Considerations for higher education to enhance economic security and sustainability in South Africa and beyond

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Abstract: Higher education (HE) must equip youth with skills for economic development, security and sustainability, which is central in the SDGs' 2030 Agenda. South Africa (SA) intends to partly achieve Agenda 2030 through its National Development Plan, by improving youth's access to HE. However, SA's HE subtly trains employable graduates, yet the country suffers ascending unemployment. This defeats SA's intentions. Using vygotsky's zone of proximal development, this paper aimed to understand students' discourse on HE, because this is central to the ways they acquire and use HE knowledge, for sustainable economic security. Thematic data analysis was used on findings from three first-year focus group discussions. Most students viewed education as supposed to be passively passed to them. This discourages life-long learning and potential innovations to contribute towards economic security and sustainability. HE institutions must promote self-reliance in student learning to encourage their contribution towards bettering their communities' economic status.

Keywords: economic sustainability; higher education; HE; Southern Africa region; sustainable development; tutor; first-year student.

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1   Introduction

The 2030 Agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) intends to enhance global socio-economic progress and justice (United Nations, 2015). Countries globally have subscribed and committed to achieving the 2030 Agenda, and its various targets. To this effect, South Africa (SA) has been part of the process of formulating Agenda 2030 and through its National Development Plan (NDP), it designed possible actions towards realising the agenda's targets (Casazza and Chulu, 2016). However, SA is already behind in this global commitment. For example, Casazza and Chulu (2016) show that by the time SA renewed its commitments to socio-economic progress and justice in 2015, it had not yet achieved most of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Therefore, SA's

success in achieving its commitments enlisted in the NDP, may require a renewed or enhanced approach in different aspects including access to economically and context relevant training for higher education (HE) students. But SA has committed to improving young people's access to HE through the NDP[1] – despite the seemingly limited scrutiny on the regional economic relevance of the curriculum in HE.

Globally mere access to HE is usually viewed as providing a potential for economic progress and justice. Hence, there are various global existing and emerging research interests, and pedagogical transformation discourses such as critical pedagogy, critical digital pedagogy, scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL), and HE for sustainability (Dunpath et al., 2021; Lunevich, 2021; Panait et al., 2022). There is some sense of HE for sustainability steering the discourse on HE towards encouraging students to be able to create sustainable economic activities that could improve their, and their communities' lives. However, this continues to require more research and practice especially in the Southern Africa region, which joined these discussions relatively late – compared to the global discourse (AdvanceHE, n.d.; Machado and Davim, 2022). SOTL and pedagogical discourses are also critical because they seek to improve HE accessibility in various countries whose societies are largely divided (Blignaut, 2021; Correia and Kinchin, 2022; Mbeve and Mhlanga, 2022; Mello et al., 2022).

Furthermore, there is increasing interest on how HE can contribute to sustainability in topics such as complex processes of global transition to green economy, addressing myriad of issues related to globalisation, and international crises that affect sustainable socio-economic progress (Panait et al., 2022; Machado and Davim, 2022). But the current paper expands the focus beyond problems that exist within the teaching and learning context in HE – to economic contributions of HE knowledge beyond the period of university training for students. The focus of the paper contributes to the discussions around how HE can be used in transforming the economic arena in the Southern Africa region, to achieve economic stability and progress despite currently existing challenges. Thus, the paper adds to the HE for sustainability literature globally.

One of the key challenges, related to HE, in the Southern Africa region is the lack of economic security for graduates. The region's HE may arguably not be offering sufficient skills, and a sense of responsibility for HE graduates to participate in creating a sustainable economy by finding possibly long-term innovative ways of generating income – other than mainstream employment ideologies. What seems to contribute largely to graduates over reliance on employment as the only possible source of income is the dominant discourse of the current Southern Africa HE which is founded on capitalist-based systems. Primarily, capitalism feeds from a circle of labour creation, and exploitation of that labour – in the context of this paper, capitalism relies on HE to train employable graduates, and hire them to produce high-quality profits. Thus, the most pressure that HE graduates face is to secure jobs through employment.

Globally, employment is expected to improve graduates (at micro-), their families (mezzo-), and their countries (macro-level) economic progress, sustainability, and address issues such as poverty and inequality (Casazza and Chulu, 2016). However, in the Southern Africa region, this intention cannot be achievable when the rates of HE graduates underemployment, unemployment, and poverty are high (Porter, 2017; Statista, 2022; Trading Economics, 2023; World Bank Group, 2020). But SA's HE is well-positioned to contribute effective regional economic transformation and creating micro-, mezzo-, to macro-level economic sustainability. This is because, despite that the proportion of students who access HE in the region remains low, SA is an important

Southern African hub for HE, and attracts a high population of local and regional students yearly (International Consultants for Education and Fairs, 2017; Statistics South Africa, 2019).

Understanding the paradoxical expectations for graduates to economically succeed through employment, when there is too high rate of unemployment, underemployment, and in other cases lower income, this paper's objectives are to understand;

1   students' framing of HE

2   the role of higher education institutions (HEIs)

3   possible learning and teaching approaches that may be useful in creating graduates that are economically innovative, self-reliant, and resilient – for their own, and their communities' benefits.

