



RHODES UNIVERSITY
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**IMPROVING THE FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS' ALUMNI
AWARENESS AT SOL PLAATJE UNIVERSITY: A PARTICIPATORY
ACTION RESEARCH APPROACH**

**A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
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ABSTRACT

This research study aimed to improve the alumni awareness of FGS at Sol Plaatje University in order to enjoy a lifelong connection with their alma mater. Furthermore, this study provides recommendations to Sol Plaatje University on how engage first-generation students (FGS) and alumni more effectively in the future.

This study used a mixed-method research design to collect and analyse data. The first phase of data collection used a quantitative research method in the form of a survey to obtain biographical information about the final-year students and to identify FGS as key participants for this study. The second data collection phase employed qualitative research to gain insight into alumni awareness among FGS through an alumni awareness workshop and a follow-up questionnaire.

The survey findings revealed that students needed to be informed about alumni and related activities on campus. In addition, all were eager to attend the alumni workshop in the second phase of the study.

The study findings revealed that FGS showed improved knowledge of alumni and related activities after attending the alumni awareness workshop. They also indicated their willingness to attend university alumni events such as reunions, homecoming, and fundraising events after graduation.

Recommendations include suggestions for Sol Plaatje University to identify FGS at registration and tailor its extracurricular and support programmes to cater for such students. The university should also introduce alumni awareness workshops to prepare students for life after graduation as alumni and for the world of work. Lastly, the university should develop a mentoring programme for its FGS and alumni at an earlier stage to help them transition into and out of the university.

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Ndibamba ngazibini. Makwande!

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

In recent years, the South African higher education sector has experienced a sharp decrease in state funding. The country's economy is experiencing prolonged low growth (Gumata & Ndou, 2019), and student debt is consistently increasing (De Jager & Baard, 2020). Most universities have minimum reserves to fall back on, and the days of philanthropists no longer make generous donations to deserving causes – funders now invest based on envisaged returns (Campbell, 2017). According to Campbell (2017), this phenomenon could lead to a significant budget crisis and resource dependence on operating revenue from tuition and fees. As a result, financial sustainability has never been more critical, and universities are now forced to explore alternative funding mechanisms to increase their income (Ekpoh and Okpa, 2017).

Universities have chosen to cultivate alumni support (Thomas and Shepard, 2003) to augment their coffers. However, Khanfar *et al.* (2009) argue that for any reciprocal relationship with alumni to yield results, an effective engagement effort must begin with students about to become alumni. If student engagement is conducted correctly, it can become a stable launchpad for building long-lasting postgraduate relationships with students (Khanfar et al., 2009). This point is supported by Volin (2016), who found that most active alumni community members list undergraduate experience as contributing to their involvement. As a result, Volin (2016) and Aloï (2020) determined in their various studies that highly involved students on campus were 31% more likely to be engaged and active alumni than their less-involved peers.

1.2 Background to the study

There is a rapid increase in FGS (FGS) at South African universities (Moodley and Singh, 2015). In 2017, Strydom (2017) estimated that about 75% of first-year students in South African universities are the first in their family to attend university owing to the changes in the profile of students over the past decade. FGS (FGS) are defined as students whose parents have had no further education after high school (Dumais and Ward, 2010), as students of parents who have yet to graduate from a tertiary institution (Heymann and Carolissen, 2011) or the first member of their family to go to college (Toutkoushian, Stollberg and Slaton, 2018).

Sol Plaatje University (SPU), a state-funded institution opened in 2014 (Truyts, 2018), is also attracting many of such students according to its recent annual survey of first years by its Centre for Teaching Learning and Programme Development (CTLPD). A total of 64% of first-year students who registered with SPU in 2022 are the first in their families to register at a university. Of these, 72% receive public financial aid from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) (CTLPD, 2022). Furthermore, most of its students come from rural and disadvantaged communities in the nine provinces of South Africa (Sol Plaatje University, 2014).

The previous political climate in the country that limited university attendance for non-whites saw generations of South Africans being restricted from attending university. These past generations are now parents and grandparents whose children are attending university as the first in their families to do so. With this increase in access comes an array of challenges such as retention and throughput amongst first-year FGS (Motsabi *et al.*, 2020). Inkelas *et al.* (2007:405) highlight that FGS can differ from other students in many ways. It has been found that FGS need to be better academically prepared in terms of mathematical and critical thinking skills than other students whose parents have completed a university degree (Choy, 2001).

Ribeiro (2014) argues that FGS from working-class backgrounds are most affected by affordability, considering the overall socio-economic context of their households, which may also affect them as future alumni. This is because they may focus on addressing other pressing issues rather than participating in alumni engagement and contributing to the University (Beattie, 2018; Nunn, 2021). This contrasts with another study that found that FGSs had significantly lower levels of social and academic engagement and integration (Pike and Kuh, 2005:287).

However, as higher education diversifies and becomes less homogeneous, more nuanced strategies are needed that consider their students' social identity, cultural differences, and future alumni (Drezner, 2018). Universities must realize that their role does not start and end with everything between registration and graduation but evolves to include long-term relationship-building with all its stakeholders (Obeng-Ofori and Kwarteng, 2020).

Volin (2016) argues that alumni develop an affinity for their alma mater based on experiences that began as students. This affinity is strengthened and maintained based on experiences and participation as an alumnus or alumna. The result is high levels of engagement, including communication, event attendance, volunteerism, and giving (Volin, 2016). Another factor on which many studies agree is the positive impact of a vibrant campus environment that talks about lived experience, support structures, and positive student experience, which are related to more engaged alumni (Aloi, 2020).

The Illinois Wesleyan University Alumni Association (2004) took it a step further by recommending that the University cancel homecomings and reunions and focus on student awareness of alumni activities and outstanding alumni and their achievements. They urged the University to inspire current students through increased interaction between students and alumni (Morris and Carey, 2016). They proposed that the Alumni Mentors' programme should facilitate this interaction by pairing first-years and alumni to enrich their experience while creating a network for career development. Other studies suggest that other topics should be added to the awareness programme, such as racial and cultural awareness (Bowman *et al.*, 2016), re-entry workshops (Mulvey, 2015), as well as employability workshops (Mawson and Haworth, 2018).

Alumni Relations Offices typically drive universities alumni relations programmes. These offices aim to develop and nurture relationships with university stakeholders through quality programmes, services, and events to improve relationships and increase partnerships. In addition to maintaining lifelong relationships through communication and affinity events, alumni relations offices are also typically responsible for raising funds from the alumni community as an alternative income for the institution (Rust, 2012). According to Webb (1989), Alumni tend to protect and jealously guard their university's image as they hope to ensure their degrees maintain their value. This point is supported by Knoesen (2010), who identified alumni attitudes towards the reputation of the institution, poor alumni engagement, and negative attitudes toward the institution as contributing factors to alumni not giving to their Alma Mater.

This research assesses whether introducing alumni awareness workshops to FGS will improve their awareness of alumni, thereby encouraging them maintain a long-term relationship with their alma mater. The study also draws some lessons to inform how the SPU Alumni Relations Office can engage with them as alumni in the future.

1.3 Significance of the study

This study is important and relevant because it is the first of its kind in the selected university. Most researchers in this sector tend to focus on fully developed research-intensive universities. This will be a ground breaking study as it will be the first of its kind focused on the future alumni of a new university in South Africa.

In addition, the study seeks to learn lessons from the research, which will be developed into management recommendations for active listening or engagement with the student community. These recommendations will strengthen the relationships between the university and its students and later between the university and alumni after graduation. It will also help the office plan and decide whether to focus on student-alumni awareness activities in the main or on alumni engagement, or both.

1.4 Problem Statement

As one of the two recently established universities in South Africa, Sol Plaatje University will soon experience growth and face the realities of all other universities that seek to raise funds to augment their increasing budgets and new facilities and services (Ruiz-Huston, 2010). However, owing to the challenges of a sharp decrease in state funding and prolonged low economic growth, these universities will find themselves having to rely on private individual contributors, mainly alumni, for support (Smith *et al.*, 2019).

According to Smith *et al.* (2019), this potential donor group has a distinctive perspective of the university experience because many are first-generation, representing diverse sectors of the population, and from low-income families. Sol Plaatje University has a similar situation as most students come from rural and disadvantaged communities (Sol Plaatje University, 2014). Many students receive public financial aid from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), with

72% of first-year students registered in 2022 being funded by NSFAS, and 64% of them being first-generation (CTLPD, 2022). Added to this is the reality that Sol Plaatje University is a relatively small university with a small and young alumni community cohort that still needs to give to the university (SPU Annual Report, 2021).

In addition, FGS tend to come from families without a long history of philanthropy; therefore, despite having high levels of altruism, they lack the tradition of private philanthropy for education (Gyllin, 2013). As a result, smaller universities need to determine how to develop a mechanism to introduce current students to the culture of supporting their institution (Smith *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, the university needs to inculcate the sense of institutional support early in a student's educational career (McDearmon, 2013) because that creates deep-rooted motivation in one's awareness inducing a desire to give to the alma mater (Baafi-Frimpong, 2015).

Through interrogating the research questions below, the study seeks to determine whether introducing alumni awareness workshops to FGS in their final year will improve their alumni awareness. The research problem and questions are examined through stakeholder engagement theory.

1.5 Research Question

Specifically, the study endeavours to find answers to the following critical questions:

- How can a university support FGS on campus?
- How can the alumni awareness of FGS in their final year be improved?
- How can the SPU Alumni Relations Office engage with FGS as alumni in the future?

1.6 Aims and Objectives of the Study

This research aims to improve alumni awareness among FGS in their final year of study to build lifelong relationships with their alma mater. The research methodology enables the targeted participants to be identified and their level of alumni awareness assessed and empowered. According to Hoyt (2004), alumni attain readiness or motivation before participating or contributing to their alma mater. A first-generation student is the first member of a family to go to college (Toutkoushian *et al.*, 2018)

This goal translates into the following main objectives:

- To improve alumni awareness among first-generation university students in the final year;
- To share experiences, lessons learned, and administrative challenges in facilitating the project; and
- To identify strategies to improve alumni awareness among FGS in the final year.

In addition, the study sought to identify the lessons learned from the research which would be developed into management recommendations for active listening or engagement with the student community. These recommendations would strengthen relationships and improve the University alumni office's student engagement strategy. They would also assist in the office planning deciding whether to focus on student-alumni awareness activities in the main or on alumni engagement, or both.

1.7 Terms and Definitions

First-generation student – A first-generation student is the first member of his or her family to go to college (Toutkoushian *et al.*, 2018).

Alumni - Alumni is plural for 'alumnus', namely a person who has attended or graduated from a particular institution of learning (school, college, or university). (Weerts and Ronca, 2007).

Awareness – Awareness refers to the ability to maintain some knowledge about the situation and activities of others (Liechti and Sumi, 2002).

Student engagement can be thought of as a variety of constructs that measure both the time and energy students devote to educationally purposeful activities and how students perceive various elements of the institutional environment that support and facilitate their learning. The term has been defined in several ways over the years (Kuh, 2001).

Alumni engagement – This refers to ways in which alumni can be involved with their alma mater, including, but not limited to, giving, attendance at events, visiting campus, politics, and student recruitment.

Alumni giving - The exchange process between the alumni and the institution is known as giving (or donating). It could be in a monetary form, in kind, or by means of influence.

1.8 Scope of the study

The study focuses on final-year students at the Sol Plaatje University in the Northern Cape Province, South Africa. This population comprises students who are currently in their third and fourth year of study, generally known as seniors at the University.

1.9 Methodology

The survey was available online for all senior students. Those who indicated that they are first-generation and have volunteered to participate joined the second phase of the study, namely the workshop and questionnaire. This further limited the sample, making it smaller and easier to handle. The interview and workshop participants were selected from the survey of all final-year students.

Workshops were recorded and coded to ensure that everything was captured. Data relating to the experiences of the participants in the Alumni Awareness workshop were collected during and after the workshop using the written evaluation of the workshops by the participants and the transcribed recordings. Data were then analysed using the thematic approach (Creswell, 2005). This ensured that the data was well organized and easy to analyse.

1.10 Limitations of the study

The study was only conducted with a specific group within the student population of Sol Plaatje University, namely FGS in their final year. This focus on the above participants limited the scope of this research to the first-generation perspective. The views of other students within the University and current alumni were not considered for this study.

1.11 Structure of the study

This study comprises six chapters, structured as follows:

Chapter 1 deals with an introduction to the research and the background of the study. It also states the purpose for which the study was conducted. It further highlights the research questions that underpin the study. Lastly, this chapter addresses the significance of the study and its possible limitations.

Chapter Two reviews the relevant literature, the conceptual framework, and gives an in-depth explanation of the theoretical framework used to guide the study. It gives a brief historical overview of FGS and their challenges in accessing and graduating from higher education institutions. It further discusses student engagement and alumni awareness as an extramural activity and how they influence life after graduation as an alumnus. Finally, the review references the literature that identified significant undergraduate experiences that positively influence alumni involvement and post-graduation support.

Chapter 3 provides the methodological approach to the study, which details the process followed to attain the necessary data to help answer the fundamental questions of this study. More details on the sample population, research design, survey instrument, workshop and questionnaire, data collection, data analysis, and study limitations are provided.

Chapter Four presents the results of the quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Chapter 5 discusses the general findings of the study and the implications the findings have for the current literature.

Chapter Six presents the study's conclusions, limitations, and recommendations.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature on alumni awareness among FGS and how this can be improved to maintain a continued connection with the university. The study uses stakeholder theory as its primary theoretical framework. The chapter also examines the challenges FGS face on campus and how those negatively affect them. It further explores possible opportunities to better engage with and improve the plight of FGS in the final year. The chapter also reviews the term 'alumni', explicitly raising awareness among students before they graduate and become alumni. This is what is loosely referred to as 'alumni awareness'.

Lastly, the relationship between student alumni engagement and alumni fundraising is explored, although it is acknowledged that the field of alumni relations is closely related to fundraising.

2.2 Conceptual Framework

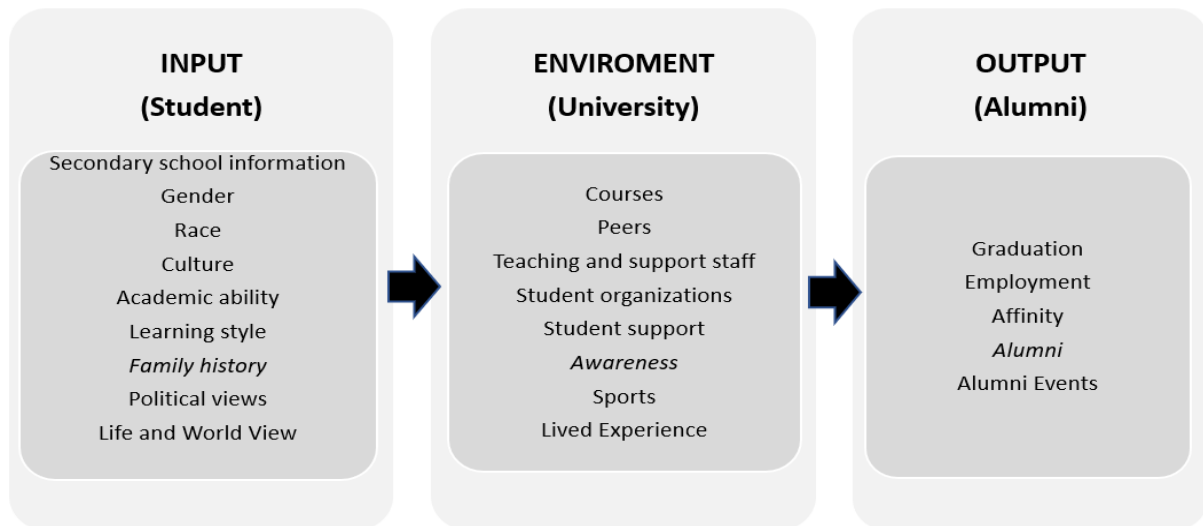


Figure 1: Conceptual framework
Model (Astin, 1977)

Source: Researcher's construction, adapted from Astin's IEO

The conceptual framework of the research, shown in **Figure 1** above, is adapted from Alexander Astin's IEO model (Astin, 1977) of student involvement. Astin's theory of student involvement focuses on the premise that the more involved and engaged a student is with the campus community, the more satisfied they will be and the more

likely they will succeed and be retained in the university community (Boscarino-Green, 2022). The IEO model also focuses on how the university environment affects the students as they transition through it.

The framework lays out a longitudinal model that incorporates input (I), the university environment (E), and the outcomes (O). It follows the students before their university placement, through university, and beyond graduation (Renn and Reason, 2021). The model considers the effects of both inputs and the environment on outputs and the effects of inputs on environmental interactions (Mayhew, Rockenbach, Bowman *et al.*, 2016).

The framework depicted above reflects the process by which the researcher envisions how institutions of higher learning should approach an introduction to alumni awareness workshops with its students, namely by first obtaining as much information about their students (inputs) as possible, and secondly, by introducing extracurricular activities in the form of alumni awareness programmes while they are still on campus (environment) in preparation for their life as alumni after graduation (output).

There are two propositions developed for this study:

First, FGS must be identified early on their arrival on campus, thoroughly engaged, and encouraged to join extracurricular activities, which can help them develop affinity and loyalty to their alma mater.

Secondly, alumni awareness of FGS will improve if the concept of alumni is introduced to them through well-considered and planned alumni awareness programmes while they are still on campus.

2.3 Stakeholder Theory

This study uses stakeholder theory. Many scholars have acknowledged stakeholder theory as the most important framework for promoting stakeholder participation and business ethics (Mamabolo, 2018). According to Fontaine, Haarman, and Schmid (2006), this theory was first proposed by Freeman in 1984. At its core, it advocates for the interests of groups affected by an organisation's decisions. This point was articulated by Freeman (1984) in his definition of a stakeholder as any individual or group who can affect or is affected by a firm's achievement or objectives during its

operations. This means that a stakeholder can be anyone affected by the actions of a business; hence, for the purposes of this study, a university's stakeholders are referred to and specified as those on which they are focusing.

Jones and Wicks (2018) define stakeholder theory as a managerial theory that recognises that organisations engage in relationships with many groups or individuals and that stakeholder theory focuses on these relationships regarding the processes and results for both the organisation and the stakeholder. This means that the organisation must collaborate with stakeholders to produce results and create shared value for their mutual benefit (Freeman, 2010). This definition of stakeholder theory is the one adopted for this study as it is relevant in the context of a university. Universities are results-oriented and need to ensure that they graduate students as well as ensuring that they create value for both the institution and the students.

In the following section of this study, an overview of stakeholder engagement is provided as well as an exploration of stakeholder engagement in a university.

