POLICY BRIEF

Photovoice Participatory Research Project: Access and Aspirations

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January, 2018

About this brief

We believe that access to higher education is a matter of the public good and social justice. Ours project adopted such a normative approach in understanding causal pathways to higher education for diverse students, capturing multi-dimensional access challenges and offering a means practically to address them.

Our policy brief summarises the findings of this Photovoice project conducted in September and October 2017 at the

Bloemfontein campus of the University of the

Free State (UFS) to take up this challenge. The project aimed to do the following:

- To understand – through the voices of young people - how they decide on university, what and who influences their decision-making, what challenges and opportunities they face, and how they get on and belong once at university.
- To involve students as co-researchers in a participatory process.
- To enhance the skills and knowledge and empower the co- researchers.
- To share this knowledge and research experience.

The brief outlines the experiences of the students and provides a summary of what the project learned that may be useful for this and other universities in research methodologies, as well as teaching and learning.

Context

Although there is some research on access to higher education in South Africa, most studies neglect student voices, their lived experiences, and their participation in the research. These studies also do not pay sufficient attention to the conditions of higher education choice and decision-making by students. Wanting to develop an inclusive approach to understanding pathways into higher education for diverse students, we selected a method that would help us understand but also expand students' human capabilities. We felt that participatory methods would foster agency, empowerment

and student voice. Such methods were a suitable tool therefore to use to advance a more democratic and inclusive way of knowledge creation. We sought not only to include the voices of the students but also to engage them as co-researchers.

Access to university

Research nationally and internationally points to the influence of socio-economic and education backgrounds on university access.

In South Africa, using non-fee paying quintiles one to three public schools (most of which are of low quality) as a proxy measure of socio-economic disadvantage, higher education access for black and poor students is severely affected. Often, students from these schools are less prepared for university and have fewer opportunities to choose and achieve higher education access.

In relation to subject choices at school, information about university and degree programmes, and careers advice, and financial aid, they have limited knowledge on how to apply or where to apply. As such, young people from township and rural schools are more likely to be discouraged from even aspiring to higher education.

Methodology

Working over four weeks and six days of intensive carefully designed workshops, eleven volunteer undergraduate students were supported by four facilitators and given basic photography training. Participatory discussions and social engagement over meals encouraged student dialogue, confidence and friendship and were central to our process of building an inclusive research team.
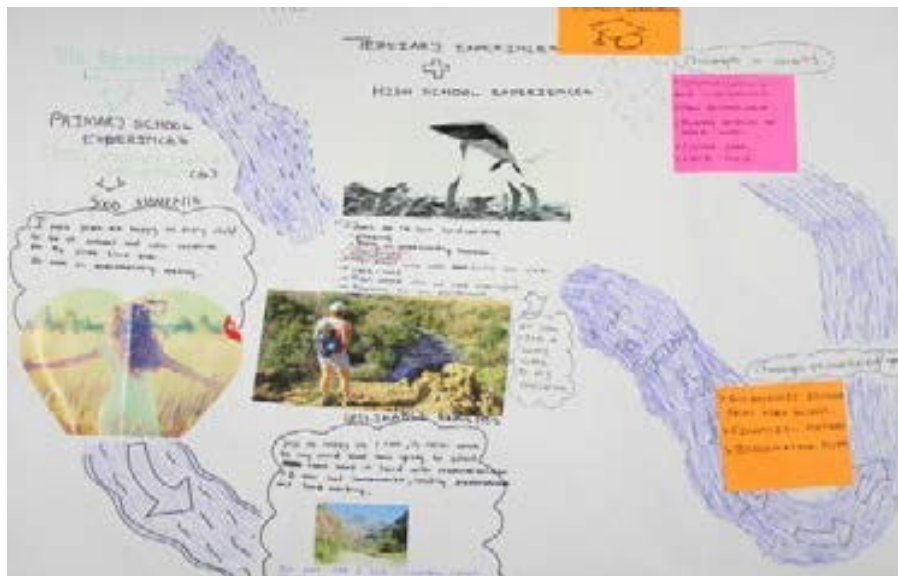

Figure 1: River of Life

Using inexpensive digital cameras provided to each of them, each student produced an individual photo-essay around an access theme of their own choosing. Working together, students then each selected five to seven photographs from those they had taken. They wrote a title for their photo-essay and a caption for each photograph.

