Exploring Higher Education Part-time Students’ Sense of Belonging: The Case of an Institution in Lesotho

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ABSTRACT

A sense of belonging is one of the fundamental human needs, which occurs when a person feels supported, accepted, and included in a variety of social situations. A university has a duty to create an atmosphere that encourages students to feel more a part of the campus community. That would enhance students’ success, achievement, motivation, and retention, as well as their wellness and mental health. The study explored the sense of belonging of part-time students enrolled in part-time programmes in higher education. A qualitative case study was conducted, and group interviews with first-year, second-year, and third-year students conveniently sampled produced the data to gain in-depth knowledge of part-time students’ sense of belonging. It was found that both full-time students and non-academic staff did not treat part-time students fairly during their stay on campus. Again, the study revealed that part-time students had no access to library facilities like full-time students do. On the other hand, students appreciated the support they received from their lecturers. It is recommended that higher institutions of learning improve students’ well-being and create a conducive environment for part-time students to feel accepted, respected and cared for.

Keywords: Belonging, higher education, place, sense of belonging.

I. INTRODUCTION

Community universities are primarily social institutions concerned with the provision of higher learning and act as hubs for research (Mulrooney & Kelly, 2020). By virtue of their composition of diverse students and staff members (academic and non-academic), universities become communities or social institutions where interaction in different spheres is embedded. As the primary role of universities is to provide education, a sense of belonging has to be created or promoted to enhance students’ learning. As a place of learning, a university advances the connection between place and experiences; as a result, students develop an attachment to the place and establish a sense of place (Riley, 2017). Consequently, a sense of place refers to the bond that people establish with a place. While people feel connected to a place, they develop a sense of belonging. In this space, it could be argued that the university, as a social institution, is tasked with the responsibility of helping students develop a sense of feeling at home, secure, and welcome. A sense of belonging refers to an individual’s desire and a human need to feel accepted, included, welcomed, cared for, connected, and valued (Allen, Kern, et al., 2021; Allen & Kern, 2017; Escalera-Reyes, 2020; Manka, 2022; Riley, 2019).

A sense of belonging in a higher institution has to be manifested in different ways and in different spheres to ensure that all the inhabitants settle freely and achieve the purpose of being there. As the university enrolls full-time and part-time students, the transition into the institution remains a challenge (Mulrooney & Kelly, 2020), especially for part-time students because they come to the university for a short period. Creating, cultivating, and promoting a sense of belonging at the university is crucial as it relates to student achievement (Barnes et al., 2021). As higher education provides a part-time programme, it is in our interest to establish if the university provides an environment that is welcoming, accessible, caring, and loving to the students. For instance, does the university give them access to academic services like the library and ICT? Are the students free to interact with the lectures at any time they wish to? What kind of treatment do they experience from full-time students? It is against this backdrop that the study intends to explore part-time students’ sense of belonging in higher education in the case of an institution in Lesotho. In doing so, we briefly reflect on the concept of a sense of belonging, its educational implications, and its importance. Thereafter, we present the findings of part-time students’ sense of belonging at the university, conclude with a discussion of the findings, and thereafter provide recommendations.

A. Significance of the Study

The study intends to encourage higher education in Lesotho, particularly the concerned faculty, to reflect and assess its practices toward the concept of a sense of belonging. The study will help the university create a conducive environment for part-time students, and it should
be a form of social capital; students' social networks, connections, and interactions are crucial to their sense of belonging (Hellwell & Putnam, 2007). Like a university, a learning community should be considered a setting where learning and social capital can be maximised through effective interactions between the social network and the learning environment. Furthermore, a sense of belonging influences engagement and performance, as well as more positive attitudes towards school, class work, and peers, lecturers, and supervisors. In this space, the university's community should provide an environment of positive support and trust, as well as trust and building supportive relationships essential for the university’s community (Collins, 2021; Viola, 2021).