The paper argues that other than relying on employment, this could promote attainable, just, better, and sustainable economic progress.

Graduates who are responsive to contemporary economic challenges in SA are well-equipped and needed to address some of the 2030 Agenda's Goals (1, 4, 8, 9, 11 and 13). To achieve these goals, an involved and dedicated society is required. For example, Target 1.4. of Goal 1, hopes that the world must have ensured that all women and men access basic services in 2030. It also hopes that they should have ownership and control over land and other forms of property by 2030. While these are fundamental, access and ownership of resources may not be enough to promote economic progress and sustainability. If these resources are not used innovatively, they may not yield expected economic outcomes, hence life-long learning and motivation for innovations is a need for HE graduates. Thus, as also claimed in Target 4.4 of Goal 1, youth need to be skilled for and motivated to engage in entrepreneurship to support and enhance economic progress, and justice.

In support of the global plans to achieve Agenda 2030, HEIs have a paramount responsibility to equip youth to be role players in various levels, as also argued by Ruiz-Mallén and Heras (2020). However, the meaning of this remains less explored. As a result, how it must be incorporated in teaching and learning is not clear. What is done so far in HEIs is an attempt to improve resilience, linking people to the planet and profit; which is important in addressing some of the 2030 Agenda goals (Ferguson and Roofe, 2020; de los Reyes et al., 2022). But the bigger challenge, as discussed above, is that most of the ideologies towards sustainability are focused on equipping students to be employable (Blackley et al., 2020; Fomunyam, 2020; Ramrathan, 2021), when there are limited jobs for the populations such as in the Southern Africa region.

Owing to; a strong focus by HEI's to creating employable graduates, and the high demand of qualifications by students, for the purposes of job hunting, HE qualifications have constantly been globally commodified (Tholen, 2022; Tomlinson and Watermeyer, 2022). Resultantly, Blackley et al. (2020) argues that it has become difficult to separate the role of HE from capitalism in the African context. As such, many other studies have reflected the need for HEI curriculums to be responsive to the 4th Industrial Revolution, and their framing suggest that this will ensure that graduates are employable and efficient for their employees (Fomunyam, 2020). Therefore, assessments of HEI students have been designed in a way that seems to merely measure their understanding and how they may apply the concepts they learn in class in workplaces. Kargozari and Tafazoli (2013), provide some examples of static and problematic assessments. These are, firstly, the

summative assessment which usually provides a summary of students' achievements at the end of the course. The second is informative assessment which aims to provide feedback through the learning period of the student, to ensure that the students may put more effort to improve on what they seem to be performing poorly and pass (Kargozari and Tafazoli, 2013).

The problem with these assessments is that they reinforce the perception that academic success means being able to competitively pass with higher grades. This is relevant for many HEIs that seek to fit in the global competition of producing more highly graded graduates, so that they become relevant and recognisable (Bird and Mugobo, 2021). Thus, feeding into the capitalist system whose interest is to produce the best labour to use for its profits, such an approach affects the students' ability to seek other ways that they could independently (without relying on employment) use the knowledge for their economic sustainability. Additionally, it exerts pressure on the academics employed by the HEIs. Because HEIs are pushing towards high production and teaching bulk of students leading to work overload (Lee et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the approach to equip graduates to be employees affects individuals when they get disappointed by failing to secure employment. This challenges them to question their capabilities and acceptability in their community. It further distracts them from creativity and innovations for entrepreneurships, and other independent brave ways of creating sustainable income. On a larger scale, we have seen many protests claiming the economic irrelevance of HE in society, as exemplified in SA by #FeesMustFall and other associated movements (Behrens, 2022; Habib, 2022). Furthermore, unemployment has yielded societal instabilities in SA as seen through different xenophobic attacks and attitudes that believe foreign nationals are taking jobs from South Africans (Masenya, 2017; Okun et al., 2020; Ukwandu, 2017). All these instabilities seem to be rooted in greater dependance of society on the government, and employment as a source of sustainable income.

As shown above, it seems most of HEIs' work has focused on other issues that have less to do with enhancing economic progress, justice, and sustainability – especially in the Southern Africa region. Over time, some HEIs have attempted to keep their goals aligned with concurrent socio-economic challenges (Pan and An, 2021). Research has also highlighted the need for this contemporary and futuristic education in HE, including questioning how HEI curriculums can respond and prepare society for the ravages of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) (Ramrathan, 2021). In addition, a wealth of research has been produced from the lessons that were accumulated and can be used to continue improving the teaching and learning praxis during and post-COVID-19 (Muangmee et al., 2021).

Research and intervention movements have also focused on other contemporary important issues such as, decolonising the curriculum to improve social integration and promote knowledge from the pre-colonised societies, in Africa a concept Africanisation has become dominant (Hlatshwayo and Shawa, 2020; Kayira et al., 2022; Minga, 2021). But most of this work focuses on transforming ideologies within the teaching and learning spaces, it does not seem to emphasise the need to promote economic ownership, progression, and sustainability, which is a significant need in the Southern Africa region. The primary aim of this paper is to understand students' discourse on HE, because this is central to the ways they acquire and use HE knowledge, for a sustainable economy.

