CREATING CONDITIONS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

**Social justice
perspectives from a
South African university**

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“ARE WE ENOUGH?”

THE ‘DOING’ AND ‘BEING’ OF FORMER ACCESS PROGRAMME STUDENTS

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most evident developments in the higher education (HE) landscape over the past few decades is the shift from elite to mass education, reflecting a change in mindset from elitism and exclusivity towards democratisation, diversity and inclusivity (Blessinger 2015; Baik, Naylor, Arkoudis & Dabrowski 2019). The changing HE landscape has resulted in a more diverse student population and a growing emphasis on the student experience in general, both in South Africa and internationally.

The notion of student experience is broad and includes academic aspects of teaching, learning and curriculum, as well as student lifestyle and extracurricular activities, academic advice, support and mentoring, and work experiences (Harvey 2013). These aspects are closely linked to student success, motivation and persistence (Baik, et al. 2019). The actual student experience of students in HE is as broad as the notion itself. Students’ experiences differ widely. Some students experience the HE environment as a foreign world that differs culturally and socially from theirs. These students face a range of obstacles such as academic pressure, inter-role conflict and social isolation (Exposito & Bernheimer 2012; Hittepole 2015), and tend to experience their being at university as conditional, contingent, marginal, and circumscribed by the institutional culture. These experiences are often linked with alienation through the languages of instruction and the languages of knowledge and power (Carolissen & Kiguwa 2018). In South Africa, this is frequently the case when black and coloured students find themselves in the minority at a historically white, Afrikaans university (Lourens 2013). Cushman (2007:44) summarises these experiences tellingly: “[Students] feel the tensions of entering new territory, and their

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parents are unable to reassure them. Their fellow students often seem to be members of a club of insiders to which they do not belong.”

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are not oblivious to the challenges that these students encounter and would concur that it is unacceptable that some students do not feel welcome or included in the universities they attend. Financial bursary schemes, language policies, residence placement policies and mentoring programmes are some of the initiatives put in place in HE to incorporate students into university life (HESA 2014; Lourens 2013; SU 2013). However, despite these efforts some students still lag behind in terms of graduation rates. For Exposito and Bernheimer (2012), this lack of success reflects serious issues at multiple levels within HEIs. What is needed is an understanding of the unique needs and challenges of students (Hittepole 2015) who feel marginalised and alienated. Marris (2018:2) emphasises that “if we know more exactly what happens to students at a university, we may be able to see more clearly not only what should be altered, and what must be preserved, but why”.

With this chapter, I endeavour to contribute to the body of knowledge regarding the student experience of students who entered HE through an access programme. I intend not merely to represent their experiences, but to explain whether and how the students were able to become part of the academic practice, to experience affiliation and to belong. I present the stories of seven students at a historically white, Afrikaans university who accessed the institution through an access programme, SciMathUS.¹ In South Africa, access, bridging and foundation programmes were initiated in the mid 1980s as alternative routes into HE in line with a drive to increase the level of participation in HE. These programmes continue to be a significant point of entry into HE. The students’ experiences are analysed from a capabilities approach perspective. For Walker (2003), the capabilities approach suggests a language of social justice for HE with which to analyse student experiences. I elaborate on this notion in the next paragraph.

A LANGUAGE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

At the beginning of each academic year two pictures confront me. The first picture: some students arrive on campus at a residence or a pre-rented flat. They are

1 SciMathUS (Science and Mathematics at Stellenbosch University) is a year-long access programme. The programme offers learners, who have already passed Grade 12 but who do not meet the admission requirements of their preferred institution or programme, a second opportunity to improve their National Senior Certificate results in specific subjects to enable them to re-apply.

