

# THE #FEESMUSTFALL PROTESTS IN SOUTH AFRICA: EXPLORING FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AT A PERI-URBAN UNIVERSITY CAMPUS

## **M. Greeff\***

WorkWell Research Unit

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4437-0818>

## **K. Mostert\***

Management Cybernetics

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5673-5784>

## **C. Kahl\***

Management Cybernetics

<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1059-575X>

## **C. Jonker\***

WorkWell Research Unit

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0011-6949>

\*Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences

North-West University (Potchefstroom Campus)

Potchefstroom, South Africa

## ABSTRACT

Students experienced unique challenges in transitioning to their first-year during the FeesMustFall (#FMF) protest actions. It is important to examine students' first-year adjustment experiences amidst study disruptions to ensure better outcomes of first-year study experiences. The impact of protest actions on the economy, higher education institutions (HEIs) and the individual student may be harmful when not managed effectively. The current study aims to clarify the first-year experience to explore how South African first-year students enrolled at a peri-urban university campus experienced the #FMF protest actions. The peri-urban university campus serves a large rural catchment area. Using the Mmogo-method® and unstructured individual interviews, researchers gathered in-depth experiences of fifteen participants who provided insight into their subjective experiences of their first-year transitions during the #FMF movement. Thematic analysis resulted in four themes: Clashes between students and police or campus security; the impact of protest actions on students' lives; psychological experiences of trauma and physical harm; and student attitudes towards and needs in times of crisis. The study uncovered the experiences of first-year students at a peri-urban campus. The knowledge gathered could aid

universities to develop proactive measures to minimize the impact of the protest actions or disruptions on the institution itself, students and stakeholders involved.

**Keywords:** #FMF protests, peri-urban, rural-origin students, first-year experiences, Higher Educational Institutions (HEI), university, South Africa

## INTRODUCTION

The #FeesMustFall (#FMF) protest actions that occurred during 2015–2016 in South Africa affected various stakeholders, especially Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and students themselves. HEIs had to make vast budget cuts and had to perform under enormous pressure (Moolman and Jacobs 2018; Ngoepe 2016; Weidemann 2016). For students, the effects of the #FMF protests have long-lasting effects, where numerous students struggled to cope with exposure to trauma, anxiety and depression as a result of the violent nature of many protest actions (Maphasa 2017). The protests affected the academic performance of many students as a result from missed classes, the disruption around the protests or because students participated in the protest actions themselves; as a result, many students were unable to complete their academic year (Gon 2016).

Since the occurrence of the #FMF protest actions, many articles have been published in the media and scientific journals. Some articles were discursive or conceptual or involved formulated-opinion pieces and studies on the background and formulated impact of the #FMF movement (*cf.* Dandara, Chimusa, and Wonkam 2017; Langa et al. 2017; Mbembe 2016). Other articles focused on decolonisation of HEIs and cost-free higher education (Costandius et al. 2018; Dube 2017; Keet, Sattarzadeh, and Munene 2017; Moja, Luescher, and Schreiber 2015; Pillay 2016), while others investigated experiences of stakeholders in the #FMF protest actions (Du Preez, Simmonds, and Chetty 2017). Since the protests raised awareness of the vulnerabilities and sustainability of HEI systems in South Africa, it was also debated how educators and lecturers should respond to the #FMF movement (Postma 2016).

Few empirical studies could be found that studied the experiences of those involved in the #FMF protest actions. Costandius et al. (2018) demonstrated students and lecturers' reactions on the protests and the effects the protests had on them. Langa et al. (2017) compiled a research report that illuminated the impact of #FMF protest actions. Students researched several university campuses across South Africa, writing individual reports on each university. The reports focused mainly on the decolonisation of HEIs and not so much on individual student experiences. Keet et al. (2017) studied the effect of the protest actions on HEI management members and the rising expectations that came about as a consequence of HEI policy developments, managerialism, and broader socio-economic influences.

The above studies provide valuable expositions of the experience and perspectives of important stakeholders of HEIs across South Africa. However, careful examination of extant literature showed that minimal research had been done around students' experiences and how the #FMF protest actions affected them on an individual level, specifically students studying at a peri-urban university campus. The general objective of the current study was to explore first-year students' experiences of the #FMF protest actions at a peri-urban university delivery site in South Africa.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Background

The accumulation of the #FMF protests officially started in February 2009 and lasted until the end of 2016. The protests emanated from a singular and diverse, but parallel motive, where students protested over high tuition fees, university leadership, and the lack of monetary aid (amongst others, flaws in the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), reimbursed tuition and lower tertiary schooling fees) (South African History Online 2016). During 2014, students started claiming access to free tertiary education (Lekhetho 2016). In reaction to this, the #FMF movement began in February 2016 and reached a pinnacle in October 2016, when more than 2 000 students marched in Pretoria against expected fee increases for the academic year of 2017 (Etheridge 2016). Student riots also emanated from dissatisfaction with accommodation, where students protested for better housing and more reasonable priced residency fees. Students further protested over inadequate registration processes, the required registration fees and universities' language policies.

