Agency and impasses to success amongst higher education students in South Africa

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WITS University
Social science that makes a difference

Lebo
Higher education

1. 55% failure rates among students
2. Low completion rates on time (only 1 in 4)
3. White completion rates 50% higher than Black students (CHE, 2013)
4. Inequity in enrolment rates (15% Black youth 18-24 enrolled versus 54% White in 2014)
Education and Emancipation

1. National research project
2. Investigate obstacles and opportunities within Higher Education
3. Started in April 2012/completed in 2018
4. Framing question: *Who are our students?*
5. In-depth quantitative and qualitative research

2. **Graduating into Professions**: literature review on obstacles to access and throughput with reference to women and black students.

3. **Who are our students and what happens to them?**: quantitative (CS) and qualitative (HSRC)
1. The study followed 80 students in 8 universities over 5 years (2013 to 2017)

2. Used a variety of engaging methods

3. Produced two accessible outputs:
   - **Book**: *Studying while black*
   - **Documentary**: *Ready or Not!*

4. Recorded struggles and obstacles, along with strategies and resources for success
Alude
I went to the bursary offices
‘Where’s the father’s Affidavit?’
‘I don’t have a father’.
‘Go to your mom and tell her to write about the whereabouts of your father’.
I go home.
Write out another Affidavit.
Go back to the police station
Using a taxi.
Then back to university.

Being a female at university is an extreme sport
Every morning I wake up
Walk down to campus with weapons
Tasers and pepper spray
There’s always crime on campus
Females being raped on campus
With cameras.
You sit there in the lecture room and think:
‘What am I going to say?
Are they going to laugh at me?
Think I’m stupid?

Some students slept.
In the Student Building.
For two days.
Without food.

I wanted to study
They said it’s full.
They just put me in another programme so that I don’t stay at home.

If you are Black and poor, you are in trouble.
This place is very brutal for Black poor kids.

I don’t feel I belong to the campus
Findings

1. Race and Racism on campus
2. Gender dynamics on campus
3. Language and power
4. Obstacles to overcome
5. Student strategies for succeeding
6. Research strategies for intervention
7. Recommendations for all stakeholders
8. Proposals for further research and intervention
## Sample Progression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Graduated</th>
<th>Still studying</th>
<th>Left university to work/seek employment</th>
<th>Untraceable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total (n=80)</strong></td>
<td>27</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School background</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Township/Rural (n=38)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban/Private (n=42)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parents’ education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher ed (n=41)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No higher ed (n=39)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. “Recognises the value of **engaging** in the research process those who are intended to be the beneficiaries, users and **stakeholders** of research” (Biggs)

2. **Key feature - location of power**, commitment to the democratisation & demystification of scientific research

3. **Community** members as knowledgeable **collaborators**

4. **Underlying values** - action-oriented, dialogue, relevant and iterative, justice (Lewin – ‘The Northern Tradition’)

5. **Core elements:** Mutual respect and trust, accountability and reflexivity, participative and interactive
METHODS

1. Longitudinal cohort study
2. Annual interviews
3. Social network interviews
4. Social media blogs
5. Written Reflections
6. Ethnographic documentary
Social network interviewing

Choose from among these people to interview e.g.

1. A person from your home town who never went to university
2. A student you consider more privileged than you
3. A student you consider less privileged than you
4. A staff contact from your previous school
5. A person in a university leadership position
6. A recent graduate that you know
7. A student like you
8. A person who works at student support services
9. A student who dropped out of university this past year
10. A person you consider to have helped you get to varsity
11. A person you consider to have helped you over this last year of university
12. A family member who has been to university
E.G. questions that interviewers asked students:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Aims</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. ...</td>
<td>Evaluating social context and external agency – what can and cannot be changed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. ...</td>
<td>Inviting constructive analysis, specifically with regard to internal agency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. In your opinion, what affects someone’s success at university?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Who is responsible for students succeeding at University?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. From what you know of me (or students in general), what do I do that stops (sabotages) me from succeeding at varsity? What should I be doing?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7....</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. In your opinion, who should be helping students succeed at university, and what should they be doing to help?</td>
<td>Developing strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9....</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10....</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Facebook: Who succeeds?