Figure 2: Presentations

As a group they decided on how, and with whom they wished to share the photo-essays. The group agreed on compiling an e-book; setting up a Facebook page; making contact with a Foundation which supports rural youth in accessing higher education; and organised a photo exhibition and a student staff presentation and discussion on the South Campus[1] of the University of the Free State. They also made short videos in which they talked about their experience of the project.

Figure 3: Getting to university, the importance of teachers

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[1] Campus where the Undergraduate Preparation Programme (UPP) and Extended Programmes (EP) are offered for students with low admission scores.

The Impact of the project on student researchers

Students learned all of this through their participation: basic photography skills; being able to produce a photo-essay; confidence; presentation skills; working with/learning from students whom you did not know before the project; gaining understanding of other's lives; having the opportunity to tell their own life story; learning to brainstorm ideas; thinking critically; participation in dissemination activities; expressing themselves through images; being creative; having their views listened to; and being motivated to encourage others to access university.

One student summed it up for the group: 'You made me feel comfortable to tell my story. And then to hear other people's stories also inspired me, that most of us are going through struggles, especially financially, to get access to Varsity. So, it was a great learning curve. When I came here, I was a bit shy when it comes to presenting. I still am shy, a bit, but you made me feel comfortable, made me feel like, I don't know. It was a great privilege, working with all of you. I hope it's not the end.'

Findings about access journeys

Schooling

Students decided themselves or with their parents on which high school to attend. High schools were sometimes far from family homes and different means of transport were used such as walking, a school bus or taxis. Teachers (most but not all) were reported to be encouraging, and the learning of discipline and knowledge was useful for higher education. Nonetheless, in this group there was a general dissatisfaction with their matric results.

Students started to think about university from primary school, or between grade 9 and Grade 12 (matric). Invited motivational speakers, school teachers or relatives encouraged them and provided information. In half of the high schools it was usual to access university, whereas for the other half it was rare.

Family

Families (including extended family) had an influence on Grade 10 subject choices for a few, but most students chose subjects for themselves. While members of their families encouraged hard work, most encouragement came from those few who were university graduates. Although most family members could not help in preparing for university, they supported the decision to come to university/UFS. However, in some instances, families were seen to be a barrier as they wanted students to rather get a job to support the household.

Communities

Most co-researchers came from communities that are not supportive of education, particularly higher education. They grew up in neighbourhoods where there are social problems, such as gangsterism and drug abuse. This creates a very high wall between high school, township and university. There are only a few to no youth who make it to university in their communities. Students therefore feel that their communities need transformation based on university knowledge (via graduates).

Funding

Funding emerged as a tremendous challenge but it did not put students off. Their first aim was to pass matric, apply to university (it matters if application is free), be accepted, register, and then find money to pay the fees.

Choosing the University of the Free State

UFS was chosen for diverse reasons: proximity, access to information from the university, because students knew someone (friend or relative) who had studied there. A major reason was the

availability of the Undergraduate Preparation Programme (UPP) and the Extended Program (EP) which allowed students admission even with very low academic scores. Students were not discouraged by the longer period it would take to complete their degrees. What was valuable for them was the opportunity to access higher education, which would have otherwise not been possible.

First months at university

Challenges experienced during the first six months were around English as the language of teaching and learning, finances, fitting in, and making friends. South Campus was viewed as welcoming. The co-researchers would recommend UFS to prospective grade 12 learners, especially if they start at the South Campus. Here students are prepared well for the diverse environment at the large main campus.

Aspirations

Students want to become tutors, engage with their peers, complete their degrees, continue to other levels of education, take part in projects, be happy and have a peaceful transition. Once graduated, most of them want to achieve financial stability through employment, and help their families, communities and other young people struggling to access higher education.

What the UFS could learn from our project

This brief is intended to encourage university management at the UFS and elsewhere to support and fund participatory strategies focused on helping students on getting into, transitioning and succeeding in university. This might include collaborative projects with schools, pedagogical action research projects, or thematic projects such as ours. It would require seeing students as active knowledge creators to help advance epistemic justice and decolonisation at the University. Moreover, access to higher education should be considered beyond numbers to include working with township and rural schools face to face, providing information and support, and then helping these students settle into their university life.

From the project we also learned the huge importance in participatory research projects of dialogic, participative, student-voice and relationship-based pedagogy and having and holding students to high expectations of good work and commitment.

Project Website

https://photovoicecrhed.wixsite.com/acces sandaspirations.

Our book