### Nature of the protests

The research interest in the 2015/2016 #FMF was due to the onset of the violent nature of these protests. Roux (2017) conducted a study at two different South African Universities, investigating student's comprehension of respect and tolerance to human rights during the #FMF protest actions. Results indicated that students demonstrated their rage through protests, aggressive actions, and disturbances of the peace. Langa et al. (2017) compiled a research report referring to several occurrences where the protests resulted in violence and disruption as student protestors expressed their dissatisfaction. The range of violent acts included setting fire to and burning down university buildings, scouring residences, setting up blockades, damaging university property and sustaining physical injuries.

Langa et al.'s report (2017) indicated the severity of violence experienced during the

protest actions was a blend of the dealings between police and student actions, where the presence of the police fuelled an already volatile situation. With the rise of increasing protest action in South Africa, protest management by police received increased attention during #FMF reactions (Roberts et al. 2017). Roberts et al. (2017) reported almost 30 per cent of participants indicated brutal police force as undesirable—quickly opting for the use of destructive methods, e.g. rubber bullets and tear gas to counter-protests (*cf.* Naicker 2016), rather than assisting in facilitating peaceful protest actions. Reports noted that protest actions became increasingly violent on the arrival of the police at the scene, including violation of human rights (Bohler-Muller et al. 2017) and overall experiences of harassment (Mutekwe 2017).

However, Langa et al. (2017) state that the police alone were not entirely to blame for the violent nature of the protests. The role of students' understanding of rules during protest actions and negotiations, may contribute to misunderstandings, especially in the light of media portrayal of police actions and an emphasis on police cruelty while overlooking or underreporting the fact that protestors' actions lead to the harm of non-protesting individuals (Gon 2016). Another under-reported issue included students' protests against HEIs leadership and management in dealing with student matters concerning #FMF. The non-engagement of university management with student groups during the protest actions could have triggered *anger* that headed riots and violent responses. Instead of open-communication, an “us-vs.-them” polarisation was created by the use of law enforcement rather than the promotion of dialogue (Langa et al. 2017).

Due to the media's attention on the violent nature of the protests, another overlooked outcome of the #FMF protests was that many protests were peaceful – a desirable outcome of protest actions that brings about the possibility of change (Bohler-Muller et al. 2017). Such attitudinal rather than socio-economic and geographical characteristics predict the nature of protest actions as a strategic response to gain positive results (Bohler-Muller et al. 2017). Positive outcomes were also highlighted by Langa et al. (2017). They noted that students experienced an increased public awareness for the need for financial aid and much-needed curriculum changes as positive. That is, though violence was not ideal, the outcome was not always physical detrimental, but could symbolically raise awareness of social issues – in the case of the #FMF, the financial strain and shortages of resources for the majority of students in South Africa became increasingly visible. Many universities already started with the decolonisation of their curricula (Langa et al. 2017). Keet et al. (2017) also indicated the positive consequences of the #FMF protests as legitimate efforts towards social justice and decolonisation of tertiary education with increased awareness and urgency of transformation in higher education (Dandara et al. 2017).

## **Experiences during the #FMF protest actions**

Few empirical studies could be found that focused on the *experiences* of different stakeholders during the #FMF protest actions. Existing studies focused on (1) experiences of university management; (2) experiences of lecturers and students during the #FMF protest actions and the effect it had on their relationship with each other; and (3) experiences of students.

### ***Management***

Dominguez-Whitehead (2011) explored the experiences of a selected group of executive university management at a South African university. One participant experienced the protests as extremely stressful. They were overseeing an office that provided services to students, and they and non-protesting students were confronted by aggressive protesting students demanding access to university services. Another participant spoke of their experience with strikes like joint academic and support staff who were demanding salary increases. The participants mentioned that the strikes could be branded by protest walks, blockades, physical intimidation and staff refusing to work. Overall, participants in the study experienced the protest movement as unlawful, doubtful, and resulting in aggressive actions.

### ***Lecturers-students***

Costandius et al. (2018) explored students and academic lecturers' experiences of the #FMF student protest actions. Both students and lecturers felt that the intensity of violence increased from the first #FMF protest actions compared to current responses, and experienced the violence as ineffective. The authors referred to the emotional experiences of students and lecturers as feelings of doubt, confusion, anxiety, tension, fear and sympathy; but also pain, powerlessness, and disappointment. Students and lecturers experienced a breakdown in their relationships. However, some cases reported positive experiences of mutual understanding and creating spaces for discussion amidst the disruptions. Students suggested mending the efforts towards social injustice, for example, the redistribution of access to education and efforts to enhance African centrality and providing the necessary resources to enhance academic success in the form of support services (e.g. writing and language-based services).

### ***Students***

Domingues-Whitehead already indicated in 2011 that student protests could influence the experience of personal safety and security felt by students and that student protest action could have an emotional or traumatic quality in itself. Roux (2017) investigated the experiences of

human rights of students taking part in protest action. Values of freedom, equity, respect, and social justice were ranked high and experienced by participants as meaningful, which correlated with the slogans used during protests. These participants were highly aware of social injustice. Also, the virtues of respect and tolerance were deeply embedded in students' social framework and stemmed from political and historical experiences. Glover (2017) concludes that student protest actions also affected non-protesting students who were inadvertently part of student protest actions as bystanders. Glover stated the majority of students wanted to continue with their studies during the disruptions the protest caused, and wanted to get the best out of their academics in which they had invested financially and contractedly.

