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A reflection on the significance of researchers' narratives in commissioned qualitative studies: A case study of four South African universities

Abstract:

The problem with most commissioned studies is that they are generally anchored on research protocols, guidelines and theoretical underpinnings imposed by research grant makers or the external Principal Investigator's (PI) own research design preferences. Furthermore, the problem is that researchers who are recruited during various phases of commissioned studies have little contribution to the overall research design, methodological or theoretical framework of such studies. On 22-23 November 2022, the University of Johannesburg's (UJ) Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies (AMCHES) facilitated a fieldwork training and orientation workshop hosted by the Nelson Mandela University's (NMU) Faculty of Education. The purpose of the workshop was to orient institutional research teams for a commissioned study titled: Steering Epistemic Access and Success of Historically Disadvantaged Students in South African Universities. *This commissioned study was funded by the National Research Foundation (NRF) and AMCHES was the principal investigator, and it had its own prescribed research design to explore the institutional student access and success narratives and experiences of students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. However, during this orientation workshop, it became apparent to the author that researchers recruited from the four participating universities were raising key research design-oriented narratives that were significant to the respective social contexts of the institutional case studies. The research design and theoretical framework of the entire study benefited from the inclusion of narratives describing the institutional researchers' own experiences and their familiarity with the SEAS research sites. The four case study institutions were the universities of Cape Town (UCT), Fort Hare (UFH), Kwa Zulu-Natal (UKZN) and NMU. AMCHES held the overall ethics clearance for the study, which had been granted by UJ's Faculty of Humanities. The author explored the pre-study narratives of the institutional research teams that emerged during the orientation workshop using a qualitative narrative analysis approach. This demonstrates the benefit of the incorporation of researchers' narratives and perspectives of their lived experiences of the research site in commissioned studies. The author argues that the incorporation*

of narratives of researchers' lived experiences of the research site adds a social context and enriches methodological approaches and theoretical framing in commissioned studies to create social relevance beyond the grant maker or the PI's imposed approaches.

1. Introduction

The author used some of the key narratives from a fieldwork training and orientation workshop organised by the Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies (AMCHES) at the University of Johannesburg as his main source of data. The researchers' narratives which emerged during workshop addressed the general problem of the imposition of the research goal and research design by commissioned studies at the expense of researchers' lived experiences and knowledge of the research which are critical in the formulation of research methods and relevant social theories. This process framed the overarching theoretical lens as was proposed by the researchers for their respective institutional studies. The primary focus of the orientation workshop for the Steering Epistemic Access and Success (SEAS) of Historically Disadvantaged Students in South African Universities study was to introduce the project and orient the researchers to appreciate the commissioned study and its requirements. The study was funded by the National Research Foundation (NRF). The author was a research coordinator of the study. The author used a qualitative narrative analysis approach to explore the researchers' proposed theoretical approaches to the institutional case studies and drew insights from key institutional documents. In doing so, the author demonstrates the value and significance of the incorporation of researchers' narratives on methodological and theoretical approaches in commissioned studies particularly the emphasis on their social experiences of research sites.

The workshop imparted research skills to master's and doctoral students and provided an opportunity for the institutional research teams to appreciate the study's focus, while also sharing their institutional knowledge relating to student experiences in general. The themes from the workshop provided an overview of social context-specific dimensions suggested by the institutional research teams which were not necessarily those suggested by the PI and approved by NRF as the grant maker. The researchers proposed to explore the SEAS study from four thematic narratives namely: humanising pedagogy, rights-based approach to education, socio-economic student struggles and observation institutional language policy. These mentioned researchers' narratives were essential towards capturing the richness of the research team members' appreciation of the SEAS struggles which characterised their institutional research sites. The significance of this process was that it highlighted how social context became such a critical element towards methodological and theoretical approaches in commissioned studies as SEAS.

