

## AUTHOR:

Taabo Mugume<sup>1,2</sup> 

## AFFILIATION:

<sup>1</sup>University of the Free State,  
South Africa<sup>2</sup>Ubuntu Higher Education  
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# Students' sense of belonging at a South African university during COVID-19

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**Abstract**

*The research on students' sense of belonging in higher education has evolved into a prominent theme worldwide. Institutional research focuses on the institution understanding itself and helps leaders to rethink improvement initiatives. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has required of institutions to revise student support programmes and approaches to maintain a strong sense of belonging. The theories of belonging by Strayhorn (2012) and Dumford et al. (2019) were adopted to analyse student responses. The aim of the study was to understand students' sense of belonging and how the university responded to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure a strong sense of belonging. Data were generated through in-depth interviews with 45 undergraduate students from all seven faculties. The findings highlight notable prevention measures intended to limit the spread of the virus on campus and student support in the form of study devices and data. The post-lockdown changes included a return to face-to-face mental health support, drafting COVID-19 catchup plans for first year orientation of 2020 and 2021 cohorts, improving the student voice. Finally, notable principles for responding to a future higher education crisis are highlighted. These initiatives contributed towards establishing and maintaining a strong students' sense of belonging.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19 lockdown; sense of belonging; South Africa; students; university.

**1. Introduction**

The study of students' sense of belonging has evolved into a prominent research theme at higher education institutions worldwide (Terenzini, 2013). Institutional research at a university refers to studies that focus on understanding the university (Terenzini, 1993; Lange, 2014). Hence, research findings contribute to institutional improvement through suggesting new initiatives towards a better campus experience, which has explicit and implicit implications for the wellbeing and academic success of students (Terenzini, 1993 & 2013). South African higher education institutions have had to evolve and adapt to the post-1994 democratic dispensation. In the case of a historically white institution, post-1994 has involved an emphasis on admitting black students who were excluded historically (Swartz *et al.*,

2018). This has had implications for the sense of belonging among all students. Moreover, within the context of historically white institutions, black students have been vocal in raising their disapproval of university culture(s), which they consider as alienating in terms of race, religion, class, etc. (Swartz *et al.* 2018). Therefore, while a great deal has been achieved in relation to higher education access and success, students (black students in particular) still find universities to be alienating for various reasons. This paper will attempt to shed light on the sense of belonging among undergraduate students at a historically white South African university during the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic led to a national shutdown, including university campuses, in March 2020 (Van Schalkwyk, 2021). However, in 2021, the case university slowly started to re-open for senior undergraduate students (students who have gone through their first year at the institution) to return. The process of re-opening the university gained momentum in 2022, since the majority of the South African population had been vaccinated. It is important to note that while cohorts of senior undergraduate students (returning students) were allowed back on campus, first-year students (joining the university for the first time) had been studying online since joining the institution. This had the potential to have a negative impact their sense of belonging, since they had never had physical access to the university. The paper has sections on students' sense of belonging literature, a conceptual framework, research methodology, data presentation, analysis and discussion, and conclusion.

## 2. Students' sense of belonging

Students' sense of belonging refers to a sense of connectedness. It is when students feel that they matter and that their presence is valued (Strayhorn, 2012). It is also seen as a student's sense of identification or positioning in relation to the campus community that reflects upon the student's mood, emotions, and attitude (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Mwangi, 2016). In support of the above definition, Strayhorn (2012) refers to students' perceived social support on campus, which implies a student feeling connected, and the "experience of mattering or feeling cared about, respected, valued by, and important". All these definitions refer to factors which support a conducive campus climate to support academic success as a core-student endeavour in a university environment.

Tinto's (1987) model of student retention has hugely influenced the research on the topic (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012). Tinto argues that "students leave universities if they fail to become integrated into social and academic life". However, this model of integration has been criticised for placing a great deal of emphasis on the student, instead of the institution taking responsibility for student adaptation. Additionally, Russell and Jarvis (2019: 498) argue that "the students' sense of belonging should illustrate the interplay between the individual and the institution" towards the necessary level of connectedness for a student to feel that they belong. The research further emphasises the effect of students' sense of belonging on retention and persistence (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Mwangi, 2016; Strayhorn, 2012). A "strong sense of belonging improves student retention and supports degree completion because students feel cared about within their campus community" (Allen *et al.*, 2018: 9). In other words, if students experience a strong sense of belonging they are most likely to feel valued, but also to integrate easily into the campus community and succeed academically.

