The #FeesMustFall protests in South Africa: Exploring first-year students' experiences at a peri-urban university delivery site

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Graduation: May 2020
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DECLARATION

I, Megan Greeff, hereby declare that this dissertation titled “The #FeesMustFall protests in South Africa: Exploring first-year students’ experiences at a peri-urban university delivery site” is my own work. The views and opinions expressed in this research study are my own, as well as relevant literature references as shown in the reference list. Furthermore, I declare that the contents of this research study will not be submitted for any other qualification at any other tertiary institution.

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Megan Greeff

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SUMMARY

Title: The #FeesMustFall protests in South Africa: Exploring first-year students’ experiences at a peri-urban university delivery site

Key words: #FMF protests; peri-urban university students; rural-origin students; student experiences; first-year students, Higher Educational Institutions, universities.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa are changing to align their practices to those of corporate companies (Bourner & Flowers, 1997; Morris, 2003). Lately, HEIs have been taking on an emphasis on client service and -experience (Steck, 2003). Consequently, a considerable number of expectations have been raised around HEIs to adequately prepare graduates for the workplace (Ball, 1990; Bridgstock, 2009). Higher Education South Africa (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2016) identified the following pressing challenges experienced by HEIs: large student drop-out rates, low completion rates, inferior levels of school leaver readiness and poor borderline growth as well as poor higher education involvement rates. Additional to the existing challenges, HEIs had to manage the unexpected disruptions that were concomitant with the #FMF protest actions of 2016. Careful examination of the existing body of research on student experiences shows a lacuna in research found on the individual first-year student experience. The present study writes into this lacuna, exploring individual student experiences at a peri-urban HEI delivery site in the light of the #FMF movement. It provides HEIs in South Africa with practical wisdom and input towards improved coping with and managing of future disruptions, such as protest actions, to reduce student turnover and improve the overall student experience and -success.

The objective of the present study was to explore how South African first-year students enrolled at a peri-urban HEI delivery site experienced the #FMF protests actions. The study utilised a qualitative research approach (Creswell, 2014) and an interpretive descriptive design as the research strategy (Sandelowski, 2000) to conceptualise the individual student experiences. The research sample (N = 15) was purposefully selected and included registered students at the HEI delivery site who were in their first year in 2016, though some second year students were also included. Data was collected by employing, firstly, the Mmogo method® (n = 11) and, secondly, individual follow-up interviews with two participants involved in the Mmogo method® session and two additional voluntary participants (n = 4).
The findings of the present study can be divided among four main themes: (1) clashes between students and police and/ or campus security, (2) impact of the protest actions on students’ lives, (3) psychological experiences, and (4) attitudes towards and needs related to the HEI education system. The significant contribution of the findings is to provide practical wisdom (Tracy, 2010) to HEIs regarding the perceptions of first-year students during times of disruptions such as the #FMF protest actions.

At its conclusion, the project provides recommendations for future research.
OPSOMMING

Titel: Die #FeesMustFall proteste in Suid Afrika: ‘n verkenning van eerstejaarstudente se ervarings by ‘n peri-stedelijke universiteitsafleveringspunt

Key words: #FMF-proteste; peri-stedelijke universiteitsstudente; studente uit landelike gebiede; studente se ervarings; eerstejaarstudente; Hoëroonderriginstellings (HOIs); universiteite.

In Suid-Afrika is Hoëroonderriginstellings (HOIs) besig om hulle praktyke aan te pas sodat dit ooreenstem met dié van korporatiewe maatskappye (Bourner & Flowers, 1997; Morris, 2003). Onlangs het HOIs kliëntediens en -ervaring toenemend benadruk (Steck, 2003). As gevolg hiervan het ‘n aansienlike aantal verwagtings ontstaan van HOIs om gegradueerdes voldoende voor te berei vir die werksomgewing (Ball, 1990; Bridgstock, 2009). Hoëroonderrig Suid-Afrika (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2016) het die volgende dringende uitdaginge wat deur HOIs ervaar word, geïdentifiseer: groot uitvalkoerse onder studente, lae voltooiingskoerse, minderwaardige vlakke van skoolverlatersgereedheid en swak grenslyngroei asook swak hoër onderwys betrokkenheidskoerse. Bykomstig tot dié uitdaginge moes HOIs boonop onverwagse onderbrekings bestuur wat met die #FMF protestbeweging van 2016 gepaard gegaan het. Noukeurige bestudering van die bestaande navorsing rondom studente se ervarings toon egter ‘n leemte in die navorsing rakende die individuele eerste jaar student se ervaringe. Die huidige studie fokus op hierdie leemte deur individuele studente se ervarings by ‘n peri-stedelijke HOI afleveringspunt te verken in die lig van die #FMF-beweging. Dit voorsien praktiese wysheid aan Suid-Afrikaanse HOIs en insette met die oog op verbeterde hantering en bestuur van toekomstige onderbrekings soos proteksies, om sodoende studente-onkering te verminder en oorhoofse studente-ervarings en sukses te verbeter.

Die doelwit van hierdie studie was om te verken hoe Suid-Afrikaanse eerstejaarstudente wat by ‘n peri-stedelijke HOI afleveringspunt ingeskryf is, die #FMF-protesaksies beleef het. Die studie het ‘n kwalitatiewe benadering gevolg (sien Creswell, 2014) asook ‘n interpretatiewe beskrywende ontwerp as navorsingsbenadering (sien Sandelowski, 2000) met die oog op die konseptualisering van individuele studente se ervarings. Die navorsingsmonster (N = 15) is doelmatig gekies en die studente ingesluit wat in 2016 ingeskryf was vir hulle eerste jaar van studie by die afleveringspunt, hoewel ‘n aantal tweedejaars ook ingesluit is. Data is versamel
deur eerstens gebruik te maak van die Mmogo method\textsuperscript{®} \((n = 11)\) en tweedens individuele opvolgonderhoude te voer met twee deelnemers wat betrokke was by die Mmogo method\textsuperscript{®}-sessie asook twee vrywillige deelnemers \((n = 4)\).

Die studie se bevindings kan onder vier hoof temas verdeel word: (1) botsings tussen studente en polisie en/of kampus-sekuriteit, (2) impak van die protesaksies op studente se lewens, (3) psigologiese ervarings en (4) gesindhede rondom behoeftes wat verband hou met die HOI-stelsel. Die beduidende bydrae wat hierdie bevindinge maak, is om praktiese wysheid (sien Tracy, 2010) aan HOIs te bied oor die persepsies van eerstejaarstudente tydens onderbrekings soos die #FMF-protesaksies.

Ten slotte bied die projek aanbevelings vir toekomstige navorsing.
ACRONYMS

- #FeesMustFall – #FMF
- Higher Educational Institution – HEI
- South African Department of Health - DoH
Protests are acts that communicate grievances through disruption of existing societal arrangements, and bring problems in society to public attention. Because protests are inherently disruptive, they can wake society up from its complacent slumber, make it realize that there are problems that need to be addressed urgently and hasten social change.

- Jane Duncan (2016)
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

So how are we going to be a light for our community while the university is switching off our lights?

- Study participant
1.1 INTRODUCTION

The focus of this mini-dissertation is to shed light on first-year students’ unique experiences at a peri-urban university delivery site in South Africa where the #FeesMustFall protests of 2016 occurred.

Chapter 1 outlines the problem statement, followed by a discussion of the research objectives stating general- and specific objectives. Subsequently, the research method is discussed and chapters divided accordingly.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa are rapidly changing to perform actions similar to those performed by corporate organisations (Bourner & Flowers, 1997; Morris, 2003). To this end, HEIs train future commercial professionals, dynamically pursue business contributions and join corporations as research associates in addition to increasingly imitating commercial organisational structures and strategies (Bourner & Flowers, 1997; Morris, 2003). The significant stakeholders of universities are industry, government and civil society (CHE, 2016). Steck (2003) states that the commercial sector acts as a suitable platform for selling HEIs’ products and well-trained graduates. Therefore, HEIs are connected to the workforce by providing industry with new educated employees (Steck, 2003). Industry is also linked with universities by providing funding to universities for education and research-related endeavours. As a result, one of the main functions of HEIs is to prepare graduates for the workplace and therefore a plethora of expectations arise for institutions to execute this task (Ball, 1990; Bridgstock, 2009). In recent years, HEIs followed a customer service orientation, a practice drawn from the corporate sector (Steck, 2003).

Higher Education South Africa (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2016), identified the foremost challenges experienced by HEIs within South Africa. These challenges included large student drop-out rates, low completion rates and poor borderline growth as well as higher education involvement rates (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2016). Furthermore, a predominant concern for HEIs was the inferior levels of school leaver readiness among HE candidates (Higher Education South Africa, 2009). HEIs are required to provide transitioning support as well as school level education to new first-years, easing them into the Higher Education academic standard. However, the large gap
between high school and HE may have an unfavourable long-term outcome for South African HEIs. The current university drop-out data provided by Statistics South Africa (2017) for three year degrees, with first year registration in 2011, shows that only 29% of students enrolled for an undergraduate degree completed their degree within the required time span; whereas an additional 29% of students took between four to six years to graduate in 2016 (the data excludes students from UNISA). One of the reasons for the increased drop-out rates among disadvantaged students, as outlined by Higher Education South Africa (USAf, 2016), is the shortage of sufficient tuition funding in the form of bursaries and scholarships provided by institutions and the government.

In addition to these challenges that HEIs face they had to cope with a recent unforeseen dilemma – the protest actions and most notably the #FMF protests of 2016. The protestors demanded quality free HEI, placing universities in South Africa under enormous financial pressures, seeing that Government subsidies to universities would have had to increase significantly (Teferra, 2016). This would have placed the contemporary government budget under enormous strain, since it would have to lend more revenue by increasing taxes, a demanding task in the South African economy (Teferra, 2016). Mutekwe (2017) found that free education for all South Africans would be “fiscally irresponsible and socially regressive”, since funding higher income students would waste limited tax monies that could have been utilised to aid lower income students. On top of the financial challenges that HEIs were faced with, these (often violent) protest actions created additional challenges for HEIs in South Africa (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2011), particularly because universities were unable to provide free-of-charge education to all students. Weidemann (2016) postulates that student protests had a negative impact on the quality education students received, influencing overall student experience. Moreover, the occurrence of strikes and protests negatively impacted the students involved mainly because they were anxious about their safety on campus during the protests (Naicker, 2016). Similar to the case of student drop-out, students exposed to the protests experienced an unfavourable first-year at university, making them prone to leave the HEI (Weidemann, 2016).

Protest action therefore created unfavourable circumstances for HEIs and the individual student. In the wake of student protests, the academic year of 2016 was challenging to most students studying at various HEIs in South Africa. Mouton et al. (2013) point out various present-day challenges in the South African Higher Education System, including difficulties
that confront first-year students when they register at university, the key part universities play in supplying high quality tertiary education and funding hurdles. The authors highlight that acceptance into higher education should be based on the capabilities of students and demand in the job market, not least since questions are asked about the standards of bachelor’s degrees in South Africa (Mouton et al., 2013). In light of all these challenges universities and students face and their cumulative impact, it is clearly essential to explore the experiences of first-year students at South African universities.

When considering the location of the specific delivery site where this study was conducted, it was significant to note that the specific delivery site should be located within a peri-urban area. However, defining the term “peri-urban” is challenging: it has been allocated to a grey location that can’t be classified as completely rural or completely urban (OECD, 1979). Clough (1996) defines it as an area that lies on the urban outskirts which is different from urban locations with a negative meaning attached to the term. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 1979, p. 9) provides a broad-based operational definition for peri-urban:

\[
\text{The impacts of economic growth and physical expansion of the urban area are not confined within urban boundaries; they reach into much wider areas surrounding urban centres, creating so-called “urban areas”, “urban fringe areas”, or “peri-urban areas”. While the peri-urban area retains the characteristics of the rural area, these are subject to major modifications: changes take place with respect to physical configuration, economic activities, social relationships and so forth.}
\]

Even though the specific delivery site examined in the present study could not be classified as a rural-based delivery site, many of the students studying at this delivery site originated from rural areas. Consider that in such a peri-urban site with its large rural catchment area, additional challenges might be experienced. Poverty occurs in rural- and urban settings, but due to improved resources, such as support, infrastructure (water, sanitation) and enhanced opportunities for help from social services more support exists in urban areas (Human Sciences Research Council, 2005). This could add to additional challenges for peri-urban university campuses, due to the lack of resources available to provide additional support. Further, first-year students from a rural background might find it difficult to adapt to the peri-
urban university context due to the lack of the vital academic foundation required for higher education at underprivileged schools (Cross & Carpentier, 2009).

Since the peri-urban delivery site acts as a catchment area for rural students, it is important to define rurality as a concept. The term “rural” is also difficult to define (Brits, 2012), although a variety of literature exists on the concept. For the purpose of this study, the concept will be defined as geographically isolated communities that entertain a unique manner of living (Woods, 2005). In contrast to urban areas, rural areas suffer from scarce resources (Masinire, Maringe & Nkambule, 2014) as well as poor infrastructure and weak social services that would have supported poverty (Human Sciences Research Council, 2005). It can be said that fewer opportunities exist for rural students to adjust successfully to university. One of the various challenges that students from a rural background face is that they may be academically underprepared for further higher education, which can make the adjustment process to university even more demanding (Cross & Carpentier, 2009). This may be due to the poor standard of education provided at disadvantaged schools, making it even more challenging for students from a rural background to successfully adapt to university (Cross & Carpentier, 2009).

In the light of the challenges faced by universities located in peri-urban or rural areas, this study was conducted within the specific context of the #FMF student protests of 2016. The #FMF protests provided a unique opportunity towards understanding student experiences at a peri-rural university delivery site. The accumulation of these recent student protests officially started on 1 February 2009 and endured until the end of 2016. The protests that occurred in HEIs within South Africa from 2009 until 2016 each emanated from a singular and diverse but parallel motive (South African History Online, 2016b). That is, students protested over high tuition fees, dissatisfaction over housing or accommodation arrangements, language policies and university leadership. The first motivation for the protests embodied a reaction to the possibility of fee increases. The opening student protest occurred on 1 February 2009 at the University of Limpopo, where students were protesting over lack of monetary aid. Similar protests occurred at the University of Witwatersrand and the University of Pretoria (UP) on 1 September 2010. Comparable student riots, where students protested over reimbursed tuition, lower schooling fees and the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NFAS) bursary flaws, occurred at several HEIs, including the Mangosuthu University of Technology, the University of Johannesburg (UJ), the Stellenbosch University
(SU), the Tshwane University of Technology (henceforth TUT) and the Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) College in Richards Bay, KwaZulu Natal. At the Universities of Witwatersrand (Wits) and UP, students protested on 14 October 2014, claiming access to free tertiary education. In response to this, the #FMF movement of 2016 began on February 25 at the North-West University, where an administrative building was torched in protest over fee increases (Lekhetho, 2016). The activities reached a pinnacle on 21 October 2016 when more than 2 000 students marched to the Union Buildings in Pretoria in protest against expected fee increases for the following academic year of 2017 (Etheridge, 2016).

The second motive for student riots emanated from dissatisfaction with on-campus accommodation in 2010 (South African History Online, 2016b). At the Mangosuthu University of Technology and TUT in Pretoria students protested for better housing. Students at the SU carried out a non-violent protest, requesting reasonably priced residency fees. A further motivation for protests involved grievances over poor registration processes or the required registration fees. These protests occurred at TUT as well as at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). Students also protested at SU and UP over the universities’ language policies (South African History Online, 2016b).

The protests underscored that HEIs in South Africa experienced serious challenges (Hauser, 2016), and most of these challenges have prevailed into the present. The student protests had an immense impact on students, universities and, indeed, South Africa at large (Tabane, 2016). The protests impacted academic performance around examinations. Students missed important classes due to the disruptions of the protests which resulted in the closing of universities for various time periods (Jogee, Callaghan & Callaghan, 2018). This influenced students’ examination results directly (Moselane, 2017). Most universities had to find alternative dates for examinations to accommodate protest interruptions, usually entailing that subjects were examined at shorter date intervals, meaning that students had less time to prepare for examinations (MIE, 2016). The registration process was delayed at the beginning of the 2016 academic year. Some students at TUT complained that the protests disrupted their meal-times and that they went hungry. Besides the academic implications, students’ safety was affected when the police fired rubber bullets injuring protesters (University World News, 2017). The safety of university staff was at risk when university staff were intimidated and forced to leave their university offices (Chiloane 2016).
During the protests, students experienced conflicts of interest. While some supported the #FMF movements others were anxious about their safety and the time lost for academic work (South African History Online, 2016b). Some matriculants were discouraged to enrol at university by the violent protests and anticipated negative impacts on their future academic achievement (Naicker, 2016). The #FMF protest was disruptive to students, especially those students at Wits. These students had to write postponed examinations in January the following year and no lodging arrangements were made for students to accommodate them in the residences. Students were sleeping over in the libraries, lecture halls and on the floor of the Solomon House while writing examinations (South African History Online, 2016a).

On 23 October 2013, President Jacob Zuma announced a 0% fee increase for tertiary education (South African History Online, 2016a). This placed an additional burden on universities, which had to obtain additional funding and third-stream revenue. Throughout the #FMF student protests, millions of rands were in fact lost, nationwide, due to vernalisation and damage to public HEI property carried out by protestors. Universities were left with a deficit of R 3 billion (Ngoepe, 2016). HEIs struggled to meet their financial goals (News24, 2016). In a study by Dominguez-Whitehead (2011), socio-economic conditions were linked with student behaviour: for example, in cases where government leveraged access to HEIs for previously disadvantaged students without the necessary financial support. Students in turn would resort to protest actions, impacting HEIs negatively. Given the promises by government around the conversion of the HEI sector, promising changes for all previously disadvantaged students, protest action occurred to ensure that the promise would be kept (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2011), placing a large responsibility and strain on HEIs. They were therefore forced to recognise the socio-economic circumstances that potential students faced as embedded within the contexts where many South Africans lived every day. If HEIs did not address the issues, unfavourable protest actions might have continued when previously disadvantaged students enrolled (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2011), thus presenting a huge management problem for universities.

As mentioned, the country at large was negatively impacted. Due to the zero-fee increase statement noted above, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) was unable to maintain sufficient financing of universities to meet basic operating costs, while some universities cancelled the payment of registration monies, which worsened the financial implications even further (Butler-Adam, 2016). Butler-Adam (2016) notes that the financial
crisis required the Minister of Finance to terminate research and post-graduate funds to Higher Educational Institutions for 2016, entailing that fewer funds were available for technical education and training. Adam Habib, Vice Chancellor of Wits warned in an announcement that if the government continued to force open access and free higher education to all students in South Africa, it might have resulted in the loss of quality of Higher Education in the country as universities would have had access to less funds to maintain quality educational services to students (Butler-Adam, 2016).

Faith Ngwenya, chief executive of the SA Institute of Professional Accountants (SAIPA) stated that the no-fee increase was a short-term victory for students, but looking at the long-term effect, would lead to higher inflation and an even more unsteady rand (Weidemann, 2016). Due to these unstable economic conditions, HEIs were forced to make budget cuts, resulting in an unfavourable impact on the quality of education provided, as Habib indeed predicted. The DHET published material demonstrating that the vandalism and destruction of university properties caused by the #FMF student protests incurred costs to the amount of R 300 million for repairs (Weidemann, 2016). He states further that almost 10 000 students could have received cost-free Higher Education with a view to that loss of R 300 million.