accompanied by their parents in a car loaded with suitcases, a fridge, a kettle and everything possible to support the student in creating a successful academic career and student life. The second picture: other students walk with a single suitcase from the taxi rank or train station towards campus. They arrive alone and many have never been to the university town before. In many cases accommodation has not been pre-arranged. Both pictures represent students who have gained admission to the university. Both groups of students have access to the lecture halls, the library, the sport facilities and other amenities. However, the student experiences of the students portrayed above are very different. One might assume that the one student has a smaller chance of success than the other if success is superficially measured as only graduating with a degree in the prescribed time. However, success can and should be more (Case, Marshall, McKenna & Mogashana 2018). To recast and reemphasise our thinking about success, “an approach that defines achievement in terms of the opportunities open to each person is needed” (Nussbaum 2011:14); hence my interpretation through the lens of the capabilities approach. This approach enables us to ask, “What are people actually able to do and to be?” (Nussbaum 2011:14). Within the capabilities approach, we can ask whether the differences between the students had an impact on their opportunity freedoms. How did their differences impact their ‘doing’ and ‘being’ in their new context? Within this framework, I continue to introduce the study and present the findings thematically to explicate how each student fared. I conclude the chapter with insights and lessons learnt.

THE STUDY

This chapter reports on a study in which in-depth, unstructured interviews were conducted over a period of four months with seven students who accessed the institution through an access programme. The unstructured interviews allowed the participants to voice their experiences without being restricted by a set of pre-determined questions. In order to elicit the broadest range of perspectives on the students’ experiences on the campus, I purposively selected first-years and seniors, male and female students, students speaking different first languages, and students from different race groups and of different ages. At the time of the study, the participants were all part of minority race groups on campus. I invited the students by email to participate in the research. All of them were willing. I realised that their willingness stemmed largely from the relationships developed between us during the SciMathUS year as I was one of their facilitators in the programme. These relationships empowered me to produce thick descriptions of their experiences and to enable their voices to be heard to validate their experiences. Cognisant of my subjective position, I requested the participants to read my descriptions of

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their experiences. This gave the students the opportunity to edit my interpretations and validate their descriptions. Ethical clearance, which included safeguarding the anonymity of the participants and the confidentiality of the data, was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee (Humaniora) and informed consent was granted by the participants.

Framed by the capabilities approach, the research questions were, 'What were the students able to do?' and 'What were the students able to be?' The focus was thus on whether the resources and university environment provided opportunities and liberties to the students. For example, policies enabled the students to be placed in residences, but did the residence environment create a space where they had sufficient opportunities to become part of the student community? Language policies were in place to support students who did not speak the dominant language on campus, but did the policies enable them to ask questions confidently in class and participate freely in classroom discussions? I met with each student four or five times for approximately 40 minutes. During the interviews, we talked about their childhood, entry to university, studies, friends, residences, academic progress and social activities. We spoke about how their experiences made them feel and how they reacted to them. Often raw emotions were exposed. The narratives were transcribed and analysed thematically using Atlas.ti. This analysis entailed an iterative process of reading and re-reading the transcriptions to identify themes and sub-themes which were then framed within the capabilities approach. In the following section, I illuminate the participants' 'doing' and 'being' using four themes that emerged from the narratives.

DOING AND BEING

In line with Nussbaum's question as referenced before, I asked: 'What were the students actually able to do and to be?' The 'doing' and 'being' of the seven participants are explicated according to (i) trauma, (ii) individual culture² versus institutional culture, (iii) outsider-insider, and (iv) institutional barriers. Although other themes were also identified, these have been purposively chosen for discussion as they provide a broad overview of the contexts that impacted the students' opportunity freedoms.

2 I apply the term 'individual culture' as used by Triandis (2001). Culture includes elements such as social norms, roles, beliefs, and values that are transmitted from generation to generation. These elements include, amongst others, familial roles, communication patterns, affective styles, and values regarding personal control, individualism, collectivism, spirituality, and religiosity.

The seven participants are introduced below. The information regarding each student represents his or her status at the time of the research.

