



Elihle Pumane (24) shared her story for the making of the documentary, Ready or Not!. She is working on a diploma in tourism management at the University of Johannesburg. "I loved being part of this. It made me dig deep within myself to see where I went wrong with my different university experiences and where the two universities that I attended could have done better."

For the past few years students, staff and the government have been embroiled in a struggle to transform South Africa's institutions of higher education. Despite the recent announcement of fee-free university education for entering undergraduate students, the road to change students' experiences and success rates in universities remains long and arduous. *Dr Alude Mahali* and *Prof Sharlene Swartz* report on how a documentary, produced as part of a five-year long research study into students' experiences at university, offers a unique contribution to ensuring this transformation.

Race, Education and 'Emancipation' was a five-year study that followed a cohort of students from eight South African universities from 2013 to 2017 portraying their struggles alongside actions to change their circumstances, as well as that of the institutions they attended.

Over these five years, students spoke to a researcher on an annual basis, described and discussed

their experiences on a closed Facebook group and became researchers themselves as they interviewed a wide array of people, including teachers, lecturers, administrators, other students, graduates and university dropouts. The data collected covered structural impediments to success, including finances, institutional racism, not feeling welcome, language problems and hunger, as well as issues of intersecting social and sexual

identities, such as being female, gay, or having too much freedom.

During the study, we realised that these stories needed to be disseminated, not just as a central part of academic research in its usual formats, but also directly to the students whose lives it is meant to benefit. We subsequently embarked on producing a documentary entitled *Ready or Not!: Black Students' Experiences of South African*

Universities. The documentary includes the testimony of 23 students from the cohort of 80 involved in the larger study. These participants volunteered and had to re-consent to coming out from behind the usual veil of research anonymity.

The documentary was filmed at various university campuses in Durban, Johannesburg, Potchefstroom, Mahikeng, Alice, Bisho and East London. The researchers used a standard interview guide, but also designed specific questions for particular individuals, based on their background, university, degree and particular struggle or strength. We filmed some interviews individually while others were done in groups of two or three, providing an added layer of dialogue as students had both opposing and shared views, experiences and strategies. We sent the film to all of the student participants and anticipate that some will be actively involved with its dissemination at schools and universities country-wide during 2018 and 2019. We also hope that the documentary can be used to engage university staff in conversations about the transformation needed in their institutions.

What a documentary asks us to do differently

In the current debate about decolonising knowledge and its production, a key feature must be the inclusion of participant-centred qualitative research methodologies that are agential and emancipatory to the people whose lives they are meant to benefit, beyond the lifespan of any given project. Our documentary starts to address this, emphasising local contexts and providing students with opportunities to voice challenges they face in their own words and to be 'agents' in their stories and successes. The stories told give us a living, breathing understanding of what it means to go

through the South African university system of accessing, starting, staying, passing, stopping, swapping, returning, finishing, graduating and working.

Furthermore, if we want to decolonise research methods, we need to be sensitive to the fact that our emancipatory methods will not necessarily mirror conventional methods. A documentary gives us the opportunity to explore the possibilities of a 'performative' social science that acts as an alternative to - what can sometimes be - the limitations in publications, long reports, conference presentations or policy briefs. A documentary has the potential to create meaningful dialogue with a wider audience.

Beyond traditional methods

The process to produce the documentary resembles the process of any social science-based qualitative project. We conducted interviewing, participant observation and document analysis and even the pre-production phase was about studying the subject, culture, issues, and events that would be central to the film. Such a rigorous methodology offers guidelines for future innovations in how research data is shared, especially where emancipation (or freedom) is a goal.

Storytelling through film enables researchers to think beyond traditional methods when representing sensitive life experiences and narratives. There is tremendous responsibility in researching human experiences and behaviour, especially when these experiences are so embedded with trauma, pain and even survival, as is often the case in South Africa. The process of engaging in the narratives of others empowers us to locate our own distinctive place in the world because watching and listening are actions that require our conscious participation.

The potential impact

After hearing other students' experiences of navigating university, academic pursuits, racial micro-aggressions, university admission processes, transformation concerns and socialising at university – what will students learn and do differently at university? It is up to the film as an audio-visual provocation 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. The usefulness of *Ready or Not!* will depend on the potential of the film to prompt reflection in students, in learners, in parents, in teachers, in lecturers, government departments, policy-makers, university administrators and faith-based institutions about alternative ways of being and operating. It is not possible to provide final answers to complex and fluid educational issues, but the documentary has the potential to raise questions about elements of educational policy and practices, and also to revel in the successes of young people who beat the odds.

Key in arts-based methodologies, is that the product is not inanimate. It must be interacted with, poked and prodded in ways that add another layer to the research. As we embark on a comprehensive dissemination process for this documentary to various stakeholders, we are looking to enhance its impact through the development of supportive facilitation material for young people and those with whom they come into contact at institutions of higher education.

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