For this paper, the author firstly, provides the theoretical framework which underpinned this study. Secondly, he outlines the methodological approach that he used to generate data for this empirical study and thirdly presents a synopsis of the four institutional case studies. The institutional synopsis provides the foundational base for the reader to appreciate the already stated researchers' four thematic propositions. These researchers' thematic narratives were meant to highlight the social contexts from which to explore the SEAS study both at a

conceptual and methodological levels. Fourthly, the author presents the findings based on the researchers' narratives which is followed by their discussion in the fifth section. This is followed by the conclusion of the paper.

The overarching argument is that the incorporation of researchers' narratives into commissioned studies enhances the potential quality of the findings by drawing from researcher's lived experience of the case study as opposed to solely relying on the imposed and preconceived research design and methodological approaches of external PIs of commissioned social science studies.

2.   A narrative theoretical framework

The absence of the voices, experiences and narratives of researchers in most commissioned studies may impact on methodological and theoretical rigour in qualitative social science studies. In view of the significant institutional researcher narratives which emerged during the workshop, the author was guided by the narrative theoretical framework in its exploits of the emerging themes. Gavidia and Adu (2022) assert that the narrative approach became popular in the education field in 1990 through the work of Connelly and Clandinin which focused on lived experiences. To date, the narrative inquiry has become one of the key qualitative research approaches in various academic disciplines beyond social sciences.

For Puckett (2016), its origin dates to Aristotle's times and it has impacted on major intellectual movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For this paper's narrative inquiry, the researchers' perspectives and suggestions themselves become the raw data. Using institutional researchers' perspectives and suggestions as raw data was imperative for this paper in view of the depth and richness of their narratives, perspectives, and insights which the author synthesised for context. For the author, the analytical narrative approach assisted towards providing a nuanced approach to the discourse of lived experiences, sociality and space. In a study of the magnitude of the SEAS, the concept of sociality and place remained incisive to explore the experiences of students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds.

For Bengtsson and Anderson (2020), thematic analysis focuses on the context of the broader story in relation to what is being told and the story is interpreted through themes. Accordingly, for this study the broader story was on SEAS which was anchored on the broader grand theme of transformation. The four case study universities' institutional plans and annual report documents reviewed by the author complemented the institutional researchers' narratives, perspectives and insights proposed as theoretical and methodological approaches to the study based on their lived experiences and institutional memories. Gavidia and Adu (2022) relate that although critical narrative researchers centre the voice of participants in their knowledge creation, they still need to pay critical attention to the potential emergence of subjective and diverse participants' viewpoints. This potential bias was mitigated by infusing the researchers' narratives with the broader institutional transformation focus areas drawn from various key institutional documents reflecting on the study's period of review which was between 2020 and 2022.

Generally, the narrative approach was embraced in qualitative studies because of its offers to researchers in various disciplines. For example, Sandberg (2022) in criminal justice studies elaborates that there are four approaches that may be used in the narrative analysis enquiry namely: thematic, structural, performative, and dialogical. Thus, these various approaches to narrative analysis depends on researcher's interest which include interest on content of

what is told, how it is told, what narratives emerge from the story being told and where this is done. Accordingly, for this study the author was interested in narrative stories told by the institutional researchers emerging from the workshop and some key themes contained in the participating universities' institutional documents. This created a balance between the institutional researchers' lived experiences and the institutional social contexts from which to explore the real experiences of the SEAS study participants about the enquiry.

The ultimate objective of the SEAS study was in exploring the students' experiences as historically marginalised groupings. An understanding of the social context drawing from the researchers' narratives on the institutional environments became critical in providing the author with a framework from which to formulate key themes on the broader story of institutional transformation.