B. Review of Related Literature

1) Place

Place straddles various fields; hence, it bears different aspects that describe it: location, locale, and sense of place (Agniew, 2011; Cresswell, 2009, p. 169). The first aspect of location describes where a place is found. The location of a place is determined using coordinates to find its exact location on the ground. For instance, a student can use the coordinates to locate Thomas Mololo Library and the sports grounds on the NUL campus. In addition, the locale refers to the material aspects of a place (Cresswell, 2009). The locale of a place explains all the physical and tangible materials found in a place. The Administration Block and Lecture Halls can be identified as tangible entities found on campus. Sense of place, on the other hand, captures the emotions and feelings (Cresswell, 2009; Kruger, 2020) that an individual develops when in connection with a place, and consequently, place attachment is advanced (Kudryavtsev et al., 2012). Concepts associated with a sense of place may include the following: place attachment, topophilia, place dependence, rootedness, dwelling, belonging, genius loci, biophilia, and place identity (Chen et al., 2018; Cross, 2001; Najafi & Shariff, 2011, p. 1). A sense of place emerges from the connection between people and the environment they inhabit, and by implication, a sense of place is grounded in the personal feelings, tastes, and opinions of an individual towards a place. Arguably, a sense of place expresses meaning and an attachment to a place. Place meaning refers to the symbolic meanings attributed to a place and centres on the meaning that a specific place has for an individual (Manka, 2022). The meaning of a place is accrued from the biophysical, animate, inanimate, and cultural environments that an individual interacts with. Since place is attributed to different conceptions and perceptions, people in the same location are likely to establish different meanings. Place attachment, on the other hand, encapsulates affective, cognitive, and behavioural attributes to derive meaning (Lestari & Sumabrata, 2018). Place attachment consequently emerges when an emotional bond between individuals, groups, and the environment is formed (Adams et al., 2016; Chen et al., 2018; Masterson et al., 2017). By implication, an attachment or rootedness to a place is established when a place provides support and satisfies one’s needs.

From the foregoing exposition, it could be argued that place comes into being through “practices that inscribe meaning into it through a measure of persistence” (Kruger, 2020, p. 326). When people have different interpretations of place, it becomes “open to contestation by practices that do not conform to the expectations that come with place” (Cresswell, 2009, p. 170). Consequently, place becomes a contested space marked by contestations and struggles between 'them' and 'us', perpetuated by unequal power relations (Manka, 2022; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Belonging is a notion attributed to a sense of place. As noted by Lampinen et al. (2018), belonging is a notion commonly used in the psychological and sociological realms. According to Chakraborty (2020), belonging is an emotional connection manifested through intrapersonal and interpersonal connections to a place. Belonging is perceived as a human need that an individual wishes to experience, including a feeling of being loved and cared for and a sense of security (Antonsich, 2010; Escalera-Reyes, 2020; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Thus, a sense of being at home is expressed as an emotional need to explain an individual's belongingness to a group of people and the environment. When people establish social ties with other people and the spaces they find themselves in, values of acceptance, care, and support are likely to be created, and a strong bond with one another is promoted. In line with the foregoing exposition, Dukynaitė and Dudaite (2017, p. 39) relate a sense of belonging to “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, involved in common activity, and supported by teachers and other community members in the school environment.” In relation to our study, Hurtado et al. (2007, p. 842) define a sense of belonging in higher education as a “psychological or normative sense of academic and social integration in their transition to college.” In this context, it could be argued that a sense of belonging is a personal experience constituted when students feel that they are accepted, included, and respected (Goodenow, 1993) and feel an integral part of the campus community, system, and the whole university environment. In this way, an individual would develop a feeling of fitting in with one’s identity, a sense of security would be advanced, and in this space, a sense of belonging would be constituted (Manka, 2022; OECD, 2017; Riley, 2019).

A sense of belonging is also manifested when individuals identify with and feel part of a group. Yuval-Davis (2006) regards belonging as "an act of self-identification or identification by others, in a stable, contested, or transient way" (p. 4). Individuals may identify with and become part of the group only when there are shared values and aspirations that underpin or are central to a sense of belonging (Manka, 2022). A sense of belonging is also embedded in a sense of community and a sense of group membership (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Antonsich, 2010; Osterman, 2000; St-Amand et al., 2017). This implies that a sense of belonging is central to a community where people share a space, values, and aspirations; consequently, a shared emotional bond and a sense of community belonging are developed (Manka, 2022; Osterman, 2000; Slee, 2019; Tabane & Human-Vogel, 2010). Dost and Smith (2023) reiterate that:

“When individuals feel that they belong to the group, they are more likely to feel connected with other members of the group. These members are more likely to become trusted and respected by their fellow group members, fostering..."
social cohesion within the group. Social cohesion can be understood as the practice of bringing people together by allowing them to feel like part of a group and to identify with that group” (Dost & Smith, 2023, p. 18).

