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Towards a conceptual framework in higher education anchored on social learning and social integration: transition, retention and graduation

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ABSTRACT

The global increase in enrolment in higher education (HE) has increased the diversity of students who access HE, which poses a challenge because we have a limited understanding of the way students experience HE institutions. This paper investigates why students dropout of HE and propose preventive measures. Dropout has adverse effects on student retention, graduation rates and experiences in HE in general. This paper represents a conceptual review based on secondary data. The paper suggests implementing a triadic conceptual framework using a conceptual review for social learning and integration, coupled with intentional support strategies, to reduce attrition and enhance retention and graduation rates. *Soft determinants*, such as the personal context, are crucial for addressing the social aspects of student interactions in HE. Empirical research in this field has predominantly focused on addressing high attrition rates through academic integration; few strategic approaches target social learning and integration despite their suggested potential to address the personal contexts of individuals in HE.

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Introduction

Higher education (HE) has experienced significant transformations in its structure and identity (Webbstock, 2016). A notable aspect of this transformation, particularly in the South African context discussed in this paper, is the widespread increase in HE enrolments, also known as massification (López et al., 2023). Worldwide, HE qualifications are necessary for achieving economic success and social advancement and hold particular benefits for low-income, first-generation and non-traditional students, for whom the return on investment is notably high upon employment (Adams et al., 2016). The trend of massification is evident globally and enrollment numbers have surged in countries such as China, India, Brazil, Russia and the United States (Webbstock, 2016).

Stakeholders in HE are well-versed in students' backgrounds and experiences upon entering HE, along with their attrition or graduation outcomes (Lane, 2016). Various factors contribute to student dropout, including demographic and psychological factors, students' academic performance, autonomy and meta-cognitive skills and institutional and national determinants, such as financial constraints (Behr et al., 2020). Despite efforts to address the issue, student dropout remains a global challenge (Behr et al., 2020, Franz & Paetsch, 2023). According to estimates, only half of students entering HE graduate and only 30% of those do so within the expected timeframe (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2016). Attainment rates for qualifications by low-income, first-generation and non-traditional students are notably low, with only 1 in 10 achieving qualifications by age 25, compared to 1 in 2 for their counterparts from more privileged backgrounds (Adams et al., 2016, Miller et al., 2011, Ross, 2021).

We lack an understanding of students' institutional experiences – it is often likened to a 'black box' – which underscores the importance of uncovering the reasons why students dropout (Lane, 2016). While

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many studies on attrition focus on '*hard determinants*', such as age, gender and academic performance, little attention has been paid to '*soft determinants*', such as motivation, satisfaction and integration, which significantly influence students' sense of belonging at an institution (Behr et al., 2020). Identifying the root causes of dropout in HE and implementing additional preventive measures could limit its detrimental effects on student retention and graduation outcomes (Franz & Paetsch, 2023, Galve-González et al., 2023).

Tlalajoe-Mokhatla et al. (2023) report that social learning and integration factors include students' struggles with *under-preparedness*, *self-management* and feelings of *alienation* in the institutional setting. Many students lack the *confidence* to navigate academic content in the allotted time. Students struggle to navigate *academic advice* and sometimes have to catch up after being accepted into a programme after the start date, which poses significant challenges to achieving success at the end of the semester or year (Tlalajoe-Mokhatla et al., 2023).

Moreover, students who face eviction from their accommodation just before crucial summative assessments because financial aid is delayed may struggle to prepare adequately or miss the assessment entirely. A news report by Wicks states that nearly 100 000 South African students who were reliant on the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) experienced delays in receiving allowances, thereby highlighting external challenges that affect students (*Eyewitness News*, Wicks, 2023). This delay was for November payouts – the time final summative assessments take place at South African HE institutions. Expecting financially disadvantaged students to cover their own accommodation and food costs presents an obstacle to these students achieving academic success. These challenges manifest long before students face academic repercussions, such as missing assessments or performing poorly because of inadequate preparation.