2.3.1 Stakeholder engagement in Higher Education

Greenwood (2007) understands stakeholder participation as a positive practice to involve stakeholders in organisational activities. Like stakeholder theory, stakeholder engagement has pursued an ethically informed understanding of human beings and management and their contribution to corporate value creation and the well-being of stakeholders (Friedman and Miles, 2006). This sentiment was echoed by Freeman (2006), who maintained that the purpose of an organisation should be to manage the interests, needs, and viewpoints of stakeholders. This implies that institutional leaders should work for the benefit of stakeholders to ensure their rights and participation in institutional decisions. In addition, they must act as stakeholder agents to ensure the institution's survival for each stakeholder group's long-term stakes (Asiyai, 2015). In the context of business ethics, Kaler (2002) concluded that stakeholders are claimants to whom businesses owe perfect or imperfect moral duties beyond those generally owed to people at large.

Friedman and Miles (2006) identified the stakeholders of a firm as customers, employees, local communities, suppliers and distributors, shareholders, media, the public in general, future generations, past generations, academics, competitors,

nongovernmental organisations, activists, trade unions or trade associations, financiers, government, regulators, and policymakers. However, the definition provided by Campbell and Rozsnyai (2002), which regards university stakeholders as students, society, and government participating in or benefiting from education provision, is best suited for this study. This definition categorizes stakeholders as either internal or external. Internal stakeholders are those within the university system who are interested in the quality of education provided to learners and in the standard of the outcomes while external stakeholders are those outside the system.

Figure 2 (Asiyai, 2015) shows the internal and external stakeholders of an institution of higher education in Nigeria. The situation is similar in South Africa, with the only difference being the names given to different entities.

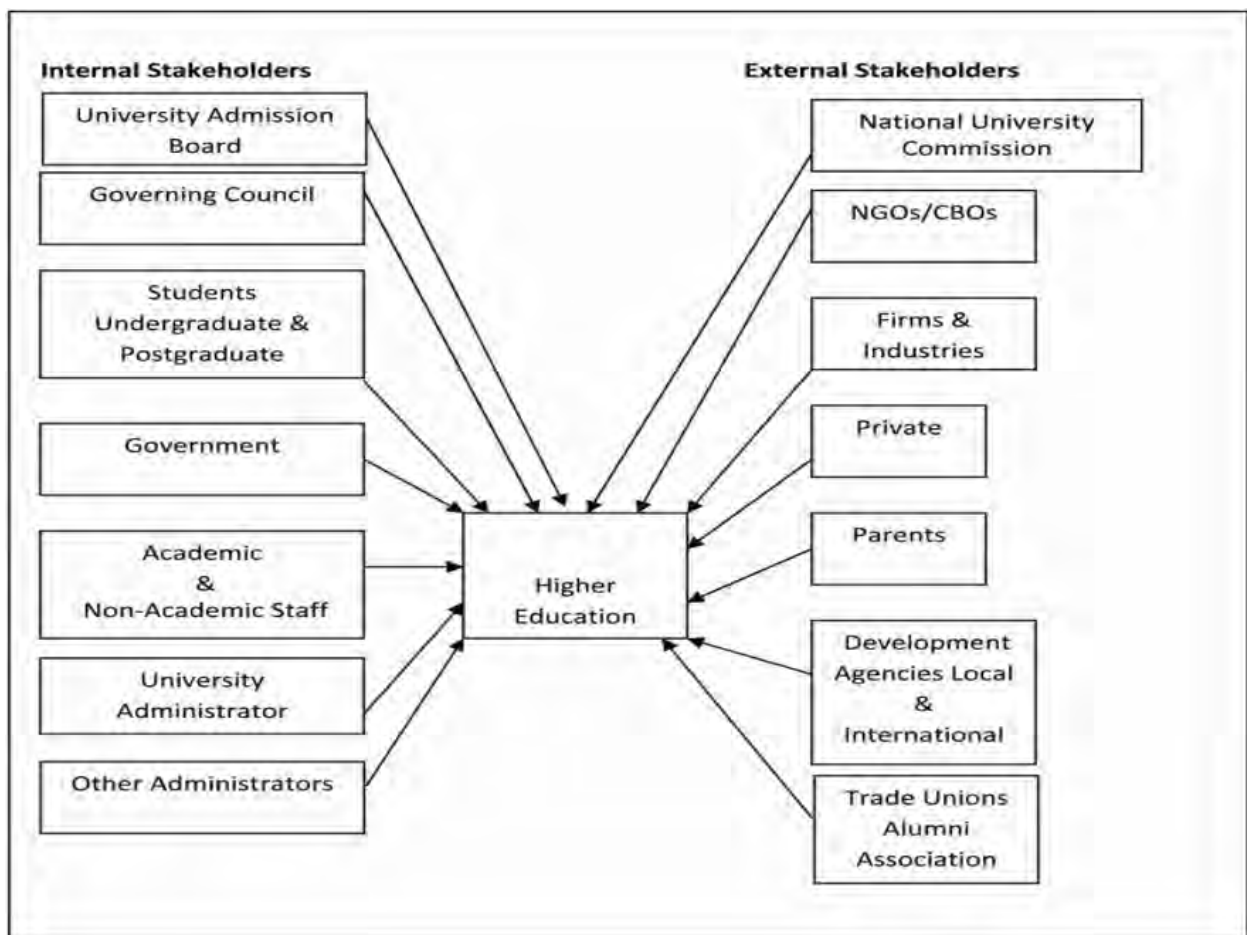


Figure 2: Higher education stakeholders **Source:** Asiyai (2015)

In the next section, the study will discuss the participation of students as one of a university's critical internal stakeholders.

2.3.2 Student Engagement

Students are critical stakeholders in a university as they are customers in the education industry who strive to obtain the best education (Asiyai, 2015). The essence of establishing any higher learning institution is to ensure the healthy development of students academically, morally, socially, politically, and spiritually. Students must be an integral part of the success of any educational institution. Successful institutions encourage significant participation by students, teachers, and parents (Wilson, 2008).

According to Di Battista *et al.* (2014) and Farr-Wharton *et al.* (2018), student engagement is broad. Promoting student engagement is a global issue and crucial to education in industrialized nations (Coates, 2010; Zepke, 2015). The idea is frequently theorized and studied (Kahu, 2013). According to Kuh (2001), student engagement can be thought of as a variety of constructs that measure both the time and energy students devote to educationally purposeful activities and how students perceive various elements of the institutional environment that support and facilitate their learning.

Strydom and Mentz (2014), drawing from the work of Kuh *et al.* (2005:9), define student engagement in terms of two key components; first, the amount of time and effort students spend on academic activities and other activities that lead to experiences and outcomes that constitute student success. The second is how institutions allocate resources and organise learning opportunities and services to induce students to participate in and benefit from such activities.

Harrison³⁷ (2013), building on the work of the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2012:2), notes that the meaning of student engagement has evolved and has been applied to any of the following: time spent on a task; quality of effort; student involvement; social and academic integration; good practices in education; and learning outcomes. This evolution is evident in the slight change in the definition proposed by the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2012:2), which defines student engagement as covering two domains: engagement in learning and participation of students in quality enhancement, and quality assurance processes.

Hagel *et al.* (2011), citing Vibert and Shields (2003), identify three ideological perspectives about student engagement: the critical/transformational perspective, the

interpretive/student-centered perspective, and the rational/technical perspective. The critical/transformational perspective focuses not on the activity of engagement per se but on the employment goal. It questions not what students should be engaged in, but how and for what purpose students engage. The critical emphasis is engagement as a transformation means (Meyer and Land, 2005). They further explain student engagement as a “liquid space” simultaneously transformed as the learner moves through it. The interpretive/student-centred perspective argues that participation is more than being involved in the activity (particularly an activity deemed relevant by educators) and that students need autonomy, choice, and control to be genuinely engaged. The rational/technical perspective focuses on preparing students for life after formal education. It is a functional perspective that prioritises involving and engaging students in activities deemed by educators, government, and societal expectations to be valuable and productive (Vibert and Shields, 2003).

It is the rational/technical perspective of student engagement that this study adopts to prepare students for life after formal education as Alumni of the University through the alumni awareness workshops because on-campus student experience does influence their attitudes toward the institution as alumni (Weerts and Ronca, 2007). The following section will discuss alumni awareness as an activity of student engagement.

2.4 Alumni Awareness as a Student Engagement Activity

The reputation of any educational institution depends mainly on good results, cocurricular activities, environment, and investments (Shakil and Faizi, 2012). However, there is one factor that only requires support and encouragement and brings strength and expansion to the institution's reputation and progress. That factor is the alumni of the alma mater. However, the university needs to inculcate the sense of institutional affinity early in a student's educational career (McDearmon, 2013) because that creates a deep-rooted motivation in one's awareness to induce a desire to give back to the alma mater (Baafi-Frimpong, 2015).

There is ample scholastic evidence that the general experience of students influences their subsequent perceptions of and feelings toward their university (Liu and Jia, 2008). Experience in this context is defined as the students' recollection of their participation in academic and social activities while at university (Koenig-Lewis *et al.*, 2016).

In his famous ladder of public engagement, Arnstein (1969) lists six different levels of stakeholder engagement. These levels are *information*, *education*, *consultation*, *participation*, *partnership*, and *devolved power*. Each level is explained in the literature; however, this study focuses on the education level, which Zaucha and Kreiner (2021) defined as explaining or raising awareness of something, often changing attitudes or actions. This level of engagement best describes our study as we seek to increase alumni awareness among final-year students.

One of the most valuable means of creating a sense of belonging when students arrive on campus is through their campus activities (Strayhorn, 2018). Participation in extracurricular activities is an influential contributor to student retention and academic success (Astin, 1999). With so many challenges in the South African higher education sector in recent years, such as student access and success (Strydom, 2017), decolonizing and transforming curriculum (Fomunyan, 2017), as well as finding new ways of teaching and learning post-COVID-19 through e-learning (Maphalala and Adigun, 2021), it is encouraging to see that a strong emphasis is placed on graduation and throughput rates by the sector (Motsabi *et al.*, 2020). Although significant, such a heightened focus on academic outcomes tends to disregard the holistic nature of university education and the importance of subjective well-being experiences of university students (Eloff *et al.*, 2022).

According to Clotfelter (2001), extracurricular activities promote holistic student well-being development and facilitate meaningful connections to colleges and universities that cultivate that essential sense of belonging long after students graduate and lead to lasting relationships with an institution. Utter *et al.* (1999) supported this claim by asserting that students' assessments of their campus experiences directly impact how they will feel about their alma mater after graduating. Furthermore, their happiness with their education impacts their decision to give to it in the future. One of those critical extracurricular activities is the alumni awareness workshops organised by the Alumni Association or the Alumni Relations Office. Besides driving high levels of pride in and affinity with the university, Lawley (2008) argued that these extracurricular activities are valuable tools for engaging students and alumni while encouraging future financial contributions to the institution by its alumni.

'Alumni' and 'awareness' are words with different meanings and are defined as follows. 'Alumni' is the plural for 'alumnus', a person who has attended or graduated from a particular institution of learning (school, college, or university) (Weerts and Ronca, 2007). Awareness, on the other hand, has a broader definition. Awareness refers to the ability to maintain some knowledge about the situation and activities of others (Liechti and Sumi, 2002). Therefore, awareness is a state of being aware or having knowledge and understanding that something is happening, or has happened, or exists. It is derived from the 'aware' used in many contexts with many connotations. Sometimes 'aware' is used instead of 'knowing'; other times it is used as 'generally taking into account' or 'being present in mind' (Modica and Rustichini, 1999:274). Based on the above definitions of the two words 'alumni' and 'awareness', alumni awareness means being aware or having some knowledge of the concept of alumnus.

More studies on what students plan to do as alumni are needed for various reasons. Nevertheless, according to Atwood (2004), one major factor is that students do not relate to the word 'alumni' and everything associated with it until they receive their first correspondence from their alma mater's alumni office after graduation. Their limited notion of alumni appears to be that they are wealthy, old, grey-haired men who drive huge, expensive cars (Randall, 2003). Introducing alumni awareness as an extracurricular activity within a university could remedy this severe misconception because increasing student awareness can translate into increased alumni awareness as those students graduate, leading to increased involvement and interactions (Rupinski, 2019).

Boyle and Magnusson (2007) assert that universities can help students form meaningful and long-lasting memories by utilizing the organisation's extracurricular activities, rituals, or traditions. Long after leaving the institution, they continue to carry these habits and memories with them. These routines and memories become their everyday experiences of their time at university. The university personnel interacting with students during their undergraduate years are partly responsible for how these memories are created and preserved (Magolda, 2002). This is essential for the university because there is sufficient data to show that extracurricular activities are critical to a student's overall academic success (Caruth, 2018), improving throughput and graduation rates. According to Evans (2015), graduates who perform well

academically give more money to the institution because alumni who perform better academically are more likely to be financially successful in their careers, influencing their willingness to share (Cunningham and Cochi-Ficano, 2002).

In most universities, alumni awareness programmes fall under the Alumni Relations Office. However, in some instances, they fall under the auspices of the Alumni Association, a voluntary formation of the alumni of a particular university. These associations normally create student chapters called student alumni associations or student foundations (Singer and Hughey, 2002). According to Gaier (2001), these associations are easy to run and are effective vehicles to drive alumni programmes and foster relationships with alumni (Patouillet, 2000; Campbell and Baxter, 2019; Newman, 2011; Shakil and Faizi, 2012; Singer and Hughey, 2002).

The Alumni Relations Office aims to foster and cultivate a common bond of pride, affinity, and connectivity among university students and alumni. The Alumni Association, on the other hand, typically gives students a venue for social engagement and awareness raising, while also assisting alumni in upholding long-term relationships with the organisation and each other (Shakil and Faizi 2012). In most countries, including South Africa, membership of alumni associations is voluntary; however, in the United States, membership is automatic after graduation (Iskhakova *et al.*, 2016:132). In most cases, membership of the association is considered a potential revenue stream, as members are asked to contribute an annual membership fee, which is another form of financial contribution to the university (Newman and Petrosko, 2011).

If this can be adopted in the South African context, it could lead to a potential revenue stream for our institutions of higher learning (Rust, 2012). However, while alumni associations as fees-based organisations have been around for almost a century, lately there has been a shift to an open membership model. Several large alumni associations in the United States have recently moved away from a dues-based model. Most notably, fees-based alumni association models at the University of Cincinnati, University of Illinois, the universities of Georgia, California, and Santa Barbara have recently shifted to an open membership model (Newman, 2010).

Reichner (2019) identified a university's student affairs department as another potential space to promote alumni awareness work because professionals must create

a university experience where each student feels supported and valued. Unlike other university counterparts, connection and belonging are a primary focus for student affairs practitioners in a unique way. Relationship-focused duties performed within student affairs to create a sense of connection and belonging with students could shape a unique experience for every student (Berquam, 2013). Alumni awareness work could be added as one of the final-year student affairs activities geared toward preparing students for life after graduation. There is also a possibility for student affairs and alumni relations to work together collaboratively because, in doing so, they can provide students with significant opportunities for their development and growth in their future careers (Singer and Hughey, 2002).

According to Brown *et al.* (2020), several strategies can be implemented to raise student alumni awareness. These strategies start from transition programmes for first-time entering students, graduate seniors' programmes, and the transition from university to the world of work programmes. These strategies can be presented in many ways through different programmes. Singer and Hughey (2002) list four main types of programmes: Campus programming, career development, alumni organisations, and other initiatives. Campus programmes provide students with alumni information to introduce them to the world of alumni. They also include alumni events, such as homecomings and combined student-alumni events. Career development provides mentorship, internship, and job placement programmes designed to prepare students for life after graduation. Other initiatives combine on-campus student life events such as fundraising, sports, and social events.

Most global alumni awareness programmes are designed to help students transition to alumni status. According to Rissmeyer (2010), the University at Buffalo offers a collaborative countdown to commencement, beginning with the 100 days until graduation celebration. The event is hosted in collaboration between the Departments of Student Affairs and Alumni Relations of the University, where final-year students are taken through a series of workshops on alumni and the world of work. Another alumni awareness programme is called the Alumni Project at a College of Business at a mid-Atlantic regional university which is an engagement between students and alumni in a mentoring program where students benefit immensely. According to Larsson, Marshall, and Ritchie (2022), students report (1) growth in interview skills, (2) improved

career discernment, (3) a better understanding of how coursework can be applied in practice, and (4) a meaningful connection with their alma mater.

The Alumni Engagement Metrics Task Force (2018:5) identified some benefits of an alumni awareness programme, such as building enduring and mutually beneficial relationships, inspiring loyalty, increasing financial support, strengthening the institution's reputation, and involving alumni in meaningful activities that advance the mission of the institution (Lauersen, 2021). In addition, Rust and Uys (2014) list the creation of culture (symbols, traditions, rituals, behaviours, and values) as another benefit of alumni awareness programmes. Such cultural aspects influence an individual's engagement and thus shape the future alumni relationship.

The measurement of alumni awareness programmes against targets is critical for proper planning. Programme evaluation should be conducted frequently. Hurwitz (2005) suggests that alumni awareness and satisfaction surveys are the best options for measuring programme efficiency and effectiveness.

2.5 Conceptualising FGS

An increasing proportion of young people worldwide are accessing higher education (Snyder *et al.*, 2016). However, research nationally and internationally points to the influence of socioeconomic backgrounds on university access (Archer *et al.*, 2005). Another group of young people who are affected by this situation are students who come from families with no university education (Capriccioso, 2006). These young people are called first-generation students (FGS).

Various scholars have defined FGS in different ways. The following section explores some of the definitions. FGS are defined as those students whose parents have had no further education after high school (Dumais and Ward 2010) or as students of parents who have yet to graduate from a tertiary institution. The latter definition implies that the parent(s) could still have some higher education experience but may not yet have graduated from a college or university (Jehangir, 2010). O'Shea (2016), on the other hand, advocates for the definition that focuses on FGS as those who are the first in the family to access a university or college qualification, meaning no one in the immediate family of origin, including siblings or parents, had attended a university or completed a university qualification.

The first and most frequently used definition focuses on the measurements of parental education levels (Spiegler and Bednarek, 2013). It does not necessarily mean being the first student within the family, as older siblings may already have attended a university. This definition is also very flexible, as some broader reports may include students with only one university-graduated parent (Smith and Lucena, 2015). This study adopts O'Shea's (2016) definition, which casts the net more comprehensively than the parents, but includes everyone in the immediate family, as well as siblings, because they are the first and only ones in the family who have broken the glass ceiling. Parents may know little to nothing about higher education, making it difficult to prepare and support their children for university life. This means that FGS may not find support from their immediate families or limited orientation from those around them because they have little experience of higher education.

