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Ready or Not!

**Race, Education and Emancipation: A five-year longitudinal,
qualitative study of agency and obstacles to success amongst higher
education students in a sample of South African universities**

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REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

South African students and their struggles

It is common knowledge that students, staff and government are all embroiled in a struggle to transform South Africa's institutions of higher education, and that these struggles are simultaneously historical and contemporary, practical and ideological. Set in universities, the focus of this study asked 'Who succeeds, who does not?' and is therefore intentionally student-centred. It aimed to follow a cohort of students from eight universities in their journey through university, and asked what obstacles these students encountered, and what they, along with their institutions are doing about these problems. As we entered the third year of the study in 2015, we encountered the beginning of the national student protests that brought national attention to many of the stories we had already heard from the students involved in this study. In the subsequent years of the study we heard from students who were actively involved in these transformation struggles as well as those who sat on the side-lines.

In Chapter 1 we provide the grounding of this study through which we can understand the stories of students and their pleas in the form of recommendations for change, support or improvement. We do so largely through a synthesised collection of literature around higher education both in South Africa and internationally. The literature is organised by drawing on the annual reports of the Centre for Higher Education (CHE) and the Soudien Report commissioned by the Department of Higher Education (DHE) in 2008. Other key areas of literature include previous studies conducted around student retention, enrolment and preparedness for South African universities; global trends on neo-liberal thinking and policies that have come to dominate higher education; as well as recent literature exploring the need for 'decolonising' the university.

Given South Africa's history, the study was framed within theory that recognised students' ability to succeed at university remains mediated by the legacies of colonialism and apartheid. This required the use of intersecting theoretical concepts through which to design and analyse our study. These include Critical Race Theory; sociological notions of capitals, and understandings of structural and symbolic violence; and theories of agency, emancipation and subversion. Critical Race Theory was utilised to emphasise how the intersection of multiple identities work to shape student experiences. Multiple forms of capital enabled us to differentiate various forms of capital necessary for success. This links structures of economic, cultural, and social capital to inequalities, highlighting the individual in larger systemic influences. Finally, theories of agency and emancipation allowed us to focus on the role that individual and collective agency from students themselves could contribute alongside the larger structural changes needed to be made by university leadership and state policies and governance.

Informed by these conceptual markers, the study's design and questions were organised according to three themes: structural and social factors, intersecting identities, and agency and opportunities. The study was designed to garner stories through student participation in annual in-depth interviews conducted by researchers along with self-documenting their experiences through weblogs (on Facebook) and by conducting interviews with members of their social networks. Beginning in 2013 (and 2014 for UL), the REE study included a total of 80 participants across eight universities over five years. The sample comprised of 74 Black students (66 African students, including 3 students from elsewhere on the African continent, 6 Coloured students and 2 Indian students) and 6 White students. While we were most eager to hear accounts from Black students, we wanted to include a demographically representative sample of White students in order to highlight some key differences in the student experience due to racial privilege. However, this study remains an account of what it is like to study while Black in a South African university. Over the five years that we followed students, we lost contact with 11 students (they withdrew from the study or were untraceable despite our best efforts). The final number of students who

we tracked across all five years was thus 69. A tracking table is offered at the end of this chapter as a snapshot of how participants progressed, dropped out, passed, graduated and went on to study further or work.

Twenty seven students graduated, 35 students are yet to complete their course, and 7 left to take up employment or seek employment before completing their degrees. We disaggregated these by institution, race, sex, area of study, school background and parents' higher education – and while this is a qualitative study a few trends worth noting (and investigating statistically) are apparent. There were no graduates from UL and UKZN and only 2 from CPUT. Twenty five students whose parents had attended university graduated, versus only 5 whose parents did not have higher education. More students from suburban and private schools graduated than those from township schools (60% v. 40%). More humanities students left to seek employment than science, commerce or law students. No White students left varsity to seek employment or to work before completing their degree. A third of Black students graduated and just over half were still studying as the project came to a close.

Students and universities in this study

Chapter 2 introduces the students that participated in the study. It provides a qualitative overview of their backgrounds, specifically family and community backgrounds, highlighting the prevalence of single-headed and extended kinship family structures that students come from. It also highlights the range of family backgrounds, and how most families are supportive both emotionally and materially of their family members' studies, with a few exceptions. This indicates that many students come from families who value education highly, despite the differing levels of education of the parents. It also introduces the community contexts that students are drawn from, where alcoholism, drug abuse, and teenage pregnancies are common features of life for many. Of particular interest are the students who speak about a lack of resources and information coming from rural backgrounds. Students emphasise different definitions of success, though these revolve around making and striving toward achieving goals. This changed from an emphasis on the achievement of material goods (such as expensive cars, jobs, houses etc.) in first year, towards completing their education as an achievement in itself in the following years. Related to success were the visions students had for their lives. The majority of these visions revolved around attaining particular education levels, and career goals. A significant amount of students mentioned that their work should contribute to helping others in some way, and a few specifically mentioned their visions for family. With this information in mind, student pathways are examined noting that the completion rate fell each year. Lastly, some of the basic information and observations about the institutions is presented.

Racism on campus

In Chapter 3 we ask how race and class affect students' lives and university experiences, and reported how some students were oblivious to race, while many reported incidents and practices that reveal deep racial cleavages on campus. These include differential treatment of students by lecturers based on race, racial stereotypes and how access to resources, student housing allocation, financial security and the ability to pay fees were all racialised. Furthermore, Black students struggled with feelings of inferiority, felt unwelcome in universities - many of whom retained colonial symbols and names as markers. Many had never been taught by Black professors although junior staff members were frequently Black. Students were able to clearly discern the skewed racial makeup of staff, the privileging of English (and sometimes Afrikaans) on campus and the absence (or marginalisation) of African scholars and knowledge.

Gender dynamics on campus

Chapter 4 focuses on experiences and awareness of gender and foregrounded the ways in which gender inequality (patriarchy, homophobia, misogyny and sexism) was still experienced on campus and how deep and unrecognised patriarchy remains. It also foregrounded female students' struggles with physical and sexual safety including sexual exploitation by staff and student leaders. While some advances towards equality for LGBTIQI students have been made, they remain an almost invisible minority and still contend with marginalisation and homophobia.

Language and power

Chapter 5 delves into the complicated role that language plays in a student's sense of self and their ultimate success at university. Findings show that language is an obstacle to academic success with students needing to carry dictionaries to class, and taking longer to complete exams and assignments. In addition, despite university policies aiming for at least one African language to be used as a medium of teaching, this has not occurred. As a result, Black students are especially not only disadvantaged but feel ashamed and marginalised through their inability to use English as the dominant language of education. Language is used as a tool of discrimination, and frequently heightens racial tension, especially when staff members engage with Black students who do not speak the dominant language. In historically Black universities students reported that using only one predominant African language excludes those from outside of South Africa and from other regions of South Africa. Black students also reported a hierarchy of English – from those who spoke English as a mother tongue, to those Black youth who had attended Model C and private schools and who had 'good accents' or 'good English'. Translanguaging and multilingualism is suggested as a way to address the issue of language in HEIs.

Obstacles to access and participation

Chapter 6 offers an overall analysis of what obstacles students experienced in both getting into and remaining in university. The two most debilitating challenges that prevented students in this study from accessing and remaining in university were academic and financial issues. Academic obstacles included choosing academic programmes and poor quality lecturing. Compounding these obstacles were ineffective channels through which to lodge complaints about poor teaching, lecturer inaccessibility, fears of intellectual inferiority, an inability to cope with the university workload and being unfamiliar with technology. When students complained about teaching standards, they were told that university success predominantly requires independent study. Financial obstacles were spoken of as the largest obstacle to success at university and were seen to be out of students' realm of influence. The lack of control students described in relation to their finances was, due to an inefficient financial aid system (NSFAS), irregular part-time work, rapidly changing family economic circumstances and hidden costs, like the exorbitant price of textbooks. Students feared financial exclusion and felt powerless against it happening. Interviews were littered with accounts of the trials and tribulations of accessing NSFAS funds. Many students' first university experiences involved long trips between township homes, police stations (to get documents certified) and university administration offices. Other obstacles to completing university degrees included accommodation and travel, which were linked to financial troubles and academic success, as housing and transport are considerable expenses and they impact on study opportunities. Large numbers of students reported suffering from mental health problems. Maintaining a balanced 'social life', avoiding 'crime' and dealing with or participating in 'student protests'- without derailing one's studies- also featured in interviews.

Student strategies for succeeding

In Chapter 7 students speak of the range of factors that contributed to their success. These included individual agency, supportive social networks, uptake of educational resources and commitment to faith-based spaces and relationships. Individual agency included self-discipline, being committed to goals and avoiding distractions of student life, especially when it came to

preparing for tests and submitting assignments, as well as finding alternative sources of funding. With regard to supportive social networks, students included family members, peers groups (mostly at university – and that included formal and informal support and academic groups), and university staff. Educational resources included tutorials and lectures, seeking individual support from lecturers, tutors and mentors (both formally assigned and socially identified) and sometimes using the psychosocial services that are available at their respective universities. Religiosity - both attending church and faith-based events, as well as faith in God, was reported to be critical to academic success by a majority of students. While the church emerged as an important space in which the students could acquire spiritual and social support, faith in God also promoted self-esteem and agency towards achieving success in their academic careers.

Research strategies for intervention

Chapter 8 reflects on our research strategy and evaluates how the activities of our study could become possible interventions that universities might employ to assist students in their trajectory through university as a project of emancipation. These include, what we called social network interviews, whereby students were asked to interview 5-7 people that fell into various categories over three years (friends, neighbours, role models, university staff, successful peers, successful elders). The idea behind this task was for students to create a network from whom they could both learn and find support during their studies. Participating in a Facebook group was another way in which students could share experiences (of both struggle and success) and allowed students from different campuses to interact with each other. The result was a deeper understanding of which struggles were individual and which were systemic. Each year students participated in a face to face reflective interview and at the end of the study they completed a written reflection. These interviews highlighted incremental learning over the years of participation (about self-management and dealing with the university structures). Most students reported how it was helpful to know that you had to account to the researcher each year and this contributed to their performance, and when they failed it contributed to their sense of being supported. Finally, our fifth method comprised of producing a 40 minute documentary of student experiences as a way to provide discussion among participants and ensure that learnings from this study can be easily disseminated through showings and discussions on all of South Africa's universities campuses.

Recommendations for all stakeholders and proposals for further research and intervention

In South African universities inequalities are rife and new ideas are needed for how emancipation from inequality can be achieved. Chapter 9 therefore summarises the overall findings of this study and organises them using Goran Therborn's ideas about how inequality works and may be disrupted. It proposes that a series of *PhDs* be funded to ensure that the findings of this study are fully addressed; that *recommendations* be discussed with all stakeholders, since there is clearly discrete action for university management, administrative staff, faculty, students, student leaders, business and high school students planning on entering university; and that a university equality ombudsman office be created. It also proposes two new studies that are focused on the efficacy of mentoring as a key intervention, and on decolonial dialogues between students, high school educators, parents, and varsity-bound school learners.

CHAPTER 1 SOUTH AFRICAN STUDENTS AND THEIR STRUGGLES: AN IN-DEPTH VIEW

Summary

It is common knowledge that students, staff and government are all embroiled in a struggle to transform South Africa's institutions of higher education, and that these struggles are both historical and contemporary. The focus of this study, as it asked 'Who succeeds, who does not?' in university,

was intentionally student-centred. It aimed to follow a cohort of students from eight universities in their journey through university, and asked what obstacles these students encountered, and what were they and their institutions doing about these problems. As we entered the third year of the study in 2015, we encountered the beginning of the national student protests that brought national attention to many of the stories we had already heard from the students involved in this study. In the subsequent years of the study we heard from students who were actively involved in these transformation struggles as well as those who sat on the side-lines.

In this chapter we provide the grounding through which we can understand the stories of students and their pleas in the form of recommendations for change, support or improvement. This chapter synthesises a collection of literature around higher education both in South African and internationally, discusses the study conceptual framework as well as the research questions and study design. To guide the reading of this report, this chapter concludes with a note on how to navigate the annexures of the report.

The literature is organised by drawing on the annual reports of the Centre for Higher Education and the Soudien Report commissioned by the Department of Higher Education in 2008. Other key areas of literature include previous studies conducted around student retention and enrolment and preparedness for South African universities. Thinking through trends on a global scale required drawing on literature around neo-liberal thinking and policies that have come to dominate higher education. More recent literature was also reviewed as different stakeholders have begun to explore the need for 'decolonising' the university and what this process would entail within the context of transformation policies being called into question.

Given South Africa's history, the study was framed within theory that recognised students' ability to succeed at university remains mediated by the legacies of colonialism and Apartheid. This required the use of intersecting theoretical concepts through which to design and analyse our study. These include Critical Race Theory; sociological notions of capitals, and understandings of structural and symbolic violence; and theories of agency, emancipation and subversion. Critical Race Theory was utilised to emphasise how the intersection of multiple identities work to shape student experiences. Multiple forms of capitals enabled us to differentiate various forms of capitals necessary for success, linking structures of economic, cultural, and social capital to inequalities, and highlighting the individual in larger systemic influences. Finally, theories of agency and emancipation allowed us to focus on the role that individual and collective agency from students themselves could contribute alongside the larger structural changes needed to be made by university leadership and state policies and governance.

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Beginning in 2013, the REE study included a total of 80 participants across eight universities over five years. The sample consisted of 74 Black students (66 African students, including 3 students from elsewhere on the African continent, 6 Coloured students and 2 Indian students) and 6 White students. While we were most eager to hear accounts from Black students, we wanted to include a demographically representative sample of White students in order to highlight some key differences in the student experience due to racial privilege. However, this study remains an account of what it is like to study while Black in a South African university. Over the five years that we followed students, we lost contact with 11 students (they withdrew from the study or were untraceable despite our best efforts). The final number of students who we tracked across all five years was thus 69. A tracking table is offered at the end of this chapter as a snapshot of how participants progressed, dropped out, passed, graduated and went on to study further or work. Twenty seven students

graduated, 35 students are yet to complete their course, and 7 left to take up a job or look for work before completing their degrees.

Introduction

Higher education in South Africa contends with multiple problems. Key amongst these is the high failure rates among students (estimated at 55%), low completion rates on time (only 1 in 4 students complete within the stipulated time) as well as the lack of equity in enrolment and completion between Black and White students (Council on Higher Education (CHE), 2016). So while the number of Black students enrolled at universities has increased since 1995, nearly four times as many White youth (aged between 18 and 24) are enrolled at university than Black students (15% versus 54% White in 2014). Furthermore White completion rates are on average 50% higher than rates for Black students (CHE, 2013).

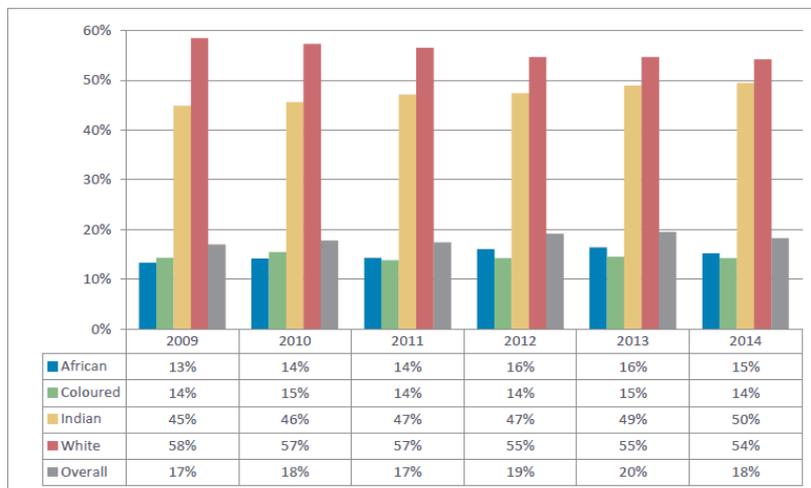


Figure 1.1. Student participation rates by race in higher education (CHE, 2016)

These problems are both historical and contemporary. Universities, historically set up for a minority elite (mostly White) as part of the Apartheid system, have not adequately dealt with the multiple needs and challenges that confront students who were previously shut out, and are ill-prepared to enter universities due to very different histories and prior education experiences and that influence their ability settle into university. In addition, universities have clearly been inadequately prepared to change their ways of doing and being in keeping with new realities of a student population who not only want their culture and language accommodated, they expect the universities to become institutions in which they can truly belong.

In an attempt to find solutions to some of South Africa's Higher Education institutional challenges, the Human Sciences Research Council embarked on a mission to track student experiences at eight universities across the country, over 5 years, in order to investigate the factors that contribute to their success or failure and the individual and structural tools needed to navigate university.

We asked, mainly Black, young people exactly what encourages self-determination and facilitates success in university. Is it entirely up to the students or does their experience of the institution also make a difference?

Following our first year of collecting data in 2013, we knew this study was going to reveal complicated answers and rich data. As a team of eight researchers, each responsible for one of the universities selected for this study we were soon hearing stories of:

1. “Accidental registration” – choosing shorter queues when it came to registering because of problems with getting home after registration, choosing a course not suited for you because you did not know better, or registering by mistake online for an incorrect course, or having a course assigned to you by a harassed administrator, or the ongoing effects of late registration and missing orientation.
2. The support and pressure of family members, who tried to influence choices, did not have any experience of university life and so left young people to flounder, but some of whom also were extremely supportive financially and emotionally.
3. The role of faith and church communities, in inspiring and motivating students to study, and who also helped out materially on occasions.
4. “Drowning in freedom” and learning responsibility for the first time, including managing time, money, friends, “heart break” and balancing work and play.
5. Dealing with academic failure and learning how to continue despite it.
6. How extracurricular activities - including political involvement - both contributes to success and distracts from it.
7. Systems of patronage that exist between students and SRC members, administrators and lecturers (including transactional sex).
8. Accounts about feeling excluded by language, racism and sexism; being made to feel inferior and unwelcome because of the institutional culture, not “knowing the system”, and being afraid to ask for help.
9. The many stories of those who had previously registered, dropped out, taken a “stop gap” before returning to the system, and that official statistics of throughput seldom capture.
10. Mental health problems such as feeling like a failure, struggling with sexual identity, and not knowing where to go for help with depression, suicidal ideation, bereavement, addiction, fear about HIV infection, anxiety and stress.
11. Financial insecurity, emanating from not knowing where funds were going to come from to pay for accommodation and food; eating “Morvite” and “baked beans” for weeks on end, “squatting”, waiting for NSFAS payments and receiving little support from university administrators in their plight.
12. Physical insecurity, especially amongst female students - about working late on campus and then having to take public transport home in the dark, hitching for rides to and from university, and not having a safe place to sleep.
13. Being completely unprepared for the volume of work, the rapidity with which it was expected and having very little experience with technology, and limited access to computers – which were now a required tool of trade.
14. The importance of the way your school (and in particular extraordinary teachers) prepared you for university (or failed to), and students’ ongoing engagement with their previous schools as a way to “give back”.
15. A strong sense that this all depends on them, and frequent accounts of self-blame, and the pressure that many carry as first generation university students, on whom whole families and sometimes small communities, depend.
16. Some stories of those who sailed straight through university and are now completing honours degrees, internships or who are thriving in new jobs.

Over the following four years (from July 2013 to March 2017) we interrogated these stories, heard new ones, delved deeper into students’ experiences and questioned the silences. Little did we anticipate that students themselves were going to answer these questions through protests and demands that had already begun on a small scale in a number of universities (such as Fort Hare and the University of Limpopo) but which were to capture the public imagination in 2015 as the protest both took a dramatic turn when a UCT student threw human faeces on a colonial-era statute and the media took an interest in the subsequent calls for free, quality, decolonised university education since these were now coming from two dominant universities, that of the University of Cape Town and the University of the Witwatersrand.

Subsequently, apart from our own planned study, we also documented students' involvement in and reactions to these protests. Our report therefore comprises multiple stories of accessing, starting, staying in, passing through, dropping out, stopping out, swopping, returning, finishing, graduating, and working.

This report sets out our research journey, key findings in multiple areas as well as recommendations for change, support or improvement. In this chapter we begin with an overview of the literature we have consulted during the course of the study, and define the conceptual framework that has informed both our data collection and analysis. In Chapter 2 we describe in some detail the students we followed and situate them in their family, school and community context while also describing the kinds of institutions they attend and how each of these factors shape their university experience. In Chapter 3 we ask how race and class affect students' lives and university experiences, while Chapter 4 asks how gender and sexuality impacts their lives. Chapter 5 delves into the complicated role that language plays in a student's sense of self and their ultimate success at university. Chapter 6 offers an overall analysis of what obstacles they experience in both getting into and remaining in university, while Chapter 7 describes both individual and collective strategies for success. Chapter 8 reflects on our research strategy and evaluates how the activities of our study could become possible interventions that universities might employ to assist students in their trajectory through university as a project of emancipation. Finally, Chapter 9 summarise the conclusions and recommendations of our study and offers multiple short and long term actions for all stakeholders, from schools and students, through to university staff, and government policymakers, using Goran Therborn's (2013) markers for reducing inequality.

Ultimately this report describes ways in which students can play a role in their own emancipation – by adopting strategies to navigate the environment and changing their own behaviour. It also point out the many structural changes that institutions (both universities and government) need to implement in the higher education environment. It does this from the perspective of a longitudinal qualitative cohort study based on the lived experiences of 69 students from eight of South African's universities.

Literature Review

At the end of 2016, Higher Education (HE) Minister Blade Nzimande announced that students from families earning under R600 000 per annum should not be subjected to a fee increase for 2017 but that a maximum 8% increase is to be enforced at the discretion of individual universities for students whose families do not fall in that category. Though there have been continuous meetings, reports drafted and debates held over the (im)possibility of free higher education in South Africa, there remains anxiety and contestation about who has the right to access university and who should pay for it.

The 2016 CHE Report explains that the current HE financial crisis is as a result of years of underfunding in the sector, further exacerbated by the financial shortfall created by the 2016 0% increase. The report also makes it clear that the number of students who require funding is rising every year, and that the number of beds available to students does not correspond with the number of students being admitted each year (CHE, 2016, p. 7).

In summary, the 2016 CHE Report (p. 14) to the commission on higher education makes the following claims:

1. The 0% fee increase of 2016 has exerted tremendous financial pressure on universities.

2. If there is again a no fee increase for 2017, then a combined R2 billion will have been lost over the 2016 to 2017 period.
3. The financial blow of a further no fee increase will directly impact other areas of the South African landscape e.g. skills or infrastructure development, or alleviating poverty more broadly.
4. Five universities were already in deficit in 2015, and in 2016 a further 11 universities failed to meet their expenses. It is predicted that in 2017, another 10 will decline further.

Amidst demands on government to find money to enable free, or at the very least heavily subsidised, higher education, the CHE 2016 report maintains that to “simply focus on fee-free higher education negates the possibility of examining what can be done at basic education level (where the work needs to start), Post School Education and Training (PSET), Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) - these all require equal attention” (CHE, 2016, p. 3). The point here is that it does no good to implement change at the HE level without considering the foundational education young South Africans receive, if we are to truly equalise access.

Since the inception of this study in 2013, calls to question university spaces along with fiscal challenges in Higher Education Institution (HEIs) have begun mounting. The national student activism initiated in 2015 (#RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall and other similar movements) was continued in 2016 with the focus evolving to include urgent discourse around sexual violence on university campuses (and South Africa broadly) as well as the conditions and payment of workers on campuses. In addition the Higher Education narrative shifted to include debates around the dangers of neoliberalism and the marketisation and financialisation of universities in South Africa (and in the world broadly). Accordingly what follows is a synthesised literature review that reflects and resonates with the challenges of higher education in South Africa placed in the spotlight, both by participants in the study and the ongoing national protests that are calling for adequate NSFAS (National Student Financial Aid Scheme) funding, better and sufficient university residence/accommodation, an end to outsourcing and exploitative work environments and even, free higher education.

The university climate: the sum of inequities and discrimination

In 2013 the Council on Higher Education (CHE) report presented the stark realities of high student dropout rates. This was in the broader context, where despite an increase in enrolment for students across race since 2005, the completion rates continue to be lower for Black and Coloured students, while “participation rates for White and Indian students are comparable with developed country figures” (CHE, 2013, p. 41). The report asserted that socio-economic challenges for Black and Coloured students are directly linked to “the obstacles to entering and succeeding in higher education [that] affect the great majority of the population” (CHE, 2013, p. 54). It went on to assert that “increasing the access and completion rates of African and Coloured students *depends much on addressing the social and economic factors – the persistent and far-reaching effects of poverty and associated inequalities*” (CHE, 2013, p. 54 *emphasis added*). These assertions were made in response to the following dynamics in HEI:

1. Only about one in four students in contact institutions (excluding UNISA) graduate in regulation time (for example, three years for a three-year degree).
2. Only 35% of the total intake, and 48% of contact students, graduate within five years.
3. When allowance is made for students taking longer than five years to graduate or returning to the system after dropping out, it is estimated that some 55% of the intake will never graduate.
4. Access, success and completion rates continue to be racially skewed, with White completion rates being on average 50% higher than Black African rates.
5. The net result of the disparities in access and success is that under 5% of Black African and Coloured youth are succeeding in any form of higher education (CHE, 2013, p. 15).

With the objective to increase graduate outcomes and decrease dropout rates, the CHE proposal suggested a replacement of the existent, colonial-inherited curriculum structure with a new structure which serves to provide “an enabling framework for undergraduate teaching and learning that is based on South Africa’s realities” (CHE, 2013, p. 25).

The three fundamental elements of curriculum structure reflective of this would be:

1. *Duration*: In order to meet the needs of the majority of the student intake, the formal time of all existing three-year degrees and diplomas, and existing four-year professional Bachelor’s degrees that terminate at HEQSF level 8, should be increased by one year.
2. *Flexibility*: To provide effectively and fairly for diversity in preparedness, the new curriculum structure should be flexible to enable students who can complete a programme in less than the formal time to be permitted to do so.
3. *Standards*: To ensure the maintenance or improvement of the quality and standards of qualifications while meeting the twin imperatives of improving graduate output and equity of outcomes, curricula in the new structure should retain or improve upon existing exit standards through utilising the additional curriculum space afforded to ensure realistic starting points and progression paths and to introduce valuable forms of curriculum enhancement (CHE, 2013, p. 108).

Looking beyond the curriculum, Letseka, Cosser, Breier and Visser (2010), in their study of student retention and graduate destination across seven HEIs in South Africa, similarly note that the high drop-out rates for Black and Coloured students are directly tied to a lack of financial resources. The correlation between access and completion of university and the socio-economic circumstances of Black and Coloured students echoed throughout this study. In briefly scanning four years of coded outputs for the REE study, the code ‘Obstacles_Finance’ appeared as one of the most highly populated codes. Other codes frequently employed in analysing data concerned university services, race, student’s visions for themselves and students reflecting on their high school experience. Although these other themes were coded frequently, ‘Obstacles_Finance’ linked directly to other codes that referenced socio-economic challenges.

The exclusion of students within the realms of financial access requires further thinking about admissions and retention of students. The inequities reflected in HEI are systemic and reflective of unequal access to quality primary and secondary education. Students from resource poor backgrounds and schools are often unprepared for the higher education system (Cross & Carpentier, 2009). Chetty (2014, p. 92) notes that “the extent to which students are prepared for university admission and benchmarked testing, the nature of school-based counselling and access to adequate medical support are [all] integral to classed experiences.”

She further argues that the inherent classed differences in access to resources are exacerbated by the inequality between and within HEIs, with students who are already disadvantaged by the system being ‘relegated’ to resource poor higher education institutions. The lack of adequate school resources in historically disadvantaged schools has a negative knock on impact in terms of higher education.

Bhana et al (2011) note that higher education enrolment rates in South Africa are low in comparison with other middle-income countries. A major barrier to higher education access, they argue, is the low quality of school education characteristic of much of the system, and especially affecting historically disadvantaged youth. Policy attempts to address this inequitable access began with the Higher Education Act of 1997, which places higher education under the exclusive

responsibility of national government, unlike school education which is partially decentralised to provinces.

The 2008 Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions (Department of Higher Education (DHET), 2008), observes that there are

real costs of maintaining a discriminatory system that continued to service and be of benefit only to the rich and the previously advantaged, and how severely the country would be affected by the continued exclusion of the majority of its people from these benefits (p. 115).

The report identifies multiple forms of discrimination in the higher education system which in turn gives rise to several obstacles for students within the system. These forms of discrimination included (1) failure by university structures to recognise the complex realities of Black and Coloured students; (2) Institutional cultures that favour White experiences and marginalise Black ones; and (3) a feeling of isolation of Black academic staff in historically White institutions that fail to fulfil transformation agendas (DHET, 2008, p. 116-117). In addition to these forms of discrimination, further examples are provided in the report e.g. the pervasiveness of sexual harassment, exclusionary language policies and troubling residence life (DHET, 2008, p. 117). It is identified that the clear disjuncture between institutional policies and the real-life experiences of staff and students creates the space in which discrimination can persist. The reasoning for this disjuncture is said to be two-fold. The first being inadequate or partial awareness on policy along with little understanding of roles and responsibilities regarding implementation of policies and a dearth of institutional will. The second is the stark gap between policies and institutional culture, translating into a lack of consensus and a common position of what these policies entail (DHET, 2008, p. 14). Published in 2008, it is clear that many red flags were raised that would later resound with the grievances of Black students and staff during the 2015 and 2016 protest actions.

South Africa in the global context

The current global HE landscape is characterised by neo-liberal values of hyper-competition, individualism and financialisation. Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Wendy Brown asserts that universities are expected to contribute to business, innovation and industry, framed by the logics of market (Brown, 2016). The university (whether private or public) has become a business and as such becomes subjected to market metrics i.e. ratings and rankings (Mbembe, 2015, p. 4). The notion of the 'world-class university' – only serves to perpetuate a stratifying discourse of 'prestige' and 'excellence' (Burke, 2016). This is maintained by our own Council on Higher Education which states: "The South African higher education system... is recognised as the best on the continent, with several institutions comparable to the best globally in a variety of international rankings" (CHE, 2016, p. 4). At the Higher Education Symposium at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in August 2016, Professor Penny Jane Burke of the University of Newcastle in her keynote address said: "Meritocratic principles, individual choice-makers even pedagogies are reduced to styles, 'delivery' and methods... even pedagogies have gone to market". This notion of 'excellence', though seemingly aspirational and positive is not innocuous. In other words, it is one thing to recruit and select the 'best' and 'brightest' in the wider context of prestige culture but, it is the assumption about who is perceived as the best and the brightest that is worrying. 'Inclusion' often acts as a form of symbolic violence deeply raced, classed and gendered because it values some dispositions while excluding others. Those who do not perform personhood in ways that might conform to expectations of 'excellence' are vulnerable to practices of shaming, internalised disappointment with self and feelings of failure or inadequacy (Reed et al, 2007, p. 19).

While clearer cognisance needs to be provided for Black and Coloured students in their admission and retention, the framing of this can easily reinforce negative and racialised notions of intelligence and diligence. It is for this reason that the term 'disadvantage' is a contested term, which some argue, comprises a deficit model of thinking that impacts on Black students' perspectives of themselves, as well as how successful they will be within the HE system (see Smit, 2012, and Kessi, 2013, discussed below). Recent international and local scholarly work around the deficit model, as it applies to Black students who enter HEIs from low-income backgrounds, has been critical of this model as it engages the notion of student disadvantage in the current post-Apartheid climate. Smit (2012) frames this kind of thinking as follows:

The dominant thinking in higher education attempts to understand student difficulty by framing students and their families of origin as *lacking* some of the academic and cultural resources necessary to succeed in what is *presumed to be a fair and open society* (p. 369).

This appears to be the case for historically White universities, in particular, as Kessi (2013) argues. The language of deficit thinking – 'disadvantage', 'underprepared', and 'not entering on merit' – is underpinned by beliefs that Black students are inherently cognitively and culturally inadequate. Kessi notes that these stereotypes are built on beliefs that "Black students lack the necessary competencies to embark on university education as 'they struggle to keep up' (Newling, 2012) with the rest of the (White) student population and that they are overcrowding and undermining the higher education system" (Kessi, 2013, p. 54).

This idea of 'excellence' creates problematic deficit logic in students who do not realise that they are being 'excluded'. The CHE report almost propagates this logic by cautioning the potential decline in the quality of education should we proceed to move with no fee increases. The fear is seemingly that the standards of universities (i.e. which universities are considered 'world class' and 'excellent') will drop and that translates into 'letting everyone in' with no discretion; there will be a decline in "the value and stature of the qualifications that the graduates aspire to" (CHE, 2016, p. 4). This is an important point to make because as Professor Achille Mbembe of the University of Witwatersrand articulates:

Decolonising the university starts with the de-privatisation and rehabilitation of the public space. It starts with a redefinition of what is public i.e. what pertains to the realm of the common and as such, does not belong to anyone in particular because it must be equally shared between equals. The decolonisation of buildings and of public spaces is inseparable from the democratisation of access. When we say access we are naturally thinking about a wide opening of the doors of higher learning to all South Africans (Mbembe, 2015).

Mbembe further asserts that, in South Africa, the concern is that our society and our government are not willing to, or are struggling to, tolerate the costs of a fundamental transformation of our HEIs (2015). He analyses the money allocated to higher education in South Africa (0.6% of the country's GDP, in 2016 increased to 0.75%), asserting that this is minimal in comparison to what countries similar to ours in terms of wealth actually do. Mbembe makes explicit the need for university recapitalisation and emphasises the responsibility that both the market and state have in ensuring that the future of education in South Africa is not jeopardised (2015).

Understanding the dangers of neoliberalism

Neoliberal policies are usually characterised by limited state-funding, meritocracy and 'hard work' as pathways to success and a belief that being able to provide for oneself is fundamentally better (Gillbon, 2014, p. 27). "Neoliberalism typically works through colour-blind language that dismisses the saliency of race-specific analyses" (Gillborn, 2014, p. 27). A neoliberal stance is highly problematic in a South African context, given the country's history. Sara Ahmed in her

article *Against Students* (2015) goes into a critique of neoliberalism and higher education i.e. how universities are managed as businesses; the commodification of education and knowledge and how students are treated as 'clients'. Ahmed argues that what is being done in the name of 'equality' is in fact, as the title of her article suggests, "Against Students". Ahmed cites a discussion with a fellow professor where he talks about being frightened of today's student because of what he called "identity politics" (Ahmed, 2015). Ahmed relates this to protesting students when she states: "what protesters are protesting *about* can be ignored when protesters are assumed to be suffering from too much will; they are assumed to be opposing something because they are *being oppositional*" (Ahmed, 2015). Similarly we hear such broad statements being made about the #FeesMustFall student activists, with the demonstrating students being characterised as "oversensitive" and "complaining". This is the kind of neoliberal discourse that assumes that if "you work harder" or "apply yourself" you would not have anything to complain about, which is a problematic stance to adopt in South Africa.

In light of these trying economic conditions and higher education fiscal challenges, Critical Race Theorist David Theo Goldberg (2016) of the University of California asks: what and who the university is for and how it should be run. He rightly recognises the pressure all university players are operating under - students who are stressed about finances and individual faculty members and their departments being forced to cover their own operational costs at administration's behest. "Consultancy work, spin-off start-ups, corporate ventures and the pursuit of outside grants are emerging as the main means of supporting and supplementing academic work, costs, even salaries" (Goldberg, 2016, unnumbered). Goldberg highlights the burden of income placed on current HEIs globally but reminds and warns that universities are not merely service providers. In other words a focus on finance, bringing in money, increasing fees etc. forgoes what universities should be about: "training grounds in a given field, they provide the foundations for thinking, both instrumentally and critically, for how to read and write, and for civic engagement. In addition, for many people, they still offer a gateway to adulthood as well as reasoned citizenship" (Goldberg, 2016).

In her latest work *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (2015), Wendy Brown also confronts the rise of neoliberalism by honing in on the political ramifications of looking at the world as one giant marketplace with possible future implications. In an interview, Brown expounds on her analysis:

Human beings become market actors and nothing but, every field of activity is seen as a market, and every entity (whether public or private, whether person, business, or state) is governed as a firm. Importantly, this is not simply a matter of extending commodification and monetization everywhere—that's the old Marxist depiction of capital's transformation of everyday life. Neoliberalism construes even non-wealth generating spheres—such as learning, dating, or exercising, babies, human organs, endangered species—in market terms, submits them to market metrics, and governs them with market techniques and practices. Above all, it casts people as human capital who must constantly tend to their own present and future value (in Shenk, 2015).

Neoliberalism functions exactly to generate and legitimate extreme inequalities of wealth and life conditions by making discriminating comparisons. Participation is replaced with competition in a world where there are always 'winners' and 'losers', the 'best' and the 'worst', 'us' and 'them'. This actually shapes pedagogy and curriculum, leading to graver implications for what a decolonised curriculum could possibly look like. Brown argues that privatisation and financialisation of universities have been the most dangerous results of neoliberalism. Privatisation changes pedagogy and research because knowledge becomes manipulated by investors.

Decolonisation and transformation

Discussion about the other ways in which students' experience higher education institutions as places of existential violence has not been widely held in the public arena. Students have long maintained that their call for free education is intricately coupled to a call for decolonised education.

Transformation policies are readily available on the websites of universities who participated in this study (see References – University Policies), but these policies will not be successful if they remain constrained by untransformed institutional cultures. “In the South African higher education context, ‘transformation’ could be said to typically refer to attempts to change higher education institutions such that they no longer reflect the values promoted by apartheid and rather reflect the values embodied in South Africa’s 1996 constitution” (Matthews & Tobensky, 2015, p. 3). There are several approaches to disabling those values of old, including rethinking and changing oppressive HE financial schemes, institutional culture that favours White experience, language practices that do not support individuals, partiality in student assessment, lack of promotion of Black academics, problematic residence/living experiences, a curriculum that does little to uphold Black African cultural experience and university sites that do not foster a sense of belonging for all students.

Institutional culture is defined as “the lived experience of the university by all those who inhabit it, including students, academic staff, management, support staff, workers and members of the public who come into contact with the institution” (Matthews & Tabensky, 2015, p. 4). While ‘institutional culture’ is a broad term, in South Africa, it typically refers to the way ‘Whiteness’ is upheld in formerly White universities. Outside of its overall ‘organisational culture’ meaning, in South Africa ‘institutional culture’ assumes a narrow definition that is centred especially on race (Higgins 2007, p. 111). Unfortunately this narrower approach tends to disregard other facets of institutional culture, “such as tensions between academic and managerial cultures” (Matthews & Tabensky, 2015, p. 4).

Most of the universities recognise that ‘institutional culture’ needs to change if we are ever to achieve a “culture of inclusivity” (Vincent, 2015, p. 21-22). These ‘ways of being’, that is, established university traditions and practices as we know them are an inherited legacy of Apartheid practices.

The question to ask is: what exactly are these ‘ways of being’? What are these practices, values and traditions that, however subtle, continue to dominate HEIs? While so much has apparently changed in higher education, two things remain the same: “the dominance of White middle class males as academics; and the institutional cultures of universities that still ‘bear their birthmarks of dominant traditions, symbols and patterns of behavior” (Higham 2012, p. 488).

Similarly, a recognition of ‘White privilege’ -- “the ingrained nature of race and racism, which is so endemic and pervasive in many educational institutions and society in general, becomes normalised, especially within the curriculum”-- means that such entrenched modes of operating can be destabilised (Mclaughlin & Whatman, 2011, 369). Critical Race Theory (CRT) challenges White privilege and refutes the neo-liberal claims that educational institutions make toward “objectivity, meritocracy, color-blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000, 2002, p. 3). In true CRT fashion and ideology, the national student movements have shown a strong commitment to social justice moving beyond talking to practice and action. “CRT scholars – like activists – are seeking the elimination of racism, sexism, classism and all other forms of oppression in society. That is why they work toward the empowerment of people of color and other subordinated groups” (Savas, 2014, p. 510-511). Subordination of people of colour is not just about lived experiences or anecdotes, nor is it a contemporary contextual issue, one must take into account historical legacies and how inequalities have managed to persist over time

(Savas, 2014, p. 510-511). Despite increasing student diversity and official commitments to inclusion and transformation, a range of old and new processes of exclusion continues.

According to Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Siphamandla Zondi (2016), these include 'epistemicide', 'alienation', 'linguicide', 'theft of African history' and 'dismemberment'. Speaking at the Restitution Conference in Cape Town (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2016), Ndlovu-Gatsheni outlined the concepts as the crimes committed in the domain of knowledge as follows:

1. *Dismemberment* of Black people from the family of humanity: This refers to rethinking of the theory of 'the human' we use in the university. Ndlovu-Gatsheni explains that it is a Eurocentric canon because the work we draw on was done by people in a time when those theorising the human did not view Black people as human.
2. *The theft of history*: History has been written from the lens of the oppressor and as a result people hold a false awareness of the impacts of colonisation and Apartheid. This theft of history allows for ignorance and aids the persistence of inequalities. Universities have the ability to perpetuate or disrupt this process.
3. *Epistemicide* through appropriation or erasure and destruction: Recognition must be given to knowledge systems that are not Eurocentric. Universities enable the thinking that African people's do not hold any knowledge system or incorrectly place the development of knowledge solely in a Western framework that does not allow students to claim knowledge as their own.
4. *Linguicide* as the deliberate destruction of other people's language: This refers to the shaming of speaking ones mother tongue or any other language that is not the dominant language imposed. This process delegitimises and relegates a language to be regarded as invalid or unacceptable.
5. *Alienation* from community and a sense of self: Schooling from pre-school to primary school to university requires Black students to undergo a process of alienation from themselves and their communities as a way of assimilation and survival. An example of this is having your name changed to an English name upon entering school.

Speaking on the role of university staff, Ndlovu-Gatsheni poses the question and reflects:

"Are we the right people to champion the transformation of universities or are we actually the problems of the university? We are produced by the very university we are trying to transform. We even don't have the right language: 'indigenisation', 'transformation', and 'diversification'... to change the attitude of the academic who is at the centre of the university" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2016)

Viewing the university as a site of struggle, the gaping flaws of the transformation agenda are summarised as: employment of Black faculty, Africanisation, and curriculum change (Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Zondi 2016, p. 60). The conclusion can therefore be drawn that "Overall, the liberal solution is reformist rather than decolonial" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Zondi, 2016, p. 61). Decolonisation therefore offers a critical response by problematising the transformation agenda as a liberal manifestation where inclusivity and diversity is reduced to racial essentialising devoid of seeing how constructs hold consequences for the experiences of students.

Conceptual framework

The study is conceptually framed within theory that understands South Africa's historical past of colonialism and Apartheid as central to university students' abilities to access opportunities and attain successful labour market outcomes. Three intersecting concepts guided our approach to the research questions: First, Critical Race Theory, through the lens of post-coloniality, highlights the intersection of multiple identities such as race, gender, disability, and class in students' experiences. Second, sociological notions of capitals, and structural and symbolic violence, offer a framework that links economic, cultural, and social capital to inequalities, allowing a reading of students' experiences of impasses within university life. Third, the theory of agency, emancipation and subversion, allows for recognising that while agency is possible, oppressive systems and ongoing inequalities limit agential behaviour. Each component will be discussed in turn.

Critical Race Theory, intersectionality and post-coloniality

Understanding the ways in which identities such as race, gender and class intersect and shape the pedagogic experience, are critical to understanding factors that either retard or facilitate opportunities and obstacles within the Higher Education landscape. Critical Race Theory centres difference and racialisation processes as constructed phenomenon that specify social positioning. According to Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, and Thomas (1995), Critical Race Theory describes and explains iterative ways in which 'race' is socially constructed across micro and macro levels, determining life chances. Contemporary Critical Race Theory is relevant for our study because it analyses the relationship between individuals, justice, and power, and considers:

- A materialist analyses of 'race' and racism, in relation to globalisation as a racialised process, and
- The intersections with other markers of difference such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and religion in various sociological contexts globally (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001).

As Solorzano (1997) explains:

Critical Race Theory is a framework or set of basic perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyse, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of society that maintain the subordination and marginalization of people of color (1997, p. 6).

As an intersecting identity, gender is particularly significant and central to this study, in terms of how young people perceive their gender identities - intersect with other identities in ways that allow and disallow success, and make way for agency and impasses. Subjected to high levels of sexual and other kinds of violence, as well as discriminatory attitudes based on sexist perceptions, the experiences of women are especially relevant in understanding students' subjective experiences and micro-social processes as they relate to impasses and agency. Critical Race Theory is useful in this regard as it takes as its premise the specificities of intersections between race, gender, class and other identity markers in shaping privilege, disempowerment and marginality.

A post-colonial framing of Critical Race Theory foregrounds the intersections between colonialism, race, gender, class and violence. Citing Mamdani and Kibirige, Sylvia Tamale notes that 'the process of decolonisation involves critical thinking, unpacking common sense knowledge and a radical reconceptualisation of dominant ideologies' (2011, p. 17). Similarly, Yvette Abrahams (2003) describes colonialism as "a series of disjunctures. First you are separated from your land. Then from your cattle. Then from your selves (as in slavery). Then from your language, your culture" (2003, p. 14). In our study, we propose that knowledge of South Africa's colonial history is central to understanding students' experiences of Higher Education institutions, particularly how this history continues to hinder access and opportunity. Critical

Race Theory, through the lens of post-colonialism, considers the ways in which power, dominance, and racialised and gendered inequalities are enacted, reproduced, and resisted in the socio-political context.

Zimitri Erasmus (2010) adds another dimension to the usefulness of Critical Race Theory, when considering the South African HE sector. Advocating for a 'conceptual and methodological shift from using race as a lens', and 'recognising the unearned disadvantages and privileges that race continues to stand for' (p. 249), Erasmus suggests a move towards "analysing the changing, often disguised, use of race as a category in the world" (2010, p. 249). This means working with "multiple factors that enable and hinder access, completion of study and success" (ibid.). These racialised factors operate at the nexus of race and class and include the following:

primary school attended; last school attended; parents' occupation; parents' level of education; parents' income; home language(s); African languages spoken; home address; number of generations in your family who attended university; access to books, libraries, computer facilities and study facilities (ibid.).

Redress practice shaped within Critical Race Theory, according to Erasmus, must centralise an ethics of care. This means caring 'for the perspective of the Other; care from the outset and along the way, not after the fact, not after the damage is done' (2010, p. 253). This approach allows for a redressing of disadvantage that meaningfully engages 'with the perspectives of the Other', in ways that unsettle 'perspectives of the Self with a view toward better knowing' (ibid.).

Capitals, and structural and symbolic violence

French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu contributes a number of conceptual understandings regarding the perpetuation of privilege through structural obstacles. He focuses on how education (or its absence) shapes success and life choices and chances at school and in higher education. His explication of the 'Forms of Capital' (Bourdieu, 1997) describe three types of capital—*economic*, *cultural*, and *social* (to which he later added *symbolic* capital). Economic capital, the form with which we are most familiar, are *physical assets that* produce profits and persist. Cultural capital comprises the forms of knowledge and ability to interpret institutional requirements (or 'the rules of the game') that allow people to succeed or achieve a higher status in society. Social capital consist of the obligations and networks of trust based on group membership and relationships that *confer advantage*, often leading to educational access and later, employment success. Bourdieu argues that "every type of capital is reducible in the last analysis to economic capital" (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 54). In his formulation, the unequal distribution of capital – in all its forms – explain why societies are structurally stratified and not merely dependent on "simple games of chance... so that everything is not equally possible" (p. 46) for all members. Bourdieu applied his theory of the forms of capital specifically to the way in which education and society are related, concluding that the existence of cultural and social capital account for the reproduction of class through education.

He argued that while economic capital can be simply bestowed or transferred, social and cultural capital is accumulated over time and "cannot be transmitted instantaneously... by gift or bequest, purchase or exchange" (p. 48), but by "presuppos[ing] a specific labor, i.e. an apparently gratuitous expenditure of time, attention, care, concern" (p. 54). In this way, cultural and social capital are directly linked to the possession of economic capital – which in turn buys useable time – which can then be used to transfer networks and institutional knowledge. This is frequently done through a mother's free time. Families who already have economic capital are therefore more able to purchase this usable time.