3. Methods

Narrative analysis according to Josselson and Hammack (2021) is a qualitative data collection method whose focus is on individuals' voices that could be explored from their narrative data to explore how these individuals make meaning of their lived experiences. Thus, the author drew from the emerging oral narratives of institutional researchers which emerged during an orientation workshop proceeding. The institutional researchers' preliminary oral narratives were the primary data source for this paper. The researchers' narratives were the primary foundation of the thematic narratives. Narratives remain as one of the important approaches that can be employed for data collection, analysis, and reporting of outcomes (McAlpine, 2016). Murray (2018), however, reminds us that narratives are usually seen as deviations or diversions that answer to highly organised questions produced under more traditional and structured research methodologies. For this study, the author instead relied on an unstructured dialogical process. Participants were not subjected to a structured question and answer interview schedule but rather an open-ended workshop proceeding.

4. A synopsis of institutional research sites for the case study

This synopsis of the SEAS case study research sites helps to paint a picture of the social location and institutional setting from which the commissioned study's participants were to be drawn. The author drew from the institutional researchers' narratives and the institutional strategic documents in painting this this synoptic picture to avoid complete reliance on the imposed commissioned study research protocols without the institutional social contexts. By way of reiteration, as already mentioned, the four universities: UCT, UFH UKZN and NMU constituted two historically white universities, one historically black university and one merged one which was also a comprehensive university respectively. The author reviewed the following key institutional documents: UCT Annual Report (2021), the UFH Strategic Plan 2022–2026, the NMU Transformation Indaba Report (2022), the UKZN Research Report (2021), and the NMU 2018–2022 Institutional Transformation Plan (ITP). These documents complemented the researchers' narratives as an overview of transformation as a broader agenda from which various institutional strategic themes could be identified towards addressing institutional challenges to promote equal access and social justice for student success.

The orientation workshop had a comprehensive programme meant to train and fully orient the institutional researchers ahead of the commencement of the SEAS study research processes. Some of the items on the programme included an overview of the SEAS study, an

outline of the duties and responsibilities of institutional research teams, familiarisation with the literature and conceptual framework of the SEAS study. The programme also included training and orientation on document review processes as part of institutional data collection, data analysis strategy and the guidelines for writing case study reports. During a plenary session, workshop participants (institutional researchers) reflected on the various aspects of the training and orientation process which had been facilitated by the then PI, Dr Logan Govender and the author as a research coordinator. The presentation on the literature review and conceptual framework overview had highlighted the significance of incorporating a historical background and context from which epistemic access of disadvantaged students in South African higher education could be traced and understood. Following an overview presentation by the PI and the author relating to aspects on literature review and the conceptual framework for exploring SEAS, the institutional researchers responded in plenary:

> *Taking time to define the project was imperative because it sums up the crux of the study.*
> *It captivates and inspires a feeling that the study sought to capture voices from below*
> (Researcher's narrative, November 23, 2022).

The above citation demonstrates how institutional researchers conceived their understanding of the SEAS study and what it sought to achieve in exploring the experiences and voices of marginalised students they characterised as socially located below. Their conceptual framing of voices from below illustrated their deep understanding and appreciation of the nature of the social category of the students targeted by the study in relation to their lived institutional experiences. They further requested a clearer indication and understanding of their role in the study from the onset to set the scene, and they posed the following critical research role question:

> *What shall be our roles as institutional researchers? Researchers must not disrupt the*
> *research process but should let the stories create the narratives not necessarily for*
> *publication purposes alone, but to ensure that the participants' issues were resolved, and*
> *their views were put to practice* (Researchers' narrative, November 23, 2022).

This was a role seeking and research positionality question. The institutional researchers wanted to get into the study with a full understanding of their roles and responsibilities so that as previously cited could create institutional social environments that could allow them to capture the experiences from those marginalised students socially located from below, that is underneath the other privileged categories of students. They wanted the flexibility in the research design to accommodate the usage of their expertise and institutional memory and experience to capture the voices and experiences of those from below. Following this assurance and flexibility drawn from the presented SEAS study outline and a determination of their roles and responsibilities they started to make institutional prepositions in relation to their respective institutional social realities. They proposed that:

> *It would be very important to incorporate a humanising pedagogy at NMU to explore*
> *aspects of institutional pedagogical realities to understand how the 'missing middle'*
> *students navigate access and success* (NMU researchers' narrative, 23 November 2022).