2   Theoretical framework

The current paper aligns with Vygotsky's approach to teaching and learning, as he describes it through the theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Notwithstanding, it is not easy to utilise such a classical western theory in the context where discourses of decolonising the curriculum are prominent. However, in analysis and enhancing the arguments in this paper, this theory becomes useful. The primary reason that the paper employed the ZPD as a tool of analysis is the potential that the approach offers for the output of education. Firstly, using ZPD as an educational tool means that the learner's knowledge and interests to learn are central to the teaching process. This approach is similar to Correia and Kinchin's (2022) ideologies of accessing hidden complexity of education for sustainability through pedagogical resonance and working together with students to create their own learning with their tutors.

If students work together with their tutors, they become co-creators of the knowledge and may feel more ownership of their learning process (Konstantinos and Stavros, 2022; Machado and Davim, 2022). The feelings of ownership for the learning process, and the knowledge creates in students the required rational, and connects objective thinking to more personal, subjective knowledge structures – which when well channeled may provoke meaningful economic innovations (Correia and Kinchin, 2022; Machado and Davim, 2022). In addition to the similar lines is Odame et al.'s (2022) arguments that suggest the importance of associating emotional intelligence with sustainable development, and good citizenship. From the current paper's perspective, this can also be connected to the students' personal needs, and again, innovative ideologies. In this manner, as also shown in scaffolding of knowledge – from the students' ZPD to the advanced level of thinking – the more skilled person improves or 'scaffolds', the learner's knowledge by adding to what they already know, and in respect to their needs (McLeod, 2012; Sage, 2022).

Secondly, the use of ZPD in the current paper means that the learner is strongly encouraged, by influencing their culture and regular way of doing things, to own the knowledge that they develop over time as they approach their higher order thinking skills (HOTS) (Jarvis and Baloyi, 2020; Konstantinos and Stavros, 2022). The hope is that after learning is complete through ZPD, the learner must be a critical thinker who is able to use HOTS autonomously. The learner is actively involved with the teacher and other peer learners, and learning is collaborative (Mishra, 2013). Thirdly, we ZPD is used in this paper because it has better potential to stimulate life-long learning for learners. By expanding from here, it can be argued that it then becomes possible that:

1   the learner becomes more invested in the knowledge they acquire

2   they can effectively and innovatively use this knowledge to develop economic activities that will benefit themselves, and their communities.

With respect to the use of the ZPD theory, learning becomes an adventure for learners. Thus, a comfortable, culturally challenging and an opportunity to explore fascinating, and new economic possibilities (Freeman, 2021; Jarvis and Baloyi, 2020). In this sense, learning can possibly be a life-time self-driven activity. Thus, moving the learners from their known realities to their developed and designed possibilities. In this way, learners will start viewing life and its circumstances such as unemployment, and other economic threats as opportunities for innovations and solution explorations – an approach that will

enhance the economic endeavours and advance economic progress globally. Noteworthy, in other studies, ZPD oriented teaching has seen success of the students, although these have not explored their postgraduate's economic success (Kargozari and Tafazoli, 2013; Poskitt et al., 2021). However, there is a sense that such an approach may be implemented, and its outcomes are promising. Hence using Vygotsky's ZPD, this paper seeks to understand students' discourse on HE, because this is central to the ways they acquire and later use HE knowledge, potentially towards contributing to the achievement of Agenda 2030.

3   Methods

3.1   Study site

The data used in this paper was extracted from a larger qualitative research project (see also Mbeve and Mhlanga, 2022) that was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of a Sunday Tutorial Programme (STP) administered by the university of our focus (hereafter referred to as Z^2)'s campus housing and residence life office (CHRLO). CHRLO is a university Z's department which is responsible for the well-being and academic success of all students in the university's then (2019) 17 residences. Out of these 17 residences, 14 of them accommodated first-year students.

University Z has five faculties:

1   commerce

2   law, and management

3   engineering and the built environment

4   health sciences

5   humanities.

Five of the university Z's residences were used as venues for the STP. The venues were divided respective to the five faculties. The approximate total of all tutors in the five venues was 40. The tutors were all registered at university Z as students. They were recruited from students studying at least 3rd year of the courses that they applied to tutor – the highest level of study for tutors was PhD. Most of them had been tutoring for the programme for the past six years. By the time of the current study, the STP were conducted from 19:30 hrs to 21:30 hrs every Sunday of the university calendar. All first-year students that lived in the university residences were expected to attend the STP. By the time the data collection of this study was conducted, university Z had more than 33,000 full-time and part-time students registered in its five faculties. Of the 33,000, 5,664 were first-year students. Of the 5,664 first-year students, about 1,132 of them lived in the university residences.

3.2   Data collection process and sample

Before data collection for the broad research project, ethics approval was acquired from the University of the Witwatersrand Human Research Ethics Committee (non-medical). The project was approved in year 2018. The project was also approved by the registrar of

university Z and finally the CHRLO. Then data collection was conducted from April to September 2019.

Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used for the recruitment of the participants. A relatively equal number of participants were recruited (both tutors and students) per each of the five STP's venues. One-on-one interviews and focus group discussions (FDGs) were used as methods of data collection. These were administered using semi-structured interview schedules. In the final sample for the broader study, there were eight one-on-one interviews with second year students who had benefited from the program in the previous year when they were first-year students. In addition, 22 tutors were also interviewed, and one tutorials coordinator from the mainstream tutorial program. The mainstream tutorials coordinator was interviewed for this study, because of her long-term experience, so her views were invaluable. Furthermore, six FGDs with first year students were conducted and, in each group, there were no less than 10 participants.

3.3   Data used in this paper

Out of the total sample of the participants of the broader research project, the findings that were used in this paper are from the following participants (Table 1)

Table 1   Participants whose data was extracted for this paper

Pseudonym	*Faculty*
First-year students	
Sanele	Engineering and the built environment
Palesa	Commerce, law, and management
Amanda	Commerce, law, and management
Lerato	Commerce, law, and management
Buhle	Commerce, law, and management
Pearl	Commerce, law, and management
Pawpaw	Health sciences
Strawberry	Health sciences
Apple	Health sciences
Sihle	Health sciences
Kiwi	Health sciences
Banana	Health sciences
Orange	Health sciences
Babalo	Health sciences
Ayanda	Health sciences

As it can be seen in Table 1, the data used in this paper is from participants who were registered in the following faculties:

1   health sciences

2   commerce, law, and management

3   engineering and built environment.

The choice of presenting the findings from only these three faculties was primarily based on the validity of the quotations in supporting the themes that had emerged in the initial stage of data analysis for the current paper. Thus, the quotations presented in this paper were those that were well-aligned and demonstrated the overall discourse that this paper showcases. Data analysis was conducted following a six-step thematic data analysis as suggested by Clarke et al. (2015):

1   authors familiarisation with the data

2   generating initial codes

3   searching for themes

4   reviewing themes

5   defining themes

6   producing/writing this current paper.

4   Summary of themes

Table 2 describes the themes that emerged and were respectively used in this paper. The themes are arranged in such a manner that shows the logically flowing narrative of students' perceptions, views, and challenges that they faced during their tutorial attendance. Through this thematic narrative, the paper streamlines a central understanding of how students understood the learning discourse. The paper then provides critical analysis to show some of the constructive and problematic views that may potentially determine how the knowledge that students acquire through their HE training can be used to participate in economic progress and sustainability, for themselves and the communities around them.

Table 2   Themes in this paper

Theme	Themes
1	Students' overall perceptions of higher learning
2	Students' perceptions on the STP as a one-way knowledge receiving space
3	Students' views on their learning as their own responsibility
4	Drawbacks of the STP as perceived by first-year students

5   Findings and discussion

5.1   Students' overall perceptions of higher learning

First-year students that were interviewed for this study believed that their preparation for the STP meant bringing specific questions that they struggled to answer on their own (see also Mbeve and Mhlanga, 2022). This confirms Vygotsky's ZPD theory stating that students can complete their academic work independently and/or through assistance from their instructors (Margolis, 2020; Vygotsky et al., 1978). In this manner, tutors as instructors should help students understand their academic challenges, so that they

improve their performance (Grey and Osborne, 2020). In the context of the STPs, some of the academic challenges are those that students might encounter when studying on their own, just like Orange highlighted below:

> "I mean like maybe you were practicing maths, you got stuck on a certain tutorial question, you must keep that. Attempt it still but go to the tutors and say I got stuck here. Not to say tutor here's a question I didn't I don't understand but you didn't attempt it."

In support of Orange, Pearl below, reported that the university comes with challenges, but that are constructive in students shaping their lives. These challenges can also be understood using the transitioning theory which depicts that first-year students face challenges when trying to navigate the HE culture, yet they retain insufficient skills from secondary or high school education (matric in SA) (Gravett et al., 2020; Mbeve and Mhlanga, 2022; Schaeper, 2020). This is how Pearl explained her understanding of what happens at the University:

> "… and you can actually cry to that person, because they can do the same with you. So, like, varsity is just you developing as a person, life surviving, because challenges and everything start here because this is more of an academic challenge. And then it grows, because it influences your life, I mean we here to shape our lives, so."

Orange's narrative emphasises the importance of students taking initiatives, being responsible, and willing to participate in the learning process. This determined the success of the STP. It also suggests that students were knowledgeable, but had room for development, which could then be enhanced by the tutors (Grey and Osborne, 2020; Margolis, 2020; Vygotsky et al., 1978). However, students such as Orange, appeared to be condemning the fact that the tutor was solely responsible for the teaching and learning process.

Thus, there should be patterns of interaction between the tutor and the student. But the student has the responsibility to demonstrate their own ability and strength in working as an independent candidate – a scholarship advocated, in various critical pedagogy praxis, because it has a potential for better learning and outcomes that may yield better-equipped students (Konstantinos and Stavros, 2022; Machado et al., 2022). The tutor should be able to provide a space for such an engagement which subscribes to the idea of scaffolding, which respects and builds from the students' existing knowledge. Furthermore, attempts to reform teaching based on constructivist learning theories have called for teachers to ask fewer questions and students to learn to state and justify their beliefs, as well as argue constructively about reasons and evidence (O'Connor, 2022). In addition to seeing, HE as a cognitive responsibility, participants in this study also emphasised that being in the university is the beginning of a new life for them, and that is a challenging responsibility. Hence Pearl explained:

> "So, like, varsity is just you developing as a person, life surviving, because challenges and everything start here because this is more of an academic challenge. And then it grows, because it influences your life, I mean we here to shape our lives, so."