Robert Putnam (2000), in speaking of social capital also refers to how mobility, and the 'rootlessness' that follows it, is a chief cause of the decline of social capital. This is especially

evident amongst those for whom economic capital is limited, and mobility, or migration for education or employment becomes essential. In the South African context, young people's constant moving between family members, schools, and rural and urban homes cause connections to falter and with them opportunities for the accumulation of social, cultural and even economic capital.

Finally, Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital, describes sources of power available to those afforded prestige, honour, and attention by virtue of their classificatory position, e.g. A parent, or academic dean, politician or priest. Misuse of symbolic capital occurs when a holder of symbolic capital enlists this capital over an agent who holds less, in order to alter their actions. This coercion is non-explicit but has real effects.

Structural violence is described by Paul Farmer (1996) as the institutionalisation of social processes that differentially cause suffering through organising unequal access to social resources, such as rights, security, capital and bodily and mental integrity, based on markers of difference. In South Africa, Apartheid's systematic exclusion of Black people from employment, health care, education and land has resulted in the impoverishment of the majority of the population (see Swartz, 2009, p. 19 for a summary of Apartheid legislation). While Apartheid legislation has now been repealed, "the progenetic function of legislated inequality ensured that the effects of Apartheid remained and gave birth to new social problems, not least those of continuing inequality, poverty and insecurity" (Swartz, DeLannoy and Hamilton Harding, 2012, p. 29).

While structural violence can be used to explain limited access to both opportunities and success, Bourdieu further contributes the notion of symbolic violence to notions of social advancement in the context of injustice and oppression. Structural violence can lead to symbolic violence, the process of internalising identity-based oppressions associated with poverty and such repressive regimes, and take the existing social order to be just. Bourdieu and Wacquant (2004) explain symbolic violence as 'violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity' (p. 272). Subjects in this model are aware and 'knowing agents' who, 'even when subjected to determinisms', have a role in structuring those outcomes (ibid.). Symbolic violence can help to explain how current legacies of poverty and injustice "is constructed mutually by the persistence of Apartheid's social, political and economic structures, and by the tendency of a large group of subjects to accept the world as it is, engaging with their social environment in ways they are familiar with. In other words, 'their mind is constructed according to cognitive structures that are issued out of the very structures of the world' (ibid).

Beyond the material effects of poverty and unemployment, Bourdieu (1965) speaks of their emotional consequences including the loss of dignity, autonomy, purpose, security, coherent life-structure and feelings of hopelessness. These effects accumulate over generations as children in turn are prevented from earning a living, receiving a quality education or accessing healthcare. From this perspective, poverty does not merely exclude, it entrenches disadvantage across generations.

Swartz, DeLannoy and Hamilton Harding (2012, p. 30) offer the following description of symbolic violence and its effect on economic inequality, with its concomitant effect on education:

Despite the repeal of Apartheid laws, poverty and inequality persist in part because of the internalisation of inequalities which still structure social behaviours. This perception of the internal coherence of differential privilege, produced by the exclusive experience of a world marked in this way, is reproduced throughout South Africa across all lines of race, class and gender. In the context of such structural and symbolic violence, South Africans' assumption of coherence within social, political and economic systems in effect enables the perpetuation of inequality.

Agency, emancipation and subversion

Schatzki (2002) provides a definition of agency that is useful for our project. He notes that '[h]uman agency must... be understood as something contained in practices (i.e. as the performance of doings and sayings that constitute the actions that compose practices)' (2002, p. 240), and that it is agency that allows for change and transformation. Where ideas of race, gender, and class are located within systems of power, there is always resistance and subversion to this power. It is this agency which allows for shifts in structures of power, albeit momentarily, challenging normative social identities that are central to the maintenance of structures reliant on inequalities. Understanding that social and structural factors play a dominant role in delimiting what is possible in terms of students' access to opportunities, our study is particularly sensitive to the agency expressed by young people throughout their years of study at Higher Education Institutions. Despite obstacles, how do students use agency to attain or aspire to success? Furthermore, it is alive to the multiple ways in which systemic factors impinge on students experiences following work by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1992) and his articulation of concentric systems (or an ecological) understanding of how systems interact and impact on young people's development and agency.

Research questions and study design

In line with the conceptual framework, the three main research questions in this study are as follows:

1. What structural and social factors do 'historically disadvantaged' students identify as helping and/or hindering success?
2. What role do intersecting identities (race, class, gender and language) play in students' perceptions and experiences of, and access to success?
3. How do students use agency to create opportunities and attain success?

Underlying these three questions are a number of further questions that aim to elucidate a comprehensive and contextualised understanding of students' subjective experiences and micro-social processes over a period of nearly five years. These are summarised below.

Structural and social factors

1. What do students understand by advantage and disadvantage in terms of resources?
2. How do students – across the three clusters of universities¹ - perceive, experience, and access the resources available to them within their own institutions? How do students perceive the resources available to students from other institutions?
3. How do students perceive, experience, and access the personal, community, and familial resources available to them?
4. Do these perceptions, experiences, and access change over the five years of study?

Intersecting identities

1. What are the ways in which students both identify and dis-identify with categories of race, gender, class and language in identifying themselves?
2. Across the clusters of universities, how do identities impact on obstacles and opportunities in the five-year course of students' lives?

Agency and opportunity

1. What are students' perceptions and experiences of, and access to opportunities?

¹The clusters are Urban (Advantaged Institutions); Rural (Disadvantaged Institutions), and Universities of Technology. These were workshopped in a joint meeting between HSRC and CCRRRI researchers based loosely on existing categorisations.

2. What do students identify as moments of agency that allow for accessing opportunities?
3. What do students identify as moments of impasse that restrict accessing opportunities?

Study design

The students provided data through annual in-depth interviews conducted by researchers along with self-documenting their experiences through weblogs (on Facebook) and by conducting interviews with members of their social networks (see Figure 1.2).

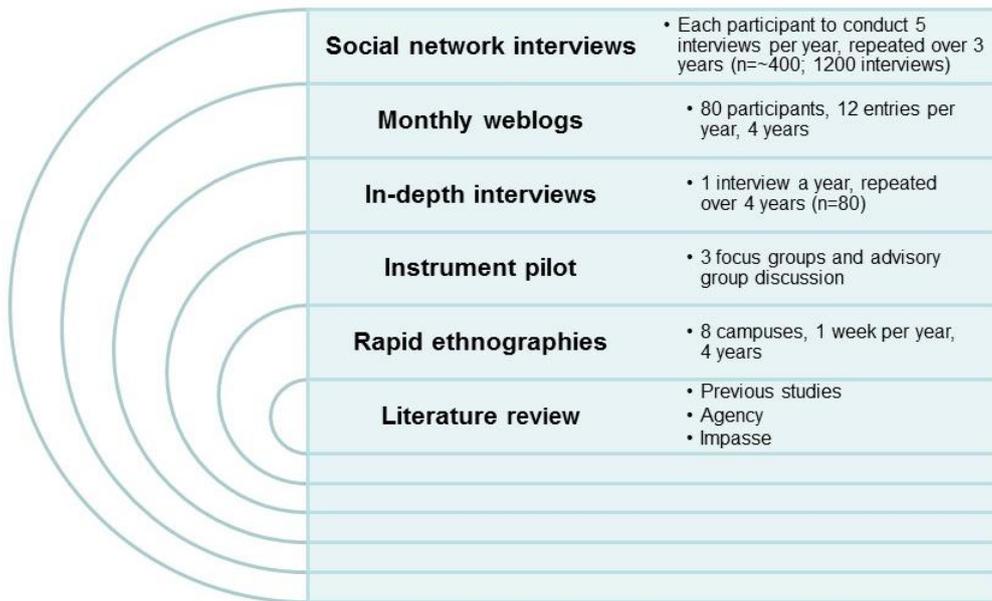


Figure 1.2. Diagrammatic depiction of the overall research strategy

Researchers prepared for these interviews by conducting an initial pilot comprising three focus groups and also spent a week on each campus in order to document the culture of the institution which was subsequently updated each year through further observation and which comprised what we have called rapid ethnographies. We also conducted an annual literature review for the past four years which is provided in previous annual research reports but updated and summarised earlier in this chapter. It was envisaged that such a multi-faceted and participatory design would provide rich, deep and nuanced data, as well as offer ‘research as intervention’ that will inform future support for students.

The university study sample

Following democracy in South Africa, mergers between previously advantaged and historically disadvantaged universities, and pressure for transformation policies and programmes, were some of the ways in which a more equitable higher education landscape was envisioned.

<i>Urban (Advantaged)</i>	<i>Rural (Disadvantaged)</i>	<i>Universities of Technology</i>
University of Cape Town	North-West University (includes rural advan.)	Cape Peninsula University of Technology
University of Pretoria	University of Fort Hare	Durban University of Technology
University of KwaZulu-Natal (includes urban disad.)	University of Limpopo	Central University of Technology
University of the Free State	University of Venda	Mangosuthu University of Technology
Rhodes University	Walter Sisulu University for Technology and Science	Tshwane University of Technology
University of Stellenbosch	University of Zululand	Vaal University of Technology
University of the Witwatersrand	University of the Western Cape	
University of Johannesburg (includes urban disad.)	Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University	

Table 1.1. South African Universities categorised according to Advantaged, Disadvantaged and Universities of Technology (universities in bold are those who participated in this study)

However, 23 years after the end of Apartheid, the differences in resources, student throughput and infrastructure between urban and rural universities for the most part remains - making an urban/rural framework, that translates fairly smoothly to 'previously advantaged' and 'historically disadvantaged' - a useful category through which to select a study sample (see Table 1.1).

Within this framework, selections of specific universities have attempted to capture some of the other variants within the higher education sector. For example, from the 'previously advantaged' institutions in urban areas, one English medium university, the University of Cape Town (UCT), and one historically Afrikaans medium university, the University of Johannesburg (UJ), were selected. Initially, the University of Pretoria (UP), rather than the University of Johannesburg, was part of the sample. However, since we were denied permission by UP to conduct research, UJ was considered as most closely resembling the historical provenance we wanted to capture in the study.

From among resource poor institutions in rural areas, the University of Fort Hare (UFH) was selected. Fort Hare has not undergone any merger, and whilst there are two satellite campuses (in Bisho and East London), the central location of the university remains in the rural town of Alice. While North-West University (NWU) was included in this category, we are conscious that the university is also host to a 'rural advantaged' community of students (in Potchefstroom). Additionally, in early 2014, the University of Limpopo (UL) was added (by request of DHET) as a further representative of a rural (disadvantaged) higher education institution.

The third category of HEIs consists of Universities of Technology. These institutions have a different historical trajectory and the recent shift towards increasing the focus on research and knowledge creation presents various challenges and possibilities. Here the Durban University of Technology (DUT) and the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) were selected. An additional institution, the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), was included in the sample although it does not fall neatly into any of the three aforementioned categories. Comprising both a previously advantaged and disadvantaged institution, it has been selected since it is a major South African university with a varied student population.

Recruitment process and formative focus groups

Following approval of the study by the Human Sciences Research Council Research Ethics Committee, relevant authorities at each of the seven universities were contacted, introduced to the study, and invited to be part of the study. Each University then conducted their own ethical review of the study and gave written permission for the study to proceed. Upon receiving written permission, researchers made an initial visit to the respective university, and conducted a week long Rapid Ethnography. Simultaneously, three formative focus groups were conducted at CPUT, UCT, and UKZN, as a means to finalise the research instruments, particularly the qualitative, in-depth interview schedule. The students who participated in the focus groups were different from those who participated in the individual interviews. The outcomes of these focus groups were used to revise draft research instruments and ensure that the language used in instruments reflected that of students.

Students were invited to participate in the study via a recruitment poster, placed in strategic places throughout the university campuses. Permission was granted by relevant university authorities to place these posters on departmental notice boards or posters were electronically circulated to first year students. Recruitment flyers were left at administration desks in various departments, and handed out to students during the rapid ethnography, and electronic versions of the poster were posted to social media sites such as *Twitter* and *Facebook*. Those who volunteered to participate in the study were screened and selected as participants according to the demographic criteria described above.

White, Indian, and male students were generally the least responsive to the recruitment posters for this study. Overall, across all eight universities, White students in particular were hard to recruit, even when we attempted snowball sampling techniques. However, since the focus of the study was on those who were struggling, this suited our overall objectives.

Throughout this report we maintain the confidentiality of students' identities by describing them according to their race, sex, age, university, degree course and the year in which the interview was done from. So an appellation to a quote such as "BM_21_NWUSTUD8_BCom_2014" means Black Male, aged 21, from North West University, Student 8 studying towards a BCom degree, with the quote coming from an interview conducted in 2014. Other racial descriptors are White, Coloured or Indian – using the Apartheid era designations.

Student sample

Many HEIs, particularly those in urban settings, have a diverse student body. Student participants (who themselves acted as researchers by conducting Social Network Interviews) from the above institutions have been, as far as possible - and taking into consideration which students showed interest in participating in the study - selected primarily on *past* and *current* levels of 'advantage' and 'disadvantage'. Here 'advantage' and 'disadvantage' should be understood as closely associated to socio-economic status, although it is also closely mapped onto race. However, during the in-depth interviews with students, it became apparent that separations between 'advantaged' and 'disadvantaged' were not as clear as we'd imagined. Emerging as a category was 'borderline' students, who did not neatly fit into either category. An example of a borderline student would be where a Black student, for instance, attended an 'Indian' school (former House of Delegates under Apartheid), her parents have some tertiary education, but took out a bank loan to pay for her university fees. The 'borderline' students in our sample are diverse, and provide an interesting perspective on how we understand 'advantage' and 'disadvantage'. This was developed further as we tracked students over the five years. Table 1.2 reflects the student sample at each university in terms of the 'advantaged', 'disadvantaged' and 'borderline' categories as constructed by each researcher based discussion during researcher meetings. This allows for

comparative analysis, both between and within institutions, and on how access or obstacles to institutional resources and networks relate to students' economic and social capital. The sample, while qualitative and purposive, mirrors the demographic situation of South African youth nationally, rather than regionally.

<i>University</i>	<i>Disad: Ad (school)</i>	<i>R</i>
University of Cape Town	2:8	5B, 4C, 1W
University of Johannesburg	4:6	9B, 1C
University of KwaZulu-Natal	5:5	7B, 2I, 1W
North-West University (Mafikeng and Potchefstroom)	2:8	7B, 3W
University of Fort Hare (Alice and East London)	6:4	10B
University of Limpopo	10:0	10B
Cape Peninsula University of Technology (Bellville and City)	4:6	8B, 1C, 1W
Durban University of Technology	7:3	9B, 1C

Table 1.2. University student sample ratio of disadvantaged to advantaged

Student participants were also, as far as possible, selected from various campuses within an institution. This offers some insight into whether disparities between campuses also influence students' experiences. For example, at North-West University, this will enable an analysis of whether historical advantages continue on the Potchefstroom campus, although who is able to access this advantage may well have changed, as compared to the Mafikeng campus.

Our sample initially consisted of 80 students in total - 66 Black students (including 3 students from elsewhere on the African continent), 6 White students, 6 Coloured students and 2 Indian students. Attention was paid to ensuring a mix of male and female participants – 43 of the 80 participants were women. In terms of first generation university students and later generation students, 69 were first generation students, 11 students were later-generation students. A range of disciplines (humanities, commerce, science, law), and students from varying school backgrounds were included (41 disadvantaged, 39 advantaged). The students from elsewhere in Africa originate from Cameroon (from CPUT), and two from Zimbabwe (one at UCT and one at DUT). This inclusion allows us access to the perceptions of students who came to South Africa specifically to study at a higher education institution. All students signed consent forms, agreeing to:

1. A one hour annual interview, every year for four years.
2. A monthly weblog.
3. Using the cellphones provided to them to capture agentic moments and critical incidents or impasses.
4. Conducting, with training but unsupervised, a series of social network interviews with members of their community, university and peer group.

The cellphones students received were provided as a means for staying in touch, as an incentive to participation, and as a means to receive communication about the study. They also used the cellphones to upload web blogs, to document (through photographs) critical incidents and agentic moments for later discussion, and to record social network interviews. Their continued

participation was aided through monthly incentives of airtime (R100) linked to productive engagement in the study.

University	Frequency of Participation		
	<i>Remained</i>	<i>Oscillated</i>	<i>Untraceable/ Opted-out</i>
DUT	9	1	0
CPUT	8	1	1
UCT	7	1	2
UKZN	7	1	2
UFH	8	0	2
NWU	5	2	3
UJ	8	1	1
UL	6	4	0
Total	58	11	11

Table 1.3. Student participation over five years of the study

The study began in 2013 with the recruiting of 70 students and an additional 10 were added with the inclusion of the University of Limpopo in the second year of the study. Through the course of 5 years, students either stayed, left or fell in and out of the study. These different frequencies of responsiveness is reflective of attempts by interviewers to contact students or follow up via their peers. The table 1.3 displays the breakdown of participation by students from each university according to three categories: Remained, Oscillated and Untraceable/Opted-out. By the end of the final year of the study a total of 11 students either were untraceable or had chosen to leave. If students did not respond to attempts by the interviewers to contact them or decided to no longer participate they fell into this category. To ensure that efforts were made from our side to track their progress, unless a student directly declared that they no longer wanted to participate, students were still contacted up until the end of the study in year 5. Students that oscillated missed 1 or 2 annual interviews. In some cases students were active participants for the first four years of the study but did not respond to the final reflection of the fifth year. They also fall within the Oscillated category as they contributed immensely to the study and are distinguished from the Unavailable/Opted-out category due their predominantly consistent participation. The final number for students that participated in the study up until the end of the study is 69 out of the 80 originally recruited. Table 1.4 offers a snapshot of how they progressed academically throughout the time of the study.

Twenty seven students graduated, 35 students are yet to complete their course, and 7 left to take up a job or look for work before completing their degrees. We disaggregated these by institution, race, sex, area of study and parents higher education – and while this is a qualitative study a few trends worth noting (and investigating statistically) are apparent. There were no graduates from UL and UKZN and only 2 from CPUT. Twenty five students whose parents had attended university graduated versus only five whose parents did not have higher education. More humanities students' left to seek work or to work than science, commerce or law students. No White students left varsity to seek work or to work. A third of Black students graduated, just over half were still studying as the project came to a close.

Category	<i>Graduated</i>	<i>Still studying</i>	<i>Left university to work/seek employment</i>	<i>Untraceable</i>
Total (n=80)	27	35	7	11
Race				
<i>Black</i>	21	33	5	7
<i>White</i>	3	0	0	3
<i>Indian</i>	0	1	1	0
<i>Coloured</i>	3	1	1	1
Sex				

<i>Male</i>	12	14	4	7
<i>Female</i>	15	21	3	4
School background				
<i>Township/Rural</i>	11	17	5	5
<i>Suburban/Private</i>	16	18	2	6
Parents' education				
<i>Higher ed</i>	22	11	2	6
<i>No higher ed</i>	5	24	5	5
Area of study				
<i>Science</i>	6	9	1	4
<i>Humanities</i>	13	4	4	2
<i>Commerce</i>	8	11	1	5
<i>Law</i>	0	10	1	0
University				
<i>DUT</i>	5	5	0	0
<i>CPUT</i>	2	6	1	1
<i>UFH</i>	5	2	1	2
<i>UCT</i>	7	1	0	2
<i>UJ</i>	4	4	1	1
<i>UKZN</i>	0	6	2	2
<i>UL</i>	0	8	1	1
<i>NWU</i>	4	3	1	2

Table 1.4. Student academic progress by race, sex, parent's education, area of study and institution

Navigating the annexures to this report

The annexures to this report are extensive. They are included in an effort to make clear our research journey and to facilitate replication of this study at a later date. APPENDIX 1 *Ethics* supply samples of the consent and information forms used to enrol participants. APPENDIX 2 *Rapid Ethnographies* are descriptions of each university based on a series of observations over the course of the study for each of the universities involved in this qualitative study. APPENDIX 3 *Recruitment Poster* reproduces the main mechanism by which we recruited participants for this study. APPENDIX 4 *Annual Participant Interviews* details the exact questions asked of participants over each of the four years during which face to face interviews were conducted as well as the final reflection in the fifth year that participants were asked to complete on their own. APPENDIX 5 *Participant Profiles* describes each person who engaged in the study and summarises their background and trajectory. APPENDIX 6 *Final Code List* describes the codes we used to analyse the very extensive data that resulted from annual interviews, social network interviews and the final reflection. APPENDIX 7 *Social Network Interview Questions* are the guides participants used to gather data and widen their social networks. APPENDIX 8 *Documentary Interview Guide* details questions asked of those participants invited to participate in the documentary entitled *Ready or Not!* that was produced over the last two years of the study. APPENDIX 9 summarises recommendations from the study according to categories such as race, gender, orientation, mental health, finances, accommodation, transport and academics, and delineates who should be responsible for implementing these changes in South Africa's Higher Education institutions.

CHAPTER 2 PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR INSTITUTIONS: INDIVIDUALS IN CONTEXT

Summary

This chapter introduces the students that participated in the study. It provides a qualitative overview of their backgrounds, specifically family and community backgrounds, highlighting the prevalence of single-headed and extended kinship family structures that students come from. It also highlights the range of family backgrounds, and how most families are supportive both emotionally and materially of their family members' studies, with a few exceptions. This indicates that many students come from families who value education highly, despite the differing levels of education of the parents. It also introduces the community contexts that students are drawn from, highlighting alcoholism, drug abuse, and teenage pregnancies as common features of life for many. Of particular interest are the students who speak about a lack of resources and information coming from rural backgrounds. Students emphasise different definitions of success, though these revolve around making and striving toward achieving goals. This changed from an emphasis on the achievement of material goods (such as expensive cars, jobs, houses etc.) in first year, toward qualities and completing their education in the following years. Related to success were the visions students had for their lives. The majority of these visions revolved around attaining particular education levels, and career goals. A significant amount of students mentioned that their work should contribute to helping others in some way, and a few specifically mentioned their visions for family. With this information in mind, student pathways are examined noting that the completion rate fell each year. Lastly, some of the basic information and observations about the institutions is presented.

Introduction

In 2013, the first year of data collection of this study, multiple sources were already highlighting the fault lines of a higher education system in a deeply unequal society which was moving toward crisis, a crisis which has been realised through multiple student based movements which are often collected under the banner of #Fallism. This chapter introduces the participants in the study, situating them against pre-existing literature around higher education's (lack of) transformation and pressures.

Using qualitative data is a way of bringing alive the statistics presented in literature, and as such this chapter seeks both to give an overview of the basic information about who the students are who we followed over nearly five years, but mostly to highlight illustrative stories that help understand the breadth of experiences and challenges that students bring to higher education settings. Information is drawn from the basic set of demographic data and tracking spreadsheets used during the research process, from the Annual Participant Interview questions relating to family and community backgrounds, definitions of success, and vision for life. Institutional information is drawn from rapid ethnographies (summarised in Appendix 2).

Findings

In 2013 the study began with 70 students from seven institutions. In 2014, another 10 participants were added from an additional institution at the request of the Department of Higher Education. There were marginally more women than men (54% vs 46%); 82% of students identified as Black, 8% as White, 9% as Coloured, and 1% as Indian. Home languages were diverse, with the majority (33%) speaking isiXhosa, followed by Afrikaans (26%), English (20%), isiZulu (10%), and smaller numbers of Tswana, Ndebele, Shona and Venda speakers. In terms of fields of study (using a broad disciplinary brush), students were in the majority studying in the Commerce field (36%) followed by Sciences (24%), Social Sciences (15%), Arts or Humanities (12%) and Law (11%). It must be noted that whilst students self-identified in terms of gender,

population group, field of study and home language, it was the researchers who classified their cohorts into 'advantaged, disadvantaged or borderline' based on a collective analysis of factors such as parents' level of schooling, area students lived, and their university funding. Students were classed as: 59% 'advantaged', 29% as 'disadvantaged', and 13% as 'borderline'. At the start of the study, students' ages ranged from 18 to 44 years of age, with an average age of 21. Three participants were not South African, one from Cameroon (at CPUT) and two from Zimbabwe (at DUT).

As of November 2016, the students reflected a variety of pathways through their higher learning experiences. At the end of their first year², 67 out of 80 students had passed, 6 were financially excluded, 2 academically excluded, and 3 dropped out. In addition, one student was busy with his first year of a Diploma after graduating his undergraduate degree. Another person had failed 5 out of 11 courses, and one had only registered to begin in the second semester. This first year pass rate is considerably higher than the national average (REAP, 2008, DHET, 2008), pointing to the fact that our participants could be considered to be performing above average in terms of their student careers.

At the end of second year, there was a high retention rate in the study, and of the 76 students, only 48 completed their academic year successfully. Four students told us they had failed some modules, but still advanced to third year. A further five students were financially excluded, two were excluded both academically and financially, four dropped out for personal reasons (family crisis, mental health issues, physical health issues, and one started a second degree but dropped out). Other interesting developments were four students who decided to start a new degree at a different institution. In addition, students who had been financially excluded after first year were mostly working to either support their families, or save money to return to university.

The number of students who successfully passed and completed their third year of study out of the 59³ students interviewed dropped to 33. Of these only 13 were due to graduate.⁴ A number of the students were involved in four year or longer degree programs, or were completing or re-doing failed modules (6 students). Of the students no longer studying, 4 were at home waiting to re-enrol, or looking for work, and six were working. Notable is the number of students who started *new* degrees (8).

In 2016, 3 of these 'new degrees' were participants who were combining working and studying through UNISA, and two were pursuing skills qualifications, one in sound engineering, and one in nursing. Working with data from 57 participants⁵, 18 students were completing the degrees they had started, either working to make up failed modules, or busy with four or more year degrees. Ten students were busy with their second degree, either in their first (2) or second (8) year of study. Fourteen students were pursuing post-graduate studies (6 BTechs, and 8 Honours). Only two students at this level were financially excluded from graduating or completing their degrees.

² The ten students from University of Limpopo who joined the study in 2014 were counted in this cohort, and their 2014 results compared with the 2013 results of the other participants. Thus 'Year 1' is the 2013 results from participating institutions and 2014 results from University of Limpopo, 'Year 2' is the 2014 results from original institutions and 2015 results from the University of Limpopo and so on.

³ 10 students from the University of Limpopo's data unavailable for this calculation as they will only be able to tell us this in 2017, and 11 students did not respond to interview requests.

⁴ Students at CPUT and DUT would have completed their National Diploma certificates, and needed to do a fourth year for a BTech qualification, students at UJ do four year undergraduate degrees and thus would not graduate at the end of their third year.

⁵ The University of Limpopo's data is unavailable as they are a year behind, and 13 students did not respond to interview requests.

With this overview in mind, we turn to the thicker descriptions produced during the interviews about the range of experiences of family, school and university that students presented in the interviews over the years.

Family

Two major areas of focus emerged from students' conversations about their families. The first being the multiple forms of family structure students came from, and the second being the varying levels of family support (both emotional and material) received from family towards their studies. Most families were emotionally supportive, many materially to the best of their abilities, but some families did not support studies, and some students were estranged from their families with implications for their studies.

Family structure

Though some students spoke of their nuclear heterosexual families, what stood out is that the norm for the majority of Black students was being raised by their grandmothers, their single mothers, or supported by their aunts and uncles. For some students this is because parents have passed away, for others because they are absent, or divorced. Though each story has different expressions, the following reflect some of the complexity of family structures:

"I prefer my Granny's place because that's where I called home, because I love it and feel at home. My dad stays in Vryburg, and he's from Marokwent, so what happened I was staying with my Mom in Mafikeng up until she passed away in her early years. I think I was twelve years. Then I stayed with my Auntie until I finished matric, but every school holidays I go to Greypark at my Granny's place." (BM_21_NWUSTUD8_BCom_2014)

"I do not know who my father is, I have never seen him in my life. My mother she got married to another person so I do not live with them. I lived with my grandmother." (BF_20_ULSTUD6_BSc_2014)

These different home environments and family relations illuminate that students do not enter university simply as students who will later enter the labour force. Instead they come from complex home environments that will impact their time at university and the subsequent decisions they make. Also evident in these stories is that many students do not fit into the Western conception of a nuclear family and instead draw on extended family within their structures.

Family resources: values, emotional support & material support

The majority of families strongly supported their children's higher education studies. Sometimes this was from within the nuclear family, sometimes the support came from siblings, grandmothers, or other family members. Parents had a range of occupations, some having their own tertiary qualifications, many having professional jobs such as teaching, others run market businesses or drove trucks. Single mothers were more likely to do menial work (one person said his mother 'ploughed'), and grandmothers frequently relied on grants. What was evident was that across this range, participants saw higher education as a necessary step for their children, and supported them in different ways. Some of these encouragements, material support and even pressure are reflected in the stories below.

"Yes, my aunt is helping me, my uncle and my aunt. She did IT, my uncle and aunt are working in the same company, and my uncle did Economics. Yes so those people they support me and they keep on motivating me." (BM_21_ULSTUD3_LLB_2014)

"I'm the youngest, during that time they were struggling to look after us. It was a bit difficult and then they managed, my mom and my sisters... didn't go to universities. They tried working so that they can look after... it is now that they went to higher institutions and all that. So I can say through all that process they just showed me that whatever happens education still came back to them... They wanted to show me that education is just the best thing that can ever happen, that's why I chose to study and that's why I have a different mentality from others." (BF_18_NWUSTUD10_BA_2013)

"The only thing my grandmother showed support on, because she could not support me 100%. I'm not the only person she was raising, she is also raising some other orphans at home. So she always encourage myself to study hard so I can get a bursary or financial aid because she didn't have much money to pay." (BM_19_UKZNSTUD7_LL2013)

"My dad is a Math's lecturer, since I was in Grade 8. Every day he came back from work no matter what time it was, he would always ask me how's maths going? Ja and that for me was very encouraging because it showed that he's really into the whole school thing. He helped me with Maths." (BM_21_ULSTUD4_BA_2014)

"Yes, they expected me to come, to go to university. They said I have to go, at a young age already, and I must go to university and study. They said I mustn't study what they did, they studied teaching." (CF_19_UCTSTUD4_BSc_2013)

"Yes it did have a lot to do with the support we had from our parents, our parents not being biological but are being aunts who raised us. It is just different, they pushed everything, they pushed and they kept on encouraging us. They would take us to school, they drove us even late at night to study." (BM_18_UCTSTUD9_BSocSci)

"My mom always wanted to be a judge, and my dad has his degree so it's the pressure of look, law student, law student, and being better than the rest of my siblings... because my sister did psychology and my brother did IT, so now it's me, the law student." (BF_19_UJSTUD7_LL2013)

A few students had siblings who were also studying, as indicated by UFHSTUD10: "I'm the third one, my brother is working at WSU University, he graduated there. My second sister is studying Civil Engineering at TUT, and I am studying here, and my other sister is studying at WSU."⁶ Others were the only ones who had 'made it':

"My dad had eleven children... I'm the fifth one, and you can see that the first four did not manage to go to university, only one of them was able to reach matric... so I'm the first one. The second one he was doing his matric last year, but he passed, but he decided not to come, I don't know for what reason... The other thing that is lacking in our community is that people are not educated about such financial skills like aids, loans, bursaries, they don't know about that." (BM_20_UKZNSTUD1_LL2013)

Sometimes students were the sole breadwinners in the family, which places an enormous pressure on them. This student, when asked if her family supported her studies replied:

"Yes, they did agree because there's no-one who's working at home. I'm the only one, so I'm supporting myself. I'm also supporting my family. Yes, and my sister just got a baby now so I have to help out again." (BM_23_UJSTUD9_BA_2016)

⁶ (BM_24_UFHSTUD10_BA_2013)

Very few students were estranged from family and studying 'despite' their family. For one student this estrangement was due to a combination of his sexuality and his family:

"My family, I try to stay away from them as much as possible, because I just have a sketchy picture... I was thrown around relatives, and it was also the gay issue and no one wants to talk about it... My brother gives me support and the people from church and people I know from the community. If my brother is financially tight, I get a part time job, I don't want to owe anyone in the end." (BM_22_UJSTUD10_BEng_2013)

Another was unclear about why:

"Just living day to day because like I'm at the point family wise where I don't interact with them anymore." (IM_21_UKZNSTUD2_LL2015)

This student's family did not understand his ambition at all:

"My mother is an uneducated person, she doesn't believe in education in such a way because she knows that she can't afford the university education, so she wasn't encouraging us to go. In fact, she was saying that we must just aim for getting matric certificate and looking for work. She was not working so it was really a struggle for us to grow up, I think each and every one of us struggled." (BM_18_UCTSTUD10_BCom_2013)

It is interesting to note that this is the only student from UCT who dropped out after first year. A friend mentioned that the stress of studying and the alienation he felt at UCT as a Black man from a rural background was part of the reason for this, but perhaps it is also because the lack of support from his family.

Another student told a similar story about his family not understanding about the importance of studying:

"Basically I think it starts with the parent, because your parents are uneducated. So when you tell them about the task... in terms of how they react onto that, they take you as a person who doesn't want to do maybe one of the works at home... It's just like you want to be treated specially because you are saying now you're going to school." (BM_22_UKZNSTUD1_LL2015)

For multiple students, though their study ambitions were supported, finances were an issue. For some it was about their parental figures not being able to afford to support them, and relying on grants, and for others whilst at university, they had responsibilities to support their family.

"Last year I had outstanding fees. I have R12 250, mind you my parents are pensioners. How on earth are they supposed to get that money?" (BF_21_ULSTUD9_LL2015)

"Ja, they do, but they can't afford varsity because only my father is working, and he is driving trucks so it is hard for him to support me at varsity, and even NSFAS is giving us problems. They're giving us R19000, and res R7000 so it's going to be stress for them." (BM_22_ULSTUD1_BSocSci_2014)

"It's a lot because I'm the only one working. My mum is not working. Even my sister here in Durban is not working, so when I get paid I need to buy groceries for my mum and also send money for my sister." (BM_22_DUTSTUD9_IT_2016)

"Well my mom doesn't work, we live with my grandmother, also my grandmother doesn't work, and we basically live under the government grant." (BM_18_UFHSTUD1_BSc_2013)

Many reflected that it was these home and family circumstances that motivated them to study hard:

“Yes I think that contributed because whenever I fear sometimes I think of my background, I think of – I feel like I owe myself a lot, I owe my family.” (BM_24_UFHSTUD4_BCom_2014)

Other students, whose parents were working but who have come to be called ‘the missing middle’, describe their financial difficulties:

“I don’t qualify for NSFAS because my mother is working for the government, but I personally think this NSFAS issue is not fair. The parent has four kids, and two cousins depending on them, but I still can’t apply for NSFAS so I have to go out and get a loan even though NSFAS was there, and I know that when I start to work, I have to pay back all the loan.” (BF_20_CPUTSTUD8_FoodTech_2014)

Though experienced in different ways, for all students, their family has played a major role in their getting to university, with experiences ranging from parents (or guardians) non-involvement, and lack of understanding through to a clear expectation that university study was expected. The level of support offered by parents does often correlate with the parents’ level of education and/or exposure (though this is not always the case). As education levels could be argued to be one indicator of class, and certainly contribute to Bourdieu’s understanding of the development of capitals that would be useful in succeeding, these family backgrounds are important for understanding the students participating in this study.

Community

Students were asked to identify problems within the communities they grew up in, or lived in when they were not at university. They were also asked to compare themselves to the people they grew up with. A few said there were no issues or problems, aside from perhaps people not knowing or talking with one another:

“People are reserved, we just say hi to our neighbours, we don’t know anything about them, don’t talk, yes, very boring.” (CF_19_DUTSTUD7_IT_2013)

“It’s not very well developed but it’s a good place, there’s not much of the crime there, but there’s a lot of open space.” (BF_20_DUTSTUD4_IT_2013)

However, the majority of students’ responses incorporated elements of alcoholism, school dropouts, drug abuse, related crime, and teenage pregnancies. Given that the majority of students in the study are Black, these issues reflect the adverse environment often associated with township living (Swartz, Harding & De Lannoy, 2012).

“Because you know where I come from there are a lot of people who never went to school. They just sit around and smoke weed you know. Do some silly stuff, you see, like robbing people and stuff.” (BM_21_ULSTUD2_LLB_2014)

“It’s a bad space, it’s a typical township space where there are all sorts of crimes you know, all sorts of diseases, teenage pregnancies and deaths... You know the taxi driver phenomenon, the sugar daddy phenomenon...? By the time we got to matric I think there were not more than five guys in the class, there were more girls. I think we were like fifteen, but in grade 8 we were seventy in a class.” (BM_24_CPUTSTUD7_OpMan_2013)

These issues seem to relate to lack of resources which were felt in a variety of ways, often related to family involvement or investment in the future:

“Many, I think many kids would, maybe where they come from, or how they were raised, like some people have nonchalant attitudes toward their school work, or maybe finances would put them off but they never really did research on how to go about that. I had a friend who also wanted to study but they were eight people...living in the house. So ...she just wanted to work so that she can contribute to expenses and things. So I think finance plays a huge role in that as well.” (CF_20_CPUTSTUD1_InfSys_2013)

“It’s like a stigma on that community, most of the people they don’t take school as a priority. You come chill at the corner, or you work at Pick ‘n Pay or some sort of life... You know truly speaking, from my high school, like learners who used to demotivate themselves... They say ‘urgh, I am not doing those subjects so there is no need for me to study hard, either way I won’t get a good job, I won’t get good salary’, so they were like ‘what’s the point?’” (BM_19_UJSTUD3_CivEng_2013)

The lack of resources, both financial and communal, had distinct rural and urban variations. Rural experiences included:

“We have some clubs, no taverns... I think there is four or five, there are a lot of taverns, there are no parks, there is just a bush. If you want to put your life in danger, just go there, there is not safe. They can’t expect a girl to go alone.” (BF_20_ULSTUD6_BSc_2014)

“It’s a deep rural area where few people are educated, and if they are educated, there are no doctors, no lawyers, it’s just teachers... I can assume two percent of the people of the place I’m coming from are educated.” (BM_19_UKZNSTUD7_LLBB_2013)

UKZNSTUD7 went on to talk about the lack of additional facilities and opportunities that he sees for children in the town, such as libraries to study in, or Saturday education groups run by good teachers to assist with school work.

For many of the students, this background is part of their motivation to succeed:

“Seeing poverty all around you really makes you strive to get a better life for yourself, so that’s what it has taught me.” (BM_18_UKZNSTUD2_BA_2013)

“I go home in rural areas where most of the people are not educated. It’s one of the things that encourages me to come to the university and get a higher education and qualifications.” (BM_18_UKZNSTUD9_LLBB_2013)

There were a few students who reflected on the fact that they had ‘made it out’ of their circumstances in ways that their peers hadn’t. They emphasised their own agency in the matter:

“I think it’s more how you respond to where you come from that’s important, because many people don’t make it... Many people drop out because of the way things are... where we staying.” (CF_19_UJSTUD2_MechEng_2013)

“People become dependent on things, or people to become something or to do something with their lives. They depend on government, social grants or whatsoever, but you as a person, it’s up to you if you gonna make it or you gonna follow the crowd.” (BF_19_UJSTUD4_BCom_2013)

“In that community I’m sure about one thing, there are a lot of choices there... There are peer groups, there are a lot of inspirations everywhere, you can get inspired by some people, and they smoke the wrong stuff, you can get inspired by them. I think it was about choices. I think it was hard growing up there...because we didn’t have electricity and running water and it was not easy in our village.” (BM_19_UFHSTUD5_BAgricult_2013)

UFHSTUD5 went on to relate how he was arrested as part of a group suspected of a robbery, and some dagga was found on him. The police took them to visit prisoners which made him quit smoking and turn his life around.

Schools

Schools exist within communities, and reflect the ethos and challenges they are situated within. This student reflected on the links between these:

“Honestly, the community I come from, there’s a lot of people who are illiterate, not many people like get their matric, so the school I went to is not really good, because most of the time we had a shortage of teachers, especially for maths and science. So it was difficult studying all the time, trying to pass. I don’t think they really encouraged us.” (CF_19_UJSTUD2_MechEng_2013)

School backgrounds ranged from private schools, some students attended Model C schools in urban areas, many were in township schools, and a few attended rural or small village schools. Some students swapped schools during high school, usually due to family circumstances, and those at private schools were frequently funded through scholarships based on high levels of academic performance.

In schools that were rated as ‘well performing’ there was often strong leadership involved:

“It’s always takes number one, if not number two [performing in the district]... a very strict principal, you can’t mess with that man. He was always a kind of motivator, he was motivating us even though some of them do it by force, but he benefited us like. If he can find us in class making a noise, that man he’ll tell us we will be going home at 6 o’clock and that man will see that we are studying during that time.” (BM_21_ULSTUD3_LL_2014)

Another student also identified the commitment of teachers to staying after school and running extra activities as a key motivator for success. However, this was not always applied universally:

“They were focused on a few people whom they saw that they have potential to get to university and survive there.” (BF_19_CPUTSTUD8_FoodTech_2013)

One student identified competition amongst students as a key to succeeding at school:

“Yah the competition was very high. If you didn’t get a university entrance you felt like you failed.” (BM_22_ULSTUD1_BSocSci_2014)

A feature identified by a number of students as motivational was the schools inviting professionals, companies and universities to come and present options to students:

“They invite other people or Doctors to come and encourage us, or we go ...to a Science Centre.” (BF_20_ULSTUD8_BSc_2014)

“They had professionals from certain fields of expertise and then they came and talked to us about university life. So they did encourage us to go to university after matric and study hard in order to get good marks.” (BF_19_UKZNSTUD8_ComDev_2013)

While students spoke of the challenge of absent teachers and principals, some identified the issue as the learners’ fault:

“But actually most teachers were just sick and tired of the learners because most of them are misbehaving, so they just wanted them to get out.” (BM_20_CPUTSTUD9_IEng_2013)

“From what I saw, a lot of students are like ‘whatever’, and a lot children was discouraged from studying, but the teachers was very motivating, but I don’t think the children themselves actually wanted to do something.” (CF_20_CPUTSTUD1_InfSys_2013)

Fourteen students spoke about having different forms of leadership positions at schools, ranging from classes, to organisations, to being part of the student leadership body. Three of them travelled internationally, usually as a result of being involved in a community service organisation. The following story is a good illustration of this and the impact it had:

“There was a time at high school, we had this competition to do a business plan and whatnot, and we actually competed, and this thing was initiated by Take A Girl Child to School. Luckily the Deputy Minister, then Elizabeth Thabethe, she asked - I was one of the six she asked to accompany her to Chile, to the Global Summit. It was a great opportunity, basically women that are in entrepreneurship. I was so inspired.” (BF_21_UJSTUD8_BA_2013)

The overall picture that emerged from students speaking about their schooling backgrounds is that for many, despite a lack of resources (primarily textbooks, computers, maths and science teachers and laboratory facilities) there were always at least one or two caring teachers who motivated and encouraged students to succeed. In one or two cases, more serious stories emerged that were linked to community challenges, such as ULSTUD9 who had witnessed a stabbing on the school premises which left the student feeling unsafe⁷ and pushed her to succeed.

The awareness that students had concerning their differences in schooling and communities indicates a personal understanding that students do not begin university on an equal footing. For many pursuing tertiary education is not a given progression but rather an end to a cycle of disadvantage.

Perceptions of success

Asking students about their definitions of success was something that we did each year, asking them if they had learned anything from their experiences, and whether their definitions had changed at all. An interesting pattern for many (although not all) was that in the first year of the study, many students used concrete achievement of material goals, as measures for success. Over the years, these were dropped out of the conversation and the qualities of success were prevalent instead. Though these were evident from the first year onward, the key features for many definitions revolved around notions of success being different for different people and achievable in different spheres of life (e.g. family, sport, personal).

Definitions and modes of realising success

⁷ BF_20_ULSTUD9_LLB_2014

Requirements in order to realise success were stipulated as hard work, dedication and focus, and setting and attaining goals. For some these requirements included learning from failing when you did not achieve the goals you initially set out. These are evident in the examples of student's definitions below.

First there are the definitions of success as material achievement:

"I'm talking about having my own things, not depending to other people," (BF_20_ULSTUD10_BSc_2014)

"Success is everything like getting a car, a nice job, having a family, that's what I called success." (BF_20_ULSTUD9_LL_2014).

Yet another student responded:

"To me success it's actually living comfortably and being accepted as a person. When they say someone succeeded I just see a person with a degree and a person who's living comfortably and can afford the lifestyle that he or she imagined." (BM_19_UCTSTUD9_BSocSci_2013).

Success was also about achieving goals:

"My mind hasn't changed at all, success is about setting a goal and achieving that goal." (BM_20_UJSTUD3_CivEng_2014)

"You can have long term and short term goals, but the ultimate thing, it's goals... Your goals could be to be at home and sleep every day... The key is to stick to your goals." (WM_20_UCTSTUD1_BSocSci_2014)

Other students picked up on this aspect of goals being different for different people:

"You know it's also really personal. Success for me it's not going to be the same success for my friends so that's what I've learned about success." (BF_23_UFHSTUD7_2014)

"Success comes in different shapes and sizes. Whether it be you waking up on time- that's success on some days. Some days it's like handing in an assignment on time, or getting 85%. It depends on you as a person." (CF_22_UCTSTUD6_BA_2016)

For some it is about being content. Many phrased this in terms of being happy with doing what they are doing:

"I would say being successful can be different phases of your life. For instance, when I get my degree then that will be a success for me. Getting my degree, and then getting a job, being happy, you know, and that job that I'm doing being influential somehow." (BF_22_UJSTUD8_BA_2014)

"I think success is when you are happy and you feel like you achieve all your goals or at a comfortable place, and you are happy with everything you have got. Not necessarily material stuff, but just everything in general I think." (CF_21_DUTSTUD7_IT_2015)

For others it is about hard work, effort and overcoming challenges:

“The idea of being successful to me means that you must work very hard, and challenges will always be there. You must just always be prepared for them.” (BF_24_NWUSTUD5_BSc_2016)

“I think I’ve learnt that you have to like focus and put your mind to it, and give yourself time. You can’t leave things to the last minute.” (BM_20_UCTSTUD5_BSocSci_2014)

For a few, it was about what you did when you did not achieve your goals:

“Learning from the failures, that’s the most important lesson.” (BM_21_UJSTUD10_BEng_2014).

The other theme that stood out, though from a smaller number of students, was the emphasis on succeeding as a personal choice despite circumstances.

“I’ve learnt that your success is not determined by your cultural background or social background but it’s also determined by you as a person.” (BM_21_UJSTUD9_BA_2014)

“Success doesn’t come easy... You don’t just get it handed in a silver plate. So you have to work hard for it, even if you were born in a good family and you get everything easy. It will come a time in life where you will have to struggle to get what you want. So if you want to be successful, you need to work hard.” (BM_25_DUTSTUD2_HRM_2014)

Interestingly, despite the sphere and focus of the study in higher education, less than five students identified education as a key measure of success, typified by this response:

“Okay let me start with education because some people define success as education. It plays a major role.” (BM_20_UJSTUD3_CivEng_2014).

Only NWUSTUD5 identified postgraduate study as success: “Degree, Honours, and Masters, I’ll be successful.”⁸

A few people defined success in terms of relationships with people around them, or by being of service in some way:

“What I have learnt about success from what I have seen... I think you have to look for the human need and you have to try and reach that human need, because at the end of the day, the reason why people are maybe motivated, to me, to become who they are, because of people. Because without people you wouldn’t be studying.” (BF_21_CPUTSTUD6_NatCon_2015)

Perhaps the last word is this sage advice from a student in their final year of the study, which is echoed by a number of other participants:

“What I’ve learnt about success is that we look at people who have already succeeded and they make it look like it was such an easy journey. Because they don’t look all beat up and tired and all of that. It’s really not an easy journey. And my success should not be compared to someone else’s success. We are running different races. They could be in a sprint – I’m not in a rush, it’s a marathon.” (BF_22_UJSTUD7_LLB_2016)

What might prevent success?