The above was in line with what the NMU Transformation Indaba Report (2022) and NMU 2018–2022 Institutional Transformation Plan (ITP) which aligned with the incorporation of the humanising pedagogy as part of the institutional transformation agenda. On the other hand, given the institutional background of UFH as a historically black university, the UFH

Strategic Plan 2022–2026 emphasised on the commitment to institutional renewal. This was following a UFH Council approval of a Strategic Plan 2022–2026 on November 25, 2021, as a guide for the institutional focus over the ensuing five years. The theme of the UFH strategic plan was "Towards A Decade of Renewal" and this sought to support the university's primary missions of teaching, research, and learning (UFH Strategic Plan, 2021). This commitment to a decade of renewal by UFH through various forms of strategic changes was complemented by the institutional researchers' preposition of the rights-based approach to education which was by then the UFH UNESCO Oliver Tambo Chair of Human Rights' (OTCHR) focus under the leadership of SEAS UFH institutional researcher Dr Siyabulela Fobosi as the Senior Researcher.

> *The rights-based approach to education navigates the challenge of power relations between the university stakeholders and rights could play a major role if they could be enforced. The SEAS project shall raise awareness particularly at UFH's rights-based approach to education initiative and it shall be necessary to explore the study from the rights-based approach to understand how the students experience and navigate teaching and learning at UFH* (Researchers' narrative, 23 November 2022).

These institutional contexts of the broader transformation agenda relating to student-centered SEAS were helpful to understand the researchers' basis of their proposed theoretical frameworks for the study. The challenges and concerns relating to general student struggles on campus were raised by the UCT institutional researchers as key theoretical considerations from which to explore SEAS institutional case study research. For example,

> *Student struggles for accommodation in an upmarket place like Cape Town has an impact of student epistemic access and success endeavours. Physical access issues have resurfaced post-1994 due to inadequate government funding and the National Student Financial Aid Scheme was not coping with student demands* (UCT Researchers' narrative, 23 November 2022).

The above researchers' narrative was confirmed by the UCT's Annual Report (2021) because Council had assisted the university in accomplishing a significant student enrollment goal for the 2021 academic year. The entire SEAS agenda was impacted by the student enrollment projections that the university and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) agreed upon. According to UCT (2021), the university received R761.3 million for the 2021 academic year, as opposed to R639.1 million for the 2020 academic year, which helped to support a total of 6,506 students. An additional 310 students were assisted by the university through its internal UCT (NSFAS) GAP funding programme. The UCT GAP funding was intended for applicants who did not satisfy the NSFAS eligibility criteria but still required financial support to cover study-related expenses; this group is known as the "missing middle." (UCT, 2021). Such was the institutional social context which researchers proposed to be part of the SEAS research enquiry to understand experiences of student access and success. This among other things was echoed the UKZN institutional researchers who posed the following critical questions:

> *What is the purpose of the university? How could the issue of language be navigated during interviews where participants may not be willing to participate in English and how the matter could be addressed ahead of fieldwork to accommodate black students' local languages?* (Researchers' narratives, 23 November 2022).

Related to the function and purpose of a university, the UKZN Research Report (2021, p.05) asserts that "...universities should be outward looking, engaged with all aspects of the communities in which they are sited". This conviction focused on positioning research for impact and change (UKZN 2021). According to UKZN (2021), forming strategic research partnerships with some of the world's best universities could be one way to increase research capacity and innovation. SEAS in this regard was viewed as an equally important research vehicle for increasing research capacity and innovation in particular relating to the issue of the use of black indigenous languages in research hence the proposal by the institutional researchers for the incorporation of isiZulu as one of the contributions and promotion of indigenous language use to enhance local research capacity and innovation. These researchers' thematic narratives and insights from the institutional key documents provide the reader with a sense of the social context of the research sites in relation to how student epistemic access and success could be conceptualised.