Butler-Adam (2016) furthermore states that students should bear in mind that quality higher education should equip graduates to act as sufficient participants in the international economy and that such education comes at a cost. Accordingly, free tertiary education in South Africa may lead to the downfall of South African HEIs. Butler-Adam (2016) challenges the government by stating that, if the Department of Higher Education would not reconsider fee increases, Higher Education in South Africa could decline to a point where lack of quality research conducted as well as graduate students produced would not compare well with international standards, while this would have wide and recurring economic repercussions.

The #FMF protests could also have led to potential skill losses for South Africa with highly skilled lecturers and researchers leaving HEIs due to poor salaries (Butler, 2016). A study conducted at SU found that the protest experience of violence had a large emotional impact on the lecturers (Costandius, et al., 2018). The conditions of the #FMF protests might also have caused lecturers to move elsewhere. Pauw and colleagues (2006) mentions that the surplus of graduates and the scarcity of quality graduates adds to graduate unemployment. Current statistics show that the graduate unemployment rate increased from 19.5% in quarter
4, 2018 to 31.0% in quarter 1, 2019 (Statistics South Africa, 2019). This underscores the case against free education for all. According to Butler-Adam (2016), HEIs contribute to the economic success and profitability of a country while the #FMF protests negatively affected South African citizens. As a result, the #FM protests contributed to a currently unstable economic system, twenty years after democracy (CHE, 2016). In addition, the current HEI graduation rate of 15%, places South African HEI performance among the lowest in the world (Letseka & Maile, 2008).

Apart from the negative effects on that HEIs as corporate entities caused with a view to its responsibility to its stakeholders, the economy and the country at large, there have also been negative ramifications for students in addition to other difficulties, particularly around violent aspects of the protests. From a client centric point of view, it is of the utmost importance to ensure the loyalty of students, for disloyal students may leave the university, creating a poor company brand image (Thomas, 2011).

Consider that it is well established that first-year students faced various difficulties that make successful adjustment to university difficult, including the establishment new relations, adjusting existing relationships with family as well as mastering improved study methods suitable to the university environment (Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan & Majeski, 2004). Furthermore, they are required to learn how to function as autonomous adults; inability to adapt to the new required lifestyle is the most common reason for first-year student drop-out (Blanc, DeBuhr & Martin, 1983; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). These factors put the protests in perspective: these actions put an extra burden on an already-fragile learning situation.

Moreover, various studies have examined the stressful impact of transition to the first year of university-life (Brooks & DuBois, 1995; Cantor, Norem, Niedenthal, Langston & Brower, 1987; Cutrona, 1982). Among others, Tinto (1999) mentions six circumstances that are favourable for student success and lead to a decrease in student drop-out such as commitment, expectations, support, feedback, involvement and learning. However, a lacuna exists around studies that focus on the experience of violent protests on students and how it could impact HEIs. World-wide, since the twenty first century, there have been numerous student protests at HEIs (Brooks, 2016). These protests occurred in countries such as Germany (2008-2013), California (2009), the United Kingdom (2010), Chile (2010-2013)
and Canada (2010-2013). These protests followed similar root causes as those that occurred in South Africa, in particular increasing of tuition fees (Brooks, 2016).

The African continent has also seen its share of student protest actions such as the 1960-1977 strikes that occurred on Nigerian campuses. The psychologist, Dr. Sola Aletan states that the effect of the protests on students at Nigerian campuses was somewhat destructive (ASUU strike, 2011). The strikes caused disruptions in academic programmes and affected students psychologically and socially. In their turn, these disruptions caused a decrease in the level of quality education provided to students. Edinyang and Ubi (2013) note that disruptions of the academic schedule cause poor student-lecturer relationships and lower the quality of education. Ohiwerei and Onimawo (2016) aver that nationwide strikes on Nigerian campuses negatively impacted students’ academic performance. Adewuya, Aloba, Mapayi and Oginni (2006) examined the experience of 1026 Nigerian students and found that depression among them was a concern. The major reason for the depression amongst these students were poor sociodemographic factors. That is, students are more vulnerable to negative effects cause by disruption due to strikes (Ohiwerei & Onimawo, 2016). The Nigerian students were exposed to strikes and experienced a loss of focus after the protests, causing poor academic performance (Ohiwerei & Onimawo, 2016). In addition, Ohwerei and Onimawo (2016) state that the short term-effect of the Nigerian University protests were of a hostile nature, since classes were terminated for a period of time and no opportunity was granted to reschedule lost classes.

It is therefore not surprising that Isangedighi (2007) and Iheanacho (2002) aver that sufficient education occurs when students feel emotionally and mentally secure. Disturbances caused by strikes made students feel emotionally and mentally insecure (Isangedighi, 2007; Iheanacho, 2002). A study at a large Canadian university confirmed the finding revealing various undesirable psychological reactions among students that occurred due to faculty strikes there (Greenglass, Fiksenbaum, Goldstein & Desiato, 2002). The main emotions experienced by students were anger and anxiety concomitant with the fact that the strikes created a barrier between themselves and their successes as students, that is, between their goal-directed behaviour and significant events like graduation, travel and job opportunities. Self-report questionnaires employed in a study by Greenglass et al. (2002) portrayed that students experienced strikes as significantly stressful. Studies conducted on student protests affirm that the result of student protests is usually negative, including innocent injuries to people,
destruction of university property and interruption of academic schedules, creating emotional and mental strain among students (Davies, Ekwere & Uyanga, 2016; Ohiwerei & Onimawo, 2016).

These studies therefore demonstrate the negative effects of protests on first-year student experiences. However, although there was large media coverage of the impact of the #FMF protests, research focusing on the experiences of students around protests and strikes as well as the effect it could have on HEIs was found to be scant. Nonetheless, Langa, Ndelu, Edwin and Vilakazi (2017) conducted a study at various South African universities and wrote an individual report on each. It emphasised the decolonisation of Higher Education in South Africa. Although not the main focus of the study, it did touch on individual student experience.

Costandius et al. (2018) conducted a study at SU to examine experiences of lecturers and students, but again with the focus on how to decolonise the spaces of teaching and learning. A visible lacuna in this and other studies has been the lack of exploring student experience around protests. The present study consequently writes into the lacuna, focusing on students’ experience of the #FMF protests, in particular students from a rural background, as found at a specific HEI in South Africa. This focus entails attention to the role of the industrial psychologist in exploring and understanding individual student experiences to provide their expertise, based on research findings.

Expert knowledge will be needed if HEIs were to function at an optimal level at times of protest action: in other words, advice from experts in various fields will be required. Among others, these experts may include educational psychologists, research psychologists, industrial psychologists, HEI managers, social workers and attorneys. The industrial psychologist plays a significant role in the optimal functioning of the HEI.

The present study will aid HEIs in South Africa with knowledge around industrial psychological research and knowledge, with a view to retaining students from a rural background and improving student academic success against a background of student unrest, thus to increase HEIs’ competitive advantage and decreasing student turnover intention. Permission to conduct such research was granted to the industrial psychologists by the South African Department of Health (DoH). The expert opinion of this research could aid HEIs to
function effectively during times of protest action with particular reference to retaining students, increasing HEIs’ competitive advantage and minimising turnover costs.

According to the DoH (2011, p. 9), the scope of practice for industrial psychologists entails the following: “the planning, developing, and applying paradigms, theories, models, constructs, and principles of psychology in the workplace in order to understand, modify, and enhance individual, group, and organisational behaviour effectively.” With HEIs performing in line with commercial businesses, it falls upon the mission of industrial psychologists, amongst others, to conduct research within the HEI setting. The DoH (2011) reinforces this recognition when they state that the act of conducting industrial psychology research and the provision of expert opinions and recommendations for the betterment of organisational that is, HEI effectiveness at large as well as its stakeholders including HEI staff and students permissible.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of the present study was guided by the following research questions:

- In relation to extant literature, what were the experiences of first-year students at a peri-urban HEI delivery site during protest actions, or what would they be?
- How did South African first-year students who were enrolled at a peri-urban delivery site at an HEI experience the #FMF protest actions?
- What recommendations can be made around protest contexts for a HEI peri-urban delivery site as a feeding ground for rural students also with a view to future research and practice?

1.4 EXPECTED CONTRIBUTION OF THIS STUDY

1.4.1 Contributions on the level of the individual

First-year students enrolled for studies at a rural-based HEI are more vulnerable and experience more difficulties around adapting to the transition from high school to university (Pillay & Ngcobo, 2010; Koen, Cele & Libhaber, 2006). Student protests or student unrest, specifically if they are of a violent nature, create additional stress and anxiety for first-year students. The expected contribution of this study will be to provide a description of the effect of the recent #FMF movement on first-year students enrolled at a peri-urban delivery site of a HEI.
This will serve to address a lacuna in research on students who originate from a rural- or peri-urban background, as found at a peri-rural university delivery site, by providing information on how first-year students experienced the protests with a view to enabling students to relate to these experiences. For the students who participated in the study, it provided an opportunity to voice their experiences around these protests.

1.4.2 Contributions for the organisation

This study aims to offer HEIs information on first-year students’ experiences of the recent #FMF movement. The HEI disposes of valuable information needed to provide the necessary institutional support to students at times of strikes, protests, unrest or similar situations, thus to decrease the negative impact on their experience. Improving overall student experience will benefit HEIs and help retain first-year students. This knowledge will equip HEIs to provide the required institutional support that would enable first-year students in adjusting to university during stressful times, ensuring their optimal first-year student experience. Given the development in recent years of HEIs acting in ways similar to those of corporate organisations, consider that loyal, retained first-year students would provide them with a large competitive advantage. Research shows that loyalty is evoked from students when they are provided with institutional. The present study can therefore come to the aid of HEIs by establishing knowledge that would support students studying at a peri-urban university delivery site during times of protest action with a view to ensuring student loyalty and attrition, increasing the HEIs competitive advantage.

1.4.3 Contributions in terms of literature and the field of industrial psychology

Only limited extant literature on the effect of the recent #FMF movement on the experience of students studying at a peri-rural HEI in the South African context could be found. The present study will offer a contribution to the field of industrial psychology, for the HEI in SA is perceived as a corporate entity in recent times. As discussed in current literature, the retained student offers considerable competitive advantage to the HEI. The present study builds on extant literature of industrial psychology by examining HEI literature on attrition, providing HEI with knowledge on the retention of first-year students during times of protest action which, again, should advance competitive advantage for HEIs by lessening student turnover.
1.5 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1.5.1 General objective

The main objective of this study is to explore the experiences of first-year students enrolled at a peri-urban university delivery site at an HEI of #FMF protests within the South African context.

1.5.2 Specific objectives

With a view to examining the main objective stated above, the specific objectives of the research are as follows:

- To explore the experiences of students during protest actions as expressed in extant literature.
- To explore how South African first-year students enrolled at a peri-urban university delivery site experienced the #FMF protest actions.
- To make recommendations for future research with a view to an HEI peri-urban delivery site.

1.6 RESEARCH DESIGN

The sections to follow discuss the research approach, strategies, methods for data collection and analysis and the matter of ethics around the present project.

1.6.1 Research approach

The present study used a qualitative approach to underpin an emergent, inductive research process. Creswell (2014) states that qualitative research involves an approach for exploring and understanding the definition that individuals or groups attach to a specific phenomenon or human issue. The phenomenon examined in the present study was first-year students’ experience of their studies during the #FMF protests at a peri-urban delivery site in South Africa. The emphasis was on gaining in-depth understanding based on students’ experiences and not those of the researcher or reader (Creswell, 2007). Tracy (2013) appreciates that one of the strengths of qualitative research is that it can provide rich detail that could be overlooked with more structured methods. Such work has the potential to provide insight about marginalised, stereotyped or unknown populations – “a peek into regularly guarded
worlds, and an opportunity to tell a story that few know about.” (Tracy, 2013, p. 5). As part of the emergent process of qualitative research (Creswell, 2014), the present study focused on exploring the experiences of first-year students, as stated, at a peri-urban, HEI delivery site in South Africa, during the period of the #FMF movement.

The researcher aimed to investigate and understand the opinions, experiences and impact of the student unrest on students from a rural and peri-urban background. The primary emphasis was on the impact of the #FMF movement on the students to discover and comprehend their individual perceptions to voice a tale that few may be aware of (Tracy, 2013).

1.6.2 Research strategy

An interpretive, descriptive, qualitative research design was followed in this study. Sandelowski (2000) explains such an approach as one entailing a search for describing experiences or choosing what will be described, showcasing specific aspects of that experience. Thorne (2016, p. 85) states that interpretive descriptive qualitative research “serves as a framework within which various data collection and analytic strategies can be usefully employed, as long as their use remains consistent with the overall logic and intent of the study”. The researcher was interested in the subjective meanings participants attributed to a specific experience. Though such individual meanings may differ, the researcher sought multiple opinions rather than one-sided views. The research relied on the opinions of the participants as far as possible (Creswell, 2007). As such the researcher was aware that a person’s experience includes “the way in which the experience is interpreted. There is no ‘objective’ experience that stands outside its interpretation” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, the researcher examined the subjective experience of participants that experienced the #FMF protest actions. Though individual participant’s experiences may differ (as mentioned), the aim of the present study was to identify themes and trends based on their expressions of their subjective experiences while taking the potential differences between participants into consideration (Hunt, 2009).

1.7 RESEARCH METHOD

1.7.1 Literature review

Fink (2014, p. 3) defines a literature review as a “systematic, explicit, and reproducible method for identifying, evaluating, and synthesising, the existing body of literature”. The first
step in the review of the literature was to conduct a comprehensive literature search on related topics which, in the present case, included student experiences, -retention, -transition, -protests, the #FMF protest actions, a focus on students from a rural or peri-rural origin and universities situated in a peri-urban setting, hence to outline a sufficient context for the research topic to be studied. Since the #FMF protests occurred recently, the literature search was of great importance to provide and comprehend the extent of existing knowledge and research on the #FMF these protests (Pare, Trudel, Jaana & Kitsiou, 2015). The second step in the process was to organise the literature into specific themes such as background studies on the #FMF movement, research related to #FMF, peri-urban literature and rurality literature, university studies, student mental health studies and studies pertaining to the impact of the #FMF protests on the economy, so as to organise the information in a manner that would enable identifying possible lacunae in extant literature and to gain insight into the literature available on the topic.

Written published peer review sources were utilised for the review of literature. This included academic references obtained from accredited academic journals. Access to these academic journals was obtained through databases including Google Scholar, JSTORE, EBSCOhost, SAE Publications, ScienceDirect and Sabinet Online, accessible through the University online library. Additional sources were accessed including internet sources, books, eBooks, textbooks as well as theses and doctoral studies.

1.7.2 Research setting

The present study forms a sub-study of a larger project entitled StudyWell: Student Well-Being and Success of North-West University Students, under the leadership of Professor Karina Mostert. This sub-study links with the objectives of the larger project which aims at understanding student experiences. The long-term aim of the StudyWell research project is to develop a valid, reliable and culturally sensitive online analytical processing (OLAP) tool to empower a specific HEI (and possibly other South African universities) to proactively monitor student adjustment, well-being and success.

The university that first-year students attended was located in a peri-urban area that served as a catchment area for students from rural communities in the surrounding districts who enrolled there. These students often come from communities facing disadvantages such as poor quality schooling, socio-economic disadvantages and poverty, lack of supportive
contexts and opportunities to promote further education at HEIs including lack of parental education and fewer educational resources (Mahole, Moroke & Mavetera, 2014). These challenges might have complicated adequate preparation for university in terms of the need for enabling resources.

1.7.3 Entrée and establishing the researcher roles

Permission for the study was granted by the NWU Economic and Management Sciences Committee (ethical certificate number: NWU-HS-2014-0165). Access was negotiated with stakeholders, known as gatekeepers, on the specific peri-urban delivery site of the HEI under study. This process started with the provision of a preliminary information letter, explaining the nature of the research and its potential impact and outcomes (Creswell, 2014) accompanied by a proof of ethical clearance of the research project. Information was provided about the purpose of each of the data collection procedures. The researcher commenced with the project only once permission had been obtained to conduct research, while establishing appropriate ways to contact and recruit participants through trusted gatekeepers. Once persons agreed to participate, the researcher negotiated the time and place for each of the data collection procedures. Participants were involved in two processes: a group session as well as individual follow-up interviews. Before each of the data collection sessions the researcher explained the process and what participants could expect, the voluntary nature of their participation as well as their right to withdraw from the study without any negative consequences. The researcher also monitored that participants understood the process in collaboration with other researchers who were part of the larger StudyWell project. On completion of the data collection, the researcher made sure that the participants had access to information about psychological services if they needed to consult with a counsellor or psychologist. They further received the contact details of the project leader for more information as well as contact details of the StudyWell researchers and the researcher of the present study in case they needed any follow-up discussions.

1.7.4 Sampling and participants

The present project employed purposive sampling. Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) mention that in the case of this approach, study participants are chosen by using foreordained criteria applicable to a specific research objective. The selection criteria for the present study required that individuals (1) had to be enrolled as first-or second-year-students at the specific
HEI, (2) disposed of basic proficiency in English since the group discussions were offered in English as a common language, (3) were studying towards an undergraduate degree, and (4) would be willing to reflect on their study experiences at the HEI. Although English proficiency was an inclusion criterion, interpreters were available if participants chose to speak in their mother tongue.

Creswell (2014) further advises purposive sampling to access participants who are in the best position to provide insight on the research phenomenon. The aim of the sampling technique as used in the present project was to obtain the richest possible data in a specific setting (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delport, 2011). The researcher spent time at the peri-urban HEI delivery site (that is, the research field) to understand the HEI settings better and spent time with participants using two different data collection methods at different times (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The data were collected in two ways. The Mmogo method® (Roos, 2016) was followed and subsequently individual, in-depth, unstructured interviews were conducted (Patton, 2015). Roos (2016) recommends that the sample size of the group should be between 6 - 10 participants (2016, p. 3). In the case of the Mmogo-method® group session in the present study, the sample size consisted of 11 participants. In the case of these participants, two agreed to participate in further in-depth, follow-up interviews, and another two participants were recruited to share their insights of #FMF, by employing snow ball sampling, taking the tally of in-depth interviews to four overall (n = 4).

The Mmogo method sample included African first-year students (n = 3) and second year students who reflected on their first year at the HEI (n = 8). The sample consisted of ten males- and one female participant who were present in the Mmogo-method® group session. Two of the male second-year students involved in the Mmogo-method session continued to participate in in-depth interviews while, as mentioned, two additional interview participants were recruited to participate in these interviews (N = 15).

The participants reported that they were proficient in English, although English was not their home language. Participants spoke Setswana, Sepedi, isiXhosa and Tshivenda, and selected English as their second/third language.

