

THE MIRATHO RESEARCH PROJECT 2016-2021: Aphiwe's University Story

Life before university

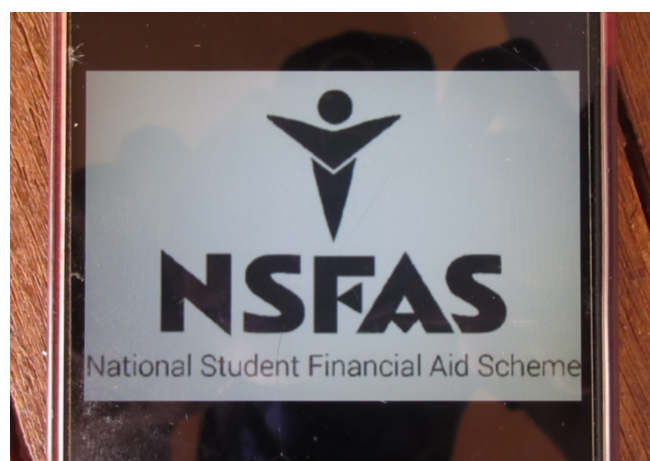
Aphiwe was born in 1997 and raised with three younger siblings by her mother in Sterkspruit, a rural town in the Joe Gqabi district of the Eastern Cape. Aphiwe described her village as 'undeveloped because many of the youth are not educated', and there was substance abuse. Only a few young people from her village have been to university.

Aphiwe's parents were separated and her father did not contribute financially. Because her mother was unemployed, Aphiwe's family relied on a government social grant. Despite being concerned about finances, Aphiwe's mother encouraged her to study hard during high school so that she could go to university – her mother did all the household chores so that Aphiwe could concentrate on her schoolwork. Aphiwe went to a quintile 1 school, St Teresa Combined School. Despite the school being under-resourced with no computer laboratories and insufficient textbooks (five learners would sometimes share a book), the teachers were 'patient' and helpful, especially to grade 12 students. Her grades dropped due to personal reasons in grade 11 and then in grade 12 she described herself as 'lazy'. Despite this she passed her grade 12 exams with some good grades (three Bs, one C, two Ds, one E). A few other pupils from her school achieved bachelor (university degree admission) passes as well.

How she gained university access

In 2015, one teacher had encouraged Aphiwe to apply to university and gave her the Provincial application form. The Thusanani Foundation visited her school and explained about university so when Aphiwe got her grade 12 results she called the Foundation and explained that she was unable to

fund her studies and they had assisted her. Aphiwe's grades were too low, however, to meet the minimum required admission points for the programmes she wanted to study (medicine, biochemistry or forensic science). She settled for a Bachelor of Education (majoring in English and Geography) and started her first year at Provincial University in 2016. The access conversion factors influencing this outcome intersected in complicated ways. Despite financial challenges, Aphiwe's mother encouraged her to work hard and go to university, but could not provide academic advice. Although the rural geography and 'undeveloped' community she came from, which 'lacked education', were challenging conversion factors, Aphiwe's 'strict' mother countered these by ensuring that she studied rather than playing in the streets. However, despite her mother's efforts, Aphiwe joined 'social networks' and did not study hard. Despite completing grade 12 with a bachelors pass, she did not qualify for the degrees she had wanted to pursue so she 'just applied to university for the sake of applying'.



2018, photo by Nsuku Nkuna

Her university access was therefore achieved within constrained circumstances shaped by four intersecting conversion factors.