Central to a sense of community is oneness, unity, commitment to one another, and a shared feeling that members’ needs will be accomplished together (Osterman, 2000). A sense of group membership is fulfilled when people join a group that bears character traits that are similar to their own. As people long to establish relationships with others, they will choose a group that is likely to respond to their needs. If one is accepted, protected, and loved accordingly an attachment to a group is enhanced, and consequently, a sense of belonging is attained. From the ongoing exposition, it could be argued that belonging and a sense of belonging could be synthesised as a personal feeling of affiliation to a certain group, place, and space (Manka, 2022). An individual develops a sense of belonging to a group or a place only if it responds to his or her needs.

C. Educational Implications for a Sense of Belonging

This section considers what schools must do to promote a sense of belonging. Universities, as communities of learning, are vested with the responsibility to create a sense of belonging to be enjoyed by all their inhabitants. In this context, all members of the school community are expected to create a warm and welcoming environment. The academic and non-academic staff are expected to create a harmonious school environment in which students feel supported, accepted, and respected (Goodenow, 1993). A warm and friendly school environment would help students establish positive social relationships that would further enhance greater school connectedness or rootedness with the school community, and consequently, a sense of belonging would be promoted (Allen, Slaten, et al., 2021; Uslu & Gizir, 2017). The school’s community is expected to provide emotional and academic support to all the students, irrespective of their age, gender, and social class. In this way, staff members are expected to be sensitive and respond to students’ needs and emotions (Pedler, 2018; Uslu & Gizir, 2017). Creating and encouraging a supportive school environment “represents perceptions of acceptance and connection” (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021, p. 3). By implication, the staff members are expected to provide:

“Unconditional acceptance of the student, which means respecting their otherness, appreciating their individual efforts, and highlighting the fact that they fit in with others as well as being important for other members of the group and the school” (Pitula & Wilczyńska, 2014, p. 251).

Arguably, the provision of emotional and academic support is integral to human beings and central to the promotion of a sense of belonging as individuals form bonds with others (Manka, 2022). When students experience constant support from the school community, it would result in effective participation in the learning environment as greater motivation, engagement and retention are achieved. Fundamentally, universities as learning communities have to create a trusting and inclusive environment that exhibits justice and fairness to all members of the university community. Consistent with the idea, Dost and Smith (2023, p. 2) aver that fairness “refers to the extent to which students believe that school rules are fair and that all students are treated equally”. In this space, the university is expected to ensure open access to all facilities for students, such as the library, counselling services, and recreational facilities. To ensure greater school connectivity, the schools must develop a communicative culture in which lines of communication are opened between and amongst the school community (Manka, 2022). In this context, there would be an easy transmission of information to and from all the inhabitants of the campus community, which is expected to yield fruitful results.

D. Importance of a Sense of Belonging in Schools

Drawing from the understanding of belonging as a human need and a social construct of feeling an integral part of a place and a group of people, it could be argued that there are benefits accrued from acquiring and developing a sense of belonging (Dost & Smith, 2023). A sense of belonging is crucial, as it encapsulates feelings of being supported, valued, included, respected, and accepted. Students’ sense of belonging affects their academic achievement, motivation, and retention (Dost & Smith, 2023; Osterman, 2000). When students in an institution feel they belong to a place, their motivation increases. In this way, a sense of connectedness to a place would lead to increased academic engagement and retention. Consistent with the idea, Osterman (2000) argues that a sense of belonging fosters students’ participation in the teaching and learning process, and they regard school as valuable, and as such, they become academically motivated (Allen, Slaten, et al., 2021; Manka, 2022). A sense of belonging contributes significantly to one’s self-confidence; as a result, students are likely to feel comfortable attending classes and feel free to interact with their peers. In this space, students become motivated and strive hard to invest in their educational development, and consequently, their academic achievement and a sense of community belonging are promoted.