In consideration of campus integration, Tinto (1993: 50) argues that "students' level of integration into a university's academic and social systems, perceived shared values with the institution, and commitment to the institution reflect a sense of belonging and 'fit' within the

campus environment". If students experience or perceive themselves as not 'fitting' into the social and intellectual fabric of an institution, they are exposed to a higher risk of attrition, while a strong sense of belonging or perceived 'fitting' into the institution increases the possibility for satisfaction and persistence. This means that the relationships and engagements that students have with their peers and staff influence how they perceive the campus experience. (Hoffman *et al.*, 2003; Strayhorn, 2008). Therefore, having "meaningful interpersonal relationships, systems of support and resources, and feelings of being accepted and valued... [are] instrumental to a sense of belonging" (Mwangi, 2016: 1017). Allen *et al.* (2018) refer to the work of Strayhorn (2012) to argue that a sense of belonging is more important for students from marginalised communities. These may include "racial and ethnic minorities, low-income, women, first-generation students, and students who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender". For example, it has been argued that African Americans in the United States (US) often go to historically black colleges (HBCs), believing that they will experience a strong sense of belonging (Allen *et al.*, 2018). The resentment towards white institutions in the US may also apply to black students in South Africa who join historically white universities. These experiences are influenced by the campus climate of a higher education institution.

## Students' sense of belonging and campus climate

Campus climate is defined by Amodeo, Esposito and Bacchini (2020) as the way that groups or individual members of the campus community experience their campus environment. These experiences can vary from substantive inclusion to extreme exclusion, reflecting the dynamics of the institution in the process. In addition, Amodeo *et al.* (2020) highlight that campus climate can be measured in relation to instances of harassment and bias, interaction between individuals and groups, and overall perceptions. Furthermore, a welcoming and inclusive campus climate is noted to contribute towards a strong sense of belonging, and has the potential to have a significant impact student academic success in a positive way, while the opposite is also argued to be true (Amodeo *et al.*, 2020; Rankin & Reason, 2008). In the case of South African higher education, transformation-related themes for understanding students' sense of belonging may include accommodation facilities, race relations, relationships between and among international students, etc.

Rucks-Ahidiana and Bork (2020) analyse the role of relationships in the college integration of first-year students, particularly how they use relationships to adapt to and integrate into this new education setting. They borrow from Tinto's (1994) work, which argues that on-campus relationships support students with information provisioning, and therefore initiatives should focus on improving these relationships across campus. While general off-campus relationships provide moral support and motivation, on-campus relationships provide detailed information about the university. This knowledge helps the student to navigate the university's bureaucracy. These relationships complement each other; therefore universities should try to support their existence (Rucks-Ahidiana & Bork, 2020).

Fernandes *et al.* (2017) show that student engagement influences a sense of belonging. Highly engaged university students are those who invest a significant amount of their time and energy in the academic experience, but they also engage with their fellow students and university academics. According to Fernandes *et al.* (2017), most commuter students do not get involved in on-campus activities that are not primarily academic, while resident students take advantage of such activities. In the end, commuting students end up with limited support networks on campus due to their limited social interactions with peers and faculty. Residences

also form sub-academic communities on university campuses. Residences are therefore now designed not only as social spaces, but also as academic communities (Dumford *et al.*, 2019). However, in most cases, universities have limited accommodation space, and most of the students end up in privately owned off-campus residences. This has implications for students' safety, access to sports facilities, building peer relationships on campus, etc.

Since student accommodation plays an important role in students' sense of belonging, which is influenced by campus climate, universities should initiate projects targeting commuting students to encourage them to be part of on-campus social life. This increases campus engagement, and fosters a sense of belonging among commuting students. This, in turn, may lead to a more positive university experience and a stronger sense of belonging. Social and formal student gatherings are important for students to foster a sense of belonging. The amount of time that commuting students spend on campus after attending class highlights their ability to be part of other social networks or activities, and therefore building social support for belonging on campus. The time spent on campus therefore has implications for students' sense of belonging (Fernandes *et al.*, 2017). Considering the above, the fact that COVID-19 forced students away from university campuses for over two years should have a negative effect on students' sense of belonging.