In general, the violent nature of the protests disrupted university campuses, where it was not possible for constructive learning activities to continue, mainly because various campuses were closed for extended periods (Glover 2017). In an online article compiled by HR Pulse (2015), it was emphasised that students wasted valuable study time required for examination preparation. They were under enormous pressure to prepare for the upcoming examinations due to the adapted examination timetables, e.g. examination dates were likely to be staggered closer together. Inadequate preparation for exams and being absent from most lectures also influenced academic performance. Physically, the protests caused students to get injured (Langa et al. 2017). Consequently, students were anxious about their physical safety and campuses were closed (Naicker 2016). The student protests were described as a "warzone" (Tau 2016). The police fired rubber bullets and tear gas to contain the chaos and students were hurt and arrested. Firearms such as petrol bombs were sneaked onto campuses and used to set fire to buildings.

Students experienced unique challenges during the #FMF protest actions. Considering the inherent challenges in adjusting to university, understanding first-year experiences amidst disruptive contexts, could better inform students' needs in dealing with study demands when starting university to ensure better outcomes of first-year study experiences and overall well-being.

With the above literature discourses in mind, the current study aims to add to first-year students' perspectives of the #FMF protest actions, regarding their study experiences at a peri-urban HEI in South Africa.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

The study used a qualitative approach to explore and understand a specific phenomenon (Creswell and Creswell 2014), i.e., first-year students' experiences of their university studies at a peri-urban delivery site in South Africa during the #FMF protests. To ensure researchers could access participants' subjective experiences and interpretations of their study experiences amidst

the #FMF protests, an interpretive descriptive approach was applied (Thorne 2016). Sandelowski (2000) explains that an interpretive descriptive approach seeks and describes the experiences of participants and showcases specific aspects of participants' experiences to interpret and make meaning of their experiences. Though individual participants' experiences may differ, identifying common themes and patterns was considered (Hunt 2009).

### **Research setting and context of participants**

The current study forms part of a larger project entitled “*StudyWell: Student Well-Being and Success*”. Selected findings of first-years' experiences of the #FMF movement are presented. The specific HEI was located in a peri-urban area that served as a catchment area for first-year students who enrolled from rural communities in the surrounding districts. Students came from areas often faced with disadvantages such as poor-quality schooling, socio-economic disadvantage and poverty challenged by a lack of supportive contexts and opportunities to promote further education at HEIs.

### **Ethics, recruitment and sampling**

The study was conducted with ethics permissions and consent (ethics code number NWU-HS-2014-0165). Access was negotiated through appropriate gatekeepers since university students are considered a vulnerable group of participants and gatekeepers help protect students' interests in agreement with institutional ethics committee guidelines (Department of Health 2015). Purposive, snowball sampling accessed participants with personal experiences of the #FMF protest actions during their first-year at the specific HEI campus (Patton 2015). The gatekeepers identified potential participants, invited and recruited first-year students who (1) were enrolled as first- or second-year-students at the specific campus, (2) had a basic proficiency in English as a common language, (3) were enrolled for an undergraduate degree and (4) were willing to reflect on their first-year study experiences at the particular HEI. Although English proficiency was preferred, interpreters were available. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was explained and signed, and withdrawal carried no negative consequences.

### **Data collection and procedures**

The data were collected in two ways. The Mmogo-method® (Roos 2012) to collect group generated understandings, followed by individual in-depth, unstructured interviews (Patton 2015). The focus of the Mmogo-method® was to understand participants' study experiences in general, while the in-depth interviews explored students' experiences of the #FMF protests in greater detail. Thirteen students participated in the Mmogo-method®, two of which agreed to

participate in follow-up interviews. An additional two participants were recruited for interviews to share their insights, bringing the total number of participants to fifteen. Accordingly, one Mmogo-method® group and four in-depth interviews formed the data corpus. Following data collection, a counsellor offered a short debriefing session and provided their contact details to participants should they need further debriefing due to the traumatic nature of discussing the #FMF protests. All sessions were recorded and transcribed verbatim at a later stage. Table 1 provides the biographical information of the participants.

**Table 1:** The biographic information of research participants

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

### **Mmogo-method®**

The Mmogo-method® as a visual participatory data-gathering method developed as a culturally-sensitive procedure to facilitate discussions individually and within a group (Roos 2012). Registered research and clinical psychologists trained in the Mmogo-method® facilitated the data collection. A central research question asked participants built a model to illustrate their experiences using malleable clay, colourful beads, and grass stalks on a round cloth. Participants were allowed to complete their models (after about 45 minutes), take a picture of what they built, and explain to the group what they built and how it related to the research question. After each student explained their model, they reflected on each other's models too. The central question was: *"Make a representation of your experience as a student at this specific HEP"*. The researchers used probing questions to clarify and gain an in-depth understanding of participants' explanations. The group analysed potential themes using interactive qualitative analysis (IQA) (Northcutt and McCoy 2004). Based on results from the IQA, additional in-depth interviews were necessary to expand group explanations.



## **Individual interviews**

The in-depth interviews were guided by a central open-ended question to obtain greater understandings on participants' experiences, perceptions, and opinions of the #FMF protest actions. The main question asked during the unstructured interviews was: *“How did you experience the #FMF protest actions?”* The researcher used probing questions to elaborate.