What her university participation looked like

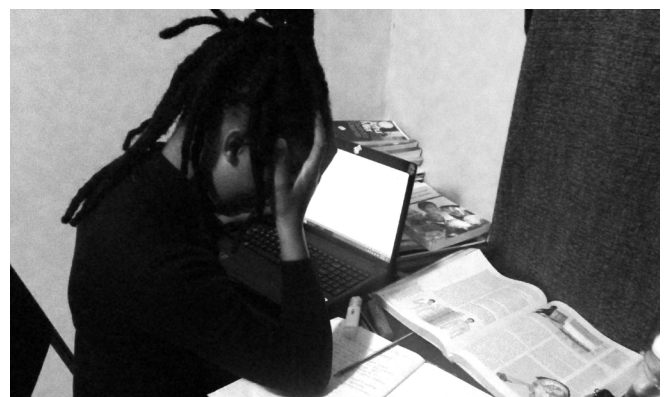
In 2016 and 2017 the Thusanani Foundation paid for her tuition and accommodation, but not any other expenses. Aphiwe did not apply for or secure funding for the first two years at university. Unlike most Miratho students who approached their studies with hard work and commitment to success, Aphiwe entered university with a lack of commitment and dedication. At the Imagined Futures workshop (18 May 2019), Aphiwe admitted: ‘Let me just confess something. Ever since I was a first-year, I was never serious about books. I neglected everything academic’. In addition, she did not know how to use computers when she got to university and struggled with typing and writing essays in her first year: ‘I would miss assignment submissions because I was slow with typing and all of that’. Her lack of exposure to scientific equipment was also an obstacle to becoming a confident member of the new world that Aphiwe first experienced university to be: ‘The first challenge was that of me not being able to adapt to the technical world of the university’. She was ‘not passionate’ and ‘motivated to study’ and was ‘not enjoying any of this’ and sometimes she ‘would skip classes, not study for tests’.

Aphiwe soon realised that university differs from school and that success is shaped by how fast you can adapt, and that this is easier for students who are familiar with computers, have used microscopes at school, and so on. However, this realisation did not translate into significant change in how she studied in her second year (2017). Aphiwe studied by trying to work out which questions would appear in tests and motivated herself by studying these questions with friends. From the modules she took for her BEd degree, she learned the most from Sign

Language but had applied rote learning techniques because it was ‘a lot of work, I hate it, I fight it’. Instead, she enjoyed subjects like Zoology, even if Zoology is a ‘huge book’. It took time for Aphiwe to acknowledge that she must work much harder to improve her chances of completing the degree, and that both her attitude and study techniques needed adjusting. By her third year (2018) she understood that ‘it’s the effort you put on your work that counts’ and said this again in her fourth year (2019), although by then she was retaking Zoology after failing it for the second time. She had slowly come to understand that in Zoology there is theory which requires students to ‘go beyond the content’, and that it was important to work out how the content is relevant to the wider world.

For example, to realize that Zoology is relevant for understanding the effect of parasites on the body, or why vaccination is important. This made her understand why doing well in modules like Zoology required her to read widely, and not just rely on the lectures.

One might think that Aphiwe not having funding in her first two years might have led to her lack of focus on academic work, but we see little change even when she does secure funding from NSFAS in her third year (2018). NSFAS covered tuition fees, a textbook allowance, food and accommodation, so



2018, photo by Andiswa Sesoana

she did not have to worry about finances and she was able to buy a laptop from her textbook allowance. Although she thought books and other study material were vital too, she worked around this by sharing these resources with fellow students. This is why she found it important 'to make friends with people you are studying with' at university. She had not needed money for transport because she lived about 5 kilometres from the university, so she walked to and from campus. Because of this, she was sometimes able to send small amounts of money from her textbook allowance to her mother. While at university, she had failed two out of six modules in her first year (2016) and failed Zoology and both her majors in her second year (2017). In her third year, she replaced English with EBUS (Economics and Business Studies) as one of her majors, and had to study the first year and second year work for EBUS simultaneously (in 2018). Aphiwe's academic performance starts to change late in her fourth year (2019), when she finally passed all her modules, including Zoology. She had worked hard to achieve this. Seeing others around her completing their degrees made Aphiwe realise that she needed to push herself to finish her degree, even though she

had not chosen it. In her fifth year (2020) she was busy with her teaching practice modules. In her spare time she watched films, and slept a lot at weekends. She had taken part in beauty pageants in the first years of university but did not gain much from them, so she stopped. She had not been in favour of student protests because they had prevented her from attending classes. Although she had friends who she could turn to for advice she did not want others to see her 'crying and depressed' because, 'I don't like people to see me as weak'. Overall, she did not enjoy her degree and was not looking forward to being a teacher. Despite her negative university experience, she was grateful for it because she felt being at university had taught her to value other people, be more focused, and to work hard.

How she moved on from university

When we last spoke to Aphiwe in 2020, she had not yet obtained her degree. She was still busy with her practical teaching modules. If she continued to pass all modules she would obtain her degree by the end of 2021, after six years of study and would be able to move on to work as a teacher.



2018, photo by Amanda Gocini