Pearl's narrative showed the need for the students to balance school and the other stresses of being a first-year student. Her perception was that a HEI should be a place of growth, which is painful and difficult but requires resilience. Pearl suggested that when one enrols into HEI, they should graduate with a different feeling and sense of life. Her expectations

were that when a student leaves the HEI, they should be more informed, having gone through a difficult process of refinement. Similar findings are alluded to by Uleanya and Rugbeer (2020), who reported that some students struggle to strike a balance between social and cultural diversity, which has an impact on their academic performance as they face unexpected challenges. Katlego, below, emphasised her own experiences by stating:

> "For me personally, like it's challenging, like it not only challenged academically also challenge like, how you think, how you actually act and how you behave, because you find different influences from different people… So, you might lose your character there… so like yah, you have to be strong as a person, you must stick to yourself, and yah just knowing like how to be independent, managing your finances… and like choosing the right friends because you need like a solid support system (Katlego, Jubilee)."

In their study Uleanya and Rugbeer (2020) postulated that students had different views about HE. They assumed that it was going to be similar to high school and they would have an "exciting social life" (p.55). Contrary, according to the current study's narratives these expectations in first year may not be met. Babalo reflected about the transition from secondary school to HEI by saying that:

> "For me it is totally on understanding and understanding which I find it difficult and different from high school. I think high school it was more about recalling information and now it is recalling but also using it, evaluating and applying it to a certain question that is more of a high order comparing to high school. That is what I am specifically struggling with."

Babalo used the word, *understanding*, twice to emphasise the importance of comprehending the material and applying it in the real world. She demonstrated that high school was mostly about cramming content and reproducing it to pass, which did not develop them in any way, whereas in HE application is paramount. Babalo implied that there is a lack of critical thinking and problem-solving abilities, particularly among first-year students transitioning from high school.

Lukitasari et al. (2019) argued that thinking skills are important in the 21st century. Permana et al. (2019) adds on to say that critical thinking skills are widely known as essential skills. They emphasise that graduate students who lack critical thinking skills will have challenges in the competitive working environment – although this paper seek to expand this beyond just work in the sense of employment but entrepreneurship and other forms of innovative economic activities. Uleanya and Rugbeer (2020) says that the HE system in SA has a huge role to play. It is expected to produce graduates who are innovative, competitive, and well equipped to contribute personally, socially, and economically to the development of the country. Király and Géring (2021, p.2) adds on to says that:

> "… one of the possible roles that HE can play is contributing to social transformation and to collective sensemaking discourses about the pressing global challenges of the day, such as economic and political polarisation in societies."

The paper then concludes that a lack of critical skills is a concern in HE because it determines students' progression after university. As seen in Ayanda's narrative:

> "I mean I came here to understand how things work not just to get a degree and then that's it (the group members agrees) and honestly that hasn't been working well with me, I feel like I will be getting the degree the way I shouldn't."

Thus, this paper's findings on this theme show that first year students have varying senses of what HE entails, and what they could possibly gain from it. From this theme, participants saw learning and teaching in the HE setting as a space where they may acquire knowledge that they need to pass, with limited sense of critical thinking. However, some did realise that being in the HEI is an opportunity for their own academic, social, and psychological growth which could possibly enhance their future academic engagements and graduating with meaningful knowledge and survival skills. However, most participants problematically viewed HE as structured as a source of colonial, banking education (Shahjahan et al., 2022), this is expanded in the following theme.

5.2   *Students' perceptions on the STP as a one-way knowledge receiving space*

Many first-year students in this study perceived the STP as a space for passively receiving knowledge from their tutors. Mostly, they did not acknowledge their own already existing knowledge, referred to by Vygotsky as ZPD (Vygotsky et al., 1978). Thus, the role of the STP in this approach was to enhance the students' knowledge through scaffolding which requires constant engagement between tutors and students (Margolis, 2020; Vygotsky et al., 1978). However, some first-year students in this study opted to not attend the STP and requested their peers to video record the relevant STP sessions so that they could use those to learn what they needed, for example Apple reported below:

> "I remember like last semester I was even asking my friend to record the videos because they were like doing the stuff, they were really moving forward… I would ask them, '…okay guys can you please record the videos for me so that I can go watch them.'"

Apple's quotation above showed that students perceived tutors as responsible for passing knowledge to them while they passively receive without interacting with the tutor and their peers in the STP venue. This detracted the opportunity for students to acquire knowledge by engaging and transforming their already known concepts and actively applying them in their own cultural context. Furthermore, the tutor would not be able to engage with the students to ask questions and enhance the students' learning through active scaffolding. Notwithstanding, a tutor would have to be able to manage this learning process, as reported by Hänze et al. (2018), when students work with trained tutors, they earn more experience of autonomy and active engagement in constructing knowledge. This paper's findings also demonstrated that students would gain better confidence on the knowledgeable tutor, as exemplified by Palesa below:

> "I am not saying this should be more like lecturers not, I am just saying that they should know their content so that I can ask questions or say that I don't understand this then you help me or sum it up for me in simple terms so that I can understand."