The campus climate can be influenced by certain variables, for example race (Mwangi, 2016) in South Africa, when one considers discrimination and other alienating experiences of black students at historically white universities (Swartz *et al.*, 2018). This may also apply when one considers international students who come with different values and life experiences (Le, LaCost & Wismer, 2016). Furthermore, gender, language, diversity of the campus community, etc., are additional variables that may influence the climate on campus, and therefore influence students' sense of belonging (Wells & Horn, 2015). The "lack of peer support could be detrimental to students' college adjustment, especially for those from ethnically diverse backgrounds ... Peer support can serve as a buffer against these negative effects, and thus living with other students may serve in part as that buffer" (Dumford *et al.*, 2019:22). This has been affected negatively by the COVID-19 pandemic and thus impacted students' sense of belonging.

## Sense of belonging and student transition to university environment

The transition period from high school to a higher education institution is critical for students, as they are introduced to a new academic and social framework requiring more responsibility and accountability. Dumford *et al.* (2019) argue that a sense of belonging can be critical during a student's transition period from high school to university life. The feeling that a student fits in with other students may not just create a smooth transition, but has the potential to influence how students prefer to select certain institutions and decide to stay at institutions (Strayhorn, 2012). According to Dumford *et al.* (2019), early peer involvement in student life or activities at the university strengthen several factors related to student belonging, including strengthening a student's perception of the institution, and also availing social support (to deal with emotional issues such as feeling isolated). This may even be more critical for first-generation students. First-generation students are typically defined as those whose parents or guardians have not achieved university education (Katrevech & Aruguete, 2017; Vincent & Hlatshwayo, 2018). Research shows that black students constitute the majority of first-generation students in South Africa; they often struggle to fit into alienating university cultures, they struggle with English and are the most likely to drop out (Vincent & Hlatshwayo, 2018).

Living arrangements should be organised on and off campus in such a way that allows students to do certain activities together, especially those in their first year (Wells & Horn, 2015; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). This may have been impacted negatively by the COVID-19 pandemic, since it resulted into more student isolation.

## Students' sense of belonging at South African universities

The above discussion highlights how critical it is to pay attention to students' sense of belonging at South African higher education institutions, given their history. Over time, the South African higher education landscape has become a "space of student protest, activism and urgency", due to social and economic insecurities and inequality on university campuses (Le Roux & Groenewald, 2021; Swartz *et al.*, 2018). The 2015 MustFall student protests are a typical example of this activism, which started with a concern over increasing student fees and ended with a demand to change universities radically through decolonisation (Le Roux & Groenewald, 2021; Amoateng, 2016; Allen *et al.*, 2018). This was also an outcry to improve students' sense of belonging.

According to Le Roux and Groenewald (2021), the South African higher education system was built on exclusion over decades. The transition to democracy in 1994 was supported with many initiatives nationally and within institutions, such as the Foundation programmes, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), etc., meant to increase the participation of historically marginalised communities (Bitzer & Wilkinson, 2009). It is important to note that while these interventions resulted in increasing numbers of black students at higher education institutions in the country, particularly first-generation students, institutional cultures remain a major challenge (Kruger & Le Roux, 2017; Nyamnjoh, 2015; Swartz *et al.*, 2018). These cultures of exclusion lead to victims not feeling that they belong to their institutions of study. (Johnson *et al.*, 2007). Strayhorn (2012) notes that social identities such as "race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and religion, and the cross-cutting thereof play a crucial role in developing a sense of belonging". Moreover, the way that students "navigate and negotiate their narrative identities indicates the inclusion and exclusion of social identities and a subsequent experience of either belonging or alienation" (Le Roux & Groenewald, 2021: 856). Therefore, analysing narratives of students' experiences as suggested in this paper can help to expose experiences of inclusion and exclusion; hence, contribute to a critical understanding of continuing student activism in South African universities.

## 3. Conceptual framework

Dumford *et al.* (2019) share two approaches which have historically been used to analyse students' sense of belonging. Firstly, there is sense of belonging regarded through a single measure, defined as the "psychological dimension of student integration" (Hurtado, Alvarado & Guillermo-Wann, 2015: 62). Secondly, the first dimension has been expanded by several scholars towards utilising a multidimensional approach (Freeman, Anderman & Jensen, 2007; Hoffman *et al.*, 2002; Ribera, Miller & Dumford 2017). As a result, in the multidimensional approach, researchers can focus on a specific campus environment theme(s), which may need improvement, such as housing, race, gender, security, sports, spaces, naming of buildings and streets, etc., without being restricted only to the psychological dimension as a single angle for analysis. Taking a multidimensional approach, this paper focuses on student accommodation and the COVID-19 experience for undergraduate students, including first years and first-generation students. Strayhorn (2012) highlights several relevant elements for analysing a sense of belonging:

- Sense of belonging as a basic human need, in other words, every human being has a desire for belonging.
- Sense of belonging as a fundamental motive. It influences a student to, for example, have a positive attitude towards their academic work in the university and be open to engagements in social spaces for their development at the university.
- The heightened importance of sense of belonging in certain contexts at certain times in certain populations, for example, among minority student groups at a university or first-year students transitioning from the high school experience.
- Sense of belonging as a consequence of mattering. The need for connectedness in relation to a sense of belonging, implying that everyone feels that they are valued and therefore matter.
- Sense of belonging and the intersection of social identities. The social identities that students may carry influence how they experience the campus climate, and therefore affect students' sense of belonging.

Universities should work towards supporting students to enjoy a strong sense of belonging. It improves student retention, but also supports degree completion, as students feel cared for within the university community (Allen *et al.*, 2018). Two dimensions suggested by Dumford *et al.* (2019) are relevant when attempting to analyse students' sense of belonging: 1) Peer belonging, which refers to the students' connections with peers; and 2) Institutional acceptance, which refers to the feelings of acceptance from members of the institution such as academics, administrators, and student affairs professionals. Within the COVID-19 context, the above framing of students' sense of belonging can provide a way towards understanding how students experienced the case university and its response.

#### 4. Research methodology

The data were generated and analysed to present an overview of students' sense of belonging during the COVID-19 pandemic. A qualitative research design was considered appropriate for this study, because of its descriptive and exploratory abilities, specifically when relying on individuals as a unit of analysis (Creswell, 2009).

The total number of undergraduate students at the case university was 30 741, and out of this number 25 207 students were black (African, Indian, Coloured) and 8 790 were first-year students (thus 21 951 were senior undergraduate students). An e-mail was sent out to all undergraduate students. The e-mail addresses were obtained from the Institutional Information System department. 138 students responded to the e-mail and all were black students. Attempts to send out more e-mails for more students did not yield positive responses. After arranging interviews with all 138 students, 45 were able to avail themselves for the actual interviews. The university has a total of seven faculties and all were represented among the study participants. Out of the 45 study participants, six (6) students were from each of the four (4) faculties and the other three (3) faculties each had seven (7) undergraduate student participants.

In-depth interviews were conducted with undergraduate students at this historically white urban South African university using the Blackboard online learning management system between June and August 2021. At this time of the year, most undergraduate students were still writing their exams, which presented a challenge in arranging interviews. The focus on undergraduate students was because they are the majority at the institution, and also because

first-year students struggle the most in relation to belonging, since they are transitioning. The in-depth interviews covered different themes of the study for breadth and depth (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Yeo *et al.*, 2003). The study was ethically approved by the University Research Ethics Committee to ensure that study participants would be protected from harm (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). The study analysed 45 interviews with undergraduate students. Students from all faculties were contacted via e-mail as indicated above, requesting their participation, and those who responded had to give formal consent to be interviewed (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Creswell, 2009). To ensure anonymity, student respondents are referred to in the analysis using the letter (S) for student, while each student respondent was given a number from one (1) to 45. The data were transcribed and thematically analysed by carefully crosschecking each transcript before categorising it into main themes and coding it. This helped to make sense of the data findings after analysis (Neuman, 1997). It is important to note that the data set was generated only from undergraduate students, since the intention of the study was to analyse experiences of undergraduate students to understand their sense of belonging during the pandemic.

The research question guiding this study was: What was the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on undergraduate students' sense of belonging at the case study university? The study objective was to understand the students' sense of belonging and how the university responded to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure a strong sense of belonging.

## 5. Data presentation

The student responses in relation to their sense of belonging during the COVID-19 pandemic can be categorised into the themes highlighted below.

### Theme 1: Student mental health

The mental health of students is critical to their wellbeing and academic success. S-1 and S-18 noted that isolation and a lack of physical social gatherings had a negative effect on their wellbeing, and therefore their sense of belonging. S-5 received support from the university just after being quarantined;

*the university has been really supportive, after we came out of quarantine, they organised sessions for each of us with a counsellor and we were able to talk about the quarantine experience. The university task team also kept reminding us that our mental health matters and there are resources within the university to support us.*

The Student Counselling and Development programme was the most popular in providing support. Additionally, S-1, who stayed on campus, highlighted the mental health challenges and acknowledged the support provided. However, the student indicated that since counselling support was provided telephonically and through online sessions due to isolation, it did not feel like the pre-COVID-19 face-to-face sessions. S-2, who stayed in an off-campus residence, narrated that they had a counsellor who could visit the residence. Students preferred this approach, because they could physically talk to the professional in person.