Their living conditions could be grouped as follows: those who lived in on-campus HEI residences (n = 2) and those who preferred to live off-campus (n = 13). Many participants
reported that they were the first in their family to attend an HEI, known also as first-generation students \( (n = 9) \). Other participants indicated that their brothers/sisters had attended university or were attending university \( (n = 3) \). Few students indicated that both their parents had attended university \( (n = 2) \). Only one student \( (n = 1) \) indicated that many members of his or her family attended university. Table 1 below presents further biographical information about the sample of participants.
Table 1

*Characteristics of research participants (N = 15)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>African</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home language</td>
<td>Setswana</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sepedi</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>isiXhosa</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tshivenda</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living conditions</td>
<td>I stay off campus and I am part of a town residence</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I stay off campus, but I am not part of a town residence</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I stay on campus and live in a hostel</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family history of university attendance</td>
<td>Both my parents attended university</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I am the first member of my family to attend university</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Many members of my family have attended university</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My brothers and/or sisters attended/attends university</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.7.5 Data collection methods

The data for this study were collected in two phases, as indicated: (1) by means of a Mmogo-method® group session (Roos, 2016), and (2) by means of unstructured, in-depth individual interviews (Patton, 2015).

1.7.5.1 Mmogo method®

Roos (2016) describes the Mmogo-method® as a visual data-gathering method. During the Mmogo-method® process, the researcher takes on an onto-epistemological point of view, accepting that participants have diverse perceptions of the research question due to their differing world views, presented visually in terms of their clay models and verbally during the discussion of their hand made clay models.

Step 1: In the first step of the process, the team of researchers introduced themselves and provided a context and background to the study. The facilitator of the session then left the
room while one of the other researchers thoroughly explained what informed consent entailed and that there would be no negative consequences if they were to withdraw from the session at any stage. The participants were also provided with an opportunity to read through the informed consent form at their own pace and ask any questions. Participants had the opportunity to complete the biographical questionnaire of which materials are presented in Table 1 above.

Step 2: During the Mmogo-method® session, participants were provided with unstructured materials: grass stalks, a round cloth, multi-coloured beads and malleable clay. The participants were then requested to create visual representations in response to an open-ended research question that instructed them as follows: “Make a representation of your experience as a student at this specific HEI”. This occurred in a group setting where all 11 participants were seated around a table. At that stage, the role of the researcher was to observe the building or making of visual representations. Participants were subsequently allowed to complete their models, which took approximately 45 minutes, while the team of researchers observed what they made.

Step 3: Once these visual representations were complete, the researcher took on an empathetic position when participants spoke about their visual representations to explain what they had constructed. The researcher utilised techniques such as probing and questioning to aid them towards sharing their experiences, thus to understand what the participants built. They explained the meaning of their own models but were allowed to comment on each other’s models.

Step 4: Since it was possible that these reflections and explanations could elicit strong emotions from participants, the Mmogo-method® session was concluded with a short debriefing session provided by the counsellor present at the session. The counsellor’s contact details were provided to the participants should they have required further debriefing after the research had been concluded. The team of researchers present during the session were also debriefed by the on-site counsellor after the session.

A registered research and clinical psychologist that had been trained in conducting the Mmogo-method® guided the sessions. The researcher of the present study made observations in sessions and jotted down relevant field notes. The data gathered by means of the Mmogo-method® required recording of the group session using audio recorders, and these
audio samples were later transcribed to form the text-data to be analysed. In addition, photographs were taken of the models participants made, which formed the visual-data the method requires.

1.7.5.2 Individual interviews

The present study conducted face-to-face, follow-up, in-depth individual interviews with two selected, voluntary participants (Creswell, 2014) from the Mmogo-method® session as well as with two additional participants, as mentioned, totalling four in-depth interviews. Two open-ended questions were asked so as to invoke their experiences, perceptions and opinions around the #FMF student protest actions. During the interviews, the researcher utilised techniques such as questioning and probing to come to a clearer comprehension of the participants’ experiences. All individual interviews were recorded on an audio recorder and transcribed afterwards by the researcher for data-analysis purposes, as indicated.

The following question was asked in the unstructured interviews to the two participants that were part of the Mmogo-method® session:

“As you can probably remember in the Mmogo-method® session, we discussed the #FMF protest actions that occurred at the HEI. How did you experience the protest actions?”

The following question was asked in the unstructured interview to the two additional participants that weren’t part of the Mmogo-method® session:

“You indicated that you were first-year or second-year during the #FMF protest actions, how did you experience the protest actions?”

This open-ended question was asked to give participants room to explain their subjective experiences. As mentioned, the researcher made use of techniques such as probing and follow-up questioning to clarify explanations provided (Patton, 2002).

1.7.5.3 Field notes

At the Mmogo-method® session as well as during follow-up, in-depth interviews, the researcher observed participants with a view to the data collection process and made handwritten notes of these observations in a journal (Creswell, 2014). Observations made during
the group sessions and individual interviews were utilised to reach additional insights where possible. The field notes included, for example, notes on who was talking during the Mmogo-method session so as to facilitate the accurate transcribing and analysis of the group session. The field notes were important for facilitating data-analysis of the Mmogo-method® session since it shed light on the context within which participants expressed themselves as well as the order of the group discussions with a view to referring accurately to specific participant’s explanations so that accurate referral to models built, as well as in-depth interviews when participants reflected on the group session, would be ascertained. Field notes moreover captured participants’ emotional and non-verbal communication to pave the way towards interpreting the findings of the analysis in the context of participants’ experiences (Patton, 2002). Finally, the field notes assisted the researcher in transcribing the data at later stages of the process such as when participants spoke together or words were unclear, allowing the team of researchers to interpret the recordings with greater clarity.

1.7.6 Recording of data

Prior to the start of data collection, the researcher planned the manner in which data recording would be conducted (Creswell, 2014). The Mmogo-method® group-session and individual interviews were therefore audio-recorded. The participants were informed prior to the data collection procedures that the session would be recorded and transcribed at a later stage to capture their descriptions verbatim.

These recordings enabled the team of researchers to gather as much data as possible as accurately as possible. Informed consent was obtained prior to the session and interviews including gaining participants’ permission to be audio-recorded for research purposes. The Mmogo-method® group session and unstructured interviews were transcribed for data analysis. The transcripts were anonymised so that participant names and any identifying information were removed from the text, that is, pseudonyms or code names were used for analysing the text.

All data was saved electronically and password protected to ensure that confidentiality was maintained. All persons with access to the data signed confidentiality agreements stipulating that they may not share any information contained in the raw data or its analyses. All data records were stored and protected as per the ethics guidelines of the North-West University.
1.7.7 Data analysis

The analysis of the Mmogo-method® data formed part of the larger StudyWell Research Project and the present study. As such, a secondary analysis was conducted on the Mmogo-method® group session data collected. For the present study, the researcher made use of thematic analysis as the preferred rigorous data analysis method. Tracy (2010) states that rigorous data analysis manifests by means of translucent processes of categorising, selecting and organising data. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as the process of analysing and reporting themes that are visible in the collected data. Furthermore, thematic analysis categorises and portrays data in full detail. Tracy (2013) proposes two phases of data analysis: (1) primary-level or descriptive, open coding and (2) secondary-level coding to understand the code relations or patterns that may explain the research phenomenon. The researcher used a combination of Tracy's first- and second-level coding woven into the six phases of qualitative analysis set forth by Braun and Clarke (2006):

*Phase 1: Acquainting yourself with your data*

At the commencement of data analysis, the researcher may or may not have been involved in the data gathering process, thus he or she might have some preliminary knowledge around the data. Tracy (2013) mentions that the first steps in data analysis include the categorising of data and deciding on the instruments to be used for analysis such as manual- or computer aided instruments. The researcher familiarised herself with the complexity and extensiveness of the data prior to data analysis. This was done by means of the repeated active reading of the data while searching for meanings, patterns and preliminary themes. When the researcher worked with verbal data, that is, interviews, focus groups, television programmes and so forth, the data was transcribed into written format. The process of transcribing acted as a means for the researcher to become acquainted with the data, as suggested in general by Riessman (1993).

*Phase 2: Creating original codes through open coding*

Codes refer to “the most recent basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 63). The first step in the coding process is known as open coding or primary cycle coding (Tracy, 2013). This process starts with the analysis of the data and allocating words or phrases that summarise their significance (Tracy, 2013). In the case of the present project, during coding,
data was classified into respective groups (Tuckett, 2005). The groupings entailed that similar codes were grouped on a descriptive level to develop code categories into a code book, which Tracy (2013) describes as a means to organise codes and facilitate rigour in analysis.

Given that the Mmogo-method® was analysed as part of the larger StudyWell project, the code book contained codes from other data sources that were not necessarily part of the present study. Some of the code groupings were developed as part of the process of exploring student demands and resources. The researcher was aware that the code book could inform further analysis, but was also aware to not fit quotations to suit codes if the data differed from the code book. Thus, the code book was used only if it accurately reflected the data.

Where required, new open codes were created to capture the essence of the data (Saldaña, 2016). The creation and allocation of codes were carried out by using a sophisticated computer software tool called ATLAS.ti version 8. This programme was developed for qualitative data analysis (Friese, 2019). ATLAS.ti aided the researcher to manage and arrange data in a creative and systematic manner. The transcriptions from the interviews and the Mmogo-method® group session were loaded into ATLAS.ti version 8, and analysed accordingly.

Phase 3: Code relations or seeking themes from the data

Phase 3 commenced once all data had been coded and a code book of all codes within the data set had been drawn up. This phase focused on the wider level around themes, thus to move from descriptive- to conceptual levels of understanding. Codes were organised into possible themes by employing primary- and secondary-cycle codes developed from the data (Tracey, 2013).

At that stage a thematic map and table were drawn up as well as brief descriptions of each code and code category or group. Using network view in ATLAS.ti version 8, the researcher was able to consider different patterns that could explain the code relations to determine the themes that explain participants’ experiences as grounded in the data (Friese, 2019). The code relation process was used to classify different codes into separate themes.
Phase 4: Revising themes

The fourth phase started with a developed set of themes that the researcher subsequently revised. During this process it became apparent that some themes might merge with others or be separated and that some themes were not significant or did not have enough robust evidence to support them. Revising the themes entailed two processes: the researcher allocated codes into different groups to generate themes and subsequently evaluating the code groups by comparing them with the overall data set to ascertain that the thematic map was in fact a concise representation of the transcriptions.

Phase 5: Conceptualising and naming themes

In this phase it is assumed that a sufficient thematic map of the data has been achieved. This phase “refines and defines” the developed themes to conceptualise the gist of each and describe how it fitted in the overall picture created by the analysed data. The process also ensured that each theme was not too large or varied but, instead, that it explained a concise aspect of the phenomenon. To ensure each theme conceptualised a particular aspect of the research precisely, the researcher returned to the selected data extracts (quotations) for each theme and categorised them in clear sections, each with its own evidence justifying the theme. For each theme a thorough analysis was written down that explained its meaning as well as how it fitted into the overall narrative emerging from the data.

Phase 6: Constructing a report

The purpose of data write-up was to convey the tale of the data in a manner that could convince the reader of the value and quality of the data analysed. The report was written in a clear and concise manner, providing proof of the themes that emerged from the data. This phase also provided a final opportunity to critically analyse the data to ensure that explanations accurately reflected participants’ experiences meaningfully. This involved the selection of rich, convincing excerpt examples from the selected data, linking back these to the analysis, research questions and literature and creating an academic account of the data analysed. Creswell (2014) states that the last step of the data analysis process includes the interpretation of the qualitative research findings. Denzin and Lincoln (2018), recommends that the researcher should reflect on the lessons learned during the analysis to describe the significance of the study. With a view to this, the present researcher disclosed her personal experience around explanation of the data. The individual meaning that the researcher took
from the present study was divulged to differentiate between a possible own bias on the one hand, and actual participant understandings on the other (Patton, 2015). The researcher also considered whether this study confirmed or contradicted previous literature. At that stage of the unfolding process, the researcher explored the potentials of linking the findings to literature to compare existing explanations with that of the present study, thus to finalise the write-up and explanation of the findings and thematic analysis.

1.7.8 Strategies employed to ensure quality of data

Rigorous data strategies were employed to ensure the quality of qualitative research carried out. The researcher made use of big tent criteria as suggested by Tracy (2010) where she noted, as presented in the Table below, the manner in which the application of the criteria was assured in the present study. Though Tracy (2010) recommends applying as many practices as possible to ensure research rigour, it is understood that it is unnecessary to employ all practices in the checklist. Instead, the most appropriate measures taken to guide the researcher towards engaging qualitative research of quality were considered.
Table 2

*Ensuring high quality research using Tracy’s (2010) criteria including references to further authors where applicable*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria for quality</th>
<th>Various means, practices, and methods through which to achieve</th>
<th>Practical application of the various means in the present study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Worthy topic</td>
<td>The topic of the research is</td>
<td>The political unrest in South Africa and the recent #FMF movement that occurred at most HEIs in the country heighten the relevance of the topic, underscoring the need to produce meaningful research that addresses the necessary lacunae around understanding the implications of these unrests for higher education and associated student well-being. This topic will be of interest to the following stakeholders: tertiary students, HEIs, the Department of Higher Education, industrial psychologists and educational psychologists who join forces with students at HEIs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Relevant</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Timely</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Significant</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Interesting</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Rich rigour</td>
<td>The study uses sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and complex</td>
<td>Appropriate sampling methods were used, allowing access to participants who experienced the #FMF movement. To ensure the quality of qualitative data, it was collected using appropriate methods. To ensure the dependability of data gathered, the “overlapping method” was utilised (Shenton, 2004). The researcher relied on culturally-sensitive methods of collecting data. The Mmogo-method® was used to collect data in a group setting, respecting participants’ meaning-making in the context of shared discussions. The Mmogo-method® is specifically designed in the South African context as a culturally-sensitive data gathering approach. Adequate time was spent in the research filed where the researcher conducted additional follow-up interviews with selected participants who also partook in the Mmogo-method® group session, as well as providing an opportunity for in-depth interviews with participants who did not have the opportunity to participate in the Mmogo-method®. At these interviews participants could relate experiences that they did not necessarily have the opportunity to share in a group setting previously. The researcher allowed participants time to reflect on their experiences and probed for in-depth descriptions of said experiences. In its turn, the Mmogo-method® group session mostly explored the participants’ overall experiences at their HEI, where some touched on their experiences of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Theoretical constructs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Data and time in the field</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Sample(s)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Context(s)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Data collection and analysis processes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criteria for quality</td>
<td>Various means, practices, and methods through which to achieve</td>
<td>Practical application of the various means in the present study</td>
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<td>---------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Sincerity           | • The study is characterized by self-reflexivity about subjective values, biases, and inclinations of the researcher(s)  
                      • Transparency has been ensured around methods and challenges | the #FMF protests. At the interviews the scope of the discussion was narrowed to focus on the participants’ experiences of university particularly during the #FMF protest actions, since this topic was noted as a prominent conversation point during the Mmogo-method® group discussions. It was one of the important concerns noted by participants. As such, the researcher respected the participants’ voices and allowed the research process to unfold according to their needs. The setting of the study is a rural HEI delivery site where participants were most likely exposed to fewer resources than in urban delivery settings.  
                      The data analysis of the Mmogo-method® was conducted at a site that may offer greater variety and availability of supportive contexts. To ensure rigour around the method adopted and analyses conducted, the research was conducted in a systematic manner, in a team format, under supervision of an independent researcher psychologist with expertise around the method and analysis strategies. The individual interviews were analysed with a co-coder to ensure quality data analysis.  
                      In-depth methodological explanations were needed to ensure that the study could be replicated successfully in the future (Shenton, 2004).  
                      The researcher reflected on their own bias that may be rooted in her worldview and background. She conducted introspection before data collection and -analysis. Self-observation assisted her in avoiding avoid personal biases and perspectives that might have influenced the nature of data gathered and analysed. Transparency was ensured by conducting data collection and analysis in accordance with the Mmogo-method® in group format. The researcher furthermore made use of a co-coder when analysing the individual interviews. |
### Criteria for quality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Various means, practices, and methods through which to achieve</th>
<th>Practical application of the various means in the present study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Credibility</td>
<td>The researcher ensured that detailed individual nuances were captured through appropriate use of probing as an effective interviewing technique and providing participants with the opportunity to tell their story. In favour of minimising the effects of researcher subjectivity, Shenton (2004) suggests that confirmability is necessary by employing triangulation to decrease researcher bias and prejudice, involving practices such as describing the researcher’s worldview and background, discussing limitations of the study’s methods and their implications, thoroughly explaining the research method that was followed, studying the integrity of research findings as well as utilising illustrations to reveal an audit trail.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The research is marked by:</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Thick description, concrete detail, explication of tacit (nontexual) knowledge, and showing rather than telling</td>
<td></td>
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<td>- Triangulation or crystallization</td>
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<td>- Multivocality</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Member reflections</td>
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<tr>
<td>Resonance</td>
<td>Resonance was achieved by means of engendering naturalistic generalisations from participants that could be appealing for other university students who will be able to resonate with and relate to the experiences of the participants. During the write up of the results, the researcher presented them in an understandable manner, ensuring that stakeholders will be able to connect with the outcomes in a significant way.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The research influences, affects, or moves particular readers or a variety of audiences through:</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Aesthetic, evocative representation</td>
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<td>- Naturalistic generalizations</td>
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<td>- Transferable findings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Significant contribution</td>
<td>The findings of this study provide practical wisdom to universities concerning the views of first-year students of the #FMF movement. The findings can be used to improve practice and should enable HEIs to extend a two-way communication channel to students where their issues are heard and responded to in appropriate ways.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The research provides a significant contribution</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Conceptually/theoretically</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Practically</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Morally</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Heuristically</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Criteria for quality</td>
<td>Various means, practices, and methods through which to achieve</td>
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<td>----------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical</td>
<td>The research considers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Procedural ethics (such as human subjects)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Situational and culturally specific ethics</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Relational ethics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Exiting ethics (leaving the scene and sharing the research)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaningful coherence</td>
<td>The study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Achieves what it purports to be about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Uses methods and procedures that fit its stated goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Meaningfully interconnects literature, research questions/foci, findings, and interpretations with each other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1.7.9 Reporting

Due to the nature of the research topic, namely student experiences of student unrest, the report was written in a discreet manner to ensure validity. Creswell (2014) states that the process followed in reporting on qualitative results is to derive descriptions and themes from the data. In the case of the present study, these themes and descriptions portrayed various perceptions among participants and, in addition, offered explanations for phenomenon are found in research surroundings or among participants. Literature has shown that a qualitative approach may result in a chronological discussion of the participant’s life and an explanation of their lived experience. The strategies used for reporting results therefore included, in the case of the present study, examining quotes form participants (some long and others short), examining dialogue that portrayed their culture, language and ethnicity and combining the participants’ words and interpretations made by the researcher. Various narrative formats were used such as comparison tables and diagrams (Creswell, 2014).

1.7.10 Ethical considerations

The researcher was aware of ethical responsibilities throughout the entire research process, allowing these to guide her actions (Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, 2001). The participants in this study were considered to be a vulnerable group. The Department of Health (2015) states that to ethics in health research in South Africa need to protect vulnerable groups especially. University students are considered a vulnerable group due to inequitable relationships as well as economic and academic dependency. Consequently, the researcher obtained clearance as reflected in the ethical certificate number: NWU-HS-2014-0165, including as part of the application a clear explanation of research participation risks and counter-measures to protect participants. For the present study, the researcher was aware that the participants’ vulnerability might be ascribed to poor socio-economic circumstances and living conditions of first-year students attending a peri-urban university.

