further shows that 1st-year students struggle during the registration process each year; this was shown when participants expressed their feelings about registration experiences at the University of Venda. Out of the participants, 50% expressed that the registration process was complicated ($n = 5$), and 20% further showed that the registration process was complex ($n = 2$). In contrast, the remaining 30% were neutral (20%) and easy (10%).

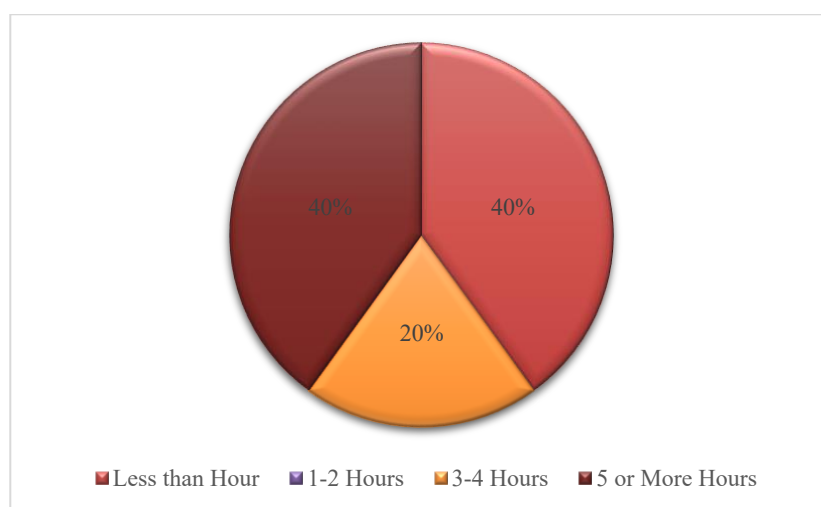


Figure 2: Time taken to complete the registration process

The study further revealed that 40% of 1st year students ($n = 4$) took less than an hour to register with the University. It further showed that the other 40% of first-year students experienced difficulties with registration, which resulted in them taking longer and more than expected time, resulting in 5 hours and more hours. The remaining 20% of students took 3-4 hours to complete during registration. During the registration journey, there were technical difficulties for those who utilized the online platform; this included issues with the website and system crashes during online registration. The study revealed that 80% of first-year students had no challenges related to the availability of Identification documents like ID and proof of acceptance.

Theme 2: Challenges and Obstacles during Registration Process

First-year students face common challenges and obstacles during the university registration process. The study found difficulties with the online payment system; this challenge prevents first-year students from registering as the institution needs to confirm the student or sponsor payments. Students get blocked by the University system before all confirmations can be made to ensure that the student is eligible to register. Moreover, some students are expected to come to campus for physical assistance with registration. First-year students face financial difficulties in traveling, which could sustain them for registration and thereafter. Students face financial difficulties in paying other registration-related costs.

Participant A: "Having to come to campus earlier with a little amount to sustain much week's waiting for NSFAS."

Participant B: "I'm a first year I had difficulties whereby they blocked me so I had to travel long distance to register physically and it was not easy they also wanted R5000 for registration and I did not get it back."

Participant D: "I was unable to register because I did not have money for registration fee."

Furthermore, participant F elaborated more on the challenges by indicating that language barriers are challenging when communicating with university officials. System Crash was outlined by the study as an obstacle that first-year students face during registration; when the first-year try to register, the system goes offline, which requires students to travel to campus for physical assistance. The study showed that first-day accommodation was a challenge for students with network and system crashes, as they had to rush to the campus.

Participant F: "Language barrier from people assisting me."

Participant J: "It was difficult because when I try to register, the system would crash, and then I enquire as to what is going on to find that I have been blocked. I have to go to campus, and I live far from campus, and I do not have relatives around and transportation networks is bad in my area."

According to De Villiers and Pretorius (2020), first-year students in South Africa (SA) face problems and obstacles during university registration. Obstacles generally come from administrative hurdles, limited access to resources, and the intimidating nature of navigating higher education systems for the first time (Smit & Vorster, 2022). Moreover, many first-year students have trouble comprehending degree requirements, course prerequisites, and the registration deadline, which causes them to become confused and frustrated (Ndebele & Ngcobo, 2019). Additionally, students from underprivileged backgrounds are disproportionately affected by problems such as system breakdowns or lack of access to online platforms, which can impede the registration process due to limited technological infrastructure (Mthimkhulu & Ngcobo, 2020). Financial issues and delays in financial assistance payments also lead to stress, as many students cannot finish registration until their money is confirmed (Mseleku, 2021).