Institutional induction and orientation lack strategies to address these social challenges. The absence of strategies and procedural structures to accommodate social learning and integration factors amplifies their impact on student transition, integration, attrition, retention and graduation in HE settings. As Lane (2016) points out, while there is increasing literature on improving student retention, few studies have theorised about the effectiveness of specific strategies in this regard.

The problem addressed by this paper is the absence of intentional applications of *soft determinants* as support strategies for enhancing student retention and graduation in HE. The paper focuses on examining individuals' personal contexts.

Background

In South Africa, massification has increased access for previously disadvantaged individuals, many of whom are not adequately prepared to achieve success in university settings (CHE, 2020). Table 1 provides insight into the context of my institution. The data are from a biennial Beginning University Survey of Student Engagement (BUSSE), which is completed by undergraduate students to gain insight into their academic and extracurricular experiences and to promote equitable conditions that facilitate student success.

The variables in Table 1 are *soft determinants* that appear to be prominent in my HE setting; these variables may have a direct impact on student retention, attrition and, ultimately, their journey leading up to graduating.

As an academic advisor who is exposed to the variables listed in Table 1, I employ a humanistic approach to provide academic support and development services with the aim of improving student success (Bermea, 2023; Jama, 2017). Through my interactions with students, it became evident that many of them struggled to meet the demands of their academic environment and faced challenges in integrating socially. For instance, students frequently mentioned that they found it difficult to form friendships with classmates, which led to them feeling isolated and experiencing adjustment issues. This example aligns with Tinto's Tinto (1975) emphasis on the significance of networking and social connections. Additionally, students expressed a desire to be paired with senior peers who could advise them about navigating the faculty, thereby illustrating Bandura's theory (1969), which refers to observational learning, imitating and modelling. When I realised the potential implications of these observations for future research, I decided to explore this topic further.

Table 1. Beginning University Survey of Student Engagement (BUSSE) factors at a South African HE institution.

Variable	2019	2022*
First-generation students	Race: 81% African, 71% Mixed ancestry, 38% White	The first-generation cohort made up 84% of students
Home language	Only 8% of students indicated that English was their home language	No significant variation
Gender	64% female, 36% male	69% female, 30% male (1% chose not to respond)
Age	35% aged 18–19 years, 65% older than 20 years	52% aged 18–19 years, 48% older than 20 years
Accommodation	73% in off-campus accommodation, 27% in on-campus residences	No Significant variation
Financial resources	69% NSFAS funded, 14% funded by other government bursaries, 7% funded by loans, 10% funded by self, parents, guardians, employers, private sponsors, or bursaries**	77% NSFAS funded, 14% funded by other government bursaries, 4% funded by loans, 9% funded by self, parents, guardians, employers, private sponsors, or bursaries
Choice of institution	57% indicated this particular institution was their first choice, 28% second choice, 9% third choice, 2% fourth choice, 4% fifth choice or lower	63% indicated this particular institution was their first choice, 25% second choice, 8% third choice, 2% fourth choice, 2% fifth choice or lower
Programs enrolled for	49% enrolled for their first choice of program, 37% enrolled for their second choice, 14% enrolled for their third choice of program	48% enrolled for their first choice of program, 41% enrolled for their second choice, 11% enrolled for their third choice of program
Social relations at the institution	A third of the students enrolled at the institution arrived not knowing anyone	43% enrolled at the institution not knowing anyone, 16% had at least one close friend at the institution, 15% had two close friends, 9% had three close friends, 17% had four or more close friends

Note. * The survey is usually administered biennially; however, disruptions caused by COVID-19 meant it could not be administered in 2021, and data were collected in 2022 for the first time after 2019.

**As students advance from first year to senior levels, some of them are less reliant on their parents for funding and their reliance on NSFAS increases.