When students feel free to interact with others, reside in a warm, welcoming environment, and are happy, a greater sense of belonging is developed, and they (students) do not feel isolated. "Driven by stable and consistent relationships" (Dost & Smith, 2023, p. 2), the students’ well-being and mental health are secured. It could be argued that a sense of belonging serves as a barrier to anxiety, stress, and depression. As students feel accepted, respected, and supported (Arslan, Allen, et al., 2020), their engagement becomes meaningful in their educational landscape.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative in nature. A qualitative research approach can be defined as research that produces findings not through statistical procedures or other quantification means but through research about people’s lived experiences, emotions, behaviours, and feelings (Flick, 2014). A qualitative approach was therefore deemed suitable for this study, which seeks to explore the lived experiences of Bachelor of Education part-time students regarding their sense of belonging in higher institutions in Lesotho.

The nature of this study also allowed us to use case study
design as a strategy to do an in-depth investigation of a real-life and specific situation within a specific context (Yeung & Thomas, 2022). This study is a case of part-time students in higher institutions. Since case study design is a type of research methodology that is used to gain a deeper understanding of a particular event or phenomenon under study (Heale & Twycross, 2018), the use of case study design enabled us to get detailed and thick descriptions of the experiences of part-time students from their standpoint as a unique social group. Moreover, there is no single reality in a case study; there is also no right or wrong answer (Yeung & Thomas, 2022); hence, it was regarded as suitable for conducting this study. We believe that individual students have their own meanings and interpretations of their experiences, and we were interested in stories narrated by relevant people sharing their experiences, not judging which story was right and which one was wrong.

Data were collected from 45 students, 15 from each year of study. This means that 15 students represented the first-year students, another 15 represented the second-year students, and the other 15 represented the third-year students. The participants were conveniently sampled from the part-time students. During their normal meeting, one of us addressed the students about the study and asked them to have 15 students as representatives from each year of study. One Lecturer Hall was used as a meeting point during our focus-group discussions. Since we are lecturers in this faculty, students were interviewed during their residential period, and focus-group discussions were used as a data collection method because we believed that when they were together, they could influence each other to reveal information that they would feel ashamed to share if they were interviewed individually. The collected data was then analysed using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) by identifying, coding themes, sorting, categorising, and transcribing the students’ responses (Smith, 2011). To ensure quality data analysis, the participants’ responses were read several times to pick points from each of their responses. General observations were compared with the analysis of the data, and verbatim quotations were used to support the study’s findings.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study explored part-time students’ sense of belonging in Higher Education. Its purpose was to determine the nature, importance, and lack of a sense of belonging in the lived experiences of students who participated in both on-campus and off-campus activities, as well as what that concept meant to them and what aspects of the on-campus experiences were significant to them in terms of a sense of belonging.

From the analysis of the responses obtained from the participants, the following themes were derived: relationship with the academic staff at the university; relationship with the non-academic staff at the university; relationship with the non-academic staff at the university; institutional acceptance at the university; and access to university infrastructure. The five main themes emerging from semi-structured interviews are explored in the following sections, which include quotations from the participants’ responses obtained from the interviews to ensure that their voices are heard.

A. Relationship with the Full-time Students on Campus

Students shared their experiences on the relationship they have with full-time students. One of them believed that full-time students hated them for a variety of reasons. The students raised the following concerns:

“The full-time students do not want to see us; they call us names, theymock us, they even laugh at us about our age, calling us grandmas and grandpas; they laugh at how we dress, how we walk, how we speak, almost everything about us.” (Participant A104)

One of them added:

“We know we are mature students, but to be laughed at like that is not nice. The full-time students do not see us as students here; you would hear them asking each other in a mocking way whether there is a parent meeting on campus because they see parents all over.” (Participant A104)

Students found the behaviour of full-time students unacceptable. For example, one student explained their behaviour:

“The way they behave shows that they believe they are the ones entitled to the campus, not us. They do not even respect our lecturers.” (Participant A104)

It was clear that their behaviour was intolerable. Another student described them thus:

“Sometimes when we are in the lecture halls with our lecturers, the full-time students would just enter, sit down, and do whatever they want to do. They are not even ashamed to laugh at our lecturers as they teach. I have never seen such disrespectful children!” (Participant A107)