Engle and Tinto (2008) assert that FGS face various obstacles that make it difficult to succeed in higher education. They have less advanced academic credentials and are disproportionately from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds. Additionally, they are more likely to be older, receive less financial assistance from their parents, and have multiple responsibilities outside of school, such as work and family, which prevent them from fully participating in the college experience (Mehta *et al.*, 2011). These elements reduce the chances that students will complete their education.

FGS should be better prepared and have a better awareness of how institutions function before enrolling (Rodriguez, 2003). According to Holland (2020), FGS evaluated universities using the criteria of incidental, limited, and personal fit. The unintentional frame was used most frequently by students who had less understanding. Students who adopted this framework placed greater emphasis on going to university and minimised differences across universities. This implies that the issue is caused by the experiences these students have before and during their time at college or university, depending on the situation.

According to Engle and Tinto (2008), FGS are less likely to participate in the academic and social activities that support success in college, such as group study, interacting with faculty and other students, participating in extracurricular activities, and utilizing support services. These include academic support programmes such as mentoring and extra after-school classes (Rodriguez, 2003), because these programmes often

isolate FGS from other students, creating an exclusive, protected group that does not fully integrate into the greater campus life (Lowery-Hart and Pacheco, 2011). This separation from others results in FGS not participating in these programmes and ultimately failing to build relations with other students and their alma mater (Wilson, 2000).

The lower levels of educational and social integration of this population are inextricably linked to finances and financial aid (McLewis, 2021). Owing mainly to a lack of resources, FGS are more likely to live and work off campus and take classes part-time while working full-time, thereby limiting their time on campus (Engle and Tinto, 2008). Additionally, they work more hours and have more financial dependents as they sometimes look after their siblings (Inman and Mayes, 1999). This, in turn, makes them unprepared for university (Rodriguez, 2003).

The unavoidable fact is that while access for FGS has increased, the opportunity to graduate and earn a qualification successfully remains a challenge. The graduation rate among FGS is low (Ishitani, 2006) compared to students with educated parents from advantaged backgrounds. The reasons are many, but one notable one, according to Pascarella *et al.* (2004), is the availability of scholarships related to the development of FGS. However, in South Africa, this is cushioned by the introduction of fully subsidized higher education for students from poor and low-income families from the end of 2017 (De Jager and Bitzer, 2018).

Despite all their challenges, McCoy (2014) confirms the high expectations of family and community throughout the academic journey. In the section below some of the challenges experienced by FGS are discussed as they navigate higher education. Some of the opportunities they present to the system are also investigated.

2.6 Challenges experienced by FGS.

It is a known fact that all students encounter challenges when transitioning into higher education; however, FGS often encounter more challenges than their non-FGS counterparts (McCoy, 2014). There is a substantial body of research that shows that FGS differ in many ways from other students who do not come from similar backgrounds, including racial/ethnic demographics, socioeconomic status, and

preparedness for the academic rigor of higher education (Gibbons *et al.*, 2011; Havlik *et al.*, 2020).

Owing to these challenges and barriers, FGS experience problematic transitions to higher education and lower rates of university enrollment, retention, and graduation than their non-first-generation peers (Smith, 2015). For FGS, these barriers are substantial and persistent today, and they continue to restrict their potential and undermine their desire even to submit a college application (Ramos, 2019). However, Ortega (2018) suggests that creating community-centered mentoring or social support networks could help FGS overcome these barriers. Research shows that increased support from peers and academics motivates FGS and effectively deters significant dropout rates (Blackwell and Pinder, 2014). Watt *et al.* (2013) specified that interventions aimed at self-determination could increase retention and graduation rates, especially among culturally diverse students.

Several examples of barriers make FGS struggle in higher education, with tremendous consequences (Gardner and Holley, 2011). These include poor academic preparation, financial constraints, lack of family support, and the need for more social and cultural capital that negatively impacts their ability to find information about the university and their application process (Engle *et al.*, 2006). According to Saenz *et al.* (2007), this continues throughout their campus life, negatively affecting their academic and extracurricular decision making. Closely related is the general lack of academic preparedness and limited academic and social support specific to their needs (Smith and Lucena, 2015; Atherton, 2014; Gusa, 2010; Ishitani, 2016; Smith, 2015).

FGS enter higher education with more significant stress and are less equipped to deal with this stress (Gusa, 2010). Those who attend traditionally white institutions tend to experience a sense of culture shock, isolation, and individual and systemic racism that make their university experience difficult and highly stressful (Gusa, 2010; McCoy, 2014). Besides being in a different place away from their comfort zone, the first-generation status itself does weigh hard and negatively impacts students' ability to be involved socially on campus. In most cases, combining these factors results in lower academic performance and integration into the new environment.

FGS come from lower-income families and have attended poorly funded high schools, increasing their need for more significant financial and academic assistance while

attending university (Ishitani, 2016). It is further confirmed that FGS from families that are struggling financially receive less or no financial support from the family (Mehta *et al.* 2011). Tate *et al.* (2013) argue that FGS need help to focus entirely on a student role, as they think a great deal about those they have left behind. In addition, FGS tend to take longer to complete their qualification compared to other students (Ishitani, 2006; Pike and Kuh, 2005).

According to Ciobanu (2013), higher learning institutions generally support the importance of student life beyond the classroom. However, many still need to address the constantly changing student body as well as the learning environment around them (Renn and Reason, 2021). Although demographic and socioeconomic information on all students is readily available from the application process, many universities rarely use this information to design programmes that provide more excellent value and enhance the lived experience of all their diverse students. Higher education institutions must familiarize themselves with the background of first-generation and low-income students to develop institutions that are fit for the purpose and that will serve their needs (Kezar *et al.*, 2023). This includes recalibrating current student support services. Haugen (1999) asserts that an effective student support service of a university requires integrated solutions with three major components, namely strategies based on executive vision, commitment, planning, and performance; redesigned processes focused on students and parents as customers served by the university employees (who become service providers); and the efficient use of tools.

The plight of FGS tends to be the same in different parts of the world. In Australia, they are mainly from the minority indigenous community of Aboriginals (Hutchens *et al.*, 2011). In Western countries, most FGS are students of colour (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). In the USA, they are all from minority groups such as Native American, Latino, African-American, Hispanic, and Asian-American origin (Ecklund, 2012).

In the South African context, the situation is similar. The main difference is that in South Africa FGS are predominantly black and from a poor background. The problem in South Africa is exacerbated by the socioeconomic backgrounds of students and how this affects university access (Archer, Hutchings and Ross, 2005; Van Broekhuizen, 2016). The characteristics of South African FGS are that they tend to live in extended

family households, are raised by a single parent (Steyn, 2016), with some coming from child-headed homes (Pillay, 2016). The majority come from rural areas and black townships and generally are from low socioeconomic contexts where parents are unemployed or from families that live on state grants or those facing extreme poverty (Breier, 2010).

In addition, many of them are primarily second- or third-language English speakers (Engle *et al.*, 2006; Warburton *et al.*, 2001), which makes communication difficult in higher education as they speak a different language at home but only use English for teaching and learning purposes. Most of them come from under-resourced fee-free public schools that do not adequately prepare them for higher education (Walker, 2019; Engle *et al.*, 2006). These socioeconomic complexities make university access and graduation challenging for FGS.

However, there are ways to work with FGS and ensure their journey will be successful (Motsabi *et al.*, 2020; Heymann and Carolissen, 2011; Visser, 2007). They all recommend system theory as in Bronfenbrenner's systems theory which uses concepts of microsystems, ecosystems, and macrosystems. Motsabi *et al.* (2020) suggest a three-pronged approach focusing on social support, the role of family and the role of community and social policy." Social support is offered to individuals through social bonds with others, the community, and other groups. The role of family stresses the importance of family support and participation for the success of FGS. The role of the community and social policy refers to the influence of the community and its part in student life. The students' community includes the school they attend, their community, teachers, the church, and other support structures. This also refers to the policies within universities and governments that govern higher education and society (Tilak, 2004).

According to Motsabi *et al.* (2020), children are raised by their families within a particular community in a specific way that shapes their worldview. In this environment, children learn everything until they reach higher education. These are embedded within Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory (1979), as shown in (Figure 3).

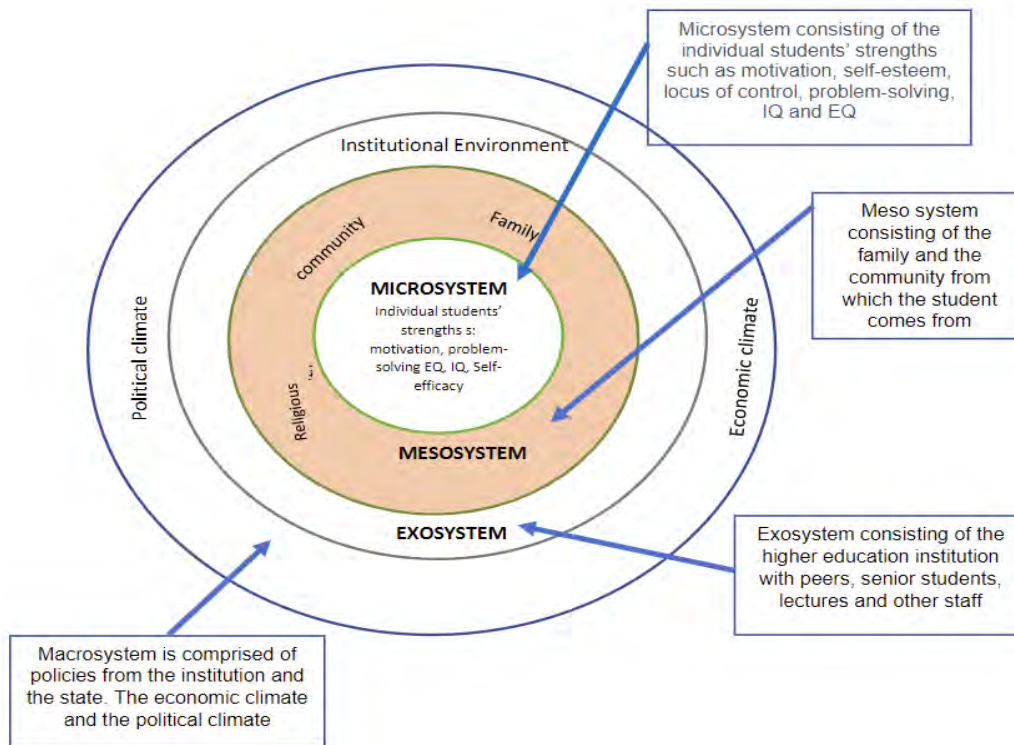


Figure 3: Bronfenbrenner bio-ecological systems source: Motsabi *et al.* (2020)

2.7 Conceptualising First-Generation Alumni

The definition of first-generation alumni that this study adopted is that of Bohna (1997), who defines first-generation alumni as the first in their families to attend or graduate from a post-secondary educational institution.

According to Biedermann (2020), the demographics of a university's current student body contribute immensely to the institution's fundraising success. This is because the institution's perceived quality, the wealth profile of students, and the development effort impact alumni giving (Wunnava and Lauze, 2001). These students typically grew up in households that donate to charity organisations. Therefore, they have a higher sense of philanthropy and will continue to give as alumni. Biedermann (2020) further states that students from families where multiple family members attended the university (legacy families) are likely to continue giving when they are alumni.

However, Monks (2003) stated that the situation differs for black alumni and individuals from multiracial or ethnic groups. These minority groups give less to their alma mater than their white counterparts do. As indicated earlier, these groups traditionally produce more FGS. Cohen (2006), in his study on alumni giving to African colleges, found that most alumni believe their alma mater could exist in the future without their financial support, and most of them tend to support their church four times more than they do their alma mater.

Havens and Schervish (2007) found that African Americans tend to give more than any other ethnic group, especially to religious causes and personal causes unique to their culture and community. This willingness to contribute, though not to an alma mater, is something that can be nurtured through extramural activities while on campus, as both Clotfelter (2003) and Rust (2012) contend that the most critical factor in driving alumni donations is individuals' satisfaction with their experience of student life at the institution. This is essential for stakeholder theory, as there will be shared value through benefits for both university and students. Universities are results oriented and want to ensure that they graduate students simultaneously. They also want to ensure that value is created for both the institution and the students through alumni contributions after graduation.

Significant research reveals a pattern of pro-social behaviours to improve society among alumni who support their alma mater (Weerts and Cabrera, 2018). Human beings are creatures of habit. Studies show that those raised and participating in religious institutions tend to develop practices and dispositions to give to charitable causes (Bekkers and Wiepking, 2011).

2.8 Relationship between Student Engagement and Alumni Giving

In recent years, the South African higher education sector has experienced a sharp decrease in state funding, and the country's economy is going through a rough patch/experiencing a downturn? with high levels of student debt. Most universities have low reserves to fall back on, and philanthropists no longer make generous donations to deserving causes – funders now invest based on envisaged returns. This could lead to a significant budget crisis and resource dependence on operating

revenue from tuition and fees (Campbell, 2017). As a result, financial sustainability has never been more essential, and universities are now forced to explore alternative funding mechanisms such as philanthropic income and alumni contributions to augment their income streams (Ekpoh and Okpa, 2017).

One of the income streams universities targets to augment their depleting reserves is individual donors, specifically alumni giving. In some countries, such as the United States of America (USA), alumni giving is considered an essential funding stream of public higher education institutions owing to the decreasing governmental financial support (Newman and Petrosko, 2011). However, it is critical to understand the factors that influence alumni giving, particularly toward an alma mater (Saraeh et al., 2018). Weerts and Ronca (2007) state that many factors contribute to alumni giving after graduation, such as alumni involvement, alumni engagement, and alumni loyalty; however, the quality of an alumnus's undergraduate experience is the main one.

Bingham *et al.* (2003) define alumni giving as the exchange process between the alumni and the institution. Research on alumni giving is typically divided into two different approaches, namely qualitative and quantitative approaches. Various studies examine what determines an alumni donor. The qualitative approach tends to have a more in-depth insight into why alumni give or do not give to their alma maters (Weerts and Ronca, 2007; Gunsalus, 2005). In this area, most research focused on factors that influence donor-giving patterns, the nature of the exchange process, and the quality of the solicitation programme (Harrison *et al.*, 1995).

Some studies provide economic and social explanations as motivations for alumni giving. A financial transaction whereby the giver (alumnus) provides something of monetary value and, in return, receives something of value in the form of education they received from the institution. Another added incentive, according to Kitchen and Dalton (1990), is the tax incentives they receive for the donation. The social transaction explanation is the social status and prestige accrued by the alumni donor. The alumni provide the institution with gifts, and in return, they receive the recognition which distinguishes them from others (Bingham *et al.*, 2003).

Student engagement is discussed in detail in the student engagement section on page 13. Kuh (2001) articulates the importance of student engagement in laying the foundation for successful alumni engagement. What students do during their time at university counts more in terms of desired outcomes than who they are or even the institution they attended. Kuh (2001) also emphasised the importance of inclusive and affirming institutional environments where expectations for performance are clearly communicated and set at reasonably high levels. Students engaged in campus life are likely to feel a stronger bond with the university once they graduate and become alumni (Singer and Hughey, 2002). This is supported by Conley (1999), who contends that alumni who participated in student formations such as student alumni associations, and sport while at university tend to give back after graduation. This shows that individual behaviour, expectations, and motivations as alumni are strongly influenced by their student experience. In one study, Sun et al. (2007) examined alumni association membership as a predictor of alumni giving. They found that alumni demographic variables, including alumni association membership, significantly distinguished alumni donors from nondonors.

If fully engaged, students develop improved student loyalty, which is a good sign for future involvement as alumni. Relationships with students should begin early in a student's educational career in order to build a strong sense of institutional affinity (Reichner, 2019). McDearmon (2013) defines institutional affinity as a feeling of connection or affection for one's university or college. According to Nessel and Helgesen (2009), this connectivity leads to student loyalty and alumni loyalty because that is one journey that begins when a student enrolls and continues after they have completed their formal qualification. Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2001) define student loyalty as the extent to which students feel connected to the educational institution in which they are enrolled. Alumni loyalty, on the other hand, is defined as the faithfulness or devotion of alumni to their alma mater (Iskhakova *et al.*, 2017). Snijders *et al.* (2019) state that a college or university can benefit significantly by inculcating a sense of institutional affinity in its students.

It is becoming increasingly obvious that higher education institutions are now significantly reliant on alumni contributions for their funding needs. Therefore, universities must design programmes or activities involving the most active and loyal

student alumni in order to reach them more efficiently (Golz, 2013). In the USA and the United Kingdom UK), a large portion of their annual budgets are derived from alumni contributions (Iskhakova, Hoffmann and Hilbert, 2017). Because of this, some of these institutions have been able to increase their reserves dramatically through endowments and legacy gifts, becoming financially sustainable in the process.

One of the important elements that must be investigated is the impact that students' experiences at their universities have on their future alumni giving behaviour because research has established that students experiencing satisfaction is the strongest predictor of alumni giving (Saraeh *et al.*, 2018; Singer and Hughey, 2002). This view was supported by McDearmon (2013) and Gaier (2005), who confirmed that donations are highly correlated with satisfaction with the university experience. According to Dugan *et al.* (200), undergraduate students experiences have an impact on their motivation to give back to their alma mater, and this demonstrates the importance of looking into how students perceive the institution while they are on campus (Saraeh *et al.*, 2018). This can be done through ongoing student satisfaction reviews, surveys, or questionnaires throughout their time on campus.

There is also the potential funding opportunity presented to universities by young alumni. Monks (2003) contends that the time has come for universities to focus on young alumni as they are more likely to give, even in modest amounts, for longer and with lifetime-giving effects. Therefore, alumni and development offices must create effective strategies to target these potential young donors. Bent (2012) supported this argument after noticing a seriously waning in alumni support for higher education institutions. Billings (2013) also found that young alumni are willing to give to their universities and offered several strategies that fundraisers could use when identifying, cultivating, and ultimately soliciting young alumni. However, Day (2018) cautioned against unrealistic expectations during the first few years after graduation, since only 14.5% of recent graduates made charitable contributions in that time.

2.9 First-Generation Alumni Giving Case Studies

First-generation students are becoming more prevalent in higher education settings (Watts *et al.*, 2023). As this population grows, there is an increased need to understand their unique experiences, relationships, and practices to avoid some documented adverse outcomes they face (Cabrera, 2014). However, Biedermann (2020) claims that scholarly research on alumni giving has focused mainly on general alumni giving rather than specific subgroups, such as first-generation, low-income, and disadvantaged families. However, they have been some of the largest growing groups to enrol at institutions of higher learning in recent years (Bohna, 1997).