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, it aims to develop a conceptual framework concerning social learning and integration by drawing from two fundamental constructs: social learning theory, as proposed by Bandura (1969), which emphasises the importance of people learning from one another through observation, imitation and modelling, and social integration theory of Tinto (1975), which focuses on social and academic integration, which Severiens and Schmidt (2009) call ‘twin concepts’, in that social integration relies on academic integration and vice versa. Second, this study examines the transition, integration, attrition, retention and graduation experiences of students in HE settings.

Academic integration is displayed by meeting the performance standards of the HE system through results from examination feedback and appraisal of the personal fit to HE (Franz & Paetsch, 2023; Tinto, 1975). Furthermore, social integration describes the necessary conditions for a successful transition to HE, such as building new social networks and friendships and having contact with academic staff. Students are more likely to remain enrolled at an institution if they are connected to the social and academic life of that institution (Tinto, 1975). Tinto (1975) describes two fundamental concepts related to the HE experience: (i) institutional experiences, which involve the education system, and (ii) academic and social integration, which involves the personal context.

Elements of Bandura’s Bandura (1969) social learning and Tinto’s Tinto (1975) social integration theories are, to some extent, aligned. For instance, Bandura refers to the way individuals learn from each other through observation, imitation and modelling. Tinto states that institutional interaction and experiences can influence persistence, which can also be regarded as a personal drive that emerges from either direct or indirect social and academic integration. Both these theories are illustrated in practice in HE settings, and their influences have a direct impact on the transition experiences of students in HE settings, which, in turn, influence their retention and, ultimately, their graduation from the institution.

In this paper, I combine the two theories and refer to them as social learning and integration, which is defined as interaction through institutional experiences that can influence how individuals learn from each other through observation, imitation, modelling and persistence (Tlalajoe-Mokhatla et al., 2023). Although the paper focuses on the two social aspects of social learning (Bandura, 1969) and social integration (Tinto, 1975), academic integration and the link between the two mentioned theories cannot be

overlooked because of the academic nature of the HE setting. Combining the theories, furthermore, emphasises Tinto's critical stance regarding psychologically grounded concepts; he states that social integration plays a crucial role in interacting with satisfaction and institutional commitment, and these concepts indirectly affect a student's decision to dropout. Tinto explains that psychologically grounded concepts concentrate on student attributes and, therefore, dropping out is mainly student failure, which does not present the complete picture (Behr et al., 2020; Tinto, 1975), which further highlights the importance of interactions of students in HE through institutional and personal contexts.

The rationale for merging these two theories stems from the observation that, while much attention has been given to academic integration and transition to HE, deliberate strategies are needed to recognise that students encounter transitional social issues that could affect their retention and graduation (Maher & Macallister, 2013; Mayhew et al., 2016; Morelli et al., 2021; Shmeleva & Froumin, 2020). Although induction activities typically focus on academic preparation during students' first week at the university, literature often relegates or omits the social aspects of transition, attrition, retention and graduation (Hultberg et al., 2008). This neglect of the importance of the social aspects means the influence of institutional experiences on students' social learning and integration, including interactions and observational learning, is not addressed (Tinto, 1975). Tinto's depiction of dropping out as a longitudinal process suggests that multiple social learning and integration events could contribute to a student's decision to abandon their studies. However, there is a limited understanding of early identifiers for social learning and integration factors (Tlalajoe-Mokhatla et al., 2023), and effective measures to counteract negative social influences on student success in HE remain elusive (Wild et al., 2023). Moreover, strategies to identify students at-risk of dropping out as a result of early transitional, integration and attrition issues related to social learning and integration in HE are not well-established. In this paper, the concepts of transitioning and integration refer not only to the move from high school to the first year at university but also to progression in the program enrolled for.