Themba³ – male, 22 years, third-year, BSc
 Thandi – female, 24 years, fifth-year, BSc
 John – male, 22 years, first-year, BCom
 Asanda – female, 22 years, third-year, BSc
 Adena – female, 21 years, second-year, BA
 Daniel – male, 20 years, first-year, BSc
 Karen – female, 21 years, second-year, BSc

All seven participants gained access to Stellenbosch University (SU) through the SciMathUS access programme since they did not initially meet the entrance requirements to enter the university. ‘Getting in’ was therefore not taken for granted. They used terms such as ‘quality’, ‘different’, ‘challenge’, ‘perfect’, ‘top’ and ‘reputable’ to describe SU. Although they were aware of the possible challenges they might encounter, they wanted to study at SU since they did not want people “questioning [our] knowledge or the value of [our] degree[s]” (Adena). First, I discuss how the students negotiated traumatic events which were integral to their journeys.

TRAUMA

All seven students experienced traumatic events and neighbourhood hazards that formed an integral part of their life stories. Few South Africans live lives untouched by trauma and for many, exposure to traumatic events is an inescapable part of their lives (Kaminer & Eagle 2010). Links exist between socio-economic status and trauma as lower socio-economic status is often associated with increased exposure to multiple types of traumatic events leading to an overall increased cumulative burden of trauma (Bradley-Davino & Ruglass, n.d.). Traumatic events include multiple types of interpersonal violence, including childhood maltreatment and witnessing or experiencing physical and sexual assaults. Economic disadvantage is also associated with lack of access to resources needed to support resilience and recovery in the aftermath of trauma exposure. Low socio-economic status further increases the risk of living in dangerous areas (Bradley-Davino & Ruglass, n.d.). The students’ narratives reflected the aforementioned links and revealed how their ‘doing’ and ‘being’ were shaped by difficult personal circumstances and traumatic events.

During the June holidays of Thandi’s third year, her biological father was murdered outside his home. Thandi was shocked and traumatised. This resulted in her failing her third year. Just before entering HE, in his Grade 12 year, Themba lost his father.

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3 All names are pseudonyms.

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His mother was the sole breadwinner and when she fell ill, it was a serious concern for Themba:

It's just like now, since my father passed away, my mother kind of struggles on her own. Like she tries and makes stuff, but then financially, it's kind of challenging for her, being the only parent, having to pay fees here.

Asanda's sister passed away during the orientation period in Asanda's first year. Asanda was devastated. The family had to go to the Eastern Cape for the funeral and was away for almost 10 days. "I came back the day before the classes started. It was difficult. It was really, really difficult for me," she remembers. During her second year, Asanda ended her relationship with her boyfriend who assaulted her so badly that she could not sit for a week. In the first term of her third year, both her mother and her aunt were killed in a bus accident on their way back from a church meeting.

Daniel and his family lived in a small house in a neighbourhood notorious for burglaries and gangsterism. Daniel described the neighbours as "druggies". To protect the family, Daniel's father covered the porch with burglar proofing, giving the house a jail-like appearance. During his SciMathUS year Daniel travelled to campus daily:

Anyway, that first day of classes, I don't know how early I woke up that day. I took a taxi, two trains and another taxi and I was two minutes late. At that moment, it hit me. On literally each word, I would see a kind of small dot. It bothered me a lot, but I ignored it, because I assumed it was because of the stress. Exactly a month after that, it just started getting bigger. So I went to the doctor and he had a look. He referred me to the guy who makes the glasses, then they tried to see what's wrong, but the woman couldn't see anything. They can't do anything about it. Now it's becoming annoying, because I can't perceive depth so well. So I can't walk straight. Sometimes I would just get dizzy.

Due to his incurable eye defect, Daniel had to visit a state hospital once a month. On the days he had a doctor's appointment, he rose at four o'clock to take the train. It took him a full day in trains, waiting rooms and consultation rooms. After such a busy day, he was exhausted and slept for extended periods. Each of these days cost him a full day's classes and tutorials. Similar events and circumstances were revealed by John, Karen and Adena. Home circumstances, health issues and exposure to traumatic events limited the extent to which the students were able to convert the available resources in HE into functioning and capabilities.