⁸ BF_21_NWUSTUD5_BSc_2013

It is interesting that despite the definitions of success not necessarily always relating directly to university, many of the obstacles to success that people identified were tied to their university path. The major concern was access to finances to complete studies:

“Money, I don’t have the necessary finances to complete my studies. As we speak my father is stressing on a way to get money for my education.” (BF_20_ULSTUD9_LLB_2014)

“For now, since I don’t have financial aid for school... If I don’t get financial aid next year I don’t think I’ll be able to continue with school.” (BF_19_UKZNSTUD8_ComDev_2013)

Related to this is the fear of something happening to a family member, both for the emotional impact, but also for the loss of financial support:

“Let’s say for instance my Dad loses his job, that’s where I’d start, because he is the only one paying for my fees... I’d lose my dream, who would pay for my fees?” (BF_20_ULSTUD8_BSc_2014)

The other major theme amongst at least half of participants was choosing bad friends, who were generally defined as people who would distract participants from their studies by involving them in parties, alcohol and drugs:

“You get a lot of people that seem to have good intentions and it’s so easy to get caught up in them that you actually forget about what you have planned for you.” (OF_19_UKZN_STUD3_BA_2013)

“Like alcohol, parties, you know those things that teenage people get up to.” (BF_18_UKZNSTUD4_BSocSci_2013)

“I think those things might be peer-pressure, having most of time with your friends doing things that are not necessarily good. Like going drinking. Every time you are drunk, you do not get time for your books.” (BM_19_UKZNSTUD7_LLB_2013)

A few people mentioned their own negative habits, such as procrastination:

“I’m the world’s biggest procrastinator. Even today I was writing a test and the only thing I did to prepare for the test was to briefly go through my notes. I didn’t even look at them properly.” (BF_22_CPUTSTUD2_BCom_2016)

Regardless of perception and definition of success, all students understood their path in tertiary education as being an integral part of realising their aspirations. Despite the realities of stress and threats of financial exclusion there was a clear hope for progress and betterment for themselves and their families.

Visions for life

In the first year of the study, students were asked about their vision for their lives on a short, medium, and longer term scale. The majority of the plans mirror students’ ideas about success, namely finishing their degrees, and pursuing a career. A few of these stories are highlighted in the section below. A significant finding was the degree to which students’ visions for their lives involved helping other people, and less so, though also prevalent, were students’ visions about family. This is interesting also in the light of the finding that the majority of students came from single parent/guardian households. For the majority of students, their visions did not change through the years.

The vision for myself

The two major themes that students raised when asked about their visions for their lives revolved around their education, and their career. For this student, the two are connected:

“One thing I would like to see myself doing one day... I want to study Metallurgy... I want to see myself one day being a Metallurgist dealing with metal and things of that nature.” (BM_21_ULSTUD7_BSc_2014).

For this student, the education itself is the goal:

“What I want in life is to finish up my BSc in four years, since it’s a four year degree. I don’t want to find myself repeating any or failing any course. And then secondly, I don’t want to end with a degree only, I also want to do Masters... and then PhD.” (BF_20_UFHSTUD8_BSc_2014)

For some students, their vision did change over the years, but mostly this was related to their course of study:

“My vision... I wanted to do Honours in Development Studies, not in Sociology, because I’m so in love with Development Studies.” (BM_25_UFHSTUD10_2014)

For a few of the students, their visions had not changed, but the way that they are achieving them has. For example, this student who has ended up in the job they dreamed of, without the degree:

“Ironically, I skipped a few steps, it’s so weird. My plan was, 22, get a job that you studied for. I have the job that I studied for. I don’t have the qualification though, which is weird.” (BF_22_DUTSTUD1_IT_2016)

She still intends to study to get her qualification, though her pathway has changed.

Vision for myself through helping others

Significant to note that for over a third of participants, one of the key visions for their lives was being able to make a difference for other people in some way. These are a few of the examples to illustrate the different kinds of difference students wanted to make.

For some it was about starting businesses to provide jobs and opportunities:

“I want to establish my own company... I will hire many people to work under my company, actually to create jobs for other people who are unable to get jobs.” (BM_22_ULSTUD1_BSocSc_2014)

“Being a business woman or economist, earning lots, lots of money (l) and I also want to help at my village... I may start a new business and employ people from there.” (BF_19_NWUSTUD3_BCom_2013)

“I think to start my own company that would hire unemployed youth in order to decrease crime. Yes.” (BM_23_DUTSTUD8_PR_2013)

For others it was themselves becoming an educator:

“Teaching, I suppose I really wanted to make an impact in society.”
(WM_20_CPUTSTUD5_BEd_2014)

Another CPUT student, CPUTSTUD2, spoke about a potential project in first year working with friends to go back to their schools and educate and inform students about access to higher education institutions, and how to survive first year. In 2016, she is actively working on starting the project.⁹

For others, the vision is to help child and other vulnerable groups:

“I don’t want to see myself only being successful, I want to see others as well to be successful.” (BM_21_ULSTUD3_LLB_2014)

For ULSTUD3 this was a very personal vision because he had himself spent time on the streets as a child. This had motivated him to start a creative project to assist children while at university.

Another student wants to start a library:

“I wanna go back to helping my community... and one thing I realised is they don’t have a library.” (BF_18_NWUSTUD10_BSocSci_2013).

Being a lawyer and defending rights:

“I just want to get a degree and after getting a degree I want to serve as an attorney or public protector so that I’ll make sure justice is served.” (BM_19_UKZNSTUD7_LLB_2013)

Some spoke of wanting to work for government:

“I feel I want to work for the state. I want to serve my country.”
(BF_20_ULSTUD9_LLB_2014)

“I want to...work at the municipality... and bring development to the communities and societies that are poor.” (BM_19_UKZNSTUD9_LLB_2013)

In these ambitions, it is revealing that for many the work of assisting others is not completely altruistic, rather it is a measure of success. Often the assistance hinges on the attainment of a good career, or starting an organisation or business that would see them be successful in order to assist others. It is also important to note that this desire crosses academic disciplines, everyone from business studies to law, to the more expected community development streams.

Visions for family

We picked up that about a quarter of students mentioned having a family as part of their vision for their lives. The majority of these students were women, but also included at least five men. For the men having a family was often tied to having the resources to support them:

“I don’t want a big house, I just want a normal house that can accommodate myself and my family.” (BM_19_NWUSTUD6_LLB_2015)

“If I look forward ten years from now, I most definitely have to be married... at least [have] a steady job.” (WM_NWUSTUD2_BEd_2015).

⁹ BF_22_CPUTSTUD2_BCom_2016

A typical response from female students is displayed by NWUSTUD4: “Five years beyond that I will, I want to see myself having a family if it’s possible, I prefer four children.”¹⁰ However, UJSTUD6’s answer stood out as it relates to the vision of making a difference: “I will do an honours degree on developmental studies. Ten years from now, I love children, I like to have three kids of my own and adopt four children, and adopt two disabled children. I just want them to feel loved.”¹¹

These gendered differences are indicative of the traditional and conservative forms of socialisation that people undergo. Women specifically are conditioned to consider success as being represented by fulfilling gendered roles such as a mother and wife, regardless of their academic and professional achievement. It also indicates that as much as families may encourage girl children to excel at school and to pursue their studies, there is still the expectation to abide by the traditional norms they grew up within.

Institutions of higher learning

The rationale for the spread of higher education institutions has been documented Chapter 1. The participating institutions included two previous Technicons that were both formed out of mergers of previously White and previously Coloured (for CPUT) and Black (for DUT) institutions. These, along with other merged higher education institutions like NWU, UKZN and UJ have campuses with distinct characters that reflect their history, mostly in terms of their location. Historically Coloured and Black institutions were on the fringes according to Apartheid social planning. CPUTSTUD7, who studies at the historically Coloured Bellville campus noted:

“The fact that I have to spend R14 to get to the shops, or cross the railway line which is not safe. The fact that there's a sewage station right here, and there's a dumping site right here and right here's a factory that manufactures glass blowing out carbon and chemicals twenty-four hours. How it smells here in the evening at round about eight, nine-ish. You can smell the sewage station and the dump sites. To me that speaks loud volumes politically.” (BM_27_CPUTSTUD7_OpMan_2016)

These disparities were often noted by the researchers in their rapid ethnographies (Appendix 2). Because institutions were often spread over multiple sites, researchers chose specific campuses to engage with. So for DUT, the campus chosen was ML Sultan (positioned only a block away from the Steve Biko campus), and for UKZN only the Howard College campus was chosen, while for UJ it was only the Auckland Park Kingsway campus. For CPUT both the Bellville and District 6 formed part of the study. Similarly for Fort Hare (Alice and East London) and NWU (Mafikeng and Potchefstroom). The initial engagement with observations in and around the institutions was conducted in 2013, and the various themes included campus climate, surrounds, resources and services.

Information about the basic demographic profiles (Table 2.1) of the institutions has been gleaned from the institutions websites over the course of the study. This is presented briefly, and followed by comments drawn from researchers’ rapid ethnography reports about the interactions between groups on campus.

INSTITUTION	TOTAL # STUDENTS	SEX (%)		RACE (%)				INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS (%)	LANGUAGES ON CAMPUS	STUDENTS IN RESIDENCE (%)
		<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>W</i>			
CPUT	33,477 (2013)	54	46	58	28	1	13	N/A	English	+/- 23

¹⁰ BF_18_NWUSTUD4_BA_2013

¹¹ BF_20_UJSTUD6_BA_2013

DUT	26,059	N/A		81	2	14	3	N/A	English	6
NWU	73,414 (2015)	67	33	70	5	>1	25	N/A	English, Setswana, Afrikaans	N/A
UCT	25,500 (2012)	52	48	28	15	7	36	N/A	English	N/A
UFH	12,315 (2013)	N/A		95	2	>1	2,6			
UJ	48,386 (2013)	55	45	80	3	5	12	4,6	English primary	39,2
UKZN	69,027 (2015)	58,5	41,5	73	2	22	3	0,1	English & Zulu	23,5
UL	22,914	N/A	98		>1	>1	1	N/A	English	N/A

Table 2.1. Basic demographics of South African Universities participating in the study

A common thread amongst observations of how students moved around together was that at many institutions, despite having students from different racial categories, students still tended to socialise in public in small groups within their own racial category. This also applied to language, and to gender.

The universities varied in terms of the number of student residences, whether these were on or off campus, whether student transport was provided and the kinds of access to food that students had on campus or the surrounds. The researcher at UCT noted that it was definitely a middle class campus, the researchers at UJ and NWU's Potchefstroom campus noted the very Afrikaans nature of building names, signage and the regard in which these campus' were spoken about by students. Many students at historically Black campuses noted that they felt isolated in terms of access to resources in the communities around the institution, and were reliant on what the institution provided.

Discussion

Universities in South Africa have been called on to contribute meaningfully to democratisation and transformation to address social and economic inequalities which still cleave along historically created racial lines in South Africa, and at the same time have been facing international trends of neo-liberalism and commodification. These goals have often been put in tension (Paxton, 2009). This tension is most evident at the interface between the student and the institution, in the ways that universities originally set up for elite (White) minorities are being called on to serve students within the institutions as they exist (Chetty, 2014).

This starts at enrolment. Bhana et al. (2011) suggest that South African enrolment rates are lower than comparable middle income countries. They suggest that this is partly because of low quality school education. Once students access the institution, overcoming (in some cases) multiple barriers to entry, they face institutional racism. Those who have not been groomed through class-based family connections or schooling to gain the social, economic and cultural knowledge and experiences that allow them to 'fit', 'assimilate' or 'succeed', are disadvantaged further. Further examples of discrimination include sexism, exclusionary language, institutions that favour White experiences and marginalise Black ones, and high rates of sexual harassment and discrimination (DHET, 2008). This equates to high levels of drop-outs, especially in the first year of study (REAP, 2008, DHET, 2008). According to the Council on Higher Education report (CHE, 2010) only 35% of the intake went on to graduate, and only 48% of those that graduated were able to complete the three year degree within five years.

These dropout rates are not neutral, they reflect the institutional racism and sexism with White graduation rates being on average 50% higher than that of their Black counterparts. These

differential rates success and attrition have “largely neutralised important gains in access.” (Ndebele & Maphosa, 2013, p. 9).

The failure of students to succeed in these institutions is largely framed within a deficit or ‘disadvantage’ model, one where failure is due to a lack on the students part (Smit, 2012). Consequently, they, instead of the institutions, are regarded as cognitively and culturally inadequate (Kessi, 2013). This ‘lack’ is often framed solely in terms of race (Leibowitz et al, 2005; Erasmus & De Wet, Pattman 2007). However, Chetty (2014) argues for the strong link between race and class, stressing class as a powerful social category that impacts on the ways in which the world is culturally, socially and materially organised. Class also needs to be understood as more than markers of income and occupation, but also ‘practices of living’. Class, when understood this way, deals with the impact of economic and occupation markers on how people live in, and move through the world. For example, class plays a role in the kind of schools that are accessible, the quality of education, levels and types of extra-curricular activities available, the location and type of housing that people occupy, and their chances of accessing and imagining success in life as a result of these factors. As argued by Leibowitz et al. (2005, p. 31), there is an “ease with which middle class individuals acquire academic discourse at school or university, because of the similarity of middle class communicative practices with academic discourse.” These learned behaviours that form part of the ease of middle class students to occupy universities form part of what Bourdieu (1997) calls habitus: a set of capitals (ways of being in the world, including economic, social and cultural) that help maintain class. These come not only from schools, but also families and communities, and it is with this in mind that the students’ backgrounds are presented, alongside the basic demographic overview of the universities we have studied.

CHAPTER 3 NAVIGATING RACE IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND BEYOND

Summary

Twenty-three years after the end of Apartheid, the prevalence of racism and racial bias in South African universities continues to plague students and staff, impacting how they navigate and position themselves in relation to each other. Over the course of the study, participants were asked to probe questions around race and racism, mainly through annual in depth interviews over five years. Through their responses, it was evident that there was no one singular view of what racism necessitated and how it was manifested. Instead students related their own lived experiences of how they recognised racial discrimination both on the part of their peers' and lecturers' behaviour and more tangibly through university policies. Common indicators for participants was access to resources, student housing and language policies, more specifically financial security and the ability to pay fees was racialised. These experiences of racism were marked by Black students who also explained that they often felt less than their Coloured, White and Indian counterparts. The reinforcement of narratives of inferiority was also a function of not feeling welcome, alienated and not belonging in the university environment on a visceral level.

The use of racial stereotyping between and within racial categories was reported as being pervasive and obstructive to cohesion amongst students. This behaviour led to two consequences: students were hesitant to engage across racial categories or when they did engage, they were regarded as being inauthentic and betraying people belonging to the same racial category. There were, however, also many students that reported easily connecting across diverse social groups and not seeing barriers to these associations. The factors resulting to these differences in relations was attributed to growing up in diverse communities, attending racially mixed schools or having family members of different races. While some students were able to draw the connections between the way their university operated, South Africa's past history of Apartheid exclusion and their lived experiences of racism, others indicated that racism was simply not an issue. Those who believed (and experienced) that racism did not exist or was not an issue, reported that all students were treated equally on their campus.

The subject of equity and representation of university staff and academic content was frequently discussed when students were asked to comment about the visibility of Black academics as well as about the Africanisation of the taught curriculum and hence knowledge production. The majority of students observed that the lower level teaching posts like teaching assistants are staffed with Black academics while senior positions are staffed mainly by White academics. Students also reported that lecturers (who are often not Black) were unaccommodating and distant through subtle or overt exclusion.

Considering these findings, this chapter reports on how students' racial identities are negotiated, affirmed, and contested as they navigate university settings. Additionally the chapter presents data on how racial identities (i.e. Black, White, Coloured, and Indian) in the South African context facilitates or hinders success in university and in life beyond. The chapter further reports on student experiences of racism and other intersecting forms of exclusion in their interactions with their peers, lecturers and staff at numerous campuses around the country. Issues and instances of structural violence, representation, and symbolic violence are described. By interrogating these findings, recommendations are made that target four key areas where racism is seen to be manifested: accommodation and university resources, university symbols, academic staff and knowledge production. For university resources and housing, there is a need for an audit around the distribution and access by students. University symbols must be open for debate by encouraging students to discuss the history of the institution and how symbols can be regarded as exclusionary. Academic staff require intentional investment to ensure Black scholars are supported to reach professorship and internal structures must be created to mediate between student and lecturer through the form

of an ombudsman. Funding must be dedicated towards promoting African Scholars' work and must draw on this work as key modules. These recommendations aim to deter the perpetuation of racial discrimination by calling for interventions on the part of university management, academic staff, students and government.

Introduction

Twenty three years into democracy, race relations continue to shape the lived experiences of South Africans. Both 2015 and 2016 were volatile and transformative years for South Africa's higher education institutions where issues specific to race were unearthed. Persistent concerns around systemic and symbolic violence, and structural inequalities in higher education resulted in the formation of national student activist movements including #RhodesMustFall and #DisruptingWhiteness (University of Cape Town), #RhodesSoWhite and the Black Students Movement (Rhodes University), #TransformWits (University of Witwatersrand) and #OpenStellenbosch (Stellenbosch University). Others such as Cape Peninsula University of Technology and University of Western Cape joined the protest under the banner of #FeesMustFall. In many ways, these movements represent the existential struggles which shape South African life that can no longer be limited to the individual and social sphere. Instead a magnifying glass is now being held up to the embedded structural inequalities in the university and in society (Keet et al., 2009, p. 114).

The message that has come from these movements is a call for recognition by institutions and the government: things can no longer carry on as they have as the current modes of operation within universities are perceived as being oppressive, stifling and unsupportive. Moreover the traditions, values and practices that have been disguised or explained as 'institutional culture' have been shown to be exclusionary to such an extent that it permeates the student's everyday reality in the institution (especially in previously Whites-only institutions). It is in this context that this study sought to understand and articulate the many ways that students are racialised. This was an important aspect of the study as students themselves do not always recognise (or were reluctant to speak of) the ways in which their student experience is racialised. They live and experience racism but they cannot always name it. Zimitri Erasmus and Jacques de Wet (2003, p. vii) had similar findings in their study on 'race' and 'racism' at the University of Cape Town's Medical School:

A little over half of the students who say they have no personal experiences and/or hurts around 'race' find it difficult to name and/or talk about 'race'/racism when asked directly. This suggestion is confirmed by a more explicit pattern emerging from the data, namely, that some students do have difficulty naming 'race' and experiences related to 'race' and furthermore, tend to downplay encounters with 'race' that are hurtful and/or reinforce racialised relations of power.

This chapter explores the experiences of students regarding integration, interactions and perceptions of their peers across racial groups. A prevailing theme that emerged from Black students' accounts was a yearning for a sense of belonging and recognition (Fraser & Honneth, 2003) by their peers. Students were also asked to think about privilege and how socio-economic advancement is a function of race. The chapter clearly shows how racial identities navigate the cultural symbols of a university such as language, built environments, curriculum, teaching and learning, and everyday university life in residences and other spaces.

Findings

While many students believed that racism is alive and well on campuses around the country, there were diverse views on how racism manifests itself. Students' experiences of discrimination were

observed in various aspects of student life, from access to resources, student housing and language policies. Black students specifically spoke about how their inability to pay fees often left them feeling isolated and ashamed in comparison to their peers of other races. These experiences culminated in a broader feeling of not having a sense of belonging and not being accepted as legitimate students. There was also a clear discomfort expressed in how students socialised with other racial groups and students observed self-imposed segregation on their campuses. A key area where segregation was felt was in the racial stereotyping that students encountered and displayed towards their peers.

Students who were exposed to diversity early on in their lives (i.e. students who grew up in racially diverse families or those who grew up in multicultural neighbourhoods and schools) reported increased associations with students of different population groups. In other aspects, students were reluctant to socialise with one another due to circulating racial stereotypes or lived experiences with other population groups. Some Black students felt that when they socialised outside their racial groups they were stigmatized by other Black students as being 'traitors' or shunning their identity.

When asked if racism was a major issue at their universities, responses varied. Some felt that they attended universities where everyone was treated equally and therefore felt their experiences were not racialised. Students that indicated racism as being evident on campuses around the country pointed to the legacies of Apartheid as the main culprit in shaping ideas about race and racism. The findings show that racial identity is mainly shaped by the racial and socioeconomic history of South Africa. The majority of the Black students identified themselves as being at the lower level of the socio-economic ladder. This means that they identify themselves as poor when compared to Indians, Coloureds and Whites.

Students also reported shifting notions of what privilege means within the post-Apartheid context that has afforded students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds opportunities for post-secondary schooling. For example, Black students reported a sense of advantage when it comes to university admissions and pointed to government policy of increasing access to post-secondary education through financial aid schemes. Coloured students also mentioned this newfound advantage, but this was viewed negatively as preferential treatment, particularly if the perception from these students was that lecturers are lenient in accommodating Black students.

The issue of equity and representation of academic staff within institutions came up numerous times when students were asked to comment about visibility of academics of colour. Students across all the universities agreed that generally the administrative staff in universities is more reflective of the South Africa's demographics. The findings further show that the lower level teaching posts like teaching assistants are staffed with Black men and women where senior positions are staffed mainly by White educators. These findings hold important implications when thinking through calls for decolonising the university and modes of knowledge production.

Inclusion and identity politics

Racial bias is based on negative attitudes regarding race, class, culture, ethnicity or other perceived or real attributes. Students who feel discriminated against because of their racial background confront unjust barriers to political, social, and economic activities and services. While a broad array of students may report such structural violence, some quietly confront racism on a daily basis, espousing what Philomena Essed (1991) frames as "everyday racism".

Manifestations of racial discrimination

A number of the students felt that racism was associated with preferred languages (see more in Chapter 5) on their campuses. In particular, students commented on their perception and/or observation that the ability to speak the language of instruction provided an advantage, typically to White students. This advantage was seen in lecturers displaying preferential treatment towards students who spoke the language of instruction and observed in the ease that these students were able to navigate the university space. These sentiments were expressed as follows:

“When you want to ask a question with your language, some lecturers don’t want to speak the language that you speak and things like that, and some don’t want to give you the help that you need.” (BM_23_CPUTSTUD10_CEng_2014)

“No, I don’t feel I belong to the campus... The student’s society that we have here don’t accommodate Black students, it’s only Whites and others. And just a few number of Blacks who know Afrikaans. But other than that everything is in Afrikaans.” (BF_21_NWUSTUD7_LL2015)

Student residences are also areas of discrimination. Black students indicated that White students were always given residence rooms on campus while this was not a guarantee for Black students. A couple of students noted:

“White people are the first preference and when I got here we applied for res but we didn’t get the place. And when you ask they will tell you that, you’re still on a waiting list to this day... When I met her [White first year], she told me she’s moving in.” (BF_20_NWUSTUD7_LL2014_2)

“You never see White people in queues but they always get residences. It’s like they get first preference than Black people do.” (BF_21_NWUSTUD4_BA_2016)

The combination of language policies and access to residence was identified and linked to the struggle for a sense of belonging at university. A lack of access to resources to pay fees and other circumstances caused one student to feel that he did not belong at the university and that his issues are typical for Black students, who therefore would feel the same as he does.

“There’s a lot of challenges that you actually go through and those things actually make you feel like you don’t belong there. One specific one would be your finances. If you’re failing to actually pay, you feel like you don’t belong there. You should be somewhere else where you can actually afford to pay. And that’s an obstacle that mainly Black students have to deal with.” (BM_21_UCTSTUD9_BSocSc_2016)

These encounters of discrimination, from language policies to residence life or the inability to pay fees, are racialised experiences. More so, these experiences imply that Black students, specifically from disadvantaged backgrounds, feel they do not belong and that they are not welcome at the university because of the difficulties they face. A specific area where a lack in the feeling of belonging is highlighted is in the informal structures of how students relate to one another.

Struggles in socialising and building relations

It is vital to note that the way someone was raised is also important in how it primes how one relates to the other race groups. Students who had previous experiences of inter-racial socialisation are more likely not to see race as an identifying factor.

“No, I’m a mixed baby in terms of that my mom is White and my dad is Coloured, so I mean, my whole life I have been exposed to different races and I don’t, I just don’t identify myself with race or other people with race.” (CF_18_UCTSTUD7_BCom_2013).

Students who have been raised in an environment without inter-racial socialisation are more likely to view their race and culture as a form of their identity and also see other racial groups as homogenous. This group of students are more likely to focus on cultural differences as a determining factor that shapes their relations with other students.

The findings also show that various student populations experience racial stereotyping. These are the unwritten racial norms that students from certain races are expected to conform to. One student highlighted that Black South Africans are stereotyped as criminals. The student highlighted that if different races perform the same activity, it will be viewed in a different light by the observers because of racial stereotypes.

“Um, so I don’t know – how do I put this? – because when they see Indian people chilling together, smoking and whatever, the security people don’t even bother them. But as Black guys you huddle around for too long... security is going to walk close.” (BM_23_UJSTUD10_BEng_2016)

Students highlighted that in most cases fellow students make a judgement on using their race without examining the facts. For example, Coloureds are stereotyped as violent:

“Ja because I am Coloured people think I am violent so, but I don’t think so.” (CF_19_UJSTUD2_MechEng_2013)

Racial stereotyping also affects how various student race groups identify themselves and other races on campus. Some students believe that the behaviour of one individual in a race group reflects on how the rest of the group is perceived.

Perceptions of racism on campus

Students were asked whether they have experienced racism at the university and how these experiences have affected them. Many students did not disclose personal incidences of racism, but reflected on witnessing racist incidents on campuses. Responding to whether race affects their lives more directly, one Black student commented:

“Not really, race doesn’t have any effects on my side because I found we share conversation with White people, we share conversation with guys from Zimbabwe you see, so race doesn’t actually affect my life in a way.” (BM_24_UFHSTUD4_BCom_2014)

Other students corroborated that racism seems not to be the issue affecting how students interact especially in campus activities.

“Here on the campus no, haven’t actually seen it [White people being in positions of power or privilege] because here we are all equal here on campus, we play for sports, you see it well in the hostel...” (WM_20_NWUSTUD6_BCom_2014)

“They [lecturers] don’t tolerate the whole racial thing; we talk about it in lectures, but no one is disrespectful and it’s just for educational purposes. I haven’t experienced any racial discrimination. (BM_19_UCTSTUD5_BSocSci_2013)

“Yes we have an equal opportunity like I don’t think there’s discrimination in this campus, we are all just equal. We are using the same computer labs. Everything we share, the rooms everything.” (BF_21_ULSTUD6_BSc_2015)

For these students, speaking from three different universities, their daily lives appear to be relatively egalitarian. However, for some students they attributed the reason that race is not an issue at their university to the lack of racial diversity. At these universities, the majority of students are Black, and as a result, race does not act as a marker. In one case, it seems that the campus was more of a mixed race campus, but there did not appear to be any tension because students socialised within their own racial group. So while there may have been self-imposed segregation, there was no perceived racial tension. A student observed:

“The White people stick with White people and Black stick to Black, but some of them do mix so you see groups where there are Whites and Blacks... I don't have Indian friends but some of my friends are Black especially those who started with me, my hostel side. I don't have a problem with race and interracial relationships.”
(WM_20_NWUSTUD6_BCom_2014)

There was a perception that all White students were racist. White students on the other hand were perceived not to extend their friendship circles to other groups and often isolated themselves on campus. Additionally, some White students indicated that they feel guilty about being White given the history of Apartheid.

“I suppose in other terms how I'm being seen by other races, I don't even know how they see me - I think people might judge me as being sort of being privileged.”
(WM_20_NWUSTUD2_BEd_2014).

“Obviously growing up during the Apartheid regime, I went to a school where the only Black kids we had were diplomatic because the embassies are in Pretoria only. I suppose have a White guilt.” (WM_39_CPUTSTUD5_BEd_2013).

Black students felt that they can easily relate to some aspects of Coloured and Indian experiences but did not think that they could identify in any way with Whites.

“Coloureds and Indians - they all fall under the Black umbrella. When you chat to a Coloured or an Indian you can feel that this person you can relate to, you see. Not on all aspects but on certain aspects. Like are you using NSFAS to pay for your studying and then you'll tell them you also using NSFAS but then you'll find White people using NSFAS but getting more money than you as a Black or Coloured person, that happens here.”
(BF_21_NWUSTUD7_LLB_2015)

While some students felt their own campuses did not have overt racial tension (or at least the students themselves did not experience it), Black students articulated incidences of subtle racism where students are made to feel they do not belong.

“It's almost like White people are up here and Black people are down here. The energy there... White people have their own chilling places and it's like you as a Black person can't just go there and sit there, you know, that kind of thing, which I find weird.”
(BM_23_UJSTUD10_BEng_2016)

“In Johannesburg... it's a bunch of Indians, Whites, Black, mixed races all seating separately in a bunch of groups. Nobody sits with another one, and everyone does their own thing. I was very disappointed. That was my first year in South Africa but in Cape Town, I love this town, it's okay. You can breathe you can speak your mind, people interact with each other, doesn't matter the race. That's very beautiful!”
(BM_23_CPUTSTUD3_Entre_2013)

Although some students had not personally experienced racism on campus, concern was expressed about racism at other campuses (of the same university) that some of the participants attended. Racism seemed to pervade a number of spaces on some campuses to create an atmosphere where all kinds of discriminations flourish even when not deliberately directed at any one person. Students mentioned the following:

“The pages here on Facebook... confessions page. Most of the confessions written there ... you'll find a White guy saying, 'I was in that Physics class and then this Black Nigerian lecturer couldn't speak English well, so I left' and they will all laugh. You'll find so many LOLs. That's how racist people on campus are.” (BM_21_UKZNSTUD7_LL2015)

“Also in sports, like for instance in rugby there are only Afrikaans speaking people, players, they are White Afrikaners. And also in soccer there are only Blacks.” (BM_21_UJSTUD9_BA_2014)

When prompted to think about whether other races experience the campus the same way that participants do, one student replied:

“I don't think so. For example, the social aspects – the other races, like Whites and Indians, when the weekend comes, they go home and most of us remain. We attend campus events but they don't. So it's different. (BF_21_NWUSTUD4_BA_2016)

Students commented on how race was not just an issue of Black and White people but that there is discrimination within Black groupings.

“There is a lot of racism and the school it's not reporting and we are the one who should report it, because we do not know where to report it and why we should report it. And the fact is they get that White privilege because they are White. Women oppress each other and Black people oppress each other. It's about how we treat each other.” (BM_19_UCTSTUD9_BsocSc_2014).

The last statement of 'how we treat each other' was mentioned by another student, who felt that White people remained racist because they saw how Black students were treating each other, justifying their racism. This offers a glimpse into the kind of comprehension that some students may hold regarding how systems of power work along with identity politics. Moreover, the accounts of students who stated that they had not experienced racism, is reflective of deeper lacunae within the thinking of how race as a social construct has significances that include and go beyond verbal or physical racial abuses and instead has material impacts on livelihoods of those who are racially marginalised.

Understanding legacies of Apartheid

In addition to commenting about racism on campus, students were asked to reflect about the state of racism in South Africa. Observations, experiences, and perceptions about race at universities became a microcosm of similar types of comments on race in South Africa in general. According to the students, socioeconomic status is defined by which high school one goes to, the residential area where one lives and the ability to pay fees.

When asked what 'privilege' means to them, most students responded that having better access to basic resources, opportunities, transportation, shelter, social mobility, and prospects for future employment are the most significant indicators of privilege. Some pointed out that it means to be better off than other people and being treated better by others. Hence, privilege is often perceived as a differentiation between oneself and others and defining/comparing one's own standard of

living to what others have. Also being comfortable in terms of being able to afford certain things was mentioned as an important aspect of privilege. Students were then prompted to think more deeply about how the legacy of Apartheid dictated these realities and how class informed privilege post-1994.

Understanding the impact of racism in South Africa

There were a few students that stated they had never experienced racism growing up, in some cases, due to the racial mix of the places where they lived.

“No, it hasn’t [affected] me because where I grew up everyone was, I mean, I lived with Whites and stuff, and there was nothing different about it. We just all got along.” (BF_19_UKZNSTUD8_ComDev_2013)

“I don’t know I haven’t really experienced anything like that... that would make me feel like I wish I was this or that. It’s just normal because like in my community... it’s like a norm and I don’t really go places where like I mingle with other types because I mostly just have Muslim friends. So if I do go out, it’s usually friendly people that I meet. It’s nothing really that affects me.” (CF_20_CPUTSTUD1_InfSys_2013)

As in other aspects of race, students described intra-Black racism in addition to racism between other groups. As with other analyses of colonialism where the victims become the victimisers, one student explained:

“We always say racism is from the White to the Black but racism is everywhere. You find that the Xhosa man does not want to speak Xhosa because he feels that he’s much more inferior to the other races and so on.” (BM_23_ULSTUD4_BA_2016)

In this instance, the person’s own perception of themselves is affected by racism itself, a feeling of inferiority. One student problematised the common understanding of racism and felt that too many people in the country feel it is a White and Black issue, when that concept itself is much broader and is evidenced more widely in South African society.

“I’m finding that recently people’s, er, description of the word ‘racism’ has become White against Black which is not the only case. It’s Black against White, Indian against Coloured. It’s everyone against anyone else that’s different in skin colour. And whenever anyone uses the word ‘racism’ now, the automatic assumption is White vs Black. And that’s just wrong.” (IM_22_UKZNSTUD2_BA_2016).

Some students do recognise that it is not just White students that succeed and have better opportunities available to them, but Indian students as well. One student remarked:

“Because they come from schools where they [White and Indian kids] learn things and they’re exposed to things and it’s a completely different education system... Kids that do well, better marks - they will, you know, be given better opportunities. It’s just, it’s a whole mess.” (BF_32_UKZNSTUD6_BA_2015)

While the quality or number of opportunities available to Indian students might be similar to those of White students, many students, nevertheless, felt that most racism was directed at Black people from White people in their daily lives. One student, for example, was asked whether or not they avoided spaces where they felt there might be racially charged incidents, to which the

student replied: "I just avoid, I say if you are going to that place guys I'm sorry, you know [I'm not going]." ¹²

This student would end up not being able to socialise with friends if they were going to a place where the student felt uncomfortable or felt was not a safe space for him as a Black person. In addition, students feel that they are subject to racist comments as they try to go about their daily lives, feeling that race is still a prominent feature in the way people think and behave. This reflects a constant concern about what White people might say. Indeed, there are specific spaces that some of the students spoke about where they felt, or were made to feel, inferior to White people.

The 'race card' was mentioned as not just something that people seem to keep in their minds, but one Coloured student in particular felt that the 'race card' was used by Black people to justify their difficulties in life. She took issue with this and felt that since many of them had been born in the year Apartheid ended or around the time of the transition, some of them have been given better opportunities than they might otherwise have received in the past:

"When we were born, Apartheid ended, you can't use that. But yes you were affected socially and economically maybe by it. But if you are at university now, then clearly you've benefited in some way. So stop blaming everything on the Apartheid." (CF_19_UCTSTUD6_BA_2013)

How, then, can this all change? How can South Africa move toward equality? By posing these questions, it is important to consider why racism persists in the country. In response to this question, one strong theme that emerged was that there is a victim mentality that persists, often times instilled into newer generations from older generations. The victim mentality is explained as when historically disadvantaged groups mistrust the historically dominant groups and blame the latter for what happened to their forefathers. Students expressed:

"Yeah my parents' generation they were born in the slums and they really experienced this oppression first hand. My parents are really forgiving and they accepted the changes that came down in 1994 but most people aren't like that and they pass down that [oppression] mentality to their children." (BM_21_UJSTUD1_BEng_2015)

Parents are influential to the point where their children do not interact with people of different races. One student described a Black friend of hers that would not attend classes taught by any White lecturer. According to the student, this is because her friend's grandfather had told her how terribly White people had treated Black people in the past, and now she did not want to have anything to do with White people.

While students did not indicate specific instances of White people being racist, there was a belief that the general mentality of people in the country was that White people are superior and Black people are inferior, and this mentality would be detrimental to lifting Black people out of the challenges they currently face in society. The implication here is that even if things are changing, some Black people may not be able to see it because their internal beliefs about themselves affect how they perceive their society and opportunities, and as a result, it will be difficult for them to change. Students did not really express ideas on how things could change in South Africa. However, they emphasised the challenges of dealing with mindsets or mentalities and influence from families and how these perpetuated race issues in the country.

Reflecting on understandings of privilege

¹² BM_22_UJSTUD10_BEng_2015

White students did not identify with Black students' struggles of not affording to pay for fees, food and other amenities. One White student agreed that it was linked to privilege.

"My racial identity? Actually for me being White, I suppose initially it gave me the privileges of being able to go to the schools that my parents wanted me to go to as a child. As an adult, it makes things a bit more difficult but I won't say there's any prejudice towards me." (WM_39_CPUTSTUD5_BEd_2013)

Black students also recognised the privilege that White students had and explained this in terms of the Apartheid history of White privilege in South Africa.

"Their parents are well-off, or they're, can I say 'set' financially? So you'll find that most of the Black kids, just because they came here, they're like, 'OK. Now I can't mess this up. I can't mess this up. I don't have time for this.'" (BM_22_UJSTUD5_ElecEng_2016)

"Whites are more privileged... The thing is the system had to change, the system of the Apartheid government, so yes, and the thing is that us as Black students have been given the privilege to be part of UJ [said with emphasis]... It's still like the old system at the university... Afrikaans." (BM_23_UJSTUD9_BA_2016)

An Indian student highlighted that in some aspects they could relate to the struggles of Black students while in other aspects their lives were different.

"You'd look at yourself and say, 'You know what? I am privileged for being able to have the money to study rather than seeking financial aid.' I feel for them [Black students]. So I'd say my experience is different in that sense." (IM_22_UKZNSTUD10_BSocSc_2016)

"I'd say a bit of both because there was years where I had to register late because my dad couldn't rake up the money as well, you know? Like register on the last day of deadline day. So I think that's more of a class thing and a race thing, because in that financial aid line you'll find the Indians, Coloureds, not necessarily Whites." (IM_22_UKZNSTUD10_BSocSc_2016)

In terms of pursuing careers, Black students felt that other races are more primed to achieve their career goals as they can identify themselves with relatives or other individuals of their race group who have achieved professional and personal aspirations. One student emphasised that Black students dream of their careers but other races may know someone who has achieved it and can assist them in achieving their goals.

"I will make an example of Law. Other races, like Indians, for an Indian to study law there must be somebody who has studied Law at home or they have a relative who is practicing or who is at a law firm for them to secure a job. We as Black or the historically disadvantaged and still disadvantaged, we come here with only dreams." (BM_21_UKZNSTUD7_LL_2015)

Responses to how privilege is understood may be seen as apolitical and ahistorical at first. However the responses by students expanded from being descriptive, as captured below, to more nuanced interpretations of what it means to have access to resources and the social impact that systems of historical privilege have had in South Africa.

"Being privileged for me I think it is having an opportunity that's more than others could get... I think I'm privileged in a sense that I was fortunate for my parents to afford to send me to a really good school... I was fortunate for my parents to influence me and send me

off to university. Well some people, even with my cousins they don't have that opportunity."(BF_23_UFHSTUD7_BSocSc_2014)

"Being privileged, having all the tools that will help you to get where you want to be. I would say a student who is privileged is a student who gets to university, who has all the funding, who will be able to buy text books not just make copies from the library books... will have their own tutor or mentor, a student who has all the equipment that is needed ...for university, that's being privileged." (BF_20_CPUTSTUD8_FoodTech_2014)

Two ideas of privilege were highlighted: first having access to financial means was perceived as playing an important role in student's perception of privilege. Second, educational attainment was seen as an important determinant of privilege: having a good education was associated with having better financial means by the majority of student participants. Thus, being at university and receiving higher education was perceived as a privilege in itself for many participants.

"Education is key, because education brings knowledge and if you are at a tertiary institution you have access to knowledge and there is no one who can take knowledge away from you. They can take your cellphones, materials and whatever but knowledge you cannot take away. So for me being in a university, being able to access the library, being able to access the free Internet 24/7, I could say I am much more privileged than someone who hadn't had those accessories." (BM_20_UJSTUD3_CivEng_2014)

While some associate privilege with fortune/luck and something that was simply given to some and not given to others, there was also the sentiment that privilege is something one can work for and achieve. Therefore, education is not only the basis of privilege but also a means to achieve privilege.

"I found that it was so sad that some children didn't have dreams, because I was teaching a Grade 4 class and I would ask them what they want to be when they grow up. They didn't have aspirations. I thought that is very sad because I remember being that age thinking I could do everything, I could be anything I wanted, I thought it was so sad that they just did not know." (BF_19_UCTSTUD2_BSocSci_2013)

Besides material aspects, being privileged can also mean having hopes and wishes with respect to how one wants to live and achieve in life. This is expressed through having a purpose or a goal in life. Moreover, having stability in financial terms but also support from family is considered important.

Shifting notions of privilege

Many students expressed that they may feel privileged in comparison to peers from their communities or family but not in comparison to other South Africans. From the interviews it becomes very obvious that class and race are still closely interconnected and most students stated that being White is a privilege. For many students this does not only affect the educational outcomes but also has impact on opportunities for working life.

"And if it's so easy for White people, they will say 'get over it', especially since now that we have 'equal opportunity' [laughs]. So for them it's easy to dismiss something if you are in a situation... But you don't know who is paying for my fees, what struggle I have overcome to come here or when I do get my degree, what do I do from there." (BF_19_UCTSTUD2_BSocSci_2013)

Several students point to the changing understanding of privilege as a result of economic mobility within the Black community since some Black students are increasingly coming from privileged

families, and as such social class rather than race is beginning to define who is privileged after the end of Apartheid. Students who foreground class as indicators of privilege regardless of race, indicated that privilege and advantage now exists across the socio-economic class divide and not so much along racial lines.

“I believe that I was born in the democratic time, so I’m not fighting for anything because I was born at a time everything was set out for me, I just have to use those opportunities. I might be Black or you might be White but it doesn’t define me, or my future or where I’m going or coming from.” (BF_19_UJSTUD4_BCom_2013)

“It’s not about being African or being White, no! It’s about your economic class, so since we are from under privileged economic class then that’s the only disadvantage I can say.” (BM_18_UKZNSTUD9_LL2013)

The family background and where one comes from (i.e. rural vs. urban) were also highlighted as having an immense impact on how students judge their privilege. Living closer to so-called ‘better or good schools’ or having more options in terms of variety of schools such as those found in urban centres or cities was perceived as advantageous. On the other hand, if one comes from a rural setting, participants perceived this as limiting or a barrier because one has to cope with the limited resources and restricted access to educational facilities.

“We don’t really get the same education in terms of technology, literacy and language... So when they get to varsity it’s a challenge really and obviously it affects their writing abilities. So they have to work hard.” (BF_20_NWUSTUD9_LL2015)

“It affects your life because first of all the distance between you and the school. And the weather conditions affect your life, because when it’s raining you can’t go to school, when it’s windy it’s dangerous to go to school for us in rural areas.” (BF_44_UFHSTUD8_BAdmin_2013)

Another noteworthy aspect mentioned by the students is that being part of the privileged class means to have a ‘backup’ plan i.e. financial security from their parents. Therefore, students from those families do not seem to have the pressure to work as hard as students who come from poorer households and instead engage in more leisure activities. On the other hand, it seems that students who do not consider themselves as privileged take a certain pride in being more successful and more focused with regard to their studies.

“I remember one time in high school, my final year, I was on the net looking for bursaries and it was during break time, and all the other White children they were in a matric quad, and they were having fun - laughing joking. They didn’t have a care in the world and I just thought to myself ‘maybe if I was one of them I would have had a different life.’” (BF_19_UCTSTUD2_BSocSci_2013)

“Most of the people in my class they are rich, they even own cars. But I passed better than them and I even passed the module that I didn’t think I would pass. Meanwhile they are technologically advantaged and they have all this material but I had nothing but I performed better than them. I told myself although I have nothing I can’t let that stand in my way of making it this year.” (BF_21_ULSTUD9_LL2015)

Nonetheless, there is also a certain feeling of wanting to belong to a wealthier class and to be exposed to a different lifestyle while having frustrations about not fitting in or being excluded. This leads some to the realisation that trying to ‘fit in’ is not an option but one has to find their own approaches to dealing with life’s challenges.

“I was in a Model C before, and then that didn't work out. The people from that school where high class and if you weren't they'd pick on you. So I ended up getting into physical fights with them so I had to change schools.” (IM_19_UKZNSTUD2_BA_2013)

“Okay me being Black and from the background that I am from, there are sometimes when you feel like you don't belong to a place judging at how people dress... Okay I can say, my first year experience I was like, ‘I don't belong in this place’ because of [pause] material things.” (BF_18_NWUSTUD10_BSocSci_2013)

“What I have just said is that you must not compare yourself with someone because we are from a different background. If I can compare myself with somebody I think somewhere, somehow that thing is going to hinder my success... You must compete against yourself. You must say I want to get 90%.” (BM_23_ULSTUD1_BSocSc_2015)

It is also important to note that because of the struggles which Black students are experiencing they are also in active engagement with university management to address their challenges. At times the engagement ends up in protest that other student groups do not participate in.

“And you know, the sad thing is I've noticed at strikes... it gets really- the racial tensions go very high. Because what the Black students feel - sometimes Indian students are not supportive of them and they resort to violence against the races. And the best thing we do, we get an email, ‘campus is striking’... we stay at home. We don't get involved.” (IM_21_UKZNSTUD10_BSocSc_2015)

“It's not the same. Um, I feel like here Black students are like looked at like the hustlers. I don't know why, because all the strikes [are done by] Black people. No-one ever supports - like you'll see Indian students going home. We don't have many Coloured students, so it's just like they don't even count. Um, White students always are running away...” (CF_22_DUTSTUD7_IT_2016).

Black students observed that White and Indian students rarely interact or support issues that impact Black students. The students' perception is that perhaps White and Indian students do not feel safe or comfortable around them let alone support causes or engage in campus activities that affect them.

“You see that they live their own life and they walk in groups but I don't think those people they feel safe around us.” (BM_22_ULSTUD2_LLB_2015)

Decolonisation and rethinking the university

While interrogating students' racialised experiences of university, the education system was noted as being influential to change or perpetuate race relations in the country. When asked what keeps racism in place, one student replied: “Um, I think schools and institutions.”¹³ Another student felt that there was not yet equity within institutions at the senior administration and professorial/ academic staff level:

“*Heerrre* [Lord!], the fact that, you know, the people that are still in power are the same people that were still in power then. If they can give a fair chance to other people to come in and take those positions I don't think they would allow... If there was equality even up there, like your Deans and whatnot, ja, I think it would be better.” (BF_24_UJSTUD8_BA_2016).

¹³ BM_22_UCTSTUD5_BsocSc_2016

The centering of the education system as being a source that enables current race relations, point to both an understanding by students of the power universities hold - but more deeply - the failure of universities in disrupting the cycles of inequality. Despite this, and surprisingly, no students spoke of participating in formal courses or workshops on race and racism. Instead, an emphasis on university management being more racially representative was central as students began interrogating existing university structures.

Issues of staff representation

The general responses to the representation of the teaching staff in various universities are that the majority of senior teaching staff is White. It is only in historically disadvantaged universities where the majority of the teaching staff is not White. In most cases, all students regardless of population group indicated that Black lecturers or professors have never taught them since they joined the university. Most students were emphatic that that reversing this trend was key to addressing transformation and complying with employment equity act. One student commented that it was senior academics who needed to be Black rather than just tutors:

“There's the Academic. And then there's Academic Support. A lot of tutors that are hired are actually Black. And in filing reports, um, it was revealed that they're only hiring them so that they can actually put them together under Academic so that the Blacks who are tutors make up a huge percentage of the group that are actually regarded as Academics.” (BM_21_UCTSTUD9_BSocSc_2016).

There was also a general consensus among participants that in historically Black universities, the majority of senior teaching staff is dominated by Blacks as compared to the historically White universities. The students felt that in historically White universities transformation is slow and the lack of representation of Black staff in these universities disadvantages all students.