## Theme 2: Academic support and funding

In relation to academic support, S-8 noted that tutorial sessions conducted on the learning management platform Blackboard were very helpful. It is important to note that not all modules had tutors. Students who had tutors, however, indicated that tutors provided more than academic support. Tutors would make time to talk to the students during online consultations, and this included personal challenges faced by students (S-13; S-10; S-11; S-24; S-32). In addition, engagements between tutors, facilitators and students during the pandemic helped students to share their challenges with someone, given the level of isolation, especially in the case of first-year students. In relation to online classes, most students indicated that they used the university computer labs to attend class and write tests because they did not have laptops.

Conversely, S-5 and S-6 acknowledged the funding support provided by the government through NSFAS. Students also noted the support provided by the university's COVID-19 task team, in particular, making laptops available to students and putting in place the GlobalProtect application. This allowed students to access the internet at a very low cost. They could access the learning management system, the university library, the university website, submit assignments, and access all reading material using the application without being charged.

In relation to staff engagement with students online, S-7 and S-8 claimed that staff did not respond to emails promptly. As a result, they would wait for weeks to get a response.

## Theme 3: First-year students

Students admitted to the first year go through an orientation phase to expose them to basic information and institutional processes. This is meant to help with their integration into the new learning environment and to help them feel a sense of belonging.

S-6 indicated that the Faculty of Education at the university continued to provide extra support to students during the pandemic. This included prompt response (mostly via email) to student challenges with the modules, tests, assignments, etc. On the other hand, S-19 complained about online orientation during the pandemic, and indicated that they would have preferred the orientation activities to take place face to face. S-20, S-36 and S-38 indicated they did not feel that they belonged because they had not anticipated studying from home. The pandemic had deprived them of the entire first-year experience in terms of the fun activities usually hosted by the university for first-year students.

Friendships are very important, especially among first-year students. Opportunities are usually created during orientation to forge new friendships. S-8 explained that joining the university during the pandemic made it very difficult to make friends, which led to further isolation. However, S-13 and S-15 were able to befriend senior students through their older siblings, who were already senior students. It is clear that friendships are very important for students to feel part of the university community, in other words, a sense of belonging, as noted further here:

*friendships among students were very helpful in terms of catching up on academic work through constantly chatting to one another but also sharing personal challenges in the process. (S-13)*

The pandemic had a negative impact on this growth, especially for first-year students who joined the university during the pandemic.

## Theme 4: First-generation students

Orientation programmes are very important to first-generation students, as highlighted by S-7 in the comment below.

*it is very fulfilling knowing people who can comfort you when you need them, having someone you can just go up to when you have a problem and then they try to help you. During orientation they try to bring us together to know each other and feel at home.*

In addition, S-17 shared that, during the pandemic, orientation involved two training sessions on how to use Blackboard and the GlobalProtect application. Emphasis was also placed on how to navigate the university website, university regulations in relation to COVID-19, and how to participate in campus activities.

First-generation students also faced family challenges, with implications for their sense of belonging as they mostly stayed home during the pandemic. S-5 explained the high expectations faced by first-generation students from their families.

*I mean everybody wants you to get that degree. They expect you to be at your best every day, they really want positive results.*

At the same time, this student also highlighted support from family members and how this has had a positive effect during the pandemic. This included extra financial support, motivation, and creating a conducive environment to talk about personal education challenges. On the other hand, S-7 complained that,

*the pressure is too much sometimes because you know when you fail a certain test, some of the family members will be looking at you as if your failing the whole family. I am under that kind of pressure. Even though the work is too much, I know, I must do it for my family.*

*As a first-generation student, it is challenging because everyone at home is looking up to you, you need to be perfect, when you make mistakes ... you put them under stress and you are under stress too. (S-18)*

Additionally, S-6 and S-7, as first-generation students, emphasised the same pressure and support provided by family. Therefore, the challenges posed by COVID-19 amplified the fear of failure when considering the high stakes for these students.

A first-generation student noted a positive experience which seemed to have contributed positively to her sense of belonging:

*I am currently living on campus, the experience is quite positive, I mean at my residence, there is just so much of sisterly love among us, everybody is just there for each other. It is really a home away from home for me. (S-5)*

Additionally, S-19 noted that the university has invested heavily in preventing the spread of the virus, and this was clear from the posters and hand-sanitizing stations around the campus. Information about COVID-19 cases was also regularly communicated to students.