INDIVIDUAL CULTURE VERSUS INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

Some students come from communities that are often very different to the university community. The culture of an HEI is the sum of the assumptions, beliefs and values shared by the members and expressed through what is done, how it is done and who is doing it (Farmer 1990). It is thus not surprising that at the time of the study the institutional culture of SU, a historically white university, mostly supported the norms, values and practices of the white students (DoE 2008). On campus, the students were faced with and had to negotiate this very different culture. John reflected on the differences between cultures:

Let's say, where I come from, it's unusual as a young person to maybe argue with an elder. But here it's different. Students or a younger person is more, he has a right to argue and express their views in terms of whatever or in terms of what he or she thinks. Where I come from, your views, they tend to matter less than the elders' views. Most of the things are decided for you by the elders. You don't have a say in what needs to be done or how it should be done. You just follow the procedure, but here I'd say there's freedom. You're given a chance to say, are you for this or against this. I'd say how you feel about a specific situation or procedure is taken into consideration, yeah, that's what I would say. I feel it's a good thing, but I have to adapt to it, because being used to taking orders, not choosing what's best for me, it's something that's new to me. Acting on my own way in this place, it's not viewed as disrespectful, so I think I've been trying to adapt to that. I'm still trying to find my independence.

John perceived being able to voice one's opinion and having freedom of choice positively. He realised that it was something he had to adapt to and was working to find his voice.

Thandi echoed John's experience. In her family her mother was the 'reference'. Her mother had the final say regarding all aspects of her life, but on campus she had to take responsibility for her own actions. She recalled how she started thinking about being independent and responsible: "I had control. I had to learn how to control myself. I had to take care of myself without my mom or an elder looking over me." Both John's and Thandi's reflections illuminate the differences between a traditional African and a typical Western educational approach and how the institutional culture was more aligned with the Western approach. Although this part of the culture on campus was vastly different to what they were used to, they embraced it and considered it an area of personal growth. They chose to convert the different way of 'doing' into a new way of 'being'.

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Socialisation, which is regarded as a key element shaping a student's sense of belonging (Carolissen 2012), was a dominant aspect of the institutional culture that the students had to negotiate. Thandi recalled that Wednesday night was "student night". The idea of socialising in the middle of the week seemed odd. At home she was allowed to go out on a Saturday evening, but at university she learnt that Stellenbosch students had a social night on Wednesdays. Thandi felt she had to adapt in order not to be left out completely and did so occasionally: "Somehow I would go out on some nights if my friends would come along, but not all time."

John experienced the dominance of the social culture as frustrating:

Most of the students are ... they are more into having fun, going clubbing, and I tend to not spend most of my time doing those things. I feel I'm forced to do that, but it's going to take me some time. In order to find comfort in this place, you also have to change a bit of who you are, or who you were. You need to start to be more social. Because I think one thing that is important in this place, is to socialise. And it's one thing I don't do often. I'd say it's kind of difficult to adapt and I sometimes get frustrated ... socialising is my biggest challenge at the moment.

John consciously grappled with the idea of socialising and even considered that maybe he was just not 'a social guy':

I've learned that I can also make the most of myself. What I've learned is, where we are is our own responsibility or where we end up after some time ... I think I was looking too much in to socialise. What I noticed is I'm not a social guy and I think I have accepted that I'm not into social things. That's one thing I didn't see in myself before. But I think as you get to learn more about yourself and you get to appreciate what you are, you tend to care less about others.

In reality he had to admit that he did not feel comfortable in the university community where he was:

If I was in a different university it would be different. This is one of the places where race is still not balanced. So, maybe at [another university] it would be better and any other place, because most universities are populated by black people and since I'm used to socialising with blacks, it's much easier for me. So, yeah, it would be different.

Being part of a minority in terms of race on this campus complicated John's growth and development process. Adena also experienced belonging to a racial minority as challenging:

I'm not enjoying it here! I think I would have enjoyed the social activities at another university more. I have a feeling they let you be you. Whereas

here, they want you to be who they are. It is also easier to be around my own. It is easier to communicate and stuff like that.