For the protection of the researcher and the participants, the following arrangement was set in place, in accordance with the procedures and requirements of the application for permission to conduct the project that was made to the ethics board:

Autonomy: Capron (1989) states that participant autonomy entails that all research conducted should be led by principles of respect to all people. In addition to this it was significant to take the principles of the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPSCA, 2016) into
consideration: it holds that respect for participants concerns the two values of autonomy and confidentiality. Regarding the former, participants that are able of making sound decisions about participating in the research should be provided with the opportunity to do so. In the case of the latter, all participants’ rights to confidentiality should be respected and honoured. All information gathered from participants should be stored in a safe and secure way to protect their privacy. Creswell (2014) identifies a few guidelines to aid researchers when it comes to ensuring participant autonomy. The research objectives should be explained to them in written and verbal form and they should be informed that participation would be completely voluntary and that no pressure would be placed on taking part in the research. They should further be informed that they would be allowed to withdraw from the study without any negative consequences and written permission to take part in the study should be obtained from them by the informant, that is, what is known as informed consent. They should moreover be informed of all data collection equipment to be utilised (such as audio recorders) and made aware that all verbal information from data-collection sessions would be transcribed and utilised during data-analysis. Their rights and requests would be taken into account before reporting on data and it would be the researcher’s responsibility to store all data safely, since it would remain the intellectual property of the researchers. In this study, the data collected would remain the intellectual property of the applicable HEI. The above was practically implemented in accordance with the guidelines provided by Creswell (2014).

**Beneficence:** The HPCSA (2016) emphasises the principle that the “benefits of health research must outweigh the risks to the research participants” and that “risks and harms of research to participants must be minimised”. It was the responsibility of the researcher to treat her participants with respect, avoiding harm. Beneficence may however be excessive, amounting to paternalism that is, involving the rejection of autonomy and freedom of choice. This would indicate that research on participants were in some cases not conducted because they might be exposed, threatening harm. The researcher was mindful of the possible effect of paternalism and therefore ensured best practice beneficence.

Ensuring that the identities of the participants are not revealed forms part of the moral duty of the researcher. The present project upheld the following practical implications to ensure beneficence: participant anonymity was ensured. When results were published, participants were informed about the manner in which research it had been done. Preferably, they were
informed about citations used in publications and made aware of all the researchers that had access to the data.

*Justice*: The term “justice” in this instance entails equality and fairness. The present research process therefore pursued the following activities in ways that honoured and empowered participants’ voices: selection of the study topic, study design, data collection methods, selection of participants and analyses of participants’ information and, finally, writing up and publishing the findings. To ensure justice the researcher prevented misuse and manipulation of participants during research. Her role throughout the research process was negotiated with participants, which ensured the establishment of commitment on the side of participants to support her role. The acknowledgement of ethical values indeed guided the entire research process. All actions undertaken as part of the project were guided by scientific procedures, ensuring scientific justice.

The researcher and all co-workers were appropriately qualified, capable and legally competent to implement the proposed research methods. To ensure researcher ethical competence, the researcher completed the online TRREE ethical course. TRREE is the acronym for Training and Resources in Research Ethics Evaluation. It is headed by an association of involved individuals from Northern and Southern countries. Its purpose is to deliver rudimentary training on the ethics of health research concerning human participants, to ensure that research achieves high ethical standards and endorses the welfare of participants. TRREE is based on international ethical standards and regulations. The following modules were included in the researcher’s training: Introduction to Research, Research Ethics Evaluation and Informed Consent. Furthermore, an interview course was attended to ensure researcher competence.

See Appendix A, a copy of the informed consent form.

### 1.8 OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

The research findings as based on the research objectives are presented in the form of a research article in Chapter 2, while Chapter 3 presents limitations and recommendations of the research conducted.
1.9 CHAPTER SUMMARY

The present chapter introduced the problem statement, research objectives and research questions underpinning the present project. Subsequently, it discussed research design and research method and presented a brief outline of individual chapters to follow.
REFERENCES


CHAPTER 2

RESEARCH ARTICLE
The #FeesMustFall protests in South Africa: Exploring first-year students’ experiences at a peri-urban university delivery site

Orientation: Students studying at a peri-urban university with a large rural encashment area had unique first-year student experiences during the FeesMustFall (#FMF) protest actions. To ensure a constructive first-year student experience where they would achieve academic success it is important to examine their experience at a peri-urban university delivery site.

Research purpose: To explore how South African first-year students enrolled at a peri-urban university delivery site experienced the #FMF protest actions.

Motivation for the study: The impact of protest actions on the economy, HEIs and the individual student may be harmful and destructive if not contained and managed effectively. This study aims to elucidate the student experience to inform HEIs with proactive recommendations around times of protest actions.

Research design, approach and method: A qualitative research approach was followed. The data was collected at a peri-urban university delivery site. Two data collection methods were utilised: the Mmogo-method® and unstructured interviews. The participants (N = 15) included students from the specific peri-urban university delivery site.

Main Findings: The participants’ experiences engendered four main themes: clashes between students and police and/or HEI delivery site security, impact of the protest actions on students’ lives, psychological experiences of trauma and physical harm attitudes towards the delivery site and students’ needs as required from the university delivery site.

Practical implications and contributions: The study will elucidate the experiences of first-year students at a peri-urban university delivery site. The knowledge gathered will aid the HEI to develop proactive measures to minimise the impact of the protest actions on the institution itself, students and all stakeholders involved.

Keywords: #FMF protests; peri-urban university students; rural-origin students; student experiences; first-year students, Higher Educational Institutions, universities.
INTRODUCTION

First-year students face numerous challenges during their transition period to a Higher Education Institution (HEI). These challenges include, amongst others, establishing new friendships, adjusting existing relationships with family and friends, adapting their learning approach for university standards as well as learning how to cope as an adult for the first time (Blanc, DeBuhr & Martin, 1983; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). The adjustment process for first-year students studying at a peri-urban university delivery site can be an even more daunting due to the unique challenges they face. This could include the lack of proficiency in English, which prevents them from engaging in the full learning experience (Painter, 2015) as well as suffering from an academic backlog due to sub-standard schooling in rural communities (Letseka & Breier, 2008). This could result in poor academic performance and in many cases the end-result is dropout (Greenfield, 2010). Other challenges of students from a rural origin that influence their academic performance include poor social-economic background and continued poverty, especially among students who live off-campus, as well as many students representing the first in their generation to attend an HEI, thus often receiving inadequate family support (Letseka & Breier, 2008).

Presenting these unique challenges of first-year students from a rural background in the case of the present study, forms part of a larger project that was launched to explore the general experiences of first-year students studying at a peri-urban university delivery site. The data collection- and analysis process of this larger project had already made it clear that the #FMF movement impacted significantly on students. It was therefore deemed an important topic to explore in isolation, not least because of the emphasis students had placed on their experiences during the #FMF protests and the richness of the participants’ descriptions of these experiences as found in the larger project.

The trigger for the student protests and the #FMF movement was the announcement of fee increases at HEIs for the 2015 academic year (Langa, Ndelu, Edwin & Vilakazi, 2017). The outdated patriarchal- and colonial nature of higher education was challenged by the #FMF and the #RhodesMustFall movements (Müller, 2017). #RhodesMustFall was the student movement that occurred at the start of 2015 at the University of Cape Town (UCT) where students commanded that the statue of Cecil John Rhodes be removed from the university grounds because it represented a colonial figure and therefore reinforced the colonial ethos at HEIs in South Africa (Costandius et al., 2018). On 20 October 2015, the #FMF student
movement started by demanding free higher education as had been promised in 1994 in the first democratic elections in South Africa (Costandius et al., 2018). The #FMF movement also included the demand for a decolonised Higher Education curriculum and language of teaching (Mbembe 2016).

The #FMF movement affected various stakeholders, including the South African economy, HEIs and students. In the case of the economy, damages to university property caused by the #FMF movement has been estimated at R1 billion including 18 campuses (Gon, 2016). While insurance companies covered most of the #FMF damage expenditures, the surplus rested upon tax payers (Gon, 2016), causing further complications, mainly because South African tax payers are already over-stretched (Moerane, 2015).

HEIs were severely affected by the #FMF protest actions. Shortly after the announcement of a zero percentage fee increase by the then President, Jacob Zuma, in response to the protests, public HEIs were forced to make immediate budget cuts (Moolman & Jacobs, 2018), which directly impacted on the quality of education provided to students (Weidemann, 2016). On top of the financial strain of those days, HEIs had to perform under substantial pressure to make up for the losses of the damage caused during the protest actions (Ngoepe, 2016). Most importantly, the #FMF protest actions impacted severely on students, collectively as well as individually. Maphasa (2017) mentions that the emotional marks left by the protest actions will have a long lasting effect for those involved. Numerous students have continued to battle with trauma, anxiety and depression in response to the experience of the protest actions (Maphasa, 2017). The protests also affected the academic performance of students: they missed classes as a consequence of the disruption around the protests or because they took part in the actions themselves (MIE, 2016). Various students were unable to complete their academic year due to the protest actions and did therefore not graduate in due time (Gon, 2016).

Although the #FMF protest actions came at a cost for most students, it created awareness amongst public HEIs that it was necessary to open channels for communication and negotiation (Langa et al., 2017). Postma (2016) mentions that one benefit of the protest actions was that it called for an improved society through the demand of democratic promises made in 1994. Du Preez, Simmonds and Chetty (2017) state that the protest actions contributed to the creation of a sound democratic country by challenging the existing status quo.
Since the occurrence of the #FMF protest actions, many articles have been published in the media and scientific journals. However, many of these articles were of a discursive or conceptual nature or involved formulated-opinion pieces and pieces on the background and impact of the #FMF movement. These articles focus on decolonization of HEIs and cost-free Higher Education (Moja et al., 2015; Pillay, 2016; Dube, 2017; Keet, Sattarzadeh & Munene, 2017). Some research articles did investigate experiences of stakeholders in the #FMF protest actions (Du Preez, Simmonds & Chetty, 2017). Postma (2016) published an article on how educators and lecturers should respond to the #FMF movement, seeing that the protests acted to raise awareness of the unsustainability of the existing HEI system. Costandius et al. (2018) investigated the reactions of students and lecturers and the effects that the protests had on their experiences, the decolonisation of places of education and how students felt empowered and included to improve the African centrality of HEIs. This study mainly emphasised the frustration engendered between lecturers and students by the #FMF protest actions as well as the transfer of academic knowledge and syllabuses in an Afri-centric way.

Langa et al. (2017) compiled a research report that illuminated the impact of the #FMF protest actions. Students conducted research on several university campuses across South Africa, writing individual reports on each university. These focused mainly on the decolonisation of Higher Education and not so much on individual student experiences. Keet, Sattarzadeh and Munene (2017) touch on the effect of the protest actions on university executive management team members. They analysed the reported experiences in the context of rising expectations that came about as a consequence of recent higher education policy developments, newly institutionalised managerialism and broader socio-economic influences.

These studies provide valuable expositions of the student experience and perspective of various HEIs across South Africa. However, careful examination of extant literature showed that minimal research had occurred around individual experiences of students -- protesting students as well as non-protesting ones -- within a peri-urban HEI. The benefits of investigating individual student experiences would be to provide HEIs with insight to craft and drive proactive measures in terms of combatting and preventing the negative impact of similar student protest actions in future as well as inform HEI management around customising proactive prevention measures and the course-of-action during times of crisis, hence to minimise the negative impact of protest actions on students as well as the HEI, its staff and relevant stakeholders.
Given this problem statement, the general objective of this study was to explore the experiences of the #FMF protest actions that first-year students enrolled at a peri-urban university delivery site at an HEI bore within the South African context.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**The violent nature of the #FMF protest actions**

The violent nature of the protest actions was a central element of the #FMF student protest movement (Costandius et al., 2018). It seems that it was induced by violent actions of certain student protesters as well as the presence of the police and the tactics they used to control the situation.

As regards to the violent actions of student protesters, Langa et al. (2017) compiled a research report referring to several occurrences where the protests resulted in violence and disruption as they expressed their dissatisfaction. At the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, protesting as well as non-protesting participants consulted in the study mentioned that the use of violence from the protesting students as well as the police or private security was fuelled by passive university management, the presence of the police and security on campus and the presentation of toxic masculinity. The range of violent acts included burning down university buildings, shooting with rubber bullets, searching residences, setting up blockages, harming university property and physical injury. Students interfering with the daily operational activities at universities became characteristic of the #FMF protests. Students at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology used road blocks made from rocks, stones, burning tires, benches and other objects to prevent employees and non-protesting students from accessing university grounds. This trend had started at Wits university when protesting students successfully prevented it from functioning. This approach had been so effective that it led to the coordination of a national one-week shut-down of all universities in South Africa that participated in the #FMF protests.

Roux (2017) conducted a study at two different South African Universities, investigating students’ perceptions of respect and tolerance as human rights during the #FMF protest actions. It found that students demonstrated their rage through additional protests, aggressive actions and disturbance. Roux (2017) specifically refers to one incident where students pushed the vice counsellor of the university while yelling belittling comments at him. This incident was captured on national television. The intervention of the police and security
personnel appeared to be the only option to stop possible acts of violence towards the vice counsellor. The same study refers to another clash between a female student and a member of university management. The two individuals met outside the university gates. The female student leader expressed her anger through her body language and yelling, showing that she was irritated. She also ordered the university management representative to “sort out the mess”. This scene was also captured on national television.

Further violent acts occurring in the #FMF protests were reported in the media. On 24 February 2019, students at the Mahikeng campus of the North-West University burned down the administration building (NWU closes Mafikeng, 2016). Students were asked to evacuate the campus and return home. The instruction to return home and the closing of the campus followed after clashes between students and university security. The students expressed their anger towards university management’s decision to dismiss the current Student Representative Council (SRC) and to install a new SRC council.

At Rhodes University, in September 2016, there was a shutdown due to the protests. When classes had to resume one week later, students interrupted lectures in the legal department. They obstructed an intersection and chaos burst out where one student threw a rock at a police van (IOL Independent media, 2016). The police responded with violence and started shooting at students. Wicks (2018) of the Times Live, wrote an article, three years later at the trial of a #FMF activist, Bonginkosi Khanyile.

This student, Bonginkosi Khanyile, who had been studying at the Durban University of Technology during protests, was sentenced on charges of public violence, non-compliance with police commands and custody of a dangerous weapon. Khanyile confessed that during the violent protests he used a slingshot to cause disruption and to stone the police. He admitted that he had failed to comply with the requests from the police to disband.

Deploying police often seemed to be the only intervention that could control possible violence or damage that might have been done against individuals and university property. However, several reports note that protest actions became increasingly violent when the police arrived at the scene. Bohler-Muller and colleagues (2017) state that the police used strategies that violate basic human rights and that the crowd-control techniques they used triggered further violence. Students were exposed to the use of tear gas, stuns grenades and
water cannons (Naiker, 2016). Students also mentioned that the police resorted to violence too readily, without trying to negotiate with the protesting students (Mutekwe, 2017).

Protest actions did not always remain on the university campuses. There were instances where students protested off campus. In October 2015, at the University of the Western Cape, protesters went to the streets in demand of a zero percentage fee increase, where they were handled with a “heavy hand” by the police (Badat, 2016). Protesting students also marched to the National Parliament in Cape Town where actions of conflict between protesters and the police followed (Badat, 2016).

It is important to revisit the methods that police employed to control protests, given that peaceful protest action is more advantageous than disruptive or violent action (Bohler-Muller, et al., 2017). However, Langa et al. (2017) state that the police is not entirely to blame for the violent nature of the protests. A report written by the South African Institute of Race Relations (Gon, 2016) analysed student protests in the country and students’ misunderstanding of the rules of protest action and negotiation. The report states that the media placed much emphasis on the cruelty of the police during the protest actions but overlooked the fact that they and other individuals fell victim to violent actions of protesting students.

It is therefore imperative to investigate ways to combat the violent nature of student-police interaction during protests and to make police intervention more peaceful and constructive. In addition, it is important that leadership at universities, the Ministry of HE and the Department of Higher Education (DHET) address the protest actions in a constructive manner and prevent reactions that elicit student rage (Badat, 2016). Badat (2016) also argues that stakeholders should embark on authentic attempts to communicate with the protesters instead of calling on the police or hiring private security to intervene too soon. Langa et al. (2017) further suggests that peace and reconciliation interventions should be used to repair relationships after the protests. Authentic reciprocal communication needs to occur between the university management and students to solve dissension.

Experiences during the #FMF protests

Literature on the effect of the #FMF protest actions and specific experiences of various stakeholders during these protests focused on three main groups or areas related to relations
on campus: university management, the relationship between students and lecturers in addition to the experience of students.

Dominguez-Whitehead (2011) conducted a qualitative study on the experiences of university management at a specific South African university in the context of strike- and protest activity. Semi-structured interviews were conducted involving six participants who were interviewed on two occasions. That study did not aim at generalising the experience of university management across South Africa but rather to explore the experiences of a selected group of executive university management at a specific university. One participant experienced the protests as extremely stressful – she was overseeing an office that provided services to students and found herself between non-protesting students, demanding university services and aggressive protesting students who were locked outside the building. At one stage the participant explained that the protesting students broke through the doors and she found herself among protesters, other staff members and non-protesting students. Another participant spoke of his experience with strikes in the nature of joint academic staff and support staff who were demanding salary increases. He mentioned that the strike could be branded by protest walks, blockades, physical intimidation and staff refusing to work. This specific participant experienced the strike as disordered and insincere. Overall, participants in this study experienced the protest movement as unlawful, doubtful and resulting in aggressive actions.

Regarding the influence of the protest actions on student-lecturer relations, Costandius et al. (2018) conducted a study at Stellenbosch University. The researchers considered the reactions of students and lecturers and the impact of the protest actions on their experiences. The results showed that the protest actions and demands for decolonisation of HE were affective and had an impact on the relationship between students and lecturers. The findings of the research are portrayed in terms of affect, relationships, decolonisation and social justice. Regarding affect, it was noted that various lecturers experienced the presence of violence on campus in an unfavourable way. Lecturers experienced feelings of uncertainty and confusion, rage, helplessness and disappointment. Concerning the relationships between the students and lecturers, it is significant that the protests affected these in various ways. Lecturers noted that there seemed to be mutual disenchantment where neither lecturers nor students were truly listening to each other, leaving both parties frustrated. Costandius et al. (2018) note that the relationship between students and lecturers could be described in short as
doubt, apprehension and helplessness as well as the need for connection and care in addition to change.

As regards student experiences, the #FMF protest actions influenced students on various levels and in various dimensions. Academically, the violent nature of the protests caused disruption on university campuses where it was not possible for constructive learning activities to continue, mainly because various campuses were closed for long periods of time (Glover, 2017). Grade 12 learners were anxious about the damage done to university property and its impact on their prospective academic studies (Naicker, 2016). In an online article compiled by HR Pulse (2015), it was emphasised that students wasted valuable study time required for examination preparation. They were under enormous pressure to prepare for the upcoming examinations due to the adapted examination time tables: examination dates were likely to be moved closer together. Poor preparation for exams and being absent from most lectures also had an influence on academic performance.