In the USA, the shifting demographics are leading to more FGS pursuing higher education now than ever before (Gosier, 2022). State support of higher education has diminished over the decades, thus higher education has become more dependent on philanthropy, especially alumni contributions (Radcliffe, 2011). In African-American communities, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have been shown to have a track record of successfully educating African-American students, especially first-generation and low-income families (Gasman, 2010). The study of Rowan University First Generation Alumni that left the University after 2006 Gosier (2022) found that first-generation alumni gave back to their alma mater, namely Rowan University, at higher rates than the institution's alumni giving rate. The findings also revealed the desire of first-generation alumni to remain connected and engaged with their alma mater.

However, Havens and Schervish (2007) found that African-American alumni tend to give more to religious causes and personal causes unique to their culture and community. Cabrales (2013) reached a similar conclusion using the community cultural wealth hypothesis in his investigation of the connections between Latina/o alumni giving, professions, and community. The study found that three philanthropy models are prevalent in Latino alumni, namely extended family networks, church involvement, and mutualistic organisations. They employ different forms of capital through their occupations and community involvement to give back to students and their communities financially through mentorship (Cabrales, 2013).

In West Africa, alumni giving to higher education institutions is driven mainly by alumni associations. In a study of the impact of the Alumni Association at the University of Cape Coast in Ghana, alumni valued their experiences on campus positively and all confirmed their willingness to contribute to their alma mater and the alumni association (Baafi-Frimpong, 2015). A similar view was shared by Obeng-Ofori and Kwarteng (2020) in Nigeria, who assert that effective engagement of tertiary institutions with their alumni association brings strength and growth to the reputation and growth of the university. This was supported by Anila and Waqar (2012), who argue that alumni associations can enhance a university's national and international reputation when adequately harnessed. Similar trends were observed in China and Pakistan. In China, Mo and Zhu (2022) suggest that satisfaction with campus life and faculty-alumni involvement positively affect alumni giving. This presents an opportunity for Chinese higher education institutions to increase their engagement with current students to increase the lower levels of alumni giving in Chinese universities.

Rust (2012) points to the transformation and massification of higher education, leading to more significant percentages of the population accessing institutions of higher learning in South Africa. This has affected the ability of institutions to provide the same level of services, among others, as has as the drop government funding (Shaik, 2005). This has led universities to seek alumni support to augment the shrinking government funding (Rust, 2015).

The current situation in South Africa is that previously advantaged universities, commonly known as traditional 'white' universities, still enjoy more philanthropic support than their previously disadvantaged counterparts. The latest report of the Annual Survey of Philanthropy in Higher Education in South Africa stated that in 2013, 94% of all donor income from participating institutions went to historically advantaged institutions and 6% to historically disadvantaged institutions. In monetary terms, this equated to R622 million versus R37 million (Thaver and Abrahams, 2021). The report attributes this to the confidence these universities have in the philanthropic world due to their reputation. This is confirmed by (Rust, 2012) who states that traditional 'white' universities still attract learners from traditional white schools that have developed

alumni activities as part of the school setup, making it easier for them to continue the trend at university.

2.10 Chapter Summary

The chapter has discussed the theory underpinning the study, namely the stakeholder theory and the concepts of stakeholder engagement. It has also discussed in detail student engagement as an aspect of stakeholder engagement. The concept of alumni awareness is woven into student engagement, which was discussed at length as an essential part of student engagement at higher education institutions.

The chapter also dealt with FGS in their final year. It discussed the origins of the concept and detailed some of the challenges FGS face as they navigate life in higher education institutions. It further introduced the concept of alumni giving and discussed how it is related to FGS in their final year.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This research aimed to improve alumni awareness among FGS in their final year at Sol Plaatje University in order to build lifelong relationships with their alma mater. Research methodology explains how the researcher intends to carry out the study and the approach chosen to answer research questions (Greener and Martelli, 2015:11). This chapter presents the methods and procedures used in this study. Specifically, it describes the study's research setting, sample, and design. The chapter also explains the procedures used in developing the instruments for data collection as well as the method of data analysis. Lastly, the chapter presents the procedures that the researcher followed to meet the ethical requirements of the study.

3.2 Aims and Objectives

This research aimed to improve alumni awareness among FGS in their final year of study to build lifelong relationships with their alma mater. The research methodology enabled the researcher to identify the targeted participants and to assess and empower their level of alumni awareness. According to Hoyt (2004), alumni attain readiness or motivation before participating or contributing to their alma mater. A first-generation student is the first member of his or her family to go to university (Toutkoushian *et al.*, 2018).

This goal translated into the following main objectives:

- To improve alumni awareness among first-generation university students in the final year;
- To share experiences, lessons learned, and administrative challenges in facilitating the project; and
- To identify strategies to improve alumni awareness among FGS in the final year.

In addition, the study sought to identify the lessons from the research, which would be developed into management recommendations for active listening or engagement with the student community. These recommendations would strengthen relationships and the University Alumni Office's improved student engagement strategy. They would

also assist in the office plan and decision whether to focus on student-alumni awareness activities in the main or on alumni engagement.

3.3 Research Setting

This study employed a participatory action research (PAR) approach, better known as "learning by doing" (MacDonald, 2012). PAR is a qualitative research methodology that involves researchers and participants collaborating to understand social issues and taking actions to bring about social change. According to O'Brien (1998), PAR aims to both contribute to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and simultaneously promote social science goals. It expands the horizons of knowledge for participants and others with whom the research is shared (Appadurai, 2006). Therefore, there is a dual commitment in action research to study a system and collaborate with system members to change it in what is regarded as a desirable direction.

The study was carried out at Sol Plaatje University (SPU), established in 2014, the only university in the Northern Cape. The study results will assist the University in identifying gaps and areas of improvement to improve alumni awareness and develop lifelong relationships before students leave the university. It will also provide baseline information to SPU for monitoring and evaluating as a growing university. To obtain valid data, the researcher targeted FGS in their final year, almost at the end of their academic programme. The study was conducted in English as the University's medium of teaching and learning and was conducted after hours to ensure that the academic activities of the participants were not interrupted.

3.4 Research Design

According to Maxwell (2005), the research design is the basis upon which all other study aspects depend. It denotes a detailed and in-depth evaluation of a subject within its context-related conditions (Yin, 2014). Babbie and Mouton (2001) further contend that it is the conception, directory, and form in which a study occurs. Mechanisms of a research design include research questions, theoretical perspectives, data collection, data analysis, writing, and the validation processes adopted (Creswell, 1998).

3.5 Research Paradigm

In general, a paradigm is a system of thinking (Neuman, 2011:94). In research terms, "it refers to established research traditions in a particular discipline" (Neuman, 2011:94). According to Babbie (2011:436-455), a paradigm "could be seen as a model or framework for observation and understanding". The word 'paradigm' is significant for the study, as it was meant to evaluate and improve the alumni environment at SPU.

The study followed a social constructivist paradigm that recognises that reality is constructed through various social factors, including values and perceptions. Social constructivism is built on the deep-rooted need for interactions with stakeholders to build knowledge and understand the context (Atwater, 1996). The social constructivism approach is based on its focus on facts that come from social interactions with individuals or groups, as opposed to facts that exist independently of human thought (Hay, 2016).

This paradigm helped the researcher interpret the views, knowledge, experiences, and perceptions of FGS in the final year and their relationship with the University to improve their awareness of alumni. According to Williamson (2006), there are two main constructivist approaches; one focusing on the individual, personal constructions, and the other on shared meanings that could be said to reflect social constructions. The former was adopted for this study.

3.6 Research Methods

A mixed-method research design was used to conduct this study. As Creswell and Clark (2007) have argued, mixed-methods research focuses on collecting, analysing, and mixing quantitative and qualitative data in a single study to better understand the research problem. Mathipa and Mukhari (2014) have also added that mixed-method research allows the researcher to seek more information. It is argued that the answers to the research problem are only sometimes accurate. The mixed-methods approach helped to identify the targeted participants and establish their alumni awareness before and after the focus group workshop. This method is deemed accurate as more than one method and strategy are used to provide an in-depth understanding of the research problem (Henning et al., 2013).

3.6.1 Quantitative research methods

According to Coldwell and Herbst (2004:15), quantitative research involves collecting data to project the results to a broader population. It is commonly applied to a research methodology designed to collect statistical data from a specific population or a sample from that population. It typically uses a questionnaire as a data collection instrument since that is easier to administer.

The researcher used a quantitative research method for the first part of the data collection. An online survey was administered to a research sample of 638 final-year students registered in 2022 (SPU Registrars Report to Senate, 2022). Participants had to complete a questionnaire containing nine closed-ended questions explicitly structured to identify FGS as key participants in the study and evaluate their level of alumni awareness. A total of 21 FGS out of 31 respondents completed the survey.

3.6.2 Qualitative research methods

The qualitative approach collects data from comparatively fewer participants and analyses them in-depth (Creswell, 2012). It enables researchers to collect participant data through interviews, focus groups, direct observations, documents, and records. The second part of the data collection for this study adopted a qualitative research method to gain insight and analyse the thoughts and behaviour of the identified 21 FGS in greater detail using quantitative research.

3.7 Sampling

Punch (2009) highlighted the two types of sampling as probability and non-probability or purposive sampling. Probability sampling, commonly used in quantitative research, is the selection of variables to represent a larger population by simple or stratified random sampling. Non-probability sampling is mostly used in qualitative research. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011) assert that researchers often use the purposive sampling technique by selecting their samples based on their judgment and experience of the central phenomenon in their studies. Likewise, McMillan and Schumacher (2014) agree that purposive samples are chosen because they will likely

be familiar with the phenomenon the researcher is investigating. Both forms of sampling complement the mixed-method research approach of this study.

As mentioned above, the population of this study consisted of 638 SPU final-year students. To obtain additional rich information and in-depth data for the study (Geertz, 1973), a purposeful sample of 21 FGS was drawn from the 31 respondents who completed the survey. These students received consent forms to participate in the study, which they completed and returned to the researcher. Twenty-one students participated in the focus group workshop and the post-workshop survey.

Since participants were voluntarily included in the sample and based on their willingness to participate, the study results were only generalised to some of the population.

3.8 Data Collection

Toni (2007) defined data collection as the gathering of information to address a research problem through various methods and sources. The research was based on primary and secondary data. Primary sources refer to data that is personally collected from organisations, often in the form of literature, unpublished research, and private correspondence (Greener and Martelli, 2015:26). "Secondary sources consist of data that is obtained from someone else as the original source" (De Vos *et al.*, 2011:378).

Data collection strategies consistent with a mixed-methods research design include document study, observations, interviews, questionnaires, and achievement tests (Henning, Van Rensburg and Smith, 2004). In addition to using existing literature, the research objectives, questions, and research context informed the design of the research instruments used to collect primary data. The data collection tools for this investigation comprised a survey, an online focus group, and questionnaires. The purpose of multiple data collection strategies was to allow for triangulation, to strengthen the results, and to provide evidence for various aspects of the research.

3.8.1 Survey

A survey is a data collection tool that lists structured questions to which respondents provide answers based on their knowledge and experience. A questionnaire was administered to final-year students through an online survey to collect information such

as demographics, interests, family background of participants, and activities in which participants would have been involved on campus (Appendix A). This was to check what they already knew. Furthermore, the survey helped determine the first-generation status of participants and their willingness to participate in the second phase of the project. The survey covered the following questions:

Question 1: How do you identify your gender?

Question 2: In what year of study are you at Sol Plaatje University?

Question 3: Which school are you in?

Question 4: Are you the first in your family to attend a university?

Question 5: Select one aspect you like about Sol Plaatje University.

Question 6: How would you rate your time and experiences at Sol Plaatje University so far?

Question 7: How aware are you of the University's Alumni Relations/Affairs Department activities?

Question 8: Do you feel that the University is adequately preparing you for the job market?

Question 9: Would you like to participate in the Sol Plaatje University Alumni Awareness Programme to prepare you for life after graduation?

3.8.2 Focus Group Workshop

A focus group is a data collection method that involves bringing a small group of people together to discuss a topic (Collins *et al.*, 2004). A focus group workshop was conducted to better understand the opinions of the participants. The workshop sought to introduce participants to alumni relations while on campus through the Alumni awareness workshops and to develop a basic conceptual understanding of alumni relations among students as they progress into life after graduation (Appendix B). Twenty-one FGS participated in the alumni awareness workshop. The one-hour workshop was conducted online in one day, and an independent expert in alumni relations moderated it. The following topics were covered during the workshop:

Topic 1: Building a brand: Introduction to alumni relations.

Topic 2: Be the Brand: Student/Alumni Life

Topic 3: Sharing in success: The transition from student to alumni is a meaningful celebration of this moment.

Topic 4: Maintaining a relationship: Staying connected to others and to your alma mater.

3.8.3 Post-Workshop Questionnaire

After the workshop, all participants were asked to complete a structured questionnaire with ten questions, five open ended and another five closed ended (Appendix C). The questionnaire sought to their views on the workshop and to evaluate their knowledge and understanding of alumni relations after the workshop. After attending the workshop, the researcher had planned to interview each participant for more information. However, this was impossible owing to time constraints as students were preparing for their examinations. The post-workshop questionnaire covered the following questions:

Question 1: Describe your student experiences at Sol Plaatje University (SPU).

Question 2: Describe any extra-curricular or co-curricular activities in which you participated at Sol Plaatje University.

Question 3: Are you a member of a student society/club/sports club?

Question 4: Have you served, or do you currently serve in a leadership position of a student society/SRC/club/sports club?

Question 5: Do you feel you are now aware of alumni relations after attending this workshop?

Question 6: What overall rating would you give this workshop?

Question 7: To what extent do you feel connected to Sol Plaatje University (SPU)?

Question 8: What kinds of activities would enhance your connection to SPU after graduation?

Question 9: Indicate whether you intend to attend SPU alumni events after graduation.

3.9 Data Analysis

"The purpose of business research is to take data and convert it into meaningful information and knowledge for use by organisations to improve the quality of decision making" (Greener and Martelli, 2015:71). Proper analysis of research data helps convert raw data into meaningful information and knowledge. The data collected from the various instruments were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. This gave the researcher an opportunity to recheck the reliability values, the legitimacy of the data sample test, and the method required to answer the questions. Quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) statistics program owing to its credibility in social science research. The coding, sorting, and thematic organising of qualitative data was conducted with the aid of ATLAS.ti Version 6 owing to its fast, flexible, and user-friendly features.

3.10 Pretesting and Validation of Instruments

Cozby (2001) contended that the validity of an instrument is an important issue as far as research is concerned. According to Ogunniyi (1992), a valid instrument measures what it is supposed to measure, while reliability is the degree to which an instrument produces stable and consistent results over time. Conducting a pilot study before the main survey allows researchers to identify potential problems with data collection tools and remedies before fielding a study (Nyasha, 2011).

A pre-test involves collecting data from relatively few respondents using data collection sampling. Ten final-year students were invited to participate in the pre-test, from which three FGS were identified. A trial alumni relations workshop was held with the three students, and they were asked to complete the post-workshop evaluation questionnaire to assess improvement after the intervention. The reliability, validity, and practicality of the data collection tools for the study objectives were all confirmed during the pre-test.

3.11 Ethical Consideration

The ethical statement is the code of conduct that guides the relationship between researchers and participants. Swann and Pratt (2003) stress that ethical considerations are necessary for moral and practical reasons. Neuman (2003) also asserts that in a research study, the researcher needs to explain to the participants what the research entails and why the data are being collected in a particular setting.

3.11.1 Consent of authorities

Ethical clearance was sought from Rhodes University's Senate Research Ethics Committee to conduct the study. Subsequently, permission was sought from SPU to conduct the study at the university (Appendix D). This ensured adherence to the guidelines to establish an acceptable relationship between the participants and the researcher.

3.11.2 Consent of participants

Christian (2005) stresses that research participants must be allowed to participate in research work. All participants received background information about the study and its objectives as well as consent forms to indicate their willingness to participate (Appendix E). Participants volunteered to be a part of the research. They were also informed about their right to withdraw from the study at any time without victimization.

Participants were informed that data collected did not include personal information and that their participation and contribution to the study would remain anonymous. All participants agreed on a convenient date for the focus group workshop. The workshop was recorded with the participants' consent to ensure the quality and accuracy of the information. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state that the audio recording of an interview ensures that everything said during the interview is preserved for later analysis. Participants were also assured that the researcher would comply with all legal and institutional requirements concerning data collection, storage, handling, processing, and analysis.

3.12 Chapter Summary

This chapter described the research design and the methodology used in conducting the research. The researcher used a mixed-method research design to collect and analyse data. The first phase of data collection used a quantitative research method in the form of a survey to obtain the biographical information of the final-year students and to identify FGS as key participants for this study. The second data collection phase employed a qualitative research method to gain insight into alumni awareness among FGS. The chapter also introduced the techniques used by the researcher to analyse the collected data. The next chapter presents and interprets the findings of the study.

CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results of the data collected from the study as described in Chapter 3. The study was specifically designed to collect data using a prequalification online survey and a post-focus group workshop online survey to assess and improve alumni awareness among FGS in their final year of study.

The first section of the chapter presents the results of the quantitative survey, which sought to identify first-generation final-year students and their level of alumni awareness. The second part gives the results of the qualitative survey, which sought to assess the level of awareness after the students had attended the alumni workshop as well as identifying factors that connect students to the University.

4.2 Results of the Quantitative Survey

In July 2022, an online survey questionnaire was used to determine the level of alumni awareness amongst final year students (third year and fourth year) and identify FGS and their willingness to participate in the study's second phase. The survey questionnaire consisted of demographic information about participants, their family history, and statements relating to the experience of SPU students and their connection to the university. The survey questionnaire consisted of closed questions only (Appendix A).

The survey questionnaires were distributed to all SPU final-year students. The researcher received a total of 58 responses. Of those responded, 31 were FGS in their final year.

The following section presents the survey results.

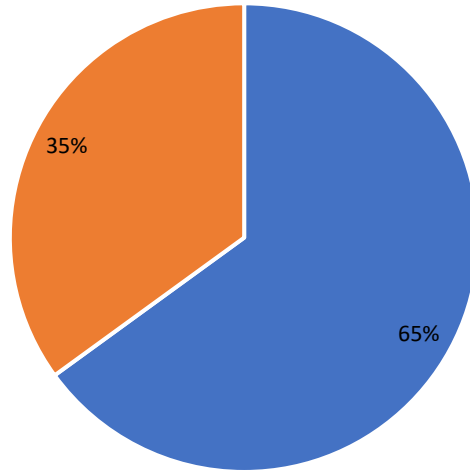


Fig. 4.1: Gender distribution of the respondents

Figure 4.1 indicates that 65% of the respondents are women and 35% are men.

