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***It all comes down to you”: Interventionist research strategies for emancipation in university.***

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Adopting Kathleen Lynch’s ideas around emancipatory research, this study engaged with five interactive and participatory research methods in order to promote agency amongst the research subjects involved; expand networks and social support and facilitate a safe space for students to reflect on their university experiences in ways that might ultimately move them to act and navigate more strategically, purposefully and wholly in university and beyond. In Lynch’s article on equality and emancipation in research, she proposes an emancipatory research methodology that sees often side-lined subjects becoming agential in the research, resulting in transformative effects (Lynch, 1999, p. 55). In other words, emancipatory research encourages research subjects to exercise agency and ownership over knowledge produced about them and their lived experience. Lynch posits that emancipatory research be reciprocal so that the research enables participants to both understand and change their situation through the research process.

In the spirit of emancipation, it is not up to the study to decide that students have experienced emancipation but rather, we rely on trends that emerged in student’s reflections across the 5 methods where they expressly detail how they have changed over time; as a result of interaction with the study, its prompts, with researchers themselves, and through their own research undertaken.

- 1) SNIs required participants to interview 5-7 people that fell into various categories over three years. The idea behind this task was to assist students in creating a network through encouraging conversations with their peers, other potential supporters and university personnel.
- 2) The Facebook weblog was active for five years and acted as a site for participants to post writings or upload photographs on a monthly basis about their achievements or hurdles. This platform allowed students to connect across university campuses and was valuable in gathering data.
- 3) Annual Participant Interviews entailed conducting a face-to-face interview with each participant each year. These interviews aimed to map the changes in students’ experiences and personal circumstances, and record how they understood and interacted with the university environments over time.
- 4) The Final Written Reflection took place at the end of the five year study and allowed participants to examine their journeys guided by self-reflexive questions that resulted in deeply insightful responses.
- 5) The fifth method was the producing of a documentary entitled Ready or Not! that emphasised a visual and interactive approach to the project in which selected

participants were able to tell real, insightful, more comprehensive narratives that is often missing from educational research.

***How did we go about using these methods, how were they interventionist and agential for the students?***

**(SNI)** Many students found it to be a helpful exercise that promoted identification, motivation and information sharing, in some instances encouraging participants to think or do things differently. Students expressed how the SNIs were not only interventionist but agential as well...

**(FACEBOOK)** A private Facebook group called “Who Succeeds, Who Doesn’t?” was set up with the intention that participants would join the group (mediated by a researcher) and post or upload a paragraph or photograph once a month that speaks to what has made them feel successful or discouraged in university that month. With the Facebook group we found that despite intermittent posting, the group served a valuable function for developing productive relationships between participants at different institutions and as an effective communication tool for the research team and students. The students reported that being able to interact with other students in the group created a community where problems are not only discussed but strategies to overcome problems were also shared. Through sharing, students were able to offer advice about how to navigate certain structures within their universities. For others the group was a space to offload emotionally.....

**(API)** What can we say was significant about following the same group of young people, across the same institutions, over five years? When we asked the students why they thought a five-year-long study was important, their responses in the 2017 written reflection included comments such as “to see patterns that hamper a student’s progress and ways to prevent these” or as UCTSTUD2 put it “to assess what kind of student makes it and what kind doesn’t” and “to draw a correlation between background and success at university”. NWUSTUD1 said “to monitor the change in mind-set I have gone through from the signup till now.” All of these students are correct about the reasons we followed them but APIs specifically focused on tracking any changing definitions of success, highlighting any obstacles with regard to gaining access to the new study year, and questions regarding race, class, language, gender and student services. Our combination of methodologies really provided nuanced revelations for us but equally important was what they were able to do for self-reflection and introspection for our co-researchers, the students. Overall tracking the same group for 5 years really give us insight into Prof Maree’s important question: who are our students?

Researchers and participants formed real bonds and it was not unusual for participants to text message their allocated researcher at different points in the year to either share an achievement or problem – there was a symbiotic sense of investment and care from the partnership. The trust established in these relationships meant that students were able to talk candidly about the issues affecting them at university. Ultimately through conducting the APIs we found that many students go into their degrees with no prior knowledge, little information about the programme and minimal introspection about what it is they want and

why they want it. Additionally APIs revealed student concerns around potential jobs and employability, lessons and changes brought on by stop gaps, maturation and growth having largely to do with a heightened level of focus, greater discipline and confidence over the years.

**(WRITTEN REFLECTION)** The final reflection in the form of a written questionnaire proved to be impactful. Students were able to, in their own time, sit and think through the last five years and articulate what it has meant to be at university, involved in this study, how they have changed and what they would do differently if they could. Participants were able to reflect on themselves and what was helping them succeed or preventing them from reaching their full potential at university. They ultimately revealed that they are lacking mentors, role models and information. When asked to reflect on if they found their involvement in this study helpful (or not), only two student said that they did not find the study helpful at all – they did not state the reasons. Majority of the students responded that they found the obligatory self-introspection helpful, and a great way to reflect on their journeys. One student expressed that the methodology has been transformative stating: “I got to learn a few things about myself as I had to evaluate my yearly performance and look for areas of improvement or areas that needed change.”

Students also mentioned that just the ability to share their daily stresses through APIs was empowering and a huge relief – they mentioned that speaking to their researchers regularly was not only therapeutic but also helpful in problem solving: “The study helped me in a psychological way... I felt relief because I answered questions that touched straight at my problem”. A couple of students also mentioned that the study helped them remain accountable, not only to themselves but knowing that each year, a researcher would interview them, made them feel responsible to the researcher as well. A few said that knowing that they are a part of “this thing” for five years encouraged them to work hard.

**(DOCUMENTARY)** With filming the documentary we found a candid, animated, emotional, living and breathing account of what it means for students to go through the South African university system of accessing, starting, staying, passing, stopping, swopping, returning, finishing, graduating and working.