Palesa demonstrated the importance of experience and knowledge in ensuring students' confidence in the tutor to be able to guide their learning. However, students such as Palesa, above seemed to use the tutor's experience and knowledge in ways contrary to the idea of scaffolding. Palesa suggested that when the tutor knows the information, then they will be able to answer their questions. In this way, there is limited evidence for possible engagements between tutors and students in creating knowledge and expanding

their ZPD. But evidence for students needing answers that may help them answer their assignments to pass or improve their marks (Arco-Tirado et al., 2020; Grey and Osborne, 2020), yet it is not clear if this enhances their thinking to HOTS (Jarvis and Baloyi, 2020). Strawberry also demonstrated students' expectations of tutors to support them in writing their assignments, "They're not telling us everything they should just explain the assignments" (Strawberry).

Below, Amanda also stated that, at times she did not understand what the lecturer explained, but the STP helped her understand the theory:

> "… sometimes when you are in the lecture room and the lecturer explains the formula or theory you sometimes get lost, and you don't really catch the concept. But then you go to the STP and you ask again and they take you through like step by step and eventually, you can see the method and where everything was coming from. Instead of fumbling on the dark and hope for the best."

Although there were great benefits that students earned from the tutors in the STP, as Amanda described above, the component of the student's responsibility seemed to be lacking if a ZPD perspective is used. ZPD theory highlights the importance of the instructor to offer a step-by-step guide to enhance the students' understanding (Margolis, 2020; Vygotsky et al., 1978). The step-by-step instructions approach seemed to had been implemented in Amanda's STP sessions by her tutors. This helped her to understand the theories that were taught by the lecturers in the lecture room. However, Amanda and other students seemed to believe that their responsibility was to then consume these lessons passively. The component of students' self-learning to immerse themselves with the knowledge, and we can borrow here the concept, 'self-actualisation', which Fraud uses to explain the maturing of self-esteem on individuals, seemed to lack on students in this study.

Amanda suggested that the STP compared to lectures helped her better understand the content. This seemed to be possible because tutors were able to answer students' questions in a way that they understood. Research findings support that students see tutors as a source of information and support because they are expertise of a specific subject (Raven, 2022). Such support from tutors makes a student feel cared for and supported resulting in positive academic progress (Yale, 2019). However, if tutors become too directive, providing answers rather than questions, students might struggle to take ownership of their own learning (Konstantinos and Stavros, 2022; Munje et al., 2018). This may negatively affect the ways students take ownership and progressively use the learnt content. Sanele stated that he preferred that tutors explain the whole topic, "If they could explain the whole topic then you understand how you get the answer."

Sanele showed that he believed that the tutor must be knowledgeable about the subject matter and be able to explain it fully for him to get the answers. However, this may suggest an overreliance by Sanele to the knowledge that the tutor has to offer, thus compromising the possibilities of effective scaffolding that must involve a reciprocal learning process between the tutor and students. Although the predominant discourse from the students was that HE knowledge must be passively transferred to them, there was a contrary discourse that is discussed below.

5.3 Students' views on their learning as their own responsibility

First-year university students are exposed to numerous adaptation challenges (Moosa and Langsford, 2021) that include taking responsibility for their instructed or independent learning. Oates (2019) and Räisänen et al. (2020) described this process as self-regulation of learning which requires students to independently plan, monitor and reflect on their cognition, understanding, motivation, academic purposes, performances, and emotions, to achieve their studying goals. The first-year students that interviewed for this study reported that mastering to be responsible for their learning proved to be a challenging task because they had to find a balance between their learning and other spheres of their lives as Sanele explained, "For me the challenge is balancing yourself, your work, financially, social life, and no late submission of assignments, yah being diligent as well."

Sanele's response indicated that while being in first year in, HE comes with academic-related challenges such as students ensuring that they are up to date with their work. There are also other associated challenges that he had to deal with including his personal development, social life, and finances. This experience may be noted as part of self-regulation problems which Räisänen et al. (2020) explain as, problems that students often face when studying. Thus, the difficulty in time management and combining study time with personal life and work. Sanele further expressed the need to be diligent in his response, which is important if a student wants to master or be able to find the balance between academics and personal life. Being diligent may be associated with academic competence as it requires students to engage in activities such as spending time reading and completing their coursework (Wilcox and Nordstokke, 2019). Another participant echoed Sanele:

> "It's been different, strange but just a lot of more studying, a lot of dealing with other people. Bigger classes, everything's just a lot. But you know, you have to adapt… Otherwise, you will sink (Lerato)."