Physically, the protests caused students to get injured (Langa et al., 2017). Consequently, they were anxious about their physical safety and campuses were closed (Naicker, 2016). The student protests were described as a “warzone” (Tau, 2016). The police fired rubber bullets and tear gas to contain the chaos and students were hurt and arrested. Research by the South African Institute of Race Relations (Gon, 2016) reported that on some occasions at Wits intimidators wearing baklavas entered lecture halls and physically assaulted students and university staff. Firearms such as petrol bombs were sneaked onto campuses and used to set fire to buildings. One student was hit with a sjambok in a law class and other students were assaulted and beaten in the dining hall on campus. Female students were sexually harassed and frightened. Police and security officers were attacked and brutally injured at the university of Witwatersrand.

Students were frustrated that HEI management was constantly unresponsive to their grievances (Langa, et al., 2017). A reflective paper on the protest actions by Dandara, Chimusa and Wonkam (2017) raises an appeal for more strategic initiatives to address student grievances to prevent the negative effects of the protest actions on students. Langa et al. (2017) indicate that one of the insights gleaned from the protests is that university management requires a more open mindset around discussions with students about grievances, instead of using the police or court interdicts as the first course of action.
RESEARCH DESIGN

The following sections discuss the research approach and strategies, methods for data collection and analysis as well as the ethical aspect of the present project.

Research approach

The study used a qualitative approach to explore and understand the definition that individuals and groups attach to a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). The specific phenomenon under study was first-year students’ experiences of their university studies at a peri-urban delivery site in South Africa during the #FMF protests. The emphasis of the study was to gain in-depth understandings from participants (Creswell, 2007) to discover and comprehend their individual perceptions and voice a tale few may be aware of (Tracy, 2013).

Research strategy

An interpretive descriptive, qualitative research design was followed. Sandelowski (2000) explains that this approach seeks and describes the experiences of participants, choosing what will be described and showcasing specific aspects of participants’ experiences to interpret and make meaning of their experiences. Though individual participants’ experiences may differ, the aim of the current study was to identify common themes and patterns based on examining individual experiences, while taking the differences between participants into consideration (Hunt, 2009).

Research method

The research method comprised the research setting, the entrée and establishing the researcher’s roles as well the sampling of participants. Data collection methods, recoding of data, data analysis and strategies employed to ensure rigour formed part of the method adopted. Finally, ethical considerations and the reporting style fall under this rubric.

Research setting

The current study forms a sub-study of a larger project entitled “StudyWell: Student Well-Being and Success”. The present sub-study links with the objectives of the larger project to understand student experiences. The long-term aim of the StudyWell research project is to develop a valid, reliable and culturally sensitive online analytical processing (OLAP) tool to
empower the specific HEI (and possibly other South African universities) to proactively monitor student adjustment, well-being and success. Qualitative enquiries are used to inform the development of the OLAP tool.

The specific HEI that first-year students attended was located in a peri-urban area that served as a catchment area for students who enrolled from rural communities in the surrounding districts. Extant research demonstrates that various factors affect the transition from rural areas to university, including the rural location where students may originate from (Jones, Coetzee, Bailey & Wickham, 2008).

The community’s first-year students originated from areas that were often faced with disadvantages such as poor quality schooling, socio-economic disadvantage and poverty and lack of supportive contexts and opportunities to promote further education at HEIs including, for example, lack of parental education and scarcity of educational resources (Mahole, Moroke & Mavetera, 2014). In their turn, Cicchinelli and Beesley (2017) speak to the following circumstances of rural education, referring specifically to the lack of resources such as stable internet connectivity, access to technology, facilities in good condition, a favourable configuration of the student population and consistency of local residents. Such circumstances may make it difficult for participants to prepare adequately for university and they may enjoy fewer opportunities and exposure to enabling resources (Letseka & Breier, 2008).

Entrée and establishing researcher roles

Permission for the study was granted by the NWU Institutional Research Ethics Regulatory Committee (NWU-HS-2014-0165). Access was negotiated with gatekeepers on the specific peri-urban delivery site of the HEI under study. The researcher provided the gatekeeper with an information letter explaining the nature, potential impact and outcomes of the research (Creswell, 2014), accompanied by a proof of ethical clearance of the research project. Information was provided on the purpose of each of the data collection procedures. The gatekeeper provided a permission letter to conduct the research and the research commenced. The researcher established appropriate ways to contact and recruit possible participants through trusted gatekeepers.

Once participants agreed to participate, the researcher negotiated the time and place for each of the data collection procedures. Participants were involved in two processes: a group
session as well as individual follow-up interviews. Before each of the data collection sessions the researcher explained the research process, what participants could expect, the voluntary nature of their participation as well as their right to withdraw from the study without any negative consequences. The researcher also ensured that participants understood the process in collaboration with researchers who were part of the larger StudyWell project. On completion of data collection, the researcher made sure that the participants had access to information about psychological services if they needed to consult with a counsellor or psychologist. The participants also received the contact information of the project leader and researchers forming part of the collaborative team as well as the researcher of the current study should they have required any additional information or clarity.

**Sampling and participants**

For the purpose of this study purposive sampling was used. Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) explain that purposive sampling allows researchers to access selected participants according to selection criteria to inform the specific research objectives. The selection criteria for the current study sought individuals who (1) were enrolled as first- or second-year-students at the specific HEI delivery site, (2) had a basic proficiency in English since the group discussions were offered in English as a common language, (3) were enrolled for an undergraduate degree and (4) were willing to reflect on their study experiences at the particular HEI. Although English proficiency was an inclusion criterion, interpreters were available if participants chose to speak in their mother-tongue.

Creswell (2014) advises purposive sampling to access participants who are in the best position to provide insight on the research phenomenon. The aim of this specific sampling technique was to obtain the richest possible data in a specific setting (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delport, 2011. The researcher spent time at the peri-urban HEI delivery site (research field) to understand the setting better and spent time with the participants using two different data collection methods at different times (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) with a view to gaining better insight into the lives of participants over time.

The data were collected in two ways. First, the Mmogo method® (Roos, 2016) was used followed by individual in-depth, unstructured interviews (Patton, 2015). Roos (2016) recommends that the sample size of the group should be between 6 - 10 participants (Roos, 2016). Two of the Mmogo-method® participants agreed to participate in the in-depth
follow-up interviews and a further two participants were recruited for in-depth interviews to share their insights by using snowball sampling (Merriam & Tisdall, 2016). Therefore, four in-depth interviews were conducted. Table 1 displays the biographical information of the participants.

Table 1
Biographic characteristics of research participants (N = 15)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>African</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home language</td>
<td>Setswana</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sepedi</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>isiXhosa</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tshivenda</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living conditions</td>
<td>I stay off campus and I am part of a town residence</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I stay off campus, but I am not part of a town residence</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I stay on campus and live in a hostel</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family history of university attendance</td>
<td>Both my parents attended university</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I am the first member of my family to attend university</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Many members of my family have attended university</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My brothers and/or sisters attended/attends university</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data collection methods

As indicated, the data for this study were collected in two phases: (1) a Mmogo-method® group session (Roos, 2016) and (2) unstructured in-depth individual interviews (Patton, 2015). The focus of the Mmogo-method® was to understand participants’ study experiences in general while the in-depth interviews explored these experiences in the light of the #FMF protests.
**Mmogo-method®**

Roos (2016) describes the Mmogo-method® as a visual data-gathering method. During the Mmogo-method® process, the researcher accepts that participants enjoy diverse perceptions of the research question in terms of their differing world views portrayed visually in models built around the topic and verbally when these models are discussed. A registered research and clinical psychologist trained in the Mmogo-method® conducted the sessions. The data gathered through thus entailed recording the group session using audio recorders that were transcribed at a later stage to form the text-data of the project. In addition, photographs were taken of the models participants made, which formed the visual-data of the project.

**Step 1:** In the first step of the process, the researchers introduced themselves and provided the context and background of the overall StudyWell project as well as the procedure around informed consent. There was an opportunity to clarify questions participants may have harboured. Participants also had the opportunity to complete their informed consent and biographical questionnaire forms.

**Step 2:** The eleven participants were grouped together and seated around a table. They were provided with unstructured materials: grass stalks, a round cloth, multi-coloured beads and malleable clay. Next, participants were invited to create visual representations in response to an open-ended research question: “Make a representation of your experience as a student at this specific HEI”. Participants were allowed to complete their models (which took about 45 minutes) while the researchers observed what they made.

**Step 3:** After the visual representation the researcher adopted an empathetic position, asking participants to explain what they built, allowing them to speak about their visual representations freely. The researcher utilised techniques such as probing and questioning to aid participants in the sharing of their experiences and to clarify what each participant had built. Participants explained their own models, but could comment on each other’s models. Probing questions were aimed at enhancing the understanding of study experiences, particularly in the context of study demands and resources that participants had mentioned.

**Step 4:** As it was possible that the reflections and explanations might have elicited strong emotions from participants, the discussion was concluded with a short debriefing session provided by the counsellor present during the session. The counsellor’s contact details were
also provided to the participants should they have required further debriefing after the research had been concluded. The researchers present during the session were also debriefed by the on-site counsellor.

**Individual interviews**

As indicated, face to-face, follow-up, in-depth individual interviews were conducted with two selected, voluntary participants (Creswell, 2014) from the Mmogo-method® group at a time after the group session. Two additional participants were recruited, totalling four in-depth interviews. Two open-ended questions were asked to participants to obtain material around their experiences, perceptions and opinions of the then-recent #FMF student protest actions. The main question asked during the unstructured interviews was: How did you experience the protest actions? During the interviews, the researcher used probing questions to enhance understanding of the experience of the participants. All individual interviews were recorded on an audio recorder and transcribed afterwards, by the researcher, for further analysis.

**Field notes**

The researcher of the current study made observations during the Mmogo-method® session as well as the follow-up in-depth interviews. The researcher observed participants’ during the data collection process and made hand-written notes of these in her journal (Creswell, 2014). Observations during the group sessions and individual interviews were utilised to provide additional insights where possible. Such field notes included summary notes, possible key ideas that were engendered as well as reflective notes. The notes also indicated who had been talking during the Mmogo-method® session to facilitate accurate transcribing and analysis of the group session.

**Recording of data**

Prior to the start of data collection, the researcher planned how to record the data (Creswell, 2014). The participants were informed prior to the data collection procedures that the sessions would be recorded and transcribed at a later stage to capture their descriptions verbatim. The recordings enabled the researcher to gather as much data as possible as accurately as possible. Informed consent was obtained to record data collection sessions for research purposes. All data were saved electronically on password protected computers with limited access to ensure that confidentiality was maintained.
**Data analysis**

The data produced through the Mmogo-method® (visual- as well as text data) formed part of the larger StudyWell Research Project and the current study. As such, the primary analysis for the larger project explored the general study experiences of participants by analysing the visual- and associated verbal data from participants. The researcher of the current study conducted a secondary analysis on the text data based on the Mmogo-method®, focusing on participants’ elicited explanations and experiences of the #FMF protest actions in relation to their study experiences. Primary analyses of the in-depth, individual interviews formed the rest of the data corpus that was analysed by using thematic analysis. All analyses were reviewed by the research team and an independent research psychologist to ensure rigour.

Thematic analysis is a process of analysing and reporting on themes emerging from the collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Tracy (2010) states that rigorous data analysis manifests though translucent processes of categorising, selecting and organising data. Furthermore, Tracy (2013) proposes two phases of data analysis: (1) primary-level or descriptive, open coding and (2) secondary-level coding to understand the patterns that explain the research phenomenon. The researcher used a combination of Tracy’s first- and second-level coding woven into the six phases of qualitative analysis as set forth by Braun and Clarke (2006):

**Phase 1: Acquainting yourself with your data:** repeated active reading of the data, searching for meanings, patterns and preliminary themes.

**Phase 2: Creating original codes through open coding:** systematic coding by using computer assisted analysis in ATLAS.ti version 8, producing a list of codes and categories into a codebook.

**Phase 3: Code relations or seeking themes in the data:** focused analysis to explore the broader themes by shifting from descriptive to conceptual understandings. Codes were organised into possible themes using the primary and secondary-cycle codes developed from the data (Tracey, 2013). The researcher relied on analysis tools in ATLAS.ti to explore code distribution (density, groundedness), code co-occurrence (overlapping codes, simultaneous coding) and code groupings to explore possible patterns to create preliminary themes.
Phase 4: Revising themes. Revising the themes entailed two processes. The researcher allocated codes into different groups to generate themes. Next the researcher evaluated the code groups by comparing the overall data set to create concise representations of the overall data set. Such descriptions and groupings affirmed preliminary themes or were regrouped to facilitate enhanced understandings thereof.

Phase 5: Conceptualising and naming themes. This step was performed to “refine and define” the developed themes, to conceptualise the gist of each theme and to determine how it fitted in with the overall picture engendered by analysis of the data. The process also ensured that each theme was not too comprehensive or varied but, instead, explained a concise aspect of the phenomenon.

Phase 6: Constructing the report. The report conveys the data narrative in a manner that convinces the reader of the value and quality of the analysis.

Strategies employed to ensure quality data

Rigorous data strategies were employed to ensure trustworthy research. The researcher made use of big tent criteria as unpacked by Tracy (2010) where the researcher illustrated rigour across various quality qualitative research criteria. The application of Table 2 summarises Tracy’s rigour strategies; see Chapter 1 for a more comprehensive explanation of how each strategy was employed.
Table 2
Ensuring high quality qualitative research using criteria as found in Tracy (2010) noting additional authors where applicable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria for quality</th>
<th>Practical application of the various means in the current study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Worthy topic</strong></td>
<td>The political unrest in South Africa and the recent #FMF movement that occurred at most HEIs in South Africa underscore the relevance of the topic, that is, to produce meaningful research that addresses the necessary gaps in understanding the implications for HEI practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rich rigour</strong></td>
<td>Appropriate sampling methods were used, accessing participants who experienced the #FMF movement. Quality qualitative data were collected using culturally appropriate methods. To ensure the dependability of data gathered “overlapping methods” were utilised (Shenton, 2004).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sincerity</strong></td>
<td>The researcher reflected on her own bias that may have been in their world view and background. The researcher furthermore conducted introspection before performing data collection and data analysis. Transparency was ensured by conducting data collection and analysis as part of a research team and under supervision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Credibility</strong></td>
<td>Triangulation was used to decrease researcher bias and prejudice by employing practices such as describing the researcher’s world view and background while methodological triangulation was promoted by means of multiple data collection methods and rigorous analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resonance</strong></td>
<td>Resonance was achieved by determining naturalistic generalisations based on participants’ responses that could be appealing for other university students who may relate to the experiences of the current study’s participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Significant</strong></td>
<td>The findings of this study offer practical wisdom to HEIs concerning the views of first-year students in the light of disruptions such as the #FMF movement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contribution</strong></td>
<td>The findings of this study offer practical wisdom to HEIs concerning the views of first-year students in the light of disruptions such as the #FMF movement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethical</strong></td>
<td>Ethics permission was obtained to conduct the study ensuring sound ethical conduct and adherence to ethics rules and guidelines for research focusing on first-year students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meaningful coherence</strong></td>
<td>Findings of this study were linked with existing literature to understand interpretations around extant findings, but also with a view to elucidating how the current study’s findings inform literature and address knowledge lacunae.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Reporting**

Given the research focus around student experiences of student unrest, the report was written in a discreet manner to ensure that descriptions accurately reflected participant experiences, that is, validity was upheld (Creswell, 2014). The strategies used for reporting on results included presenting quotations form participants in a manner that reflected their dialogue and culture, language and ethnicity and combined their words with interpretations made by the researcher. ATLAS.ti was used to export a report of coded quotations.
FINDINGS

Thematic analysis engendered four main themes: 1) clashes between students and police or HEI delivery site security, 2) the impact of the protest actions on students’ lives, 3) psychological experiences, and 4) attitudes towards and needs that the university was required to meet. The themes and their definitions, boundaries as well as conceptualisations will be presented in table format in the case of each theme.

Theme 1: Clashes between students and police or HEI delivery site security

Participants elaborated on their experiences and interaction with the police and campus security, which were described as “clashes” or conflict between students. These were the views of participants, specifically students who reportedly did not participate in the protests. Table 3 summarises three categories that describes these experiences.

Table 3

Theme 1. Clashes between students and police and/or campus security

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Formulated Meanings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-protesting students are mistaken as protesting students by the police</td>
<td>Non-protesting students were seen and targeted as protesters by the police or HEI delivery site security.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and deployed HEI delivery site security.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police and HEI delivery site security place restrictions on the free</td>
<td>Students’ natural movement around HEI delivery site was restricted by the police and HEI delivery site security. Students could not walk around freely on HEI delivery site or move through all the gates. This influenced their academic performance because they were prevented to work together on group assignments on HEI delivery site.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>movement of students on HEI delivery site.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students are injured during their interaction with the police and</td>
<td>Police fired rubber bullets at students, students were physically injured.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEI delivery site security.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the #FMF protests, many protesting students became violent on the specific HEI delivery site examined by the current study: buildings were burned down and classes were disrupted by protesters. As a result, the police and HEI delivery site security guards were deployed to regain order. In some instances, police and HEI delivery site security confused protesting students with non-protesting students. This mainly happened because non-protesting students moved past protesters to go to class, the library or to their on-HEI delivery
site residences. Other students were standing close by and observed the protest actions out of curiosity. Participants described this situation as very confusing. According to the participants, all students were targeted or seen as protesters by the police or HEI delivery site security and prosecuted when they were near the protesters, even though they were not partaking in the protests. It was almost as if the police practiced a “no-mercy”, “zero tolerance” approach towards students, regardless of whether they were actually part of the protests or not. This created a degree of fear among participants who sensed that it was as though the police and HEI delivery site security were not on their side: “As long as they catch you, they just arrest you; they don’t want to hear your story”.

In addition to the confusion around protesting and non-protesting students, participants shared the frustration of not being able to move freely on their HEI delivery site. Because of the protests, the police and HEI delivery site security restricted certain areas and closed HEI delivery site gates, hindering students to enter or exit the HEI delivery site, which prevented access to the university or avenues that would have been taken to return to their homes; using important HEI delivery site facilities needed to complete academic assignments were also blocked. It was difficult completing academic assignments, especially group assignments, since moving around in groups was not tolerated by the police or HEI delivery site security. One participant reflected: “We were not allowed to work in groups or walk around on HEI delivery site in groups or you are going to be shouted at”.

Participants voiced an intense fear of physical harm because rubber bullets were fired at students who were perceived to be protesters: “I got shot with rubber bullets, two on the arm, and two at the back”. Various students obtained physical injuries during the clashes with police and HEI delivery site security. One participant who was physically injured while running away from the protesters explained:

I don’t know what happened, but very fast, crisis came. Suddenly they were shooting. Police were shooting the students. I remember, that day I went to the hospital. My left arm got broken and I went to the clinic. During those times when there were people running, I fell and tucked my arm under my body. I was running from the shooting and so I got my arm broken.
Theme 2: Impact of the protest actions on students’ lives

The second main theme was the impact of the protest actions on the lives of participants. They voiced the impact that the protests on their academic work, living arrangements and adjustments to university. Table 4 presents the three sub-themes of this theme.