Even though the part-time students saw themselves as a part of the institution, they were unaware of the SRC’s duties. In regards to full-time students, a student remarked:

“Aside from the fact that we are not represented in the Student Representative Council (SRC) even though we are a part of the student body, we have no idea how SRC operates.” (Participant A102)

One of them stated:

“We envy from a distance the opportunity to liaise with SRC so that our voice may also be represented in the affairs of this institution, but that seems like a nightmare.” (Participant A101)

From the part-time students’ utterances, it was evident that they were experiencing unfavourable sentiments about the student body.

B. Relationship with the Academic Staff at the University

Participants were asked to provide their views on how their instructors or lecturers interact with them during classes. This
is one of the responses:

“Our professors are a Godsend. They care about our academic well-being; they are nice and humane; they nourish us; and they provide an extremely conducive environment for learning and teaching. Their knowledge is commendable. Perhaps since they work part-time like us.” (Participant A101)

One student added:

“They make us feel at home.” (Participant A104)

The above responses indicate that students had a good academic relationship with their lecturers because lecturers created a student-friendly environment for their well-being.

C. Relationship with Non-academic Staff at the University

The study discovered that when students enter the university campus, security or guards also mistreat them at the main gate. One young female student went on to indicate:

“Even the security men are too tough on us.” (Participant A106)

It was not surprising that even the servants who cleaned the surroundings also mistreated them when using bathroom facilities. She stated:

“Even the cleaning people treat us as though we do not belong here.” (Participant A107)

Again, students found classrooms dirty during their stay at the university. They emphasised how the situation affected them:

“We sometimes find the classrooms and toilets not cleaned, yet when the full-time students are around, they are always clean. The servants shifted the blame to them when there was littering.” (Participant A107)

Another student further explained:

“Another thing is that even when the full-time students litter, the cleaners say we are the ones who litter.” (Participant A103)

The findings reveal that students felt non-academic staff did not treat them fairly. This was highlighted by the incidents where they found classrooms, bathrooms and the surroundings uncleaned by relevant departments.

D. Institutional Acceptance at the University

The participants explained the kind of relationship they had with the institution's management. These were their appeal statements:

“In the offices, when we seek any type of support, we are made to feel that we do not belong at the university.” (Participant A101)

Another respondent posited:

“You know, even when we are given a real explanation like the system is down, we presume we are dismissed because we are made to feel, by all means, that precedence is given to full-time students and we are treated like fund-raising aliens.” (Participant A101)

The comment implies that while the part-time students pay fees like the full-time students, staff members do not regard them as university students. This is also corroborated by the following comment by another student:

“The institution is basically reaping us off, merely treating us like income-generating entities because our activities depend mostly on what full-time students are doing.” (Participant A106)

It was clear that the university benefited from the students; however, when it was time to offer them services, they were treated differently.

Some participants expressed concern about how management handles the school calendar.

“We will have our calendar of events, which will be adjusted because most of the time the full-time students might have gone on strikes or whatever.” (Participant A102)

Other students wished that full-time students would never go on strike.

One stated as follows:

“In reality, instead of praying for our academic achievement, we pray that the full-time students do not go on strike because our programme will be disrupted.” (Participant A103)

When the institution transfers students without informing them, the situation of being mistreated is intensified, as one student complained:

“Matters occasionally worsen to the point where we are transferred to other campuses and schools like IEMS and NULIS, where we are treated inhumanely.” (Participant A103)

Another student clarified:

“For example, we would be instructed that we should only be on campus for a particular period because the 'real' owners (full-time students) would occupy it at a certain time and we should be away when they arrive. Students who were just on campus for a brief time were not even considered by the university to belong there. This creates an issue since, as part-time students, we only have time to meet with other students when we have come for residential classes.” (Participant A105)

The research also found that the institution could not regard students as paying fees for themselves; hence, students could not register for the next semester. The registration debacle
leads to alarming dropout rates, as one of them explained:

“Sometimes we fail to register during the registration period due to financial constraints and the system closes. Some students give up attempting to return to school because of that. We would later find out that the registration deadline was extended, and management does not even communicate with us who fail to register.”  
(Participant A104)

