



Possibilities for Student Transformation Through Capability-Enhancing University Participation

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Funding

- The first year of study was precarious, because most students had managed to register, but they still had not secured bursaries, which worried and stressed students constantly.
- Ntando (Provincial) explained that *'finance stresses us because when your account accumulates they keep sending you messages like "you will be de-registered" .*
- Like nearly all Miratho students, he felt that 'the stress of money is too much'. This situation changed for the group.
- By year three (2018) nearly all had secured funding, more than half (42) funded by NSFAS.

Access to technology

- Being at university allowed students access to technology for educational purposes for the first time, but they were disadvantaged by not having had it earlier.
- Lungile (City) said *'I was computer illiterate. I didn't know anything about computers'*. As Bonani (Provincial) described *'it was difficult, because it was my first time using the computer lab, the computers, scanners, printers all that stuff and online assessments'*.
- By the end of the first year, students were accustomed to using computers. However, for students at historically-disadvantaged universities like Country and Rural, low digital literacy was compounded by limited access to other technology and equipment even after they entered university.
- Another related issue for students across all universities, especially for those who resided off-campus was lack of access to the internet. As Anathi (Provincial) explained: *'You have Internet access when you're on campus, but when you go to home, there's no Internet'*.

The effects of schooling: lack of confidence to speak up

- While all students reported attending classes and tutorials regularly, many struggled in silence during the first years of university because they lacked confidence in speaking English, and, more generally, the confidence to speak up.
- Rimisa (Country) said he did not feel confident to speak in class because his '*English language was poor*'; Ntando (Provincial) '*just did not get along with English*'; Busisiwe (Provincial) '*did not know the language that much*'. Yet, even those students who had a good command of English did not engage in lecture discussions. Kamohelo (Provincial) said '*sometimes I'd really have this burning question in my chest but I wouldn't ask it*'. Sonto (City) who spoke English very well said she'd '*never said a word*' during lectures.
- As the years progressed, students grew more confident in their use of English, and more confident in themselves. Rimisa (Country) said:
I used to maybe at some point like use my home language. So my friend used to say no, don't do that. If you do that, you will not learn how to speak. So now, because I'm now a bit good at English, I'm now able to ask questions, yes. I'm also confident to raise up and ask questions.

The effects of schooling: ‘cramming’

- The Miratho students struggled to take on new identities as university students: they had achieved good to excellent grades for their grade 12 exams so they assumed that they should carry on as they had done in high school and would then achieve similar results at university.
- Moreover, some students carried problematic approaches to learning from high school to university. We heard examples of rote learning techniques and a narrow focus on ‘cramming’ content that might appear as a question in tests or exams. *‘I was passing, but by using cramming methods’* (Rimisa, Country); *‘I don’t study, I just cram’* (Busisiwe, Provincial); *‘I will just cram everything there and read and cram everything, maybe two times, cram and cram and cram’* (Rendani, Country).
- Students taking long to change their approach to learning could be an indicator of internalized schooling norms that generate limited ‘repertoires of possible actions’.

Relationships (with lecturers and others)

- Students were uncertain about what to expect from a lecturer or what the student-lecturer relationship should look like.
- Accounts were largely of distant relationships with lecturers, with the odd mention of slightly more positive interactions. Across disciplines and institutions, students seldom consulted lecturers out of class.
- The reasons for not approaching lecturers for assistance varied. Mthunzi (City) did not know how he would initiate conversations: *'Sometimes it's scary, you know? Scary. Because you don't know when you arrive to him or her what you're going to say. Sometimes you feel like the question you have is too... like, that's just the dumbest question'*. Malusi (Provincial) said *'me and lecturer [are] strangers'*. Malusi did not assume, as advantaged students might, that meeting lecturers to discuss his academic progress was a part of university education and expected.
- Over time, some students became less reticent...

University community and geography: the impact of living off campus

- During their time at university, most Miratho students (42) lived off-campus. While this was fine for those who lived within walking distance to campus (five kilometres), it was often problematic for those who lived further away (20 kilometres).
- This is captured in students' descriptions of how they travelled to campus using public transport (mini bus taxis, university shuttle buses, regular buses or trains or a combination) and how they sometimes skipped classes due to insufficient taxi fare.
- In contrast, the 24 students residing on campus did not report having to miss classes.
- This indicates that living far from campus as a low-income student (even with funding) is a barrier to the capability for inclusion and participation because off-campus residence generally means spending less time within the university environment which results in fewer opportunities to be engaged members of the university community.

University general conditions

- University general conditions influenced students' overall university experience in different ways.
- The 41 students enrolled across City, Metro and Provincial gave more favourable reviews about the general conditions of their university campuses, while the 25 students enrolled at Rural and Country often expressed disappointment with the sub-par conditions for teaching and learning, such as overcrowding of lecture halls, and insufficient equipment.
- This reminds us that the legacies of inequality and ill-distribution of resources across historically advantaged (e.g. Metro University) and historically disadvantaged (e.g. Rural University) institutions are manifest in the physical spaces of universities, which can affect students' overall university experience and capability for inclusion and participation.

Information about university

- The people with whom students had the closest relationships (family, friends), could not provide them with academic support or guidance and advice about how to manoeuvre through university systems or seek support for doing so from their lecturers.
- Students had to figure out how things work on their own, which they did through their determination, and this helped developed their capability for navigation.