5.   Presentation of findings

It is important to outline the significance and implications of the researchers' narratives as their propositions for methodological approach and theoretical framework for the SEAS study. This comes from the backdrop of an understanding that commissioned studies generally have an imposed research design approach and goal which may not necessarily accommodate the views of researchers incorporated in subsequent phases of commissioned research processes. Accordingly, it is imperative to note that there is generally a level of unease that researchers experience during commissioned research projects because among other things they are conducted under contracts which tend to impose restrictions on resources and outline specific goals to be pursued (Richter and Hostettler, 2015). Both the PI and the author as officials of the SEAS project coordinating agency conducted the orientation workshop with little intent to infuse the researchers' intellectual thoughts, voices and social experience to the study. Our primary objective was to orient the researchers to appreciate the commissioned study's project goals, conceptual framework, research design, sampling technique and data analysis strategies to arrive at a predetermined research output.

However, the workshop's plenary session became a process of intellectual engagement with the researchers leading to the proposition of theoretical reconfiguration and grounding of institutional studies on social realities and to be cognisant of transformational processes and activities in each university. Four thematic propositions as already indicated emerged from researchers' narratives and the author explores those in the subsequent sections below.

6.   Humanising pedagogical narrative

The researchers proposed bringing the concepts of humanising pedagogy and epistemic access together in the context of NMU given the institution's conviction and commitment to humanising its pedagogical practices as part of the broader transformation agenda. For the researchers:

> *The social organisation of the university has an impact on the student epistemic access and success* (UCT Researchers' narrative, 23 November 2022).

By social organisation, the researchers implied that an array of student challenges from an institutional socio-cultural dimension had to be brought into consideration to explore student epistemic access and success studies from a humanising pedagogical perspective. Their

proposition of a humanising pedagogy can be understood from Salazar (2013) and Zembylas' (2018) articulations of the 1970 Freirean thesis that humanising pedagogy is predicated and focused on the pursuit of one's full humanity. It is the process of becoming fully human through consciousness and it is a practice of freedom in which the oppressed is liberated and carry a desire for self-determination (Salazar, 2013). For the researchers, this transitional process from being historically dehumanised, excluded and marginalised to the attainment of full humanity could be realised through making education accessible for the students from historically poor backgrounds.

The SEAS study NMU researchers' proposition for a humanising pedagogy whose central theme is humanisation is inseparable from the concepts of decolonisation and transformation. Their humanising pedagogy insistence can be better understood from Le Grange's (2016) Ubuntu Currere as articulated by Hlatshwayo and Shawa (2020) towards helping us to imagine context, difference and the cosmopolitan perspectives that are important in the mapping and re-imagining the purpose and future of higher education. Thus, Hlatshwayo and Shawa (2020) articulate Le Grange's Ubuntu Currere as implying that the context in which curriculum is enacted is important and that instead of focusing on individuality a humanising pedagogy must embrace collective diversity to manage social differences and inequalities. By proposing a humanising pedagogy, the NMU SEAS institutional researchers were demonstrating their appreciation of the social differences and contextual backgrounds of the target group of students from historically poor backgrounds.

The institutional researchers' proposed concept of humanising pedagogy as articulated by Ubuntu Currere philosophy is like what Kajee (2019) explains as methodological teaching approaches which are not instruments from which teachers can manipulate students, but instead, those that embrace students' expression of their subjectivities. Students from historically poor backgrounds have expressed their challenges of access and success through Fallist Movements such as Open Stellenbosch, Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall for example. These student movements were calls for the removal of systemic and structural barriers to epistemological access and humanising pedagogical approaches were perceived as part of the broader institutional transformation agenda in pursuit of access and success. A humanising pedagogical conceptual lens to the institutional SEAS study as proposed by the researchers was imperative. It sought to provide theoretical ground from which to explore the institutional progression and transformational trajectory on the quality and nature of the pedagogical approaches to student access and success. A humanistic pedagogical approach lens towards studying the experiences on how poor students navigated and negotiated epistemological access makes a good theoretical measure of institutional transformation.