It is obvious that there is a lack of communication between students and the university. Other students went on to express that:

“We hoped the deadline would be extended once more the next academic year because we are having trouble paying our tuition due to the university's inconsistent discretionary policies. We are perplexed by how the university functions raised these queries. ‘Are there penalties for late registration?’”  
(Participant A101)

Another one insisted:

“If they do, how do they work?”  
(Participant A108)

Students perceived unfair treatment at the university against part-time students. Another student clarified:

“We feel like the university discriminates against us yet we pay heavy fees here, but the institution seems to view us as an unwelcome annoyance.”  
(Participant A106)

We could infer from the aforementioned data that part-time students felt they did not belong to the university like full-time students.

E. Access to University Infrastructure

Participants were questioned about their opinions on campus amenities and whether they used them. Some students interpreted this in various ways, through comments like:

“We are denied facilities enjoyed by full-time students on campus as though we are less deserving students.”  
(Participant A104)

It appeared that a variety of factors could contribute to students' difficulties. For instance, one of them stated:

“We understand the library should operate as "normal" while we are on campus, but yesterday, shortly after lectures, we arrived at the library and it was closed.”  
(Participant A105)

A different student chimed in:

“We discovered the notice written in bold, "PLEASE NOTE THE LIBRARY WILL OPERATE FROM 8:00 AM TO 5:00 PM," and we were like, why now when we are around yet when the full-time students were around we would use the library up until 10:00 PM!”  
(Participant A108)

Some students thought that the Faculty of Education had not gone far enough in preparing for their arrival. The students gave the following description of the situation they encountered:

“Interestingly, getting access to facilities starts to cause issues.”  
(Participant A109)

They claimed:

“We sometimes wonder if prior preparations were done prior to our arrival. Several difficulties appeared to be causing students' problems. Surprisingly, even access to electricity becomes a difficulty, according to the student. ‘Even simple tasks like charging our laptops are difficult for us.’”  
(Participant A102)

The students also reported that electronic appliances did not work while they were on campus, which astonished them because full-time students had no problems. They said:

“All the plugs would be functional when the full-time students are on campus, and immediately as they leave, the struggle begins.”  
(Participant A107)

Since they were treated differently, they were compelled not to disclose the incidents to relevant authorities:

“We sometimes do not bother reporting since we presume management makes the choice.”  
(Participant A105)

Students found themselves in a difficult situation. One of them described it as follows:

“All these leave us disheartened and confused as to what perception the university community has of us.”  
(Participant A106)

It could be concluded that students had no access to the infrastructural facilities of the university, and as a result, they felt that they were not part of the university.

Feeling a sense of belonging is an essential human need that, when realised, leads to positive outcomes (Dost & Smith, 2023; Osterman, 2000). According to the findings of the study, part-time students have experienced a sense of belonging from the interactions they had with their respectable lecturers. From the literature, it is indicated that it is imperative for the academic staff to provide unconditional academic and emotional support (Manka, 2022; Pedler, 2018; Uslu & Gizir, 2017). Considering the findings of the study, part-time lecturers provide support to part-time students. The statement that ‘lecturers are “God's gift” indicates that they create a habitable home for the students and that they feel comfortable around their lecturers. In this context, it could be deduced that the students feel accepted and recognised. As a result, they experience happiness, feel free to attend classes, and are able to relate to others in their programme. It could be concluded that a feeling of being accepted and supported
by the lecturers promotes a sense of belonging and translates to positive outcomes. In this case, the students’ success, engagement, motivation, and retention are met.