Theme 3: Effectiveness of Communication and Information Dissemination

Lack of communication

Communication serves as a powerful tool to keep ongoing engagement. The study's findings showed a lack of direct communication from the University's relevant office to the prospective students. First-year students arrive at a new setting or community, the University; the first-year students become clueless about what should happen as they do not know anyone in that setting. There is no proper communication on how to deal with things or guidance on how to do things from the university management as the overseer of everything within the institution. The lack of proper communication comes with delays in tackling registration matters and solving obstacles that first-year students are encountering. Proper communication enables and promotes proper engagement between the students and the relevant registration offices within the institution. The participants below supported the findings.

Participant G: "Well, I feel like everything was okay, but when students are facing issues, we do not get proper communication on how to deal with issues, and the University should have its platform to address students rather than relying on SRC."

Participant B: "I feel like they take time to resolve the issues that delays the registrations."

Participant I: "There was poor communication since nobody knew what was happening and we were not receiving updates from the SRC urgently enough, the SRC and management could have improved their updates and delivered them better and more informed."

Furthermore, Participant H stated, "Clear instructions must be made for the registration step-by-step as first years have no idea or experience of what they are supposed to do." It is crucial to provide clear registration instructions to enhance proper flow in the registration process.

Theme 4: Expectations vs. Reality of the Registration Experience

It is not always what reality should be and should be met to satisfy the needs of the expectations. What first-year students expected was not what they got to experience during the registration process at the University of Venda. The reality kicked in when the students did not see what they expected. The students expected that the institution would consider that they were still new to the system and were not exposed to the registration process at a higher institution. However, things were unexpected, like regular updates and assisting first-year students individually, as they require special attention. They do not know anything about registration and how the University operates. Registering as soon as after being admitted was used as an opportunity to get back to campus quickly, but there was a specific period of waiting as they were still fixing room allocation.

Participant A: "No! They could at least inform students earlier that they will be needed in thus certain days so we can save some money."

Participant C: "I was admitted early, and I took that as the opportunity to do the registration process as quickly and as I can."

Participant E: "They should have assisted us one by one because we did not know anything about registration and university."

Emotional reactions of first-year students range from frustration and stress due to unforeseen complications to relief and satisfaction if the process is better than expected. Students often base their expectations on external sources such as university websites, peer information, or promotional materials. These include expectations of a smooth, organized, and efficient registration process. First-year students expect adequate help and clear guidance through registration but encounter poor communication and inadequate support services. Students expect the online registration system to be intuitive and user-friendly but encounter issues like system crashes, errors, or complex navigation.

Theme 5: Guidance and Preparation for First-Year Students

Familiarizing yourself with the registration process and understanding the registration procedures, required documentation, and deadlines is essential. This can be fully demonstrated via support and updates to the prospective students of the institution. Guidance and support start at a communication level, which is lacking in the institution. Dissemination of legit information symbolizes latent guidance to the students as to what they should do and follow. Not enough guidance was distributed and shown to students who were partaking in online registration during the period. Moreover, this also includes disseminating the right modules and subjects that first-year students should register for in their specific courses and faculties. Information Technology (IT) matters should get the correct and relevant officials to facilitate and guide students who have not been in the system. Findings showed significant concern about the lack of guidance and support students encounter during registration—an example of participants' expression.

Participant G: "No! The University should communicate with students and release proper information to help students stay up to date with any changes made."

Participant H: "No, we did not have enough guidance throughout the registration process. Enough comrades must be allocated to help guide first years on how the registration process works, like registering for the right modules, getting a room, etc."

Participant I: "IT support did not help at all in my point of view."

Assistance and planning for first-year students to guarantee a seamless transition to college life. Students who receive proper orientation and preparatory help are better prepared to handle academic, social, and logistical problems (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2019). Students feel better prepared and confident when participating in programs that provide pre-semester introductions, workshops on time management, study techniques, and information about academic resources. According to Pescosolido (2017) and Johnson (2018), early participation in peer mentorship and academic advising enhances students' academic performance and sense of community, which are important for retention. Additionally, educating students about degree requirements and course choices before registration helps them make well-informed decisions and lessen anxiety (Crockett, 2017). Increased student success and satisfaction are associated with these proactive support systems, primarily when they address a range of student needs and provide ongoing, individualized assistance during the first year (Fritz, 2018).