“Honestly it's not a problem to me because if a person is a really good lecturer, is really good at what they do then I really appreciate that. Like the one Black lecturer I had, he was really good at what he did. He made me enjoy it. I loved it, so I really appreciate that.” (BF_22_UJSTUD7_LLBB_2016)

Some other issues raised by students in terms of representation include issues of comprehension and clarity (i.e. how material is explained in class) and language barriers (i.e. difficulties in understanding the accents of non-White or 'foreign' trained lecturers whose first language is not English).

“Well, I mean there are Black lecturers that, er- I mean I just hear little bits and pieces. You know, 'He's so bad at pronouncing stuff... I don't find anything wrong with that and I think people are making those comments just because they can... And he's actually one of my favourite lecturers and he's eloquent and speaks very well.” (WM_42_CPUTSTUD5_BEd_2016)

In terms of how the students are treated by staff members from diverse racial backgrounds, most students acknowledged that although subtle discrimination exists, their experiences of overt discrimination are limited. Having said that, Black students pointed out that Black lecturers demand more from them and at times treat them stricter than other students, thus keeping them on their toes and making them feel pressured to excel at all times. It is important to note that on further exploration of this view, Black students believe that Black lecturers bring different perspectives to their learning as they are more accessible to them, they make them feel comfortable, and can interact with them freely without any social distance. Black students did not express having similar experiences with White lecturers who are viewed as always distant and less accessible to them.

Students pointed to the fact that at times Black professors are marginalised by the universities because of the perception that Black educators who are part of the teaching staff are there because they are only employed to fill racial quotas and implement affirmative action policies. This perception has an impact on Black professors and educators according to Black students and leads to the perpetuation of stereotypes that Black academics are incapable and incompetent when compared to White academics.

“I think there is an issue with Black lecturers and that students know that there's a sort of quota within the staff that they need to fill and then complaints that this person is Black and they could be White if they didn't have to- for those quotas.” (WM_42_CPUTSTUD5_BEd_2016)

In terms of academic managerial staff and representation in that level, students felt that despite the high number of Black students in universities other population groups dominate the top management.

Knowledge production and curriculum

In addition to a lack of racial representation amongst academic staff, the students highlighted their concerns about the content of the curriculum. Students felt that twenty-three years after the demise of Apartheid, they are still being directed to curricula, which was designed to advance colonialism and Apartheid. Most Black students particularly felt that they are far removed from the curriculum content, which they claim does not reflect their lived experiences. This sentiment was also shared by Indian and Coloured students who felt that all the disciplines (except natural sciences) such as psychology, sociology, law and so forth advances Eurocentric and Western knowledge and does not reflect the South African context. For these students, revulsion of colonial knowledge systems is what is needed in South African universities. In fact the call for a decolonised curriculum was resounding.

“The Whites who consider themselves more privileged than others or superior than others write the history they taught us. And then when those White students learn from the smaller ages to now, they are more confident in that now they are superior compared to others. That's why I don't think this race thing will end soon unless we write our own history and then we tell our history to the White people.” (BM_23_UJSTUD9_BA_2016)

Most students regardless of population group agreed that the curriculum esteems Eurocentric and Western knowledge, which in turn produces professionals who lack African contextual knowledge. The students pointed out that the focus on European and/or Eurocentric ontology and epistemology¹⁴ (i.e. theories, methods, and so forth) standardises that knowledge and positions it at the centre while at the same time driving African or Afrocentric-leaning content to the margins.

“The curriculum is not going to be decolonised to represent me, it's decolonised to represent those who it doesn't at the moment represent. The content, the authors of that content should be represented, like diversity – and also the way that it's presented and basically everything should be done in order for people to feel... safe and represented in their curriculum.” (WM_22_UCTSTUD1_BSocSc_2016)

¹⁴ Ontology is the nature of what we know (i.e. the knowledge itself) while epistemology is how we know (i.e. how knowledge is accumulated or gained).

Students felt that a way forward is to embark on a decolonisation process that includes interrupting the process of curriculum development and the process of teaching and learning in universities. Specifically, the students voiced that increasing the number of Black professors and thought leaders was key to infusing a decolonial curriculum. This, according to students, will have an impact on student performance in universities across the country, as they will be able to grasp concepts quickly, which could be explained using vernacular and indigenous languages. Students also indicated that they would like to be taught by someone who understands their background and experiences. In some cases the indigenous language of the teaching staff was important, as Black students prefer the teaching staff to augment lectures using mother tongue explanations.

“Lecturers at Fort Hare - here it’s mostly Black students who are the majority so you find that a lecturer will say something in isiXhosa and then also translate into English... I don’t have a problem with it... Sometimes you need to say things in Xhosa.” (BF_31_UFHSTUD6_BAdmin_2014)

Black students further articulated their dissatisfaction with the curriculum and the manner in which they are being taught in some universities in South Africa. They reflected on the state of the academic literature and content as wholly un-African.

“Why aren't we reading like your literature from Blacks? Reading court cases decided by your Black chief justices? But you're busy reading cases from 1902... We just need to transform everything. Like the curriculum needs to be transformed in that way, starting with the literature that we're reading.” (BM_21_UCTSTUD9_BSocSc_2016)

The majority of students felt that even in situations where the content and literature on Africa is available, it is written by White scholars. The students were not only critiquing the knowledge, but also were implicating Black academics as silent participants in the knowledge production process.

Discussion

This chapter has highlighted issues and approaches to understanding how race impacts learning in South Africa’s universities. The evidence points to continuing confidence that historically disadvantaged students (i.e. Black, Coloured, and Indian) hold highly the potential of education to provide them with the skills, opportunities, and knowledge to be able to fully participate and succeed in South African society. These students hold this view despite their experiences, and the feeling that the tertiary education system has been unable to respond to their needs, interests, expectations, and aspirations. Attending university still provides a life changing opportunity not only to empower themselves, but also their families and communities. From the interviews it is clear that regardless of non-inclusive environments of learning or how race identification (dis)advantages them, they are somewhat still optimistic about future prospects.

The research highlights the prevalence of racism and racial bias on campuses in South Africa twenty-three years after the end of Apartheid. Racial bias manifests itself in many ways from the perpetuation of racial stereotypes, to overt and subtle expressions of racism, to uncomfortable classroom encounters where language and the curriculum are exclusionary. Most students reported that educators (who are often not Black) were unaccommodating and distant. The students (mostly Black) criticised the educators’ use of subtle or overt mechanisms of exclusion. The students mentioned both verbal and nonverbal communication tactics as ways in which educators disregard them. These negative interactions include: being ignored or overlooked in class discussions, being patronised and humiliated in front of their peers, being assessed unfairly, experiencing challenges or feeling less motivated during class discussions, being accused of cheating if they do well, and facing expectations to perform lower than other students on exams.

Such messages cause students to feel alienated and excluded from the academic environment and this has potential of diminishing their confidence to succeed.

Although some students did not indicate that they had been personally affected by racism and racial discrimination on campus, they acknowledged that race and racialisation processes played a role in their integration to university life (i.e. who they hang out with, what activities or events they attend, what language they speak on campus, where they live on campus, who teaches them, how good is the infrastructure in their departments or faculties, or how they socialise with each other). Generally, early exposure to diversity (i.e. diverse cultures, languages, different socio-economic class, population groups and so forth) equipped students with tools to better navigate the terrain of a university campus. Good high school education also primed students to excel and concentrate more on their studies instead of feeling that they have to fit-in or 'hustle' in a somewhat hostile terrain in order to survive.

A learner, whose cultural upbringing differs from their lecturers may experience classroom interaction differently. If cultural expectations are not foregrounded, educators and learners alike might remain unaware of such possible cultural influences; they can cause misunderstandings in the classroom. All students enter the classroom with racialised and classed identities, whether consciously or unconsciously. Students and lecturers alike bring their histories into classrooms and respond to certain historical/contextual, and pedagogical approaches that are distinct to their lived experiences. This is accomplished by providing materials or examples that draw from a wide variety of backgrounds. As such, creating inclusive, supportive learning environments that are cognisant of all markers of difference requires acknowledging and addressing the centrality of these differences in the classroom and beyond. Critical feminist scholar, Yvonne Jewkes (2012, p. 68) suggests that "knowledge is not something objective and removed from our own bodies, experiences, and emotions but is created through our experiences of the world as a sensuous and affective activity".

It is clear from the conversations with the students that the issue of knowledge production and staff representation has an impact on how students navigate university life. If the majority of students feel that lecturers, professors, and university administrators are not representative of the diversity in the country or the curriculum is immaterial and inappropriate; then all students are deprived of perspectives, understandings, and worldviews that diverse knowledge systems bring. In this case, Black students will continue to feel alienated from universities they have inherited because these universities are not transformed enough to reflect, affirm, and narrate African systems of knowledge and practice.

Recommendations

Accommodation and university resources

1. An audit of residence demographics from undergraduate to postgraduate housing must account for which students are in need and which students can find alternate accommodation.
2. Residence housing criteria must be reviewed with ongoing audits of how students of different racial background are treated and in which residences they are placed.
3. A similar audit must be taken on the distribution of university resources – computers and internet access – to discern if students that are most in need are not marginalised by advantaged students who are able to seek alternate resources.

University symbols

4. Student activities aimed at encouraging diversity in social groups both inside and outside the classroom must be encouraged to counter the legacy of isolation of Black students in historically White universities.

5. Awareness must be raised regarding the naming of buildings, and the presence of university symbols and artworks that are perceived by students as exclusionary.

Academic staff

6. Internal structures must be created or improved so that students can report racial abuses by academic and management staff.
7. In cases where students are victimised and not provided with adequate support by the university, external structures must be made available (e.g. a university race ombudsman).
8. Intentional investment must be made by universities and government to support young Black scholars along the path of academia to reach professorship.
9. Student's perceptions and treatment of Black lecturers must be challenged through exposure to teaching by a diverse grouping of lecturers from undergraduate to postgraduate studies.

Knowledge production

10. A formal course on the origin of race and racialisation should be included in every student's degree course.
11. Revision of course assessments and curriculum must take place every 2-3 years to ensure that the curriculum remains relevant to current events while rooted in a clear understanding of past events.
12. Curricula must draw on African scholars (and those from the Global South) as key components to the work being studied.
13. Government and universities must dedicate funding towards publishing, writing and other areas that influence the cycle of knowledge production to ensure that South African universities can speak to the realities of the country, continent and the rest of the world.

CHAPTER 4 GENDER DYNAMICS AND (IN)EQUALITY OF EXPERIENCES

Summary

University environments can be regarded in some aspects as microcosms for societal norms and this is particularly evident around gender and sexual orientation. Through the perpetuation of pervasive attitudes, behaviours and invisibilised structures, universities can be fertile spaces that allow for the expansion of patriarchy, homophobia, misogyny and sexism. As a result, shifts in university policies towards gender mainstreaming, affirmative action and other transformation mechanisms need to be monitored. Top-level changes in policy must be seen to translate into shifting practice across structures and in students lived experiences. The findings with regard to gender dynamics on various campuses reveal that students hold somewhat of an awareness of how gender functions and dictates the interactions between peers and faculty and how it operates to shape institutional culture, mobility, societal norms and culture. There were also many students in the study that indicated that they received no benefit or disadvantage due to their gender or sexuality. However, a careful analysis of their responses showed how their experiences and perceptions were patently gendered.

This chapter examines how students understand gender differences as influencers of success and/or failure at university. More specifically, the observations by students are used to unpack how gender affects levels of confidence and perceptions of success. To provide this context, the section reviews lived experiences (i.e. barriers, challenges, and opportunities) concerning gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. This is explained by students who self-identify as heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex, and the experiences that have shaped their lives at university and beyond. Additionally, interrogations of the manner in which experiences of gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation in context, or observations about it (including experiences of discrimination, homophobia, and general perceptions of safety, violence, and security on campus) affect students differently. There is further elaboration on students' observations and reflections on how gender and sexuality operate in the classroom and how this in turn perpetuates (dis)advantage on campus through their behaviour, safety concerns, use of available resources, participating in the classroom and socialising with peers.

The recommendations for this chapter are outlined according to governance and leadership, academic staff, infrastructure and safety, and student support. There is an acknowledgment that university management and student structures hold a great deal of influence that can be leveraged to interrupt societal norms of marginalisation. In the same breath, both bodies must also be held accountable for not recognising and representing the gendered experiences of female students and students who identify as belonging to the LGBTQI group. It is therefore necessary that reporting mechanisms are developed and strengthened. With regards to academic staff, critical analysis must be given to the composition of staff and representation of women specifically in fields that are male dominated. Spatial planning and safety within the university environment requires greater attention with emphasis placed on equal access to facilities and availability of protection against potential dangers while on campus and travelling off campus. There is a clear need for further student support on issues of gender and sexuality. The recommendations in this area are to create mechanisms for students to report staff in cases of abuse as well as forming organisations within the university to assist students in distress regarding gender dynamics. On a macro level, there is a need for students to become more aware of gender dynamics at play on campus, especially regarding automatic patriarchal thinking and actions. Through five years of engaging with students, it became evident that many universities need to develop programmes that aim to reduce gender bias and disadvantage as well as increase awareness around issues of sexual orientation and gender. For this to be realised, universities must be committed to examining and changing traditional hierarchical social structures that operate to maintain a gendered status quo for both students and staff.

Introduction

There is a paucity of literature on gender in HEIs in South Africa. In 2008, a report of the conference *Institutional Cultures and Higher Education Leadership: Where are the women?* noted that there is a necessity for a “more nuanced analyses of the gendered and racialised higher education environment” (DHE, CHE, HESA & HERS-SA, 2008, p. 3). Universities, were challenged to “move beyond mere compliance, to changing attitudes and cultures”, and the need to highlight “Black women’s experiences of racialised knowledge, sexist stereotypes and the politics of pedagogy” was raised (2008, p. 3). The report focused particularly on leadership within HEIs (see for example, Mabokela and Mawila, 2004), but dynamics of race and gender continue to operate at all levels of university life, and a longitudinal qualitative study is a useful way of drawing out the experiences of students who mediate the complex intersections of race, class and gender. The 2009 CHE *Response to the Ministerial Report* makes reference to this, stating that it is highly unlikely that the “the endemic rape and sexual harassment in South African society” has not filtered into universities. CHE states the importance of “serious steps to both protect and promote the interests of women”, and to continue its work with DHET, HESA and HERS-SA in monitoring women’s positions in HEIs (CHE, 2009, p. 8-9).

South African scholarship on women’s experiences in HEI point to the lack of recognition young female students give to gender in their everyday university realities. Moorosi and Moletsane (2009) narrate how young women in the Sciences at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) did not identify gender as significant in their academic experiences, articulating that the university space is not hostile to women. However, on deeper probing, some of these young women revealed the multiple ways in which gender affects their lives at universities. Some of these experiences included gendered treatment by male students, such as the downplaying of women’s ability to succeed in specialised science programmes, sexual innuendos used by male students in exchange for academic assistance (not requested by female students), and the targeting of first-year female students.

The findings of the current study, however advances knowledge about gendered experiences of South African universities by pointing to how sexual orientation, gender expression and gender identity impact students in university and beyond. Understanding how gender differences¹⁵ operate at university and in society requires an interrogation of how males and females experience life similarly and/or differently. The current study describes how students understand gender as an influencer of success and/or failure at university. Particularly, how male and female students’ levels of confidence affect their perceptions of success or failure at university campuses around the country.

First the chapter unpacks notions of patriarchy; its meanings and how patriarchy is exemplified at university through who leads and who is represented. The discussion then moves to gendered socialization, that is, the insidious ways in which men and women are differently socialized in a South African context. The findings then point to the varied ways in which students feel like gender issues are being addressed or not on campus, in particular the way policy often fails to translate to practice. Critical to the findings were participants sharing the impact of toxic masculinities, aggressive males and sexual exploitation where young female students often fall victim. Finally the findings point to the interplay between sexuality as an interpersonal and familial struggle that can insulate both women and LGBTQI students into a space where they are

¹⁵ The term gender and sex are at times used interchangeably in social science and humanities literature depending on the disciplinary traditions. In this chapter we adopt a critical social constructivist approach where the term *sex* is understood as a biological construct, referring to the genetic, hormonal, anatomical, and physiological characteristics on whose basis one is labelled at birth as either male or female. *Gender*, on the other hand, denotes a cultural construct in which meanings of patterns of behaviour, experience, and personality that are labelled masculine or feminine.

further silenced and isolated both in learning environments on campus and in their homes. Being aware and knowledgeable of the range of potential gender and sexual identities will promote open, accepting, and academically supportive environments necessary for all students to thrive.

Findings

Many students in the study stated that they were shown no benefit or preference as a result of their gender or sexuality at university, citing that “in class we were just treated as students.”¹⁶ Nevertheless the following findings reflect more nuanced observations and insights on how gender operates for individual students, in their interaction with other students and faculty and how gender affects institutional culture, mobility, society and culture more broadly.

Understanding the meaning of patriarchy and gender difference on campus

Many participants understood gender differences through a lens of patriarchy. In their brainstorm of the term, participants not only demystified patriarchy as a social system that perpetuates male dominance and advantage in every sphere of life, but also observed its real and deeply operational influence on campuses and the society at large. Although some students did not know what patriarchy was or meant, many who did pointed out that patriarchy is alive and well on campuses and universities across the country. Students particularly pointed to numerous structures and bodies within universities where patriarchy is prevalent including student councils, in classrooms, and in university governance structures.

Representation and leadership

The infrastructures on some campuses were reported to be unfriendly to the female students, an indication that architectural designs did not recognise the needs of women in the past years.

“Ya! Then all of the toilets there are only male toilets... [women] must go back through the main building in order for to go to the toilet.” (BM_23_UJSTUD9_BA_2016)

Furthermore where female students were involved in university politics they often face a barrage of male aggression and undermining.

“I’ve noticed at Fort Hare... the males really do look down on us and they get surprised when they find an outspoken female like myself... They demean us mostly and they get so surprised when you are outspoken, you can think for yourself. And so here that’s what I’ve noticed, but in the outside world I think it’s slowly changing. I think woman and especially Black woman, they’re slowly making a name for themselves and proving for themselves... so hopefully by the time I get into the professional world it won’t even matter whether you are female or male.”(BF_23_UFHSTUD7_BSocSc_2014)

With regards to university leadership and top management, most positions of authority and influence are predominantly male. For example, students recognised there were very few female vice chancellors, head of departments, deans, professors, and PhD candidates.

“Um... men being given preference over senior positions in management and then you find that one woman being put there just for a stat.” (BM_21_UCTSTUD9_BSocSc_2016)

¹⁶ BF_22_CPUTSTUD8_API_2017

“Well, where I can say that there's patriarchy, it starts at the management. I've never seen any lady in management... senior management – I've never seen any lady.” (BM_22_UFHSTUD3_BSocW_2016)

“I think women still have to work extra harder than men because a lot of positions are still occupied by men. If you go to my faculty, like your professors and your Deans, it's mostly still men.” (BF_24_UJSTUD8_BA_2016)

It was found that male students also dominate enrolment in professional degrees such as medicine, electrical and civil engineering, and computer sciences.

“It's very different, like, I think we're the only faculty – this is an assumption – but I think we're the only faculty that has the least women in it, because you can literally count.” (BM_22_UJSTUD5_ElecEng_2016)

“I don't know, I guess females aren't all into Engineering – I know I'm not into Engineering and all of that. I wouldn't just wake up one day in matric and think, definitely going for Engineering – I wouldn't... The two engineers I know are males.” (BF_22_UJSTUD7_LLB_2016)

“There are some modules like- because I know for Mechanical Design it's strictly Mechanical students. I think in that class we were 80. There was six girls in the whole class.” (BM_23_UJSTUD10_BEng_2016)

Female students are not only underrepresented in class in these specialised fields (including commercial fields like law and accounting), but positions are still dominated by males.

“Oh, teaching us now are males – males in my department. But I know people outside Engineering, like HR, Industrial Psychology, Anthropology – their lecturers are mostly female. So I think it differs from department to department... Um, for me it doesn't matter... because I think what depends is that the person knows their work.” (BM_22_UJSTUD5_ElecEng_2016)

Patriarchy also manifests itself not only in choices in leadership, but also in attitudes of who should lead. The participants maintain that males are given preferential treatment over women and attitudes towards female university leaders were improper.

“I think it does [matter] because I remember when I was at CPUT I think we had a Dean who was a woman or she was the head of something and every time the SRC boys will refer to her they'd be like, 'One of the reasons CPUT is like this is because we are being run by a woman'. It also made me a bit angry because I was like- I feel like a woman can run you know a university, a country the same way any man can – that it doesn't have anything to do with whether she's a woman or not.” (BF_22_CPUTSTUD2_BCom_2016)

The above quote points to the fact that women leaders are looked down upon as not capable of leading compared to their male counterparts. The majority of participants indicated that society, as a whole is still patriarchal.

“I mean, if I look at our government, we have never had a female president before. I look at home; my dad is the head of the house... The top Engineers right now, most of them are males. And also in those high-ranking positions, the gender you find at those top positions are usually males – from what I have seen anyway.” (BM_22_UJSTUD1_BEng_2016)

“No it’s not equal in a sense that people still don’t believe that a woman can lead them ... I don’t know what makes them don’t believe so. I don’t know maybe it’s because of their gender stereotypes. I don’t know perhaps that’s the case but I think if people can be educated. No let me not say educated but if women are given a chance to show that they can play an equal role in leadership like men.” (BM_20_UJSTUD3_CivEng_2014)

Gendered socialisation

Men and women are socialised to assume gender roles and through the institution of the family, these roles are shaped and performed both publicly and privately. Female roles are strenuous and highly demanding as at times they have double roles. They have to fulfil societal roles and expectations.

“Sometimes you kinda get confused, in our culture women are meant to be submissive, they are not meant to speak very much. So when you get to school you’re meant to engage in the classroom, even in tutorials. Sometimes you’ll find yourself keeping quiet [laughs]. Rather have the guy talk because that’s what you grew up knowing. It’s nice to have a place where you can go and just be a person where it’s not like ‘you’re a woman, you are a man’. At home women have to kneel and do everything for a man.” (BM_19_UCTSTUD5_BSocSci_2013)

According to most students patriarchal practices are learned through culture and perpetuated through socialisation processes. Households are the biggest incubators of patriarchy where for example women continue to be ignored and side-lined in decision-making processes. Female respondents shared that even mobility requires male permission. This clearly shows that male dominance is still rampant in households.

“Whatever you're doing that requires culture, you need a male and there is a male that is considered as the head of the home. For everyone in the family there's just one head and whatever the head says goes. Whether you agree or don't agree.” (BF_23_UFHSTUD2_LL2016)

“Well, that’s when most things are done by men in the interest of men, while women continue to backtrack and remain side-lined. Women just remain in the kitchen and women assume their duties at home while men are at the forefront.” (BF_22_NWUSTUD7_LL2016)

In addition to patriarchy manifested in family gender roles and responsibilities, being male or female determines life prospects according to student participants. As such, students suggested that the power of women to make career choices and general decisions is limited as compared to their male counterparts.

“The society I grew up in – I grew up in a society without a female Attorney, without a female Doctor, with [women] only teachers and nurses. And I know only one female Professor from there [home]... So from the area with more than 5,000 households, only one female Professor from this area and more than six male Professors. So that alone... I always say females are just vulnerable.” (BM_21_UKZNSTUD7_LL2015)

This student’s account is in many ways reflective of the challenges that women are confronted with both within the university setting and once they leave and enter the professional world. The university environment is therefore a microcosm of gendered norms, from students’ interactions with lecturers and their peers to their thinking around leadership and authority.

Progress and challenges in addressing gender equity on campuses

When asked to comment on progress in addressing gender safety issues on campuses, generally most student participants indicated that there is no doubt that gender equality is making some inroads in their respective universities. Gender equality at workplaces is slowly being achieved in terms of availing opportunities to females. However, equity is still trailing behind because proportional representation is not on par with their male counterparts and oftentimes policies fail to translate to practice.

Linking policy and practice

The students pointed to the remarkable increase of female students and professors in their institutions of higher learning.

“Yes for sure the gender equality is not a big issue as in the past; I would say its equal here on campus. There are a lot of woman who are positioned higher than any other man on campus so yah that speaks for itself that it is equal on our campus.” (WM_20_NWUSTUD2_BEd_2014)

Furthermore, progress is being made to mainstream gender issues; women empowerment strategies are being put in place to cushion women from the risks and dangers associated with gender inequalities, historical subordination and marginalisation.

“There is now special preference for women... I do understand they are more vulnerable than guys. You know, you can have a situation... where some guys were sleeping on campus because they're homeless. That could be a dangerous situation for females... They're favoured, but I think it's for a good cause because- you might say gender equality but, to be honest in all fairness, the world is a little bit harsher for women than it is to guys.” (BM_23_UJSTUD10_BEng_2016)

Gender – sexual safety

Despite some progress being made, the general picture still paints women as vulnerable in certain spheres of university life. Although there are overall efforts to make campuses safe spaces for women through gender-based violence campaigns, for instance, participants' responses reflect an inordinate amount of sexual misconduct occurring on university campuses. Some students mentioned not being victims of, or witnesses to, sexual violence or inappropriateness between faculty and students or between students and students. But many students were vocal about the visibility of sexual violence on campus especially during campus bashes and events where binge drinking occurs. There were also many female students who expressed that they do not feel safe on or off campus and that the issue of safety definitely limits mobility i.e. freedom to move on or off campus which can eventually affect academic performance.

Men have more privileges, opportunities, and choices for mobility at home and in their educational careers at university. Many young men are highly mobile and they have no tight restrictions in terms of curfew for example. The general assumption is that the girl child is more restricted than the boy child.

“Yes [laughs] because, like after, if I got a late class here in school my aunt will be like, ‘Where are you now?’ and I'll be like, ‘Catching a taxi’ and she will be like, ‘You are a girl, you're not supposed to be walking in the dark’. So, I'm thinking if I was a boy then she

wouldn't have so much trouble, she will be like, 'Oh okay, he's come back.' (CF_19_UKZNSTUD3_BA_2013).

This student's frustration was iterated by many female students who felt handcuffed by their gender because of the inability to do certain things on campus at certain times. This may mean sacrificing a study group, group meeting or limited access to the computer labs or library which, in many instances is a direct disadvantage to a student's academic progress:

"Yah living at the res is an advantage for me because the library is close. I can go home when the library closes not when it's dark. It's safe if I decide to go and study around 3am until sunrise at the library - I know that I'm safe. There's security, no one is going to attack me or anything like that. I don't have a laptop and I really use the internet a lot. I go to the computer lab. It's way much closer than if I was living off campus." (BF_20_ULSTUD9_LLB_2014)

"The security company they always tell us don't walk alone you are a girl, and I feel like the fact that I'm a girl doesn't give people the right to mug me or something, because my roommate was mugged by gun point she's traumatized, it was so bad... we are targeted. Guys never get mugged. I never heard of any guy being mugged on that road." (BF_21_UJSTUD7_LLB_2015)

"Our campuses are not safe because for us if you are female you cannot study at night, you cannot go and study at night because a Library it's very far from our residence because it's a satellite campus so our reses are all over and you can't even study at res because people will be making noise telling you that a res it's not a place to study it's a place to sleep." (BF_21_UFHSTUD2_LLB_2014)

"It sucks because sometimes you actually need to be on campus like until late and then you don't wanna be walking and you won't feel safe and then when something happens people will be like "it's your fault, why were you walking around at that time?" - but you are like "I also needed to get my work done, like what was I supposed to do." (BF_21_UCTSTUD5_BSocSc_2015)

These narratives reveal persistent feelings of fear around campus mobility, victim blaming and the potential for traumatic attacks – these are not stories one would hope to hear in a modern university. One student shares a possible solution, speaking about an on campus domicile for 'day scholars' that functions as some sort of overnight space for students who struggle with freedom of movement:

"It's like a daily Res. It's like a residential area but we don't sleep there. You can if you want to – but not on a daily though. If you decide to study overnight in the Library and it's unsafe to walk out. As a female I can't just walk out in Johannesburg alone, I can sleep there, I can chill there in between classes. It's like a sorority" (BF_22_UJSTUD7_LLB_2016).

This kind of space could be a temporary solution for vulnerable students who do not feel as though it is fair to have to choose between their safety and their academic performance. Where students fear for their safety, others detail instances of sexual violence that necessitate safe spaces for female students on and off campus. Female students are victimised in large numbers with perpetrators never brought to book even when violations are reported or witnessed. One student recounted an experience of being harassed by a police officer and when she brought it to the attention of a female officer, she was not protected.

“He grabbed my butt. I have an evil eye, so I turned and looked at him to give him my evil stare. He laughs. I go on with my singing, my dancing – he does it again. So I look around, I see a female cop. I walk to her, I’m like, ‘Sorry your colleague over there keeps harassing me and I’m really uncomfortable. So I don’t know, would you like to talk to him or I don’t know what happens from here’. Because I was trying to be really calm and mature about this situation. She laughs as a female in her uniform.” (BF_22_UJSTUD7_LL2016)

Furthermore students from three different universities detail the lack of safety and frequently reported rapes at female residences

“In my opinion I think there’s more problems when it comes to females, females have more problems at university especially at Fort Hare because... They are being raped especially in female res... There’s high rape of females there.” (BM_25_UFHSTUD10_BA_2014)

“Yahh in 2013 there was a rape here in the res, more especially this side they rape, we found that they always get access to girl’s residence, they were raping them.” (BM_22_UJSTUD9_BA_2015)

“But I do hear of stories, one girl was nearly even raped at the res [pause] girls are attacked. You can’t go from the library and walk to the res alone; you have to call a male friend... Yah and there is no lights on campus... Some are attacks by the students, some are attacks from people who lived in the townships but on campus, they happen on campus.” (BF_23_UFHSTUD7_BSocSc_2014)

“Like there was a case last year, gate 2, ja I think it was around 10... ja and a student was raped.... I don’t know where she was going, the bus waits at the student centre... Ja she was outside the campus.” (BF_21_ULSTUD6_BSc_2015)

UCTSTUD2 however says, at her university, campus protection services are very active and visible on campus, so she feels relatively safe:

“I see them in their reflective vests. And I feel safe when they are here and I know where their offices are should I ever be in trouble, and not many students have had bad experiences on campus so that makes me feel safer. But as soon as I move out of campus then I feel unsafe, because there have been horrible stories of what people can do to females, so naturally because of these stories I would feel unsafe when there’s no one there to protect me really.” (BF_21_UCTSTUD2_BSocSc_2015)

UCTSTUD2 is describing the many threats to women’s lives in university, a reflection of the broader society in which we live. Recent news-making protests against rape culture (e.g. RU Disrupt at Rhodes University) that is perpetuated on university campuses and in residences indicate that female students and allies have had enough of being victimized and are prepared to fight for protection and justice. These realities are indicative of the void between university policies around gender equity and support for female students and the practical implementation. The experiences of female students being marginalised and abused occurs in other more invisible and pervasive ways that often go unnoticed.

Toxic masculinities and exploitive relations

Gender exploitation by males is expressed through abusing their power as educators, tutors, or lecturers to manipulate female students (who are usually less powerful) for sexual favours in return of being assessed favourably or assisted with funding or residence for instance. While there were mixed responses to the extent of this occurring un-noticed on campuses around the

country, the student participants cited incidences where relations between female students and lecturers were exploitative usually culminating into sexual exploitation and transactional sex between the parties. DUTSTUD1 for instance mentions a member of staff sharing; “he [the male member of staff] is the guy that dates the chicks [female students]”¹⁷. NWUSTUD3 also describes an illicit relationship between a lecturer and student: “I use to see them... People told me that they have been dating for a long time but I just found out early last year”.¹⁸

According to student participants, male lecturers give special favours and treatment to female students whilst female students indicated that male students get special treatment from female lecturers.

“Most of our tutors or demonstrators are young males so they tend to pay more attention to the females. So obviously they have ulterior motives in mind.” (BM_22_UJSTUD1_BEng_2016)

“I find lecturers are more prone to help the female students... or maybe you're going to look for some marks. He'll be very harsh on me but then with the female students – I don't know, he's more lenient.” (BM_22_UJSTUD5_ElecEng_2016)

“At entering level it seemed unfair to be a man because the females were favoured more by lecturers and so on. As a man you are expected to have it all figured out.” (BM_22_ULSTUD4_BA_2017)

Female students indicated that they prefer not to be given special treatment. They want to be seen as equal to their male counterparts.

“When I’m doing group work I don’t allow people to undermine me... I think it basically depends on how vocal you are about how you feel about the whole group work thing but I’m sure there are people here who have been undermined in situations like that. So it is something that does happen.” (BF_22_CPUTSTUD2_BCom_2016)

“I don’t know where males got the idea that they can treat us anyhow and have a say to how we walk, dress and speak. I have always had to defend myself and other women even though I was viewed as bitter by males. There are many instances where I had to work with males in groups and they implied that some work is for females only. I have been involved in programmes where I had very bad encounters with males because of how they treat us. Being a women in varsity has taught me to defend myself and women”. (BF_22_UFHSTUD2_LLBB_2017)

Another example mentioned by female students is exploitation at the hands of the largely male student representatives. As highlighted by the quotes that follow, at some universities, giving SRC influence over residence allocation might lead to or encourage sexual abuses.

“Yes, it’s something that I witnessed. Um at UKZN for example you’d get people who would do sexual things just to get residence.” (BF_20_UKZNSTUD4_BSocSc_2015)

“SRC members they take advantage of those young females who come from all over. They come to the university, they don’t know anything about Fort Hare. They don’t have any res, they don’t have any place to sleep, they don’t have NSFAS. They take advantage of them, they use them. They become sex slaves to get what they want, they sleep with them.” (BF_21_UFHSTUD2_LLBB_2014)

¹⁷ BF_22_DUTSTUD1_IT_2016

¹⁸ BF_21_NWUSTUD3_BCom_2015

Female students indicated that at times it is difficult to fight back or empower themselves because of certain biases about female gender roles that are cemented and perpetuated in society.

“It’s really difficult for a girl to confront someone.” (BF_18_NWUSTUD9_LLB_2013)

“There’s a whole patriarchal thing but I’ve never experienced that. There are certain roles that they see women to fulfil and men to fulfil and I’m okay with certain things. I’m fine with the women cooking and whatever but to me there’s a line where the man should also put input and be there to help out when need be. But when it comes to university I think if you are a Black female you have a better opportunity than any other gender and race.”(CF_19_UCTSTUD6_BA_2013)

Gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation at university

Although a modest body of knowledge on LGBTIQ experiences in diverse social settings has been established in the literature in terms of sexual and gender minority stigmatisation in African contexts (see Welle et al, 2006; Kajubi, 2007; Reddy et al, 2009), specific work on the educational experiences of LGBTIQ students in South African universities have been the subject of relatively little attention, particularly with regards to the impact these identities have on learning experiences and outcomes. Students in the current study did not share overt experiences of discrimination, but other studies [i.e. an American and Australian study on ‘campus climate’ by Hurtado, Carter, & Kardia (1998)] indicate that most often LGBTIQ students frequently report fears for their physical safety, frequent occurrences of disparaging remarks or jokes regarding sexual orientation, and students feeling as if they need to censor themselves in classroom environments or academic activities for fear of negative repercussions from students and educators. Explicit and implicit discrimination based on gender identity, sexual orientation or gender expression may negatively influence student’s motivations to engage and participate fully in learning.

The invisible minority

Only three participants in the study sample overtly identified as belonging to the LGBTIQ community. The students are all Black males at UFH, UJ and UCT respectively. Only one of the two has officially “come out” and while the other two were somewhat comfortable talking about their sexuality in annual participant interviews, they were not as open about their sexuality at university or even with their families.

“Let’s start by what I don’t tell most people. I’m actually gay, so based on what’s happening around lately and if you are involved in religion and stuff, I just feel like connected to people, because mostly on campus they say gay people don’t interact with other people they just hang out with themselves.” (BM_22_UJSTUD10_BEng_2013)

Where their sexuality seems to be a hindrance is when mixing with other men (who make insensitive and homophobic comments) or feelings of safety i.e. can I be myself in this environment or am I under threat.

“Some people make jokes, some inappropriate jokes like if they are sitting behind you and they would be like ‘gay people should be burned’, of which if I were to go to the dean and report them they would be in serious trouble. Sometimes you just like, you don’t want to do something bad to people, if they get in trouble, if their academic results are not good and now the disciplinary plea comes out and they would be kicked out of school.” (BM_22_UJSTUD10_BEng_2013)

“When I was in the lift going up coming from the ground floor, the guys that were there, the Xhosa guys they just said no, they said ‘soze ndingene kwilift nemoffie’, they said they won’t go in the lift with a moffie, such things they thought I couldn’t hear, they were actually surprised when they saw that I can actually hear what they were saying.” (BM_18_UCTSTUD9_BSocSci_2013)

“I would say being homosexual it is not easy, it not very accepted... at the res that I was in, I ran for House Comm because I wanted to address the matter which has bothered me for quite some time, because what happened to me last year where some guys said they would not take a lift with me because of my sexuality”. (BM_19_UCTSTUD9_BSocSc_2014)

Apart from the occasional bullying, ostracising, and stigmatisation by other students and staff, LGBTQI students (who often have no family or community support to whom they could turn), experience both overt and subtle discrimination in course assessments and overall treatment on campuses in South Africa. On numerous campuses LGBTQI students choose not to disclose their sexual orientation because they fear stigmatization. A student pointed out that tolerance in most of the campuses is very low and stigmatisation is very rampant.

“That’s a huge one. Most people they don’t ask you if you are gay. It’s when you are more comfortable talking to each other and then we are like friends that’s when they ask. But others when you sit down they just walk away, and if it makes them not say something bad it’s for the better, instead of getting into an argument. It has been a challenge.”(BM_22_UJSTUD10_BEng_2013)

“Not completely openly, not at home, because it’s a different story at home but here I found it easier to actually adapt and become the person that I want to be. I do identify as, I’ve been labelled, I’ve become the gay ambassador at student residence somehow because what I did... it was the first time a person actually spoke about it.” (BM_18_UCTSTUD9_BSocSci_2013)

Several students revealed that even though there are policies in their respective universities to advance and protect LGBTQI rights, universities are still failing to enforce these policies. Furthermore, at times students are reluctant to openly advocate for their rights out of fear of suspension or even expulsion.

“It was a problem for me because it was going through my mind that what if UCT actually expelled me and I had to go home, and then everything else would be exposed because my parents would actually want to know what happened. They would want to look at the reason for my expulsion and what not. No parent would want to sit and have their child back home and not say anything. I’d be exposed for my sexuality, for the things I’ve - it’s crazy. It was going to be out of control, till today I haven’t told my parents about that incident.”(BM_20_UCTSTUD9_BSocSc_2015)

“At UWC there’s much presence of them [gay people] also there. Nevertheless I don’t make myself visible. At the same time I wouldn’t say I’m hiding myself. It’s a conversation I’m open to. Be it that there’s a chance, okay fine someone says, ‘You know what I would like to get to know A, B and C about you’. Then fine, I’m open to such a conversation. And then to some point it’s still a conversation that I just wouldn’t have with particular people.” (BM_21_UFHSTUD1_BSc_2016)

Most students who self-identified as LGBTQI could not, however come into terms with circulating stereotypes about who they are and whom people think they ought to be. A student comments:

“I actually addressed this... being gay or bi-sexual does not make you less of a man than you are. And you need to know the proper definition of a man. A man is a person who respects people, who stands his ground and I feel that those are the same qualities or whatever that fall under a person who is gay. I’m a man yes, I acknowledge I am a man. The only difference is in terms of my sexual preference, that is all. But I’m still a man. You can’t call me a woman just because I am gay or bi-sexual.”
(BM_18_UCTSTUD9_BSocSci_2013)

In his view, LGBTQI identity is about human rights and the right and dignity to control his body and to authentically express who he is and be comfortable in his own skin. Thus, identifying as LGBTQI for students is about a right to exist regardless of what others might suggest.

Discussion

Feminist scholars such as hooks (2000b), Johnson (2005) and Crawley et al (2008) have critiqued educational practices that perpetuate patriarchy. They point to a fundamental discourse of power and power dynamics between men and women and how that power is exerted and cemented habitually, historically, and socially on university campuses. The core attributes of patriarchy according to feminist scholars is that patriarchy is expressed in a way that holds up maleness as central, while femaleness is considered subordinate. Additionally, according to hooks (2000b) patriarchy perpetuates male domination whereby males occupy the most important and visible roles, while women who hold these positions are expected to subscribe to male norms. The attributes of power, control, rationality, and extreme competitiveness espoused in universities are examples of what patriarchal societies may consider male qualities, whereas compassion, emotional expressiveness, or the ability to nurture would be considered subordinate qualities in patriarchal systems of learning. Additionally patriarchy cements gender specific roles men and women must play (i.e. men as leading, and women supporting). Furthermore, patriarchy protects traditional hierarchical social structures that affords males positions of privilege. If a person challenges such structures, then the response is to increase control and solidify these structures.

The findings in this section described how gender and sexual identities affect students’ experiences in university. University environments have proven to be incubators for patriarchy, homophobia, and sexism to flourish, but the existence of strong, in-house gender equity action strategies and gender mainstreaming actions at the organisational level can go a long way in turning the situation around for increased equity for women. As suggested by student participants, many universities can develop programmes that seek to eliminate gender bias and disadvantage as well as increase awareness around issues of sexual orientation. To ensure that support for female students and those who self-identity as LGBTQI is effective at university, a pool of qualified specialists who are conscious of gender bias must be recruited to implement these interventions.

In other words, we cannot expect to see patriarchy, sexism, gender-based violence, homophobia and other related exclusions addressed if the proportion of university authorities (i.e. professors and decision makers) is not sentient of gender and sexuality-related (dis)advantage. What is needed is leadership that affirms, recognises, and acknowledges that gender bias in all its manifestations is still problematic in university campuses around the country and thus requires full attention in praxis. Therefore, it is imperative that universities adhere to equity principles of inclusivity espoused in their transformation charters in hiring and retention of historically excluded academics (i.e. Black, female, and sexual minorities) to ensure that the necessary attitudinal and structural changes are addressed.

The findings also underscore the importance of intersectional approaches in understanding student struggles for gender justice and in facilitating inclusive learning environments. Although

the paucity of literature on gender dynamics in South African higher education point to limited analysis of intersectionality, there is a necessity for a more nuanced exploration of the interlocking mechanisms between gender, race, and class where such varied experiences are acknowledged and affirmed. Research by Moorosi and Moletsane (2009) point to the need for such analyses, particularly as gender experiences in higher education institutions become more salient. Moorosi and Moletsane (2009) note that the non-feminist dispositions of the participants suggest that while notions of gender inequality were rejected by the participants, evidence from their own accounts suggests that it in fact played and would continue to play a role in their social and academic integration, and alienation in the sciences. They argue for a stronger recognition by students and university staff of how success and retention in these fields are influenced, whether acknowledged or not, by gender and race discrimination, and how staff need to be trained to have non-oppressive interactions with students from diverse backgrounds.

Recommendations

Governance and leadership

1. University management must take cognisance of their gendered composition as this influences their capacity to consider the experiences of female students and students who identify as belonging to the LGBTQI group.
2. Student leadership bodies must be held accountable for failing to represent their constituencies by marginalising their female and LGBTQI peers through a reporting mechanism.
3. Both student and management structures must be committed to not perpetuating societal norms of marginalisation.

Academic staff

4. Staff representation along gender lines must be examined with a drive towards encouraging female students to enter fields that would otherwise be male dominated.
5. Cases of undermining from students due to gendered positioning should be exposed with students made aware of their misconduct.

Infrastructure and safety

6. The design and layout of university buildings must recognise the need of female students as well as allow for equal access to facilities.
7. More investment must be taken towards student safety both on campus and while commuting off campus, specifically for female students who are vulnerable.
8. The answer to the question 'who should control access to/allocation of residence' needs to be painstakingly problematized because the answer has real implications for national and institutional policy. Grappling with this question might also provide insight into new approaches to gender based violence and sexual assault policies.

Student support

9. Students should be provided with mechanisms to report staff if it is felt that their actions either advantage or disadvantage their peers based on gender or sexual orientation.
10. In cases of abuse or fear of abuse, students should be made aware of support bodies that can assist with physical and mental distress.
11. Compulsory courses should be taught across all faculties and years of study where students are given the platform to disrupt patriarchal thinking and actions.

CHAPTER 5 LANGUAGE AND POWER AS STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

Summary

With 11 official languages in South Africa, language is never neutral and can be an academic obstacle, heighten racial tension, affect feelings of belonging and become the cause of shame and marginalisation in HEIs. The dominance of the English language in South African universities can be seen as an impasse as well as a necessary resource that promotes success in higher education. English has retained power despite the current HE language policy that aims for one African language to become the teaching language. Inequality is perpetuated where the absence of linguistic inclusion can be a structural barrier, a form of intellectual violence and an obstacle in a student's interaction within a university. Based on study findings and current HE language policy, this chapter looks specifically at how the languages being used at the eight universities studied - by administrators, in lecture rooms and between students - fail to affirm individuals as subjects of learning and prove to be another discriminatory practice hindering success in university.

We found that strategies employed by students involved taking a dictionary to class or using Google to look up unfamiliar words or concepts. Participants' comments also indicated that there are practical ways in which instructors can make the language used in class more accessible, illustrative and straight forward for better understanding. We found that most students equate the privileging of English and Afrikaans in many university contexts, to racial privilege. Of the different university cohorts studied, UJ, NWU, UL and UFH seemed to have the most to say about the way language operates at university, for different reasons. Several students talked about faculty members assuming they know a particular African language because they are Black and how this practice excludes Black foreign students and other Black students not speaking that language. In this regard some students hinted at 'tribalism' being at play - demonstrated through language. Many students, across the different universities, describe how they are automatically linguistically disadvantaged in university because of where they come from and how they were taught in secondary school. Understanding their disadvantage leads students to make socio-economic comparisons i.e. comments on township or rural backgrounds versus so called model C or private school backgrounds. Students describe a phenomena they termed as 'high level English' or 'good English'. So-called 'good English' takes into account what constitutes a 'good accent' i.e. which accents are valued, which accents are considered inaccessible and how these values are associated with intelligence and academic capacity. Several students complained about lecturers that are sometimes difficult to understand due to their language, accents or command of English. These lecturers are largely from other parts of the African continent, and like the students who face language barriers, is particular to Black academics.

While the chapter posits translanguaging as a possible way to address HE language issues, there remains little capacity and incentive for the instructors to make multilingualism or even translanguaging a full-fledged reality. On the other hand, in spaces where an attempt at multilingualism is occurring, students are reporting this to be an obstacle because of the presumption that all Black students necessarily speak the same African languages or because students have actually not been conditioned to embrace multilingualism and so it feels foreign to students who have grown accustomed, in formal academic spaces, to hearing English only.

We make recommendations for university administration that consider writing centres as sites for students' academic development. We ask whether it is possible to make one African language course compulsory for all students at all South African universities. We ask that university administration consider second and third language English speakers more deliberately and call for transparency and flexibility for languages used in lecture rooms between students and lecturers. We make recommendations for lecturers and faculty that embrace possible forms of translanguaging. We make recommendations for students to make better use of campus resources designed to improve

language and literacy. Finally, we make recommendations to government that monitoring and evaluation tools be used to discern how existing HE language policies are being enforced at different universities. Additionally we encourage civil society, together with educational institutions, government and corporations to actively participate in supporting multilingualism in South Africa. We make these recommendations to promote inclusivity and equality and to balance power relations between existing university structures and students.

Introduction

With 11 official languages in South Africa, language is never neutral and can be an academic obstacle, heighten racial tension, affect feelings of belonging and become the cause of shame and marginalisation in HEIs. An overwhelming majority of instruction at universities is conducted in English or Afrikaans. In 2001 the Council on Higher Education language policy framework noted:

Of the 21 universities, 16 use English as the language of tuition. In the other five institutions, English-medium tuition is steadily and often rapidly increasing alongside, and perhaps at the expense of, Afrikaans-medium tuition... Of the universities that returned the questionnaire on which the survey was based, hardly any can be said to be promoting the use of any African language as a Language of Tuition (CHE, 2001, p. 4).