On the other hand, the findings indicate that the concerned higher education is far from creating and cultivating a sense of belonging among part-time students. This is evident from the stressful and resentful relationships that the students experience with some of the university’s community, specifically the full-time students and the non-academic staff. The students feel excluded and discriminated against. Arguably, the concerned university expresses a disconnected community. From the literature, social cohesion can be "understood as the practice of bringing people together by allowing them to feel like part of a group and to identify with that group" (Dost & Smith, 2023, p. 18). It was revealed that there is no social cohesion between the part-time students and the university’s community; as a result, a sense of community is compromised, as the part-time students do not feel an integral part of the university community. It is our contention that by failing to promote a sense of membership, the university’s community is not contributing to the creation of a warm, welcoming environment, and consequently, the realisation of these students’ desired goals is compromised. It could be argued that part-time students are struggling to connect with others, and as a result, their self-identification with the university is contested or compromised. The findings from the study reveal that the interaction between these students and the university’s community is characterised by tension and intolerance due to barriers of difference and unequal power relations (Le Roux & Groenewald, 2021). In this way, a sense of belonging is hampered. In order to create a place of belongingness, the university should come up with a reactive policy that would outline the directives and transformative strategies that will characterise students' daily experiences of a sense of place, which translates into belonging (Le Roux & Groenewald, 2021).

Furthermore, the findings of the study revealed that the concerned institution does not afford part-time students adequate support for them to engage meaningfully in the teaching and learning process. This is evident when registration becomes a debacle for the students, and consequently, some end up stressed out while others eventually drop out. It could be argued that a lack of sense of belonging could lead to anxiety, stress, and depression (Arslan, Allen, et al., 2020). It was revealed from the findings that students are denied access to the library as the closing times are changed, and unfortunately, these changes are not communicated. Denying them access to the library shows that they are not catered for, and as a result, their success, engagement, and motivation are compromised. From the findings, students further lament that the institution charges them exorbitant tuition fees, which they do not feel are worth it due to the treatment they receive. In order to create a sense of belonging, the university has to develop a communicative culture in which lines of transmitting information are opened to everyone on campus, including the part-time students. As the institution is expected to recognise and support part-time students in all respects, it must ensure access to all facilities at all times so that these students are catered for and are able to engage with their studies.

The literature indicates that the university has not created a trusting and inclusive school climate. Hence, the full-time students are favoured while the part-time students are discriminated against and disregarded, as they do not experience the same treatment from the institution. It is our contention that an institution has to create a fair and just school climate to ensure fairness and equality for all students, irrespective of their social class. As noted by Dost and Smith (2023), fairness "refers to the extent to which students believe that school rules are fair and that all students are treated equally" (p. 2). The creation and promotion of a fair and just community is likely to contribute to a sense of belonging, hence engagement and connectedness to the university. To create a sense of belonging at the university, the institution should foster inclusion and equality through engagement and active participation (Dost & Smith, 2023; Le Roux & Groenewald, 2021) of all members of the university’s community.

From the findings of the study, it was indicated that Bachelor of Education part-time students have not experienced a sense of belonging as they feel disrespected, discriminated against, and marginalised by the institution, and as such, they feel disconnected. This feeling brings up challenges and effects that they have to bear throughout their study. A lack of a sense of belonging causes them a lot of stress; hence, some end up dropping out of the university. Failure by the university, for instance, to communicate the registration dates on time adds financial strain to the part-time students, as they sometimes have to pay penalties accrued from the delay in registering. Social exclusion, lack of access to facilities, and absence of supportive policies and systems serve as barriers to belonging and the development of a sense of belonging. These challenges act as barriers to identifying with the university; students’ engagement is compromised, and consequently, their achievement is challenged. To foster belonging and a sense of belonging, the university must be receptive, provide support services, and develop inclusive policies for all to be recognised, respected, and cared for.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study highlighted the facilitators and barriers to the attainment of a sense of belonging for part-time students at a higher institution of learning. The students developed a sense of belonging from their part-time lecturers. This feeling appears to influence their eagerness to attend classes. In addition, their positive interaction with the lecturers has led to greater engagement, and subsequently, the students’ achievement is likely to increase. The study has also revealed that part-time students experience a lack of a sense of belonging in the university’s community. This is evident in events where the students experience unpleasant relationships with the institution’s non-academic staff. In essence, part-time students felt that they were excluded from the social milieu at the university.

In conclusion, it is our contention, therefore, that the concerned university has to create a social milieu in which inclusive measures that pave the way for a sense of belonging on a day-to-day basis are enhanced. Again, the procedures that promote accessibility to the university’s infrastructure must be developed. Lastly, the concept of socialisation needs to be promoted, along with developing a communicative culture and promoting acts of love, care, and compassion by
university community members (Taff & Clifton, 2022).

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

REFERENCES