## **Data analysis**

The primary analysis of Mmogo-method® is outlined by Roos (2012). Participants and researchers engaged in IQA, to identify participant-driven themes. Following the thematic analysis generated from the Mmogo-method® and IQA analyses, the researcher conducted a focused analysis to target experiences of the #FMF disruptions. The focused analysis was conducted in two distinct phases (Tracy 2020), i.e., (1) primary (open), and (2) secondary (conceptual) coding and generate appropriate themes. The researchers systematically coded using computer-assisted analysis in ATLAS.ti version 8 (Friese 2019). The researchers made use of analysis tools in ATLAS.ti to explore code distribution (density, groundedness), code co-occurrence (overlapping codes, simultaneous coding) and code groupings to explore possible patterns to create preliminary themes.

## **Trustworthiness**

The researchers employed criteria for quality, qualitative research to ensure trustworthiness.

**Table 2:** Ensuring trustworthiness (adapted from Tracy 2010)

<b>Criteria for quality</b>	<b>Practical application in the current study</b>
Worthy topic	The political unrest in South Africa and the #FMF movement that occurred at most HEIs in South Africa underscore the relevance of the topic, i.e., to produce meaningful research that addresses the necessary gaps in understanding the implications for HEI practice.
Rich rigour	Appropriate sampling methods accessed participants who experienced the #FMF movement. Quality qualitative data were collected using culturally appropriate methods.
Sincerity	The researchers reflected on their own bias, conducted introspection before and during data collection and data analysis. Transparency was ensured by conducting data collection and analysis as part of a research team under supervision.
Credibility	Triangulation: decrease researcher bias and prejudice by describing the researcher's world view and background; methodological triangulation through multiple data collection methods and rigorous analysis with an explicit data audit trail.
Resonance	Providing naturalistic generalisations based on participants' responses that could be appealing for students who may relate to their own or similar experiences.
Significant Contribution	The findings of this study offer practical wisdom to HEIs concerning the views of first-year students of the #FMF movement.
Ethical	Ethics permission and consent was obtained. All researchers are registered at the HPCSA and signed ethical conduct and confidentiality agreements.
Meaningful coherence	Findings of this study are linked with existing literature to understand, interpret, and reveal the current study's findings to inform extant literature and address knowledge gaps.

## FINDINGS

The thematic analysis produced four main themes: 1) clashes between students and police or campus security services; 2) the impact of the protest actions on students' lives; 3) psychological experiences of trauma and physical harm; and, 4) students' attitudes towards and needs in times of crisis (summarised in Table 3).

**Table 3:** Overview of themes, sub-themes and associated conceptualisations through formulated meanings

Sub-themes	Associated topics (if any)	Formulated meanings
<b>Theme 1: Clashes between students and police or campus security services</b>		
Mistaken identities	Non-protesting students mistaken as protesting students by the police and deployed campus security.	Non-protesting students were seen and targeted as protesters by the police or university security, i.e., there was a lack of differentiation of protesting and non-protesting students.
Movement restrictions	Police and campus security place restrictions on the free movement of students on campus.	Students' natural movements around university were restricted by the police and university security. Students could not walk around freely on university or move through all the access gates. Lack of movement affected students' academic performance because they were prevented to work together on group assignments on university.
Violent interactions	Students were injured during interactions with police and university security.	Rubber bullets fired by police at protestors resulted in physical harm and injuries.
<b>Theme 2: Impact of the protest actions on students' lives</b>		
Academic impact	Disrupted classes	Protesters entering classrooms, disrupting classes.
	Missed classes	Loss of academic time, classes was cancelled. As a result, additional pressure to catch up and a very difficult and challenging exam.
	Consequent high academic pressure	High academic pressure because classes had been cancelled and lecturers had to move quickly through the syllabi. Negative consequences included that participants did not clearly understand the work since it was difficult to follow lecturers and keep up with the pace. Little room for questions around work not understood and inadequate preparation for the exam.
	Considering drop-out or lengthened course timespan	Thoughts of drop-out or lengthening the time span of university studies due to poor marks and increased academic pressure, caused by the no-class period.
	Administrative hassles	Difficulty to register online for the new academic year and having no internet access when off-campus.
	Staying up to date with academic workload despite of challenges	During the no-class period, lectures were of course cancelled. Participants therefore had to master the university work on their own through self-study. Some participants indicated that they tried to keep up with their university academic performance despite the cancellation of lectures.
Impact on living arrangements	Unsafe in on-campus residences	Residences were shot at and experienced as unsafe.
	Vacating on-campus residences	Having to vacate residences at night, not having alternative housing on such short notice, very disruptive while also struggling to cope with other events.
Impact on university adjustment	Adjustment to university life made more difficult	Co-occurring effects of the protest actions made the adjustment period to the university worse for first-year participants. Participants questioned choosing this specific university, but after a while adjusted and became accustomed to the protests.
	Adjustment to academic standards made even more difficult	Some participants described university academic adjustment as more challenging than they were expecting.