The intersection of socialisation and being a member of a racial minority proved to be particularly difficult to negotiate for first-years during the orientation period. Events included attending an Afrikaans church service and compulsory socials between male and female residences. Asanda recalls one such social event:

We were facing the other white guys who did not dance. They did not want to dance with us [black and coloured females]. It hurt. I just wanted to walk out of there; you know, just go back to res or go somewhere else. But we were forced to stay for a few hours or so.

The social arrangements during orientation deprived the students of their agency to negotiate the social context of the university effectively.

The overall institutional culture⁴ did not provide equal opportunities to the students to belong. This left the students feeling vulnerable and marginalised. However, despite a social context that was not supportive of diverse cultures, the students exhibited strength and agency. They still chose, when allowed, how and when they would engage with the institutional culture. In some instances, they participated, but more often they chose not to. They employed the adaptive preference of disengagement from the social context as a survival tool. Disengagement represented a tool of empowerment to deal with challenging situations. The strength and resilience with which the students negotiated the social context and how their adaptive preferences allowed them to cope is noteworthy.

OUTSIDER-INSIDER

The 'individual culture versus institutional culture' theme is closely linked to the 'outsider-insider' theme and provides the backdrop to the many contradictory experiences that the students had to negotiate on a regular basis. Their 'doing' and 'being' continuously left them with an experience of 'I am in' and the next moment 'I am out'.

The discourse of racial minority groups experiencing alienation and marginalisation at historically white university campuses has been well documented (Carolissen & Kiguwa 2018; Liccardo 2018; Vincent & Hlatshwayo 2018), and was also evident in these students' experiences. Their narratives confirmed the rhetoric of feeling like

4 The research reported on in this study was conducted in 2012 and 2013. Since then, the institutional culture has shifted significantly towards being more inclusive. However, this does not invalidate the findings of this study since the focus is on the 'doing' and 'being' of the students despite the environment.

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‘outsiders’ on campus. Their feelings were based on linguistic challenges, financial exclusion, coming from ‘lesser’ schools and having norms and values different from the dominant institutional culture (Carolissen & Kiguwa 2018; Heymann & Carolissen 2011; Lourens 2013). The flip-side of this coin was that despite the array of challenges they had to negotiate every day, they were proud of being students at SU, a reputable university; thus, they did in fact regard themselves as ‘insiders’. They chose to be at SU, they had plans and they had agency to execute their plans. Adena expressed this attitude as follows:

For me it was not whether I was intimidated or was the only coloured here. I wouldn’t mind, because I know that I needed to study here. So, that’s why I wanted, that’s the main reason that I wanted to stay here.

She was aware of the difficulties and challenges she was facing but made specific choices that enabled her to graduate. In addition, she deliberately chose not to accept her residence placement. She opted for private accommodation where she was surrounded by friends with whom she felt comfortable. She was content with her choices:

I feel part of it. I’m going to my classes and writing my tests and doing the exams and stuff like that. I do feel that I’m part of the academic system. I mean for me I’m here as a student to learn and stuff like that. I think I’m really incorporating myself and stuff like that; even if I was on the periphery or something like that.

She regarded herself as an insider within her own determined boundaries. Daniel concurred:

Seeing that I’m in Matieland,⁵ I’m studying here, I am a Matie ... I don’t do communities. It’s just a personal thing, like, I’m more of a spectator. I don’t participate, I sit here and watch and that’s how I learn.