7. Rights-based approach

Human rights to higher education were included in the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) from a global perspective in 1976 (Kotzmann, 2018). In the South African context, the concept of rights-based approach to education can be understood from a historical and policy orientation perspective on access to education. The SEAS project's focus was undergraduate students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds which was fitting given that during the apartheid era, access to education was racially mediated. Gamede (2005) relates that upon the adoption of the historic Freedom Charter of the African National Congress (ANC) on 26 June 1955, there was declaration by the charter that "the doors of learning and culture shall be opened." The proposition by the

UFH institutional researchers for the rights-based approach to education as a suitable concept from which to base their case study was significant given the history of UFH as a Historically Black University. This is because the concept of access has various dimensions and exploring it from an understanding of the university's apartheid and post-apartheid reality could have presented contextual and conceptual meaning.

The university's decade of renewal document outlined a vision on financial sustainability to support the implementation of all strategic plans for transformation, equity, student administrative processes, and other projects on renewal (UFH, 2021). Kajee (2019) asserts that it is imperative for teaching and learning to be anchored on a social justice perspective to address injustices and inequities in a context like South Africa which has culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. Meanwhile, Kotzmann (2018) reminds us that the perception of higher education has shifted from a public good to being a commodity bought and sold because of various states' legislation and policies on higher education which have leaned towards a neoliberal trajectory.

The researchers' proposition of a rights-based theoretical approach to their institutional SEAS study sought to ground the study in a historical and contemporary social reality and context. This meant that the UFH institutional SEAS case study sought to provide a conceptual understanding and meaning of the university's transition and trajectory from its HBU inequalities to its contemporary decade of renewal transformative commitments to see how this translated to a rights-based approach to education. The researchers' rights-based approach theory was alive and conscious to what Gamede (2005) conceded that the problem of access to education continues despite progressive policy positions and a constitution that recognises education as a basic right.

The researchers' narrative conception can be understood from Themane and Mabasa's (2022) assertion that there is a distinction between formal access to education and epistemological access. For these scholars, the former can be a mere physical entry into an institution of higher learning in the form of actual student registration at the institution of learning while the latter can be things such as academic support, additional teaching time, or the provision of tutorials. A rights-based approach aligns well with the humanising pedagogical approach as a student care centred teaching philosophy that embraces social inequalities and contextually diverse backgrounds among students from poor backgrounds. These propositions brought some theoretical and methodological flexibility to the commissioned study by introducing social context as a key consideration from which to address the challenge of SEAS.

8. Student on-campus and off-campus struggles

Themane and Mabasa's (2022) clarification that student access must be conceived beyond mere physical presence on campus is important. Their conception of access helps us to understand the researchers' proposition that student struggles on and off-campus must be appreciated to fully comprehend the concepts of access and success. The researchers' cited Cape Town as generally an affluent place with exorbitant accommodation costs that students from historically poor backgrounds can ever hardly afford. Although some students were registered with tuition fees but without housing either in official campus residence or in private residence they are confronted with huge access challenges. Their fate is that although they may be officially registered with student cards and all formal access rights but without

accommodation, they may still suffer epistemological access consequences as a result accommodation challenges. The researchers' quest for the inclusion of student struggles in the SEAS analysis was a noble preposition. This is because material hardship or challenges for access to resources and facilities play a crucial role in the student's academic journey. For example, Dominguez-Whitehead (2017) argues that although overlooked in most literature on exclusion in higher education, food and housing are essential resources for academic success. The usual assumption is that students will automatically be able to access these non-epistemological factors which is where the institutional researchers' proposition to include non-academic struggles finds expression and relevance.