The overall goal of this paper is to raise awareness among stakeholders in HE settings about the importance of deliberate integration of social learning and integration strategies to enhance student transition, integration, retention and graduation experiences. The decision to address these three important, interconnected concepts simultaneously stems from the researchers' recognition that, despite the efforts to address this issue, 'most institutions have not yet been able to translate what we know about student retention into forms of action that have led to substantial gains in student persistence and graduation' (Tinto, 2007, p. 5) – a challenge that persists nearly two decades later. I suggest that, by triangulating these concepts, which have mutual influence, and internationally integrating social learning and integration aspects into HE settings, more effective solutions for this ongoing challenge may be realised.

Conceptual approach and methodology

This paper is a conceptual review that relies solely on literature; new empirical data were not gathered. It focuses on the combined concept of social learning and integration and discusses enhancing student transition, integration, retention and graduation experiences in HE settings. A triadic framework was utilised to connect these elements (Siltaloppi & Vargo, 2017). This study is an extension of a previous research project that received ethics approval from the Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee, ethics No. UFS-HSD2018/1300/2711.

Theoretical framework

Social learning theory

Baldwin (1973) presents three distinct definitions of social learning, each with its own focus, albeit with some overlap. The one of interest to this paper is the definition that encompasses a 'social learning theory' that is rooted in a stimulus-response perspective by emphasising the relationship between stimuli and responses in behaviour, as adapted from Bandura (1969).

Bandura's social learning theory demonstrates the influence of observational learning on complex social behaviour. The evolution of this theory started from studies on *social learning and imitation* in 1941 and was followed by investigations into *frustration and aggression* in 1950. By 1959 and 1963, Bandura and Walters had popularised the term *social learning theory* (Baldwin, 1973). While the theory emphasises learning mechanisms, its conceptualisation of the 'social' aspect is not fully elaborated. Nevertheless, it has made significant contributions to understanding both prosocial and deviant behaviours at a micro level. Bandura also emphasises the importance of reciprocal determinism in the interaction between individuals and their environment (1969).

Social integration theory

Despite facing personal challenges, some students demonstrate resilience (Radhamani & Kalaivani, 2021), while others lack sufficient coping strategies. Consequently, in the absence of adequate structural support systems to identify students at-risk of dropping out, some fall through the cracks of the system. Therefore, there is an urgent need to investigate structural support strategies that can identify students as at-risk before they are flagged solely because of academic integration strategies.

Furthermore, studies that examined the 'twin concept' in HE settings often prioritised academic integration over social integration (Wild et al., 2023). To rebalance this emphasis and underscore the importance of social integration, the researcher coupled it with social learning concepts. While the focus of social learning remains on learning, owing to the context of HE settings, the focus does not dominate as much as academic integration does within HE settings.

Social integration fosters a sense of community among students in HE and facilitates cohesion and the formation of social networks with peers (Tinto, 2017). Moreover, social integration encompasses interactions not only among students but also between students and faculty members and promotes social cohesion (Franz & Paetsch, 2023).

Findings and discussion towards a conceptual framework of social learning and integration

Social learning and integration concept

The combination of these theories stems from students' social expectations in my institutional setting. Social expectations are a concept that was also reported by Cole (2017); these expectations directly influence social learning and integration in HE and students' commitment to institutions and programs. Unlike academic expectations, social expectations are often inaccurate or naive, leading to a mismatch between reality and expectations that increases the likelihood of students leaving their programs and institutions (Galve-González et al., 2023). Generally, support strategies that address this mismatch are still lacking. Despite ongoing investigations into various factors, such as degree satisfaction, self-efficacy, self-regulation strategies and institutional engagement, to understand high attrition rates (Galve-González et al., 2023), the challenge persists. Hence, HE systems must help students by promoting and supporting their social expectations through a longitudinal approach, starting from transition and integration, through attrition and retention, to ultimately ensuring successful program completion and attainment of qualifications.

The social learning and integration approach serves as a fundamental guideline for enhancing graduation rates by members of diverse cohorts in HE settings. Figure 1 depicts a triadic conceptual framework to illustrate the intersection of learning and integration on a social level. This framework establishes social learning and integration as the cornerstone of developing structures and strategies to address social aspects of transition, integration, attrition, retention and graduation in HE, thereby aiming to improve outcomes and qualification attainment.