Sub-themes	Associated topics (if any)	Formulated meanings
<b>Theme 3: Psychological experiences of trauma and physical harm</b>		
Experiences of anxiety, apprehension and fear		Tension and apprehension around protesters and the chaos they caused on campus. Anxiety and uncertainty about what was going on around campus, fear of being shot by the police or campus security, fear of firearms that police carried; overall edginess or anxiety when moving around campus during the protests.
Traumatic exposure to violence		Witnessing acts of violence, personal experiences of violence, witnessing a shooting, being shot at and injured by the police, intense feelings of total bewilderment, feeling isolated during traumatic experiences because of a lack of support or counselling services to deal with these experiences.
Psychological and emotional pressures		Severe psychological pressure to complete the same amount of academic work with fewer or no classes under fearful circumstances; intense emotional pressure because of constant fear and witnessing emotionally upsetting situations.
Disappointment and feelings of failure		Feeling disappointed in themselves due to poor academic results that did not meet university or their own personal standards or expectations.
Surreal experience		Experiencing protest actions was new and foreign, viewed as something that happens to others, something that is seen on television and not in real life.
<b>Theme 4: Student attitudes towards and needs in times of crisis</b>		
Positive attitudes towards the university	Feelings of understanding and empathy towards the university	Understanding and empathy from some participants towards the university because of the difficult task managing the uncertainty and abruptness of the protests.
	University experiences as supportive and resourceful	Strategies implemented by the university during the protests experienced as supportive and included the provision of study resources and extra classes by some lecturers before the final exam.
Specific needs or assistance from the university in dealing with strikes	Need for provision of alternative accommodation	Participants felt the need for assistance in finding alternative arrangements if they had to vacate residences immediately without prior warning.
	Need for financial assistance	Need for assistance in terms of monetary aid in the form of bursaries and free education; perceptions of university versus college. Colleagues are perceived as providing more monetary aid to students than universities.
	Need for stricter regulations to deal with protestors	A need for stricter rules, regulations and consequences to protect students and the university – “if you break, you pay”.
	Need for better communication	Students and university management should actively listen to each other and alter behaviour accordingly.
	Need for free access to university	Students are demanding their university government-promised free education. Participants do not want to be provided with bursaries, but rather good quality free education. This was promised in 1994 but not delivered. Participants perceive the fight for free education as a noble cause even though it created academic and other challenges for them. They consider this a breach of government's promise of free education.
	Need for better counselling and medical assistance	Need for additional counselling and medical services to assist during traumatic events.

### Theme 1: Clashes between students and police or campus security services

Participants described their interaction with the police and campus security as clashes or conflict with protesting students. Explanations included confusion between identifying protesting and non-protesting students, restrictions on movements to and from the campus, as

well as injuries sustained during interactions with police or campus security services.

During the #FMF protests, participants reported that protesting students became violent. Buildings were burned down, and classes were disrupted by protesters. As a result, the police and campus security personnel were deployed to regain order. In some instances, police and campus security confused protesting students with non-protesting students. This mainly happened because non-protesting students moved past protesters to go to class, the library or to their on-campus residences. Other students were standing close by and observed the protest actions out of curiosity. Participants described this situation as very confusing while the lack of differentiation between protesting and non-protesting students was experienced as though police practised a “no-mercy” or “zero tolerance” approach towards students, regardless of whether they were actually part of the protests or not. This created a degree of fear among participants who sensed that it was as though the police and campus security were not on their side: “As long as they catch you, they just arrest you; they don’t want to hear your story”.

In addition to the confusion around protesting and non-protesting students, participants shared the frustration of not being able to move freely on their campus. Because of the protests, the police and campus security restricted certain areas and closed campus gates, limiting campus access. Such restrictions prevented access to the university via usual routes to and from campus and students’ accommodation while limiting access to important campus facilities needed to complete academic assignments. It was difficult completing academic assignments, especially group assignments since moving around in groups was not tolerated by the police or campus security. One participant reflected: “We were not allowed to work in groups or walk around on campus in groups or you are going to be shouted at”.

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

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

## **Theme 2: Impact of the protest actions on students’ lives**

Participants narrated the impact of the protest actions on their lives. They explained the impact on their academic work, living arrangements and adjustments to university. Participants

mentioned that protesters would sometimes violently disrupt classes and that they were afraid of the protestors: “People from the strikes, they just enter the classroom. Even the lecturer was scared. The lecturer ran away, and it was very scary, but what about us students?” Participants stated that during the protests, academic time was lost, putting additional pressure on them because of missed classes and keeping up with the work through self-studying in preparation for exams.

Participants experienced high levels of pressure in their studies during the time of the strikes. Due to increased time pressures, lecturers had to move quickly through the syllabus. Participants explained they lacked a clear understanding of the work, had no time to clarify challenging aspects of the work and had difficulty keeping up with the pace. Participants were not adequately prepared for the exams. One participant explained:

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

Participants did not perform well, and their marks were not what they had aimed for. They stated that they forfeited their privilege of residing in the Campus residences due to not meeting the required academic standard for continued residence space in the following academic year. One participant explained:

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

Various participants indicated that they considered dropping out or lengthening the timespan of their studies to relieve increased academic pressure: “Some of us were considering it to drop out of university because the academic pressure was very intense, we were very scared”. Participants also talked about their frustrations around administrative hassles. Many participants experienced frustration when they had to register online for the new academic year and not at the campus during the protests because they had limited internet access at their

homes. One participant said that he did not own a smartphone to access the internet: “My phone is not well connected to the internet and I had to go to my family and I had to ask them to help me to register.”