The UCT SEAS institutional researchers' call for the inclusion of non-academic struggles for example hunger and housing challenges, is strengthened by Singh's (2022, p. iv) lamentation that '…globally, as in South Africa, student hunger is a growing phenomenon that threatens academic successes. Mansvelt, Schenck and Soji (2022, p. 219) 'insist that student hunger and food-related challenges are a pressing issue for higher education institutions in South Africa and has a negative effect on academic success and overall student well-being'. Hungry students and without accommodation can hardly cope with their academic responsibilities and in the past such struggles resulted in student uprisings. Poor black student living conditions on campus contributed to some of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) ideological and philosophical processes of conceptualisation of blackness in the past.

Steve Biko himself on arrival at the then University of Natal in Durban to pursue his medical degree studies lived in what was called the University of Natal's Non-European Section of student residence named after Dr Alan Taylor, the founder of the then Durban Medical School (Biko, 2021). The student housing challenges therefore carry a deep-rooted history which continue to shape contemporary student access and success debates. Biko (2021) reminds us that in 1972 for example the BCM led a strike action on several university campuses in solidarity with Onkgopotse Tiro who had been expelled from the then University of the North's Turfloop campus. His expulsion was triggered by his address at Turfloop campus where he had criticised the poor conditions of student residences, bad food at campus cafeterias and the general humiliation experienced by black students on university campuses (Biko, 2021). Bringing these socio-economic dimensions of student struggles into the analysis invokes the very thought of a rights-based approach to education. The rights-based approach to education is inseparable from a humanising pedagogical philosophy which embraces the socially unequal backgrounds in its teaching practices and allow the students to self-actualise in their diversity and social inequality. The institutional researchers demonstrated their understanding of student epistemic access and success conceptual requirements to bring contextual meaning and social relevance through their propositions. Byond these non-academic factors already mentioned, the institutional researchers flagged indigenous language use for methodological approaches to SEAS study.

9. Indigenous language use for methodological approach

Qualitative studies like SEAS are effective and valuable methods which are suitable for exploratory research because they can identify and provide in-depth understandings of the issues under study (Aloudah, 2022). Institutional researchers identified language as one of the critical instruments that could be used to provide an in-depth individual understanding and expression of students' personal experiences of the SEAS concepts under study. Researchers

expressed concern on the use of English as the mainstream research language particularly on the target group of students from historically disadvantaged rural backgrounds. Thus, they insisted:

> The issue of language translation from English to local dominant languages must be finalised before the formal beginning of fieldwork. Each university must be flexible enough to accommodate research participants who may not be comfortable to participate in English. At UKZN it is official policy that all research material and instruments must be translated into isiZulu (Researchers' narratives, 23 November 2022)

The researchers' preposition for use of appropriate language during research processes like data collection and analysis can be supported by various literature. As such, some scholars view language as important for appropriate communication of key concepts, and that it should always be congruent with that of participants (Pelzang and Hutchinson, 2018). Concepts like epistemic access and success are contested in their conceptual meaning and use, it therefore remains reasonable for such contested concepts to be put to context in the language of the participant. Given that Aloudah (2022) observes that qualitative research gathers and analyses non-measurable data to arrive at a conclusive meaning of words, a study such as SEAS could be able to provide information about the ways participants experience the world. Therefore, the social world of SEAS required appropriate language terminology for participants to be able to express how they experienced these concepts from a social perspective using their own language and cultural terms.

