

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

Life before university

Rimisa was born in 1997 in a rural village in the Vhembe district of Limpopo. He grew up in a large family with 11 siblings. His mother died when he was a child, and he was not close to his father who had spent most of Rimisa's life working in Johannesburg but was home because of an illness when we first interviewed Rimisa in 2017. The family relied on his father's disability employment benefit of ZAR5 000 monthly.

Rimisa went to Hanyani Secondary School (a quintile 2 school). In grade 12 he preferred to spend most of his time at school, reading to avoid 'unpleasant' situations at home. 'A lot' of pupils from Rimisa's school went to university, he thought. He worked hard throughout high school and achieved good grades (two As, two Bs, three Cs). Rimisa's high school teachers played a significant role in his academic life and encouraged him to work hard and go to university. For example, his Life Orientation teacher invited universities and colleges in Limpopo to visit the school to provide information and bursary application forms to grade 12 learners. In contrast, his family did not think it was worthwhile for him to aspire to university because they knew they would not be able to provide financial support for tuition fees.

How he gained university access

Although Rimisa knew he wanted to go to University from grade eight, he lacked access to the internet to apply to different universities and for bursaries. He also lacked money for university application fees and applied to Country, a rural university, only after his high school teacher gave him the ZAR100 application fee: it was 'the cheapest university'.

The teacher's assistance made up for lack of family support for whom it 'difficult' to 'understand the situation. They didn't know anything about application forms'. Because most people in Rimisa's village were nurses and teachers, he had wanted to be a nurse but he could not register for either because places were full. He was offered a space to study Bachelor in Indigenous Knowledge Systems instead, which he accepted, despite not knowing anything about it.

And so in 2016, Rimisa became the first in his family to go to university.

For Rimisa, university access was achieved under constrained circumstances because he neither freely chose Country nor to study for a Bachelor of Arts in Indigenous Knowledge Systems. His hard-working disposition and determination to pursue his aspirations made him apply for university despite being 'rejected' by Country three times. The Thusanani Foundation (an NGO) and a relative paid his registration fees in his first year (2016).



2018, photo by Tinyeko Ndlovu

What his university participation looked like

Rimisa's high school teachers paid for his application fee and gave him money for food and clothes during his first two years (2016-2017). In 2018 he secured NSFAS funding, and became less dependent on them for financial support, but he maintained these relationships.

Although he was 'clueless' about his study programme at first, he grew to love it and he worked hard. He particularly enjoyed learning about indigenous health care. His African Health Care lecturer took a research-based approach to teaching by which students were given a research topic in class with basic guidelines about using the library, anthropology department and internet for information. They sometimes had to interview traditional healers, and Rimisa did this in Tshivenda, his home language. Findings were discussed in class. Rimisa thought this the right approach for the course and felt he was part of producing new knowledge for the course. Students were also expected to work in groups and present in class. He attended all of his lectures and kept the handouts. When preparing for tests or exams, he would write notes, and first read through them 'as if I am reading a newspaper' to familiarise himself with the content. Thereafter, he would read in depth. Following this he would set up his own test questions, and then he would write

down the answer before going through the questions again but answering them orally. He did not like to work in groups, although he saw the benefits of doing so.

He consciously 'associated' with lecturers who regarded him as 'one of their best students'. He also had five friends whom he described as hard working, encouraging, and able to distinguish between the 'right' and 'wrong' people to associate with at university.

Rimisa worked very hard to achieve as many distinctions as possible by the time he completed his studies. This was part of his strategy to win university merit awards to help him pay off tuition fee debt from his first two years at university. He was also motivated by the annual Thusanani Foundation award ceremonies, where students' achievements were celebrated and awarded (he received a tablet in 2018 for being one of the top achievers). Rimisa's study programme included a research module that culminated in a thesis which had to be submitted as a requirement to complete the four-year (integrated honours) degree. His research explored the role of indigenous knowledge for sustainable livelihoods. He conducted the qualitative study at a local village in Venda in his fourth and final year (2019) and received a B (over 70%) for the thesis.



2018, photo by Colen Tshibalo

Rimisa completed his degree in 2020 cum laude. He had developed ambitious academic aspirations: to have a PhD at 27.

Out of class, Rimisa volunteered as a class representative. His job consisted mostly of liaising between students and lecturers about the availability of lecture halls. Because there was a shortage of venues for teaching, class representatives had to arrive early and look for available classes, book them and let students and lecturers know the days. He also volunteered at the Community Engagement and Research Centre at Country, for which he earned a small stipend. He was also a Miratho photovoice participant. He titled his story: 'The difference between "here" and "there" is courage'. The excerpts below are summaries of the six captions he used to label the photographs that comprised the story he told about his university journey.

The beginning of my journey at tertiary: I felt like a child who is lost in the street, because I was not familiar with the university and I experienced a lot of confusion.

First heart-warming experience in higher education: First time I felt included in tertiary is when I was in possession of a student card.

Challenges I experienced: Lack of information about residence on campus and lack of funds drove me to stay off campus, which is not safe.

Three pillars: Thusanani Foundation, NS-FAS and my high school teachers helped me to overcome the challenges I experienced and have success.

Relief: Now I am able to buy shoes or takkies and clothes of my choice.

My future plans: I want to build an orphanage home to help others who are poor because I do not want them to experience the struggles I experienced.

How he moved on from university

Rimisa applied for and was accepted for Masters in African Studies at Country University in 2020 and applied for funding from the National Research Foundation.

His four years of university had helped him gain confidence and helped him achieve things that he could not be or do before: speak English with confidence, dress nicely, have a bank account, and be financially independent. He widened and thickened his capability set with each year of being at university. He seems well on his way to achieving his aspiration of having a PhD at 27 years. He valued being at university because even if a degree may not result in employment, it helped him learn strategies to survive and to solve his life problems.



2018, photo by Unarine Ndou