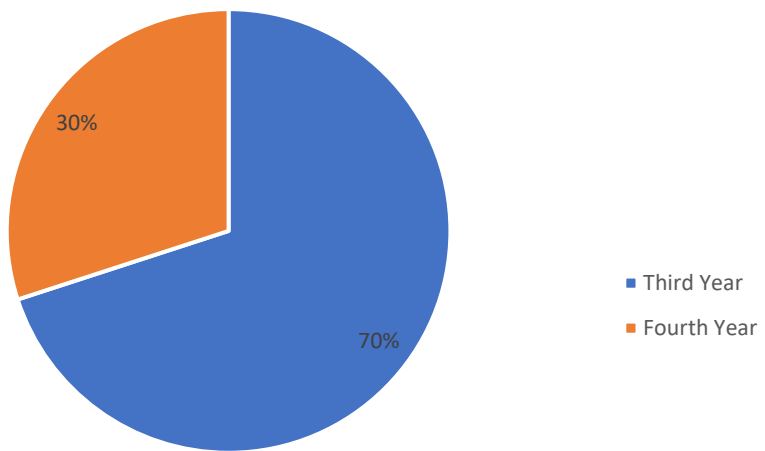


Fig. 4.2: Respondents' level of study

Figure 4.2 indicates that 70% of the respondents are at their third-year study level and 30% are at their fourth-year study level.

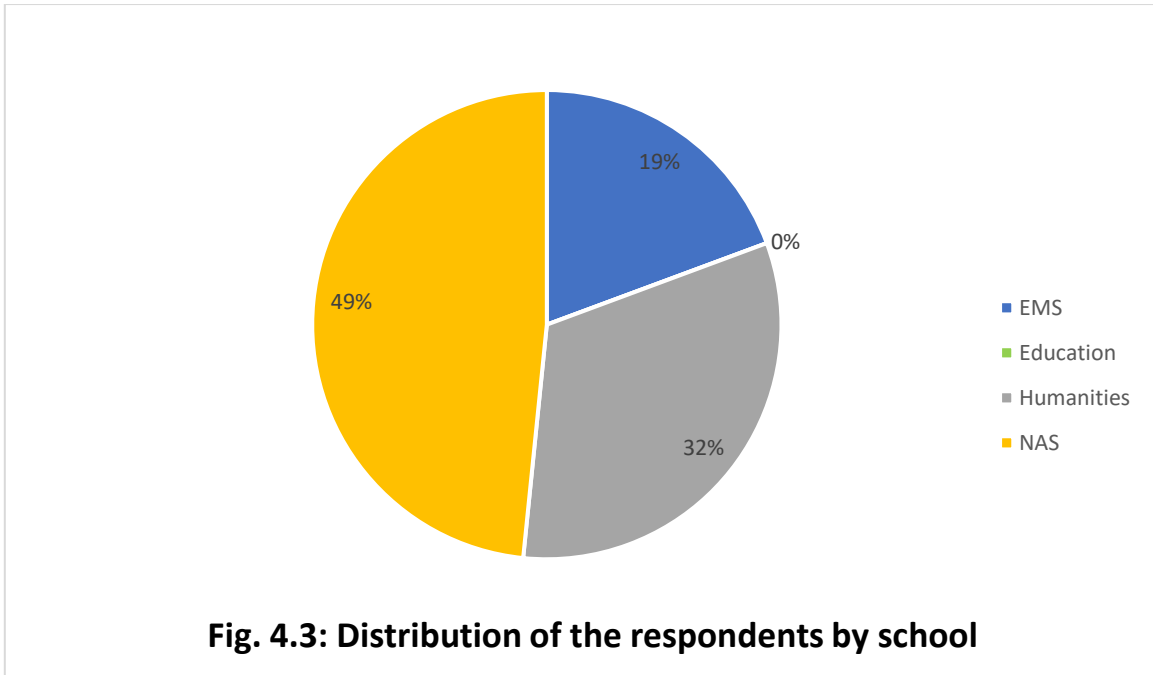


Figure 4.3 indicates that 49% of the respondents are in the School of Natural and Applied Sciences, 32% in the School of Humanities, and 19% in the School of Economic and Management Sciences. There were no respondents from the School of Education.

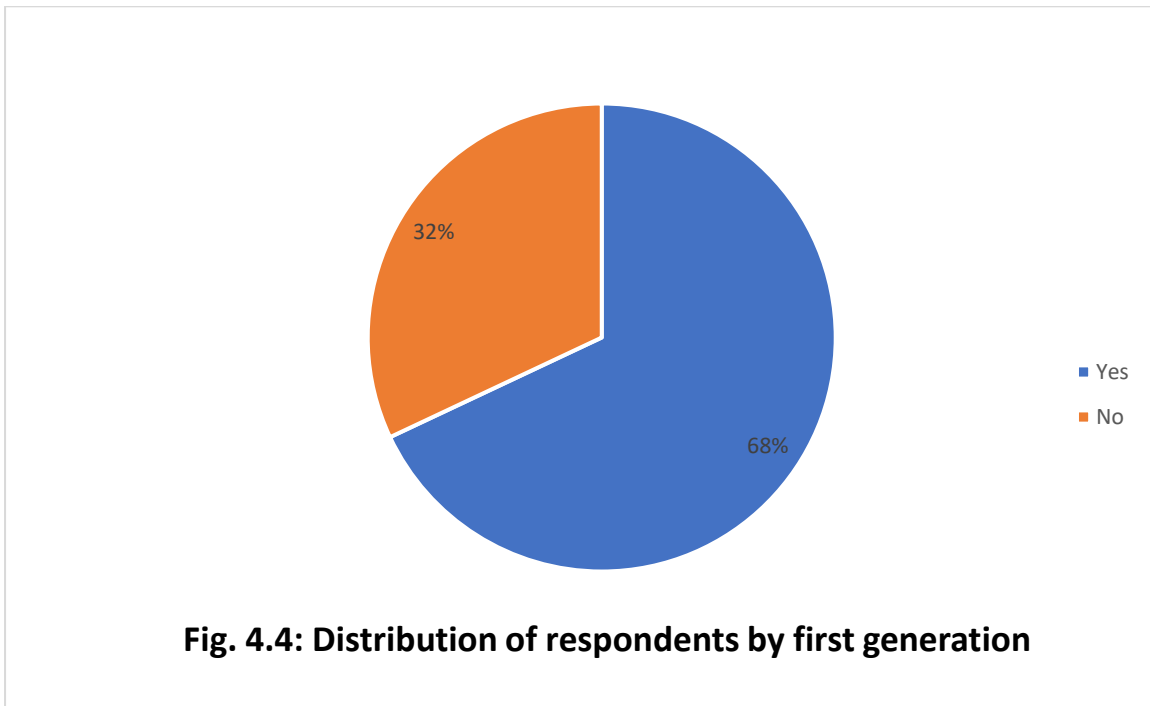


Figure 4.4 indicates that 68% of the respondents are FGS and 32% are not.

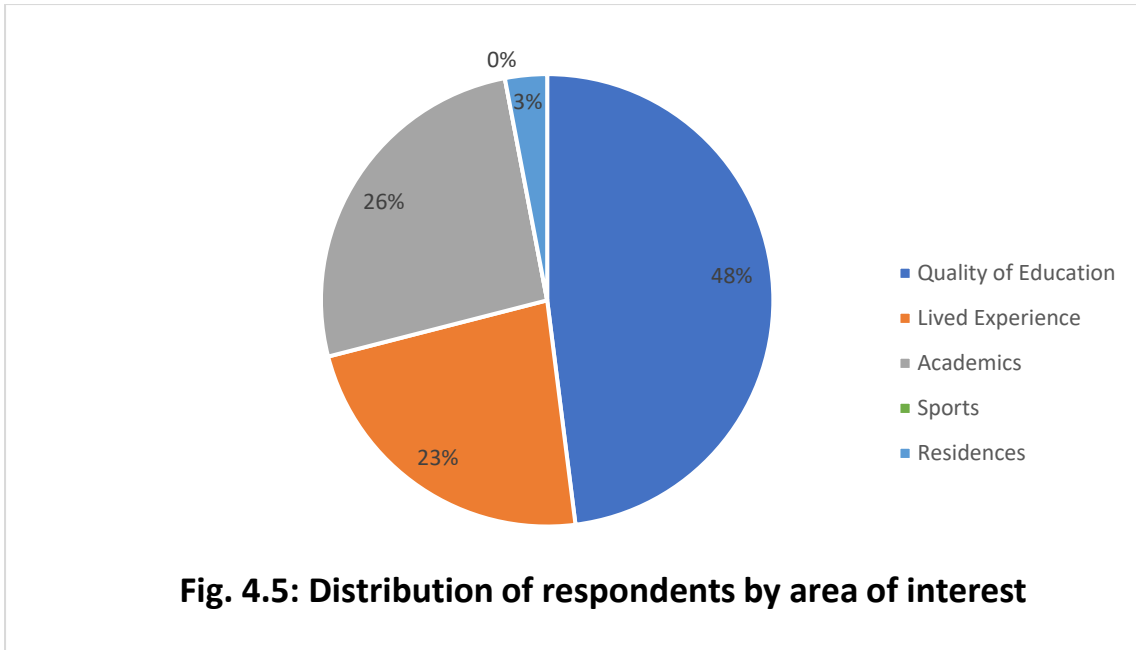


Figure 4.5 indicates that 48% of the respondents are positive about the quality of education at SPU, 26% are positive about academics, 23% are positive about their lived experience and 3% are positive about residences. None of the respondents expressed any interest in sport at SPU.

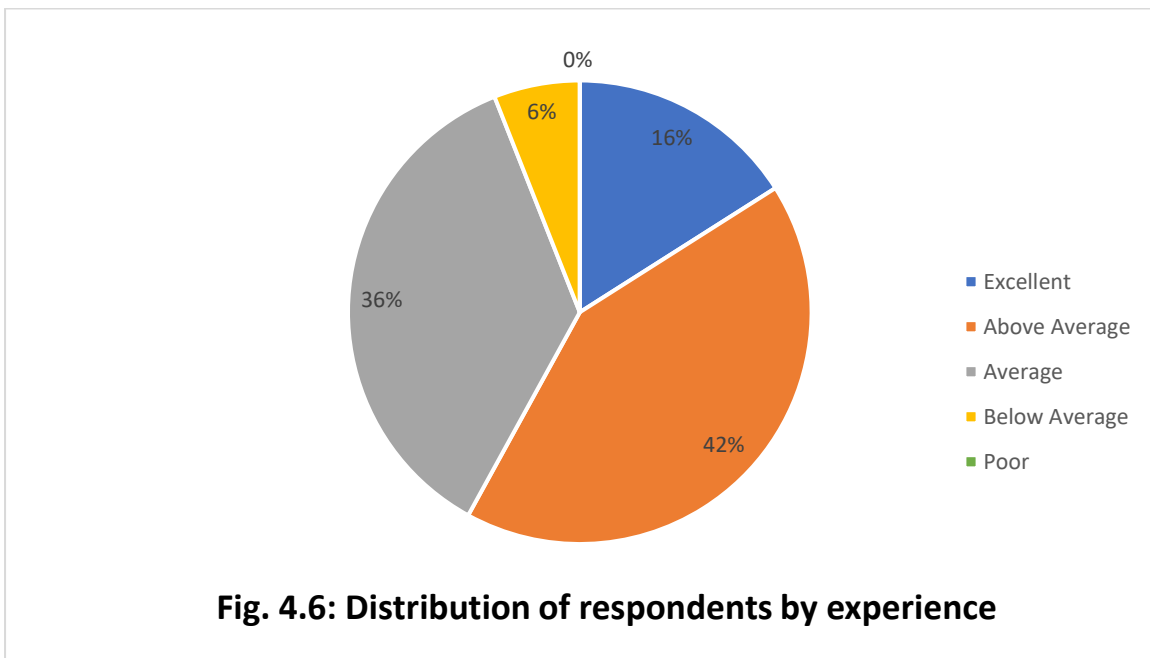


Figure 4.6 above indicates that 16% rated their experience at SPU excellently, 42% above average, 36% rated it as average while only 6% felt it was below average. None of the respondents indicated that they were extremely unhappy with their time and experience at SPU.

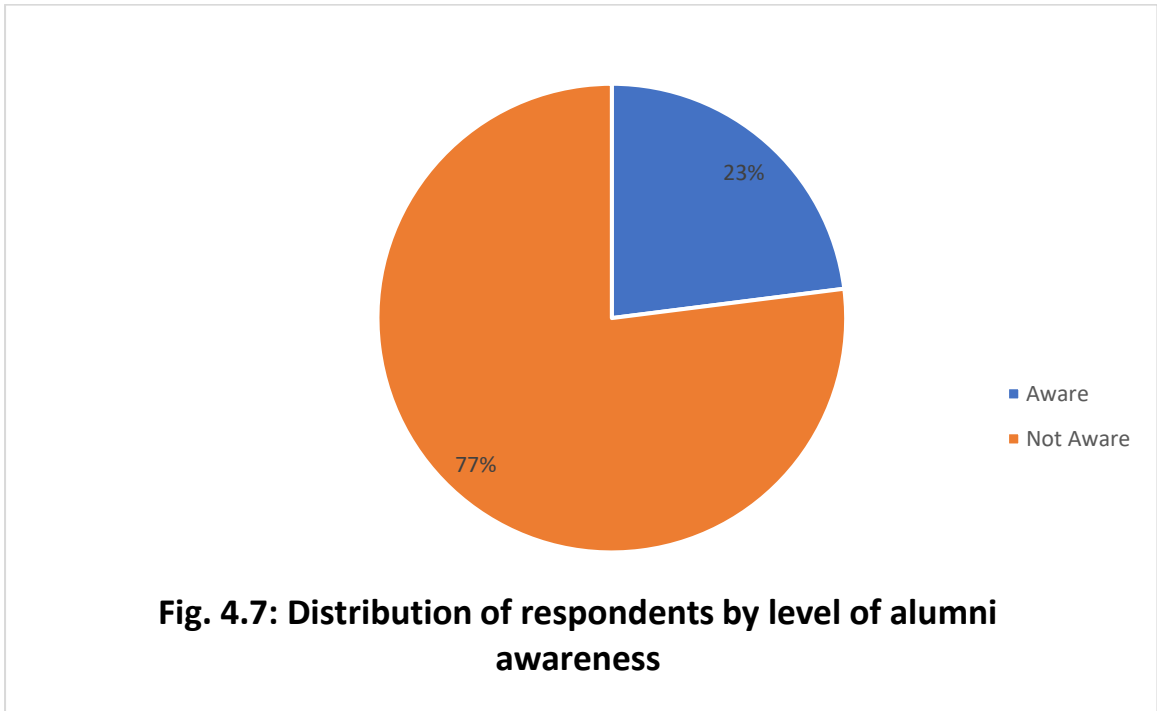


Figure 4.7 indicates that 23% of the respondents are aware of alumni relations and activities within the university while 77% indicated that they are not.

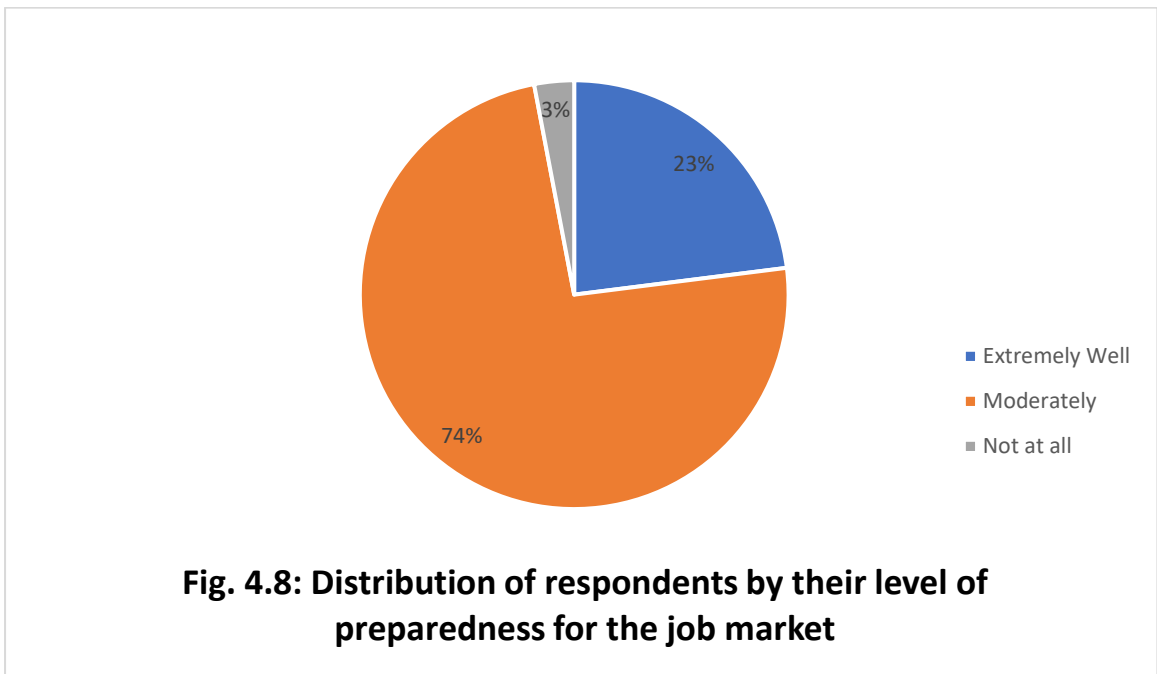


Figure 4.8 indicates that 23% of the respondents feel that the University has prepared them well for the job market, 74% are adequately prepared, and 3% are not prepared.

