CREATING CONDITIONS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

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

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CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

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It has been noted that, while South Africa conducts an extraordinary volume of education research (about 10% of PhDs are in this area), much of this work is not easily accessible or well known even now that postgraduate dissertations are often available online (Ashwin & Case 2018; ASSAf 2010). This volume thus does important work in bringing together the findings of a series of studies conducted on student success all in the same institutional setting.

Student success is such a popular term and focus not only in the scholarly literature but also in public debate, and can have many different interpretations attached to it. The studies featured in this book have in common an exceptionally broad, holistic, and essentially sympathetic way of thinking about student success. This is important work in helping us all move beyond what continues to be quite entrenched 'deficit discourses' (Smit 2012). The choice to frame a collective reinterpretation of their work around social justice, drawing especially on the capabilities approach, helped make explicit what I think were already implicit orientations to the studies.

The studies are all oriented towards understanding and interrogating initiatives and structures that are aimed towards promoting student success. In the introduction, Fourie-Malherbe draws on Tinto's (2012) injunction to determine 'which actions matter most' to set the scene for the book. These are crucial questions as higher education institutions face increasing limitations on how they are resourced – hard decisions will increasingly need to be made on what institutional initiatives need to be prioritised.

Stellenbosch University is the institutional setting for all the studies in this book. As higher education becomes more competitive and rankings-obsessed, it feels all the more significant to see an institutional culture that welcomes 'insider research' that will inevitably prompt scrutiny and deliberation on how its initiatives are delivering on their stated goals.

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However, this book should not only be of interest to this one university community. It provides us a really interesting case study of a South African university in ongoing transformation. Its historical legacy and current realities mean that it is still a majority white institution even though it continues to enrol increasing numbers of South African students from other race groups. The terms ‘traditional’ and ‘underserved’ populations are used in this publication, signalling where the university is coming from and where it is aiming towards. What this means in the present is that students who are in the majority in the national population find themselves a minority population at university, a situation also shared by a few other South African universities. At the same time, the university has a strong strategic focus with multiple prongs of action to try and alleviate some of the inherent difficulties that these ‘minoritised’ students might face, and to support their success. This forms the significant backdrop for this book.

What has always been for me a fascination in watching Stellenbosch University was to see whether the very ‘pastoral’ orientation that the university historically had (and which I experienced first-hand as an undergraduate in the late 1980s) would be able to expand into its increasingly multiracial population from the 1990s onwards. I think this book is a testament to how that ethos of care has been reinvented in a fresh way for a new generation of students in a significantly changed country.

Avoiding any simplistic racial essentialisms, the book signals a close interest in students’ lived realities, paying particular attention to the challenges of first-generation students, adult students, and commuter students. We follow these students through access programmes, into classrooms that are trying to promote interactive teaching, into a holistic view on residential and extra-curricular life, and into the workplace.

A particular strength of the book is how it locates all of these challenges within a global context, and uses this literature to bring forward fresh interpretations.

The social justice approach infuses not only how this book sees students and their struggles, but also the lived realities of the staff who are at the centre of these many efforts to support students. A really significant challenge here is to manage the tension between an empathetic understanding of why, say, lecturers do or do not use educational technology in their classrooms, and at the same time be able to call out ways in which the institution can do better. The authors in this book manage this tension admirably, and at points also demonstrate their active engagement in addressing the barriers that their research surfaces.

The final impression on the reader comes from the fine-grained and careful engagements with the empirical evidence that these various studies generated. Through a careful juxtaposition of macro and micro data, we are taken into the daily life of this

university. It's easy to write statements about the importance of, say, engagement, internationalisation, digital integration, or whatever – but quite a different thing to get close-up to see how these imperatives are received both by those who are charged to deliver them, and by the students who are the subjects for this work. The really powerful points in this book are where the authors unflinchingly point out the gap that nearly always exists between intention and actuality. At the same time, we also come to see how contradictions are maybe at the heart of what a university is all about (Castells 2001). Students come to this university because they want an experience that will set them apart from others, but going through this experience is sometimes deeply alienating and at other times empowering. We cannot shy away from this full reality while at the same time focusing our efforts to an overall outcome which will foster students' ability to become the people that they want to be, to have the freedom to make choices about what matters to them, and what will constitute for them a flourishing life (Walker 2008). This book offers ample pointers for all of us in higher education to think afresh about how we focus our efforts.

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