In relation to socialising during the pandemic, S-30 indicated that, "because of COVID-19, it was hard to socialise with other students, just because of the regulations set so that we can prevent the spread". In addition, late NSFAS allowances seemed to be a serious challenge for students:

*The only problems I encountered during my first year, while I was staying at residences were late allowance payments and sometimes, I have had to call home and ask for money for food. And they would just think that I am scamming them since I am already on NSFAS. (S-16)*

In terms of family support, first-year students with graduated parents shared how their parents were their role models in terms of education. These parents support their children in terms of academic choices and schoolwork. They also seemed to be more financially stable and did not make use of NSFAS. These experiences were shared by some of the senior students (S-22), and collaborates the literature on first-generation students and students with graduated parents.

S-3, a first-year and first-generation student, narrated the challenges of living at home with family members who did not understand university processes. They could not, for example, understand sitting in the house for a full day while studying at home, and they wanted the student to contribute to the house chores. Some students faced serious challenges at home due to unemployment in their households. S-3, for example, had to use some of her NSFAS funds to support her family to cover basic expenses such as food and electricity.

## Theme 5: Senior students

In most cases senior undergraduate students (students who have gone through their first year at the institution) have a better understanding of the institution in comparison to first-year students.

Senior undergraduate students at the institution seem more productive through participating in available institutional programmes. It allows them to feel productive and live a meaningful student life. As highlighted in the quote by S-5, this can be tutoring, mentoring new students, etc.

*I am currently a mentor and as a result I have been having quite an experience. I have been engaging with first years, helping them in their academic journey, it has been an honour for me to be a mentor and I have grown so much in the process. Even at my residence, we went through a phase whereby we were quarantined due to COVID-19 and most of us were quarantined off-campus, as mentors, we had to take on the responsibility of making sure that the residence ran well.*

The student did not only feel cared for, but through these additional responsibilities she felt that she had grown through these meaningful experiences. S-6 further added,

*I honestly never saw myself as somebody who would actually take the responsibility of trying to be a leader, so that is one area of my life that I have to say that I have really grown, before, I would never put myself out there.*

Senior students (S-14 and S-30) shared their experiences, highlighting the unique challenges faced by first-generation students. S-14 indicated receiving a great deal of support from parents after leaving home during the pandemic. The parents ensured that all the necessary study materials were purchased, and investigated off-campus accommodation to determine if it would be appropriate. They regularly checked on the student's wellbeing and ensured that he had enough data or access to Wi-Fi to continue studying. S-30's parents called him every day to find out how he was and to enquire about his academic progress. Even though students receive meal allowances from NSFAS, students' parents and guardians provided additional financial support. Furthermore, S-8 and S-9 indicated that they received more support from

their graduated parents, who understood the university environment and its demands. This further exposed the need for the institution to understand the challenges experienced by first-generation students in order to tailor their support accordingly.

## Theme 6: Student accommodation

The effect of the pandemic on access to accommodation has been enormous, resulting in limited spaces with a need for additional supervision given the necessity for isolation, especially during the period of contact tracing.

S-17 shared his personal experience:

*as a student who is doing practical-based modules, I received a permit earlier in the year to come to campus and when I got here I was welcomed, the residence head welcomed me and they showed me to my room, everything seems to be at a pretty good standard so far, I really can't complain.*

Regarding off-campus accommodation, S-14 was concerned about safety, noting that he felt safe on campus and experienced a strong sense of belonging. Once he left the campus, however, safety became a major concern. S-1 and S-2 highlighted the huge difference in support provided to on-campus students, compared to off-campus students. They indicated that off-campus students who tested positively for COVID-19 locked themselves into their rooms and had to take care of themselves. In some instances, friends would check on them. The on-campus experience was much more positive, as university staff would check on students who had tested positive and were recovering in their rooms.

The respondents who lived at home, such as S-11 and S-15, shared negative experiences, as for some, their homes were just not conducive to studying online.

S-7, S-11, S-12, S-19, S-20, S-21, S-23, S-24, S-28, S-29, S-34, S-35, S-38 and S-40 were appreciative of the work done by the university task teams on COVID-19 to create a conducive environment during the lockdown, such as widely placing information posters and sanitizer containers around campus.

## 6. Analysis and discussion

The implications of COVID-19 to students' sense of belonging are illustrated in the student narratives above. This section focuses on discussing the findings from those narratives.