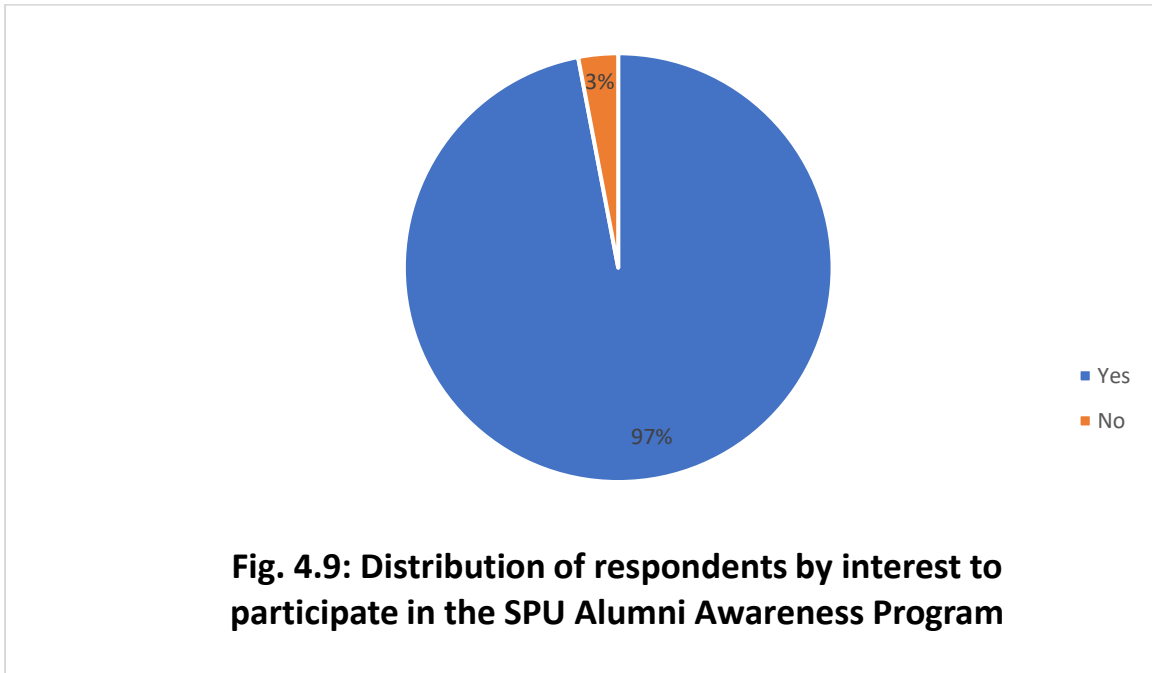


Figure 4.9 indicates that 97% of the respondents are interested in participating in the SPU Alumni Awareness Program while 3% are not.

4.3 Results of the Qualitative Survey Questionnaire

In October 2022, a focus group workshop was held to introduce alumni relations to participants as they neared the end of their studies. An online survey questionnaire was used to evaluate the impact of the workshop in improving alumni awareness among participants. This post-workshop survey also sought to identify factors that connect participants with the University while on campus and after graduation. The survey questionnaire consisted of both closed and open-ended questions attached as Appendix C.

The survey questionnaire was distributed to all 31 participants who attended the focus group workshop. A total of 21 responses were received, which indicates an 80% response rate. The survey results are summarised below:

Question 1: Describe your student experiences at Sol Plaatje University.

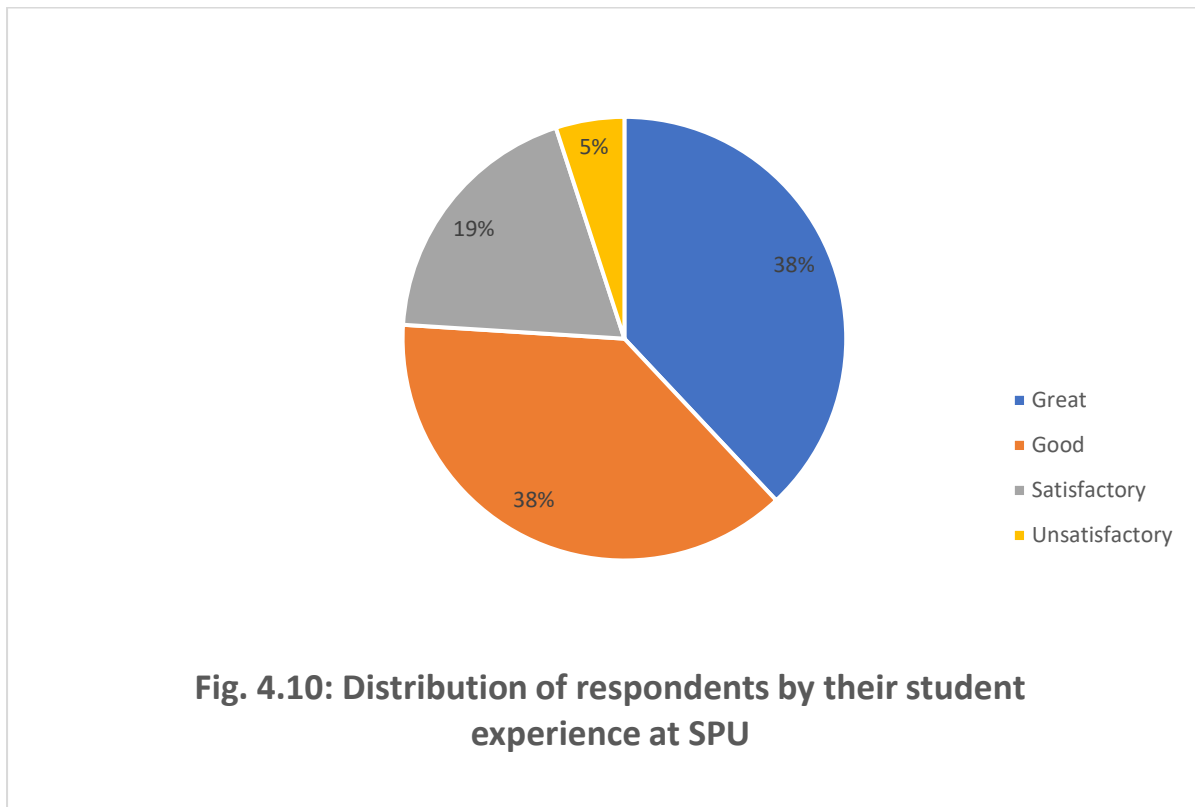


Figure 4.10 indicates that 38% of the respondents have had an excellent student experience at SPU, 38% rated their experience as good, 19% as satisfactory, and 5% as unsatisfactory.

Question 2: Describe any extracurricular or co-curricular activities in which you engaged at Sol Plaatje University.

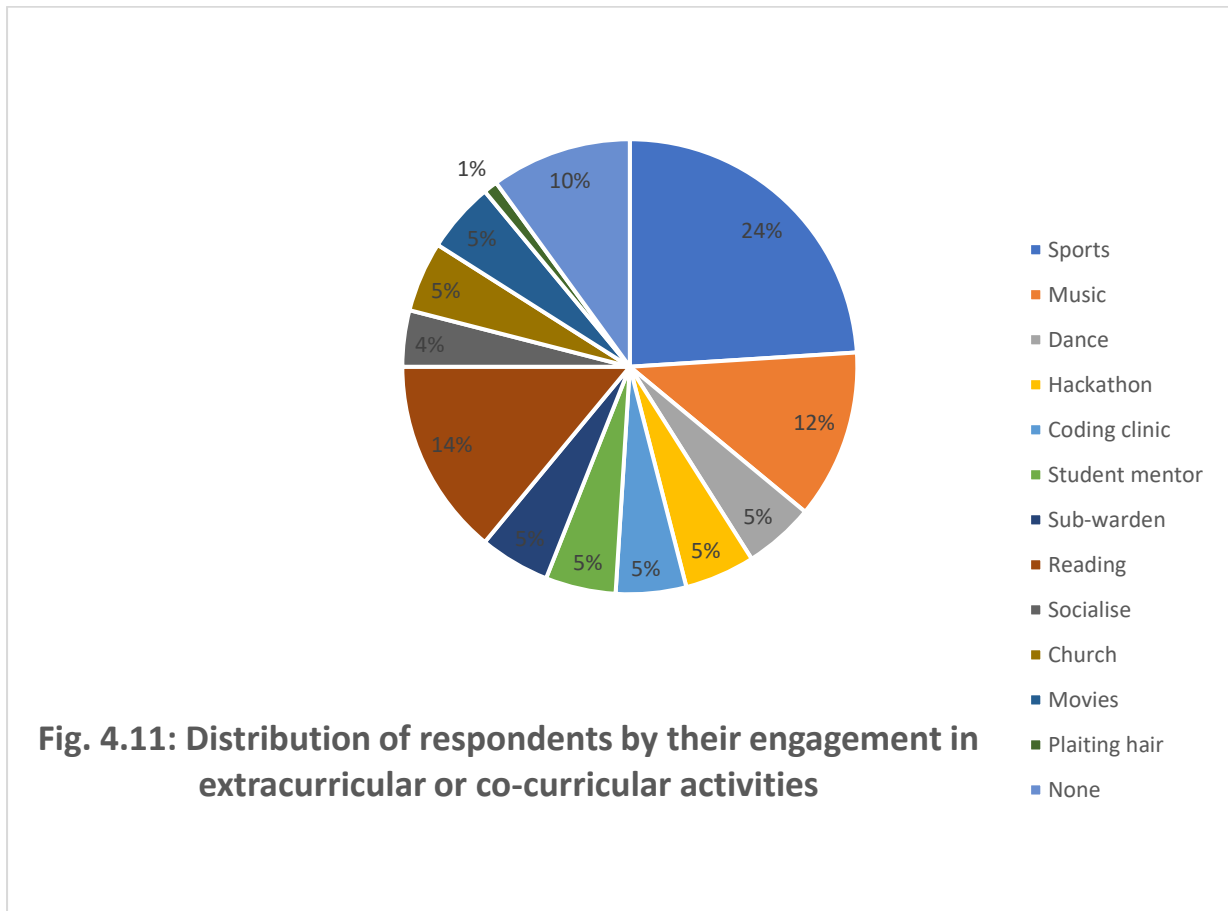


Figure 4.11 above indicates that 24% of the respondents participate in sports, 12% in music, 5% in dance, 5% in hackathons, 5% in coding clinics, 5% in student mentoring and 5% in sub-warden activities. A total of 10% of the respondents indicated that they do not participate in extracurricular or co-curricular activities. Furthermore, 14% of the respondents indicated that they spend their free time reading, 4% socialise with other students, 5% participate in church activities, 5% watch movies and 1% plait their hair.

Question 3: Are you a member of a student society/club/sports club?

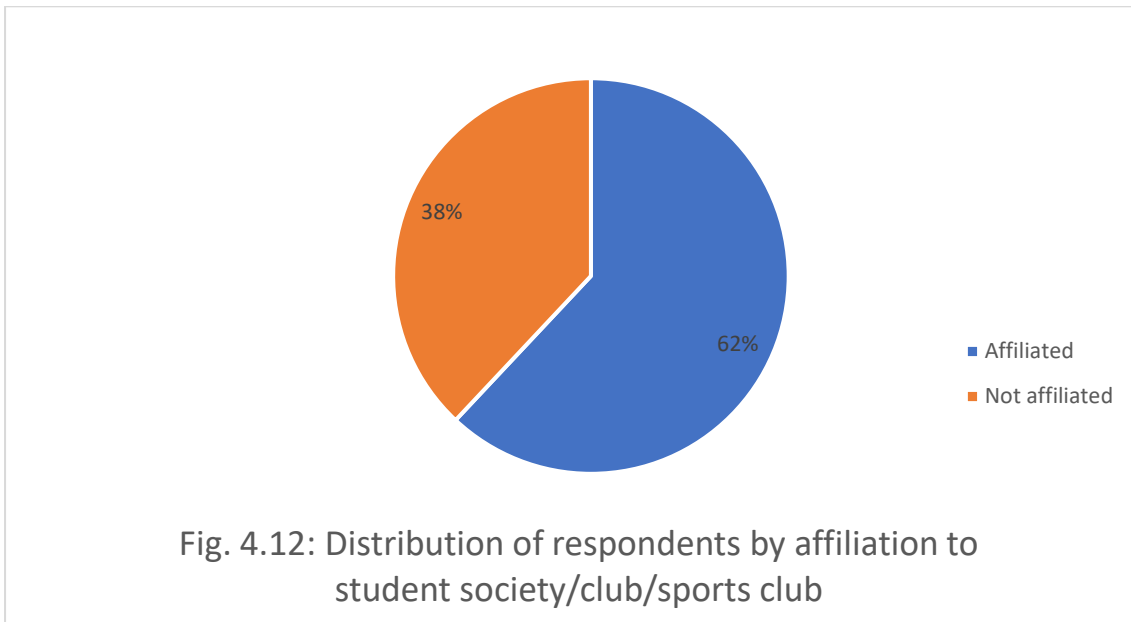


Figure 4.12 indicates that 62% of the respondents are members of a student society or sports club, and 38% are not affiliated.

Question 4: Have you served, or do you currently serve in a leadership position of a student society/SRC/club/sports club?

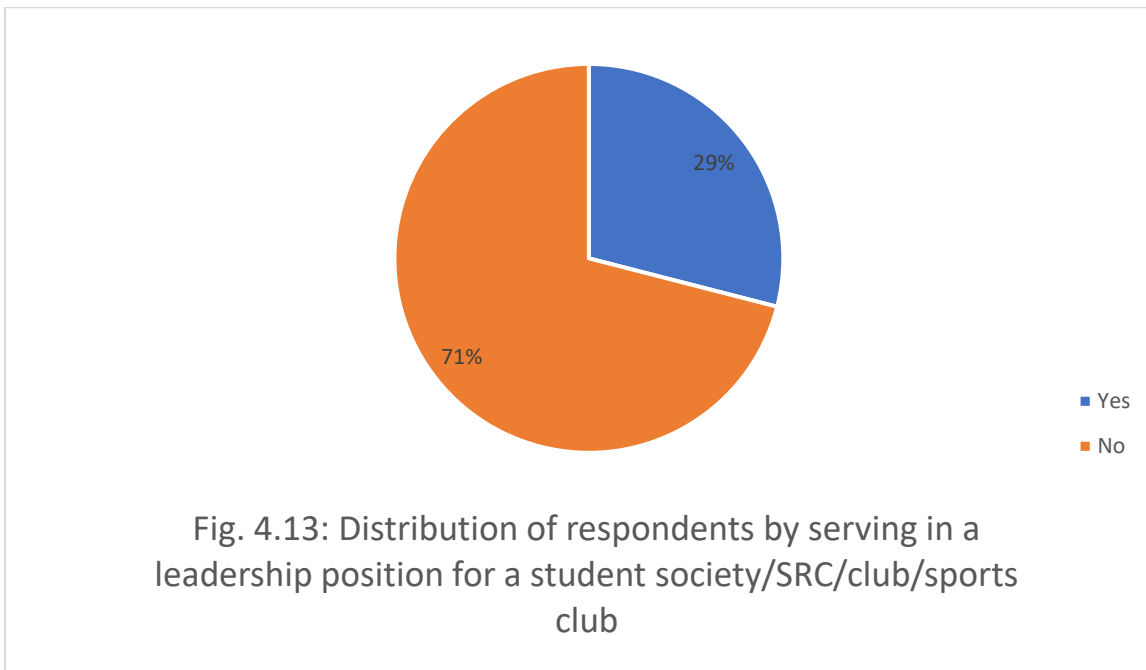


Figure 4.13 above indicates that 29% of the respondents serve in leadership positions of either a student society, student representative council (SRC), club or sports club.

Question 5: Do you feel you are now aware of alumni relations after attending this workshop?

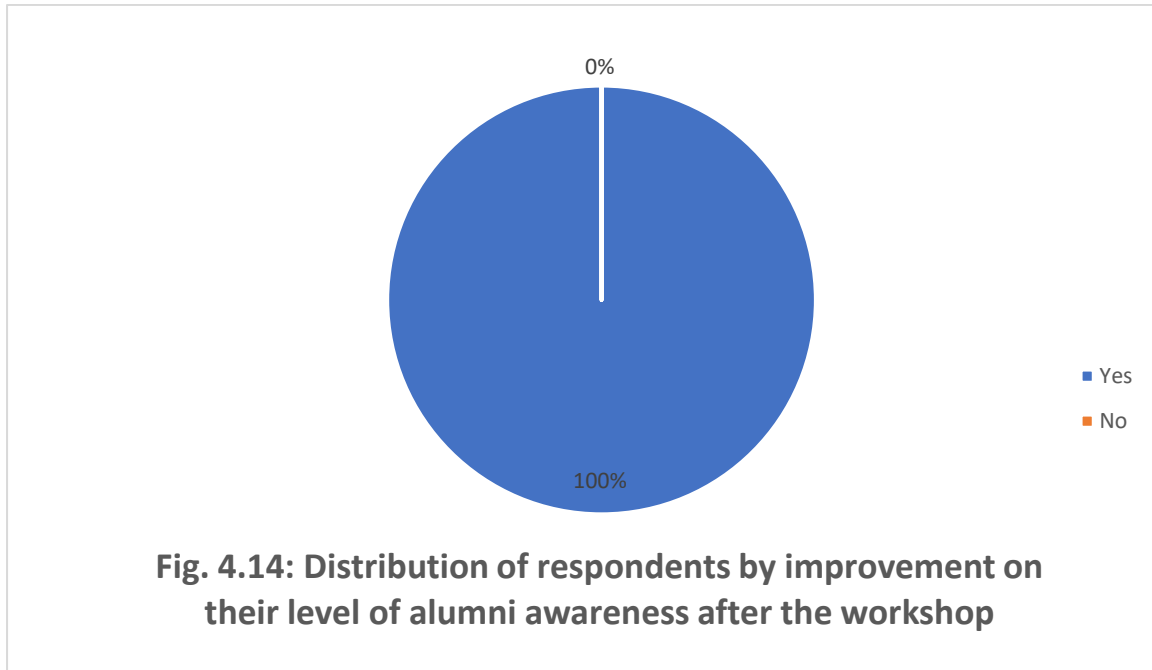


Figure 4.14 indicates that the level of alumni awareness for all respondents improved after attending the focus group workshop.

Question 6: What overall rating would you give this workshop?