Figure 1 illustrates how the intersection of social learning and integration settings influences the quality of learning and outcomes. By combining transition and integration, attrition and retention, and graduation in the social setting, students can master personality, social psychology and stimulus-response in social learning contexts and develop a sense of community, social networks and cohesion in social integration contexts. Effective transition, integration, attrition and retention depend on these pillars and ultimately lead to successful graduation. Transition and integration are contingent upon

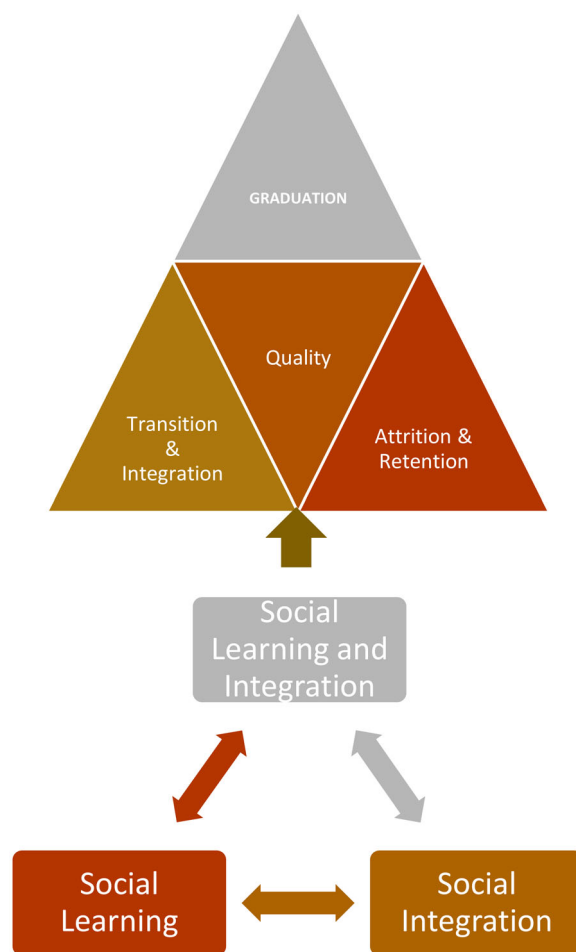


Figure 1. A triadic conceptual framework depicts the quality of social learning and integration in addressing the social aspects affecting student success in HE, namely, transition and integration, attrition and retention, and graduation.

retention; without it, attrition occurs. However, by consistently employing social learning and integration strategies to address attrition and improve integration, the quality of efforts can affect graduation outcomes directly.

Transition and integration in HE

When students enter HE, they must integrate into both the broader HE environment and their specific program, with its unique cultural norms and requirements (Franz & Patsch, 2023). Additionally, students need to assess and adjust their personal contexts to align with the institutional context through a process known as integration. Integration involves adapting to HE settings while maintaining a personal identity to foster a sense of belonging (Tinto, 2017). Over time, the interaction between personal and institutional contexts leads to ongoing integration development (Behr et al., 2020; Timmis et al., 2022). This paper discusses transition alongside integration because each transition phase in HE involves navigating integration elements (Cole, 2017; Hussey & Smith, 2010).

The meaning assigned to the term transition varies widely in the literature, to the extent that achieving a single consensus definition is deemed impossible (Brooman & Darwent, 2014; Colley, 2007; Thompson et al., 2021). Literature on education transition, in general, extends beyond HE transitions (O'Donnell et al., 2016). This paper specifically addresses educational transition in HE by emphasising its continuous occurrence from enrolment in a program until graduation – a desired outcome – or dropout – an unfortunate possibility.