The dominance of the English language in South African universities can be seen as an impasse as well as a necessary resource that promotes success in higher education. English has retained power despite the HE language policy that aims to facilitate that one African language become the teaching language. Inequality is perpetuated by the dominance of English in higher education where the absence of linguistic inclusion can be a structural barrier, a form of intellectual violence and an obstacle in a student's interaction within a university. Interaction operates on three institutional levels: (1) Administrative: language affects a student's ability to access resources, facilities, critical information and other 'help-seeking' behaviour; (2) Academic: language impacts a student's overall academic plan, confidence in their ability to learn and interact with lecturers and the broader faculty; and (3) Identity marker: language aids in the creation of identity and social relationships.

Language policy challenges plaguing the HE sector and affirmed by students in this study include: the dominance of English influencing the institutional culture of a university; Black students feeling marginalised at mostly Afrikaans institutions; and accent being commonly used as a marker of difference promoting prejudice (HESA, 2010, p. 30). The Rural Education Access Programme (REAP) speaks of language as a 'disadvantaging factor', particularly where the language of tuition in the higher education institution may be a second or even a third language for the student (2008). Aware that students enter with different language backgrounds, all the universities in this study offer services in different capacities to assist students with the language of instruction. These services include writing and literacy centres, extra curriculum support and assignment consultations. However, the true awareness of this reality is determined by the implementation and effectiveness of the services offered and the amount of capacity and resources afforded to the centres or support units.

UCT's Writing Centre is housed under the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED). UL's Writing Centre is housed under the Centre of Academic Excellence (CAE). NWU has an Academic Literacy and student support unit that offers students' one-on-one assistance with studying, reading and supplementary instruction. DUT has 5 Writing Centre's across its 5 campuses but, according to the website has only 20 trained tutors across those sites. UJ also has 4 Writing Centres across its 4 campuses that fall under the Academic Development Innovation (ADI) unit. UJ also boasts an entire Language Unit dedicated to ensuring the implementation of its language policies – this unit's effectiveness is something to investigate, if it is to be a model that can be

replicated. UKZN provides academic support programs for students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds and these programs focus on communication and academic writing. UFH's Writing Centre falls under the Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC) and is there to help students with writing assignments. Finally CPUT's Writing Centre offers assistance with writing, mathematics and physics. The centre is based on the Cape Town, Mowbray, Bellville and Tygerberg campuses. Students are required make an appointment to see a consultant and bring a draft version of their assignment with them. (See *References – Language Centres* for a web link to each university's writing centre).

While there is recognition that language obstacles still exist in HEIs, not much change has been implemented with the exception of UKZN where from 2014, all students are required to pass or obtain a credit for a prescribed isiZulu module before they can graduate as part of the university's commitment to the development of isiZulu as an academic language alongside English.¹⁹ Although UCT, DUT, CPUT, UFH and UL claim to support multilingualism in policy, in reality they have not managed to formalise African languages as alternate languages of instruction, communication or examination and English remains dominant. NWU's language policy claims to be succeeding in ensuring that multilingualism – English, Sestwana and Afrikaans - works in practice, but several NWU students in the study have remarked that Afrikaans, in actuality, is far more privileged at the institution. Similarly, several students from UJ have also commented that Afrikaans speaking students have a slight advantage, this despite the university's commitment to promoting Sesotho, English, isiZulu and Afrikaans as the institutions primary languages.

Since language is central to communication and communication is central to education, and “communicating is always a certain way of acting upon another person or persons” (Foucault, 1982, p. 217), power always exists within the pedagogical transaction. This chapter looks at the various ways in which participants are disadvantaged by language and how power - demonstrated through language - acts upon another person or other persons, through considering the findings of this study. The dominant themes that have emerged through in-depth annual interviews are: Language Action, Language Privilege, Background Disadvantage and ‘Good English and Accents’. These themes will be discussed chronologically and supported by direct quotes from participants’ in the study. Race will be highlighted where relevant.

Findings

This chapter describes the individual action students’ take in order to overcome the obstacle of being instructed in a second or third language. Most strategies employed involve taking a dictionary to class or using Google to look up unfamiliar words or concepts. Surprisingly, no students make mention of visiting their universities academic writing centre for extra assistance or attending language tutorials (if their university provides such a service).

Several participants mentioned how they either took a dictionary to class so that they could look up words they do not understand as they are hearing them or made notes to look up certain words after class. A 23-year old Black female Social Science student from UKZN explained, “Sometimes when I don't understand I will just raise my hand and say, ‘I don't understand there, and there and there’ and she or he [the lecturer] will start again and explain in a way that I can understand.”²⁰ The same student later mentions her strategy of writing words/concepts down and Googling them after class. A Black male Bachelor of Arts student from UJ in 2013 explained, “I always carry a dictionary around; it is so useful for me”.²¹ Two years later, he shared again: “For me if the lecturer asks... I go to my dictionary”.²² While it is admirable that this student exercises

¹⁹ http://registrar.ukzn.ac.za/Libraries/policies/Language_Policy_-_CO02010906.sflb.ashx

²⁰ BF_23_UKZNSTUD5_BSocSci_2015

²¹ BM_23_UJSTUD9_BA_2013

²² BM_23_UJSTUD9_BA_2015

agency by carrying a dictionary around to help him better understand course content, it is worrying that, after two years, he still has to employ this strategy and has not considered consulting with the lecturer or looked to the university's Academic Development Innovation (ADI) unit, for example.

A CPUT student studying Nature Conservation described how being taught in English as a Black female is a huge challenge: "I have to every time use a dictionary for me to understand... Even sometimes with tests, they will throw a word which I'm not sometimes familiar with... I have to try and make sense with it."²³

To remedy this lack of comprehension, 44 year old student, UFHSTUD9 feels that lecturers should simplify the kind of language they use so that you do not "have to have your dictionary always".²⁴ UKZNSTUD1 agrees asserting that "you are in class and then this lecturer just suddenly uses this bombastic word".²⁵ UCTSTUD5, a Black male, calls this kind of "very cryptic language" and "academic jargon" unnecessary, explaining that "you're meant to produce knowledge and give it back to people, but if people don't understand that, what's the point?... You're just creating knowledge for a certain pool of people".²⁶ UFHSTUD10 suggests that students should go through language assessments "in order to check whether he/she fits to deal with a particular course" along with a language training course to assist students struggling with a particular learning language.²⁷

These comments from participants indicate that there are practical ways in which instructors can make the language used in class more accessible and straight forward. The opportunity is also present for instructors to be more illustrative in explaining terminology and new concepts. The students discussed in this section are all Black students who are second and third language English speakers. They are a range of ages and sexes, attending a mix of previously White and predominantly Black institutions, yet the issues expressed about English comprehension in lecture rooms, are similar.

Language privilege

Language privilege centres on the exclusive use of English and Afrikaans, as well as the absence in most institutions of African languages as a language of tuition.

English and Afrikaans

Students describe the dominant uses of and privileges afforded to English and Afrikaans, and how these operate as structural and social barriers in university. Here students express that the barriers not only affect instruction in class, but also involvement in campus organisations, activities and socialising with other students. Of the different university cohorts, UJ, NWU, UL and UFH seemed to have the most to say about the way language operates at university, for different reasons. UJ and NWU students spoke mainly about the privileging of Afrikaans. While students at all-Black universities UL and UFH had concerns about the casual and presumptuous use of African languages in lectures.

Many students spoke about frustrations around the privileging of certain languages over others in university. Numerous students bring attention to the perceived unfair advantage Afrikaner students have:

²³ BF_20_CPUTSTUD6_NatCon_2014

²⁴ BF_44_UFHSTUD9_BSocW_2013

²⁵ BM_23_UKZNSTUD1_LLB_2016

²⁶ BM_22_UCTSTUD5_BSocSc_2016

²⁷ BM_28_UFHSTUD10_BA_2017

“They can attend their own lectures whereby everything is written or spoken in Afrikaaner language”. (BM_23_UJSTUD9_BA_2016)

“Include indigenous language as a medium of instruction. If it can be done by Afrikaans speakers why not isiXhosa, isiZulu etc?” (BF_34_UFHSTUD6_BCom_2017)

“They get to perform better than the rest of us because they are doing it in their home language.” (BF_24_UJSTUD8_BA_2016)

“In your home language you get to understand better”. (BF_22_UJSTUD4_BCom_2016)

A Black male student, also from UJ, shares that even the exam question paper “comes in both English and Afrikaans” benefiting “those people who speak Afrikaans.”²⁸

Conversely in 2014, a White male Afrikaans speaking NWU student claimed that being taught in your home language is not necessarily an advantage, making the argument that “the English students who use translation, they are the top performers in class” and that “the Afrikaans speaking students that is being taught in Afrikaans without translation services, they do not perform as well”.²⁹ On the other hand, a native Afrikaans speaking, White female student from the same university acknowledged that “because I speak Afrikaans first language, it is easier for me to understand the subjects that are given to me in Afrikaans”.³⁰ She makes the argument that NWU is after all an Afrikaans-speaking university and that there are other universities that cater to English speakers even though by her own admission “that’s a bit unfair towards students who perhaps are Sotho speaking first language or [who speak] another language like Portuguese”.³¹ As Black female LLB student NWUSTUD7 points out, the issue of privileging Afrikaans is not just an obstacle in the academic sphere, but in university organisations as well:

“I was part of the committee for Golden Key. Despite my performance, despite everything else, they spoke Afrikaans when we were in meetings. When I tell them they can’t do that, they say this is an Afrikaans campus. I told them that we are in a meeting and it was not agreed that we are going to speak in Afrikaans. They say they can’t speak English, I told them I also can’t speak Afrikaans so why don’t we compromise. You can speak your bad English; I’ll also try where I can. They refused so I left the committee.” (BF_21_NWUSTUD7_LLB_2015)

NWUSTUD9, a Black female also doing her LLB, remarked when she began her university journey in 2013: “It’s really difficult here in Potchefstroom because mostly it is really White dominated and... Afrikaans, so sometimes I would see that I have missed out on some opportunities.”³² A year later, NWUSTUD7 agreed that “it’s tough”.³³ Both NWUSTUD7 and NWUSTUD9 are enrolled in the same language intensive LLB degree at the Potchefstroom campus of NWU.

In efforts to scrap the benefits afforded to Afrikaans, some students felt English should be the medium of instruction language, enforced through policies, across *all* universities:

“The one thing I would want in this policy is to make English a compulsory medium of instruction in all South African universities so that no one gets to benefit unfairly from the system on the basis of using their mother tongues. A university is a think tank, not a battlefield of issues of unfair politics and privilege.” (BF_23_NWUSTUD7_LLB_2017)

²⁸ BM_20_UJSTUD3_CivEng_2014

²⁹ WM_20_NWUSTUD6_BCom_2014

³⁰ WF_20_NWUSTUD2_BEd_2014

³¹ WF_20_NWUSTUD2_BEd_2014

³² BF_18_NWUSTUD9_LLB_2013

³³ BF_20_NWUSTUD7_LLB_2014

“Language policy-English should be the only language used for teaching and learning, and under no circumstance may another language be used.” (BM_27_UFHSTUD4_BCom_2017)

Another student strongly suggested a language policy should include “at least two Nguni languages and one from the BaSotho/BaPedi/BaTswana gang, solely because not all students come from schools where English is done as a home or first language.”³⁴ The student identified language as a huge barrier and related a personal account of his struggles: “I know this because once upon a time in Grade 6 at school I did not speak a lick of English being fresh out of an Afrikaans boarding school.”

Language also affects the way students socialise in university. A Black male Social Science student at UCT mentions that his ability to speak English puts him at a social advantage because “if I wasn't able to speak English then it would have been difficult for me to make Indian friends, Coloured friends, White friends.”³⁵ At DUT, a Black male student observes: “You get Black people making friends with Black people only and they are not helping themselves there because when you are surrounded by your people you only speak the language that you know”.³⁶

The privileging of certain languages quickly becomes a conversation about racism as expressed by UFHSTUD2:

“We are taught a White man's language at a young age. We're told that ours is not important therefore you have to bow down to a White person... they're more important, they're more intelligent than you because you're Black.” (BF_23_UFHSTUD2_LLB_2016)

CPUTSTUD5, an older White male opines that a White, Coloured, Black and Indian student will not have similar experiences in university because of language, citing that “Language... is very difficult for, you know, non-English people that don't have English as their mother tongue”.³⁷ UJSTUD8, a Black female, agrees stating that the favouring of Afrikaans as a language of instruction is one of the many things that for her “stands out... at UJ when it comes to the Blacks and Whites being different.”³⁸ NWUSTUD7 argues that language can even influence the material conditions of the campus, clarifying: “NWU might have three campuses, but they are not the same. The facilities, resources, the campuses, they are not the same.”³⁹ The implication here is that the campus with a predominantly White student body is better resourced. This kind of covert racism reproduces itself in the universities, despite national and institutional policies that discourage it.

Observations about the privileging of Afrikaans emerged most strongly at UJ and NWU, yet interestingly these are the two schools whose language policies make it a point to emphasise multilingualism. NWU names main regional languages, English, Setswana and Afrikaans as the official languages of communication on the three campuses. NWU's policy also highlights the university's interpreting services (from Afrikaans to English) which are used most at the Potchefstroom Campus, where Afrikaans is the language of tuition. The policy is rather thin when it comes to allocating similar interpretation services from Afrikaans to Setswana for instance. Similarly, though UJ's policy promotes Sesotho, English, isiZulu and Afrikaans as primary university languages, there are limitations as the statement “all approved modules and programmes are offered in English, and wherever possible and reasonably practicable, will also

³⁴ BM_24_UJSTUD7_LLB_2017

³⁵ BM_22_UCTSTUD2_BSocSc_2016

³⁶ BM_21_DUTSTUD9_IT_2015

³⁷ WM_42_CPUTSTUD5_BEd_2016

³⁸ BF_24_UJSTUD8_BA_2016

³⁹ BF_22_NWUSTUD7_LLB_2016

be offered in the other three designated languages” suggests.⁴⁰ What the UJ students in this study are expressing is that, it is troubling that somehow offering modules in Afrikaans has been “possible and reasonably practicable” and yet the same cannot be said for Sesotho and isiZulu. What NWU and UJ also have in common is that both schools are the result of mergers between historically Black universities and historically White and Afrikaans universities. So while both schools experienced mergers in the spirit of the transformation agenda, it seems there is still language inequality in unification efforts.

It is critical to think through both how English and Afrikaans is used as a weapon to further disregard Black students who have historically been marginalised through language under colonial and Apartheid rule. The response to Afrikaans must be understood in the context of a more recent history of Apartheid and its education policies (a legacy the current education system is tormented by) and for many Black South Africans it is symbolic of the White oppressor’s language (Alexander, 2009, p. 2). These negative connotations to Afrikaans linger, despite Afrikaans being spoken by a large majority of Coloured South Africans. Unlike English, Afrikaans could be argued to be an African language. While it has links to Dutch it is largely situated in slave history of the Cape Colony and is a culmination of the Malay, Khoisan and Bantu languages (Alexander, 2009, p. 2) – much like Swahili in East Africa. This reveals that responses to Afrikaans are informed by the past and present power and more specifically how language is not ahistorical or apolitical and continues to be used as a tool for ostracising and disadvantaging Black students.

African Languages

This section discusses the reverse of English and Afrikaans privilege, detailing the kinds of problems that arise when African languages are favoured and Black people are, as a result, homogenised. Several students talk about faculty members assuming they know a particular African language because they are Black and how this practice excludes Black foreign students. One student mentions her command of English deteriorating, a consequence of speaking African languages in class. A couple of students also hinted at tribalism – demonstrated through language - occurring at their university.

We see language operating in different ways at UFH and UL, where surprisingly, students have expressed concern with lecturers speaking African languages in lecture rooms. This is unexpected only because both universities are predominantly Black yet both have language policies that make it explicit that English is the primary language of tuition. In most instances of university policies, language related and otherwise, a clear inconsistency exists between the suggested commitments of the university and the reality of what takes place in lecture rooms. In a country as diverse as South Africa, it is dangerous to make assumptions about language, which can be a difficult and sensitive subject, particularly when it is presumed that all Black students necessarily speak isiXhosa or Sepedi for example, which is often not the case.

This is expressed especially by students at the University of Limpopo, where ULSTUD8 complains that “lecturers, they sometimes assume that since they use Sepedi or Setswana, when they are lecturing, they assume like all of us know Sepedi or Setswana and only to find that it’s not all of us who can speak or hear Sepedi.”⁴¹ She describes that even after students make formal complaints, “they’ll listen for a couple of weeks but after then” the behavior persists. In opposition, ULSTUD9 says that language discrimination is not perpetuated by lecturers but by students, citing that:

⁴⁰<https://www.uj.ac.za/about/Documents/policies/Language%20Policy%20%20Council%20approved%20-%203%20April%202014.pdf>

⁴¹ BF_20_ULSTUD8_BSc_2014

“Lecturers most of them are Pedi, but I think they understand this thing of discrimination, they understand we come from different places and all of that. They teach in English and strictly English, and if you don’t understand you go to their office. They will still speak to you in English unless you ask, ‘please I’m Tsonga I cannot understand this’.” (BF_21_ULSTUD9_LL2015)

ULSTUD10 agrees that for the most part lecturers speak English, but on occasion “yah... they use Pedi.”⁴² ULSTUD9 goes on to explain, “they lecture in English, but they tend to make jokes in Pedi. They tend to emphasise... in Pedi.”⁴³

UFHSTUD6 shares “here it’s mostly Black... so you find that a lecturer will say something in isiXhosa and then also translate it.”⁴⁴ While UFHSTUD6 says she has no problem with this, UFHSTUD7 explains the problem with this practice:

“You find my public administration lecturer standing in front of class lecturing in Xhosa... So now I speak a whole lot of Xhosa and I feel my English has deteriorated and ya, that’s a major challenge for me because I now think in Xhosa and translate into English. My essays are becoming a mess.” (BF_24_UFHSTUD7_BSocSc_2015)

She goes on to point out that a Zimbabwean student, who may not understand isiXhosa is disregarded because lecturers “just don’t care, they just teach in Xhosa”.⁴⁵

These observations reveal that addressing linguisticide - “the killing of languages and the cultures of the colonized” - cannot be a rigid and seamless process but is one that will demand a multilogous approach (Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Zondi, 2016, p. 5). It cannot be an add-on method that presumes that whatever the dominant African language is in a particular region, will be the secondary language used in that university. Seriously addressing language equality will demand that real thought be given to the possibility of translanguaging approaches in university spaces (Canagarajah, 2013; Garcia & Wei, 2013). Translanguaging refers to “the ability of multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages, treating the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integrated system” (Canagarajah, 2011, p. 401). A translanguaging method recognises that “communication transcends individual languages” and that “people do not use *a* language, neither do they simply code-switch between a number of distinct languages” (Cooper, 2017, p. 12). Instead, it is more helpful to think of communication as using a range of signs and symbols, in this manner, no one language is seen as being more powerful or important than another.

Background Disadvantage

Many students, across the different universities, describe how they are automatically linguistically disadvantaged in university because of where they come from and how they were taught in secondary school. Students talk about being taught subjects in their home languages at high school level and this impacting their ability to understand and speak English at university level. Understanding their disadvantage leads students to make socio-economic comparisons i.e. comments on township or rural backgrounds versus so called model C or private school backgrounds. These comparisons also affect self-confidence, with some students feeling like they cannot compete at university because they are ‘from the township’ or ‘not Model C’ enough, like UKZNSTUD7 and UKZNSTUD1 who describe:

⁴² BF_21_ULSTUD10_BSc_2015

⁴³ BF_21_ULSTUD9_LL2015

⁴⁴ BF_31_UFHSTUD6_BAdmin_2014

⁴⁵ BF_24_UFHSTUD7_BSocSc_2015

“Coming from a high school which was in rural areas where I was taught with isiZulu which is my mother tongue, the first obstacle I encountered I think is, the language... I think the first week I couldn't hear the lecturer. I couldn't hear much, and I couldn't engage, ask questions. I was afraid but if you look at those people who were coming from multiracial school, they were not afraid, they were always speaking English in their high school.” (BM_19_UKZNSTUD7_LL2013)

“Most of us were not raised in schools where every subject is taught in English”. (BM_23_UKZNSTUD1_LL2016)

CPUTSTUD8 and NWUSTUD7 explains why this is so:

“In those schools everything is taught in that home language. Xhosa is a home language, everything will be taught in Xhosa. Even the question paper they write is in Xhosa, besides English that's the only time they get to write in English.” (BF_20_CPUTSTUD8_FoodTech_2014)

“Yah everything from maths was taught in Tswana”. (BF_21_NWUSTUD7_LL2015)

UJSTUD8 details the experience of a fellow student who was excluded because “she couldn't understand anything in class, she was from Limpopo and she used to tell me that they taught them in Venda.”⁴⁶ UJSTUD1 shares that her background determined how exposed she was to English: “In Umtata, in Alice, I was pretty much limited to Xhosa speaking people and also as much as I may know, understand English there and there; I didn't really have that much of a territory to expand in with regards to speaking.”⁴⁷

UJSTUD6, a Black female in the Humanities faculty, names her disadvantage:

“So I felt disadvantaged... coming from a township school and going to university and meeting someone from a Model C school or a suburban school. When we are talking you could see there's a difference. She's from the township, she's from the Model C. You could see it.” (BF_22_UJSTUD6_BA_2015)

A Black CPUT student, two years senior commiserates:

“You know nothing and you must work hard there [in university]. Even the language, the way you write things - your literacy just shows that you're from the township - academically the language changes.” (BM_24_CPUTSTUD10_CEng_2015)

For some students, English deficiency not only hinders their ability to understand academic content but also affects their confidence to participate in the lecture room and to engage in certain social relationships, often eliciting feelings of shame. This is described by UKZNSTUD8 and supported by UKZNSTUD5:

“Some people in lectures don't speak, so when you're in tutoring classes it's only 15 of you. Obviously at some point you are going to have to speak. And then you get someone who can't really, you know, speak English and then people will be like, ‘What you saying?’” (BF_21_UKZNSTUD8_ComDev_2015)

⁴⁶ BF_22_UJSTUD8_BA_2014

⁴⁷ BM_20_UJSTUD1_BSc_2015

“Yes, I just feel ashamed. When I talk I go, ‘Just think first before you say something else’, because there were students from town. We were a few from informal settlements.” (BF_23_UKZNSTUD5_BSocSc_2015)

UKZNSTUD5 adds that her fear of judgement and humiliation was exacerbated when she spoke up in class and her classmates laughed and asked, “What is she exactly saying?”

While considering the disadvantage of Black students entering university from schooling that was solely in their home language, there is also a shaming of language that Black students face when they undergo schooling in wealthier and predominantly White schools. When the Pretoria Girls High protest made national news and garnered the attention of many South Africans in 2016, it was understood that the protest was more than just about African hair. One of the central concerns was around African languages being so tightly regulated at school and White teachers allegedly threatening, mocking or berating students for speaking their home languages in classrooms and on school premises. If African languages are forbidden, shamed and delegitimised at secondary school level, how then are we expecting young people to embrace a culture of multilingualism and translanguaging at university level?

What these students in this section have in common is that they are all Black. Similar issues of language comprehension and confidence struggles were not shared by their White, Coloured and Indian counterparts. Shaming and marginalisation because of English language deficiency, is one part of dehumanisation that demands attention if we consider the purpose of education (Zinn & Rodgers, 2012, p. 77).

‘Good English and accents’

Students describe a phenomena they termed as ‘high level English’ or ‘good English’. So-called ‘good English’ takes into account what constitutes a ‘good accent’ i.e. which accents are valued, which accents are considered inaccessible and how these titles are associated with intelligence and academic capacity.

Second-language speakers or Black students can no longer be homogenised since a growing number of Black students consider English as a first language, either because it is one of many home languages or because they took English as a first language at school. Schooling backgrounds reflect an increasing number of ‘African’ and ‘Coloured’ students now “being educated at relatively well resourced, middle class, formerly ‘White’, now racially mixed (ex-model C) schools” and given a choice many of these students choose English as a language of study, believing it offers global mobility (Bangeni & Kapp, 2007, p. 2). There is recognition of proficiency in English as social currency but that currency’s value also depends largely on a certain quality of English or accent.

DUTSTUD9, a Black male, explains, “Some schools they get high level English. If I can say, they are taught the best English and some they didn’t have that privilege.”⁴⁸ While UCTSTUD5 speaks to the hierarchy of ‘good English’ accents being associated with intelligence: “I just have a feeling that sometimes White lecturers are more interested in speaking to you if you have a certain accent”; what he calls a “good accent”.⁴⁹ This view is supported by another Black male from the same university who asserts, “if you have a particular accent, people believe that you are intelligent and if you don’t have that accent then you aren’t intelligent.”⁵⁰ He identifies this accent

⁴⁸ BM_21_DUTSTUD9_IT_2015

⁴⁹ BM_22_UCTSTUD5_BSocSc_2016

⁵⁰ BM_21_UCTSTUD2_BSocSc_2015

as a “twang” and that speaking in this way suggests that “you are deemed to be intelligent or whatever you have to say is important.”⁵¹

Both UJSTUD8 and UKZNSTUD7, a Black female and male respectively, associate ‘good English and accents’ with those Black students who attended Model C and private schools:

“I always had like cousins who went to private school... so like just the way we growing up, ‘cause I went to township primary school then went to a rural area but I always wanted to, you know, have good English.” (BF_23_UJSTUD8_BA_2015)

“Very few students raise their hands in lectures. There you have those English speaking Blacks, you know the Blacks who are too White, but then it's just that they are not proud of being Black. There are those guys from the [Pretoria] Boys' High, you have those girls from the Girls' High... they speak English. Their English accent is deeper than the accent of a White. They twang, they roll their tongues. You even get afraid of asking in class when you see them.” (BM_21_UKZNSTUD7_LL2015)

What UKZNSTUD7 is revealing here is intra Black-on-Black discrimination where assumptions are made about one's intellect; the measure being just how ‘White’ one's accent sounds. UKZNSTUD5, a Black female, thinks that English deficiency at university, is a result of common practices in predominantly Black high schools where teachers speak in African languages, she describes:

“I was studying in Black schools where there's Black people, so our teachers were not interested in teaching us English strongly. We would just talk simple English. So when I was having my friends at university, I will talk the English I know at school. They will just ignore and say that this is ignorant. Even not interested in what you are talking about. So I just simply stand there, and keep quiet and only listen to them.” (BF_24_UKZNSTUD5_BSocSc_2016)

Another Black female student from UJ observes:

“When you are standing in front of a group of people and you about to address them and you are not fluent in English, they tend to look down on you, so it's a matter of people, they judge your intelligence on your ability to speak English, which is - sometimes, they just cannot.” (BF_20_UJSTUD4_BCom_2014)

Here students are illuminating the value placed on the ability to speak a perceived ‘high level of English’ using a certain kind of accent – an accent usually characterised by frequent exposure to first-language English speakers, better resourced high schools and how ‘un-African’ or ‘White’ one sounds. This notion of ‘high level English’ emerged most strongly at historically White universities and universities that have merged with historically White universities. Students at UFH and UL for instance do not talk about ‘good English’ or ‘high level English’ and this is perhaps because they are all mainly Black students, and varying levels of English is not an attribute they value, particularly as a measure of intelligence.

The belief in a hierarchy of accents extends to perceptions about lecturers as well. The feedback from UKZNSTUD7 indicated that instructors do not want to give up their power and not being able to speak other languages, automatically disempowers them. He says: “This university says they are promoting the learning [of isiZulu] to everyone. Then you ask one question in isiZulu – you'll see who'll fume in class”.⁵² A member of staff feeling disempowered in this regard, is no

⁵¹ BM_21_UJSTUD8_BA_2015

⁵² BM_22_UKZNSTUD7_LL2016

different than the experience of many second and third language English speakers who have to simply accept that English or Afrikaans are primary languages of instruction every day at their respective universities.

The experience of academic staff being on the receiving end of prejudice due to their language, accents or command of English is evident with several students complaining about lecturers that are sometimes difficult to understand. These lecturers are largely from other parts of the African continent, and like the students who face language barriers, is particular to Black academics. These, at times, discriminatory views in some ways speak to how South Africans respond to Africans from the rest of the continent and more generally, the perpetuating intellect and worthiness being equated to accent and language. French or Italian lecturers in South Africa, for example, never experience the same discrimination.

Like UFHSTUD9, a Black South African female, who complains about a Ghanaian professor:

“You have to listen very attentively and when he is teaching you also interpret the word... oh he was saying this word... I’m not being racist or you know but especially with these lecturers that are from the North, you know their English.”(BF_45_UFHSTUD9_BSocW_2014)

Or an Indian male from UKZN who criticizes an Angolan lecturer, “We couldn't understand much of what he was saying and he started to get upset at us because he thought we were making fun of him”⁵³. He then details how his class resolved the communication breakdown:

“One day he explained to us that, you know what, English is not his first language and we explained to him, ‘you know, maybe if you go a bit slower and stuff’ and we resolved the issue and it was fine after that. And it actually was beneficial because he ended up - besides teaching us the notes - he ended up putting the notes online for us... so we can access it because of the language barrier.” (IM_21_UKZNSTUD10_BSocS_2015)

UJSTUD1, a Black male Engineering student and UCTSTUD3, a Coloured male Science student express their difficulties:

“We have this one lecturer, I don’t know where he’s from, probably he’s from Congo or Nigeria or something, he teaches Statistics. It’s hard to hear him when he speaks because of the accent so I think those are some of the problems that led to me not doing as well as I would have liked to. And also you start developing negative emotions for that lecturer and then if you don’t like the lecturer, you obviously won’t like his course and as a result... you won’t do well.” (BM_20_UJSTUD1_BEng_2014)

“The only thing that does get to me though is if the lecturers are not from here, so their English doesn’t sound right. A lot of our lecturers are not from here. It’s like we have American lecturers or some they are from somewhere like Zambia or Zimbabwe and like I don’t know, sometimes I’m really like ‘sorry what’ and they don’t understand that we don’t understand. That’s the only language problem I see.” (CM_19_UCTSTUD3_BSc_2014)

However, a more mature Black female student at UKZN feels as though these criticisms are only justifications for discrimination stating,

“We have an attitude of looking down on other foreign nationalities so if it’s a foreign lecturer they will make fun of his accent and all of that. And the way he pronounces words and stuff. So I’m noticing that.” (BF_32_UKZNSTUD6_BA_2015)

⁵³ IM_21_UKZNSTUD10_BSocS_2015

While in some instances that may be the case, we cannot ignore students saying that accents are hindering their ability to grasp certain ideas in class and in some cases, leading them to have negative feelings about a module or lecturer, as a Coloured female student from UCTSTUD6 explains:

“I sit in lectures where I have a foreign lecturer from up in Africa...but then they have such severe accents that you actually can't make out what they are saying and sometimes it's just... like the actual language doesn't make sense.” (CF_21_UCTSTUD6_BA_2015)

The report of the ministerial committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in South Africa's Public Higher Education Institutions position paper of 2010, points to the “ways in which accent is used as a marker of difference and hence to legitimise prejudice” (HESA, 2010, p. 30), but are these students expressing what appear to be legitimate barriers that must be acknowledged?

Discussion

Language, especially an aptitude for the languages used for “teaching, learning, assessment, administration and socialisation” (Coetzee-Van-Rooy, 2010, p. 309) has been identified as a significant factor influencing students' academic performance and experience at universities (Heugh 2002; Weideman 2003; Butler 2007; Cummins 2009; CHE 2010). That students are not engaging at multiple levels in their mother-tongue or experience structural barriers caused by dominant uses of English or Afrikaans is an important reason for poor performance and even failure; feeling excluded; impacting success and throughput in university (Yeld, 2009).

The 2008 Soudien Report notes language as critical to higher education transformation, impacting institutional culture, access and success. The report encouraged that there be “substantive and sufficient multilingualism in academic and support activities” at all public universities in South Africa (DHET, 2008, p. 36). Nevertheless, English and Afrikaans continue to dominate and the integration of African languages mandated (albeit on different levels) by HEI language policies is not happening in practice, and where students' may push this agenda, they end up feeling unsupported by instructors -like UKZNSTUD7 who describes that he has addressed White lectures in isiZulu before and received backlash for it:

“I've got people I don't speak to in the faculty because of such. When I feel like speaking isiZulu to a White lecturer, I do. I say, 'Go grab a dictionary. Search what I was saying.' One left the class – said she can't stand that – and I said, 'No, it's fine. Leave, go tell your Dean, tell whoever that I spoke isiZulu. If speaking isiZulu is a crime, arrest me'.” (BM_22_UKZNSTUD7_LLB_2016)

There is no capacity or incentive for the instructors to make multilingualism or even translanguaging a full-fledged reality. Furthermore, a multilingual future rests on the availability of qualified staff, finances and student interest (DHET, 2008, p. 94). On the other hand, in spaces where an attempt at multilingualism is occurring, students are reporting this to be an obstacle because of the presumption that all Black students necessarily speak the same African languages or because students have actually not been conditioned to embrace multilingualism and so it feels foreign to students who have grown accustomed to hearing English only, in formal academic spaces. Universities do not operate as islands but neither do they solely dictate societal shifts. Changing approaches and outlooks to language requires participation from all government sectors, even corporate South Africa.

What is clear is that since the language policy for higher education released by the Ministry of Education in 2001, the use of English has increased substantively,

Including at the University of Johannesburg (formerly Rand Afrikaans University) and, to lesser degrees, at the universities of Pretoria and Stellenbosch. Since 2001, nothing notable has happened with regard to use of African languages, save for the University of KwaZulu-Natal's newly adopted policy of requiring all undergraduates to have learned some Zulu by the time they graduate. (Metz, 2015, p. 249)

In reality, only UKZN demands that all new students registering for undergraduate degrees be required to pass or obtain a credit for a prescribed isiZulu module before they can graduate; the "unless they get exemption" caveat withstanding.⁵⁴ NWU language policy posits that English, Setswana and Afrikaans are the three official working languages of communication for staff on the three campuses but participants are revealing something different (Afrikaans as most privileged). UJ claims Sesotho, English, isiZulu and Afrikaans are the designated primary languages of the institution but how is this multilingual ethos being implemented, particularly when the stipulation "wherever possible and reasonably practicable" follows closely behind.⁵⁵ UFH is broad and idealistic in their assertion that there be equitable use of as many of the 11 official languages as possible in their language policy. UCT, UL and DUT are clear that English is both the medium of teaching and of examination except in language and literature departments where another language is taught. Finally, CPUT claims to want to achieve linguistic balance through the integration of multilingualism in as many activities of the university as possible.

So while these attractive policies exist officially, the persistent dominance of English and Afrikaans in South African universities remains an impasse that prevents success. The idea of translanguaging has been met with resistance in South Africa for some 20 years now but with little substantial reasoning other than the realisation that this kind of approach will demand a tremendous amount of work, time and money, but what it could potentially mean for South Africa's educational and socio-political future is significant. Most South African students at university level are bilingual. Instead of seeing this as a deficit, it should be considered an asset that:

- Will balance power relations in the lecture room.
- Affords students the comfort to mix languages, and encourage other students to help with translation where there is misunderstanding.
- Adds another dimension to learning.
- Fosters participant confidence, fluency and increases participation in the lecture room.
- Turns the focus to meaning rather than form and thus, content is better understood.
- May help with racial relations (Gunnarsson, 2014).

Language becomes another way that racism is demonstrated in HEIs and in this study; students are able to articulate how language privilege equates racial privilege. The absence of linguistic exclusion perpetuates inequality and is seen as a structural barrier and a form of psychic violence and construes a misuse of power. This inequality is entrenched before the student even enters university and this is evidenced by the belief in 'good English and accents' still being considered to be markers of intelligence and that those not as 'good' or proficient still experience shame and humiliation. What also goes directly against the work being done at policy level at HEIs, are the current language practices at many ex-Model C and Private elementary and secondary schools where, African children are forbidden from speaking African languages on school premises.

⁵⁴ http://registrar.ukzn.ac.za/Libraries/policies/Language_Policy_-_CO02010906.sflb.ashx

⁵⁵ <https://www.uj.ac.za/about/Documents/policies/Language%20Policy%20-%20Council%20approved%20-%203%20April%202014.pdf>

Banning African languages in high schools and then encouraging student to use them once again at university is counter-intuitive.

As history continues to reproduce itself in our education system, a translanguaging framework might be the only way to truly ensure inclusivity so that no one language is privileged over another. Previous studies of this nature have focused closely on language and its effects on academic literacy (Bitzer, 2005; Cummins, 2009; Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2012). What this study has been able to do is take a holistic approach to how language affects a student's university experience and interaction – in the lecture rooms, with faculty, other students, and university administrative structures - based on which, we make the following recommendations.

Recommendations

University Administration

1. Students should be made explicitly aware of available resources to assist in language comprehension. While there are writing and academic development centres in most universities, students do not know where they are located and exactly what services they offer. Some universities have English Language Centre's for international or foreign students where the teaching methods are far more nurturing. The same concession must be made for South African second and third language English speakers.
2. Extra language tutorials, foundation language courses and functional writing centres must be available for second and third language English speakers and in cases where these services are offered, capacity should be increased to ensure adequate one-on-one consultancy. Those who do know about the writing centres complain that they are often full and one has to make an appointment days or weeks in advance, which is not always possible.
3. Compulsory African language courses for *all* students enrolled in South African universities. This should be framed as a necessity for producing graduates who can holistically participate and contribute in a multilingual society both professionally and socially.
4. There must be transparency around the use of and acceptance of African languages for administrative and recruitment purposes, for communication and clarification in lecture rooms.
5. Examination paper instructions and questions must be provided for students in *all* of the university's' official languages. This is to avoid making students feel exposed or shamed for requesting a question paper in their home language instead of in the dominant language of use.
6. Struggling second and third language English and Afrikaans speakers should be granted extra time to complete examinations, tests and provision be made to extend deadlines for course work.
7. Second and third language English speakers be allowed to carry dictionaries to examinations in order to interpret instructions (if they are not written in their home language).

Lecturers and Faculty

8. Deep consideration must be given to facilitating better understanding between students' struggling to understand the accents and language used by instructors.
9. Instructors should be trained to be more illustrative where it pertains to introducing new terminology and unfamiliar concepts to students, drawing on different methods of presenting content.
10. Serious attention must be afforded to the concept of *translanguaging*. A shift must be seen in language policies that enables more resources to be provided towards creating space inside and outside the classroom for using multiple languages. Even where instructors are

monolingual, they should consider embracing translanguaging; to let go of the authoritative role in lecture rooms and become a co-learner.

Students

11. Students must make use of on-campus services to improve language, language learning development and academic literacy.
12. Residence hall and digs should be used as platforms to mobilise study groups and tutor support outside of formally organised course work – both in multiple languages and to improve dominant language.
13. Group mentoring should be initiated by students to provide peer support around emotional well-being and other challenges faced by students who are faced with language-related academic and social obstacles.

Government

14. Government must probe language practices across secondary schools, nationwide. The issue of linguicide must be taken more seriously with a fostering of multilingual learning encouraged at basic education level.
15. The development of monitoring and evaluation tools by both government and universities are required, to discern both the value of current university language policies and how these policies are implemented.
16. Promotion of African languages must be extended beyond the university space and government stakeholders and corporate South Africa should be incentivised/encouraged to recognise multilingualism as legitimate modes of communication.

CHAPTER 6 OBSTACLES TO ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION IN UNIVERSITIES

Summary

The two most debilitating challenges that prevented students in this study from accessing and remaining in higher education institutions were academic and financial issues. Academic obstacles included choosing academic programmes, poor quality lecturing and ineffective channels through which to lodge complaints about staff, lecturer inaccessibility, fears of intellectual inferiority, an inability to cope with the increased university workload and being unfamiliar with technology. To expand on these challenges, students were often not admitted into their first choice of programme, many changed courses and a considerable number were unaware of the entire gamut of programmatic options that exist at university. Participants regularly complained about teaching quality, saying that staff lacked pedagogical skills, arrived for class without adequate preparation, simply read PowerPoint slides, provided insufficient time for students' questions and were reluctant to make themselves available outside of class. When students complained about teaching standards they were told that university success predominantly requires independent study. There was no indication that students were provided with training so that such independence might be attained. Poor lecturing skills and staff inaccessibility were exacerbated by many students' fears of intellectual inferiority. Large university classrooms are intimidating spaces where question time can be daunting and expose where students attended high school, their socio-economic status and knowledge levels. Many also felt that they were technologically incompetent.

Financial obstacles were the most common theme that young people described as hampering tertiary education completion. Whereas students perceived academic issues to be controllable, finances were said to be out of students' realm of influence and therefore more stressful, with the university reserving the right to exclude students who had outstanding financial debt. A great challenge was therefore to maintain academic motivation, whilst knowing that academic success may be insufficient to guarantee degree completion. Interviews were littered with accounts of the trials and tribulations of accessing NSFAS funds. Many students' first university experiences involved long trips between township homes, police stations (to get documents certified) and university administration offices. Despite these tedious processes and hostile staff, NSFAS was a highly desirable source of financial support. The arduous initial challenges of registration and paying tuition fees up front were also emphasised, as many students do not have access to the large sums of money required to secure university places at the beginning of the academic year. The lack of control students described in relation to their finances was, therefore, partly underpinned by an inefficient financial aid system, irregular part-time work, rapidly changing family economic circumstances and hidden costs, like the exorbitant price of textbooks.

Other obstacles to completing university degrees included accommodation and travel, which were linked to financial troubles and academic success, as housing and transport are considerable expenses and they impact on study opportunities. Large numbers of students reported suffering from mental health problems. Maintaining a balanced 'social life', avoiding 'crime' and dealing with or participating in 'student protests'- without derailing one's studies- also featured in interviews. While these contextual challenges were not reported to hamper studies extensively, they provided additional challenges that need to be considered in trying to understand the overall picture of obstacles that plague student success at university. Taken together these obstacles meant that the overall university experience was portrayed as one of hustling for survival, with a number of students using military metaphors. University was depicted as substantially combative, rather than as a comfortable, reflexive space for deep critical thinking and maturing into a well-rounded citizen. Recommendations to alleviate some of these problems include improved transparency and accountability of the NSFAS system and its university personnel, an urgent resolution for financial support for the 'missing middle' (those whose parents earned too much to qualify for NSFAS but who

earned too little to afford university fees), improved quality of lecturing and more effective processes for students to lodge grievances they have with staff.

Introduction

The ability to access and participate in university is largely dependent on a student's financing ability and academic circumstances. Both determine how likely it is for students to either pass or be excluded during their time at university. In the main, these conditions remain shaped by the historical legacies of Apartheid education in South Africa.

Academic obstacles included choices related to academic programmes, poor quality lecturing and ineffective channels through which to lodge complaints about staff, lack of academic support systems and structures, lecturers being inaccessible outside of class, students fearing to appear intellectually inferior, an inability to cope with the increased university workload and being unfamiliar with technology. Financial barriers plagued participants in the study because they were said to be out of students' control. In attempting to exert some control over their financial situations, students face the highly unreliable and bureaucratically arduous NSFAS system, or entered part-time employment. Even when they did achieve some degree of financial security, they were tormented by additional unexpected costs like textbooks and unforeseen changes in families' financial circumstances.

While students came from a range of faculties, their challenges were organised around similar grievances and insecurities. The responses to questions of funding was informed by race and class but also illuminated the many unacknowledged costs that students must face. Through our interviews it became evident that obstacles, big or small, are interlinked and have great bearing on academic retention and success. Negotiating and overcoming these obstacles further impacts student's mental health and their capacity to fully engage socially and academically.

Findings

Students' claimed that academic and financial factors were the most debilitating obstacles that inhibited access and continued participation in universities. Academic factors included being inadequately prepared to choose a programme of study, poor quality lecturing, ineffective channels for complaints about staff, lack of academic support, lecturer inaccessibility, fears of intellectual inferiority, coping with high workloads and technological unpreparedness. Students complained bitterly that financial barriers were out of their control. They tried to exert control over finances through the highly unreliable and bureaucratically arduous NSFAS system, or by finding part-time employment. Students were tormented by unexpected additional costs like textbooks and unforeseen changes in families' financial circumstances. These challenges occurred whilst students continually struggled to deal with onerous (and expensive) registration and administration systems. Inclusive of but separate from financial barriers, was the issue of accommodation. Residential location had a substantial impact on safety as well as access to libraries, laboratories and quiet places to study.

A number of smaller interlinked themes that plagued students are dealt with in the final part of the chapter, including mental health issues, social life, crime and protests. These themes were present in the students' accounts and need mention, however they were not seen as substantial barriers (hence the label 'smaller obstacles') to success for the majority of participants. As one student said, "When you look at these problems individually, they may seem small, but actually, they are problematic when combined."⁵⁶ These findings make sense in the light of the 2015 and

⁵⁶ BM_23_ULSTUD7_BSc_2016

2016 student fees protests, as financial issues were named by students as the most debilitating factors that hampered their success in higher education.

Academic obstacles

The first obstacle recorded was that students struggled to choose appropriate programmes because of limited information and course availability. Second, they experienced the quality of university teaching to be poor: lecturers were described as dull, badly prepared and unable to convey material clearly. Third, staff were described as inaccessible outside of class. In terms of issues related to students, fears of appearing to be ignorant were widespread, leading to a related issue of feeling poorly prepared, and 'ashamed' to use computers. Finally, students described the workload as incredibly challenging.

Choice of academic programme and institution

Tertiary education begins with decisions related to academic programmes and institutions. Stories regularly emerged in the interviews of students not being admitted into their first choice of programme and a number of participants changed courses in first year and later. Many students were unaware of the entire gamut of programmatic options that exist:

"When we are in high school all we know is social work, psychology, medicine and blah, blah; we not exposed to all these other courses." (BF_19_NWUSTUD10_BSocSc_2014)

High schools, it seems, do not prepare learners adequately for university. Prospective students are not provided with the necessary information in order to make informed choices about which university programme is most suitable as a course of study. High schools not providing sufficient information may be due to the lack of first-hand knowledge on the part of educators as well as a dearth of student handbooks, especially in rural parts of the country:

"There is this other person in our community who did agriculture, who is living a good life... He said I must come, he will apply for me. He took me to East London for applications. So he said, 'What are you going to apply?' and I said 'I'll see when I'm there'. He asked, 'You don't have a booklet?' and I said, 'No I don't have a booklet'. He said he is doing agricultural economics... So I took the idea like 'Okay, I wanted to be an actuarial scientist so let me choose agricultural economics'." (BM_19_UFHSTUD5_BAgric_2013)

While this student may well eventually enjoy agricultural economics, it appears as if he was not exposed to all of the available options before making his decision. His choice was based on the material rewards he perceived to accompany this career, informed by observations of a member of his community, and confusion between the words 'actuarial' and 'agricultural'. One person's financial success is hardly reliable information upon which to generalise likely material rewards. Furthermore, his decision was not based on academic interests. All these reasons contribute towards a poor choice of programme.

Other were stifled by course availability:

"I wanted to study Psychology and then they said it's full. So they just put me in another programme so that I don't stay at home and I will decide to change next year... The school, they just put you in any programme that they think it's going to be appropriate for you." (BF_18_NWUSTUD10_B.SocSci_2013)

Courses of study have different capacities, meaning that institutions limit the number of students that are accepted for particular programmes. As a result, many students are not granted

admission for their first choice. This may lead to frustration and boredom and could, in turn, lead to students discontinuing their university careers. Many students also spoke of making a mistake on an online form (and not being allowed to rectify it by administrators) and finding themselves in course they had not intended to register for. Some spoke of joining shorter queues for courses other than those they had planned to register for because they had to catch taxis home.