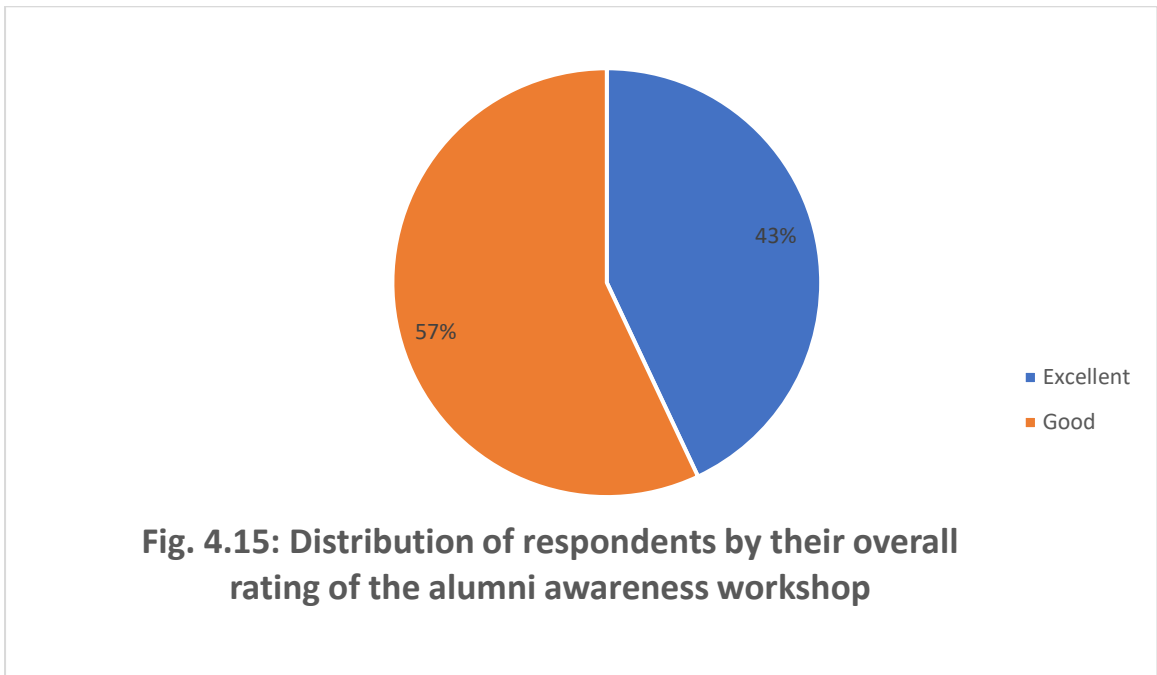


Figure 4.15 indicates that 57% of the respondents gave an excellent rating for the alumni awareness workshop and 43% gave a good rating.

Question 7: To what extent do you feel connected to Sol Plaatje University?

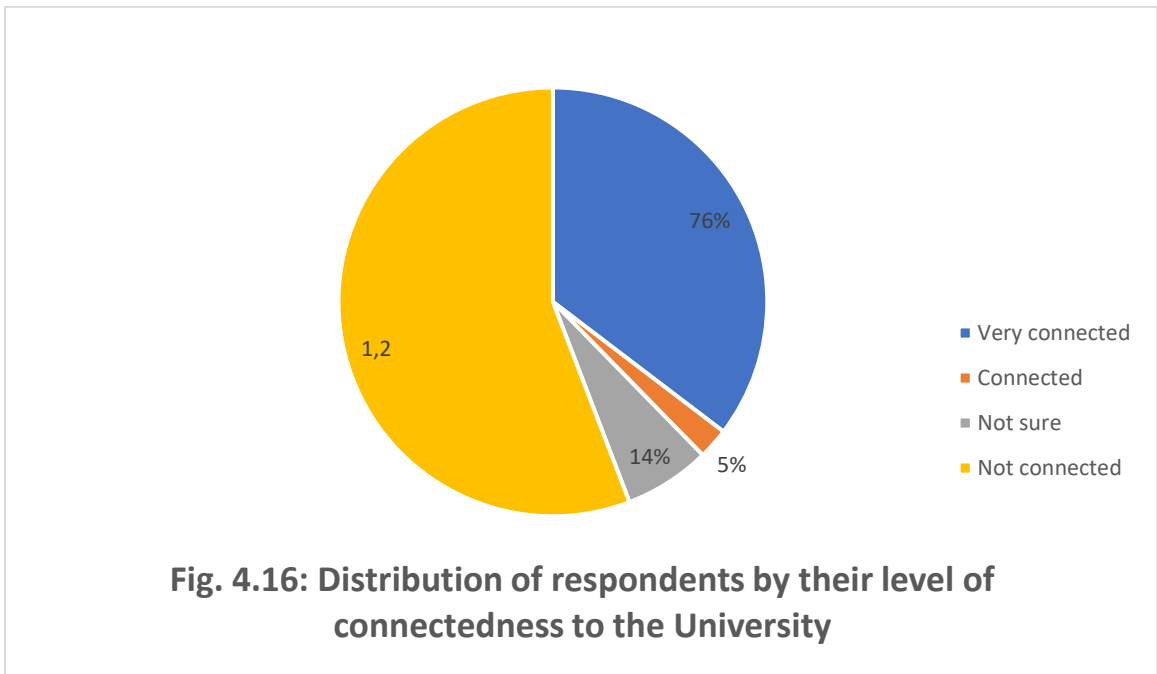


Figure 4.16 above indicates that 76% of the respondents feel very connected to the SPU, 5% are connected, 14% are not sure, and 5% feel disconnected.

Question 8: What kinds of activities would enhance your connection to SPU after graduation?

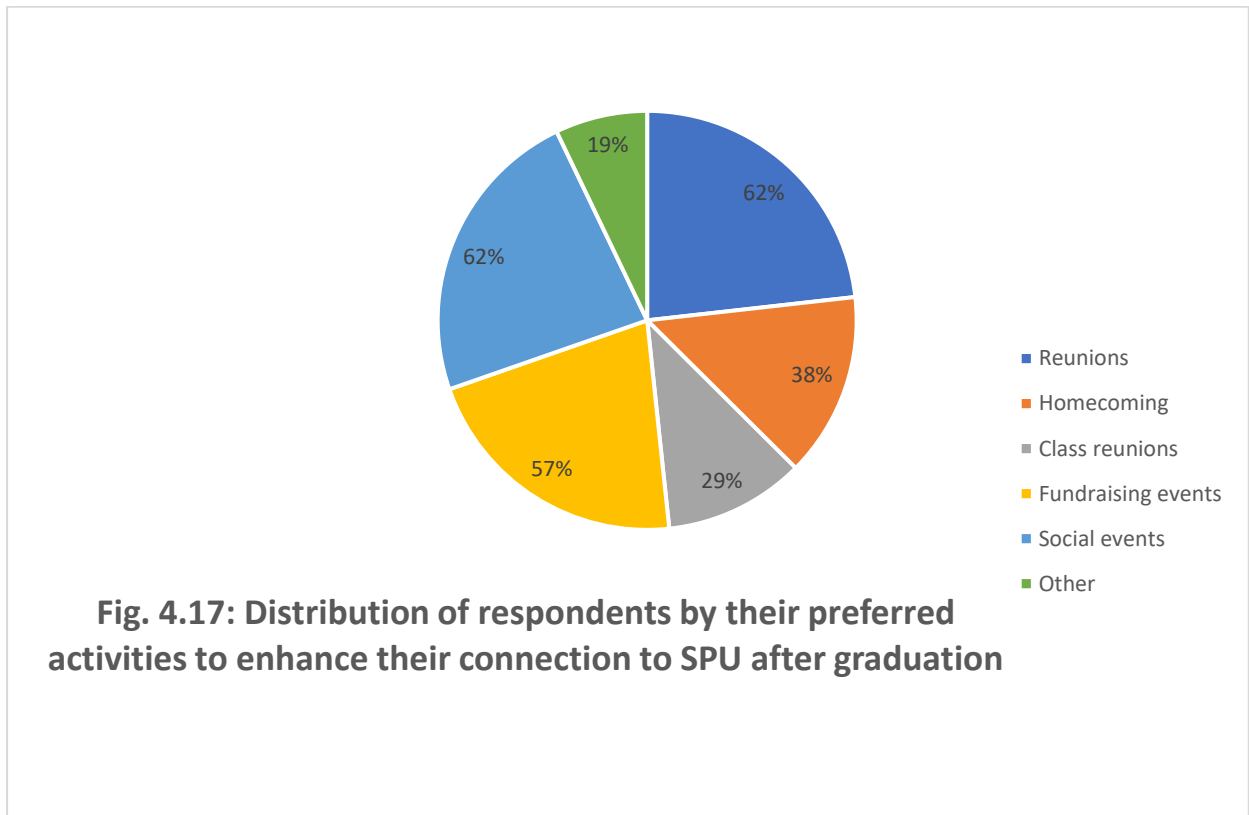


Figure 4.17 above indicates that 62% of the respondents preferred reunions to enhance their connection to the University after graduation, 62% preferred social events, 57% opted for fundraising events, 38% indicated homecoming, 29% would like class reunions and 19% preferred other activities such as sport reunions, SRC reunions, former cheerleader events, and leadership summits.

Question 9: Indicate whether you intend attending SPU alumni events after graduation.

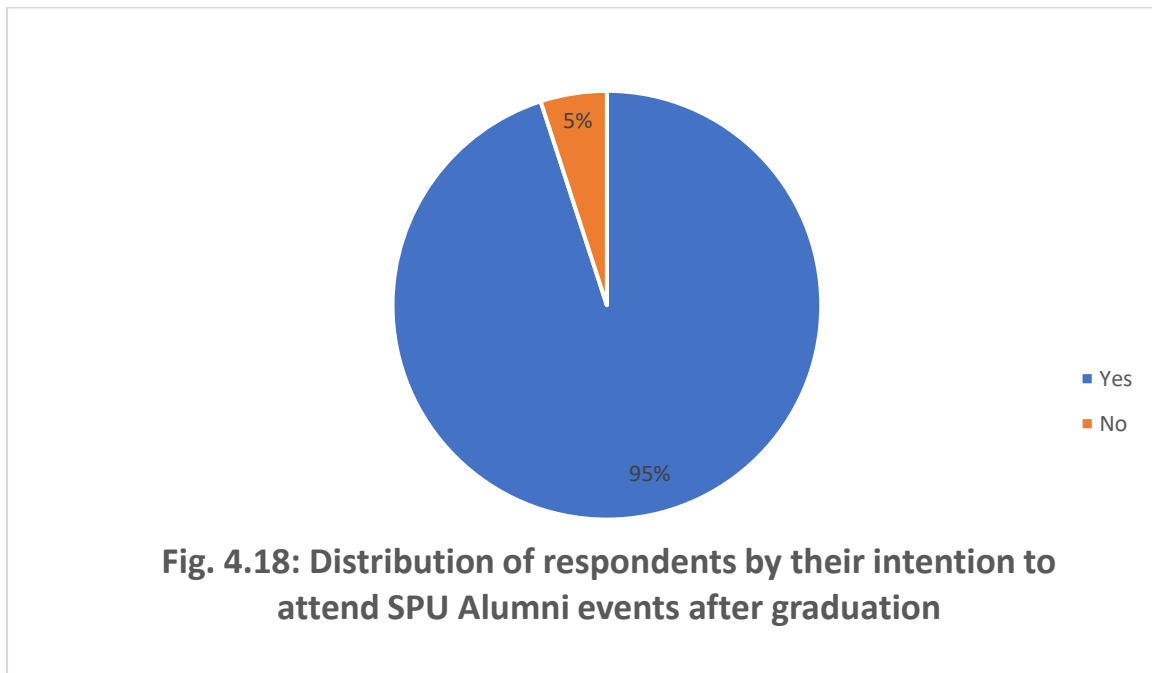


Figure 4.18 indicates that 95% intend to attend SPU alumni events after graduation and 5 % do not intend to.

Question 10: Would you recommend this workshop to other students?

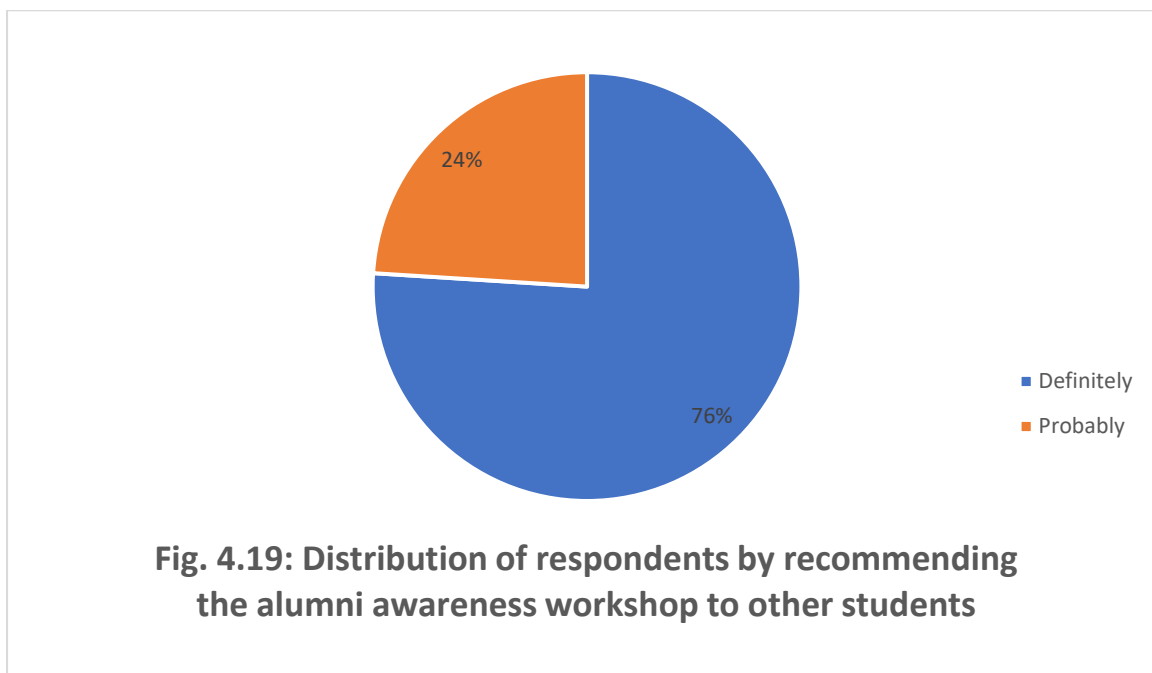


Figure 4.19 above indicates that 76% would recommend the alumni awareness workshop to other students and 24% were unsure.

4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, the researcher analysed and interpreted the results of the two surveys to identify the targeted participants and their level of alumni awareness and to evaluate the level of alumni awareness of the first-generation final-year students after attending the focus group workshop. The qualitative survey was also used to identify areas of interest that connect students with the university.

The next chapter will focus on the discussion and interpretation of the findings.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings of the study. The study used a mixed-method research design to collect and analyse data, so the findings were drawn from the first and second phases of data collection. The first phase used a quantitative research method in the form of a survey to obtain final-year students' biographical information and identify FGS as key participants for this study. The second phase employed a qualitative research method to gain insight into the level of alumni awareness among FGS after attending the alumni awareness workshop.

5.2 Stakeholder Theory

This study used stakeholder theory, defined earlier in the study, to promote stakeholder participation and business ethics (Mamabolo, 2018). According to Jones and Wicks (2018), it is a managerial theory that recognises that organisations engage in relationships and collaborations with many groups or individuals to produce results and create shared value for the benefit of everyone (Freeman, 2010).

The concept of business ethics is critical in higher education (Kouatli, 2019). El-Kassar, Messarra and Elgammal (2015) define it as the application of ethical principles in the day-to-day operations of a business or organisation as it influences trust between the business and its stakeholders (Kouatli, 2016). Trust is important in alumni relations as it is about transactional relationships between the university and its alumni, funders, and friends (Arnold, 2003). Therefore, it is crucial that alumni relations officials, including their boards, have an ethical responsibility to exercise due care and ethical procedures in the solicitation and stewardship of relationships and funds received on behalf of the University (Craft and Guy, 2019).

The methodology used in this study at the primary level was the survey, and the second was a questionnaire administered to a group of selected FGS after attending the alumni awareness workshop. The survey has shown that the participants, the final year students of Sol Plaatje University, did not know what alumni are. This view is in line with the study of Atwood (2004), which found that students do not relate to the word 'alumni' and everything associated with it. Their notion of alumni is that they are wealthy, old, grey-haired men who drive huge, expensive cars (Randall, 2003). Very

little is done to change this perception as many institutions still view current students as separate from alumni (Cho *et al.*, 2019). Nevertheless, according to Lesht *et al.* (2020) and Pinsker (2019), students are part of a continuous process that begins early when they commence their academic journey and eventually become alumni and donors.

However, after engagement through the alumni awareness workshop in the second phase of the study, participants showed an improved understanding of the alumni concept. Stakeholder theory aligned very well with the social constructivism lens used in this study, which depends significantly on obtaining knowledge through interactions with individuals and groups as seen in the study of Hamid (2021) that initiated the change process undertaken to close the gap in alumni engagement within a university. The social constructivist approach reinforced the focus on engaging stakeholders first and then utilising learning from the engagement to develop an effective and efficient solution Gehart (2017) tailored for the specific audience (Kezar *et al.*, 2023).

According to Clotfelter (2021), there are extracurricular activities in a university that promote holistic student engagement and facilitate meaningful connections and a sense of belonging. There are various types of engagement in different formats. Singer and Hughey (2002) list four main types of such programmes, one of which comprises student alumni organisations the primary purpose of which is to introduce students to the alumni world before graduation. This study used the alumni awareness workshop, and the results showed improvement in the participating FGS awareness after the workshop.

The stakeholder engagement theory was appropriate for this study because there was better stakeholder participation and knowledge transfer (Atwater, 1996) following the study's second phase, namely the alumni awareness workshop.

5.3 First-Generation Students (FGS)

The study found that 68% of the students who responded to the survey were FGS, which means that they were the first in their families to enter a university. Only 32% that indicated they were not. It is noteworthy that there is an increase in the number of FGS accessing higher education (Bohna, 1997; Watts, Garfield and Davis, 2023; Snyder *et al.*, 2016). According to Gosier (2022), this is caused by the changing

demographics in the USA. However, in South Africa, Rust (2012) points to the transformation and massification of higher education, leading to more significant percentages of the population accessing higher institutions.

The findings in the second phase of the study present many challenges for FGS that participated in the study at Sol Plaatje University. A total of 71% of participants indicated that they do not serve in a leadership position while 48% are not involved in extra-curricular activities on campus. These findings are aligned with the view that FGS are less likely to be involved in academic and social experiences such as studying in groups, interacting with faculty, or participating in extracurricular activities (Rodriquez, 2003). McCoy (2014) attributes this to the socioeconomic challenges hampering their preparedness for higher education, and thereby affecting their transition into university with lower enrolment rates. This tends to force them to focus more on academics rather than on extracurricular activities in order to do well and graduate (Smith, 2015). To deal with these challenges Kezar *et al.* (2023) suggest that institutions of higher learning need to familiarize themselves with the first generation and their challenges to develop institutions that are fit for purpose and serve the needs of all their students.

5.4 Alumni Awareness

The survey results revealed that 77% of the final year students that participated in the study were unaware of alumni, the Alumni Relations Department, and its activities within the University, while only 32% indicated that they were aware. This was in line with the study (Baafi-Frimpong, 2015) at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana, which improved the awareness of members of alumni association activities. As many as 88.2% of the respondents were unaware of such activities on campus. The same sentiments are shared by Atwood (2004), who found that university students do not relate to the term 'alumni' and everything associated with it. However, 97% of the participants indicated they want to participate in the alumni awareness programme to prepare them for life after graduation. This is encouraging because, according to the studies of Austin (2002) and Caruth (2018), enough evidence shows that extracurricular activities are critical to the overall academic success, throughput, and graduation rates of the student.