The students developed their own definitions of what it meant to belong to SU and considered themselves as insiders regardless of traditional perspectives of being a Matie. The outsider-insider dichotomy was not only relevant in the institutional context, but also in their own communities. Themba explained:

Like I can’t be at home and talk about a teacher or about res or talk about majoring, because then no one is talking about that. Everybody is talking about girls, drinking, like stupid stuff. They’re always speaking about stupid stuff. Like, so, that’s why I don’t like being at home so much ... I hate that about my culture. People drop out at grade seven, grade nine, grade ten. Like of my friends, only three of us have passed matric;

5 Amongst students and alumni, Stellenbosch University is colloquially known as Matieland, and SU students as Maties.

out of like more than 20 guys, I think. Yeah, they just dropped out along the way and some of them failed matric!

Although the students were part of the communities where they had grown up and still lived, being at university moved them to the periphery of those communities. In both social contexts where they functioned during their HE studies, they had to negotiate the experience of being an outsider-insider. Once again, the agency which they activated to negotiate these dichotomies was one of the strengths that helped them persevere on their journey.

INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS

Institutional barriers can be defined as policies, procedures, or situations that systematically disadvantage certain groups of people, mostly in a majority-minority group context. For most students, institutional barriers, as experienced by the minority, do not appear to be barriers. The policies, procedures or situations seem natural to the majority as they fit their norms, values and socio-economic status (NCWIT 2009). An example of such institutional barriers that emerged from the students' narratives is the concept of *kamerpunte* (room points), which is a system used by residences to allocate rooms to students. These points can be earned through academic achievement and social involvement in the residence. The number of points a student accumulates determines the position he or she obtains on a list according to which the students select rooms for the next year. The participants in the study who were residing in the university residences gathered only few room points during the year, mostly because they were not involved in many residence activities. Thandi's reflection on the system reveals the narratives regarding this issue of all the participants who lived in residences:

I didn't go around choosing rooms, because I knew that I didn't qualify. So, I was in my room quietly studying and a girl walks in and she's like, 'Hey, can I check out this room? I want to stay in this room next year.' I said it's fine ... I think I was just more focused on my academics than any other thing ... It feels like everyone knows you failed to make the requirements. They print out a list and put it on a notice board in front of the res of who qualifies for a room. So, everyone would know, 'Oh, Thandi's name was not there', so, it's not nice at all.

At the end of his first year, Daniel had very few room points. In addition to not being socially involved, he acquired few room points for his academic performance as he was in the extended degree programme in which he was only able to earn a limited number of academic credits even if he passed all his modules. Another example of an institutional barrier affecting the 'doing' and 'being' of the students is the concept of using academic credits as criterion for re-entrance into residence. Although Daniel

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had passed all his modules up to then, he was not re-admitted to residence. He had to go through a process of re-application to be placed in residence again. Asanda also experienced academic credit challenges: due to an emergency appendectomy during her June examination in her second year of studies, she could not complete the examination. Consequently, she did not acquire sufficient academic credits to be re-admitted to residence. After a re-application process she was re-admitted. In her third year, after passing all her modules, the previous year's academic credits still applied and the same process needed to be followed. She found it demoralising to go through the process of re-applying once again.

Whereas the academic credits and the room points systems are aimed at fairness of allocation and re-admittance for the majority of SU students, the systems do not sufficiently take a diverse student cohort into account. The arrangement of the systems empowered those students who conformed to the institutional culture, values and norms, and to them the systems appeared normal and fair. Students outside of the norm, who repeatedly had to deal with re-applications and re-admittance were regarded as needing 'special help' or 'accommodation'. However, the institutional barriers did not defeat the students. Although they experienced feelings of alienation, they persevered. They completed the re-application forms, they stood in the queues at the administration offices, they used the few contacts they had, and they obtained re-admittance. They did so in spite of institutional arrangements that were inhibiting rather than enabling.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The four themes discussed above highlight the challenges the students experienced in HE and corroborate what has been found in research on the challenges experienced by some students (Badenhorst & Kapp 2013; Bozalek, Hölscher & Zembylas 2020; Lourens 2013). However, the focus of this chapter is not on the challenges but rather on 'What were the students able to do?' and 'What were the students able to be?'. The seven participants accessed SU because they had certain goals. They regarded SU as a 'resource' that would enable them to 'do' HE and become what they wanted to 'be'. However, the environment they entered differed culturally and socially to what they were used to. The social arrangements and the institutional conditions were foreign and exclusive and did not support the values and beliefs with which the students entered HE. They had to re-evaluate their norms and values and were not particularly reassured or confirmed through their experiences. The discrepancies between what the students brought into HE and what they were assumed to have were unaddressed, leaving the students to function on the periphery of the institutional environment. The differences between the social context and culture of