1. Smartphone & airtime
2. Status updates
3. Images and Photo’s
4. Inspirational Quotes
5. Memes
6. Video clips
7. Newspaper articles
8. Blog posts
9. Bursary/Funding Info
READY OR NOT
Black Students' Experiences of South African Universities
Sharlene
What inequality does

1. **Short lives**
   - Lack of education (less than 12 yrs of schooling)
     - 3 and 12 yrs shorter life
   - Hierarchically low jobs in government service
   - Unemployed

2. **Psychic/social stress**

5 to 15 more years of illness
4 Mechanisms of inequality

1. **Distanciation** - a systemic process designed to discern ‘winners and losers’
   - **Approximation** – close the physical distance

2. **Exclusion** - the division of ‘in-groups’ and ‘out-groups’
   - **Inclusion**

3. **Hierarchisation** - formal organisations of inequality
   - **Flattening power structures**

4. **Exploitation** - unfairly capitalising on the physical labour of others
   - **Protection, redistribution and rehabilitation**
RECOMMENDATIONS

Three spaces for action

- Individual/personal
- Institutional
- National/structural

Actions for management and administrators, for lecturers and support staff, for students/student leaders, for government
University leadership

1. Symbols
2. Accommodation
3. Access to facilities
4. Race/gender ombud
5. Diverse lecturing experience
6. Diverse management
7. Spatial planning - safety of female students
8. Translanguaging
9. Writing centres
10. Use of dictionaries in exams
11. Transit time increased for consultation
12. Formal mechanism to complain about lecturer conduct
13. Administrators equipped for students’ realities
14. Hardship funds
15. Funding information officers
16. Compulsory African language
University leadership (2)

18. Commissioners of oaths available in funding offices
19. Administrative offices accessible hours
20. Free or subsidised transport
21. Technology proficiency capacity development
22. Improved mental health facilities
23. Institutional justice processes
24. Formal mentoring programmes for all undergraduate students.
25. Resources for student self-management
26. Family events part of student orientation
27. Multiple orientations - compulsory
28. Course on other directed and self-directed learning
Lecturers and support staff

1. Formal course on the social history of SA
2. Relevant Southern material
3. Formal reporting mechanism for GBV and harassment
4. Accents
5. Lecturers trained to communicate
6. Translanguaging
7. Lecturers as enablers of learning
8. Lecturers accessible
9. Course content to include academic know-how
10. Lectures compulsory for 1st yrs
11. Lecturers trained for referral e.g. mental health & crime
12. Faculty to act as mediators between students and management
13. Academic credit for reflections on transformation
14. Faculty to offer/administer mentorship programmes
1. Student activities must encourage diversity
2. Mechanisms to report staff who gender discriminate
3. Awareness of support services – academic and mental health
4. Compulsory courses to disrupt patriarchy.
5. Mobilise peer academic support (incl. social media)
6. Students helped to include family in study progress
7. Compulsory lectures
8. Frequent incentivised check-ups (study skills, career guidance, mental health, time use and writing).
9. Opportunities for funding
10. Watchdog over residence allocations, incl. racial mix
11. Technology courses required
12. Public service messages
13. Student protests as opportunities for reflection
14. Student orientation repeated
Government and policy makers

1. External structures for victimized students
2. Dedicate funding for Southern knowledge production
3. Multilingualism encouraged from school level
4. Change monitored
5. Policy-makers should
6. Student funding reforms and accountability
7. No withholding of marks for non-payment of fees
8. Incentives for faith communities to assist students (eg. Accommodation, study spaces, com of oaths)
9. Private security firms to be held to strict codes of conduct
10. A standing forum for students to engage policy makers
11. Govt funded research on learning from students
12. Money for peer support and mentoring programmes
Urgent next steps

1. Discussion of recommendations with stakeholders
2. Full use to be made of the *Ready or Not! Documentary* in schools and for new students
3. Three follow up studies dealing with
   - Sexual violence and safety for women on campus
   - Translanguaging: Policies, practices, practicalities
   - Mentoring: For whom, by whom, how long, what medium?
Thank you