This paper discusses transition in HE through three main conceptualisations: induction, development and becoming (Brooman & Darwent, 2014; Gale & Parker, 2014). Transition as induction involves a linear progression, during which institutions support students in making the academic and social adjustments

necessary for full participation in HE (O'Donnell et al., 2016). A smooth transition can be facilitated through well-implemented induction programs that promote social learning and integration initiatives. These strategies should also encompass discipline-specific conventions to enable students to engage with peers and faculty members. While induction transition typically implies a defined endpoint, the deliberate introduction of social learning and integration strategies should remain open-ended. Transition in HE is an ongoing process, and expecting an institutional endpoint only upon graduation is appropriate.

The second conceptualisation of transition, development, also associates progress with specific time points, such as considering an individual to have completed a developmental process (Gale & Parker, 2014). However, there is limited discussion on practical measures for determining the completion of this developmental process in transition. It is important to recognise that developmental transition entails a complex transformation of multiple smaller changes in individuals' values, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, understanding and skills, leading to changes in self-concept and learning (Gale & Parker, 2014; O'Donnell et al., 2016). These changes underscore the significance of personal contexts during students' transition into HE. The aim is to develop strategies and formal structures that incorporate social learning and integration aspects of students' personal contexts throughout their developmental transition in the program until graduation. This approach seeks to move beyond solely understanding individual-level activities and, instead, integrates both individual and institutional levels by simultaneously considering social learning and integration contexts.

The third conceptualisation of transition, becoming, holds particular importance for this paper, as well as its emphasis on transition. O'Donnell et al. (2016) argue that transition is not a finite process with a clear start and end, as seen in the previous two conceptualisations. Transition, whether through induction or development, should be viewed as ongoing and occurring with each shift in life events, such as transitioning from high school to HE, between academic semesters, or between undergraduate and post-graduate studies. This perpetual state of transition underscores the significance of social learning and integration strategies, thereby highlighting that transition has no definitive endpoint, neither institutionally nor in broader personal contexts. Student identities in HE may encompass various roles beyond academics, such as parenthood, familial roles, or employment, which emphasises the continuous nature of the transition further.

Retention and attrition in HE

Massification, resulting from the demand for skilled individuals, has sparked significant interest in the topic of student success and dropout rates in HE, both politically and practically (Behr et al., 2020; Cole, 2017). The consequences of student dropout encompass individual, institutional, and societal costs (Behr et al., 2020); nevertheless, it is projected that there will be a surplus of unqualified individuals and a growing shortage of HE graduates in the coming years (Behr et al., 2020).

Persistent factors that contribute to dropout include a lack of social support from faculty, staff and mentors and inadequate social networks (Chambers et al., 2010; Franz & Paetsch, 2023; Kehm et al., 2019; Powazny & Kauffeld, 2020; Wolf et al., 2021). Despite ongoing efforts by HE institutions to motivate and support student success, many initiatives primarily focus on academic integration, such as informational activities, study advice and mentoring programs (Behr et al., 2020). Dropout rates persist as a result of a combination of academic integration and social learning and integration factors, including motivation, attitude, satisfaction and the learning environment (Behr et al., 2020). Dropping out of HE is not a straightforward or immediate decision but rather a complex and gradual process that is influenced by multiple challenges and factors (Behr et al., 2020).

The term *dropout* – typically understood as leaving a HE institution without having qualified – can have various meanings because of its diverse nature. Often, terms such as *dropout*, *failure*, *academic exclusion*, *non-completion*, *withdrawal* or *discontinuation from the program* are used interchangeably (Behr et al., 2020; Kehm et al., 2019). However, upon closer examination, the first three terms imply an involuntary departure, while the three latter emphasise a more voluntary aspect, typically from the student's viewpoint. For instance, a student's decision to leave after academic failure may be seen as non-voluntary, whereas departures because of financial or personal challenges are viewed as voluntary (Behr et al., 2020; Hadjar et al., 2023; Kehm et al., 2019). In contrast, the term *attrition* is used from an institutional perspective (Behr et al., 2020).