Lerato's experience suggested that she was struggling to adapt to the HEI context and to regulate her learning. This was expressed in phrases such as, "… just a lot more studying", and "… everything's a lot". This is part of the bigger challenge faced by students in first year as Wilcox and Nordstokke (2019) highlighted. Lerato's response also suggested that she may had been feeling overwhelmed with the HEI context; coursework, meeting people and other factors which was likely to negatively impact her self-care. Lastly, it portrayed her willingness to take up responsibilities for her learning by adapting and understanding the consequences of failing to do so. Pawpaw shared similar sentiments:

> "… But then I feel like maybe the place where I am right now is really because I didn't plan my time well and this is something that has never been an issue in matric because we didn't have that much work. We didn't have to follow a strict schedule nje and be like this time and this time I have to be done with this chapter because there wasn't a lot of work, to be honest. So, I feel with…yeah."

Pawpaw's response indicated that not only does university differs from high school in terms of expectations, but it required her to adopt specific skills for planning and managing time and developing a schedule to attend to all the given academic coursework. Other studies have found that the development of study skills (planning and managing time) in first year are a determining factor that influence students' successful transition

experience from high school (Lombard, 2020; Mbeve and Mhlanga, 2022). Pawpaw seemed to understand that the university context required a different approach when studying because of the workload, therefore, she needed to develop effective time management skills which would enhance her studying and planning skills. Buhle reflected on how her university experience differed from high school by stating the below:

> "And no one is like after you asking you why don't you go to class? Why aren't you doing this? Why aren't you doing that? You can literally be in your room for the whole week, and no one will come and ask you, you know so. And the fact that you have to go the extra mile, you have to see that you don't understand this, you have to consult by yourself. You have to be the one to know what you're doing. In high school sometimes the teacher would be the one to realize that you actually not coping before you even realize."

Buhle's comparison suggested that she was still struggling to adjust to the university learning context which required and encouraged independent and self-regulated learning at most times through developing effective learning strategies and managing her time to complete and meet their coursework demands (Cameron and Rideout, 2020). Effective learning strategies may include going 'an extra mile,' to understand the given content. Even though the students were provided with an opportunity to extend their understanding and seek academic support in the STP, Buhle's response suggested that she still felt alone and not fully supported. In addition, though she understood that she was responsible for her own learning, it seems she may not had comprehended that the university context required that students must be independent learners and seek support from their lecturers and other personnel such as tutors for additional academic assistance.

5.4   Drawbacks of the STP as perceived by first-year students

First-year students highlighted that there were a few drawbacks of attending the STP. Some of the concerns related to the program were focused on the tutors' attitude, knowledgeability, and etiquette while other responses highlighted that the first-year students assumed a passive learning role during the STP. These findings further show that students viewed the program as a platform for receiving knowledge as opposed to it being a collaborative learning environment. Pearl echoed these sentiments, "I think one problem is the gap. Cause with most tutors, when you ask for help, they're like I did this, two or three years back so I don't remember anything."

Pearl's response indicated that tutors did not always attend the STP fully prepared. It seems, they occasionally appeared less knowledgeable of the content that they taught students. As shown in Pearl, it appeared as though she did not acknowledge the role that she and her peers could potentially play in co-facilitating the STP as active learners. Instead, in her narrative she viewed the tutors as individuals that should know it all. However, although Pearl appeared to be overdependent on the tutors for learning, it is also important to note that it is the responsibility of the tutors to also ensure that they create an environment conducive for the learners to critically engage with each other and the tutor. This could be best created if the tutors also have the best knowledge about the subject.

Correspondingly, a study testing the effectiveness of a flipped classroom showed that it was the educators' responsibility to create a conducive learning environment for the learners to be active in their learning process (Nouri, 2016). Contrary to these findings,

Pearl projected that the tutors in the STP did not make means to create and allow for a collaborative learning environment. The passive learning process as seemed to be the case in the STP, may be reinforced by tutors by not fostering an environment that allowed for critical engagement and interaction between the students. Apple expressed similar frustrations:

> "Sometimes they just…when you ask for assistance, they come to you without any idea of what you are asking them. They waste time trying to find ways and explaining and relating that to what they did in first semester in their first years. So sometimes it's a waste of time." (Apple)

Although Apple demonstrated her frustrations on the tutors' incompetence in terms of the subjects that were being taught, she criticised the learning process during the STP based on the tutor not giving the students answers. In other words, her understanding was not on cooperative learning. This response reinforces the notion of banking education, other than scaffolding. Thus, while the response above highlighted the tutors' lack of knowledge on the subject, the student disregarded her responsibility of being an active learner. Sihle, another first-year student shared a similar experience in a focus group. Her response to the STP drawbacks suggested that she perceived the competence of the tutors based on the knowledge they shared with the first-year students and not on the engagement that she had with her peers and the tutors, Sihle stated:

> "Like the tutors don't know their work. (The group members agreed and started giggling) we might have maybe like 10 tutors, like for me in my STP session when I come here, they are only 2 people whom I know that if I ask them, they will give me the answer or help me the rest they just don't know. They will come they will scramble or try helping but you never get the answer. Then that for me it's like why do I come here for exactly?"

Studies show that lecturers advocate for the learning process as they believe it to be more important than obtaining a qualification (Miño Puigcercós et al., 2019). This means that STPs should be more about learning than they should be about the learners consuming information to score good grades. Identifying not getting answers from tutors as a drawback indicates that the learning that took place in the STP may had been more about acquiring good grades and obtaining a qualification than it was about learning and understanding the content. To add to this, Sihle expressed that she did not find enough motivation to attend the STP if the tutors were not going to give her answers that she was looking for. This suggested that Sihle attended the STP to receive information instead of interacting and processing the information. That way, the first-year students do not use the STP as a platform that will enable them to be critical thinkers. Yet in another study it was reported that learners that assumed an active role in their learning tended to be critical thinkers and displayed good problem-solving skills (Sihaloho et al., 2017).