Table 4
Theme 2. Impact of the protest actions on students’ lives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Associated topics</th>
<th>Formulated Meanings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic impact</td>
<td>Disrupted classes</td>
<td>Protesters entering classrooms, disrupting classes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Missed classes</td>
<td>Loss of academic time, classes was cancelled. As a result, additional pressure to catch up and a very difficult and challenging exam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consequent high academic pressure</td>
<td>High academic pressure because classes had been cancelled and lecturers had to move quickly through syllabi. Negative consequences included that participants did not clearly understand the work since it was difficult to follow lecturers and keep up with the pace. Little room for questions around work not understood and inadequate preparation for the exam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Considering drop-out or lengthened course timespan</td>
<td>Thoughts of drop-out or lengthening the time span of their studies due to poor marks and increased academic pressure caused by the no-class period.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Administrative hassles</td>
<td>Difficulty to register online for the new academic year and having no internet access when off-HEI delivery site.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staying up to date with academic workload despite of challenges</td>
<td>During the no-class period, lectures were of course cancelled. Participants therefore had to master the work on their own through self-study. Some participants indicated that they tried to keep up their academic performance despite the cancellation of lectures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact on living arrangements</td>
<td>Unsafe in HEI delivery site residences</td>
<td>Residences were shot at and experienced as unsafe.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vacating HEI delivery site residences</td>
<td>Having to vacate residences at night, not having alternative housing on such short notice, very disruptive while also struggling to cope with other events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact on university adjustment</td>
<td>Adjustment to university life made more difficult</td>
<td>Co-occurring effects of the protest actions made the adjustment period to the HEI worse for first-year participants. Participants questioned choosing this specific HEI, but after a while adjusted and became accustomed to the protests.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adjustment to academic standards</td>
<td>Some participants described their academic adjustment as more challenging than they were expecting.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants voiced the impact of the protests on several aspects of their academic work. They mentioned that protesters would sometimes violently disrupt classes and that they were afraid of the protestors: “People from the strike, they just enter the classroom. Even the lecturer was scared. The lecturer ran away and it was very scary, but what about us students?” Participants also stated that during the protests academic time was lost, putting additional pressure on them because of missed classes and keeping up with the work through self-studying to be prepared for writing the final exams. Exams were furthermore experienced as extremely challenging due to the loss of class time.

They experienced high levels of pressure in their studies during the time of the strikes. Due to increased time pressures, lecturers had to move at a faster pace through the syllabus to make up for lost time. This led to several negative consequences, including a lack of clear understanding of the work, no time to clarify difficult aspects of the work and difficulty keeping up with the pace that lectures kept. As a result, participants were not adequately prepared for the exam. One participant explained:

> We were really under pressure. Lectures were trying to catch up with the syllabus. So I did what I had to do to catch up. So for us as first-year students, truly speaking, it was pressurising. We tried to listen to what the lecturers were teaching us. I can assure you, they were really fast, because they had to finish what they had to do. So somewhere, somehow, we didn’t clearly understand what we were taught, but we couldn’t just ask: ‘I don’t understand there and there, because you are really fast and could you just please explain that for me.’ But you had to finish your work and keep quiet. So when the exams came, that’s when we noticed that we lost a lot of time during the fees-must-fall strike.

A further consequence was that participants did not perform well and their marks were not what they had aimed for. They stated that they forfeited their privilege of residing in the HEI
delivery site residences due to not meeting the required academic standard for continued residence space in the following academic year. One participant explained:

No, I did not decide to move out of the residence. Somewhere, somehow, as I have said, the strikes affected my academics and I did not pass very well. In order you occupy your room for the next academic year you should reach a certain percentage. From last year, we were told by residence offices, you have to obtain 50% in order to occupy our rooms this year. As from my side, I’m doing, I’m writing exams only. So, my average was 57% and they said that 55% to occupy your room, but it did not happen. So, if the strikes did not happen, I could have maybe reached 70%.

Various participants indicated that they considered dropping out of the HEI or lengthening the time span of their studies to relieve increased academic pressure: “Some of us were considering it to drop out of university, because the academic pressure was very intense, we were very scared”. Participants also talked about their frustrations around administrative hassles. Many participants experienced frustration when they had to register online for the new academic year and not at the HEI delivery site during the protests because they had limited internet access at their homes. One participant said that he did not own a smart phone to access the internet: “My phone is not well connected to internet and I had to go to my family and I had to ask them to help me to register”.

Despite all these challenges, it was interesting to hear that participants kept on working hard in their academic studies. Since no lectures occurred and classes were cancelled, participants mentioned that they had to study on their own. They specifically mentioned they had to stay up to date with their academic work during the no-class period by themselves. They made it their own responsibility to keep up with the workload with the resources provided by lecturers such as slides or resources provided by senior students such as previous exam papers. One participant described it as follows:

I didn’t see a big impact on my marks, because when people started striking, the lecturers gave us the slides [electronic study materials] and we knew where to study everything. When people were striking, I was staying at my place, busy studying. It was like a holiday, but I was studying.
As regards the effect of the protest actions on participants’ living arrangements, participants specifically mentioned that the HEI delivery site residences were unsafe for them to reside in during the protest actions. Residences were shot at with rubber bullets: “What I experienced was that there was war in my residence. We were attacked there”. Because residences were no-longer safe for students to reside in, all students were sent home until further communication from management. Some participants, who lived far away and were unable to go home, went to live with friends. Participants who had no refuge were provided with alternative housing options by the HEI during the protests. Having to vacate residences in the middle of the night was very disruptive while coping with all the events that occurred. One participant reflected:

*You will get SMS’s from management saying that you should evacuate the HEI delivery site, during the night, at 12 o’clock. So some of us stay far from the specific location, some of the students live in Limpopo. And then you receive that message that you should leave the residences for your own safety. Where are you going to get the safety? Where are you going to get money for transport to go home in the middle of the night?*

Finally, the protest actions made the whole adjustment experience far more difficult for participants. The adjustment period from high school to university in itself already amounts to a substantially challenging experience for most first-year students. The participants voiced that the protests made the adjustment period from high school to university even more daunting than the regular adjustment experience would have been, adding increased pressure on them. One participant even questioned his choice of HEI:

*When you come to university, nobody is holding your hand; you had to learn stuff yourself. So, sometimes you felt difficulty, you come to the point of giving up when you want to ask yourself: ‘why did I even come to this place?’*

Another participant said: “It was difficult, because of the ongoing strikes of #FeesMustFall. It made it even harder to adjust to the academic life (standard)”.
Theme 3: Psychological experiences

Psychological experiences permeate and overlap with other themes and sub-themes such as interaction with the police and HEI delivery site security, academic pressure and poor performance and a lack of counselling services to support students who experienced trauma. However, clear psychological aspects were embedded in participants’ experiences and these are worth highlighting despite the overlap, as outlined in Table 5 below.

Table 5
Theme 3. Psychological experiences of trauma and physical harm

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Formulated Meanings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experiences of anxiety, apprehension and fear</td>
<td>Tension and apprehension around protesters and the chaos they caused on HEI delivery site. Anxiety and uncertainty about what was going on around HEI delivery site, fear of being shot by the police or HEI delivery site security, fear of firearms that police carried; overall edginess or anxiety when moving around HEI delivery site during the protests.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traumatic exposure to violence</td>
<td>Witnessing acts of violence, personal experiences of violence, witnessing a shooting, being shot at and injured by the police, intense feelings of total bewilderment, feeling isolated during traumatic experiences because of a lack of support or counselling services to deal with these experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological and emotional pressures</td>
<td>Severe psychological pressure to complete the same amount of academic work with fewer or no classes under fearful circumstances; intense emotional pressure because of constant fear and witnessing emotionally upsetting situations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disappointment and feelings of failure</td>
<td>Feeling disappointed in themselves due to poor academic results that did not meet their own personal standards or expectations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surreal experience</td>
<td>Experiencing protest actions was new and foreign, viewed as something that happens to others, something that is seen on television and not in real life.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants expressed intense feelings of anxiety, apprehension and fear during the protests. They specifically voiced that the presence of police and security on HEI delivery site and seeing the firearms they carried caused feelings of anxiety, apprehension and fear due to the constant danger of getting shot. One participant reflected that they were “scared”, that they “didn’t know what to do” and that there was “shooting” on HEI delivery site. Another participant noted “the fear of getting arrested”, while another was too afraid to leave his own house: “Sometimes I didn’t want to go outside to attend classes, because when I go to classes,
there were police with guns and stuff so I was afraid for my life”. Participants also felt apprehensive due to the constant anxiety of being near the protesters and getting arrested by the police, specifically due to the fact that the police and security targeted residences, for the reason that protesters moved into the residences to hide away from the police. It frequently happened that students were mistaken for protesters. One participant explained: “I was scared to get arrested. As I was saying, we were attacked in the residence. I did not have a chance”.

Participants were also afraid of the protesters and the disruption they caused. One participant said that he could see that some of the female students in the class were traumatised by the protesters disrupting the classes:

*I remember one day when we were in a physics class when they (the protesters) came into the class. There was this one guy in class, he just banged on the door and said: ‘hey hey hey, class dismissed!’ Okay, we were first years; we didn’t know what was happening. Then we just sat there and he went out of the class. Then he came back in with, I think four or five other guys. They were saying ‘hey, we said class dismissed!’, then most of the girls then, you could see that they were traumatised.*

Participants furthermore voiced that the events were traumatic because they either witnessed violence or personally experienced violence, mostly being shot at by the police or security or witnessing a shooting of other students. One participant stated that he and his friend were walking from the library when his friend was injured: “We just heard the guns, rubber bullets passing by us and my friend. He got shot by the police, and it was very painful”.

Participants experienced the protests as extremely psychologically and emotionally demanding or challenging in terms of missed classes and the increased pressure to produce the same quality of work. One participant described it as a “tough time”. However, the same participant reflected on his experience and noted that although the experience was “tough”, they were able to overcome it through “learning something from the experiences of the protests and moving on from there”.

Besides the psychological and emotional pressure experienced around academic work, some participants voiced that they were disappointed in their academic performance due to the protests. Although they passed all their modules, they did not meet their personal expectations and standards. This caused an overall feeling of disappointment among
participants. Some of the consequences of not meeting their personal academic expectations were that they lost their placement in the HEI delivery site residences. This was very stressful for them because it was a requirement to meet the prescribed HEI academic standard for continued residence placement for the following year of studies.

In essence, participants described the whole episode as surreal – they were unaccustomed to protest actions and it was new and foreign to them. As one participant said, it was something that they were “not used to”, something “new and scary that you just see in the movies”. Participants shared that as first-year students originating from a safe environment they found the university environment with the protest actions to be disillusioning and rude awakening.

_Students are demanding their government-promised free education. Participants do not want to be provided with bursaries, but rather good quality free education. This was promised in 1994 but not delivered. Participants perceive the fight for free education as a noble cause even though it created academic and other challenges for them._

**Theme 4: Attitudes towards the university and needs as required from the HEI education system**

Participants expressed their attitudes towards and needs that the university was required to meet during the protest actions. They demonstrated some understanding and empathy towards the HEI as well as their specific needs and areas where assistance was needed from the university during the protest actions. Table 6 presents these categories and sub-categories.
### Table 6
**Theme 4. Attitudes towards the university and needs it was required to meet**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Associated topics</th>
<th>Formulated Meanings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive attitudes towards the HEI</td>
<td>Feelings of understanding and empathy towards the university</td>
<td>Understanding and empathy from some participants towards the university because of the difficult task managing the uncertainty and abruptness of the protests.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University experiences as supportive and resourceful</td>
<td>Strategies implemented by the university during the protests experienced as supportive and included the provision of study resources and extra classes by some lecturers before the final exam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific needs and/or assistance from the HEI in dealing with strikes</td>
<td>Need for provision of alternative accommodation</td>
<td>Participants felt the need for assistance in finding alternative arrangements if they had to vacate residences immediately without prior warning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Need for financial assistance</td>
<td>Need for assistance in terms of monetary aid in the form of bursaries and free education; perceptions of university versus college. Colleagues are perceived as providing more monetary aid to students than universities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Need for stricter regulations to deal with protestors</td>
<td>A need for stricter rules, regulations and consequences to protect students and the university – “if you break, you pay”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Need for better communication</td>
<td>Students and university management should actively listen to each other and alter behaviour accordingly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Need for free access to HEI</td>
<td>Students are demanding their government-promised free education. Participants do not want to be provided with bursaries, but rather good quality free education. This was promised in 1994 but not delivered. Participants perceive the fight for free education as a noble cause even though it created academic and other challenges for them. They consider this a breach of government’s promise of free education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Need for better counselling and medical assistance</td>
<td>Need for additional counselling and medical services to assist during traumatic events.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants expressed positive and sympathetic attitudes towards the university around the difficulties management had to deal with during the protests. One participant acknowledged that the university might have had a difficult task managing the uncertainty of the protests. It was mentioned that the university was placed under pressure by the student protest action due to their extreme and unpredictable nature. The university had no protest-emergency plan in place and was completely caught off guard by the protest actions. It was also a challenge to act in the best interest of all stakeholders involved, including students, management, staff,
protesters, the media and the government. Some participants placed themselves in the shoes of the university and tried to understand their side of the story. One participant mentioned that it must have been a challenging occurrence for university management to manage, control and resolve the situation: “The university management didn’t have it easy, because every decision they could make has a negative effect on a specific group of people. It was hard for them to make a decision that will benefit everyone”.

Participants also experienced the various strategies implemented by the university as supportive. These strategies included the provision of study resources and additional classes by some lecturers to catch up with lost academic time during the student protests. One participant mentioned that the protest action did not have a substantial impact on his academic results: “The lecturers communicated with us through e-fundi. Some lecturers uploaded past question papers there and previous tests. So I got that information, went to my room, studied and prepared for the exams”.

Even though participants expressed empathy and experienced support from the university, they expressed very clear needs for assistance from the university. As mentioned above, students were given short notice from management to vacate residences late in the evening and all students had to make alternative arrangements for accommodation in haste. Participants expressed their need for assistance from the university to make alternative arrangements or provisions if they need to vacate the residences immediately without prior warning: “For future protests and those students staying in res [residence] … if they want them to vacate it, to vacate HEI delivery site, they must arrange some accommodation outside HEI delivery site, because the SMS was send around twelve at night”.

Participants voiced a strong need for assistance in terms of monetary aid, specifically in the form of bursaries and free education. They contended that universities should look at the example provided by colleges, stating that colleges offered more bursaries to students in comparison to universities. They mentioned that job opportunities after graduation were far greater for college graduates than for students with a university qualification. Therefore, colleges created a more conducive study environment than universities:

*I would like to advice – they [universities] must try to attract people who give bursaries, people like at colleges. Because most colleges, like I said,*

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The university was perceived by participants as not applying strict rules and regulations and to (violent) protesters and felt that the latter suffered no consequences implemented by the university. They voiced a need for stricter regulations and implementation of these to protect both the students and the university. It was suggested that the university should implement a “if you break, you pay” principle. Participants felt that this would enforce protesters to take accountability for their actions during protest. One participant gave the following suggestion: “Let’s say when people want to strike; maybe they must be given certain laws”. The significance of the need for stricter rules was emphasised by one participant: “So I think the university must provide regulation that protects us as students, and I think the environment will be protected. If they protect the students, they will feel protected and then they won’t burn the university”.

Communications was another concern raised. Participants voiced their need for improved mutual communication between the students and management. They expressed the need for the class representative to communicate student concerns to management before students “exploded” and acted out through protest actions where university property was damaged because management did not adhere to or was unaware of their concerns:

University management must try by all means to communicate with the students better and as soon as possible, before the students explode. Because it’s not good for anyone. They [the protesters] talk with violence and it’s destructive. They even burned a building when the student exploded [lost control].

While some participants experienced the university as supportive, others felt that the university was unsupportive because the only measure of action that they took to support students during this chaotic time was to deploy the police. One participant explained: “I can’t say they [university management] did nothing, they did something, because all they did was get the police and all that, threatening our safety. Can’t say they did something that was helpful to me”.

The fight for free education was perceived by participants as a noble cause: it was a fight for what was owed but not delivered. They felt a successful outcome might relieve their financial
strain, even though it created academic strain and other challenges for them. One participant who did not participate in the protests mentioned that the fight for free-education is a “good fight”, even if it comes with consequences: “I can’t say I blame those who were protesting, because there are reasons we can clearly have, what they are fighting for. So even if it did put us under pressure”. Another participant, who took part in the protests referred to the broken psychological contract by government when he insisted that, as students, they do not want bursaries or financial discount, but free tertiary education as promised: “Bursaries is not what we want, we want free education. We don’t want financial support; we want free education”.

Participants experienced a lack of support with access to psychological and medical care, explaining that they felt HEI management did not provide victims of the protests with the necessary support to counter the trauma and harm caused. As one participant explained: “Some students were left traumatised. They were not given medical care or psychology stuff”.

DISCUSSION

To understand the current participants’ experiences, it is necessary to connect our understanding with existing research studies and provide the backdrop for contributions for the current body of research. The discussion is structured in terms of the four themes that emerged from the data.

Clashes between students and police and/or HEI delivery site security

The first theme illustrated the friction between the police or HEI security personnel and participants. As indicated, there seemed to be a lack of differentiation of protesting and non-protesting students during the events of the #FMF. They expressed their frustration and disorientation because their access on and from HEI delivery site was restricted and this influenced the effective performance of academic related activities. While using crowd control methods various students were also physically injured.

Langa et al. (2017) present a comprehensive compilation of multiple studies conducted on the #FMF movement. In this report, conflicting interactions between the police or HEI security were mentioned in several cases. For example, at Rhodes University, in an effort to control the protestors, the police fired rubber bullets regardless of students participating in the protest actions or not. The report also included an incident that occurred at the Cape Peninsula
University of Technology where a non-protesting student was forcefully removed from his/her residence and arrested. Such incidences resulted in the fear of physical harm and injuries sustained as a consequence of police and security services. Langa et al. (2017) affirmed similar incidences of restricted movement to and from HEI delivery sites due to closure. A similar strategy was deployed at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology when police also restricted access on the CPUT campus as part of their strategy to regain order on the campus (Langa et al., 2017).

**Contributions**

Against the background of Langa et al.’s (2017) report the current study affirms the confusion that police or HEI security services experienced by not being able to differentiate protestors from non-protestors during violent student protest actions. The current study provides additional insight into students’ experiences of the confusion. As such, it sheds light on the multiple levels of confusion that reigned.