Students' personal attributes

- Students worked very hard because they were determined to succeed. This determination for academic success almost came at the cost of students' involvement in non-academic activities on campus but it did not.
- Most students were supporters of the #FeesMustFall protests (but none showed interest in #RhodesMustFall) and a few had been members of student associations like the Student Representative Council.
- The development of the capability for practical reason was evident here in how students drew on their personal values and attributes, and made decisions about the steps and actions they were willing to take to change the course of their lives, or as was the case in their active support of #FeesMustFall, to change the lives of future students.
- For those who participated in the photovoice project, narrative capabilities were supported. Not only in terms of students having the opportunity to tell their stories and be heard, but they drew from these stories in a process of collective analysis and synthesized them into a charter for an inclusive university.

A charter for an inclusive university

The charter has five key points:

- **Outreach and access**

Forge good relationships with schools in rural areas, that is take the university to the schools and districts. Develop a range of creative information and inductive programs. University induction programs should include food and accommodation for those who require.

- **Student welfare**

Establish a food programme (e.g. reasonably priced cafeterias on all university campuses where low income students can afford to eat nutritious meals twice a day). Set up a wellness centre, and ensure students feel comfortable in accessing the services, especially around mental health.

- **Inclusive teaching**

Good, clear lecturing by experienced/ trained and caring lecturers. Training for lecturers in using teaching ICT platforms effectively. Using English for all lecturing, combined with inclusive language use in classes (e.g. small group discussions). Include students who register late through pod-casts, handouts, catch-up tutorials etc.

- **Access to ICT**

Offer free and timely workshops on computer competence and on using the internet effectively for research and study purposes. Provide internet services for off-campus students - e.g. make deals with internet providers for cheaper data provision.

- **Teaching space**

Address overcrowded lecture halls because they hinder the process of learning

Teaching and learning conditions

- The most common description of class was that lecturers gave 'speeches' accompanied by power point slides.
- Khuselwa (Metro) said lecturers did not explain things very well and they discouraged long questions in class because they see it as taking up class time.
- While we mostly heard examples of one directional teaching, there were a few examples of other teaching approaches like problem based learning.
- But we also heard examples of bad teaching. As Nelisiwe (City) described, lecturers who '*read the slide as it is. They are not explaining anything. They're not making examples*'.

Teaching and learning conditions

- Students mostly described class timetables that seemed manageable, and talked about a wide range of assessment methods, which varied depending on field of study, but students did not speak much about formative assessment.
- For example, Ntondeni (Metro) said for most of her assignments she received a grade, but no comments or feedback. Ntando (Provincial) said lecturers did not ask questions like '*why are you guys getting low marks?*' or '*what can we do [to help]?*'. He said '*they don't interact with us in that way*'.
- While increasing class sizes can make formative feedback for each student less achievable, students need the opportunity to construct varied learning structures, and opportunities to be challenged and to learn from their mistakes (Pym, 2013).

Knowledge that transforms

- On the whole, the teaching and learning arrangements at all five universities, although not ideal and heavily reliant on rigid lecturing as a pedagogical tool, did support transformative learning, but to a limited extent. We saw this in how some, but not all students gained knowledge that was changing the way they thought about and applied concepts, the way talked about the purpose of their future professions, or the way they viewed the world.
- For example Rudzani (Metro) said he became more open minded because of university participation:

Now I think, I think a lot and I try to see what's happening like in the world. In first year I didn't really care much about politics, I didn't. Yes, but now I try to look like what are the problems in society...I try to follow these politics and whatever which is happening in the world [to see] what are the problems? What does our future look like?

- Bongeka's (Provincial) BSocSc studies changed how she thought about criminal behaviour: '*What I understand now is that sometimes the environment people grow up in, makes them, makes them to commit crime*'. In this way, her university education allowed her to '*see the bigger picture*' and '*to see things not just as black and white*'.

Knowledge that transforms

- Sabelo (Rural) learnt from his Social Work studies how to apply social theory critically in the module 'indigenisation of social work'. Students learnt about the importance applying '*theories from the West*' but '*indigenising them*' to '*put them in an African context*'. He provides this example:

We had theories that when you are talking with a child, the child must look at you in the eyes, maintain eye contact. And then with the African context, if I may say, most African children are taught that if they are speaking with elders, they must not look straight in the eyes. Because if the child does that, it shows some level of disrespect. With that module, it taught me that what I've learnt from a Western theory, it's not totally relevant when it comes to African societies.

Knowledge that transforms

- Sonto (City) learned from her BA Politics degree how seemingly unconnected concepts and subjects were intertwined: *'You find feminism in politics, you find feminism in sociology'*.
- Making these connections allowed her to see the world differently: *'There was this time where we did religion. For me I feel like religion is also some form of governance over people, like I said before. I think that's how it fits into politics'*.
- Sociology fulfilled Sonto's curiosity to understand human beings better *'not psychologically'* she said *'but how life is structured for human beings'*.
- Sonto also learned about feminist movements and now (rather hesitantly) thinks of herself as a feminist.

Knowledge that transforms

- We believe that university participation should be accompanied by this type of reconstruction of selfhood (Ashwin, 2020).
- That students should be transformed by university education through developing new ways of understanding structured bodies of knowledge and the way that these bodies of knowledge construct the world, as well as students' positions in it (Ashwin, 2020).
- This involves fostering students' ontological imagination (Kencheloe, 2008) of what they might become as individuals and what they can achieve as a collective in their endeavors to address the questions Rudzani wonders about '*what are the problems? What [will] our future look like?*'.

To conclude...

- While students' capabilities were underdeveloped in the first year of university, this changes gradually over time so that we see the emergence of a widened capability set as the years progressed, which we see as indicative of their transformation.
- We therefore conclude that although it happened unevenly, university participation enabled student transformation. However it could be much more transformative if pedagogical arrangements and other provisions for learning (including those presented in the charter) were taken up.