

## ***(Not) Heeding the call for change: Reinforcing power structures at the expense of student success***

*L Peta Myers*

*Department of Finance and Accounting, University of Exeter Business School,  
L.P.Myers@exeter.ac.uk*

### **Abstract**

This study investigated the challenges faced by a group of students while completing a professional higher education qualification at a small Higher Education Institution in South Africa. Research data was obtained from seventy hours of interviews conducted with 43 students in semi-structured interviews and fifteen academics in three focus groups.

Interviews and focus group discussions took place in three separate phases; firstly fourth-year student participants were interviewed, and feedback was provided to academics in the fourth-year focus group; this was repeated for the third-year student participants and teaching cohort and lastly for the first- and second-year group. It was data emerging from the fourth-year student interviews and fourth-year academics focus groups that forms the basis of this paper.

While students being accepted onto this four-year combined undergraduate and postgraduate programme would all have had to achieve the same minimum marks on entry and on progression to the next level, the pass rates amongst black students were significantly lower than that of their white peers. For most students learning in a second language was a problem; but it was their interactions with the fourth-year academics that became a bigger challenge.

When these issues were raised in the focus group, academics fell back, unquestioningly, on the deficit model of believing that the problems lay within the student cohort, their motivation, their ability, their preparedness, and were unable to see their own contribution to these students' struggles. At the time of the research, academics appeared to have little understanding of the impact of their teaching practices on students. Equally, there was little awareness of a need to examine and potentially revise how they engaged with students within the cycles of Teaching, Learning and Assessing, given the change in the demographic composition of the student body.

Subsequent to this research taking place, many staff who were research participants have left and the department currently comprises a significantly different teaching cohort. The experiences of these students and the responses from the academic body, are still relevant when examining calls for change, in a context of unequal power dynamics.

### **Keywords**

Accounting Education, Insider Research, Qualitative Research, Student Success, South African Higher Education.