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

“I didn’t see a big impact on my marks, because when people started striking, the lecturers gave us the slides [electronic study materials] and we knew where to study everything. When people were striking, I was staying at my place, busy studying. It was like a holiday, but I was studying.”

The protest actions also impacted participants’ living arrangements, specifically as campus residences, were considered unsafe for them to reside in during the protest actions. Residences were shot at with rubber bullets: “What I experienced was that there was war in my residence. We were attacked there”. Because residences were no-longer safe for students to reside in, all students were sent home until further communication from management. Some participants, who lived far away and were unable to go home, went to live with friends. Participants who had no refuge were provided with alternative housing options by the university. Having to vacate residences in the middle of the night was very disruptive while coping with all the events that occurred. One participant reflected:

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

Finally, the protest actions made the whole adjustment experience more difficult for participants. The adjustment period from high school to university in itself was already a challenging experience for most first-year students. The participants voiced that the protests made the adjustment even more daunting than it would have been, adding increased pressure. One participant even questioned his choice of the university: “When you come to university, nobody is holding your hand; you had to learn stuff yourself. So, sometimes you felt difficulty, you come to the point of giving up when you want to ask yourself: Why did I even come to this place?” Another participant said: “It was difficult, because of the ongoing strikes of #FMF. It

made it even harder to adjust to the academic [standard of] life”.

### **Theme 3: Psychological experiences of trauma and physical harm**

Psychological experiences permeate and overlap with other themes such as interaction with the police and campus security (theme 1), academic pressure, poor performance (theme 2). However, distinct psychological aspects were embedded in participants' experiences highlighted here. In particular, experiences of anxiety, apprehension and fear, traumatic exposure to violence, psychological, emotional pressure, feeling disappointment or a sense of failure, and, experiencing #FMF as surreal. Of concern was the reported lack of counselling services to support students who experienced trauma.

Participants expressed intense feelings of anxiety, apprehension, and fear during the protests. They specifically voiced that the presence of police and security on campus and seeing the firearms they carried caused feelings of anxiety due to the constant danger of getting shot. One participant reflected that they were “scared”, that they “didn't know what to do” and that there was “shooting” on-campus. Another participant noted “the fear of getting arrested”. At the same time, another was too afraid to leave their own house: “Sometimes I didn't want to go outside to attend classes, because when I go to classes, there were police with guns and stuff, so I was afraid for my life”. Participants felt apprehensive, anxious and feared being near the protesters and getting arrested by the police since the police and campus security targeted residences where they considered protesters entered or hid. One participant explained: “I was scared to get arrested. As I was saying, we were attacked in the residence. I did not have a chance”.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### **Theme 4: Student attitudes towards and needs in times of crisis**

Participants expressed their attitudes towards and need they felt the university should meet during the protest actions. While participants demonstrated some understanding and empathy towards the university, they also expressed specific needs during the protest actions that were unmet.

Participants expressed positive and sympathetic attitudes towards the university around the difficulty’s management had to deal with during the protests. One participant acknowledged that the university might have had a difficult task managing the uncertainty of the protests and that the university was placed under pressure by the student protest action due to their extreme and unpredictable nature. The university had no protest-emergency plan in place and was completely caught off-guard by the protest actions. It was also a challenge to act in the best



interest of all stakeholders involved, including students, management, staff, protesters, the media, and the government. Some participants placed themselves in the shoes of the university and tried to understand their side of the story. One participant considered the challenge for university management to manage, control and resolve the situation: “The university management didn’t have it easy, because every decision they could make has a negative effect on a specific group of people. It was hard for them to make a decision that will benefit everyone.”

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

Even though participants expressed empathy and experienced support from the university, they expressed very clear needs for assistance from the university. Students were given short notice from management to vacate residences late in the evening, and all students had to make alternative arrangements for accommodation in haste. Participants expressed their need for assistance from the university to make alternative arrangements or provisions if they need to vacate the residences immediately: “For future protests and those students staying in res [residence] ... if they want them to vacate it, to vacate campus, they must arrange some accommodation outside campus, because the SMS was sent around twelve at night.” The university was perceived by participants as not applying strict rules and regulations and to (violent) protesters and felt that the latter suffered no consequences implemented by the university. They voiced a need for stricter regulations and implementation of these to protect both the students and the university. It was suggested that the university should implement an “if you break, you pay” principle. Participants felt that this would enforce protesters to take accountability for their actions during protest. One participant gave the following suggestion: “Let’s say when people want to strike; maybe they must be given certain laws”. The significance of the need for stricter rules was emphasised by one participant: “So I think the university must provide regulation that protects us as students, and I think the environment will be protected. If they protect the students, they will feel protected and then they won’t burn the university”.