For some students their university experience was informed by perceptions of the particular institution that they attended, in comparison to other institutions:

“I have got this thing that UCT is the best. I was there at UCT for career guidance... There is a nice swimming pool, they’ve got dining halls; it is a creative environment where you can meet someone from China maybe. Here at Fort Hare, maybe 90% of the students are from... the Eastern Cape. The whole institution discourages me... In my first year and on my first day I missed my two lectures.” (BM_19_UFHSTUD5_BAgric_2013)

A hierarchy of institutions clearly existed in the minds of students, although there were exceptions. In general, the historically White universities were desirable, as they were perceived as more cosmopolitan in terms of student demographics and their physical location and they were said to have better facilities, services and academic standards. Beliefs that one attends an inferior institution may lead to students having limited motivation to complete and excel at their studies.

Poor teaching styles

Participants complained about teaching quality, saying that staff lacked communication and pedagogical skills:

“The lecturers has a monotone voice... he opens a lecture in his computer, puts on the projector. He write his notes... [and] everything is mixed up and you don’t understand what he’s writing... Lecturers that I don’t like are the ones who have a funny teaching style that confuses me.” (BM_20_UJSTUD1_BEng_2014)

This student complained about his lecturer’s use of materials and technology, which left him confused and unable to comprehend the material. Many students reported that the lecturer’s lack of effort resulted in poor quality classes:

“He wouldn’t open a text book. I went to the HOD about this... So he said its entrepreneurial skill, we have to learn on our own. How do we know what entrepreneurial skill is when you didn’t teach us? One of my friends says that happens as well with other lecturers.” (CF_21_CPUTSTUD1_FinSys_2014)

The lecturer justified his laissez-faire teaching style by stating that students need to become ‘entrepreneurial’, reinforcing key characteristics of the neoliberal university in which students ‘teach themselves’ (Brown, 2016; Goldberg, 2016). The student wondered how to become ‘entrepreneurial’, as her prior education had not prepared her for this form of learning. Effective teaching and learning can promote independence and initiative, however this should be accompanied by support and training for students that are not familiar with independent study techniques.

Part of the reason for poor quality teaching is that lecturing is not incentivised for academics, as promotion ultimately depends on peer-reviewed publications. For disgruntled students few options exist through which to complain:

“Who would I complain to? The lecturer was not even there and when we went to complain they told us not to. Now we are even scared to report.” (BF_20_NWUSTUD3_BCom_2014)

“He is arrogant, he did not lecture at all. He used to tell us that he drinks expensive whiskies, goes to parties. We told the Law Council and they did nothing.” (BF_21_UFHSTUD2_LLBB_2014)

Management may be hesitant to confront colleagues that students complain about, as disciplinary procedures are cumbersome, requiring time and effort and staff may be hesitant to appear to side with the students. Collectives such as Law Councils are notorious for in-group patronage.

The poor quality of lectures often included limited question time:

“They don’t know what they’re doing. My tourism lecturer just reads her notes. She doesn’t care who understands. And then she didn’t really answer my question.” (BF_20_UKZNSTUD4_BSocSc_2015)

Not answering questions compounds the confusion that students experience. The lack of care, effort and understandable instruction extended to evaluation processes:

“Lectures are not good. A lecturer comes and gives an assignment. They don’t give background on how the assignment should be done, where we should go for information and how we can get more resources.” (BF_19_CPUTSTUD8_FoodTech_2013)

Lecturers often assume that students are able to write essays and conduct independent research. Yet, schooling focuses on curriculum delivery rather than student agency and does not generally provide students with the skills needed to excel at university. All of these in-class, lecturer-related inhibitors of academic success were exacerbated by academics’ inaccessibility outside of university classrooms.

Inaccessible lecturers

Students reported that academics were reluctant to make themselves available outside of class:

“You would come and say, ‘Sir, I need your help here and here and here.’ He’ll say, ‘Right now it’s my lunch time. Go and tell someone else.’” (BF_23_UKZNSTUD5_BSocSc_2015)

This academic did not refer the student to his consultation hours or suggest an alternative meeting time, instead dismissing the student and instructing her to seek assistance elsewhere. Other students complained about the dearth of adequate time for consulting:

“The lecturer is offering weekend classes which you have to pay for. All we ever do in class is just learn... never consult. The consultation times are only like two hours per week, you know, and one of those consultation times are in class.” (BM_22_UJSTUD10_BEng_2015)

This student complained that “all we ever do in class is just learn”, demonstrating that “learning” is understood in cognitive terms, what Freire (1970) called “banking education”: knowledge that is deposited into the heads of passive learners. This student assumed that asking questions, participating in dialogue and ‘consulting’ are not integral components of ‘learning’. The fact that students are charged for extra weekend classes again indicates how staff, in neoliberal fashion, are constantly attempting to supplement their income and maximise profits (Ball, 2012). Some students experienced lecturer inaccessibility as racially differentiated:

“The lecturer was a White man, and I asked a question and he said, ‘No, I have no time. I must leave for a meeting’. But then a few seconds [after] White girls, asked the same question we were asking, they were given time. (He) showed them the answers, for more than ten minutes.” (BM_23_UJSTUD9_BA_2016)

Other students mentioned their own racialised forms of intimidation as constrictive in facilitating interactions with lecturers:

“Adjusting was difficult. You must challenge yourself and overcome fear. If you feel intimidated by White men, slowly but surely - start by asking a question after the lecture, gradually you’ll be able to sit in his office, and engage in a conversation. So it’s about taking baby steps.” (BM_22_UCTSTUD2_BSocSc_2016)

Part of the reason for poor Black students being intimidated by White lecturers is that they are rarely exposed to other race groups prior to attending university. The student above was able to overcome his insecurities, producing a rewarding experience and bolstering self-confidence. There is no evidence in the quotation above that the institution supported him in this endeavour. Fear of White lecturers may well be linked to concerns about appearing to be ignorant, something which was regularly mentioned in the interviews.

Fearing intellectual inferiority

Poor lecturing skills and inaccessibility were exacerbated by many students’ fears of being judged to be intellectually inferior:

“You have to sit there in the lecture room with everyone and think, ‘What am I going to say? Are they going to laugh at me or my question or think that I’m stupid?’” (BF_19_UJSTUD4_BCom_2013)

University classrooms are often large and intimidating, with question time being seen as an opportunity to gauge what others know. Students come from vastly different backgrounds and fear they may be exposed through their verbal contributions:

“[High school] was semi-township... The level of education wasn’t really up to standard... you get into a lecture room, you’re even scared to ask questions. People will be like, ‘You don’t know that? I mean, I knew that since Grade nine.’” (BF_21_UKZNSTUD8_ComDev_2015)

“Yes, I just feel ashamed. When I talk I go, ‘Just think first before you say something because they were students from town. We were from informal settlements.’” (BF_23_UKZNSTUD5_BSocSc_2015)

These Black females described their fear of appearing less knowledgeable than their peers, inhibiting participation. Students feared that questions and comments could betray where they had attended high school, as well as their socio-economic status and give others an indication of their levels of intelligence.

Struggles with technology

Lagging behind peers was particularly pronounced when academic tasks involved technology:

“Attending computer literacy, a lecturer just says once ‘Do this’ and you don’t even know what ‘enter’ is and you cannot even control the buttons. Sometimes you look stupid.” (BM_22_ULSTUD3_LLB_2015)

Students regularly arrived at university with limited exposure to computers. Technology therefore presents an entire new realm of potential humiliation for poor and rural students. Many participants described such differences in terms of schooling rather than race:

“But I think it is not the difference between White and Black people. The only difference is the schools which you attended. Some from private schools have access to computers.” (BM_23_ULSTUD1_BSocSc_2015)

At tertiary institutions young people become more aware of the rampant inequalities that underpin South African society, such as different levels of access to resources like computers. Realising you have not arrived at university with the skills needed to excel can be terrifying:

“Sometimes when you are coming from an informal settlement you don't know anything about computers. You just stand still in the computer [place]. You don't know what to touch, what to do. Even Black people there... don't even want to help you; to tell you what to do or [who to] ask.” (BF_23_UKZNSTUD5_BSocSc_2015)

The phrase “to stand still in the computer [place]” evokes an image of a deer in the headlights, unsure how to proceed, provocatively portraying the emotions some students experience when using technology in academic spaces. Coping with poor quality teaching and inaccessible lecturers is therefore made more difficult as students are simultaneously required to deal with their own rampant insecurities regarding their intellectual and technological inabilities. Indication of this deficit in lecturers providing assistance is made clear as one student reports being told by his lecturer “the majority of you deserve to be in FET colleges”.⁵⁷

Adapting to workloads

One of the most common themes that students spoke about was workload:

“There are times I just want to drop out. We get five assignments for five modules on consecutive days. Since early this year I felt I cannot handle the pressure here”. (BF_18_NWUSTUD4_BA_2013)

Taking multiple courses, with simultaneous submissions creates pressure that students did not experience in high school. Comparisons with peers create further insecurities:

“School is nothing compared to varsity. We had physics and chemistry every day and we had tuts for three hours. They would give us a test... The questions were so difficult... Watching everyone figure the answer out, thinking ‘I don't how to do this, why are these questions so difficult?’ People start leaving after an hour - then you say ‘What? I only answered the first question? Surely we are all same intellectually.’” (BF_18_UCTSTUD8_Medicine_2013)

Comparisons with peers even extends to the speed at which others complete examinations. Students are vigilant for signs of their academic potential or lack thereof, often leading to false alarms and unreliable comparisons. Learning to live with and accept failure seemed to be a healthy component of some students' success. One student noted that despite not passing “100 percent of my modules... I am in third year now.”⁵⁸

⁵⁷ BF_32_UKZNSTUD6_BA_2015

⁵⁸ IM_21_UKZNSTUD10_BSocSc_2015

Those who were able to write off unsuccessful courses and persevere were more likely to graduate than students that interpret failure as evidence of a lack of ability. Students rarely said that university work was too difficult, instead complaining that the volume of work and the planning needed to succeed were their greatest challenges.

Many participants complained that university students are left to fend for themselves:

“[At high school] teachers rally behind you to do assignments. Then you woke up the next day, you are now all by yourself. No one is going to force you to do anything. No one is going follow you around ask you about that homework.” (BM_21_DUTSTUD9_IT_2015)

At school teachers monitor students' progress closely. A number of participants struggled to adapt to the independence of university life. Academic obstacles therefore involved a combination of lecturer related issues, students' personal insecurities, feelings of alienation, a lack of support structures and the unprecedented workload. Together these factors present an intimidating academic wall that students needed to climb to attain academic success. The financial 'wall' was described as even higher and more daunting.

Financial obstacles

This section consists of six sub-themes, beginning with the interesting finding that students perceived academic issues to be controllable, whereas finances were said to be out of students' realm of control and therefore more stressful. The next two financial sub-themes explore how participants attempted to deal with monetary obstacles, through securing financial aid and by finding temporary employment. This is followed by two sub-themes around the issues that arise at the start of the academic year, namely struggles with registration and with finding money for the unexpected and considerable cost of textbooks. Related to finances due to it being one of the most prominent expenses for students and it having associated costs like travel, the section concludes with the substantial and widely discussed issue of accommodation.

Perceptions of obstacles

Financial obstacles were the most common theme that young people described as hampering their tertiary education. The view shared by most participants, was that “money” was unequivocally the main barrier to success. Academic work was perceived as controllable, whereas finances were not:

“You can control it... it's pretty much controllable. But in terms of finances...” (BF_20_UKZNSTUD4_BSocSc_2015)

Even though students faced logistical difficulties in completing academic work, these could be overcome:

“Eighty percent - you control it. Twenty percent would be financial problems. Coming from a disadvantaged family, for instance, if you are having an assignment, you have to wait in those long queues in the Computer Labs... then you end up being late. So I think it's a matter of - I can say that - success is under your control. But then in terms of the resources and in terms of finances, then I can say - on that one - it affects your success [and it's out of your control].” (BM_22_UKZNSTUD1_LLB_2015)

The extract above is interesting: certain academic related factors are out of students' control, for example access to computers needed to type assignments. However, it is likely that students experienced leniency when it came to submitting work late. They may be penalised for late

assignments, but are unlikely to be excluded. Being in arrears with fees created highly debilitating fears of exclusion:

“Going to lectures is not [more] important than accommodation and finance. Knowing that university reserves a right to de-register you at any time.” (BM_21_UKZNSTUD7_LL2015)

“That’s the only thing that can prevent me from achieving in fact from completing my studies... there’s nothing except money, because when it comes to academic I don’t have a problem.” (BF_20_ULSTUD9_LL2014)

Monetary resources were almost always perceived to pose greater troubles than academic challenges. Whereas students could control lecture attendance, the university reserved the right to exclude students with financial debts. In the previous section it was apparent that students were extremely worried about their academic success, so it is interesting that comparisons between academic and financial barriers led to assessments that academic work was controllable. Students’ spoke extensively of how experiences in high school did not prepare them for financial planning in university:

“No-one told us that if you don't pay the money you are going to be excluded next year. Most of us are coming from schools in townships where the school fees was R200. From Grade eight, Grade nine, Grade 10, Grade 11 – and at Grade 12 level you didn't pay the R200. You've never paid school fees and you've never been excluded, but in this institution - just one year you are being excluded.” (BM_22_UKZNSTUD1_LL2015)

Some students believed that their debts might be overlooked. One of the greatest challenges faced is therefore to motivate themselves to excel academically, knowing that this may be insufficient to guarantee their success:

“The one that I can say upsets me the most, is when I study day and night and realise I won’t have money to pay for my school fees, so that I can reach my goal at the end.” (BM_22_ULSTUD3_LL2015)

These frustrations make the 2015 and 2016 fee protests at South African universities more understandable. In the following section some of the strategies students used to deal with financial constraints are explored.

Financial aid

Interviews were littered with accounts of the trials and tribulations of accessing NSFAS funds:

“If you have siblings older than 18 years who are unemployed, they must write an Affidavit. To write an Affidavit you have to go to Dobsonville police station with transport. So for me, I take my sister’s child support grant and use it to go to the police station. Everyone at home who is older than 18 must write an Affidavit. I went to the NSFAS offices, ‘Where’s the father’s Affidavit?’ I’m like, ‘No, I don’t have a father’. He said, ‘Go to your mom and tell her to write about the whereabouts of your father’. Then I have to go back at home, write out another Affidavit, go back to police station again in Dobsonville using a taxi. Then I had to go back to UJ. Some students even slept at the Student Administration Building for the past two days, without food.” (BM_23_UJSTUD9_BA_2016)

Students must pass 50% of their courses and provide a signed affidavit for each unemployed family member over the age of 18, to continue receiving NSFAS money. Many students’ first

university experiences involve long trips from township homes between police stations and university administration, to have information related to family income verified. Higher education institutions are intimidating environments for poor youth who often face hostile administration. This kind of initial experience communicates to them that they are unwelcome in this context:

“Especially with NSFAS, students always struggled – those ladies [in the university administration], when you apply, sometimes they give you tough times. They even tear student’s applications apart.” (BF_21_NWUSTUD9_LL2016)

Despite these tedious processes and hostile staff, NSFAS is highly desirable. Bitter disagreements exist regarding who should have access to financial aid. A group that has become known as the ‘missing middle’ are students who are regarded as financially stable and therefore do not qualify to receive financial aid, but are still too poor to afford tertiary education:

“Our parents are middle-class people. My sister is in university, I’m in university, my one sister is in primary, my other sister is in crèche. It’s a lot of money. They must pay rent, food, everything. It cannot happen with two basic salaries. Government needs to consider this. The larger bracket of students at every university are middle-class students and most of these students drop out of university because of finances.” (BM_23_ULSTUD4_BA_2016)

This student is correct in saying that households above the NSFAS threshold of R122,000 per annum, cannot adequately support the educational aspirations of four children. NSFAS means tests are used to determine the financial need of a student, taking into account the number of family members dependent on household income, the number of students attending tertiary education and household location. These criteria predict Expected Family Contribution (EFC), a measure of student financial need. Many students belong to families whose household income does not meet NSFAS requirements, but for whom tertiary education is unaffordable.

The inefficiency of the system is also a problem:

“NSFAS only came in July actually, late, very late. I literally had no food to eat. I contacted a friend’s father.” (BM_18_UFHSTUD1_BSc_2013)

Requesting money from others is humiliating and may lead to students discontinuing their studies. Applications for NSFAS funding are also complicated by families’ economic circumstances constantly changing:

“If my mother gets retrenched... she is paying for my university and my dad passed away... then I might not be able to go to university anymore.” (CF_19_DUTSTUD7_IT_2013)

The turbulent South African economy and the myriad social problems that shape family life are perpetually changing, making it difficult for students to predict resource availability and NSFAS eligibility. This makes financial planning for tertiary education difficult. Students that did not receive NSFAS money needed to explore other avenues to help support them during their studies. For many this meant gaining part-time employment; no mean feat in a country whose unemployment rate approaches 40%.

Strategies for income generation

Employment needed to be carefully managed to prevent it hampering studies:

“It does impact on my studies, but I’ve learned to juggle. You have to be strong like that when you’re Black [laughs].” (BF_24_UJSTUD8_BA_2016)

Some students found succour in expressing resilient notions of Blackness. Combining academic success with income generation is a difficult task, requiring a complex balancing act. Many Black students are forced to ‘hustle’:

“I’ve got R43,000 worth of fees hanging right here and I can work that, trust me. I can hustle, you know. I sell liver, for goodness’ sake.” (BM_27_CPUTSTUD7_OpMan_2016)

Many students survive through calculated strategies that ensure sufficient income generation and academic success. This requires self-belief that money can be obtained through planning, hustling and selling whatever resources students can access, for example ‘liver’. Social networks are also valuable. The same student indicated:

“I used to sell perfumes to the lady at the registration office. She was like, ‘Agh, dude, I know you man. I’ll make sure that...’. [She] at least allowed me to register ... [but] my grace is kind of running out.” (BM_27_CPUTSTUD7_OpMan_2016)

Many poor students do not have access to networks that include university lecturers and management, contacts that some White students are able to leverage, meaning that they need to develop alternative forms of social capital in these institutions. When ‘grace’ does eventually run out, as alluded to above, a number of students mentioned studying through UNISA:

“Yes I still owe them [university] - is not easy to get that money in a short space of time. My first option is to study at UNISA part time because I do believe here in Standard Bank [current job] I will be permanent.” (BM_21_DUTSTUD9_IT_2015)

The opportunity for permanent employment is often too difficult to refuse. UNISA now has 450,000 students completing their studies through distance learning, indicating how this is a popular option for many South Africans.

Some parents encouraged their children to focus on their studies:

“I was a part-time bookkeeper. My parents said, ‘We are proud that you want to work for yourself, you want to be independent but listen your studies come first’. So I had to tell them, ‘Listen guys I can’t work for you guys any more. Maybe let’s see after graduating’”. (BF_22_UJSTUD4_BCom_2016)

Families are forced to make complex decisions to promote social mobility in the immediate and long-term futures. Volatile economic and social contexts mean that situations change regularly, leading to reassessments and new ‘hustling’ strategies.

Registration and administration

One of the first tasks students are required to endure in relation to the university is to negotiate their way through registration and administrative services. Participants complained about registration fees and paying tuition fees up front:

“I was comparing the application fee. If I go to Wits I will be able to afford the application fee but I won’t be able to afford the registration fee. So if I come here [UJ] I can afford both.” (BF_20_UJSTUD6_BA_2013)

“They told me to pay R7,000 up front which I didn’t have. At least I could come up with the registration fee, which was R3,000.” (BF_20_CPUTSTUD4_MathTech_2015)

Many students do not have access to the large sums of money required to secure places at the beginning of the academic year. Students regularly complained that administrative staff were impolite:

“The lady at the reception is the rudest human being ever.” (BF_21_UJSTUD7_LL2015)

“Now the people at Finance, they're mean. They are mean, mean, mean.” (BM_22_UJSTUD5_ElecEng_2016)

For some, their interactions with administrators can even result in exclusion from university:

“So I left and the next day I came with my mom and she explained and the receptionist was nicer. She explained that I didn’t have the right documentation... If I didn’t speak to my mother I wouldn’t have come to university this year.” (CF_19_DUTSTUD7_IT_2013)

A student’s university career can be determined by their interaction with an administrator. Many Black students are intimidated by these institutions and may not question or challenge staff they encounter in initial interactions at university. Black students’ felt that administrators treated them differently to White students:

“White people get better service from Black people who work there...If you go there, you will be treated like a piece of.... Ja.” (BF_20_NWUSTUD9_LL2015)

Another Black student⁵⁹ related an account of trying to query the progress of his application at UCT but “dropped the phone from fear” when he felt like he couldn’t answer the questions the “White woman at the end of the phone” was asking him. This is the same student, who despite excellent marks in matric ended up studying agricultural rather than actual science, not at UCT but at Fort Hare. Such treatment (or feelings of fear on the part of students) by university administration communicates to Black students that they do not belong in these institutions. Black administrative staff may be resentful that Black students are on an upwardly mobile path, one reason for the racially informed differential treatment on campus.

Unanticipated costs

Once students are registered, a number of other unanticipated costs may appear in their lives, for example text books:

“I’ve used a book that cost R700. I do 7 modules, 5 of them are year modules. I bought 4 books that cost R3,000.” (BF_21_NWUSTUD7_LL2015)

After paying fees and accommodation, it can be defeating and financially straining to have to pay large sums for textbooks. Sometimes students only obtain funds for books once the semester has started. The lack of control students described in relation to their finances was, therefore, partly underpinned by an inefficient financial aid system, irregular part-time work that was difficult to obtain, rapidly changing family economic circumstances and hidden costs like the exorbitant price of textbooks.

⁵⁹ BM_19_UFHSTUD5_AgSc_2013

Financially interlinked obstacles: accommodation and travel

Finance and accommodation are linked obstacles as indicated by this student: "You can't get accommodation if you don't have finance".⁶⁰ Accommodation was related to another obstacle, namely travel. One student said that "my main obstacle [is] the travelling every single day"⁶¹. Another explained why travel was the biggest obstacle as follows:

"I wake up by 4am, by 6am I'm leaving. My day ends late. I got to a point where sometimes I'm in the 24 hour section in the Library because I have a test tomorrow at 8am. If I leave campus at 6:45pm I'm getting home around 8:30pm. I have to wake up at four so I'm wasting about four hours every day." (BM_23_UJSTUD10_BEng_2016)

Some participants described sleeping in the university library to save time. Accommodation therefore affected time lost on travel. Travel used up valuable financial resources. Staying far from campus and paying for public transport systematically disadvantages Black and Coloured students:

"Black students, most of them they didn't get the school residences so they had to move from their townships to school. Guys from other races, their parents are driving them, and then for us we had to use public transport." (BM_22_UKZNSTUD1_LL2015)

South Africa's history of racial discrimination impacts on where students live, how they travel to university and affects lecture attendance. Students found resilient methods to counter these hardships:

"I used to miss 8 o'clock classes because of transportation, but then every afternoon I used to revise with a class member. So you went out of your way to be like 'Hey what happened? What have you covered? Can I see your notes? Which chapters did you do?'" (BF_22_DUTSTUD4_IT_2015)

Despite the competitive nature of university courses and the rampant individualism, evidence existed that students could rely on their peers to catch up with work missed. In this and other ways, students demonstrated genuine entrepreneurial skills. Living close to campus was an advantage because of the access it provided to resources like computer laboratories, books and the internet:

"Living in res is an advantage because everything is much closer - everything I need. I don't have books but I get high marks because I go to the library almost every day from six o'clock to ten o'clock. I read cases, I go to the computer lab. I don't have a laptop." (BF_20_ULSTUD9_LL2014)

Library access enabled this student to maintain an evening study routine and save travel time. She avoided purchasing books and used online and library resources, which saved money. Academic libraries provide a range of resources, including academic journals, previous years' question papers, books, reliable internet connection and quiet, secure spaces for study.

Students described sleeping in cars, toilets, television rooms and even on the road:

"There were moments I did because sleeping on the floor of a TV room in a particular Res. for some six weeks." (BM_21_UFHSTUD1_BSc_2016)

⁶⁰ BF_23_DUTSTUD3_IA_2015

⁶¹ BF_23_UFHSTUD7_BSocSc_2014

“I once slept on the road. I just feel ashamed for myself.” (BM_19_UKZNSTUD7_LL2013)

A common term to emerge from the interviews was that of the ‘squatter’:

“It’s a big problem because in this res, you might find out like there’s 100 people who have squatted. We had 23 rooms but in 15 of those rooms there were squatters because this university doesn’t have enough space to accommodate all students. It’s illegal but we still do it because we can’t leave our brothers to suffer.” (BM_23_ULSTUD1_BSocSc_2015)

Squatting was another way students supported one another. Sometimes students reported renting their rooms out to others to obtain some income and then went and stayed with a partner. Other students seemed less impressed with staying in university residences, particularly at the University of Limpopo, complaining about a lack of hot water, burst pipes not being fixed for days, not having study desks and other resource shortages. However, students generally spoke about university residences as a sought after resource and a desirable living arrangement.

Additional Challenges

In this final part of the chapter we discuss three less prominent themes that emerged in the interviews with students. While these issues were not sufficiently debilitating to cause many students to discontinue their studies, they were quite commonly touched on by participants and need to be mentioned in the chapter.

Mental health

The stressors associated with financial, academic and accommodation troubles led to one of the unexpected findings in the data: the large number of students that reported suffering from mental health problems. The word ‘depressed’ was scattered throughout the transcripts:

“Of course there was a time I felt depressed.” (BM_23_UJSTUD10_BEng_2016)

“Okay, well like I’m most depressed just after receiving marks.” (BM_22_UJSTUD1_BEng_2016)

“I stayed in my room because, I mean. I’ve got depression, I’ve got anxiety. I can’t deal with these things, you understand?” (BF_21_NWUSTUD9_LL2016)

Negative feedback received in relation to academic assessment is one of the challenges students faced and they needed to accept setbacks and persevere if they were to overcome academic challenges. Quite a few students described visits to mental health professionals and a number of students were treated medically for depression and anxiety. Financial worries may be the root cause of many of these students’ struggles. Many spoke of not getting help because they had been told that depression is “an adult sickness” or “a White person’s disease”.

Social life, crime and student protests

A number of less debilitating themes, linked to the university environment and student life emerged from the interviews and need to be mentioned. These are “social life”, “crime” and “protests”. It was a challenge for students to obtain a balance between their academic work and the myriad social activities associated with student life:

“Students need to be focused and they need to party also. To keep a balance is very good, if there is too much of one and less of the other one, the student will not be satisfied.” (BM_23_CPUTSTUD3_Entre_2013)

Many of the students in the study mentioned their recreational activities and said that they experienced peer pressure, but also that they enjoyed drinking alcohol and socialising. There was little evidence that these activities proved to be serious barriers to academic success, unless they were interspersed with descriptions of mental health problems. Quite a few students mentioned that romantic relationships led to emotional stress:

“The girl I was dating at the time - she did me wrong and then it just spilled into the academics. Like my performance was below average.” (BM_23_UJSTUD10_BEng_2016)

While relationship troubles influenced students, none of them reported that these interactions resulted in academic failure. Rather they sometimes led to drops in performance.

Criminal activity on campus also impacted on academic studies. One student whose friend had been attacked said:

“So I just do everything online and attending class is very important but I can’t because I’m scared of getting mugged or kidnapped on campus. I don’t even attend my six o’clock classes anymore because I’m just that scared of walking. And every time there is car behind me I just panic and my palms sweat.” (BF_19_UJSTUD7_LL B_2013)

Criminal activity affected feeling safe at university and hampered attendance for some participants. Recent publicity around gender-based violence on South African university campuses has highlighted this as an issue that particularly affects young women (discussed in Chapter 4).

One participant consistently referred to protests as “strikes” and it seems as if this term to him, usually associated with working-class labour action, is deemed appropriate to describe students’ actions. There is also a moral component to ‘striking’, one in which strikers claim to have been treated unfairly. Protest action was associated with the threat of physical and gender-based violence:

“And there was a small Indian girl that got caught up in everything. She didn’t know what to do. And some of the strikers were saying, ‘Rape the Indian bitch’, at which point I ran back and got out. And stuff like that only happens during the strike period where there’s blatant disregard for other races because strikes happen with predominantly Africans.” (IM_22_UKZNSTUD2_BA_2016)

While much protest action has been peaceful and students have generally strived to negotiate and dialogue with management, some protestors have become frustrated and, at times violent, reproducing problematic gender based norms that are already present on university campuses. While protests certainly make it difficult to complete university studies, these actions simultaneously need to be interpreted as the result of other barriers to success, like financial constraints and racial frustrations. Protest cannot, therefore, only be understood as a cause of the problem, rather it is an outcome of other barriers to success at tertiary institutions.

Social life, crime and protest are therefore integral components of South African student life in the current period, contributing to the environment within which tertiary studies take place. While these contextual challenges were not reported to hamper studies extensively, they provided additional challenges that need to be considered in trying to understand the overall

picture of obstacles that plague student success at university. It should also be noted that the protests of 2016 may severely limit individual success at university.

Discussion

Research on retention and academic failure in South African higher education focuses on the lack of preparation students receive in the basic education system, highlighting the skills deficit that young people bring with them when they embark on their university careers (CHE, 2013). This study has shown that these learner issues are compounded by university staff that lack teaching capacity and abilities, financial troubles and inadequate accommodation at universities. Research indicated that many lecturers arrived for classes without adequate preparation, simply read PowerPoint slides and provided insufficient time for students' questions. When staff did attempt to answer questions, they did so inadequately. Students in the current project that complained about teaching standards were told by lecturers that success at university requires a great deal of independent study and that they needed to become 'entrepreneurial learners'. There was no indication that students were provided with training such that they may become such effective entrepreneurial and independent learners. A danger also exists that university staff use the notion of 'the entrepreneur' as an excuse to shirk some of their teaching responsibilities.

Other research also indicates that lecturing quality is a substantial problem on university campuses (see Wadesango & Machingambi 2011). However, an inquisition into the standard of teaching at South African universities is likely to be met with a backlash in terms of staff claiming that such research would impact on academic freedom. Teaching skills could be improved through supportive feedback from peers, through a process that is constructive rather than punitive. In other contexts students have devised their own methods for monitoring lecture quality, such as the hugely popular 'Rate my professor' in the United States. While this kind of evaluation process may play into some of the dangers that Goldberg (2016) pinpoints in his indictment that the university now resembles an Uber car ride service, a feedback mechanism of some sort may lead to improvements in teaching.

Staff were reportedly inaccessible during designated office hours, assignments were not returned timeously and insufficient instruction was provided for essays, tests and other assessment tasks. In South Africa there is a drive to ensure that higher education institutions are research intensive and internationally competitive, but little emphasis or incentive is placed on teaching duties. This has produced a climate in which many lecturers do the minimum (or less) required in order to complete their teaching duties; they are not rewarded for these tasks, nor is their performance seriously reviewed. Support that staff did offer was experienced as different for Black and White students and further research is needed to understand the extent and nature of racism that exists in relation to student support. Students said that they felt that processes or channels did not exist through which they could voice their unhappiness with lecturers and that management was unaccommodating and disinterested when they complained. The 'old boys' networks that underpin academic departments and institutions prevent students from holding academics accountable for their actions and performance.

Students expressed feeling intimidated and scared that they would appear ignorant and simultaneously reveal their township or working class backgrounds, if they participated and made comments or asked questions in class. While this may be a natural concern of students in many contexts, it appeared as if South African universities did little to alleviate these struggles, or to address the alienating experience that many students reported on campus. Students struggled with the introduction of technology to their academic lives; the support they received to learn technological skills was reported as being uniformly poor in quality.

Interestingly, a number of participants interpreted differences in preparedness for university and exposure to, for example, English language and the use of technology, in terms of the type of high school which young people attended, rather than perceived racial differences. This finding differs from much research with high school learners who express a range of social differences in racial terms (Bray et al, 2010; Dolby, 2003; Cooper, 2017). University classes are now thoroughly mixed and it is likely that students observe a diverse range of multi-racial peers, who have arrived at university from different backgrounds.

The theme of financial resources appeared more frequently than any other in the interviews, indicating the pertinent role that it played in student life. This is underlined by the Fees Must Fall protests that erupted in a continued fashion across South African universities in 2015 and 2016. An interesting finding from the research was that finances, unlike academic work, was perceived to exist in a realm that was outside of the control of students. Even though students struggle to exert control over many components of their academic lives – for example they had little influence over the high schools they attended, access to computers or the quality of lectures - students believed that they could exert considerable influence over academic obstacles, but that finances were out of their control. Part of the reason for this is that families' economic circumstances change incredibly rapidly, meaning that it is difficult to plan financial aid applications. Another reason for this 'lack of control' was disillusionment with the NSFAS system.

Complaints about inefficiency and the unfriendly services provided by NSFAS administrators was a prominent finding from the research. Many students highlighted the time, money and effort required to apply for financial aid, the fact that they found the system confusing and lacking in transparency and that they felt powerless in the face of staff that were generally, rude, abrupt and unhelpful. Changes to NSFAS leadership and, in turn, organisational systems, will illuminate whether or not improvements to this service occur in 2017. Students' extreme lack of trust and belief in NSFAS might explain why they are adamant that "Fees Must Fall", even for wealthy students, as they no longer want to deal with the inefficient financial aid systems of the neoliberal South African university that are over-burdened, under-capacitated and generally hostile towards beneficiaries. Student resistance to NSFAS was also shaped by the shame involved in obtaining affidavits for each unemployed family member, the financial burden of transport and data costs to ensure your application is made, and having to queue for long hours (frequently multiple times) to share those personal details with universities.

Part-time employment presented students with a range of stressful decisions, as they both tried to ensure that they could finance their studies, but also prevent employment detracting from the considerable dedication that academic success requires. Students received different responses from parents regarding the value of their tertiary studies, with some parents believing the investment in a university degree to be worthwhile and others favouring immediate employment, if opportunities arose. For those that found part or full time employment, the possibility of distance studying through UNISA was a desirable option. The administration and initial outlay of funds required for registration was mentioned by many participants and has been well-documented elsewhere.

Textbooks have become a considerable expense for students and it appears as if multi-national corporations that produce these books charge exorbitant fees. Textbooks are an extremely troublesome cost because they are not always budgeted for when students work out their financial needs. In waiting for financial aid, students are often forced to delay purchasing the books they need, which is detrimental to their academic work.

Accommodation struggles were linked to finances, but finding lodgings presented its own set of problems. Residential location impacted on access to services like libraries and computer laboratories and it determined the amount of time and money that students were forced to spend on travel. For these reasons the majority of respondents favoured living in university residences

on campus, even though some complained that these places were often noisy. The allocation of rooms was a cause for concern and respondents mentioned that a great deal of corruption and patronage existed. 'Squatting' also appeared to be a common phenomenon, as hapless students were charged rent by entrepreneurial students with res lodgings, and homeless students were taken in by their peers until they were able to find and afford their own place of residence.

Taken together these obstacles meant that the overall university experience was one of survival and hustling, leading one student to express:

"Sometimes we learn to pass and not to understand so that sometimes creates troubles on their own when we are looking for work because we don't know anything about the course that we did. If you [only] learn to pass more trouble will come."
(BM_24_DUTSTUD8_PR_2014)

Other students described their time at university as akin to "fighting a war" and doing "anything to survive". These descriptions differ considerably from the ideal university experience of comfortable reflection and deep critical thinking, which may produce well-rounded citizens. While this may not be possible in the South African context with its resource constrained limitations, it is certainly in all of our interests to strive towards tertiary educational experiences that do not resemble combat zones. Some ideas about how this may be achieved are explored in our recommendations.

Recommendations

Finances

1. The inefficient financial aid scheme has lost the trust of students, leading to their call for its demise during #FeesMustFall. The new NSFAS system needs to be closely monitored and evaluated. A public strategy to repair faith in its operations should be developed and communicated.
2. There should be transparent, public communication about the efficiency of funding, as well as criteria for funding and how amounts are allocated. NSFAS should place on campuses, highly visible posters clearly stating how many students have been funded, how quickly the monies became available and what the performance of NSFAS looks like.
3. An urgent plan to accommodate the 'missing middle'. This is not the place to explore possible strategies to achieve this goal, but the current university crisis probably hinges on this issue.
4. Spaces for dialogue and feedback with/from students on financial issues need to be made by university management. This needs to be done to address student leadership legitimacy crises and as an alternative to university management strategies to militarise and securitise campuses.
5. Administrators who work with financial aid from the universities' side need to be evaluated. Whilst acknowledging that theirs is a difficult and largely unappreciated task, unfriendly and unhelpful personnel working in the financial aid sector can lead to capable students being turned away from tertiary studies; unfriendly administrators exacerbate scorn for NSFAS.
6. Cheaper textbooks and alternative materials need to be sourced for required reading. An investigation into the price of textbooks should be carried out. Questions need to be asked regarding why university staff set expensive textbooks for their courses, why textbooks are exorbitant, and whether inexpensive online alternatives exist.

Academic Obstacles

7. The quality of lecturers' teaching needs to be improved. This should be carried out in a supportive rather than punitive manner. This could take the form of a peer review system

whereby academics observe each other and provide colleagues with constructive feedback on how to improve their lectures.

8. Staff keeping regular office hours and being available after lectures for 5-10 minutes to answer student questions would improve the accessibility of teaching staff at universities.
9. Transparent, effective and regularly evaluated processes for students to lodge complaints regarding lecturer conduct should be established and monitored.

Accommodation and mental health

10. The stigma attached to student mental health issues requires attention and the services of student counsellors and medical services should be publicised better.
11. Student housing requires systematic research, as well as housing allocation processes and student practices in terms of applications for accommodation, at all South African universities. The roles of SRCs in this process should be critically scrutinised for signs of corruption.

CHAPTER 7 STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES AND STRATEGIES FOR SUCCEEDING

Summary

This chapter highlights the way students understand and act on ideas of success in the university environment. The findings and student accounts provided in this chapter reveal that university success has to do with more than getting a 'good mark' but is implicitly and explicitly facilitated by a range of interrelated factors. These factors entail individual agency, supportive social networks, uptake of educational resources and commitment to faith-based spaces and relationships. Their understandings can be seen as a culmination of both internal and external factors where responsibility is placed both on their actions and the roles played by the support systems that surround them.

A key finding is centred on students' determination to remain focused on their academic aspirations. This was enacted through self-discipline and the completion of academic tests or assignments, as well as the proactive way some of the students secured funding for their studies. Internalised notions of success at university saw students placing importance on their individual decisions to commit to their goals and avoid the distractions of student life. This self-induced pressure to perform well and be disciplined does not occur in isolation. Students spoke of the broader systems that assist them. These networks included family members, peers groups (mostly at university), and university staff. Given that the university environment can be experienced as isolating and exclusionary, these supportive networks play important roles in affirming students and ensuring they also understand their own worth, in order to realise their aspirations.

The importance of making use of those educational resources that were accessible to students was identified as a facilitator to university success. These educational resources generally included tutorials and lectures, seeking individual support from lectures, tutors and mentors (both formally assigned and socially identified) and sometimes using the psychosocial services that are available at their respective universities. Religiosity or spirituality was identified as a significant driver of academic success. Religiosity entailed both attending church and faith-based events, as well as faith in God. While the church emerged as an important space in which the students could acquire spiritual and social support, faith in God also promoted self-esteem and agency towards achieving success in their academic careers.

Student strategies to achieve success in the university is clearly complex. A stronger emphasis on student integration into universities' social and academic spaces, with a particular focus on strengthening student dispositions (associated with self-efficacy, self-discipline, etc.) and positive learning climates (approachability of lecturers and university administration staff) should also be prioritised. Concerted efforts towards the promotion of collective (peer) learning opportunities, both formal and informal, as well as mentorship programmes should be prioritised. Further research into the role of religiosity and church spaces in facilitating students' persistence and university success is needed. Moreover, this chapter provides interesting information on the depth of students' experiences and further statistical research will be useful to explore the breadth of these issues.

Introduction

In recent decades there has been increased interest in understanding the factors associated with academic success amongst students in higher education (Fraser & Killen, 2003; George, Dixon, Stansal, Gelb, & Pheri, 2008; Crisp & Nora, 2010). Similarly, in this study we wanted to understand students' perspectives and experiences related to achieving university success, i.e. what are the factors that the students thought promoted success? The students were thus asked to reflect on this topic throughout the study.

Students shared their views, reflecting on personal acts that helped them achieve success along with broader networks of people and the institutions they were located in. These insights from students can be divided into four main types of influences: Individual (focus, self-reliance and academic interest); Micro (supportive networks); Organisational (educational resources); and Macro (religiosity). These influences will be illustrated through students' accounts and have been organised systematically drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological categories.

Bronfenbrenner proposed that human development be considered through a 'hierarchy of systems at multiple levels moving from the most proximal to the most remote' (1992, p. 226). At the centre is the individual or what some have termed the endosystem. The next, the microsystem, is the immediate contexts of home, community, university and other "activities, roles, and interpersonal relations" (p. 227), including extended and blended families. The mesosystem comprises the interrelationships between microsystems – linkages between university and home, home and community, community and university. The exosystem comprise the institutions and practices affecting students such as health, criminal justice, parent's work place policies and policies governing universities and the country in which the student finds herself in general. The macrosystem comprises social and cultural contexts as well as belief systems. Belief systems of a society include things such as a belief in meritocracy or communal or collective action. Finally, and added later to Bronfenbrenner's thinking was the chronosystem – how ecological systems change over time due to political and historical shifts – such as the ending of Apartheid, the emergence of neo-liberal economic thinking and protests against colonial modes of being. While students gave account of some of these systems, they did not report on, for example, the exosystem or the chronosystem (change over time), nor on many macro factors apart from religiosity.

The findings presented in this chapter, do however indicate that that success at university was not only connected to academic performance, but depended on a range of systemic factors as described by Bronfenbrenner. These factors include individual, peer and filial, organisational and religious influences. In order to leverage these factors for success across the student population, a policy shift is needed. The final section of this chapter proposes recommendations towards improving university support for students, fostering peer support and devoting more resources towards researching this area further.

Findings

Students approached the notion of success as being a product of both internal and external factors. Individual actions in their opinion were determined by remaining focused and setting clear goals. This drive went beyond doing well at course work which was seen as a means to an end. Focus and goal setting also aided in acquiring steady employment, achieving financial stability and realising an improved future. Self-reliance was therefore seen as a core component that enabled the realisation of personal aspirations. In addition, while success in university can be understood as a means to an end, it is also influenced by students' attitude towards the degree itself. We can therefore assume that academic interest is a critical element in achieving success.

Students were clearly aware that they did not operate in silos and instead relied on support from both peers and family. A clear area where effective peer assistance is seen is through study groups and mentoring activities. For the students who participated in these activities, collective learning strategies were extremely useful as it allowed them to cope better with the academic workload and offered psycho-social support in the form of affirmation and encouragement. Students also looked to their families for inspiration to do well. However, this is not a singular experience with students sometimes facing discouragement or even being rejected by their family for choosing to study further instead of getting a job straight after matric.

For some students, utilising educational resources provided for them was a difficult task because these services were often only available in public and meant that students those who used them could be stigmatised or labelled 'weak'. However by seeking assistance during formal consultation times (which were also private) this fear was reduced. This particular finding is indicative of the students' sense of individual agency and the perceived contribution of self-efficacy and self-sufficiency to success at university.

On a broader level, a high number of students reported that their belief in God and attendance at religious events was a significant contributor to spiritual wellbeing and also a driver of academic success. Being involved in a church, for example, meant that people from that community supported you practically while belief itself strengthened you internally.

Individual factors: Focus, self-reliance and academic interest

Individual characteristics like "remaining focussed"⁶², goal setting, "self-discipline"⁶³, "working hard"⁶⁴, "self-determination"⁶⁵, "time management"⁶⁶, and "perseverance [and] patience"⁶⁷ were amongst the most mentioned factors that students perceived to have contributed positively to their academic trajectory. Focus and goal setting were interrelated, and were not only linked to the successful completion of academic tasks like tests and assignments, but also to future aspirations of acquiring steady employment, financial stability and a better future. This was particularly evident amongst the Black participants.

Self-reliance, in the form of discipline, time-management, hard work, determination and perseverance, were thought to be imperative for university success. Discipline and time-management were often used interchangeably, and were mostly discussed as a way to manage "social temptations"⁶⁸ like peer gatherings, parties or university 'bashes'. These social gatherings were considered as hindrances to good academic performance by most of the participants, as they are associated with excessive drinking and at times drug usage. However, a few of the participants mentioned that social gatherings are necessary for students because it adds "some flavour, some fun" to the demands of academia.

For some of the students, self-reliance also meant being proactive in securing funding to pay for or supplement their university costs. These opportunities involved fully- or partly- funded bursaries, student loans through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) and part-time employment. Only a few of the students reported that they had fully funded bursaries to pay for their study costs. Amongst the students who reported having part-time jobs, these jobs included opportunities that were internal and external to the university. Internal opportunities generally included being a tutor, while off-campus jobs included a range of options such as working as waitrons or in fast-food restaurants, doing promotional work and operating as a call centre agent. In some cases, part-time cleaning jobs were also mentioned.

"I worked at two different places last year. I worked at a salon place and they wouldn't pay me on time or they wouldn't pay me enough so I moved on and got a job at Nedbank as a financial assistant" (BF_22_CPUTSTUD2_BCom_2016)

Another student who worked as a waitron, was asked why she needed to work, she explained:

⁶² BM_23_UJSTUD10_BEng_2016

⁶³ BF_22_UJSTUD4_BCom_2016

⁶⁴ BF_NWUSTUD7_LLBB_2013

⁶⁵ BM_22_UKZNSTUD1_LLBB_2015

⁶⁶ BM_23_ULSTUD2_LLBB_2016

⁶⁷ CF_23_CPUTSTUD1_FinInSys_2016

⁶⁸ BM_20_UJSTUD9_BA_2013

“Yes I need to because my family, my parents don’t pay for my petrol to get to college. They pay for college but for the rest, I gotta eat somewhere, I gotta eat something. I am always on the road. So I have to pay for my food, I pay for petrol, I pay for my car as well.” (BF_19_UKZNSTUD3_BA_2013)

A Black male student who had been looking for a job said they had found a part-time job as a call-centre agent that would allow them to study while working. When asked how he felt he said “It’s a breather just finding the job.”⁶⁹

Linked to the theme of self-reliance, the students also commented on the importance of an “I don’t give up” attitude for university success. Students emphasise that a positive attitude together with perceived self-efficacy are significant motivations for their hard work and dedication towards successfully completing their degrees. ‘Positive attitudes’ for the students meant remaining determined and focussed on their academic achievements and future aspirations as articulated in the following extracts:

“I think that I had the right attitude and I was positive with whatever I did. I just understood that I wanted to succeed and get my degree in record time. So that kept me going and focused”. (BF_21_NWUSTUD4_BA_2016)

“My pride won’t let me put anything on hold right now. I need to finish so [that] I can be like ‘Yes, I did it!’ And somewhere somehow there are people saying she will make it. That’s what keeps me going.” (BF_21_UJSTUD7_LL_B_2015)

Although not explicitly identified by the participants, our analysis showed that academic interest also seems to influence (positively and negatively) university success. The role of academic interest was conveyed as students related the importance of enjoying the courses that they are studying. This was not always explicitly recognised, but was evident in the implicit associations that the students made between their academic attainment and their passion for a specific course.

Micro factors: Supportive networks

The theme of supportive networks is characterised by two main components namely *peer support* and *family support*. Peer support here refers to the academic and/or emotional support and encouragement that the students received from other students, classmates or social peers (friends). For the students in our study, family networks consisted of their parents, siblings (brothers, sisters, nephews or nieces), and aunts and uncles. Family members played a significant role in the lives of the students as they provided emotional and financial support to the students. The importance of these supportive networks is captured by UKZNSTUD6: “Doing well on campus isn’t an individual effort, it’s really about having people to support you and understand what you’re going through.”⁷⁰

Peer networks

Academic peer networks were considered extremely important for the educational development of students and presented itself in the form of study-groups. These study-groups produced collective learning opportunities where the students engaged with a range of issues such as daily class topics, individual/personal academic challenges, upcoming assignments and studying for a test or an exam.