Before discussing the context in which dropout occurs, we should acknowledge the terminology used as positive counterparts to dropout. Students use terms such as *persistence*, *completion* and *qualification obtained*, while institutions use terms such as *retention* or *graduation* (Behr et al., 2020). The latter terms, *retention* and *graduation*, are explored further to elucidate the differences in meaning according to the perspective being presented.

Both institutional and personal contexts shape students' experiences in HE. Cole (2017) examined nine articles to explore the persistent issue of attrition. The strategies he discusses, including relatedness, competence and autonomy derived from self-determination theory, address intrinsic motivational factors. However, the effect of the implementation of these three social elements as tangible structural strategies remains undetermined.

Additionally, Cole (2017) cites Brahm et al., who observed a decline in both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in students during the induction phase of transition at the start of the academic year. However, by the end of the year, students were reported to have increased levels of competence and enjoyment, which emphasises elements of social learning and integration in particular (Cole, 2017). This finding underscores the necessity of an ongoing monitoring process during the induction transition period despite the period having a temporal endpoint. Such an approach enables HE staff to monitor and identify potential changes resulting from intentional structural strategies and to facilitate the determination of social learning and integration factors that either promote or hinder retention.

Let us reflect on Tinto's Tinto (1975) insights from nearly five decades ago. He proposed that involuntary attrition stems from inadequate academic integration, such as poor grades and failure to meet minimum standards, while voluntary attrition arises from social isolation in HE environments. Numerous empirical studies have revealed attrition taking place in various contexts, which indicates that there is no one-size-fits-all explanation for attrition. Although much literature focused on identifying academically integrated factors that contribute to attrition, little empirical research has addressed social learning and integration factors (Behr et al., 2020; Kehm et al., 2019).

In their empirical review paper, Kehm et al. (2019) analysed 44 empirical studies and identified nine factors that influenced attrition, including study conditions, academic integration in HE, information and admission requirements and prior academic achievement, which reflect students' academic experiences. The remaining factors were linked to social aspects that contributed to student success, including social integration in HE, personal effort, motivation for studying, personal characteristics and sociodemographic background, as well as external conditions beyond the control of the HE setting. Notably, four of the factors related to academic challenges, while five pointed to social challenges, which underscores the need for support strategies that address these social learning and integration challenges proactively.

Graduating

Investment in HE is driven by the multitude of benefits and opportunities offered by the attainment of a qualification. Individually, these benefits include higher employment rates, access to better-paying jobs with additional perks, improved working conditions, and enhanced personal and professional mobility. At an institutional, national, or global level, the benefits extend to increased tax revenue, enhanced productivity, greater consumption, a more flexible workforce and less reliance on government financial aid. Socially, HE improves health outcomes and quality of life of future generations, ensures more informed consumer choices, increased leisure opportunities, elevated social status, heightened civic engagement, reduced crime rates, enhanced community service, improved social cohesion, and more advanced technological proficiency (Andrade et al., 2022). Therefore, students who enter HE must acquire the skills needed to flourish and become successful graduates.

As mentioned, massification has broadened access for a diverse student population, which has prompted ongoing efforts by institutions to support students in graduating and achieving success beyond graduation (Andrade et al., 2022). However, literature consistently identifies factors that impede students from persisting in their enrolment until degree completion. For instance, studies tracking part-time, full-time and transfer students in the United States reveal that 55% of all students graduate within six years, with higher rates for Asian and White students (63.2% and 62%, respectively) than for Hispanic and Black students (45.8% and 38%, respectively). Furthermore, male students are more likely to dropout than female students (Andrade et al., 2022; Shapiro et al., 2017). Notably, graduation rates vary widely,

with lower rates observed in open admission institutions for part-time enrolment, historically underrepresented student groups and community colleges (Andrade et al., 2022).