Theme 6: Support Services and Resources

The provision of one-on-one advising sessions comes in handy to help students navigate and choose course materials and requirements and plan their academic path to ensure course program requirements. The study has revealed that the online registration system must be improved. The improvement of this resource guarantees it will not shut down and go off while first-year students are still registering or during the online registration process. Assistance personnel like staff members and the Student Representatives Council (SRC) should be put to an increased number for the smooth process of first-year students' registration. This eradicates registering the wrong modules or modules different from your degree program. An active online system reduces confusion while registering at the University. The study revealed that it is important for the University of Venda's online system to be kept up and running to reduce student disruption. The online resources and platform should be given and made known to students prior to the commencement of the registration process.

Participant H: "The system must be improved to be faster and reliable, not shutting down while students are in the middle of a registration process. There must be enough comrades from every degree or who have knowledge about correct modules from every degree, so we do not have to run to ICT later on changing modules."

Participant C: "The System must be Active and maintained during the registration to avoid unnecessary confusion to the first-year students who are interested in attending the University of Venda."

Moreover, Participant E supports this by saying that everything should be done fairly and everyone should be allowed to register without paying any required fee. This further calls for a user-friendly website first to enter students. The services that make registering difficult for first-year students should be easily accessible and friendly.

Participant E: "Everything should be fair and sure and they should allow everyone to register free."

Participant D: "They must ensure their website is first-year friendly."

Participant G: "Giving information on how to register and also making them register one faculty at a time to avoid online traffic."

Support services are essential for helping students navigate the challenges of choosing courses, comprehending academic requirements, and getting acquainted with institutional norms during first-year registration (Stewart, 2020). The effectiveness and accessibility of these services have been shown to impact first-year students' achievement significantly. Proactive institutional support can help offset early academic obstacles, increasing retention rates (Johnson, 2018).

Discussion

The "registration conundrum" refers to a complex problem that includes students' experiences, frustrations, and the effect of these barriers on their social integration into university life. Sociologically speaking, the registration process for first-year students at the University of Venda, like many other South African universities, frequently presents significant challenges beyond administrative hurdles. These challenges are not just logistical; they also reflect broader societal issues, such as inequalities in access to resources, digital literacy, and institutional support.

The intricacy of the registration procedure itself is one of the biggest challenges facing University of Venda first-year students. Students from rural areas may find the process intimidating and perplexing. According to Mthimkhulu and Ngcobo (2020), students who do not have regular access to computers or reliable internet connections face major obstacles due to a lack of digital infrastructure and restricted technology availability. Students without access to online registration platforms are at a disadvantage as the institution increasingly uses them, exacerbating already-existing social inequities. Students, particularly those from low-income families, experience additional stress and frustration because of financial assistance delays or registration system outages.

A sociological approach to the registration dilemma makes it evident that interventions should streamline the process and ensure that all students, regardless of their socio-economic background, have the resources and support they need to succeed. Improved financial aid assistance, mentorship programs, and technology access can all be vital in ensuring that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed rather than be frustrated during their first encounter with the University.

Conclusion

As a result of institutional constraints and wider socio-economic disparities, the University of Venda's first-year student registration process poses severe difficulties beyond simple administrative difficulties. The challenges, which exacerbate feelings of stress and alienation, disproportionately impact students from underprivileged backgrounds. The study's findings revealed that limited access to technology, delays in financial help, and difficulties navigating the system are the core challenges. From a sociological viewpoint, these problems are closely related to the historical and current educational inequalities in South Africa. By implementing these suggestions, the University of Venda can give its first-year students a more welcoming and encouraging environment, giving them the resources and self-assurance they need to succeed. In the end, removing these obstacles will encourage a more equal higher education system for all students by improving academic performance, social integration, and retention.

Limitations of the study

Several limitations of the study are acknowledged below:

- i. The study relied heavily on self-reported experiences through interviews or questionnaires. This introduces the possibility of response bias, as participants may have underreported or exaggerated certain aspects of their experiences due to social desirability or recall limitations.
- ii. The study primarily focuses on students' experiences, with limited administrative staff, faculty, or policymakers input. Including these perspectives could have provided a more balanced view of the registration challenges and potential solutions.

Recommendation

- i. All students should have dependable access to technology, particularly those from underserved and rural locations, and the University of Venda should invest in upgrading its digital infrastructure.
- ii. In addition to providing clear communication regarding financial aid eligibility and deadlines, the University should establish a comprehensive mentorship program that matches first-year students with returning faculty members or peers.
- iii. Additionally, a dedicated team should be on hand to help students with any registration or funding-related concerns.

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