⁶⁹ BM_24_CPUTSTUD7_OpMan_2013

⁷⁰ BF_32_UKZNSTUD6_BA_2015

Study groups were often convened, or joined, when the students recognised that they were struggling with a certain subject or aspects thereof. The groups would meet after class, at a time convenient to all of the members, and subject-specific discussions were led by students who were the strongest performers in that particular subject (sometimes formally appointed sometimes voluntarily). In this way, individual and collective agency is produced and support networks are created which complemented the existing formal lectures or tutorial sessions. Many of the students also recounted their experiences of the positive influence that the study groups had on their academic achievements, mostly resulting in better grades and a sense of accomplishment.

“I suggested we start a study group to [address] situations whereby I didn’t get something right [while] someone maybe got it easy and the one [subject] that I found easy, he or she got it difficult. So if we combine our efforts it becomes easy... We discuss whatever it is, assignments maybe, we discuss the challenges that we are facing.” (BM_23_UFHSTUD4_BCom_2013)

When asked how the idea of having a study group developed, it was clear that it involved a level of initiative-taking on the part of the student.

“It was recommended so much but we also recognised that we need to have a study group because we are suffering here and there. We had common problems. Then we had to meet... [to] sort those problems.” (BM_23_UFHSTUD4_BCom_2013)

Another student indicated that the study group he was part of saw tangible improvements:

“I am coping... We formed a group, a study group... last year and we are still continuing with the same group members - even with Criminology as well. [Another guy] is one of my group members and we did very, very well with our group especially the second quarter with [a very difficult subject]... We did very well. My group was the number one top with our assignment - we got 90% [laughs].” (BF_45_UFHSTUD9_BSocW_2014)

In addition to academic support, the students also relied on their peers, or ‘friends’, for encouragement and motivation to continue with their studies. In fact one student had this to say about peer relationships in her final reflection on the study:

“Do not isolate yourself from people. Seek relationships as they will serve as support systems for you in the coming years. Surround yourself with the right people and recognise what will serve you well. Being involved with the right people - those who are positive, energetic, spiritually centred, mature - is essential to remaining sane and focused on one’s university career”. (CF_22_UCTSTUD7_BCom_2017)

Given the demands associated with studying, this is not surprising and many reported that they had specific friends or family members that they would contact when they felt overwhelmed and in need of “emotional support”⁷¹. These included both recently acquired and childhood friends, as well as romantic partners, siblings and parents. A few students reported that their friends also occasionally provided them with financial assistance, although the majority indicated that they would seek financial support from their families. Our findings thus suggest that friendships contribute to the university experience in different ways. It is more than a social ‘hang out’ space, but can facilitate collective learning, psychosocial wellbeing through encouragement and motivation, financial support, and coping with the socio-academic demands of student life. This is reflected in the extracts below:

⁷¹ WM_19_UCTSTUD1_BsocSci_2013

“Well, there is this one girl I met and she is my girlfriend now. She showed me a different, totally different side of life... I was really down... ‘No, it’s okay to feel sad, man. It’s okay to feel sad’. Now she’s studying Industrial Psychology, so she was brilliant... I talked to her... And she’s like, ‘Okay. Do this. Try [to] do this and this and this’. You know? She had recommendations which I found that worked. I guess that’s the only real person I spoke to.” (BM_22_UJSTUD5_ElecEng_2016)

“My friends, definitely my friends, if they are not there and I feel like the problem is way beyond my ability to handle, then I speak to my mom. Generally, I have never had a huge problem whereby I don’t feel like I can talk to my friends, I try and sort it out for myself. I have really amazing friends!” (BF_18_UCTSTUD8_Medicine_2013)

Family networks

Like in friendships, family members were reported to be care agents from whom students often sought encouragement, motivation and affirmation when the demands of their academic life became overwhelming. While for most students talking with families provided direct motivation, for others it was their family *contexts* that served as indirect, but significant, encouragement to succeed at university.

“I’ve got a constant source of motivation. It’s my dad, hey. Whenever I have a bad [day] I call him or he calls me, and just - he gives me a word of encouragement, whatever, motivation. My mom as well! So I think what has kept me going basically is just [that] I’ve got a strong support structure, you know. I’ve got my family behind me, so I think that’s what has kept me going thus far.” (BM_22_UJSTUD1_BEng_2016)

“I have to be honest in this, [the] number one driver of me being successful has to be my mother. She is my number one fan! She is encouraging me and sometimes I say to her, she has a lot of dreams for me. Like I have told her about this project, she will say ‘Do it, do it’ you know? Just partaking in things like this might have some benefit and I always say to her ‘Mama you have such big dreams for me’. It’s funny because she is ambitious for me. I don’t think she has been as ambitious for... herself. And she has always been there for me; encouraging me to do things, ‘You can do it, don’t worry’.” (BF_19_UCTSTUD2_BSocSci_2013)

For one of these students, his desire to excel at university was driven by aspirations to be “the first male from my family... to actually go to university and get an education”⁷². For another student:

“[My] parents and my background itself helps me decide on what to do and how I want to do it because they motivated me and showed me that I can always get the things that I need in order to get where I want to be”. (WF_19_NWUSTUD1_BCom_2013)

As indicated previously, family members also contributed to the university lives of students through the financial assistance they gave. The financial costs of university appeared to have been burdensome for many of the students’ families. Students thus relied not only on their parents for financial support, but aunts, uncles and siblings were also reported to have made contributions towards their university costs:

“My sisters are paying for my fees actually. They managed to do it. So this year they are doing the same thing and but this year I couldn’t come back to stay at Res because of that.” (BF_20_NWUSTUD10_BSocSci_2015)

⁷²IM_19_UKZNSTUD10_BSocSci_2013

“Financially, my father is the only source... He’s always been there for me financially, and in terms of keeping [me] up in confidence and focusing on success.” (BM_18_UKZNSTUD9_LLBB_2013)

As is evident, these monetary contributions were not only towards university fees but also towards students’ daily subsistence costs. Given the costly demands of university, a few students also reported having had to move back home in order to cut costs of ‘boarding’ or staying in residence:

“I have an older sister, it’s just the two of us. She’s studying at TUT. So you know when your parents complain about money, ‘Oh I have to give you money for fees, oh I have to give you money for rent, school fees whatever’. So you think... ‘What can I do better?’ you understand, to ease their burden... So it was a decision... that I made... [to] go back home. In that way there won’t be rent. They’ll just give me travelling money, spending money and that’s it.” (BF_22_UJSTUD4_BCom_2016)

Educational resources

Another strategy that students used to facilitate university success was to draw on the educational resources that were available to them at their universities. These mainly included attending tutorials and lectures, consulting lecturers, tutors and mentors, and using (although not extensively) the psychosocial services that are available at their respective universities. One student spoke enthusiastically about the available resources:

“I think everything is just perfect for us. We’ve got tutors, we’ve got consultation hours, we’ve got lectures- so should you be afraid to ask in class, go to the consultation hours; go to your tutor, one on one consultation” (BF_19_UJSTUD4_BCom_2013)

Consulting lecturers

While not all of the students were comfortable to publicly (in class) approach lecturers, many acknowledged the importance of seeking academic support from their lecturers. This meant making time to visit lecturers during their consultation times at their offices and presenting to them the issues that they are struggling with. Some students indicated that they would consult their lecturers immediately after class, possibly because they will be able to recall the information and challenges better within a shorter time lapse. In addition to providing added intellectual support to the students, the lecturers were also, at times, praised for the encouragement that they provide to students. For one student, his lecturer encouraged his class by giving them class notes instead of insisting that they need to purchase the textbooks. In this way, he was able to cut down on the financial costs of his course: “I have a [subject name] lecturer who says we shouldn’t buy textbooks because we, all in all, use four textbooks and that’s going to cost us R3000. And he says he’ll just make us notes – so he makes us notes.”⁷³

A key contributor to students’ willingness to seek support from their lecturers was the perceived approachability of the lecturers. Of the students who reported that they would consult their lecturers when they were ‘stuck’, the majority described their lecturers as welcoming, encouraging, “nice... quite a good person”⁷⁴, “very experienced”⁷⁵, competent and “always there

⁷³ BF_22_UJSTUD7_LLBB_2016

⁷⁴ BM_UJSTUD3_CivEng_2013

⁷⁵ BF_18_UCTSTUD8_Medicine_2013

every time I knock on her door”⁷⁶. As was shown in Chapter 6, this approachability and availability was not always the case.

Consulting mentors and tutors

Other students, however, were more comfortable to seek assistance from tutors or mentors who were perhaps more approachable and accessible to them than lecturers. These student mentors were often one or two years ahead of them in the same field of study. In the extract below a student describes how her mentor promoted her academic growth when she was struggling with a particular course.

“In orientation they told us that if you are struggling to study or you don’t quite get what’s happening, mentors will be assign to you there [at the student centre]. So we went there, [and] we got assigned to mentors. So that mentor is doing the same degree as you, but it’s either he is one year ahead of you or two years ahead of you, depending on which one they give you. So for me they gave me somebody who was on second level while I was on first.” (BF_21_ULSTUD5_BCom_2015)

The student explained that her mentor, who was doing the same degree, assisted her in accounting and in economics.⁷⁷ For her, like other students, the mentoring programme facilitates success as it is a personalised activity where students have the opportunity to not only address those issues that they find challenging but do so at a pace that they are comfortable with. This is different to tutorials as these settings are group-based which, like lectures, could be considered intimidating to those students who are not able to pose questions publicly. Individual support through mentoring was considered so important to students that a select few also reported that they would informally approach senior students to mentor them:

“Econometrics... it was giving me problems in January. So I went to the postgrad centre with my friend. My friend’s ex-boyfriend did economics and use to chill with them so I asked him to mentor me while we were there. He was very good and he gave me study material like past papers. He explained very well.” (BF_20_NWUSTUD3_BCom_2014)

UKZNSTUD study flagged the importance of mentoring on her university success, (along with attending Orientation):

“I didn't know about having a mentor, so it was really a help... Obviously you're new here, so you don't know the older students and there's no-one to ask, so- Attending Orientation – oh, that's way important. I didn't attend it. I got lost. For two weeks I didn't attend one class because I didn't know where it was. So ya, mentorship, asking”. (BF_21_UKZNSTUD8_ComDev_2015)

In addition to the mentoring programme, students reported that they sought the assistance of the course tutors that were available to them. As is the case with the mentoring programme, visiting tutors was not always compulsory and the students agreed that “it’s up to us if we go to the tutors or not”⁷⁸.

University services

In addition to the resources mentioned above, students reported that there are various services available that they could access to promote their academic, physical and psychosocial wellbeing

⁷⁶ BF_44_UFHSTUD9_BSocW_2013

⁷⁷ BF_21_ULSTUD5_BCom_2015

⁷⁸ BF_19_CPUTSTUD8_FoodTech_2013

across respective campuses. These generally included: counselling and health centres or “student wellness centres”, “Fundani” (writing centres) or “academic development centres”, “teaching and learning centre”, the SRC, NSFAS, “career services”, “scholarship centre” and specific to the university of Fort Hare, the “Sunrise... an organisation that usually goes door to door at our campus. They ask if you have a problem academically, when you have a problem they will help”⁷⁹.

Importantly, although the students acknowledged the availability of these on-campus services, the majority of them reported that they mostly use the academic development services and do not access psychosocial services. For those who do not access the psychosocial services, they indicated that they do not trust the confidentiality of these services. Those who had used these services reported favourable outcomes:

“They [university] sent me an email because I’d failed everything and my friend was like, ‘Girl, what’s happening?’ I was like, ‘I can’t’. I went back to that spiral where I was and then she was like, ‘I think you should go to Psychad. Maybe they’ll help you’. And I was like, ‘Okay, let me just give it a try’. And I went - and talking to those people really helped. Even if they don’t give you solutions, I feel like talking to someone helps, you know?” (BF_24_UJSTUD8_BA_2016)

Similar remarks were made of the academic services where students indicated that the writing centres were helpful and assisted them with their academic writing skills, especially referencing. The students also mentioned that the reasons why they and other students were not accessing certain services mainly centred on awareness of the service and its perceived usefulness. Many also commented that had they known about the service in first year, they would have used it. In later years, they felt “shy” about only now going for help.

The students were also asked to reflect on their perceptions of the administrative services of the university. While we received mixed responses, significantly more negative experiences were noted. These negative experiences were related to the “long queues” and extended waiting times during the registration period, and unhelpful and unfriendly staff that were described as “rude” and “not professional”. The few positive responses, on the other hand, were associated with the online registration processes which were considered to be quick and efficient. One student explained that “It’s now straightforward. I think opening an email account is even more complicated than registration”.⁸⁰ The only time when students could not use the online system was when they had outstanding fees and thus needed to reconcile their costs as explained below:

“[The registration process] was great. There were not many things [to do as] there is a system of online registration and stuff like that. So many people registered online. And then people who went to register manually are those who have outstanding fees. You need to pay ASAP or you just won’t [be able] to register there, because you won’t see your documents.” (BF_21_NWUSTUD7_LL_2015)

“I had to come and do it physically because I had to first pay the outstanding balance and go clear and then - But it was relatively easy because I was already a registered student so all I had to do was just go pay my outstanding balance and then go clear at finance and then I could do my registrations online.” (BM_23_ULSTUD4_BA_2016).

A few, however, spoke of how having access to internet while “at home”, frequently in rural areas prevented them from registering online easily.

⁷⁹ BM_25_UFHSTUD10_BA_2014

⁸⁰ BM_23_UJSTUD10_BEng_2016

Foundational courses

In talking to the students about the courses they were enrolled for, some mentioned that they were expected to complete a bridging or foundational course before they would be able to register for a specific mainstream course. While students who were not expected to enrol for these courses perceived it to be helpful to others, mixed feelings emerged amongst students who have been through it. Some felt that it was not useful and thus did not consider it beneficial to their university success; in fact it merely delayed their progress (since it frequently took a whole year), and was associated with some stigma. Others explained that it offered them useful information and guidance towards the successful completion of their degrees:

“Personally, my foundation programme studies that I had - if it wasn’t for that, I wouldn’t make such marks”. (BM_24_CPUTSTUD3_Entre_2014)

“I started my foundation programme and it helped me to know the foundation and terms also. It’s not even because of the language. People don’t even know about business and everything but you don’t know the base foundation. It is important to study and have more patience.” (BM_24_CPUTSTUD3_Entre_2014)

Macro factors: Religiosity

For many of the students, religiosity emerged as a significant contributor to not only their spiritual wellbeing but also their academic success at university. We noted students’ religiosity when they referred to the social space of “the church” as well as the students’ faith in God. The church was described as an important space in which students could acquire spiritual and social support. Some not only attended churches but were also actively involved in church ministry or services in varying capacities such as being “an usher”⁸¹, “a Eucharistic Minister”⁸² and preaching at church. For those students who live extended distances from their families, the church was described as family (“they [the church members] feel like a family to me”⁸³). Much like the family support (described previously in this chapter), church members and leaders provided the students with “messages of hope [and] encouragement”⁸⁴ and, at times, financial support towards the completion of their degrees. For some students, ‘the church’ paid for their registration fees while another student indicated that she was offered a paying job as a cleaner at her church and thus received an income which she uses towards her university costs:

“The support that I get from my church is like - for instance, I’m not working. I managed to survive mainly from child support grants. And then at my church they know that I like cleaning houses, but not cooking. So they didn’t have somebody to clean the church and they approached me and they said ‘Sister would you kindly clean the church?’ and they paid me R600 a month. So it’s something.” (BF_44_UFHSTUD9_BsocW_2013)

The encouragement and social support that the students received from their respective faith congregations⁸⁵ were often seen as symbols of hope which increased their self-efficacy, self-esteem and belief that they are able to successfully complete their degrees. This kind of faith was also experienced through participation in prayers to God, whom the students often consulted when they needed guidance, direction and hope when they felt hopeless:

⁸¹ BF_30_UFHSTUD6_BAdmin_2013

⁸² CF_20_UCTSTUD7_BCom_2015

⁸³ BF_19_CPUTSTUD8_FoodTech_2013

⁸⁴ BF_21_NWUSTUD7_LLB_2015

⁸⁵ At least two Muslim students also spoke of the importance of their faith communities and their belief in God.

“It helps a lot because when times are tough you know where to run to, [rather] than running to a person... so I believe in talking to God or praying, then he will show me the direction of what to do, and how to do it!” (BM_19_UJSTUD3_CivEng_2013)

“The church helped me so much! They give me hope every time. I believe that if I pray I will do my things [study tasks] right.” (BM_23_UFHSTUD4_BCom_2013)

For some the involvement in faith communities and their faith in God also created a sense of belonging where they were able to connect with, and share their experiences, with other students which allowed them to cope better with university demands. Religiosity thus played an important role in the lives of the students and contributed to the personal, social and financial (to a smaller extent) wellbeing of many of the students.

Discussion

The aim of this chapter was to report on the students’ perceptions and strategies regarding being successful at university. Unlike studies that have examined this topic through quantitative predictive inquiries using academic performance (see for example Huws, Reddy & Talcott, 2005), we explored it through a qualitative lens. This approach allowed us to understand the factors that contributed towards success in greater depth, while at the same time providing students a space to tell their stories. The findings presented in this chapter revealed that success at university was not only connected to academic performance. Rather, it was associated with a range of factors including individual, peer and familial, organisational and religious influences.

Individual influences generally centred on student dispositions which embodied the subjective efforts that the participants put into their studies. Strong emphasis was placed on positive attitudes and self-efficacy, as well as self-reliance. Self-efficacy refers to the “belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the course of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). In other words, do the students believe that they are able to successfully complete their tasks, courses, semester, year of study, or degrees? In recent years, the concept of self-efficacy has received increasing interest in international educational research (Dinther, Dochy & Segers, 2011; Wright, Jenkins-Guarnier & Murdock, 2012). These studies show that students’ self-efficacy has an impact on perseverance, performances, exertion of learning tasks and goal-setting (Dinther et al., 2011; see also Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003; Schunk, 2003; Slinger, Berg, Fisk & Hanso, 2015). Self-efficacy has also been associated with student achievement and learning motivation (Dinther et al., 2011). In the current study, self-efficacy encompassed positive, persistent attitudes towards the completion of academic tasks. In this regard, attitude-behaviour theory suggests that students’ beliefs and attitudes towards certain tasks subsequently influence intentions and behaviours (i.e. whether or not to complete the task) (Hirshy, Bremer & Castellano, 2011).

Intrinsically linked to self-efficacy, self-reliance was conceptualised as those efforts for which students were individually responsible in order to achieve success during their academic careers. This generally included remaining focused and disciplined, making concerted efforts, persevering and determination. Smith & Wetlieb (2005) assert that managing independence is a key component in the lives of students while DeWitz, Woolsey and Walsh add that students “must somehow become persistent, goal-setting, self-starters who see college as important, [and must] integrate into the academic and social part of college, and persist toward a degree” (2009, p. 21). Persistence and perseverance are certainly not characteristic of all students as they are influenced by social, environmental and institutional factors (Copeland & Levesque-Bristol, 2011; Reason, 2009). For one, Hirschy et al. (2011) argue that university environments that provide adequate integration support to students can promote university success. Studies have also shown that positive learning climates are associated with desirable learning outcomes

(Copeland & Levesque-Brostol, 2011). Inversely, South African research by Moodley and Singh (2015) found that insufficient institutional support (overcrowded classes, unapproachable lecturers etc.) were linked to student dropout. The findings of our study supports the existing literature where the students reported that positive learning climates, in the form of approachable lecturers and university administrative staff, accessible tutors and mentors and, to some extent, relevant foundational courses, were important institutional structures for achieving university success.

Moreover, students identified the significance of social support in the form of peer networks and family encouragement. Both peers and the family were perceived to contribute to success through the provision of psychosocial and, at times, financial support, as well as collective learning activities amongst peer groups specifically. Families and peers played a significant role in the lives of students as they were often relied on for motivation and encouragement. These findings support recent evidence which consistently shows that social support from these networks facilitates students' persistence, perseverance and success (Copeland & Levesque-Brostol, 2011; Madhlangobe, Chikasha, Mafa & Kurasha, 2014). In relation to peer networks specifically, the availability of mentors and mentoring programmes were considered important for university success. This finding is supported by existing research that indicates that involvement in mentoring programmes can produce university success through the acquirement of additional academic support and access to educational support resources (Salas, Aragon, Alandejani & Timpson, 2014).

A final element associated with social support that emerged in our study related to the support that some students received due to their religiosity and religious affiliations. This form of support was described similar to that of familial support in that 'the church', or members of faith communities, was considered a space where students not only received spiritual guidance but also encouragement to complete their studies. Religiosity, in terms of faith in God, was also considered critical by students as it further encouraged them and spiritually supported them to complete their tasks or continue with their studies.

In all, the students in our study drew on a range of factors to obtain support during their pursuit of university success. Our findings hold implications and recommendations for practitioners and researchers who are invested in student academic success. Understanding the factors that contribute to students' success and the completion of university studies are important for the development of support strategies to facilitate such success. These issues have become increasingly important in the South African context where student attrition is a major concern for HEIs, especially amongst historically disadvantaged populations (Moodley & Singh, 2015). Recent estimates show that nearly 50% of students, in general, drop out during their first year of university (Bokana, 2010) while it has been reported that merely 5% of South African students who are Black or Coloured complete their university degrees (CHE, 2013). Moreover, university success is extremely important to students (and the larger society) as it undeniably has significant impacts on their career pathways (Brown, Tramayne, Hoxha, Telander, & Lent, 2008) and possible job and financial security in later years (Duggan & Pickering, 2008).

Recommendations

Improving university support

1. Efforts that seek to address student attrition need to understand students' experiences in its complexity; that is, that there are multiple factors that influence university success.
2. While not discussed in this specific chapter, support efforts need to consider the factors that both hinder (see previous chapter) and facilitate university success.
3. A stronger emphasis should be placed on student integration into universities' social and academic spaces, with a particular focus on strengthening student dispositions (in

relation to self-efficacy, persistence, perseverance, goal-setting, self-discipline, self-esteem, etc.) and positive learning climates (approachability of lecturers and university administration staff).

Fostering peer support

4. Consideration should be given to efforts to promote collective learning opportunities, both formal and informal, which could include advocacy on the facilitative nature of these activities as well as the provision of easily accessible spaces for students to engage in these activities.
5. Mentorship programmes should be encouraged in all disciplines and suitable mentors should be identified for undergraduate students.

Education policy makers

6. Further research into the role of religiosity and faith spaces in facilitating students' persistence and university success is needed, in order to encourage good practice from these institutions.
7. The current study provides important information on the depth of students' experiences and further statistical research will be useful to explore the breadth of these issues. This breadth of information is necessary for the development of support interventions to decrease and possibly prevent student attrition.

CHAPTER 8 INTERVENTIONIST RESEARCH STRATEGIES FOR EMANCIPATION

Summary

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. The five methods used were (1) Social Network Interviews (SNIs); (2) a private Facebook weblog (ongoing for five years); (3) Annual Participant Interviews (APIs - ongoing for five years); (4) Final Written Reflections (at the end of the study); and (5) Optional and invited participation in a Documentary (over 2 years).

*SNIs required participants to interview 5-7 people that fell into various categories over three years. The idea behind this task was for students to collect more data to aid the study and to assist students in creating a network through encouraging conversations with their peers, other potential supporters and university personnel. 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. 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. 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. 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.*

We found the SNIs to be a helpful exercise that promoted identification, motivation and information sharing, in some instances encouraging participants to think or do things differently. 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. 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. Through the APIs each year, participants were able to reflect on themselves and what was helping them succeed or preventing them from reaching their full potential at university and this extended into the Final Written Reflections where students ultimately revealed that they are lacking mentors, role models and information. 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. Having a few invited students come out from behind the veil of anonymity serves an emancipatory research agenda in that it becomes a way of disseminating data to assist future cohorts of new university students.

This chapter will describe how each of these five methods of the study constitutes emancipatory research, and records students' responses to each element. We do so in order to achieve two aims: to highlight how research methods themselves can be interventionist in nature; and to summarise students' learnings from various types of research engagements over five years.

Introduction

This chapter proceeds from Kathleen Lynch's article on equality and emancipation in research wherein she hypothesises that marginalised groups who are often the subject of social science research projects, are frequently left out of the research process. She proposes an emancipatory research methodology that sees oft 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. As Lynch succinctly argues, "this is especially important for research in the area of equality, as research which is not oriented towards transformation effectively reinforces inequality by default" (Lynch, 1999, p. 57).

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 in APIs every year for five years, in SNIs, the Facebook weblog, the final written reflections for 2017, and the documentary marking the end of the study. Since 'emancipation' is tricky to quantify, we know 'emancipation has happened' when students 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. Accordingly, the chapter will discuss the five ways we attempted to make the research emancipatory and include a findings-based discussion of the varied ways in which students found their involvement in the study to be emancipatory. The chapter ends with four case studies of students whose personal journeys demonstrate the nuances that necessitated a five-year longitudinal approach.

Strategies for emancipation

Ultimately, what a five year longitudinal emancipatory methodology allowed, was a way to hear polyphonic voices (Swartz, 2011) detail their experiences of maturation and change – in different ways - over time. Students were able to demonstrate the gains and challenges of developing a network, expanding social capital by connecting with peers and adults for social support and information sharing through conducting SNIs and the Facebook weblog, and sharing their stories in auto-ethnographic form through the documentary. Over time, through the reciprocal engagement facilitated by APIs, participants began to control the "naming... defining... and interpreting of their own world" (Lynch, 1999, p. 58). Consequently by encouraging reflexivity guided by principles of independent engagement and a commitment to change, we are able to provide evidence of why a five year methodology was both emancipatory and crucial.

Expanding social capital through Social Network Interviews

Social network interviewing (SNI) (Swartz and Bhana, 2009) is an exploratory research and intervention tool aimed at creating the template for young people to engage with community members in areas of concern for both. SNIs were conducted for the first three years of the study (see Appendix 7). During the first two years, each participant was given a set of handouts and sent off to interview seven people in the following categories:

- a person from your hometown who never went to university
- a student (or person) you consider more privileged than you
- a student (person) you consider less privileged than you
- a person who works at student support services
- a student who dropped out of university this past year

- a person you consider to have helped you over this last year at university (or life)
- a recent graduate that you know

In tasking them with this exercise we were able to; a) gather more data in support of the study and; b) help students develop a network by encouraging them to talk to other students (different to them), supportive adults and university personnel. The first two years were less successful because the paper handouts were clumsy and misplaced by students and frequently student's felt uncertain or unmotivated to carry out the interviews using the handouts. The third year proved to be a success as we gave each participant a bound booklet in which to conduct their interviews and offered a cash incentive for every interview completed. As a result, SNIs were discontinued in 2016 because sufficient data was collected between 2013 and 2015. While some students reported numerous challenges - laziness to conduct interviews, feeling shy to approach strangers, university support service employees not being open to an interview, time pressures to dedicate to conducting the interviews - most participants remained committed to and excited about doing the interviews and we were able to glean the findings below from the SNIs.

Over the years, many students found the SNIs to be a helpful exercise that promoted identification, motivation and information sharing. UJSTUD8, ULSTUD9 and DUTSTUD2 reveal:

“It was so helpful to interact with other students, it helped me get different perspectives especially on how to deal with stuff that we generally face as students. Some of the interviewees had very helpful tips that I also applied to my life.” (BF_22_UJSTUD8_BSc_2017)

“I gained interest in wanting to know, what exactly what people are doing, it was very emotional.” (BF_21_ULSTUD9_LL_2015)

“For me I have learned quite a lot from those people.” (BM_25_DUTSTUD2_HRM_2014)

Already, in the second year of the study UJSTUD8 was aware of how the SNIs were not only interventionist but agential as well: “A lot of people were just talking about discipline, studying hard and stuff and I actually realised that wow, I don't do all that, like I'm not that disciplined”.⁸⁶ In other words this student, like several others, claims that she changed her behaviour and her commitment to her studies as a result of realisations brought on by conducting SNIs with peers whose behaviour differed from hers.

Although struggles with finances emerged quite strongly in the interviewee responses, students reported that hearing other's stories of struggle helped them put their own finances in perspective (especially talking to people who were worse off). For many this identification was freeing and affirming because of the realisation that poor backgrounds do not define you as many students suffer from financial difficulties.

Other students got tips about how to handle lecturers, who to socialise with and were encouraged to use campus services by interviewees. For instance a CPUT student reported that the university counsellor she was interviewing, shared her frustration about students underutilising the counselling centre. Some participants were moved by the responsibility of conducting the interviews, feeling that it gave them a sense of purpose and professionalism. Race also emerged prominently in interviewee responses with one BA student from UJ reporting that an older student she interviewed warned her of racial issues that would surface once she reaches Honours level and has to interact with lecturers, whom she warned show favour to White students.

⁸⁶ BF_22_UJSTUD8_BA_2014

Frequently, because of the design of the SNI questions⁸⁷, participants were challenged by their own behaviour.

The idea of being empowered by others' stories and being able to identify, ultimately causes you to reflect on your own life and experiences. Participants engaging with interviewees (especially other students) was, in many ways, an exercise of holding up a mirror to themselves. It is not enough to hear the stories but the hope is that through the SNIs, participants would be encouraged to think or do things differently; a change that can be as significant as accessing a particular service on campus to finding the courage to ask a lecturer a question in class for example. In addition, the SNIs attempted to widen the networks of students so that they might also begin to acquire what Pierre Bourdieu (1997) calls social and cultural capital – people from whom they might learn the rules of the game, and who might help introduce them to future opportunities. The Facebook weblog was envisioned to facilitate a similar feeling of community, and to aid in the acquisition of these forms of capital.

Who Succeeds, Who Doesn't?: A Facebook Experiment

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. The Facebook weblog was active for five years even though use was inconsistent for a number of reasons: (1) some students were against joining Facebook as they found it incredibly distracting; (2) Students were discouraged when they were the only ones posting or when fellow participants did not 'like' or comment on their status updates and photo uploads; (3) Some students were simply not interested in joining Facebook, preferring anonymity; (4) Some complained about the constant notifications; (5) Other students admitted to lurking i.e. reading posts but not actively engaging by posting themselves; and (6) A few students, especially older students did not know how to use Facebook.

Nevertheless, the group was overall a valuable tool for collecting data, for developing relationships between participants and researchers, for developing the relationships between participants at different institutions, and as an effective communication tool for the research team and students.

Participants revealed that sharing experiences on the Facebook group was uplifting. In 2014 UFHSTUD2 expressed 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.⁸⁸ For many, the group was about connecting to other students and finding comfort in that fact that whatever you are going through, at which ever university, you are not alone.

“It does not matter really which university you go to, but we face pretty much similar challenges with regards to finances, academic work, the difficulty of the work, trying to understand the work.” (BM_22_UCTSTUD2_BSocSc_2016)

“Sometimes you'd feel like, 'Yo, am I alone in this?' You find... some are going through the same situations.” (BF_22_CPUTSTUD6_NatCon_2016)

⁸⁷ Questions began with a question aimed at building a discussion about norms around the topic (in this case of how students struggle to be successful at university), then continue to ask questions of the respondent that evaluate social context and external agency (what can and cannot be changed). Thereafter questions invite constructive analysis, specifically with regard to internal agency (i.e. what the respondent knows about the student interviewer's current behaviour). Questions then turn to developing strategies to overcome impasses or unhelpful behaviour or experiences, before finally inviting respondents to recommend further social connections whose advice and perspectives might be useful to the student interviewer.

⁸⁸ BF_21_UFHSTUD2_LLBB_2014

"I've been learning a lot from others, what they are posting. And we've got the same problems. (BF_33_UFHSTUD6_BAdmin_2016)

It was not just identification that was helpful, but being able to get immediate feedback on a question, idea or view was also encouraging. The group became a space where participants chose to write about financial woes, NSFAS, lack of preparedness from high school, information deprivation, study tips, advice on how to deal with workloads, discuss jobs opportunities and learnerships and campus crime among other subjects. Through sharing, students were able to offer advice about how to navigate certain structures within their universities: "I think for most of us on Facebook we all agree that... it doesn't matter which campus you're on. You get further if you know who the right people to speak to are."⁸⁹

For others the group was a space to offload emotionally: "I usually go to it when I'm feeling really down about school or something, so it's nice to let other people know how you feeling."⁹⁰ UJSTUD7 agrees that she turned to the group as a way of "crying out for help" because for her, the group was not just about getting solutions to the problems she was writing about but "the fact that there was a response makes it good enough" because "you are never the only one... someone is going through the exact same thing."⁹¹

UJSTUD6 suggested that the group stay open beyond the lifespan of the project because she has really bonded with a member of the group in another university explaining, "I've never met him, but we're going through the same thing... he understands what I'm going through... I mean, this is someone I can reach out to."⁹² She also recognises the potential social capital and network capacity the group offers adding "I can say, 'Hey, there's an opportunity. Come this side.' Who knows?"⁹³

Discussion about the Facebook group turned racial when one Black female NWU student made the observation that only Black students were posting in the group: "On that Facebook page, it is mostly us Black students. Because Whites don't post. The ones I saw on the Facebook page, they don't post."⁹⁴ NWUSTUD7 observations are confirmed by two White male participants, a CPUT and UCT student respectively.

"Here is stuff that a lot of it I can't relate to so much... because it is so far removed from my experience. There's not much I can say about that." (WM_41_CPUTSTUD5_BEd_2015)

"When I looked at the group a few times... I struggle to find a common denominator in terms of what people have talked about." (WM_20_UCTSTUD1_BSocSc_2014)

White, Indian, and male students were generally the least responsive for this study - White students in particular were hard to recruit. Perhaps White students may not have seen the value in the research for themselves except in terms of discourses around binaries of privilege and disadvantage, this could also explain why White students were inactive. Some students felt demotivated by a lack of participation in the group, others craved more robust discussions:

"It's not very interactive and it's quite discouraging and it's like you're writing for yourself. So it would be nice if people would respond." (BF_22_UJSTUD8_BA_2014)

⁸⁹ BF_31_UKZNSTUD6_BA_2014

⁹⁰ BM_20_UCTSTUD5_BSocSc_2014

⁹¹ BF_22_UJSTUD7_LLJ_2016

⁹² BF_23_UJSTUD6_BA_2016

⁹³ BF_23_UJSTUD6_BA_2016

⁹⁴ BF_20_NWUSTUD7_LLJ_2014

“When you don’t receive any comments you don’t see the need to post.”
(BF_20_UJSTUD4_BCom_2014)

A Coloured female student from UCT complained that she felt ganged up on in the group when she brought up a topic around Fees Must Fall and a heated debate ensued. That discouraged her from wanting to ever post in the group again - this begs the question, how might platforms like this be better mediated for future use?

Finally, several students admitted to not really understanding how they were supposed to engage in the group or as UJSTUD3⁹⁵, a Black male, explains that perhaps students got in the habit of overthinking their posts, which then discouraged them from posting because of the pressure to always say something important when really, “hi guys, how is school going” is enough to stimulate a conversation. Evidently there is a need for students to have a platform of this nature, one ungoverned by race or university or geography. While Facebook might not be the answer, the idea of a fully functioning private university weblog (perhaps delineated by course or faculty or degree) is not only useful, but necessary.

Marking change over time through Annual Participant Interviews

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”⁹⁶ or as UCTSTUD2⁹⁷ 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”. NWUSTUD1⁹⁸ 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. 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.

Annual participant interviews in 2015 and 2016 in particular saw participants’ opinions maturing; students became markedly expressive and insightful compared to previous years. In 2013 and 2014, participants spoke mostly about adjusting to being away from home and coping with academic assignments:

“Last year was a very tough year for me, because like I said it was not easy being away from home, it was not easy being on my own... and I have learnt to voice up my opinions and I can say that’s what my first year taught me.” (BF_19_NWUSTUD10_BSocSc_2014)

“This week I have two tests... but then I also have an assignment due on Friday... If I had known that I have an assignment due this week in particular I would have liked to have further notice, but I mean sometimes you just need to move around certain time changes and some schedule changes... so I think it’s just adjusting and learning how to cope with extreme work.” (CF_18_UCTSTUD7_BCom_2013)

⁹⁵ BM_21_UJSTUD3_CivEng_2014

⁹⁶ CF_21_CPUTSTUD1_InfoSys_2017

⁹⁷ BF_23_UCTSTUD2_BSocSc_2017

⁹⁸ WF_23_NWUSTUD1_BCom_2017

In 2013 and 2014 participants also realised that they could no longer operate in the same manner as they had in high school.

“Last year life was pretty crazy for me because it was the first year of university and I’ve never experienced anything like that. It’s not like high school, it’s too much work compared to high school... At university you concentrate and you are constantly highly stressed.” (WM_20_UCTSTUD1_BSocSc_2014)

These are the years where participants spoke most about struggling with independence, having to figure things out by themselves and having to interact with very different people – expressing that the diversity encountered at university can feel like a cultural shift and exercise in tolerance. In 2014 especially participants began to talk about increased feelings of confidence (both in terms of socialising and feeling more comfortable with the university environment): “I feel like I’m more confident this year.”⁹⁹ This is also the first year where students were reflecting on aspects they need to change in order to be successful in the years that follow. It was the API that helped them identify areas where they might have gone wrong in first year.

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, causing many students to say in the second and even third year of their study: “It’s not for me.”¹⁰⁰ What would make a student give up and drop out? UJSTUD2 raises an important point when she is asked: “I’m not sure whether it’s because it’s difficult or because they feel like now this is actually not what I want to do.”¹⁰¹ As one Black male student from UKZN puts it: “We as people of colour – the then disadvantaged – we study to work. We don’t study for the persuasion of knowledge... we study for work.”¹⁰²

This business of employability and work became a major theme in 2015 when students started to express concern and increasing panic about potential jobs and employability as they advanced in their degrees (three years into the study, and for many of them, their third year of university). As real anxiety around career prospects sets in from 2015, many students questioned their employability, preparedness in their field and the precarious South African labour market:

“A lot of people are sitting at home with their degrees, still dependent on their parents or whoever is the breadwinner... Even though I do want a great job and I do want to get paid... a lot of money, realistically I’m going to be home for a year or two.” (BF_21_UJSTUD7_LL_2015)

“I don’t feel like what they teach us really prepares you for life... and I just feel like if all of us are to be employable we have to be given skills not theory.” (BF_32_UKZNSTUD6_BA_2015)

In 2015 and 2016, students reflected on ‘stop gaps’, that is, having to drop out because of circumstances or deliberately taking a gap year:

“I think the gap year also taught me, you are wrong, this is not how life is supposed to be. Not now.” (BF_22_UJSTUD6_BA_2015)

⁹⁹ CF_20_UJSTUD2_MechEng_2014

¹⁰⁰ BM_22_UJSTUD5_ElecEng_2016

¹⁰¹ CF_21_UJSTUD2_MechEng_2015

¹⁰² BM_21_UKZNSTUD7_LL_2015

“You see, when you take a gap year... basically your mind set changes a little bit.”
(BM_22_UKZNSTUD1_LLB_2015)

The lessons and changes brought on by stop gaps can be positive or negative depending on how you spend your gap year. For some it offers clarity and a sense of direction for the following year and future. For others, it is a low point because of a lack of stimulation and sitting at home with nothing to do. A couple of students expressed that if they could do university over again, they would have taken a gap year to truly explore their options.

“I took a gap year because I didn’t get accepted in what I want to do. Most students who do not get what they want to do, they compromise their lifelong career. [They say] ‘Okay no, since I can’t do this I’ll do that’ and then two years down the line they realise that they really don’t like it, then they drop out. I don’t want that for myself.”
(BM_21_UJSTUD1_BEng_2015)

“Instead of wasting all the money that I did actually studying the crap that I did, if I could have taken a year off instead of wasting two years doing this.”
(IM_21_UKZNSTUD2_BA_2015)

For the students who managed to avoid stop gaps, talk about maturation and growth over the years had largely to do with a heightened level of focus, greater discipline and confidence - confidence in your abilities and your place at university. Over the years, students either went in the direction of having less certainty about their career path that caused listlessness and anxiety or they became more confident in what they were studying, causing them to apply themselves with even greater determination. For others success at university is simply about putting in the time.

“In first and second year, it’s just so simple, I got a lot of distinctions without working hard. But last year, I had to study like other students. Library all the time. So I’ve learnt to take things seriously.” (BF_22_NWUSTUD7_LLB_2016)

Work experience and internships can also give students a renewed sense of motivation and confidence. These in-service trainings and internship opportunities usually occur in the third or fourth year of study:

“In December of last year I started working at a Law firm and that was the best experience of my life. It was exactly where I saw myself, exactly the kind of stuff I wanted to do. Because after my second year I felt demotivated to study. And then when I went into the working environment and I started, you know, practicing what we learn, it was amazing. So that kind of re-motivated me to study.” (IM_21_UKZNSTUD10_BSocSc_2015)

Students reflected on individual academic progress, explaining transitions from each academic year. Students were really vocal about these observations in 2015. The majority of students agree that third year is particularly challenging. This is in part because subject matter and concepts become more complex but also the workload increases.

“Honestly my first year it was a smooth ride. Second year, yes it was a smooth ride but I was used to that, second semesters are the most hectic ones. But this year I’ve got a lot of work to a point that I can say - some of it - I’m not coping.” (BF_20_NWUSTUD4_BA_2015)

“The leap from matric to first year is great, and then from first year to second year is even more, but second year to third year isn’t so much... It’s just more work, more difficult.”
(WM_22_NWUSTUD2_BEd_2016)

Several students mentioned that failing courses meant that they were finding themselves in third or fourth year (2015-2016) having to make new friends as their peers had advanced without them. Having to find a new community affects feelings of belonging in university, especially after spending some years establishing a routine that makes you feel settled.

“Most of my friends around me are graduating, and I've learned that I mustn't look at them and worry about myself.” (CF_22_DUTSTUD7_IT_2016)

“The majority of people I started with are working now, they're done studying. And I have to make new friends.” (BF_22_UJSTUD4_BCom_2016)

For CPUTSTUD10 and other students, having a student card made them feel like “you're part of something”.¹⁰³ For CPUTSTUD2 and UKZNSTUD6, both Black female students and both older than their peers, their age made them feel as though they do not belong:

“When I came to UJ I started all over again so obviously I'm doing first year and I'm doing it with people that are way younger than me and I think that has made me feel like I don't belong because it's very hard.” (BF_22_CPUTSTUD2_BCom_2016)

“I mean I don't feel like I belong here. I feel like I'm older... so I should have studied and gotten out before.” (BF_32_UKZNSTUD6_BA_2015)

Other students spoke about how the pressure to fit in made them feel as though they do not belong at university. A Black male at UL said this pressure came in the form of class comparison as he noticed the expensive designer labels peers wear but, maturing over the years helped him learn to “accept the way you are”.¹⁰⁴ Other accounts of a lack of belonging came from students who had learning difficulties and in another case a speech impediment.

UJSTUD7's sense of belonging was affirmed once she sought university services in the form of the counselling centre:

“I attended group support at psych. So being there I saw people going through the same emotion every time before test week, every time before their assignment, they would go three days without sleep... The fact that I'm not the only one, I feel like I might just make it out.” (BF_21_UJSTUD7_LLBS_2015)

For others, academic progress and enjoying work was tied to belonging. This is why UCTSTUD7¹⁰⁵ struggled with feelings of belonging because her marks were coming up short and she had to deregister from societies she enjoyed being a part of since first year, in order to focus her time and attention on boosting her grades. UCTSTUD2¹⁰⁶ started feeling as though he belonged at UCT after Rhodes Must Fall and what he feels was the start of a process of decolonisation. NWUSTUD7¹⁰⁷, a Black female from the Potchefstroom campus adds that being at a predominantly White university as a Black person absolutely affects feelings of belonging. Finally DUTSTUD3 sums up belonging and growth in university by saying:

“That's why you find people, this year someone is doing stats and mathematics, next they are changing, they are going for medicine... they don't figure out that you don't have to start at high school to dream about the person you want to be. You start at a very young

¹⁰³ BM_24_CPUTSTUD10_ChemEng_2015

¹⁰⁴ BM_23_ULSTUD1_BSocSci_2015

¹⁰⁵ CF_21_UCTSTUD7_BCom_2015

¹⁰⁶ BF_21_UCTSTUD2_BSocSci_2015

¹⁰⁷ BF_22_NWUSTUD7_LLBS_2015

age... at this age having to reach varsity and still in three years you have already done three different courses - that shows that you haven't grown that much. You haven't understood your purpose in life and understanding your purpose, like understanding what you really you want is what has got me this far." (BF_23_DUTSTUD3_Int Aud_2015)

DUTSTUD3 is speaking to the practice of being self-reflexive as something that comes naturally for her, but for others, the only self-reflexivity they may have engaged in was prompted by the APIs each year. From APIs, participants were able to consider what they would have done differently in the previous year to achieve greater success. Moreover, participants were able to reflect on themselves and what was helping them succeed or preventing them from reaching their full potential at university. For example CPUTSTUD8, four years into university, retrospectively wished she had a greater sense of curiosity throughout university because questioning promotes growth:

"To questions things... interact with people, have the hunger to learn more. Not just learn academically, but see something, question, 'Why is it there? Why is it done this way?', because I feel that if we start questioning things, you actually teach yourself. Okay, you question why is - like say the Rhodes statue now, why was it there?" (BF_22_CPUTSTUD8_FoodTech_2016)

And if you struggle to 'find things out on your own', many participants suggested befriending senior students as mentor type figures.

"If I had surrounded myself with people who were more mature, like fourth years or third years at the time, some of the things I think they could have given me a heads up." (BM_23_UJSTUD10_BEng_2016)

Participants also revealed practical advice they would give themselves if they were starting the university journey over: adjust your mind-set and get ready to learn to cope with extreme workloads; find someone to proofread your work before submitting; terminate social media accounts – especially during busy times in the year; and do not feel pressured to take on more responsibilities as you advance in your degree as this can be detrimental to your grades.

To put it as eloquently as UKZNSTUD8, as you progress in university, "you have to learn to cope with the blows and recover quickly from failure and unexpected twists and turns".¹⁰⁸ Of course UKZNSTUD8 made this reflection three years into the study. In that three years she spent 2013 enrolled at UKZN, was financially excluded at the beginning of 2014, spent the greater part of her gap year in 2014 waitressing and trying to raise enough money to return to university and with her mother's help, was able to raise enough to return to her degree in 2015. All of this is to say that maturity and growth also come largely from experience – even if that experience is institutional violence in the form of exclusion. By being forced out of school UKZNSTUD8 chose to focus on what she wants: finding a job, saving money and ultimately fighting her way back into the system. But not all young people have this kind of fortitude or familial support. For many, university taught them lessons, from which they are still recovering.

The final reflections in 2017 enabled the participants to put into words the different ways the university experience has shaped and improved their lives, and what they are still recovering or might never recover from. In many cases respondents were really interested in comparing what they had said in first year with what they now believed. This indicated that participants were curious about their maturation and evolution over the years, so a written reflection was a wonderful way for them to bring the study to an end and to express what they have taken away from both their studies and their involvement in this research study.

¹⁰⁸ BF_21_UKZNSTUD8_ComDev_2015

Reflective takeaways from experiences of university and this study

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. Most students took the task seriously, giving erudite and considered responses to each question.

When asked to reflect on what they have learned about themselves over the last few years, many students responded that they are far more resilient than they initially gave themselves credit for, that they are capable and strong. Others highlighted their growth beyond just the academic, for instance learning to be more effective communicators, and having developed greater problem solving and decision making skills.

A couple of students talked about managing expectations and blows to confidence after dissatisfaction with their performance at university which ultimately translates to disappointment with themselves and what they assumed they were capable of:

“Imagine being a four time top achieving student in high school with a few distinctions in matric. And in the blink of an eye you're in a lecture hall staring at your script marked 47%. That was me.” (BF_23_UJSTUD7_LL2017)

One student reflected on his capacity to fight for his dreams after the trauma of being financially excluded, at the end of his first year, in 2013:

“Being financially excluded didn't stop me from continuing with my academic journey. This is something that taught me how to overcome my fear because after I was excluded I was a bit scared of going back to university life, thinking I might be excluded again... I have learned that when things don't go the way you planned, don't give up but look for alternatives immediately.” (BM_24_UKZNSTUD1_LL2017)

Like UKZNSTUD8, UKZNSTUD1 also spent 2014 working (at a call centre) trying to raise enough money to go back to university. Intimidated by the large debt he amassed at UKZN, he elected to start over and do a degree in Education through distance learning at NWU. After such derailment, it is no surprise that UKZNSTUD1 is exceptionally proud that he managed to remain in university, despite tremendous obstacles and that he went on to enjoy and excel in his new degree.