**Impact of the protest actions on participants’ lives**

The participants in the current study described how the protests impacted their lives. Firstly, they emphasised the influence of their experiences during the #FMF on their academic studies. They reported class disruptions and missing classes that were cancelled, which resulted in higher academic pressure to catch up on missed work. Consequently, they faced the risk of needing to extend the duration of their studies or even considered dropping out due to the #FMF protests acting as stressor (Karimshah, Wyder, Henman, Tay, Capelin & Short, 2013). In addition, restricted access to the HEI delivery site complicated registration processes and access to computers and the internet (Cicchinelli & Beesley, 2017).

Some participants nonetheless explained that they were able to continue meeting their academic demands regardless of the negative impact and adversity of the #FMF protests. In the context of adversity, such positive outcomes could be inferred to amount to resilience. Kotzé and Kleynhans (2013) refer to executing academic tasks despite the adversity of the protest actions as academic resilience. Participants of the current study applied self-discipline and self-study as a means to prepare for the exams when they were not allowed access to HEI delivery site to attend classes during protest actions, which resonates with findings by Platow, Mavor and Grace (2013). A study conducted by Dominguez-Whitehead (2011) contrasts to the current study’s findings of academic resilience to meet study demands. The Dominguez-
Whitehead (2011) study expresses additional disruptions where students protested and demanded additional study time to prepare for exams, when their initial preparation time was interrupted through protests.

Secondly, the protest actions impacted on the living arrangements of the participants residing on the HEI delivery site. As a result of unsafe conditions at HEI delivery site residences, students were sent home until further communication from management. Langa et al. (2017) report on cases where students were shot and injured inside their own residences during the #FMF protests. Having a safe environment to study and live in is considered to be a core need, as stated in the Constitution (1996), as well as a key ingredient for academic success (Gopal & van Niekerk, 2018). If students’ needs around safety are not fulfilled, they will not be able to succeed in their academic studies (Gopal & van Niekerk, 2018), seeing that three types of support are essential for student academic success: academic support, social support and monetary support (Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

Living arrangements were also impacted in that participants revealed that they had to vacate their campus residences on short notice, which had financial implications. They explained they had no monetary means to pay for transport home on such short notice. For example, parents could not provide immediate financial assistance to help pay for transport. An extant study indeed found that the lack of family- and financial support has an impact on the academic success of students (Dennis, Phinney & Chuateco, 2005). Participants revealed that they had no alternative place of safety to reside in for the time being. The campus residences were usually considered safe environments that provided them with protection and a supportive learning environment that enabled them to perform academically. This secured environment was ripped away from them. Some participants indicated that they had no resources to support them in this disruptive and demanding situation. Similar findings arose in a study by Gopal and van Niekerk (2018) who found that the experience of students living on HEI delivery site is a key factor for academic success, especially where the safety and security of these students are of concern. No financial provisions were however made for participants in the current study during these disruptions, and no viable solutions provided from the HEI at the time.

Thirdly, participants struggled to adjust to the way in which they were to conduct themselves within the frameworks of the HEI as well as the academic standards required. Such adjustments were experienced as even more challenging compared to the expected transition
process in the absence of additional disruptions caused by the #FMF protests. The entire experience can be described as disruptive: participants felt unsafe, adding additional pressures to the adjustment process of the first-year students. It can be argued that this might have influenced the academic success of first-year students. Liu, Kia-Keating and Modir (2017) found that collective trauma at university caused a risk for poor adjustment at the end of students’ first year of study. The current study is indicative of the necessity for effective support for academic transitions, especially during time of disruptions. Participants did not find current support strategies to be effective and expressed many needs for greater support.

**Contributions**

In contrast to existing studies such as those indicated by Bantham (2018), the current study examined student perspectives of difficulties experienced with their academic studies during times of disruptions caused by #FMF. However, the current study provides new insight into participants’ academic resilience that is, as mentioned, performing academically despite negative experiences. In addition, this study emphasises the implications of evacuating HEI delivery site residences in the absence of providing alternative accommodation or financial support. As such, this study illustrates how participants’ needs are not currently met when adjusting to university under risk-filled conditions.

**Psychological experiences**

Participants in the current study indicated feelings of anxiousness, apprehension and fear regarding the impact of #FMF at the HEI delivery site. One participant injured his arm during the protests and had to rely on medical services from a local hospital outside the HEI delivery site for access to medical help. Traumatic exposure to violence left participants with intense feelings of bewilderment and isolation. They reported a lack of supportive counselling to deal with these traumatic experiences. The overwhelming nature of the #FMF combined with a lack of psychological support meant that participants experienced intense emotional pressure under upsetting conditions. They felt disappointed about their failure to perform academically and were unable to meet their own standards and expectations. They described the protest actions as surreal, that is, strange, unreal and something that happens to other people.

Langa et al. (2017) reports on students’ perceptions of being nervous and fearful. They were apprehensive about finding themselves at the HEI site since, as mentioned, they observed acts of violence enacted by police on protesting students or were themselves victims of violence.
during #FMF. This relates to extant literature. Pilane (2017) reported shallow wounds from rubber bullets, skin rashes from tear gas and burn wounds induced by stun grenades, which were associated with psychological effects such as anxiety, insomnia and suicidal thoughts. The protests led to psychological or emotional responses that were deeply distressing or disturbing (Langa et al., 2017), such as psychological pressure reported from a student at Rhodes University who voiced concerns that the #FMF protest impacted their own and others' mental and emotional wellbeing (Langa et al. 2017). The student questioned whether students would be able to write examinations after the violent clashes between the students and police. A need for additional counselling and medical services to assist during traumatic events was also expressed.

Dominguez-Whitehead (2011) reported experiences of the protest actions as chaotic, stressful and that participants specifically spoke of the emotional impact of these actions. In the current study, participants reported similar experiences where the protest actions were perceived as an unreal experience that was difficult to understand and that happened on the television news or to other people, as has been mentioned.

**Contributions**

Similar to findings by Langa et al. (2017) and Pilane (2017), the current study’s participants expressed experiences of anxiety, apprehension and fear in context of the traumatic exposure to violence during the #FMF actions. Exposure to traumatic events left students with the need to deal with emotions elicited from the violence. The lack of appropriate psychological services as established in the current study left participants feeling isolated during traumatic experiences. Even though psychological services were available at the HEI delivery site, participants felt that following such a traumatic experience, the HEI should have offered and extended special care to support students after the protests. Participants should therefore not have been held solely responsible to access care individually, but rather the HEI should have provided psychological support actively. The emotional and psychological trauma expressed in the current study’ findings link with Langa et al.’s (2017) report on the impact of trauma on academic performance. In addition, the current study refers to participants’ sense of disappointment in themselves due to poor academic results that did not meet their personal expectations. Unlike current literature reports that emphasize the confusion and violent nature of #FMF overall, the current study however enriches the topic with its findings around how
participants experienced the effects trauma on a deep psychological level. As such, the protest actions were experienced as surreal.

**Attitudes towards the university and needs that it was required to meet**

In the present study, the final theme explored the attitudes and needs of participants in relation to the HEI, including their feelings and understandings of the impact of #FMF on university management and their responsiveness. The current study’s participants expressed empathy towards the university management in dealing with the events of the #FMF, as mentioned. They understood that university management employed strategies to oppose the impact of the #FMF protests. Such efforts, however, did not match participants’ needs. A mismatch therefore occurred between participants’ needs and what the HEI offered. For example, the findings of the current study indicated that during times of crisis participants had a need for alternative housing and financial support when they were instructed to vacate their residences on short notice. Participants expressed a need for HEIs to deal with protestors in a strict fashion and hold them accountable for damage incurred. They expressed a need for improved communication with HEI management. Improved communication would entail active and reciprocal listening between students and university management. The participants’ perception of lack of follow-through by government to provide free education as promised since the demise of the Apartheid regime in 1994 was experienced as a broken contract.

These findings dovetail with events on other campuses in South Africa. Popular social media included responses from students who felt sorry for the university management in dealing with issues resulting from #FMF. For example, a Tweet in support of the Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand expressed empathy in his dealing with students who marched to his house as part of the protests (IAmKateRoth, 2016). In terms of student needs and HEI responses in dealing with the protests, students at the Western Cape and the Cape Peninsula University of Technology refused to vacate their residences when requested to evacuate. They explained that they had no alternative housing options and lacked the necessary finances to travel home (Ntongana, Furlongand & Washinyira, 2015). Concerning the destruction of property, disruptions and violence towards non-protestors, Section 11 of the Gatherings Act 205 of 1993 stipulate that the organisers or conveners of protest actions can be held accountable for infringing others constitutional rights or vandalism.
Extant research has blamed HEI communication for disconnection from the protesters and not being in tune with their true needs (Langa, 2017). One student indicated that they set fire on campus because they perceived that the university management was not listening to them. Access to free higher education is central to the #FMF movement and to date this has not been considered to be viable or implemented (Bitzer & de Jager, 2018). The transformed HEI system (post-1994), held possibilities for an improved future for students from poverty-stricken backgrounds to attain a tertiary education (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2011), which endures to date.

Throughout the protest actions, students at the University of Witwatersrand suffered from various physical injuries (Pilane, 2017). Mental health issues were also reported. Wits University failed to lengthen operating hours of their on-campus medical centre. The medical centre was also understaffed and had almost no access to university vehicles to transport injured students to the hospital. HEIs countrywide in fact had to rely on external medical support when their own campus clinics and services could not render appropriate interventions.

**Contributions**

The current study offers unique insights into participants’ perceptions and attitudes around how the HEI dealt with the #FMF. In particular, they recognised the difficulties that the HEI faced and appreciated key resources and strategies implemented to oppose the impact of the protests. However, HEI decisions should be informed by the implications protest responses may have for their students especially when HEI responses require them to vacate HEI delivery site resources such as accommodation. HEI responses did not always meet participants’ needs or expectations. In particular, participants advocated harsher implementation of rules to hold protestors accountable for the impact on their own rights such as access to education, freedom of movement and safety as well as destruction of university property.

In addition, the present study demonstrates the need to develop an open communication channel between students and the university management where frequent feedback is provided to students enabling them to raise concerns and provide a platform that could solve the current lack of communication. Besides open communication, participants emphasised the
importance of HEI management to anticipate concurrent risks associated with violent protests—including psychological distress and access to medical assistance.

Author’s note

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REFERENCES


Regulation of Gatherings Act see South Africa (1993).


CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
3.1 CONCLUSION

This study explored the experiences of rural students at a peri-urban HEI delivery site within the context of the #FMF protest actions of 2016. It aimed to address the lacuna in extant literature around this topic by focusing on the unique and individual experiences of students at a peri-urban HEI delivery site with a large feeding ground of rural students. The study followed a qualitative research approach (Creswell, 2014) and interpretive descriptive design as the research strategy (Sandelowski, 2000) to describe the unique experiences of students during the #FMF protest actions.

The research sample included registered students at the specific University ($N = 15$) who were first year students in 2016 while some second year students were also included. Data collection was performed by using the Mmogo method® ($N = 11$) followed by individual follow-up interviews with two participants of the Mmogo method® session and two additional voluntary participants ($N = 4$). The collected data was analysed by means of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The data analysis process was practically performed by means of sophisticated computer software called ATLAS.ti version 8 (Friese, 2019).

The first objective of this study was to understand the experiences of first-year students at a peri-urban HEI delivery site during protest actions in relation to extant literature.

The violent nature of the #FMF protest actions

Extant literature reported that the #FMF protest actions were characterised by violence (Costandius et. al., 2018). The reasons for the violent nature of the protests were twofold: the violent actions of the protestors as well as responses from police and university security to regulate the violence.

Langa, Ndelu, Edwin & Vilakazi (2017) compiled a research report where the researchers examined several violent protest action occurrences at various South African Institutions of Higher Education. These occurrences were characterised by disruptions where students expressed their dissatisfaction with the lack of access to free higher education. The violent acts included the following: protestors burning down university property and buildings and blocking access to universities through barricades; police firing at protestors with rubber bullets, searching residences and regulating access at university entrances; and physical injuries sustained during protests or responses to manage it. Examples of disruption at the
Cape Peninsula University of Technology included the use of roadblocks made from rocks, stones, burning tires, benches and other objects to prevent employees and non-protesting students from accessing university grounds. This approach was so effective that it led to the coordination of a national one-week shut down of all universities in South Africa that participated in the #FMF protests.

A study was conducted by Roux (2017) at two different South African Educational Institutions to investigate students’ understanding of basic constitutional human rights during the #FMF protest actions. He explicitly mentions an occurrence where students shoved the vice counsellor of a particular university while screaming demeaning comments at him. The violent nature of the protests was visible in the news and social media. The Mail and Guardian reported on 24 February 2016 that students at the Mahikeng campus of the North-West University burned down the administration building (NWU closes Mafikeng, 2016). At many HEIs, the deployment of the police or campus security appeared to be the only intervention able to prevent violence and possible damage to university property. Several reports state that the arrival of the police at the protesting scenes drove violence, and that the police too readily resorted to violent methods of crowd control without proper negotiation with the protesting students (Mutekwe, 2017).

Importantly, the protest actions did not only stay on the university campuses but moved off-campus in certain instances. In October 2015, at the University of the Western Cape, protesting students marched to the National Parliament in Cape Town resulting in conflict between protesters and the national police (Badat, 2016). Bohler-Muller, N., Roberts, B. J., Struwig, J., Gordon, S. L., Radebe, T., & Alexander, P. (2017) reason that methods used by the police to control the protestors should be revised seeing that the outcome of peaceful protests are more effective. Conversely, Langa et al. (2017) argue that the police was not exclusively to blame for the violent nature of the protests. Significantly, it is suggested that HEI leadership and the Ministry of HE and the Department of Higher Education (DHET) should in the future target protest actions in a productive manner to prevent violent student protests (Badat, 2016).

**Experiences during the #FMF protests**

Literature on the effect of the #FMF protest actions and specific experiences of various stakeholders during these protests focused on three main groups: (i) the experiences of
university management, (ii) the influence of the protest actions on the relationship between students and lecturers and (iii) the experience of students.

First, a study conducted by Dominguez-Whitehead (2011) speaks to the experiences of university management showing that participants experienced the protest movement as unlawful, doubtful and resulting in aggressive actions. The existing body of shows the protest actions had an influence on the relationships between students and lecturers (Costandius et al., 2018). Second, the results indicate the protest actions had an emotive impact on the relationships between lecturers and students. The present study found this relationship to be characterised by doubt, apprehension and helplessness while connection and care and a need for change emerged as important motifs after the protest actions.

Third, individual student experiences showed that the protests had an impact on the various dimensions of students’ lives. On an academic level, they caused disruption at the HEIs to the extent that normal academic activities had to be placed on hold (Glover, 2017). Precious time was wasted that was required for examination preparation (HR Pulse, 2015). As a result, students were placed under enormous pressure to prepare for the upcoming examinations. Insufficient preparation for examinations and absenteeism/ the cancellation of lectures led to poor examination results. On a physical level, students suffered from injuries and bodily harm caused by the police and campus security (Langa et al., 2017). As a result, they felt apprehension regarding their physical safety at the HEI (Naicker, 2016). As a last comment, students mentioned that they were frustrated because HEI management was not responding to any grievances raised (Langa, et al., 2017). Dandara, Chimusa and Wonkam (2017) call for more innovative strategies to address student grievances in a head-on fashion to prevent the unfavourable impact of violent protest actions.

Secondly, this study aimed to explore how South African first-year students enrolled at a peri-urban university delivery site experienced the #FMF protest actions. The findings present are categorised according to four themes engendered by the data.

**Clashes between students and police and/or HEI delivery site security**

Examination of the data showed that considerable conflict existed between the police, HEI security personnel and participants (Langa et al., 2017). There was overall confusion where students struggled to differentiate themselves as non-protesting students and the police or HEI security struggled to differentiate between protesting and non-protesting students.
Participants’ access to the HEI delivery site was controlled and they experienced frustration because this had an impact on their academic performance. As a result of crowd control methods various students were injured. The present study confirms the finding by Langa et al. (2017) around the confusion that the police or HEI security services experienced when they were unable to effectively distinguish between protesting and non-protesting students. The present study will contribute to the present extant body of literature by further elucidating the confusion that was experienced on several levels.

**Impact of the protest actions on participants’ lives**

The protest actions had an impact on the various aspects of the participant’s lives. Firstly, they revealed the impact of the protests on their academic studies. Classes were cancelled, putting them under enormous pressure to catch up with work lost. As a result, some participants felt the need to extend the prescribed duration of their studies or drop out completely (Karimshah, Wyder, Henman, Tay, Capelin & Short, 2013). Limited access to the HEI delivery site furthermore impacted access to resources such as computers and the internet (Cicchinelli & Beesley, 2017). Participants in the present study used discipline and self-study when they were denied access to the HEI making it impossible to attend class (Platow, Mavor & Grace, 2013). It was true for some of the participants that they kept up with their academic studies despite the adversity of the protest actions, known as academic resilience (Kotzé & Kleynhans, 2013).

Secondly, safe living arrangements were jeopardised by the #FMF protest actions and students were sent home until further communication from management. A safe learning and study environment is considered a basic human need by the Constitution (1996) and is central to academic success (Gopal & van Niekerk, 2018). When participants had to vacate the residences on short notice it had financial implications for them, they for instance had no monetary means to pay for transport to return home on such short notice. They mentioned that this was an unplanned expense for their parents and that they could therefore not provide immediate financial assistance. Dennis, Phinney and Chuatoco (2005) found that a lack of financial and family support has an impact on the academic success of students. Indeed, no financial provisions were made during these disruptions for participants by the HEI and no viable solutions were provided.
Thirdly, participants experienced the transitioning process from high school as more challenging compared with the expected transition process in the absence of additional disruptions caused by the #FMF protests. They explained their transitioning experience as disruptive where they felt unsafe, adding another challenging element to the first-year transition process. A study by Liu, Kia-Keating and Modir (2017) found that collective trauma at university caused the risk of ineffective university adjustment. The present study would therefore underscore a need for additional support to be offered to first-year students during their transition period, especially during times of adversity such as protest actions.

The study therefore dovetails with extant literature stating that students experienced difficulty around their academic studies during disruption. However, it elucidates the matter further, not least with regard to academic resilience that is, as mentioned, performing academically despite negative experiences. The study further outlines the challenge that arises when students are asked to vacate the HEI delivery site residences on short notice in the absence of additional accommodation or financial support. This indicates that the needs of the participants were not met when adjusting to university during disruptions.

**Psychological experiences**

Participants referred to feelings of anxiousness, apprehension and fear regarding the impact of #FMF at the HEI delivery site (Langa et al., 2017). One participant injured his arm during the protest actions and had to receive medical assistance from a local hospital outside the HEI delivery site. Pilane (2017) reports on the link between physical injuries such as shallow wounds from rubber bullets, skin rashes from the tear gas and burn wounds from stun grenades on the one hand and concomitant psychological effects such as anxiety, insomnia and suicidal thoughts on the other.

Exposure to the violence of the protest actions led to psychological or emotional responses that were deeply distressing. Traumatic exposure to violence left participants with intense feelings of bewilderment and isolation. Yet again, participants reported a lack of support. In this case the HEI did not offer psychological assistance to deal with the distressing conditions of the protests. A need for more accessible counselling services and medical services during protests actions was mentioned. Participants experienced feelings of disappointment in their academic results when they were unable to live up to their own standards and expectations. They viewed the protest actions as strange, unreal and something that happened to other
people, not to them. This relates well to findings of Dominguez-Whitehead (2011) where students spoke of the emotional impact of protest actions.