Adding to the drawbacks of the STP, Kiwi said, "Like sometimes you just raise your hand for a very long period of time because there are limited tutors and many of us in that hall so it's very annoying." According to the response above there were fewer tutors than students. The notion of an active learner, however, emphasises the value of peer-learning. Thus, learning should continue especially in the presence of other students. The STP is an additional program to lectures and ordinary tutorials offered by the University. In other words, the expectation is that the students would have been exposed to the material several times prior to attending the STP. That way, the first-year students can still engage with each other since the material is already familiar to them. However, on the contrary,

Kiwi's response implied that the learning process was dependent on the tutors and in cases where there was limited availability then little-to-no learning occurred. This pattern of learner dependence on the tutor for learning to take place contradicts the notion of a flipped classroom which entails the students preparing for lessons beforehand and engaging with their peers (Erbil, 2020).

Another student, Banana, raised a concern about the attitude displayed by the tutors during the STP as a drawback for attending, she responded:

> "We've had some like that. We've had really rude tutors. It felt like they were doing us a favour and you end up not even wanting to ask question because it's like they drag their feet when it's time for them to start answering your questions." (Banana)

Banana's response denoted that the absence of a positive attitude from tutors made the learning experience unfavourable. Literature acknowledges and emphasises the significance of positive emotional engagement between educators and learners in ensuring the success of an active learning process (Molinillo et al., 2018). Therefore, the tutors' lack of social engagement and poor etiquette displayed during the STP session maintained the passive-learner role assumed by the first-year students.

In stating the drawbacks of attending the STP, the first-year students were more focused on the tutors. None of them raised concerns relating to the role that they could individually, or their peers assume in ensuring that learning occurs. In the light of this, the first-year student participants viewed the STP as a platform provided to them to receive one-way-knowledge not an opportunity to interact with other students to understand the academic material better and critically.

6   Conclusions

Using Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, this paper aimed to understand students' discourse on HE, because this is central to the ways they acquire and later use HE knowledge, potentially towards contributing to the achievement of Agenda 2030 – sustainable economic development and progress. Students had certain expectations for both the overall STP and the tutors of each subject. Some students came with an expectation that tutors should be knowledgeable of their course content. Others expected the tutors to spoon-feed them without taking sufficient responsibilities for their learning. The students leaned towards the banking education model that emphasises dependence on the tutor as the primary agent for the transmission of knowledge and information. Students perceived the tutors as sources of information instead of viewing each other as potential sources of information. Although other students believed that tutors should be careful not to spoon-feed them as the teaching methods might take away from them the learning responsibilities.

In some instances, some students perceived that lectures seemed not to demonstrate the abilities to explain the content in an understandable manner. In those instances, the STP seemed to enhance students' abilities to progress in their different subjects because tutors explained the subject content in simpler manner. Some students perceived the STP as space for revisions, where they could enhance their understanding of the subject matter. Most importantly students raised concerns that for better learning, tutorial spaces should be a conducive environment for two-way engagement between tutors and

students. The lack of critical thinking and problem-solving abilities for students coming into HE seemed to be a challenge according to some participants. Overall, students seemed to perceive tutors as source of information and themselves as passive learners which takes away their learning responsibilities, and the critical component of owning their own knowledge. This could be one of the reasons that yield graduates who may not innovatively use their knowledge for sustainable income generation, and a drawback for achieving the SDG Agenda 2030.

Recommendations

This paper contributes to the literature on ways students acquire and later use HE knowledge. The findings can potentially help HE policy and decision makers to ensure that university students are offered teaching and learning environments that will promote sustainable economic development. The paper recommends that tutorial programmes are valuable for first year students as they provide learning to students in a simplified manner making students to understand the content better. However, there is need to continue enhancing the tutorials by ensuring that tutors are always professional and portray knowledge of the subject matter to guide the students appropriately. Tutors' revision of the subject matter is recommended. Tutors also need to be trained in different pedagogies that can support teaching and learning that prioritises critical thinking, and encouragement of students to take more responsibility of their own learning. This is crucial for life-long learning, ownership of the knowledge, and possible constructive usage of this knowledge to innovate sustainable economic activities that will benefit the Southern Africa region and its intended ways to achieve Agenda 2030. Social and cultural diversity seemed to impact significantly in students' academic progress. Some students struggle to connect and establish friendship due to language barrier which ultimately allow some students to shy away from engaging with lecturers and tutors including their peers. It is important that HE spaces become conducive for all first year students by considering students differential background and fact that some students spoke English minimally. Introducing African languages in mostly English spoken lecturers will also alleviate some of the shyness and language barriers among students.

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Notes

1   A long-term SA development plan, which was founded by the National Planning Commission (n.d.) in collaboration and consultation with South African citizens.

2   The actual name is withheld for confidentiality purposes.