### First-year students and first-generation students

The friendships developed among first-year students can be helpful in the process of building a sense of belonging. It is important to note that during the pandemic this was a challenge for first-year students. According to Dumford *et al.* (2019), this limited peer belonging among first-year students. This is clearly one of the reasons why first-year students who joined the university during the pandemic and during the lockdown period did not express experiencing a strong sense of belonging to the institution.

First-generation students faced additional problems in their homes. However, if those students had been in residences on- or off-campus, their experiences would have been different. Their challenges included living with family members who did not understand the context of studying online. Often these students were not assisted by their families to create a conducive environment for studying. In many cases they were expected to do house chores without

the family taking into consideration the academic workload. Students' NSFAS allowances were often used to cover family expenses in the household due to unemployment during lockdown. Even though these experiences do not directly reflect the on-campus students' experience, or the effect on students' sense of belonging, they highlighted that appropriate student accommodation is the only way many students can access a conducive learning environment, given their challenging family circumstances. In other words, by considering Strayhorn's (2012) elements for such first-year students, a sense of belonging can be seen as a human need. It will assist in creating conducive conditions for studying, which might be better than the conditions at home. A sense of belonging therefore takes on heightened importance in this context of transitioning to university life. To promote a strong sense of belonging, there is a clear need for universities to give first-generation students preference regarding on-campus student accommodation, in particular first-generation students in their first year of study.

### Senior undergraduate students

Senior students indicated that being exposed to responsibilities such as the tutoring and mentoring of other students contributed to living a meaningful life, as they contribute to the university community, and assist their fellow junior students. These students believe that they matter, which also informs their positive attitude and becomes a motive to further engage socially and academically (Strayhorn, 2012). All of these elements contribute to a strong sense of belonging. Hence, universities should continuously evaluate available development opportunities senior undergraduate students have such as tutoring, leadership, etc., since they contribute positively towards a strong sense of belonging.

### Student accommodation

Wilcox *et al.* (2005) argue that in general, student accommodation is critical to the development of important relationships among students, since a sense of belonging contributes positively to student resilience and persistence in the institution. Student respondents praised the professionalism with which on campus accommodation staff provided them with support, especially those diagnosed with COVID-19 who were isolating in their rooms. Students appreciated daily visits and the provision of basic necessities. Therefore, it can be argued that on-campus student accommodation contributed positively towards building a strong sense of belonging in students during the COVID-19 pandemic. This also adds on the discussion above highlighting accommodation challenges of first-generation students, making university accommodation on- or off-campus a huge contributor to a strong sense of belonging in the case of first-generation students.

### Student mental health

Student mental health support is highlighted as one of the services which require urgent attention. The shift from face-to-face support to telephonic and online support during the pandemic had a negative effect. There is a need to return to face-to-face mental health support as soon as possible. Students prefer face-to-face support sessions, as these provide the human contact element, in comparison to telephonic and online support sessions necessitated by the pandemic. Therefore, universities should always be cautious of the need for human contact, even in extreme circumstances such as pandemic times, especially when it comes to student well-being such as how universities respond to mental health.

Students who joined universities in 2020 and 2021 missed out on face-to-face orientation sessions. The departments of student affairs have to assess the necessity to conduct reflective open-group engagements with these students in order to find ways of initiating responsive programmes that can reintroduce them to the university physically. While these students have been part of the institution, this has mostly been happening online. Clearly, initiating responsive programmes has the potential to have a positive impact on students' sense of belonging.

## Students' sense of belonging and campus experience

Strayhorn (2012) affirms a sense of belonging as a consequence of mattering. In other words, it refers to the sense of connectedness that people feel when they know or perceive that they are valued, and therefore it matters. One such example is that the university made study devices available to students who did not have laptops during the lockdown. Student respondents experienced this gesture by the university as a sign of caring for their wellbeing. In addition, even though students highlighted challenges with the use of the GlobalProtect application, which allowed them to access the internet at a very low cost, they acknowledged that that was a clear attempt by the university to support them. It was an indication of care from the side of the institution. These two initiatives clearly relate to Strayhorn's (2012) element of mattering, which strengthens one's sense of belonging, and Dumford *et al.*'s (2019) dimension of institutional acceptance. Hence, the dialogue between these two leads to a strong sense of belonging among students. This discussion highlights the importance of universities being responsive to student needs, in other words, the more responsive the university are, the greater are the chances of contributing positively to a strong student sense of belonging.