The study findings also confirmed that alumni awareness workshops helped FGS that participated in the study to improve their awareness of the concept of alumni. All the participants (100%) of the alumni awareness workshop indicated that they were now aware of the concept of alumni after attending the workshop. This finding appears to affirm the earlier assertions of McDearmon (2013) and Baafi-Frimpong (2015) in the literature that engaging students earlier in their educational career creates awareness and deep-rooted motivation to give to their alma mater. This point was supported by Lawley (2008), who argued that these awareness workshops were valuable tools for engaging students and encouraging future support for the institution.

The majority (95%) of participants gave the workshop a 'very good' rating, with 76% confirming that they would recommend it to others to attend. This indicates that the alumni workshop was well received and valuable to the participants.

Although there appears to be consensus between the findings of this study and the literature that alumni awareness programmes do improve the awareness of students about alumni and related activities, Newman and Petrosko (2011) advocate for continuous evaluation of alumni awareness programmes to ensure they are still delivering on their targets.

5.5 Involvement Post-Graduation

Regarding participation after graduation, participants had mixed reactions. A total of 62% of the respondents preferred reunions to enhance their connection to the University after graduation, while 62% preferred social events, 57% opted for fundraising events, 38% suggested homecoming, 29% indicated class reunions, and 19% preferred other activities such as sport reunions, SRC reunions, former cheerleader events, and leadership summits.

However, the extent of their connection to Sol Plaatje University received very decisive responses. A total of 76% of the respondents feel very connected to SPU, 5% are connected, 14% are not sure, and 5% feel disconnected. This speaks to the affinity and loyalty to the University that appear to be strong among the participants. This is in line with the studies of McDearmon (2013) and Nessel and Helgsen (2009), which found that FGS tend to show some affinity and connectivity to their alma mater.

One of the key findings of the study is the increased willingness of participants to attend fundraising events. This differs somewhat from the literature, where there is a strong view that students from first-generation and low-income households tend to give less to their alma mater after graduation, preferring to give to selected causes. Cohen (2006), in his study on alumni giving to African colleges, found that most alumni believe their alma mater could exist without their financial support. Monks's (2003) study echoed that students from minority groups in the USA tend to give less to their alma mater than their white counterparts do. When they give, it is for religious causes, and not to their alma mater (Havens and Schervish, 2007). This is concerning because alumni donations to their alma mater are critical in helping the university become financially sustainable to continue with its mission, especially as institutions grapple with declining government funding and a notable decrease in alumni giving (Gosier, 2022).

However, this willingness to attend fundraising events and contribute, though not to their alma mater, is something that needs to be exploited by nurturing it while the student is still on campus. Both Clotfelter (2003) and Rust (2012) remind us that the most critical factor in driving alumni giving is the individual's satisfaction with their university life experience. Studies show that humans are creatures of habit. According to Bekkers and Wiepking (2011), students raised in religious families tend to develop an interest in supporting religious causes or charitable causes. This point is also made by Rust (2012) who asserts that students from traditionally 'white' schools tend to give to their alma mater because these schools have a strong alumni culture that they carry through to university.

5.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed the study's findings, which were obtained in a two-pronged fashion, namely the survey and qualitative questionnaire. The discussion revealed that the awareness of FGS about alumni showed improvement after attending the alumni awareness workshop.

This study also confirmed that FGS that participated in the study seem willing to be engaged earlier in their journey as students, creating an opportunity to create the most

significant capacity for affinity and potential income for the University through alumni donations. The next chapter deals with the conclusion of the study and the recommendations.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

This chapter summarises the work done for the study and offers suggestions that can be put into practice to address the problems that the study uncovered.

6.2 Overview of the Study

The research focused on improving alumni awareness among FGS at Sol Plaatje University, Kimberley, South Africa. The study adopted a thematic approach to organise and analyse the data. Thus, two propositions were developed; first, FGS must be identified early on their arrival on campus, engaged thoroughly, and encouraged to join extracurricular activities, which can help them develop affinity and loyalty to their alma mater. Second, alumni awareness levels of FGS may improve if the concept of alumni is introduced through well-designed alumni awareness programmes while they are still on campus.

The literature on FGS and alumni awareness was reviewed, and stakeholder theory and social constructivism were used as lenses for the study. The study adopted a mixed research method, with the first phase being the survey distributed to 638 final-year students of which 31 responded. The survey comprised nine questions designed to provide biographical information of students, their understanding of alumni and related activities, and their first-generation status, as well as determining their interest in participating in the second phase of the study. Data was collected and analysed, and requests were made to the 31 respondents to join the alumni awareness workshop, the study's second phase, which was qualitative in nature. A total of 21 students signed up. The survey findings revealed that students needed to be informed about alumni and related activities on campus, and all were looking forward to attending the alumni workshop in the second phase of the study.

The second phase of the study was an alumni awareness workshop for 21 FGS to introduce them to alumni and related activities. The workshop was carried out online according to the COVID-19 regulations of the country as stipulated in the ethics application. After the workshop, participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire comprising ten (10) questions related to their subsequent understanding of alumni.

The study findings revealed that FGS that participated in the study showed improved knowledge of alumni and related activities after attending the alumni awareness workshop. They also indicated their willingness to attend university alumni events such as reunions, homecoming, and fundraising events after graduation.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are intended to improve alumni awareness of FGS at Sol Plaatje University. The recommendations can be implemented to benefit the entire University, not only the FGS in their final year.

6.3 Recommendations

This section proposes recommendations for the following critical areas of the study: 1) first generation students, 2) alumni awareness programmes, 3) post-university involvement, and 4) research.

6.3.1 Recommendations for first-generation students

Owing to the challenges identified within this study that FGS face as they transition to higher education students, the study proposes the following:

- Identify FGS who register at the University and endeavour to know more about them and their unique challenges.
- Create a mentoring programme to connect first-generation and senior students on campus. This solid social support could help FGS deal with transition issues and overcome some of their barriers.
- Connect them with Student Support Services to access extracurricular services such as wellness, health, career and career counselling, sport, and registration for student organisations. Access to these services must be monitored during the first university year.

6.3.2 Recommendations on alumni awareness programmes

Use demographic and socioeconomic information on all students to design programmes that provide excellent value and enhance the lived experience of all students.

- Adopt alumni awareness workshops as one of the student support programs that all SPU students attend before graduation. It can be introduced from the second year and continue until graduation. Increase its scope to include transition to the world of work and alumni.
- Develop a customized diversity and inclusion programme to support the needs of FGS, students from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds, students with disabilities, and students from low-income families.
- Compile a comprehensive review of university systems to modify policies, procedures, and programmatic offerings requirements to accommodate the multifaceted needs of students.
- Launch the Future Alumni Programme as a student society on campus to organise campus-based alumni programmes to build affinity and loyalty to the university.

6.3.3 Recommendations on post-university involvement

Building from the foundations of solid on-campus extracurricular activities, develop solid post-university programmes meant to create lifelong connections to the University and ultimately increase alumni support.

- Develop a comprehensive alumni engagement strategy for the University in anticipation of the future growth of the University alumni community.
- Launch a vibrant Alumni Association to support the work of existing Alumni Relations offices. The Association will serve as a mobilizing vehicle to help drive university messages and support toward affinity events such as reunions, homecomings, and class reunions.
- Introduce an Alumni Mentors programme by pairing senior students with working alumni. This will create a straightforward transition for students into their campus experience while creating a network for career development.
- Introduce an annual alumni fund to serve as a vehicle to drive alumni giving to the University.
- Formalise the collaboration between the Alumni Relations Office and the Division of Student Affairs to create uninterrupted support for students from campus to career. Connection and belonging are the primary focuses for

students' affairs and alumni relations practitioners, with the student at the centre. Therefore, it makes sense for these two departments to work closely together.

6.3.4 Research recommendations

Future research needs to cover some of the critical areas left out of this study owing to its limitations and focus. This study did not investigate the race, family financial status, or financial support of participants; however, the literature on FGS lists these areas as critical indicators. There is a dearth of literature in this area of study that can be explored in the future, especially in relation to student financial aid.

The University needs to implement ongoing research work within the alumni area to remain abreast of developments and trends within the sector. This will also help develop solutions that can be responded to quickly.

6.4 Conclusion

Implementing the recommendations to improve alumni awareness amongst university students by introducing alumni awareness workshops targeting final-year students could ensure that they maintain a long-term relationship with their alma mater and increase their giving rates over time.

Using an alumni awareness workshop model will help improve the alumni awareness of the students, making it easier for them to continue their connections to the University. Implementing ongoing research into recent student engagement and alumni trends will give the university a clear picture what still needs to be done and ensure they stay abreast of developments within the sector.

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APPENDIX A: Survey

Sol Plaatje University Alumni Awareness Survey

1. How do you identify your Gender?

- Male
- Female
- Other
- Other (please specify)

2. In what year of study are you at Sol Plaatje University?

- Third year
- Fourth Year

3. Which school are you in?

- Economic & Management Sciences
- Education
- Humanities
- Natural & Applied sciences

4. Are you the first in your family to attend a University?

- Yes
- No

5. Select one thing you like about Sol Plaatje University?

- Quality of Education
- Lived experience
- Academics
- Sports
- Residences
- Other (please specify)

6. How would you rate your time and experiences at Sol Plaatje University so far?

- Excellent
- Above average
- Average
- Below average
- Poor

7. How aware are you of the Alumni Relations/Affairs department activities within the University?

- Aware
- Not aware
- Not applicable

8. Do you feel that the University is preparing you adequately for the job market?

- Extremely well
- Moderately
- Not at all

9. Would you like to participate in the Sol Plaatje University Alumni Awareness Program to prepare you for life after graduation?

- Yes
- No

APPENDIX B: Alumni Awareness Workshop Outline

Alumni Awareness Workshop Outline

Purpose of the Workshop:

- To introduce students to Alumni Relations whilst they are on campus.
- To develop a basic conceptual understanding of Alumni Relations in students as they progress into life post-graduation.

Topics:

1. ***Building a brand:*** Introduction to the world of Alumni Relations.
2. ***Be the Brand:*** Student/Alumni Life
3. ***Sharing in success:*** The transition from student to alumni - meaningful celebration of this moment.
4. ***Maintaining a relationship:*** Staying connected with others and alma mater.

Workshop Methods

Methods: presentations, syndicate sessions, class discussion and arguments (debates), and participant presentations

Outcomes

On completion of this workshop students should:

1. have a conceptual understanding of the four topics mentioned above;
2. have a heightened awareness of the Alumni Relations activities;
3. develop an enhanced relationship with their alma mater; and
4. have a deepened pride in being part of the University.

Assessment

Post-workshop participants' questionnaire

APPENDIX C: Post-workshop participants' questionnaire

- 1) Describe your student experiences at Sol Plaatje University (SPU).
- 2) Describe any extracurricular or co-curricular activities in which you engaged at Sol Plaatje University.
- 3) Are you a member of a student society/club/sports club?
- 4) Have you served or are you currently serving in a leadership position of a student society/SRC/club/sports club?
- 5) Do you feel you are now aware of alumni relations after attending this workshop?
 - Yes
 - No
- 6) What overall rating would you give this workshop?
 - Excellent
 - Good
 - Fair
 - Poor
- 7) To what extent do you feel connected to Sol Plaatje University (SPU)?
- 8) What kind of activities would enhance your connection to SPU after graduation?
 - Reunions
 - Homecoming
 - Class Reunions
 - Fundraising events
 - Social events
 - Other

- 9) Please indicate whether you intend to attend SPU Alumni Events after graduation.

- Yes
- No

10) Would you recommend this course to other students?

- Definitely
- Probably
- Not sure
- Probably not
- Definitely not

APPENDIX D: Gatekeepers Permission



OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY REGISTRAR
Private Bag X5008, KIMBERLEY, 8300
Luka Jantjie House, Chapel Street, KIMBERLEY, 8301
Tel: 053 491 0000
e-mail: registrar@spu.ac.za
Website: www.spu.ac.za

GATEKEEPER CONSENT FORM

Title of Project:

Improving the first-generation students' alumni awareness at Sol Plaatje University: A participatory Action research approach

Name of Researcher(s):

Mr Qondakele Sompondo (g19s6501)
Mr Evert Knoesen (Supervisor)

Please add some brief information about your project here that clarifies exactly what the gatekeeper is agreeing to:

This research aims to improve alumni awareness amongst the first-generation students doing their final year of study to build life-long relationships with their alma mater which may result in a contribution to the institution. According to (Hoyt, 2004), alumni attain a disposition of readiness or motivation before participating or contributing to their alma mater. A first-generation student is someone who is the first member of his or her family to go to college (Toutkoushian, Stollberg, & Slaton, 2018).

This goal will translate to the following main objectives:

- Improve Alumni awareness amongst final year first-generation University students
- Share experiences, lessons learned, and administrative challenges in facilitating the project.

Specifically, the study will try and find the answer to the critical question below:

- How can final year first-generation students' alumni awareness be improved?

The research will start by distributing an online survey to final year students to gather information such as demographics, interests or activities on campus, and family situations. This will be followed by Alumni awareness workshops for first-generation students (FGS). After the workshop participants will be asked in-depth questions through interviews to check an understanding of the subject.


1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information provided for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.


2. I understand that participation of our university and students/members in the research is voluntary and that they are free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and that this will not affect legal rights.

3. I understand that any personal information collected during the study will be anonymised and remain confidential.

4. I agree for our university and students/members to take part in the above study.

5. I agree to conform to the Protection of Personal Information Act, 4 of 2013.

University Registrar: J.P. Cezmas Date: 08/04/2022 Signature: 

Name of Researcher: Q. Sompondo Date: 08/04/2022 Signature: 

APPENDIX E: Participants Informed Consent



PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT DECLARATION

(To be signed by research participants)

Research Project Title: Improving the first-generation students' alumni awareness at Sol Plaatje University: A participatory Action research approach

Mr Qondakele Sompondo from the Department of Rhodes Business School, Rhodes University, has requested my permission to participate in the above-mentioned research project.

The nature and the purpose of the research project and of this informed consent declaration have been explained to me in a language that I understand.

I am aware that:

1. The purpose of the research project is to improve alumni awareness amongst the first-generation students doing their final year of study to build life-long relationships with their alma mater
2. Rhodes University has given ethical clearance to this research project 2022-2820-6592 and I have seen/may request to see the clearance certificate by contacting the Ethics Coordinator (ethics-committee@ru.ac.za).
3. By participating in this research project, I will be contributing towards strengthened relationship and an improved student engagement strategy of the University alumni office
4. I will participate in the project by filling in an online survey that will be sent to all final year students, interviews and attending alumni awareness workshops.
5. My participation is entirely voluntary and should I at any stage wish to withdraw from participating further, I may do so without any negative consequences
6. I will not be compensated for participating in the research, but my out-of-pocket expenses will be reimbursed.
7. The following risks are associated with my participation:

7.1. Researcher's bias through his position in the study as he is also working for the University, and the Alumni Relations office of the University reports to him. This bias could affect the outcomes of the research if not managed properly. To deal with this bias, the alumni engagement awareness workshops and interviews will be conducted by an external facilitator. However, the researcher will be involved in the collating of data.

Rhodes University, Research Office: Ethics Review
Office Coordinator: ethics-committee@ru.ac.za
+27 (0) 80 103 7727 / +27 (0) 80 016 7707
Team 04 New Admin Building, Crookes Road, Grahamstown 6100



7.2. Risk of biographical information of participants and that of the University being shared with external entities without the consent of the participants and the University. To deal with this risk, in line with the University ethical clearance and gatekeepers' permission imperatives, all information received will be kept private and used for the purposes of the study.

7.3. Risk of participants contracting covid during the study. To deal with this risk, all non-pharmaceutical procedures will be adhered to when we do in-person sessions. But we plan to use zoom/teams which drastically reduce chances of spreading covid.

8. The Researcher intends to publish the research results in the form of a dissertation study that will be available at Rhodes University library. However, confidentiality and anonymity of records will be maintained, and my name and identity will not be revealed to anyone who has not been involved in conducting the research, *unless I indicate to the contrary/recognise that as a public figure, my identity will inevitably be/become known in which case I agree to and accept the loss of confidentiality.*
9. In terms of the Protection of Personal Information Act (No. 4, 2013), it remains my right to request the Researcher to provide me with a detailed explanation of exactly how confidentiality and anonymity will be achieved. I may request to know how my personal information will be stored securely, and for how long it will be stored.
10. If any data collected from me for this research project is to be used by the researcher for any further project, I am to be informed in writing, and my written consent requested again. I need not give consent if such further research is incompatible with the initial data presented for this study (POPIA, s15(3)). Equally, I can simply reject the request. In such cases a formal request needs to be made by the researcher via the Ethics Coordinator (ethics-committee@ru.ac.za).
11. In terms of the Protection of Personal Information Act, I possess the right to receive feedback about this research. This will take the form of the copy of the study will be emailed to the participants and the manuscript and the copy of the actual dissertation will be made available to the University according to the research imperatives of the University, *unless I elect not to receive feedback.*
12. Any further questions that I might have regarding the research, or my participation will be answered by Researcher, Mr Qondakele Sompondo 053-491 0059 email: gondakeles@gmail.com or Research Supervisor, Mr Evert Knoesen email: e.knoesen@ru.ac.za.
13. By signing this informed consent declaration, I am not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies.
14. A copy of this informed consent declaration will be given to me, and the original will be kept on record. I **disagree** (SELECT APPLICABLE) to the Researcher's request to



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take photographs and/or videos of me as part of this research project, recognising that agreement here is likely to raise the risk of compromising my anonymity and that steps will be taken to ensure this does not happen if my approval is granted.

15. I agree with the Researcher's request to voice record my comments and opinions during interviews, the purpose of which is to ensure the accurate recording of my views. Furthermore, I have the right to request a copy of interview transcriptions to confirm that my opinions are accurately recorded.
16. A copy of this informed consent declaration will be given to me, and the original will be kept on record by the researcher.

Rhodes University, Research Office/Ethical Review
Ethics Coordinator: ethics-committee@ru.ac.za
T +27 (0) 48 803 7727 F +27 (0) 88 818 7707
Room 204, Main Admin Building, ~~Wessels~~ Road, Grahamstown 6100



I,, have read the above information / confirm that the above information has been explained to me in a language that I understand and I am aware of this document's contents. I have asked all the questions that I wished to ask and these have been answered to my satisfaction. I fully understand what is expected of me during the research.

I have not been pressurized in any way and I voluntarily agree to participate in the above-mentioned project.

.....
Participants signature

.....
Date