Langa et al. (2017) reported on students’ perceptions of being nervous and fearful. They were apprehensive about being at the HEI site as they observed acts of violence enacted by police on protesting students or even ended up as victims of circumstance during #FMF. The link between physical injuries reported by Pilane (2017) was associated with psychological effects such as anxiety, insomnia and suicidal thoughts. The protests led to psychological or emotional responses that were deeply distressing or disturbing (Langa et al., 2017). For example, psychological pressure reported from a student at Rhodes University who voiced concerns that the #FMF protest impacted their own and others’ mental and emotional wellbeing (Langa et al. 2017). The student questioned whether students would be able to write examinations after the violent clashes between them and police. A need for additional counselling and medical services to assist during traumatic events was also expressed.

Participants in the present study expressed feelings of anxiety, apprehension and fear in context of the traumatic exposure to violence during the #FMF, as would be expected with a view to extant literature around the topic. The present study however elucidates the matter further. For instance, participants felt alienated by the lack of psychological services offered by the HEI delivery site after the violent and emotionally upsetting protests. Although psychological services were available a need was expressed by the students for the HEI to extend special care to support students after the protests. The HEI should have encouraged psychological health after emotionally upsetting events and should not have placed the responsibility squarely on participants to seek help. This study therefore expands extant literature by unveiling how participants experienced the effects trauma on a deep psychological level. For instance, protest actions were experienced as “surreal” according to participants.

**Attitudes towards and needs to which responses were expected from the university**

Empathy was shown by some of the participants in this study towards the HEI in handling the chaos of the #FMF protest actions. The participants comprehended that certain strategies were put in place to provide assistance but felt these efforts did not meet their needs. A mismatch between student needs and the HEI’s response occurred. For example, during crisis moments in the protests the findings of the present study indicate that participants had a need
for alternative housing and financial support, especially when it was required of them to vacate their residences on short notice (Ntongana, Furlongand & Washinyira, 2015). Participants voiced a need for the HEI to hold students accountable in a stern manner for destruction of HEI property. Section 11 of the Gatherings Act 205 of 1993 in fact stipulates that organisers or conveners of protest actions can be held accountable for violating the rights of others and causing any damage to HEI property. Participants indicated a need for enhanced open communication between HEI management and themselves by which they had in mind reciprocal and active listening between all parties involved. Langa et al. (2017) conducted research at the same HEI delivery site as the current study. They categorised the HEI delivery site as being openly violent and blamed the HEI for being out of touch with the needs of the students (Langa et al., 2017).

The participants of the present study perceived the government to be dishonouring their commitment to provide free education as promised since the demise of the Apartheid regime in 1994, which was experienced by students as a broken promise. Besides the students’ experience of a lack of government support (broken promise for free education), participants also voiced a need for other necessary support during traumatic events. Participants voiced a need for improved counselling and medical assistance to provide effective care and support during traumatic events. Literature includes an example where the University of Witwatersrand failed to extend the opening hours of the campus clinic to assist students who had been physically injured by the violent #FMF protest actions. The campus clinic was short-handed providing only limited access to transport for transferring injured students to hospital (Pilane, 2017).

The present study contributes by providing unique illuminations of participant’s perceptions around the HEI’s handling of the protest actions They noticed that the HEI implemented certain strategies to minimise the negative impact of the protests but found that these were not always aligned to participant’s needs and expectations – of which the lack of additional accommodation when students had to vacate campus is again a telling example. The HEI should in other words be guided by the impact of the protest actions on students when they attempt to cater for student needs. Stricter rules should moreover be applied to keep protesting students accountable for the destruction of university property, as expressed by the participants.
Facilitating open communication between students and the HEI would furthermore facilitate two-sided communication between the parties. This should be performed to solve the lack of communication experienced by participants, who also expressed a need for the HEI management to anticipate possible distressing effects of the protests, including psychological distress and access to medical assistance.

The final objective of this study was to make recommendations for future research with a view to an HEI peri-urban delivery site. These will be discussed once the study’s limitations have been addressed below.

3.2 LIMITATIONS

The present study is limited to qualitative experiences of a limited sample of students at a peri-urban HEI delivery site. Such limitations should be considered by future researchers when conducting research on student experiences during protest actions in different settings.

The research setting included one delivery site of a specific HEI in South Africa. In addition, only students who experienced the #FMF protest actions in their first year at the HEI participated in this study. Findings of this study can therefore not be generalised to all student experiences such as those of older students at more advance year-levels of their studies.

The sample comprised predominantly male, African students, while it is possible that female students as well as male students from other cultural backgrounds may have had different experiences. We know from literature that access to culturally meaningful support in dealing with adversity is invaluable in meeting demands (Theron, Liebenberg & Ungar, 2015). Accordingly, culturally embedded examinations of students’ experiences may offer valuable elucidations of first-year experiences.

Methodological limitations included logistical and administration timeframes, the quality of data recorded in group format as well as conducting the group session in English. Regarding the accessing relevant participants, the researcher is ethically bound to access participants via a trusted gatekeeper. The gatekeeper resigned during the recruitment and data gathering phase of the present study and a new gatekeeper was recruited. The newly appointed gatekeeper assisted with the recruitment of participants for the research sessions.
The Mmogo method® session was conducted on a Saturday morning to accommodate participants’ class schedules: this in fact was the only time available for all participants to attend. It might have been an inconvenient time for many students to attend. In order to overcome participant access limitations, the researcher scheduled additional individual follow-up interviews in time slots that suited the participants.

The quality of some sections of the recording in the group format of the Mmogo-method® data collection was poor. The recording quality was influenced by how clearly or loudly participants spoke as well as noise from outside the venue where the data was collected. The researcher relied on detailed field notes and moving the recorder closer to participants when it was their turn to speak, hence to optimise recording the data accurately. Although all participants agreed to communicate in English as a common language across different cultures, some participants found it challenging to express them in this language. Even with an interpreter present, though, participants expressed themselves in English. In future, relying on multilingual researchers and translators skilled in the use of the methodology may provide greater comfort for participants to switch between languages.

3.3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

3.3.1 Recommendations for the individual

The findings of the present study could inform first-year university students of the possible impact protest actions or disruptions may have on their study experiences; and to learn from the experiences of previous students. The findings could assist other students who experienced the #FMF protests to resonate with (some) aspects of the experiences of their peers (the participants). This could unlock the value of social support and connection to speak about the disruption of the trauma.

These findings could also be employed around practical suggestions to future students who may possibly be exposed to emergency or disruptive situations with a view to putting in place supportive measures. These measures could include improved awareness of the possible channels to follow when they seek help and support.
3.3.2 **Recommendations for the HEI**

Even though the study focussed on the year of 2016, the results could be beneficial towards informing the university currently and in future in case of protest actions or disruptions. The extent of the #FMF protests in the country has demonstrated that HEIs should be better prepared for similar events. By exploring the perspectives of participants the present study indeed offers enhanced understanding regarding the unique dynamic that existed for the duration of the protest actions.

One of the main findings was that ineffective communication occurred between the university and first-year students. The study therefore recommends regular dialogue with students and establishing open communication channels to avoid tension prior to protest actions.

Another recommendation is to include the development and implementation of an integrated plan. For example, a Holistic Stress Prevention Plan (HSPP) to provide preventative solutions to prepare students for the possible physical and psychological distressing experiences they may encounter during disruptive events such as the #FMF protests. This HSPP could follow an integrated approach that would cover various aspects. The plan should be aimed at minimising the destructive impact of protest actions or disruptions on student’s lives. It should also address the idea of proactively preparing all stakeholders that could be affected or involved in protest action: students, university staff, lecturers, campus security and university management as well as external stakeholders who may be involved such as the national police, regulating bodies influencing education policies, and others).

It should be worthwhile to educate students around their rights when they want to participate in legalized protest actions, but also to recognise the consequences of illegal protest actions. Students should be made aware of the availability of support and resources that the university and lecturers provide such as e-learnings placed on the HEI electronic platform, like the HEI website and e-fundi. Using e-learning provides students with alternative access to learning resources at times when it may not be possible to access the HEI delivery site. Another aspect that could be included in the HSPP would be to secure emergency housing options and the provision of food for students once they needed to vacate the on-campus residences on short notice. Because participants experienced the #FMF protests as significantly traumatic and indicated a need for psychological support, the university should ensure that campus counselling services and other support services are sufficient and effective during similar
events. Information regarding processes that should be followed and support services that are available during protest actions should be accessible and in a format that would be simple and readily comprehensible.

3.3.3 Recommendations for future research

The present study explored the meaning that first-year students at a specific university delivery site attached to experiencing the #FMF protest actions. Recommendations may include extending this study to various different HEI contexts while including senior pre-graduate and post-graduate students to obtain a sense of their individual experiences. Future studies should aim to include a representative sample of students across different backgrounds and cultures to enrich research understandings even further. Future studies can explore positive and effective coping strategies that students used to deal with academic and personal pressure.
REFERENCES


Constitution see South Africa (1996).


Regulation of Gatherings Act see South Africa (1993).


APPENDICES

APPENDIX A  CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH PROJECT

Dear participant

You are hereby invited to partake in this study conducted by the StudyWell research programme at the North-West University.

Please take some time to read the following information on the research project, and ask the researcher any questions you may have concerning the project that might be unclear to you. Participation in this research study is completely voluntary. At no point will you be mistreated or negatively affected if you do not wish to participate. If you however choose to participate, it is very important that you do so voluntarily. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time without reprisal or prejudice, even after you have agreed to partake. Below, you will find important information on the research project, the researchers involved in the project and information for participants who want to participate in this project.

1. PROJECT INFORMATION
   Title of the project: Experiences and well-being of students at the North-West University: Developing and testing an integrated framework
   Ethical approval number: NWU-RE-2014-0165
   Principal researcher: Prof Karina Mostert
   Address: North-West University, Faculty of Economic and Management Science, WorkWell Research Unit, Potchefstroom, 2531
   Contact details: info@studywell.co.za

2. RESEARCHER QUALIFICATIONS
   Karina Mostert is a Professor in Industrial Psychology. She obtained her PhD in Industrial Psychology in 2003 on the topic of employee burnout and work engagement in the South African Police Service and is a rated researcher (level C2) at the South African National Research Foundation. She primarily studies the psychological well-being of university students and focuses on student demands and resources, student burnout and engagement, student well-being and psychological resources that can assist students in coping with their university experience.
Vera Roos has been a senior research professor in the Africa Unit for Transdisciplinary Health Research (AUTHer) at the North-West University’s Potchefstroom Campus since 2013. Vera is a social gerontologist, trained as a clinical psychologist, and has a background in community psychology. She focuses on relational and collective well-being of older people and communities in relation to contextual realities by eliciting strengths and competencies. Vera’s theoretical approach, that the broader environment informs the continuous interactions between people, provided the background for the development of the Mnogo-method, a visual data-collection method. To date, she has published widely in peer-reviewed papers in national and international journals and contributed to chapters in textbooks. Vera is an NRF-rated scientist at level C1.

Lelanie Malan is an independent research psychologist that has worked on several projects, as well as consulting students with regard to their research needs. She completed her internship in research psychology at the Psychology department of the North-West University Potchefstroom campus in 2012 and registered as an independent research psychologist in 2014. She is also trained as a clinical psychologist and registered independently in January 2016. Her previous research experience includes publications of research papers, attending and presenting at international conferences, completing an internship at the Oxford University, assisting students with data analysis and managing projects. Lelanie is currently a senior lecturer at the Psychology department of the North-West University Potchefstroom campus and collaborates in research within the psychology department, as well as social work with a special interest in the well-being of older people and children.

Megan Greeff is a Master student in Industrial Psychology at the North-West University. She is currently busy with her Mcom in Industrial Psychology, focusing on the experiences of first-year students during the Fees Must Fall protests.

3. PROJECT SUMMARY
The long-term aim of the StudyWell project is to develop a valid, reliable and cultural sensitive online analytical processing (OLAP) tool to empower the NWU to proactively monitor student adjustment, wellbeing and success. The project focuses on the validation of a theoretical framework in order to explore first-year student’s experiences in terms of demands and resources, the validation and development of several cultural sensitive instruments within the framework in order to profile the entering status and adjustment processes of new first-year students and to determine important predictors of student well-being and success at the NWU. The project forms part of the broader framework of the Student Access, Retention, and Success framework of Prof Martin Oosthuizen’s office. Information gained from this study will be presented to the University and relevant stakeholders in order for them to implement changes and ultimately to provide current and future students at the University with a rewarding first-year experience.

4. INFORMATION FOR PARTICIPANTS
Who may participate? (Inclusion criteria)
You fit the inclusion criteria if you are a student of the NWU.
Who may not participate? (Exclusion criteria)
Anyone who recently experienced a traumatic incident.

Study approval

Ethical permission from the ethics committee of the North-West University was obtained (name of project: StudyWell: Student Well-Being and Success; Ethics number: NWU-HS-2014-0165).

What are the responsibilities of participants?

You will be expected to partake in a small group, where you will be presented with a basic question on your experiences as a university student, where after you will be expected to make a visual representation using the material provided (e.g. clay, sticks, and beads). You will be encouraged to participate in the discussions. Two sources of data will be obtained; visual data are obtained by means of photographs of the visual presentations, and textual data of the transcriptions of the discussions concerning the visual representations.

If you agree, you will be expected to attend a single semi-structured interview arranged at a time that is suitable and convenient for you. Interviews will approximately be an hour long (this may vary). You may ask about questions about uncertainties and concerns, and report any feelings of discomfort for which you will receive free counselling at the psychological services of the University.

Interview location

Your group session/interview will be conducted in a telephonic format, as a follow-up interview.

Interpretation services

Interviews will be conducted in English or Afrikaans. Please indicate your preference

☐ English
☐ Afrikaans
☐ Setswana
☐ Other, please specify: _____________________________________________
What are the benefits of taking part in the research?
The direct benefits for you as a participant will be the opportunity to share your personal experiences of studying at a Higher Education Institution (HEI). You will also learn about other people’s experiences which may confirm your experiences. You may also request counselling if necessary, which will be provided to you by the University.

An indirect benefit is that your involvement may aid the NWU to better understand the nature of its students’ experiences in order to provide the necessary resources and assistance for you and students in the future.

What are the possible risks of taking part in the research?
You may experience some discomfort by sharing your experiences with the researchers and in a group context. If the need arise, a reflective or therapeutic session will be arranged by a trained professional. You will also be referred to student counselling services to assist you in any way you need.

How will risks be minimised or prevented?
The risks in participating in this study are minimal. In addition, safety measures will be in place to prevent any predetermined possible psychological or physical harm to study participants. Registered clinical psychologists will be on standby if you are in need of counselling services. These services are freely available to you. To protect your privacy, confidentiality and anonymity a selected interview room will be soundproof and secured. However, please take note that only partial confidentiality can be ensured since the data will be collected in a group setting. Group norms of respect will be introduced to treat the information shared in the group as confidential. Tape recorder data will immediately be encrypted and transferred to password protected clouds. Hereafter data on recorders will safely be erased.

Who will have access to the research data?
The researchers and interpreters (if needed) will be present during the group sessions/interviews. Members of the research team, including a co-coder and a peer researcher, will also have access to interview information. Please note that they will not have access to your identifying characteristics. All identifying data/information related to race, demographic details, age and ethnicity will be substituted with nicknames unrelated to your identifying characteristics when recorded data is transcribed by the researcher. Any identifiable information will be coded by a coding system. Nevertheless, all above mentioned individuals are obligated by law and their professional ethical guidelines not to disclose any information you share during an interview. Apart from these individuals, no information will be shared with anybody without explicit consent from the participant. Additionally, if you make use of counselling services, information shared within these sessions will not be disclosed to the researcher or any other relevant party of the NWU. Information will be safely stored for five years, after which it will be destroyed.
Note: Research records might be inspected by the research ethics committee members if necessary. If you feel that your private research details have been exploited in any way, you are encouraged to report to the researcher who will then take legal action.

Will you be paid to participate in the study and are there costs involved?

You will not be paid to partake in this study. Refreshments will be available before the onset of the group sessions. There will be no personal costs involved if you choose to partake.

How will the study findings be communicated?

Study findings will be published as articles in scientific journals which you are allowed access to. Results will be reported in general with no identifying characteristics. The researcher will provide you with relevant information if you wish to access it.

If you have any other queries, you are welcome to contact the StudyWell research team (details provided above). Concerns and/or complaints may be reported to the Health Research Ethics Committees at the North-West University. A copy of the informed consent will be provided to you for personal record keeping purposes.

5. DECLARATION BY PARTICIPANT

In signing this form I declare that I have been informed that the purpose of the research is to explore my experience as a registered student of the NWU. My participation will involve that I will assist in a data gathering process where I will visually represent my experience as a student at a HEI, using sticks, clay and beads and further participating in a group discussion and a semi-structured interview.

I understand that there are no anticipated risks associated with my participation in the study. I recognize that the results of the study may be published and that my personal particulars (identifying information) will not be revealed. The NWU will maintain confidentiality of all records, material and recordings. I have been informed that I will not be compensated for my participation.

I have been informed that any questions I may have concerning this research or my participation before or after my consent, will be answered by the researchers of this study. I am aware of the fact that I may withdraw my consent and discontinue participation at any time of the research process, without penalty or loss of benefit to myself. I take note that discontinuing my participation will have to be indicated in written format. By signing this consent form, I am not waiving any legal claims, rights and remedies.

By signing below, I __________________________
agree to take part in a research study entitled: Experiences and well-being of students at the North-West University: Developing and testing an integrated framework.
I declare that I have read this information and consent form and it is written in a language with which I am fluent and comfortable. I have been provided with an opportunity to discuss any queries/uncertainties. I voluntarily take part in this study. I am aware that I may decline or withdraw at any time, without being penalised. I may be asked to leave the study before it has finished, if I or the researcher is of opinion that this will not be in my best interest. In such a case, my recorded data will be destroyed (not included in the study).

Signed at (place) __________________________ on (date) __________________________ 2018.

_________________________  __________________________
Signature of participant    Signature of witness

1. DECLARATION BY RESEARCHER

I (name) __________________________ declare that I thoroughly explained the information in this document to __________________________. I encouraged him/her to ask questions with regards to any uncertainties and took time to appropriately answer them. I am confident that he/she understands all aspects of the research as discussed above.

Signed at (place) __________________________ on (date) __________________________ 2018.

_________________________  __________________________
Signature of researcher    Signature of witness
APPENDIX B  TURN-IT-IN REPORT

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APPENDIX C  DECLARATION OF LANGUAGE EDITING

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DECLARATION OF LANGUAGE EDITING

I, Juan Etienne Terblanche, hereby declare that I edited the dissertation entitled:

The #FeesMustFall protests in South Africa: Exploring first-year students’ experiences at a peri-urban university delivery site

for M. Greeff for the purpose of submission as a postgraduate research degree. Changes were indicated in track changes and implementation was left to the author.

Regards.

[Signature]

Prof. J. E. Terblanche, Cum Laude Language Practitioners (CC)