Participants needed improved communication between the students and management. They needed the class representative to communicate student concerns to management before

students “exploded” and acted out. University property was damaged because management did not adhere to or was unaware of their concerns:

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

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

The fight for free education was perceived by participants as a noble cause; it was a fight for what was owed but not delivered. They felt a successful outcome might relieve their financial strain, even though it created academic strain and other challenges for them. One participant who did not participate in the protests mentioned that the fight for free education is a “good fight”, even if it comes with consequences: “I can’t say I blame those who were protesting because there are reasons we can clearly have, what they are fighting for. So even if it did put us under pressure”. Another participant (who took part in the protests) referred to the broken psychological contract by the government who did not deliver on their promises from 1994: “Bursaries is not what we want, we want free education. We don’t want financial support; we want free education”. Also, participants experienced a lack of support with access to psychological and medical care, explaining that they felt university management did not provide victims of the protests with the necessary support to counter the trauma and harm caused. As one participant explained: “Some students were left traumatised. They were not given medical care or psychology stuff.”

## DISCUSSION

*Theme 1* illustrated the friction between the police or campus security and students. Adverse interactions between the police or university security were mentioned in several cases reporting on #FMM (Langa et al. 2017). For example, the police controlled protestors by firing rubber bullets into a crowd of students regardless of their participation, and a case where a non-protesting student was forcefully removed from their residence and arrested. Such incidences resulted in fear of physical harm and injuries sustained as a consequence of police and security services. The restricted movement to and from campus due to closures was deployed at various

HEIs to regain order on the campus (Langa et al. 2017). Against the background of reports, the current study affirms the confusion that police or campus security services experienced by not being able to differentiate protestors from non- protestors during violent protest actions. The current study adds to students' experiences on multiple levels of confusion.

The protests impacted students' lives on various levels (*Theme 2*). The academic impact resulted in higher academic pressure, possible extension of studies or potential drop-out (Karimshah et al. 2013). Restricted access to the university campus complicated registration processes and access to computers and the internet (Cicchinelli and Beesley 2017). Meeting academic demands despite adversity infers resilience. Kotzé and Kleynhans (2013) refer to executing academic tasks despite the adversity of the protest actions as academic resilience. Applying self-discipline and self-study resonates with findings by Platow, Mavor, and Grace (2013), while others protested and demanded additional study time to prepare for exams when their initial preparation time was interrupted (Dominguez-Whitehead 2011).

As a result of unsafe conditions at campus residences, students were sent home. Langa et al. (2017) reported on students who were shot and injured inside their own residences during the #FMF protests. A safe environment to study and live is a core need (South Africa 1996) and is essential for academic success (Gopal and Van Niekerk 2018). Without safety, academic performance is hindered (Gopal and Van Niekerk 2018), especially relating to academic-, social-, and monetary support (Tinto and Pusser 2006). The lack of family- and financial support had an impact on the academic success of students (Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco 2005). Similar findings relate on-campus living and academic success, especially where the safety and security of these students are of concern (Gopal and Van Niekerk 2018). Such disruptions influenced the academic success of first-year students. Collective trauma at university caused a risk for poor adjustment at the end of students' first year of study (Liu, Kia-Keating, and Modir 2017). The current study is indicative of the necessity for adequate support for academic transitions, especially during times of disruptions.

In contrast to existing studies on managerial perspectives (Bantham 2018), the current study examined *student* perspectives of difficulties experienced with their academic studies during times of disruptions caused by #FMF. The current study provides new insight into students' academic resilience through continued academic performance despite adversity. Besides, our study emphasises the implications of evacuating campus residences in the absence of providing alternative accommodation or financial support and how participants' needs are not currently met when adjusting to the university under risk-filled conditions.

*Theme 3's* psychological impact due to anxiety, apprehension and fear resonates with reports on students' perceptions of being nervous and fearful (Langa et al. 2017). Pilane (2017)

reported physical harm was associated with psychological effects such as anxiety, insomnia, and suicidal thoughts. The protests led to psychological or emotional responses that were profoundly distressing or disturbing, including impacting psychological pressure and mental and emotional well-being (Langa et al. 2017). Dominguez-Whitehead (2011) reported experiences of the protest actions as chaotic, stressful and that participants specifically spoke of the emotional impact of these actions.

In the current study, participants reported similar experiences where the protest actions were perceived as surreal and were difficult to understand. Exposure to traumatic events left students with the need to deal with emotions elicited from the violence. The lack of appropriate medical and psychological services left participants feeling isolated during traumatic experiences. Even though psychological services were available at the campus, participants felt that following such a traumatic experience; the HEI should have offered and extended special care to support students pro-actively. The current study relates participants' disappointment in their academic results that did not meet their expectations and provides insights on the effects of trauma on a deep psychological level.

*Theme 4* explored the attitudes and needs of participants about the university, including their feelings and understandings of the impact of #FMF on university management and the HEIs responses. The current study's participants expressed empathy towards the university management in dealing with the events of the #FMF. Such efforts, however, did not match the participants' needs. These findings agree with events on other campuses and social media responses from students who felt sorry for the university management in dealing with issues resulting from #FMF (IAmKateRoth 2016). However, the HEI responses reported in extant findings often did not meet students' needs (Ntongana, Furlongand, and Washinyira 2015). HEI's were blamed for failing to effectively communicate and being disconnected from the students' actual needs (Langa et al. 2017). Access to free higher education has not been considered viable or implemented (Bitzer and De Jager 2018). The transformed HEI system (post-1994), held possibilities for an improved future for students from poverty-stricken backgrounds to attain a tertiary education (Dominguez-Whitehead 2011), which endures to date.