Language plays a significant role in qualitative research from both a conceptual and methodological perspective. This is echoed by Pelzang and Hutchinson (2018) who argue that apart from being a tool or a means for conveying concepts, language is an essential part of conceptualisation. These scholars further highlight that language could incorporate values and beliefs that carry social, and political meanings that cannot be articulated through the process of translation during an interview process. This clarifies the researchers' insistence that the process of translating all research protocols and processes had to be finalised and formalised before the fieldwork to avoid on-field translation as some social and political meanings of experiences could not be fully articulated during interview translation. The power of language use for participant centered purposes is illustrated by Aloudah (2022). He relates that in his review study of how researchers conducted qualitative research with Arabic-speaking participants, the data base showed that out of the thirty-one studies included in the review, five transcribed the data in Arabic and analysed it in Arabic and translated the results into English or conducted a parallel analysis while the other 26 translated all transcripts into English before analysis to enable non-Arabic authors to access the data to assist with analysis. The SEAS researchers' insistence of translation of research instruments from English to local languages was going to be critical towards striking a balance during data collection to retain the original meaning at analysis as subtleties of language are at risk of loss between translation and analysis.

10. Discussion of findings

Commissioned research according to Mikael and Norman (2021) usually challenges researchers to produce reports based on agreed timelines and this undermines creativity and research innovation. Similarly, the NRF funded study had timelines that the PI and the author presented to the institutional researchers to adhere to as part of funding contractual obligations. However, the orientation workshop marked a turning point for intellectual engagement towards

collaborative knowledge production because the process allowed the recruited institutional researchers to infuse their social experiences and ethnographic understanding of the research site into the research process. The commissioned SEAS study had no specific or contextual reality of research sites and the engagement with the institutional researchers brought about the key theoretical concepts and methodological approaches to the study. This process demonstrated how decolonisation of research methods in qualitative social science studies could be achieved by allowing locally based researchers with the social experience to design and formulate methodological and theoretical frameworks as opposed to imposing strategies of data mining with little relevance in addressing the real problems encountered by participants in their daily lived experiences. This process liberated both the PI and the author from the orthodox and rigidity of commissioned studies and equally demonstrated that case studies cannot be homogenous or use similar research processes as social contexts differ.

The author's contribution in this paper is in demonstrating that qualitative social science research carries more meaning if conducted within a social context of relevance and where possible in the language of the research participant as experiences tend to be better articulated in one's mother language and cultural orientation. As such, for this paper the author demonstrates the importance of creating a research collaborative space and opportunity to accommodate recruited researchers of commissioned studies to bring their lived experiences and understanding of the social context of the research sites. They tend to be better equipped than an external researcher who approaches research sites with limited knowledge or the experience of the social context because their presence and voices contribute intellectually towards research design and sound theoretical approaches. The SEAS study process of the incorporation of researchers' narratives into the research process illustrated that locally based researchers have the institutional memory and know how to navigate key aspects of the research process from ethics applications to navigating gatekeeper protocols and procedures into the actual conducting of the study. The institutional researchers managed to flag areas of paramount importance for consideration such as the recommendation for language translation to contribute towards suitable language use based on their knowledge of research site and target research population. The flexibility to incorporate the perspectives and insights of recruited researchers in commissioned studies is a game changer because it fosters reality of social context for both methodological and theoretical soundness in research as seen in the SEAS study.

11. Conclusion

The flexibility of incorporation local researchers' perspectives and intellectual narratives towards the methodological and theoretical conceptualisation of commissioned qualitative studies has several benefits. Some of the key benefits which must not be overlooked relate to project sustainability and ownership. Almost two years after the orientation workshop of November 2022, at the time of writing this paper, the author had remained working with the same leaders of institutional research teams who were academics because of their personal feeling of ownership and moral attachment to their intellectual contribution to the study. Researchers had institutional project coordination responsibilities to nurture and sustain their intellectual thoughts and philosophical contributions to the overall study. This strengthened the intellectual and emotional attachment to the SEAS project. The all-institutions project seminars nurtured and strengthened collaborative knowledge production opportunities and enhanced research creativity and innovation. The approach created harmony between the research coordinating

agency's officials and the institutional researchers because the traditional commissioned study imposition of the research process had been navigated and negotiated through giving the institutional researchers a voice and agency in the research process. Social context holds a special place in the methodological and theoretical approaches in qualitative studies and this enhances the social relevance and legitimacy of such studies as demonstrated by the institutional researchers' narratives.

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