Students indicated that academics should have been more patient with them, specifically regarding online learning. However, they understood that academic staff needed to comply with the annual academic schedule, so there was little time to accommodate struggling students. The students still felt, however, that the transition from face-to-face to online learning happened very fast. They would have liked academic staff to be more patient with them, since they also needed to adjust to the new teaching and learning environment. Any support provided to academic staff to be more understanding of the students' circumstances would have contributed positively to the students' sense of belonging. A strong sense of belonging contributes positively to student resilience or persistence in the institution (see Wilcox *et al.*, 2005). These findings show a need to manage staff members working from home better in order to provide quality services to students, but also to respond institutionally to the challenges caused by the pandemic, such as a flexible (home and office) working model for staff.

The findings from the student narratives also point to the importance of including students into university activities. This may amplify their voice in university spaces, and meaning to their campus life. The student voice and responsiveness to that voice is a theme with serious implications for students' sense of belonging. The need for a more responsive university in providing timely communication may have been amplified by the pandemic, further exposing institutional challenges. The student voice as a theme should be part of departmental agendas and discussions, both in the academic and support/administration environment throughout the university to contribute to a strong students' sense of belonging.

The race dynamic and the challenges it presents in a context of a historically white institution are clear in the literature. However, while all students interviewed for this study were black, there was no reference to their race when they discussed experiences related to their sense of belonging during the pandemic and even how the university responded

to the pandemic. Therefore, the pandemic seems to have forced students to focus on their individual challenges and also to present struggles to every individual in somewhat equal form, even though the responses and each student's circumstances varied. For example, students from middle-class families could afford study devices and data, unlike students from poor households. The pace of change imposed by the pandemic appears to have forced all students to be creative and express their personal urgency to survive the pandemic storm as they responded to the challenges it presented to them and the support the university was able to provide. Hence, race was not amplified in the student responses to their sense of belonging.

Finally, it is important to note that even though the pace of vaccination did improve in South Africa and around the world, the effects of the pandemic will stay with us in the near and long-term future. This paper therefore does not simply consider student experiences during the pandemic and what they mean for sense of belonging, but also highlights lessons we can take into the future to improve students' sense of belonging, and how a university may respond to a future crisis. In this regard, a number of principles can be highlighted:

1. *Managing drastic change through task teams*: Crises such as COVID-19 lead to drastic change within the organisation, and this change process requires careful guidance. The use of a task team/s framework on specific change initiatives has proven successful at the case university during the pandemic.
2. *Prioritising the health and wellbeing of the university community*: The health and wellbeing of staff and students take priority in any response to a crisis. This allows the university to galvanise the necessary support and substantive participation of staff and students towards a unified institutional response.
3. *Making funds available for new initiatives*: In times of crisis, resources must be prioritised towards managing the crisis. If the necessary initiatives are not deliberately and adequately resourced, the university cannot respond appropriately.
4. *A flexible human resources model*: The COVID-19 pandemic forced the majority of staff members to work from home, which had negative implications on services offered to students. The need to support staff to work from home and to provide them with the necessary resources such as internet connectivity, agreements on conducive home working spaces, etc., can allow the university to be better prepared for the next crisis.
5. *The student voice*: A university should keep an eye on the student voice during crisis times, as was evidenced during COVID-19. This allows the university to respond to student concerns in a timely manner, but also to craft the necessary policy changes without resentment from the student population.

## 7. Possible limitations

The findings are from data generated from 45 student participants, and therefore broad generalisations cannot be made from these findings. Additionally, the study focuses on experiences of black students, even though black students are the majority in the case university, triangulating with white students' experiences could potentially have provided a nuanced framing of undergraduate students' sense of belonging during the pandemic. Finally, future research could cover a larger sample across institutions to provide comparisons in South Africa and beyond.

## 8. Conclusion

This paper investigated undergraduate students' sense of belonging during COVID-19 and how the university responded to the pandemic. The findings highlight experiences of a strong sense of belonging among undergraduate students in relation to university support programmes and initiatives implemented during the pandemic. These included efforts to stop the spread of the virus on campus, providing laptops and data to students, the support provided to students isolating in campus residences, etc. The needed institutional improvements are highlighted to enhance students' sense of belonging, such as improving the student voice, moving mental health support from online to face-to-face personal interaction, etc. The findings show that the majority of undergraduate students, particularly black students experienced a strong sense of belonging during the pandemic. There are, however, some challenges, and responding to these challenges effectively is necessary to strengthen students' sense of belonging further at the case university.

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