When asked what they are most proud of after five years, responses in the written reflection varied: a few participants said getting a job, others mentioned returning to university (after circumstantial or self-imposed stopgaps). Several mentioned sobriety, passing very well, improved familial relationships, involvement in outreach work and volunteering. Others noted personal accolades and awards, improved interpersonal skills, not falling pregnant or being involved in crime, avoiding drug and alcohol addiction. One student responded “buying a car”, a few were proud of qualifying for postgraduate studies, one young man was excited about becoming a first time father while a couple of participants responded that they were proud of having the courage to drop out of university for whatever reason.

When asked what they had thought their chances of success were at university considering their background, the majority of participants responded that their poor backgrounds and limited access to finances made them feel like their chances of succeeding were extremely low, but one White student responded differently, asserting “pretty high in the respect that I am White and

have a good education.”¹⁰⁹ Others mentioned poor high school results and being underprepared by high school as reasons for limited chance of university success. A few students mentioned having strict and involved parents, and strong social support from family which made them confident in their university success.

So much of this study has been centred on an intersectional understanding of a students’ university experience, that is, one that considers race, class and gender. Over the years, explorations of these areas have deepened, with the socio-political events of the last two years especially shaping students’ thinking. In APIs each year, framing questions around race and gender had to be reconsidered in ways that encourage students’ to reflect more deeply, and not only provide superficial answers (which was the case in the first two years of the study).

In the final reflection students were asked to carefully consider their White/Black/Coloured/Indian/other identities in university. Most students responded that their race did not have any effect on their overall university experience. A few Black students mentioned that although they are acutely aware of race, they never felt burdened by race issues and embraced diversity at university. However, there were a few students who poignantly reflected on their racial identities at university. Some comments from Black students were:

“If you are Black and poor, you are in trouble. This place is very brutal for Black poor kids”. (BM_22_UKZNSTUD9_LLB_2017)

“Being Black in my university has been a nightmare... there is no such a thing as a rainbow nation in South Africa and there will never be.” (BF_22_NWUSTUD7_LLB_2017)

“Being a Black person in this university has been challenging to say the least. It is a traumatic and triggering experience which I think affected me to a certain extent both socially and academically. In the law faculty, I could see that my race was a problem to some lecturers.” (BM_22_UCTSTUD9_BSocSci_2017)

These views are the result of accounts of institutional violence enacted by faculty, the fact that the languages of instruction at HEIs can marginalise Black students, that Black students constantly have to hold themselves to a standard of Whiteness and that university administration continues to favour Whiteness. A couple of students equated Blackness with burden citing, “your entire family is looking at you and waiting on you to finish and be able to lift them out of poverty”.¹¹⁰

Of the three White males in the study, two answered this question by acknowledging their racial privilege at university, as it pertains to understanding the language of instruction, ability to easily relate to administration and faculty, and historical edifices on campus that represent them. One Coloured student expressed that her identity remains indeterminate:

“Unfortunately, being a Coloured student means I am never White or Black enough for certain privileges. The Coloured population is too Black for the White population and too White for the Black population, thus we never really win at anything. Our outcome depends on the outcome of the Blacks or Whites.” (CF_22_UCTSTUD6_BSocSci_2017)

On the subject of gender, the majority of students responded that they had not been shown preferential treatment as a result of their gender – they all are ‘just students’. Nevertheless, several opposing responses highlighted gendered issues in university; including members of the SRC reportedly giving women preferential treatment, and management and lecturers showing a

¹⁰⁹ WM_23_UCTSTUD1_BSocSci_2017

¹¹⁰ BM_28_DUTSTUD2_HRM_2017

“soft spot” for female students. But ULSTUD5 shares that this preferential treatment has a disturbing side: “There are those lecturers who try to take advantage of women when they are in challenging situations such as in need of campus residences, clearance of fees, needing additional marks to qualify for exam or to pass the course.”¹¹¹

Several students, like UKZNSTUD1¹¹² felt that men still dominate in terms of leadership and performance. One DUT student expressed having to constantly prove her ability and worth in her predominantly male dominated IT degree. UCTSTUD2’s answer to being a woman on campus was “scary” because as she tells it, “there are so many threats to women’s lives at university... female students are not safe on campuses.”¹¹³ This was echoed by UJSTUD7 who said:

“Being a female at the University of Johannesburg is an extreme sport. By this I mean that every morning I woke up and walked down to campus with weapons. I had Tasers and pepper spray, because there was always crime on campus. Not petty crimes, the real stuff. Females being raped on campus with cameras literally *every-single-where*.”
(BF_23_UJSTUD7_LL2017)

UCTSTUD9¹¹⁴ acknowledged that being a man at university has made life a lot easier for him, observing that patriarchy still thrives at the university. However, he expressed that being a gay man has left him a victim of discrimination in some instances. UFHSTUD2¹¹⁵ shares that being an outspoken woman at university is tough as you are “viewed as bitter by males”. These views expressed correspond directly to the themes presented in Chapter 4.

On the subject of experiences of wealth, many students reflected on the challenge of being poor and the struggle to survive. Students spoke about instances of going hungry, having to house ‘squatters’ or ‘squatting’ themselves (in residences), and having no money for textbooks and supplementary study material. Some students mentioned being further burdened by having to financially support family while completing their degree. UKZNSTUD9, a Black male enrolled in an LLB degree said: “Being poor at university has been nothing but a humiliating experience”¹¹⁶ while a Black CPUT Chemical Engineering student said, “Being poor at university has almost made me depressed”¹¹⁷.

A few students mentioned having adequate financial support as they are from middle class families but for one student, her middle class existence is still a burden because: “I was not poor enough to get NSFAS and still not smart enough for a bursary”¹¹⁸. An older White male CPUT student recognises that his financial status makes him a better student:

“Being rich has been a huge benefit. I live close to varsity and I own a car which saves me loads of time. I have a nutritious diet which means I am able to be at my best most of the time. I have a computer and printer at home which means I can do research at home.”
(WM_43_CPUTSTUD5_BEd_2017)

When the research participants were asked to reflect on how 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

¹¹¹ BF_23_ULSTUD5_BCom_2017

¹¹² BM_24_UKZNSTUD1_LL2017

¹¹³ BF_23_UCTSTUD2_BSocSci_2017

¹¹⁴ BM_22_UCTSTUD9_BSocSci_2017

¹¹⁵ BF_24_UFHSTUD2_LL2017

¹¹⁶ BM_22_UKZNSTUD9_LL2017

¹¹⁷ BM_26_CPUTSTUD10_ChemEng_2017

¹¹⁸ BF_23_CPUTSTUD8_FoodTech_2017

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.”¹¹⁹

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”¹²⁰. 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.

It was additionally helpful to get students to reflect on what their biggest overall obstacle was in university: How many would name individual challenges? How many would name structural challenges? How many obstacles would primarily be about resources?

With regards to individual challenges, students spoke at length about dealing with too much freedom, and about how failure can demotivate you and change the course of your life. They also referred to the personal and individual challenges of procrastinating, being lazy, being indecisive about what you want in life, the pressure to fit in with others, extreme workloads, falling pregnant, dealing with depression and social anxiety.

While many spoke of the personal problems of having to deal with deaths in the family, poor social support especially from parents who do not understand the demands of modern university life, realising that you picked the wrong course, not being prepared for university and not having mentors to help you anticipate and cope with varsity life, many of these are in fact structural in nature. Poor education and parents not having experience of higher education are problems deeply rooted in South Africa’s history of Apartheid.

As far as challenges that students named as structural, the key two mentioned was that of *language* - not being able to speak English properly and therefore perpetually struggling with course content, writing and examinations, and *finances* – the fear and experience of financial exclusion, and with it shattered dreams, as well as the perpetual struggle of accommodation, transport and study resources.

For many, resources for studies was a key theme, one that students mentioned neither as a personal or structural challenge, but rather as a matter of fact. Being short of money, for fees, food, accommodation, transport, and not having a laptop were those mentioned consistently.

From our data, individual obstacles outweigh all others. So while students are demonstrating self-efficacy and self-reliance (see Chapter 7), the individual obstacles can be understood as by-products, coping mechanisms or conventional student issues that are amplified according to their circumstances. In other words, students are pointing out that psychosocial support is low for them and so while a lot of them adopt an “it all comes down to you” and “you need to hustle” attitude, they continue to fail. Except *they* are not failing, because they were never equipped with the adequate tools in the first place. Instead they are being failed by the system. Students are lacking mentors, role models and information. They are crying out for strategies to deal with academic transitions in university i.e. new studying techniques, critical thinking skills, academic literacy and learning to manage time. The phrase ‘having to manage time’ came up in almost every interview and yet there wasn’t a clear sense of practical strategies to help students achieve

¹¹⁹ WF_23_NWUSTUD1_BCom_API_2017

¹²⁰ BF_23_ULSTUD9_LLB_2017

balance in university. It is only with the benefit of hindsight, that the students were able to put into words a few things that worked for them and helped them succeed, and things they would do differently if given the chance. Some of these included:

- Do proper research about your course/degree/university (do not rely solely on your university to give you this information)
- Take notes during the lecture or download slides the same day they are presented and go through them.
- Build a good relationship with your lecturer and form study groups with people motivated to succeed.
- Watch tutorials on YouTube if you don't get what the lecturer was saying.
- Pray and be strong in your faith, it will get you through difficult times.
- Do vacation work and engage with people who are qualified and working in the field.
- Do physical exercise/sports to keep you fit and able to learn.

A lot of students mentioned that they would not have second guessed themselves so much, trusted themselves more and had more confidence in themselves and their abilities if they could do it over again. So some questions to ask would be: What contributes to their lack of confidence? What effect does this lack of confidence have on university performance and experience? Students said if they had a chance to do some things differently, they would have:

- Looked into alternative funding sources.
- Decreased the amount of time spent partying on weekends.
- Taken more chances in participating in internships and research programmes.
- Become a tutor since it forces you to know your work.
- Networked more and established a few professional relationships before obtaining the first qualification.
- Changed negative attitudes towards certain modules and lecturers.
- Cut down completely on computer games, watching TV series and social networking websites.

So was the study emancipatory for students? They have said that the APIs were emancipatory in the manner that they felt free to offload emotionally, they could evaluate themselves and their academic performance and perhaps set new goals and intentions for themselves in the following year. They have said that the SNIs were emancipatory – as a way to connect to fellow peers and as a way to hold your experience against another's, hopefully in ways that are inspiring, informative and perhaps even move you to do things differently. The Facebook weblog was perhaps less emancipatory than anticipated. In many ways the weblog had the potential to be a consistent version of the SNI. Networks were formed and shared experiences shared, although for many participants, there was not enough participation and some dominated conversations. A key feature of the weblogs was the feeling that you were not alone in your struggles, which was somewhat emancipatory (along with sharing of strategies to deal with these struggles).

Visual accounts from behind the veil of anonymity

The final aspect of the emancipatory methodology has been the creation of an auto-ethnographic documentary film titled – *Ready or Not!: Black Students' Experiences of South African Universities*. In the spirit of emancipation, *Ready or Not!* offered participants direct involvement in the research process, gave voice and agency to those students habitually dispossessed of power because "voice is important: how voice is expressed, how voice is informed, how our voice differs from dominant voices" (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015, p. 218). *Ready or Not!* allowed for an audio-visual and interactive approach to the project for selected participants to tell richer, more detailed stories that we do not often get to hear in educational research. More importantly the stories in

the documentary give us a living, breathing understanding of what it means to go through the South African university system of accessing, starting, staying, passing, stopping, swopping, returning, finishing, graduating and working. In *Ready or Not!* we meet the following four students and get to know their journeys in some depth while meeting (fourteen) others in passing. All had to consent to coming out from behind the usual veil of research anonymity, in order to make a resource that had potential for intervening in the lives of future university students.

Olwethu Lugodlo, is a young Black woman from King Williams Town who started by doing a Law degree at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University but dropped out after two years because she discovered that she in fact did not enjoy Law studies, she struggled adjusting to the institutional culture of the university, failed in her second year and dropped out at the beginning of her third year. She took a gap year to recover and then registered for a Bachelor of Social Science at the University of Fort Hare where she completed her degree and graduated in 2016.

We also talk to Henry Muchenje from Brakpan, Ekurhuleni whose first choice of study was Chemical Engineering at the University of Pretoria but after intimidation from administrative structures, struggles with the application process and feeling as though he was not welcome, found refuge at the University of Johannesburg where he is currently completing the final year of his Mechanical Engineering degree.

We meet Mthatha bred Elihle Pumane, who began her university journey at Cape Peninsula University of Technology where applying late resulted in her doing two years of Events' Management, a course she was assigned to and one she did not choose. After being financially excluded in her first year, Elihle eventually took a gap year in 2015 to regroup. In 2016 she enrolled at the University of Johannesburg and is now adjusting to, and enjoying, doing the second year of her Tourism Management degree.

Lastly, we catch up with Masego Mannathoko from Dobsonville Soweto, who is currently doing her Honours in Property Evaluations and Management at the University of Johannesburg after completing her undergraduate degree in Finance at the same university. Although her first choice was the University of Witwatersrand, Masego ended up at UJ and has never looked back. Never stumbling too hard on her path and maintaining a steady course to graduation, Masego will be starting an internship in 2017 when she completes her Honours.

These four distinct journeys teach us lessons by illustrating the outcomes of particular experiences in university. Olwethu teaches us about the emotional impact of family pressure, institutional culture and belonging, gap years and depression but also tells a story of how one can persevere and succeed in university despite grave obstacles. Henry teaches us how distressing structural intimidation and how alienating languages used on campus, can be. He teaches us to manage your expectations of your own capabilities in university because you may fail but it is how you recover from that failure that matters most. Elihle teaches us about the complications caused by accidental registration, the trauma of exclusion, the mind-set needed to survive a forced gap year, how switching courses is not life ending and how active social support can help an individual get past having to start over. Finally Masego shows us that it is possible to move through university with minimal complications and to stay on track, even excel if you are sensitive to the kind of friends you make, find yourself a mentor and build good relationships with lecturers. She shows us that it is possible to make it out in time and have a happy ending, find employment and pursue a graduate degree, as she is doing.

The other voices we hear from in the documentary serve as a summary of this report, with multiple voices highlighting structural and personal obstacles, and embodying the many ways in which these challenges can be addressed both individually and collectively.

Discussion

Understanding that social and structural factors play a dominant role in delimiting what is possible in terms of students' access to opportunities, our study and its five interventionist strategies have been particularly sensitive to the agency expressed by young people throughout their five years of study at Higher Education Institutions. What emerged quite strongly was various permutations of Bourdieu's (1997) explication of capitals: social capital, economic capital, cultural capital and symbolic. Most glaringly, economic capital was a huge point of concern for students with many participants anxious about a lack of funds to get in, stay in, survive or return to university. Cultural capital, that is knowledge and ability to interpret institutional requirements, was exemplified through lack of information, prior knowledge, structural intimidation and administrative difficulties expressed by participants in the study. Symbolic capital, the idea that one's race, class, and gender, confer differential privilege and advantage at university, sometimes overtly, sometimes incidentally, but with huge effect for success. The lack of social capital, that is, relationships that *confer practical advantage*, was shared by the students when reflecting on the absence of mentor's, role models, family support and emotional support from community. The unequal distribution of all these forms of capital explain why universities continue to remain bastions of inequality. Therefore, in this study, building social and cultural capital, and exposing symbolic capital was key to achieve emancipation, and key too for the exercising of agency.

SNIs built social, symbolic and cultural capitals by promoting identification, motivation and information sharing in an interventionist and agential way by encouraging participants to talk to other students, community members and university personnel. The Facebook weblog built social and cultural capitals by providing a community/network for participants to interact with other students in the group where problems were not only discussed but strategies to overcome problems were also shared. APIs tracked changes, transitions and shifting ideas of success over time so that in the absence of cultural, symbolic and social capital, students could use that annual in-depth interview to agentially reflect on the ways they could better position themselves, despite limited access to physical assets, certain forms of knowledge and social advantage. The theory of agency, emancipation and subversion, allows for a recognition that agency is possible despite oppressive systems and ongoing inequalities. Agency works alongside restrictions, constraints, and impasses, providing possibilities for young people to identify their challenges, shift their circumstances, resist oppressive systems, and ultimately contribute to success.

Recommendations

The following recommendations map out potential ways that the research methods used in this study can be leveraged and implemented for future work with students, in keeping with our stated commitment to research as intervention.

Social Network Interviews

The social network interview has enormous potential to develop agency and increase social, symbolic and cultural capital. In order for it to be more effective as an intervention strategy in university campuses the following recommendations are made:

1. Students should be invited to participate in such an activity from the outset of their university career
2. That an IT system (through a smart phone application) be set up to make it easy to capture responses towards a large and ongoing study
3. That participating students receive training on how to conduct interviews to ensure they develop a level of confidence to run these effectively

4. That they are rewarded for their participation (additional credit, deans recognition list, certificate, or even a cash incentive towards books or entertainment)
5. Students could potentially be asked to additionally provide a written reflection at the end of every interview cycle, so that they might better process and implement some of the more practical advice and suggestions provided by interviewees.

Facebook weblog

Usage of the Facebook weblog proved to be a challenge due to various factors but its existence appears to be a useful tool in ensuring that new students connect with others who are experiencing similar challenges. It is recommended that such an activity be promoted amongst first year students but that the strategy be improved through:

6. An administrator might prompt discussion through posting a video, photograph or narrative to encourage discussion among students. For example on one occasion, a researcher uploaded a short video clip from a popular South African television program. In the clip, a mother was berating her daughter for wanting to switch from doing Medicine to a Communications degree. Able to relate, this video sparked conversation and debate among participants with some sharing that they knew this scenario all too well while other's expressed outrage at a mother dictating her daughter's life in that way – agential results might emerge from discussions like this.
7. While Facebook is an easy medium to use, and encourages across university participation, which many participants found especially helpful, similar peer group discussion might be encouraged in university course sites (perhaps delineated by course, module, program or degree) within existing communication mediums such as student portals that would otherwise be used solely for course work content and programme information. Examples of this are UCT's Vula or Blackboard used by Stellenbosch and CPUT.
8. These groups should be set up during orientation weeks and be coordinated possibly by SRCs across universities.

Annual Participant Interviews and Final Written Reflections

An employee is given an annual or bi-annual appraisal or evaluation by their employer/manager, the aim is to reflect on their performance and areas that need improvement. In many ways the APIs were a similar experience for the participants, except the researcher was not an authoritative and intimidating figure for many. With this concept in mind and given the findings of this study, it is recommended that:

9. A similar model of review could be formally integrated into the university system to afford a student the time and space to reflect on their performance and areas that need improvement – in an official capacity. In this manner, students will have a better handle on what they need to do to improve, what resources and services their respective universities provide to help them improve (academically, psychosocially etc.); that way students are able to better position themselves in how they progress through university.
10. These might be done by a university appointed staff advisor or by partnering students up with peers who are ahead of them in the university cycle, for example a third year with a first year.
11. These annual reflections could be done electronically or face to face.
12. They should be a requirement for registration in the new academic year.

Documentary

Ready or Not! in the spirit of Critical Race Theory examines the lived experiences of a few students in order to highlight individual tools for navigating university, academic pursuits, racial micro-aggressions, university admissions, transformation and socialising at university among other topics. The following recommendations are made regarding the use of the documentary:

13. That a comprehensive dissemination process be embarked on to various stakeholders; government departments, policy-makers, university administrators and faculty, matric learners, youth going into higher education institutions, parents and faith-based institutions. What this allows for is audio-visual and engaging stimulus with which to open up discussion about the core themes of the study, provide first-hand experience/commentary and offer advice for incoming students in a way that a research report cannot do as effectively for young people. This could influence the way we disseminate research in South Africa among the people for whom it is meant to assist and whose lives it is meant to impact.
14. That all university staff (administrators, lecturers and management) be required to watch this video.
15. That a workshop be devised for entering students that includes a facilitation guideline, and that this occurs at the beginning of each new academic year in all South African universities.
16. That a strategy be devised for this documentary to be shown and discussed with groups of matric students throughout the country, facilitated by current university students.
17. That the film be placed on YouTube (and other public platforms) for maximum accessibility to students and university staff.
18. That the documentary be aired on public television channels.

CHAPTER 9 CONCLUSION: SKILLS AND SYSTEMIC CHANGE NEEDED

Summary

This report describes the many ways in which students in South Africa experience university, and the centrality of race to their quest for education and emancipation. It makes a number of recommendations throughout for what is needed to ensure that Black students succeed: from the role which they can play in their own success by adopting strategies to navigate the environment and by changing their own behaviour. However, this study has also highlighted the many structural changes that institutions (both universities and government) need to implement in the higher education environment to make university accessible and success possible for Black students. This chapter summarise these conclusions and recommendations and offers multiple short and long term actions for all stakeholders, from schools and students, through to university staff, business and government policymakers, using Goran Therborn's (2014) markers for reducing inequality.

Understanding how inequality works and how it may be disrupted is central to ensuring that the recommendations from this report are strategically implemented. It proposes that the recommendations are comprehensively discussed with all stakeholders, since there is clearly discrete actions for each of university management, administrative staff, faculty, students, student leaders, business and high school students who are planning on entering university. Finally, it proposes that a series of new PhDs studentships be funded to ensure that the findings of this study are fully implemented and evaluated; that a comprehensive outreach programme to students and prospective students centred on the documentary 'Ready or Not: Black students' experiences of university in South Africa' be embarked upon; and that two new studies are initiated: one focussed on the efficacy of mentoring as a key intervention, and the second, that a language policy review be conducted in order to continue the process of transformation in our universities.

Introduction

It is common knowledge that students, staff and government are all embroiled in a struggle to transform South Africa's institutions of higher education, and that these struggles are historical and contemporary, practical and ideological. Over the past five years, this study has sought to ask the fundamental question: 'Who succeeds, who does not?' in South African universities and has done so with an intentionally student-centred perspective.

We followed a cohort of ultimately 69 students from eight universities in their journey through university, and asked what obstacles these students encountered, and how they, and their institutions addressed these problems. We were informed by an extensive literature in the field that had repeatedly identified the key problems students in HEIs face. These include low enrolment and completion rates for Black students, and Black students taking longer to complete degrees than White counterparts. Over the past 20 years while enrolment rates for Black students have substantially increased, completion rates remain low. Financial struggles (including the neo-liberal commodification of education) and academic under-preparedness and challenges with course loads have been the main reasons. More recently, however, commentators and students have pointed to issues of institutionalised racism on campus including a lack of recognition for African knowledges and languages, and have advocated for the need to 'decolonise' the university.

Key here is the work of Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Siphamandla Zondi (2016), as they describe five areas that need to be addressed if decolonisation and transformation are to be realised. These include 'dismemberment' or dehumanising Black people through various means; 'alienation' or forcing Black people to separate themselves from their communities and sense of self, with a concomitant assimilation into the dominant culture; 'epistemicide' – the erasure of knowledge systems that are not European in origin; 'linguicide' - the deliberate destruction of languages

other than English and shaming those who speak in non-English mother-tongues; 'theft of African history' – events of the past are constructed through the lens of the oppressor and without a foregrounding of the effects of colonisation and Apartheid.

Students have foregrounded many of these concerns in this report but have gone further to discuss the areas in which they can act to change their circumstances, along with the structural and systemic change that is needed (and is not directly within their control). Ultimately, South African universities are places where the playing field is not equal, and inequality in the words of Swedish sociologist Goran Therborn (2013), 'kills'. It shortens lives literally, but kills personal and family dreams, as well as thwarting a nations attempt to upskill its youth in order to reap the benefits of a fulfilled, healthy and economically productive population.

How inequality is manifested

Therborn provides a distinct framework to understand the effects of inequality on a society that is helpful in making sense of the findings and recommendations from this study. Drawing on the work of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, Therborn states that inequality can be understood as "the unequal capability to function fully as a human being, the unequal capability to choose a life of dignity and well-being" (Therborn, 2013, p. 48). This is manifested through three kinds of inequality (vital, existential and resource inequality) that is produced and reproduced through four mechanisms (distanciation, exclusion, hierarchisation and exploitation) and upheld by three key institutions (family, capital and nation). The connections between the kinds of inequality and the mechanisms and institutions that interface to produce the circumstances and lived experiences of students in this study will be discussed in this chapter.

The three kinds of inequalities: resource, vital, existential

Inequality can be delineated in to three categories. *Vital* inequality speaks to the unequal life-chances that are structurally created, seen in measures such as life expectancy, mortality rates and nutrition. These indicators are often translated to the state of health and vigour with which students enter university, along with the physical ability they have to navigate new environments and deal with stress and deprivation. The effects of this kind of inequality is evident in students' account of how their home backgrounds and contexts and their struggles with health, mental health and nutrition when entering university.

Existential inequality refers to the expression of personhood in terms of autonomy, self-development, freedom, recognition and dignity. This inequality is seen in power relations that produces unequal allocations of autonomy and the denial of equal respect towards the marginalised. Therborn notes that we can look to institutional norms, social interactions and the practices of those that hold distinguished knowledge or skills. These areas speak directly to the organising and functioning of universities and the relationship between students and university management and lectures – including issues of belonging, power and marginalisation.

Resource inequality – and likely the one most frequently thought of when considering inequality - is the unequal provision of material resources needed in order to implement actions. This is understood in terms intergenerational poverty and thereby stunted upward mobility. Here the role of income and education in relation to resource inequality is highlighted by Therborn. This is manifested very clearly in the access students have to funding their studies and how the income of a family determines if they qualify for financial support. It is also clearly seen in the kind of education they had access to prior to university as well as the level of education their parents attained.

These three kinds of inequalities are intertwined and operate simultaneously, and were clearly manifested in the lives of the students and on the campuses we researched. Alongside these types of inequality, Therborn describes three central institutions of inequality, namely Family, Capital(ism) and Nation.

The three institutions of inequality: family, capital and nation

For Therborn, the *Family* is a key way in which wealth or poverty is transferred across generations. Attached to the institution of family is the growing class difference in parenting, which is a consequence of the expansion and de-gendering of education resulting in men and women with the same level of education marrying each other. Looking through the participant profiles in Appendix 3, this observation can be made easily with most students indicating that their parents hold the same education qualifications. The intergenerational transfer of privilege between parent and child means that the institution of family maintains class divides through education. Therborn proposes that in order to disrupt (or equally distribute) the institution of family in this regard, “the rights of all children, to a good enabling childhood” must be an organising principle (Therborn, 2013, p. 168). This would entail curtailing the choice of exclusivist schools (which are generally accessed by children who come from families that have generationally had access to this quality of schooling) and the promoting of large public investment in measures that provides disadvantaged children with opportunities. This balancing of the playing field means a shifting of education priorities towards pre-school child care, upgrading the quality of public schools, and decreasing malnutrition in children. As one student in our study put it with regards to what children need to be given:

“We need to teach our children from a young age how important they are and how valuable they are in making our country and our continent better you know. If you don’t know that you have something to give you won’t give... [We need to] teach every single child that ‘you have a gift and if you don’t give us back your gift... you are living a meaningless life.’” (BF_30_UKZNSTUD6_BA_2013)

According to Therborn, *Capital* and *Capitalism* is the second generator of inequality, since it works to separate people according to property-owners, and property-less workers and the unemployed. This works to marginalise and exclude by creating a social grouping of people in the permanent state of insecure and marginal employment. In this regard, the disrupting of the institution of capitalism can occur through the assertion of two kinds of rights: “rights of labour and right of citizens” (Therborn, 2013, p. 168). The former refers to the conditions that people work under, remunerations, treatment and the type of work they are expected to perform. More crucially, the right to labour confirms a non-precarious livelihood that disrupts capitalism enabling dysfunctionality and instability of marginal people. Tied to this is the right of citizens which translates to the vital defence of democracy and self-determination. Therborn stresses that citizens have the right to place their collective will on their economy and environment above that of private capital securities, thereby assigning the right and responsibility of economic and social regulating on citizens themselves. This centring of labour and citizen rights is regarded as essential in the reduction of inequality and unsettling of capitalism. As a student¹²¹ from DUT explains: “when you get to varsity, you must remember where you come from, remember your background. But do not put in mind that ‘If I come from a poor background then it means I will be stuck there’”. The payment of fees for university, for transport, accommodation and technology all form part of the way in which capital creates inequality in the university setting.

The third institution to maintain inequality is *the Nation*, an institution that, through physical and invisible boundaries, interacts with global forces to impact on individuals’ lives. Therborn’s understanding of the nation is that it was once an institution of equality but is now “territories of

¹²¹ BF_23_DUTSTUD3_IntAud_2015

cheap bodies, pimped by their elites to foreign capital” (Therborn, 2013, p. 170). Capital creates migrants, commodified universities, precarity – and supports racism and sexism since it promotes exclusion. Here Therborn points to the importance of the role of government policies and ideologies in positioning the nation not (only) toward global currents but also toward its citizens. He describes the concept of a different form of ‘civilian’ nation that exists as “a *collective* living together in a common civility” (Therborn, 2013, p. 171). Such a conception of a nation will address both tolerance and a commitment to support and encourage vital, existential and resource equality. UKZNSTUD6 summarises this plainly:

“Basically it's our Government... in terms of how they manage things. Especially with people who are at the university. People who are the country's future. People who are going to be the taxpayers. People who are going to lift up the standard. It seems as if our Government is not doing as much as it should be doing. For example, for me, I don't understand why we're having so much high schools, but less universities”. (BM_22_UKZNSTUD1_LLB_2015)

The four mechanisms of inequality: distancing, exclusion, hierarchisation and exploitation

Therborn also described four mechanisms of inequality – the ways in which inequality is perpetuated. Here he draws attention to systems that order the distribution of wealth, and are socially sustained through individual and collective action, having direct consequences on human advancement.

These mechanisms all impact on social transformation, and refer to a social process which results in certain distributive outcomes. The first mechanism is *distancing* – a process of creating ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ where the notion of achievement is decontextualised and rewards and advantages result in large gaps between those termed winners or losers. The pervasiveness of this mechanism is in its reproduction through generations due to differential access to information and exposure to opportunities, translating into schooling, careers and social standing. An example in our study are the kinds of schools to which some students had access compared to others, and the way it works itself out, for example in who are winners and losers in terms of information technology expertise.

The second mechanism is *exploitation* where the unqualified division between ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’ results in the unilateral extraction of value from those purported to belong to the inferior grouping by those from the superior group. This asymmetrical appropriation is often invisibilised and thereby rarely quantified and given the recognition necessary. An example from our study is the differential privilege afforded English as a language of learning.

Exclusion as the third mechanism limits access and progress to some by differentiating between ‘in groups’ and ‘out groups’. These conditions are observed through discrimination, glass ceilings and barred admission where stigmatization is a persistent sore. Examples here are through gender inequality, marginalisation of LGBTQI students, and of course racism.

Fourthly, *hierarchisation* is a mechanism of inequality derived from institutionalised ranking set in a formal organisation or intangible cultural norms. Here only some know the rules of the game and how to navigate through it to achieve a desired aim. In our study students interactions with administrative and management staff illustrate this mechanism most clearly.

Therborn explains that these mechanisms each work to compound the other. However, for each mechanism there is a corresponding mechanism that engenders equality. In the same way the mechanisms of distancing, exploitation, exclusion and hierarchisation are maintained through systemic arrangements the same is applicable to the equality mechanisms. These mechanisms

are: approximation, redistribution, inclusion and flattening of structures to counter the inequality mechanisms discussed above (Therborn, 2013, p. 63).

Overall findings of the study

By far the overall findings of the study concerned students inability to cope with the financial demands of studying – fees, textbooks, accommodation and transport – and all its knock on effects. ‘Starving’ because NSFAS payments came late into an academic year, not having any money to find safe accommodation and transport, not having money to deal with family or health emergencies and not owning laptop computers or being able to access internet facilities off campus. For students not living on campus, there were added obstacles of traveling far distances between universities and their homes in townships. Many lived in environments not conducive to studying (little space, noise and absence of internet). The threat of danger also impacted the ability of students to study, especially travelling home after dark. This said, many noted university also as the opportunity to grow, be independent, meet people, exercise the newfound decision-making “power” they now have, and appeared to act as drivers of their lives/destinies.

Most of the students described the heavy workload in their first year as hard to manage, and while all were aware of the academic development programmes put in place to assist them, seldom made use of them. Instead, most students relied on friends in grappling with difficult academic tasks. Institutional support was not rated highly, nearly all characterised the administrative support in terms of registration and finance as disabling, and described administrators as ‘inconsiderate’ (especially of transport limitations for students) and frequently ‘rude’. Race, language and class were strongly linked to how students interacted with their environment – including administrators, management and faculty. A clear example of this inferiority or paralysis was the distance between lecturers and students, which was different to high school. Students felt that lecturers were reluctant to make themselves available to help, and students were afraid to ask for help for fear of ridicule or feeling inadequate. They felt they were ‘expected to know’, yet frequently did not.

Only a few students mentioned accessing the university services for support either academically or personally. Some said student support services were helpful, while others did not know that services existed or did not know how to access them. This finding can be interpreted as lack of initiative on the students’ part, however, it is more deeply linked to how students are not equipped to navigate the university system and often feel inferior or paralysed to find assistance.

In the first year of the study, one of the initial patterns noticeable in terms of respondents was that they had often applied for other programmes at other institutions but they did not qualify for those because of low school marks. This meant that they then had a late application at the second choice university and often ended up in programmes that were not their first choice of study. This had ongoing effects for students that was often exacerbated by changing programmes the next year.

The theme of balancing the “freedom” of being at university also came through as a major opportunity or hurdle. Students now had to resist the temptation of over-embracing their autonomy and freedom and not focusing on their studies because of new friendships, relationships, and endless opportunities for socialising. This was particularly the case for those living in student residence. Students spoke frequently about being in a new environment away from strict parental oversight or the difference between school and university where teachers policed their academic work and this was no longer the case at university.

Most students reported strong support from family groups, faith communities and friends. People depended on predominantly family for financial and emotional support; friends for academic and

emotional support; faith communities for practical support and moral support and assurance. The role of the church featured prominently amongst Black participants who found practical support from faith communities and assurance that God would help them succeed. While school, family and community experiences varied, all had some level of encouragement from one or two teachers at their schools to pursue higher education, and most were supported by their families, in some cases even pushed, to attend a higher education institution. The extended kinship network also played a critical support structure to many participants. Uncles, aunts, grandmothers play a large role in the education of their nephews, nieces and grandchildren. That said, the burden of care for students is still largely gendered as mothers were most reported as shouldering the care and financial burdens for students. The make-up of family support going beyond the nuclear family is indicative of the dynamics within Black families specifically. This is one of the key findings regarding collective strategies for success that need further investigation.

Students in this study had a positive outlook on their life aspirations. They tended to see education as the most important aspect of their life in terms of its capability to lay the foundation for better career trajectories. In the same breath, a few participants expressed that they do not see the point in a university degree, that it is not preparing them for real life and they see it as a formality and a piece of paper that they have to attain to “actively participate” in the world. Some expressed that even when they obtain the degree, they still do not have the skills and abilities necessary to translate that degree into a successful career. Others suggested that it is the degree together with an influential network or family connections (social capital) that get you somewhere in life. This is indicative of a clear frustration with not feeling empowered by the university degree. Some, predominantly from universities of technology, particularly expressed anxiety around finding companies for in-service training in order to complete their degrees. It is unclear whether it is the university’s or the individual student’s responsibility to find these placements.

The findings related to race, class, gender and student activism can be (almost) neatly divided between those who either participated in, or supported the student movements of 2015, and are involved in some form of student activism on campus and those who did not. Those in support of the movement had differing levels of understanding of racism and patriarchy as social structures of power that have everyday impacts, and gave evidence of bias and discrimination based on race, gender and in one case, sexuality. Those who did not support the movement had definitions of racism as individual prejudice, and in one case, anti-White racism.

Students in the study did not follow linear paths towards completing their degrees, with “stop outs” and “gap years” featuring across all universities. The reasons for these changes and sometimes sporadic shifts differed amongst students. Some of the main reasons included family tragedies, academic and/or financial exclusion, poor mental and/or physical health and starting new degrees due to initial accidental registration or a misalignment/misunderstanding of the programme of study for which they initially enrolled.

Overall, students encountered oppressive financial schemes as well as academic challenges but in most cases internalised these obstacles and blamed themselves for failure or shifts in their paths. It is therefore critical to utilise a framework like that of Therborn that centres the role of inequality on both an individual and collective level.

Recommendations

These overall findings and the recommendations (see Appendix 9 for a comprehensive summary) that have been derived will be evaluated within Therborn’s framework.

Approximation instead of distancing

The mechanism of distancing ('winners' and 'losers') came through in students responses when discussing their experiences of what it means to be a student. They drew attention to the relentless focus on academic achievement without sufficient attention to developing people who contribute to changing society.

"There is this obsession with academics and a certain type of intelligence... I think that's extremely destructive because... it's just limiting people's potentials so much". (WM_19_UCTSTUD1_BSocSci_2013)

"You can't just be about school – you have to be an all-rounder. And then in third year that's when I was like okay I'm going to try to be an all-rounder". (BF_22_UJSTUD7_LLB_2016)

"Be more involved... it's just you focus on the academic side of things, you just forget about building those values, values that at the end of the day are important as well... I feel like getting involved with something that you [care about] ... Try and be involved so you can have those other connections rather than just academia. That's something that I did – with SHAWCO [Student Health and Welfare Cooperative]". (CF_20_UCTSTUD7_BCom_2015)

These observations highlights the need for universities to stop presenting a specific idea of what a student should achieve and how they should perform. Universities will continue to fail their students and society at large if they produce one dimensional graduates that are unable to think beyond their area of study. More so, universities cannot remain focused only on academic achievement, and producing academic winners and losers, when what is ultimately desirable are productive, healthy, active citizens in a transformed and emancipated country.

Key recommendations to achieve the equality goal of approximation would be thorough:

1. Investing in high schools: before entering university there must be a focus on assisting students from disadvantaged backgrounds regarding course requirements, career choices and funding opportunities.
2. Career guidance: there is a need for intensive career guidance in schools (not only career choices) but guidance as to where those choices can lead you and what you have to do to get there. A 'career guidance helpdesk' should also be present during university registration periods at registration locations.
3. Mentoring and peer exchange: students expressed the need for guidance from senior students and lecturers, for both academic and emotional support as a way to prevent isolation and
4. Actively promoting study groups: the formation of study groups that encompass students with different academic grades can work to ensure that any divisions that arise from a 'winner-loser' mentality are avoided.

Inclusion instead of exclusion

The realities of exclusion within the university setting are evident from university endorsed policies through to less tangible barriers. A student at the University of Johannesburg in her final reflection spoke to both these facets.

"First I'd have to re-consider the whole exclusion policy. I would have a clause that requires students who are at risk of exclusion to undergo mental, emotional, overall psychological evaluation. This is because I personally know that a person does not do

badly at school because they want to, there's always factors nobody else knows about. With me, the reason I failed two third year modules was because I had an anxiety attack two nights before my last two exams and I was admitted into hospital for severe exhaustion. A part of me had given up, but the rest of me wasn't down, and therapy has done wonders for me, and I feel like everybody deserves that chance". (BF_23_UJSTUD7_LL2017)

This kind of inclusion means providing students with guidance and support that can assist them in anticipating and navigating their circumstances. Key recommendations (contingent on the structure of the degree) to achieve the equality goal of inclusion would be thorough:

1. Upgraded orientation for students: While orientation events do happen they need to focus on giving students a proper understanding of the academic environment, support services and financial constraints that may be encountered, rather than its current emphasis on socialising and societies. Orientation should be a month long and repeated for those (many) students who register and arrive late. Students should also be able to assess the efficacy of the orientation.
2. Rethinking pedagogy: Large classes delivered in one language, with inaccessible and reluctant lectures perpetuates inequality and privileges those who have already had access to independent and critical learning. In this regard university faculty need to be upskilled and managed to new outcomes.
3. Managing self-learning: Students must be given skills within their first year of university to transition between teacher-led learning and self-led learning.
4. Introducing a core course on equality: Courses in African knowledges, South African history, and social inclusion (race, class, gender and sexuality) should be a key component of study for all incoming students.

Flattening of structures instead of hierarchisation

Students were acutely aware of power structures within the university and how these structures were often intimidating and hostile to their progress. This was especially evident in their interactions with university administrators and lecturers.

"[sighs] Every time I brought in my application they were either not handing out applications, they were not taking in applications, they were not taking in for first year students or third year students or whatever it was. It was always a hassle." CF_23_CPUTSTUD1_FiInSy_2016

"I guess it's too full some days and they're like, "Come back tomorrow at eight o'clock". And you just stand there and they just go [laughs]." CF_22_DUTSTUD7_IT_2016

"I'll start with the lecturers... you feel like, 'Why is this person dealing more with, in terms of, the people of his or her race?' For example, an Indian lecturer, if an Indian girl or an Indian boy does something wrong and then they just overlook it. But if it's a Black person it's going to be a big story. If you come late in class it's going to be a big issue. If these guys come late in class it's not an issue. If you want to go to the offices for one-on-one session they tell you that, 'I'm busy, come back tomorrow' or 'Leave your questions here' or 'Email me your questions' or 'You have to book an appointment'. But these guys they go there at any time". (BM_22_UKZNSTUD1_LL2015)

Countering this hierarchisation would require university staff to shift their attitudes and behaviours towards students and being held to accountable to do so through:

1. Establishing a university ombudsman: A neutral office to which students can report and raise concerns about how they are treated whether through discrimination, excessive bureaucracy or unfair treatment. For instance, UKZN already has an Ombudsman – insight into best practices here and at other institutions.
2. Institutionally required evaluations of lecturers and administrative staff: Not only should evaluations be required they should be acted and reported upon.

Protection and redistribution instead of exploitation

Exploitation as a mechanism of inequality is displayed in the financial realities of countless students. One way to counter this was to stay in contact with others from ‘home’ by helping them prepare for university, “Maintain contact with whoever you see as vital from where you come from”.¹²² Another student spoke about saving for her child’s education, even though her child was only a baby:

“The new vision is that I need to study hard... because I’ve got a baby [so] I need to also make sure she’s got a brighter future. So I opened two investments accounts... for her and ... for me to continue studying... I don’t want her to experience what I’ve experienced with finances. So I’m saving while she’s only a month old and for me because I want to... do a PhD as time goes on”. (BF_22_UJSTUD6_BA_2015)

The student’s initiative to start a savings account is commendable but devoid of the reality of what is needed monetarily to ensure that both she and her child are able to pursue higher learning. For this student to truly reach financial certainty, protection and redistribution needs to happen on a more systemic basis. This can be realised through:

1. Funding helpdesks: These could be run by students and student leaders.
2. Establishing an accessible hardship/emergency fund: Accessed through a referral system of SRC, lecturers and other university staff.
3. Preventing financial exclusion: Through a process being clearly demarcated, with a number of second chance steps and contingency plans that a student embarks upon if financial exclusion looks likely.
4. Student debt eradication: Businesses can pledge to assist in the payment of debt related to university when they employ graduates.
5. A graduate fund and/or a restitution fund: assists students in financial difficulty after graduation.
6. Food security: food insecurity is a huge impediment to student learning and a direct result of financial struggles. Look into feeding scheme services provided by some universities – what is best practice and how might these be better introduced/improved at universities nationwide?

Conclusion

This report has revealed how complex and nuanced the experiences of students in South African Higher Education institutions really are. Not surprisingly, our conclusions must delineate multiple actions, in various spheres. There is, to put it colloquially, something for everyone to do. The students we encountered in this study were not apathetic nor did they predominately blame others for their failures. Instead they came up with a myriad of ideas for what needed to be done in order to help them achieve their dreams, since they “carried the dreams of their parents” as Olwethu so poignantly puts it in the documentary *Ready or Not!*. Or as UJSTUD6 describes it, you have to ‘keep pushing’ until you succeed:

¹²² BM_20_UFHSTUD1_BSc_2015

“You should not have limits... I believe you should push until you are satisfied with what you have. If you are not [yet succeeding], just keep on pushing. I believe in hard work, I believe in perseverance... to get to where I want to be... If I still feel like I've not done a good job I'm not going to relax, so you never relax actually, first rule”. (BF_22_UJSTUD6_BA_2015)

In conclusion, we have three main recommendations to make about the data that this study has revealed.

Discussion of recommendations with stakeholders

The first is that the recommendations that have emerged out of each area of substantive discussion with students be fully discussed by all university stakeholders and role players – from students to management; from lecturers to administrative staff; and from high school students to business leaders. There is much for each of these groups to do to achieve equality and emancipation in South Africa's institutions of higher education. Some of these actions are already occurring in some, but not all, universities and so a first priority would be to share good practices across campuses. Many of these recommendations will cost money to ensure these key actions occur, so funds should be sourced and budgeted for. A recommendation regarding an ombudsman was frequently received, not only for issues of inequality (racism, sexism and other discrimination) but also for lecturers who failed to consult or for administrators who pushed students from pillar to post, with no regard for constraints regarding transport, time and need.

Full use to be made of the Ready or Not! documentary

The *Ready or Not* documentary, examines the lived experiences of a few students in order to highlight both their struggles in, and their strategies for navigating university: academic pursuits, racial micro-aggressions, university admissions, transformation and socialising among other topics. In order to capitalise on the documentary it should be widely disseminated to university administrators, lecturers, and government departments. In addition, a series of workshops should be held with newly arriving students on all South African university campuses. Furthermore, the documentary should be made publically available (on television and social media sites) in order to ensure its wide dissemination.

Furthermore, funding and incentives should be made available to current university students to show the documentary to Grade 11 and 12 learners at the school from where they matriculated. A similar campaign should target faith-based communities, and should include a discussion and strategies regarding the more formal ways in which churches, mosques, synagogues and temples could become hubs of caring, places where bureaucracies can be negotiated, interpreted and accessed (for example, NSFAS forms completed, notarised and monitored); and where computer resources, quiet spaces for study and even accommodation can be accessed. The efficacy of the documentary would be enhanced through the development of supportive facilitation material that could also be made available through a smartphone app.

A large scale research project on mentoring

A mentoring study might be entitled *Checking In B4 Checking Out*, and would comprise of a randomised control trial to measure mentoring as a mechanism to prevent attrition and ensure completion. Following entry into universities, first year students would be asked basic information questions regarding parents education, access to accommodation and school background (amongst other questions) and then will either be assigned no mentor, a peer mentor, a faculty mentor or to a social media mentoring group (with a biannual check in over 3 years),

with a view to measuring impact on attrition. These students should be tracked over 3-4 years and the efficacy of mentoring as an intervention tested.

Funding for a series of PhD studies regarding these recommendations

A final recommendation, again serving a dual purpose, would be to fund 10-20 PhDs over a 5 year period in order to monitor the implementation of various recommendations from this and other studies towards transformation on higher education campuses. These PhDs could serve to accelerate the production of PhDs from Black South Africans and contribute towards improving African scholarship; and ensure that knowledge is produced on multiple aspects of encouraging student agency and ensuring structural and systemic change in universities.

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<https://www.ul.ac.za/index.php?Entity=Centre%20of%20Academic%20Excellence>

3. NWU
<http://www.nwu.ac.za/academic-literacy-placement-test>
4. DUT
http://www.dut.ac.za/academic/writing_centre/
5. UJ
<https://www.uj.ac.za/corporateservices/ads/ADC/ADI>
<https://www.uj.ac.za/corporateservices/languageunit/Pages/Services.aspx>
6. UKZN
<http://cohtlu.ukzn.ac.za/writing-place>
<http://www.languagecentre.ukzn.ac.za/>
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<http://www.ufh.ac.za/centres-and-institutes/tlc/>
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<https://www.cput.ac.za/newsroom/news/article/3045/know-your-cput-%E2%80%93-writing-centre>