## **CONCLUSION**

The current study offers unique insights into participants' perceptions and attitudes in how the HEI dealt with the #FMF, recognising the difficulties that the HEI faced and appreciated vital resources and strategies implemented to oppose the impact of the protests. However, HEI decisions should be informed by the implications protest responses may have for their students,

especially when HEI responses require them to vacate or limit access to campus-based resources. The present study demonstrated the need to develop an open communication channel between students and HEI management, enabling raising concerns and providing a platform for communication. HEI management should anticipate concurrent risks associated with violent protests – including academic, physical, economic, and psychological risks.

### **Implications in dealing with the nature of protests**

The extent of the #FMF protests demonstrated that HEIs should be better prepared in dealing with the nature of protests. Student perspectives offered understandings on the nature and extent of violence resulting from protest actions for management. Postma (2016) indicates that the violent nature of protests is symptoms of a failed political and educational system. The violent and dangerous nature comes in when the aim of the protest is not freedom, but gaining social needs related to educational exclusion. Educational exclusion is seen as a violation of human rights for access to equitable opportunities and efforts to redress past injustices, which may require progressive action. Such actions have been mostly associated with violent measures. Going forward, it is essential to revisit the methods police and campus security employ to control protests, given that peaceful protest action is more advantageous than disruptive or violent action (Bohler-Muller et al. 2017). It is imperative to investigate and find peaceful, constructive ways to combat the violent nature of student-police interactions. Besides, leadership at universities, the Ministry, and the Department of Higher Education (DHET) must address the protest actions constructively and prevent reactions that elicit student rage (Badat 2016).

It could be worthwhile to provide opportunities where students may learn more about rights, responsibilities, procedures, and social justice when participating in legal protest actions and recognise the consequences of illegal protest actions. Badat (2016) also argues that stakeholders should embark on authentic attempts to communicate with the protesters instead of calling on the police or hiring private security to intervene too soon. Langa et al. (2017) further suggest that peace and reconciliation interventions should be used to repair relationships after the protests. Authentic, reciprocal communication needs to occur between the university management and students to solve dissension.

### **Implications of #FMF for management, lecturers, and students**

The protest actions resulted in emotional and traumatic effects on students, who required support from the HEI. HEIs should raise awareness of the availability of support and resources that the university, lecturers, and service providers offer. The #FMF protests were experienced

as traumatic and students expressed a need for psychological support. HEIs should ensure that campus counselling services and other support services are functioning well and purposefully extend services that meet students' needs during disruptive events. Information regarding processes that should be followed and support services that are available during protest actions should be accessible and in a format that would be simple and readily comprehensible. Where HEI sites were closed off, alternative measures should be in place and accessible to students in need, such as e-learning placed on the HEI electronic platform. Using e-learning provides students with alternative access to learning resources at times when it may not be possible to access the HEI delivery site.

The current study found a lack of effective communication was experienced between the university and first-year students, and recommends regular dialogue with students and establishing open communication channels to avoid tension before protest actions. One of the insights gleaned from the protests is that university management requires a more open mindset around discussions with students about grievances, instead of using the police or court interdicts as the first course of action (Langa et al. 2017). Investigating individual student experiences could be beneficial to HEIs to enhance understanding and communication within and across university systems to combat and prevent the negative impact of similar events in future. As such, proactive, customise HEI responses in times of crisis is necessary to minimise the negative impact on students and relevant stakeholders.

The impact of the #FMF protests extended beyond addressing communication gaps. Students required not only emotional and psychological support in dealing with the trauma but also financial aid, academic- and career development efforts that are equally necessary for students to integrate well and experience academic success.

Finally, it is important for HEIs to explore the financial challenges for the university and of first-year students during protest action. This agrees with McKay, Naidoo and Simpson (2018), who explored financial challenges of first-year students resulting from the #FMF movement. In their findings, it was evident that universities attempted to provide financial support but felt that over more extended periods, it was not feasible. As with all other international findings, government funding was perceived to be insufficient. In cases where funding did exist, communication about these opportunities were lacking. They further found that academic performance is still the primary contributing selection criteria for funding which puts a damper on any transformational efforts, leadership capabilities and subject orientated aptitudes. HEIs should actively participate to find solutions for these challenges.

## Limitations

The present study is limited to qualitative experiences of a limited sample of students at a peri-urban campus. Such limitations should be considered by future researchers when researching student experiences during protest actions in different settings. Only students who experienced the #FMF protest actions in their first year participated in this study. Findings of this study can, therefore, not be generalised to all student experiences such as those of older students at more advance year-levels of their studies. The sample comprised predominantly male, African students, while female students, as well as students from other cultural backgrounds, may have had different experiences. We know from the literature that access to culturally meaningful support in dealing with adversity is invaluable in meeting demands (Theron, Liebenberg, and Ungar 2015). Accordingly, culturally embedded examinations of students' experiences may offer valuable insights into first-year experiences.

## NOTE

1. The majority of participants were male. The larger study spans across three campuses with greater variance for gender. However, for the specific campus only one female student volunteered. Possible limitations for the current study are discussed under conclusions, limitations, and recommendations.

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