Moreover, because of the massification, there has been a surge in enrolment by low-income, first-generation and non-traditional students, in particular, some of whom lack the essential skills for successful transition and integration into HE institutions, thus making retention and graduation unlikely (Adams et al., 2016; CHE, 2013; Webbstock, 2016). In South Africa, high dropout and low graduation rates make it difficult for the country to meet various developmental and social cohesion needs at individual, institutional, national and global levels (McKenna, 2016). Despite substantial financial support efforts, such as those provided by NSFAS, which serves 1.1 million students and has significantly increased funding from R33 million in 1991 to R47.6 billion in 2023, the investment has not yielded the desired outcomes for all students (South African Government, 2023). Despite strategies such as flexible curricula and innovative pedagogies being implemented, attrition rates continue to increase (McKenna, 2016). Furthermore, institutional misalignment with students' personal contexts and experiences, including microaggressions, hinders graduation further (Andrade et al., 2022). Literature underscores the significance of social support for mitigating adverse experiences because both social and academic experiences profoundly affect students' transition, integration, attrition and retention and influence their persistence to remain at university until graduation (Pérez-Martín & Villardón-Gallego, 2023).

Empirical evidence consistently emphasises academic factors, such as academic integration and perceived academic competence, as crucial predictors of student persistence in HE. Students' attitudes toward their academic abilities – largely influenced by past academic performance – significantly affect their persistence (Andrade et al., 2022; Stewart et al., 2015). Despite efforts by HE institutions to collect and analyse data to ensure their accountability for student learning, these strategies primarily focus on academic achievement meeting expected standards (Andrade et al., 2022); comparable efforts regarding structural strategies for continuous data collection and analysis related to social learning and integration aspects are lacking.

Recommendations

Transitioning and integration into HE, navigating attrition and retention challenges and, ultimately, graduating involve complex stages shaped by academic, social, personal and institutional factors. Research confirms the significance of social learning and integration across these stages. However, academic integration often dominates and sidelines the crucial role of social learning and integration. Therefore, to enhance student success, there is a need to deliberately prioritise the development of students' personal contexts in the institutional framework of HE. Based on the findings of this study, which is based on a triadic conceptual framework, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Academic and social integration are widely acknowledged concepts. However, prioritising academic integration often sidelines social integration despite the diverse student body in HE. This tendency highlights the need, which is the result of massification, to address social learning and integration aspects intentionally.
2. Higher education faculty and staff should focus on developing structural strategies for social learning and integration alongside a stronger emphasis on personal context. This includes early identification of students lacking in relatedness, competence and autonomy in HE settings. These strategies should be as measurable and tangible as academic interventions and designed to identify at-risk students.
3. To effectively implement strategies that address social learning and integration, HE staff must evaluate and enhance their approaches. Staff must understand both the institutional and personal contexts that contribute to attrition if they are to support students effectively.

Limitations

Graduation is linked to various personal and or behavioural traits, such as motivation, attitudes and persistence. Delving deeper into the literature on the role of personal context in HE could improve our understanding of ways we could address hurdles to student success, including transition, integration, attrition, retention and graduation. Furthermore, incorporating other theories, such as Astin's model of

persistence, could provide further contextual insight into ways to apply social learning and integration concepts to develop structural strategies.

Conclusions

Ironically, institutional experiences in HE are a *black box* despite decades of global research aimed at facilitating students' transition, integration, retention and graduation. The complex interplay of these factors, including social learning and integration, contributes to attrition, which is a major issue in HE globally. The impact of social learning and integration on attrition, retention and graduation varies according to factors such as year of study, institution, sociocultural influences and students' perceptions of support programs. Notably, social learning and integration are closely linked to the personal context of HE rather than the institutional context. This suggests the need for customised social learning and integration programs at each institution to support transition, integration, retention and graduation. It is essential to consider students' social expectations and identity formation in HE settings. Because much research has focused on academic integration, we recommend that social learning and integration support strategies that are aligned with students' personal contexts in HE enrolment are investigated.

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About the author

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