these students and that of the university affected the extent to which they were able to convert opportunities into achievements. The students were not able to integrate completely into academic life and thrive as students. Yet, it is significant that they were not defeated by a system that did not support them. They made specific choices based on their preferences in order to cope and reach their goals. They employed their agency and capital to negotiate the environment and to ‘be’ a student on their own terms. Their strengths and resilience enabled them to survive in a hostile, unwelcoming environment.

As mentioned earlier, HEIs aim to establish welcoming and inclusive environments. What is needed to achieve this goal is to recognise who our students are, even if they are in the minority on a specific campus. It is also important to observe the life stories of these students and incorporate their assets and needs into all aspects of a university. This implies pedagogy, curriculum, support and social arrangements, amongst other things (Bozalek, Hölscher & Zembylas 2020; Exposito & Bernheimer 2012). The emphasis should shift from a deficit approach to students to an approach acknowledging that students come with a range of strengths, assets and capital which can lead to the interrogation of the dominant culture, content and pedagogy.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

The students’ journeys through HE were seen to be colourful, complex and challenging, and they often took unexpected turns. Themba took seven years to complete his degree, four years longer than he had planned. Currently, he owns a laundromat and is preparing to teach English in Taiwan. Thandi was not able to complete her degree at SU. She did, however, manage to obtain employment as a quality assessor at an international company. She has since completed a course in forensic investigation and is continuing her studies. John completed half of his BCom degree. He then went back to Katlehong and told me, “I know now who I am and what I want to do.” Karen completed half of her BSc Earth Science degree. She is currently studying through a distance university and is halfway through her degree in languages. She is also a freelance writer and works part-time to support herself. Despite Asanda’s very challenging journey, she persevered. She completed her degree in Food Science as well as a master’s degree in Meat Science. She currently works as the manager of an abattoir in a national park. Adena completed a BA honours as well as a master’s degree in Engineering. She married a friend who was a roommate in the house where she chose to live. Daniel changed courses and completed a degree in Education. He is currently in a teaching post in the Northern Cape.

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Did the students succeed? As mentioned previously, if success in HE implies graduating, then only four of the seven participants were successful. However, to conflate success into a degree would be to ignore every achievement, every instance of activation of agency, every individual choice in a complex situation, and many more 'doings' and 'beings'. The seven participants' narratives certainly reflected achievements, activation of agency and complex choice-making. They arrived on campus without any background of HE. They entered residences without knowledge of the traditions that enthruse many students to live in residences where family members had stayed years before them. However, despite arriving alone without HE 'knowledge in the blood' (Jansen 2009), they had dreams, hope and above all, potential. They dreamt of a possible future enabled by tertiary studies. They negotiated HE despite challenging social arrangements and could testify to growth and development in their lives. During the years at the university, they changed in posture from uncertain individuals to self-assured individuals able to 'do' and 'be'. They were and are successful and deserve credit for what they have achieved despite being constrained by the institutional context.

Did the university provide a safe space where the students experienced a sense of belonging? I would argue that there were pockets of support, but in general the students had to fend for themselves with family and friends as dominant support structures. Yet, the students were successful although they were not able to assimilate fully and to make the university 'home'. In South Africa, where we are still struggling to redress the injustices of the past, all of us working in HE should do more. We need to acknowledge that the current knowledge is not the ultimate knowledge. We should embrace the 'new' knowledge that the students bring to the institution. We should embrace the 'new normal' South African student and work hard to create a space where all the members of a diverse student body are enabled to convert opportunities into capabilities.

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