



**Understanding Epistemic Access and Success for  
Historically Disadvantaged Students in South  
African Public Universities**

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Higher Education (CHE)**

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	i
Table of Contents.....	ii
List of Figures.....	x
List of Tables.....	xii
List of Contributors.....	xiv
Abbreviations and acronyms.....	xvii
Chapter 1: Understanding epistemic access and success of historically disadvantaged students in South African universities.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Rationale and motivation.....	2
Project aim.....	3
Discussion of key concepts related to student access and success.....	4
Epistemic access.....	4
Throughput and attrition.....	7
Marginalised and disadvantaged.....	9
Methodology.....	10
Sampling and interview logistics.....	13
Outline of the report.....	14
References.....	15
Chapter 2: Student epistemic access: The dynamic interplay between agency and institutional mediation.....	17
Introduction.....	17
Historical background and context.....	18
Wave of limited access to higher education in South Africa: Dismantling barriers.....	18
Wave of diversifying formal access into higher education: Into the democratic transition of the 1990s.....	20
Wave of tackling under-preparedness and the deficit model.....	21
The Cultural Wave: Institutional efforts beyond academic programmes (2010-present).....	24
Understanding throughput, access and success.....	25
Student cultural domain: student agency.....	28
Compensatory capital.....	28
Student capability.....	29
Institutional cultural domain.....	34
The official domain.....	35
Institutional facts and constitutive rules as institutional culture.....	36

Induction as cultural practice to epistemic access .....	36
The pedagogic [academic] domain .....	37
The social domain.....	43
Decolonisation/decolonial approaches .....	46
Decolonial analytic framework and student epistemic access.....	48
Conclusion.....	49
Chapter 3: Quantitative overview of access and success in South African Higher Education	57
Introduction .....	57
Progression and pass rates in perspective .....	58
Selected statistical overview of headcount and throughput .....	60
National headcount and throughput of the South African higher education system .....	60
Institutional level (participating institutions) .....	73
Faculty level .....	87
Conclusion.....	115
References .....	116
Chapter 4: Negotiating epistemic access and success in higher education: the case of the Central University of Technology, CUT .....	118
Introduction .....	118
Background and context of CUT .....	119
Conceptually framing the CUT case study .....	120
Concepts offering insight into the institution .....	120
Concepts and factors drawing attention to the individual .....	124
Decolonial twist and implications for knowledge produced in Higher Education.....	126
Methodology .....	128
Data sources and instruments .....	128
Sampling, data collection and analysis.....	128
Data collection processes and coding procedures .....	129
Student experience at CUT: Findings and analyses .....	130
Institutional geographical location and mandate .....	130
Throughput rates, enrolment practices and teaching strategies.....	132
Student experiences at CUT .....	140
Transitioning to university.....	146
Institutional and faculty level interventions at CUT .....	149
Supplementary Instruction (SI) .....	151
Language, learning and academic literacy at CUT.....	152

Peer mentorship programme.....	154
Special programmes .....	155
Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP).....	156
Psychological and Counselling services.....	158
Economic support.....	159
Decolonisation, Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and epistemic access.....	159
Decolonial debate at CUT .....	160
Fourth Industrial Revolution and 21 <sup>st</sup> Century Skills.....	163
Conclusion.....	168
Recommendations .....	170
References .....	170
Acknowledgements .....	173
<b>Chapter 5: It takes a village to ensure epistemic access and success: The case of historically disadvantaged students at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) .....</b>	<b>174</b>
Introduction .....	174
Background: The UJ Context.....	174
Literature Review .....	176
Theoretical Framework .....	178
Methodology .....	179
Journeying through UJ .....	182
Context, preparedness, expectations and aspirations before university .....	182
A new life in a large city .....	183
Functioning at UJ: academics, opportunities and experience .....	183
Campus culture and environment.....	183
Academic experience at UJ.....	185
Academic support and usage.....	186
Residence and social experiences.....	187
Other support and usage .....	189
Institutional Changes and Impact.....	190
Capability .....	192
Collective agency: Ubuntu .....	193
Individual know-how.....	194
Know-thyself .....	195
Self-awareness and acceptance.....	196
Ownership, determination and persistence.....	197

Positive attitudes and gratitude.....	197
What drives the capabilities?.....	198
Recommendations for UJ: Towards an Optimally Functioning University.....	199
Curriculum implications.....	199
Financial implications.....	200
Implications for better support.....	200
Conclusion.....	201
Student experience versus throughput.....	201
It takes the whole village.....	203
References.....	205
Appendices.....	210
Chapter 6: Epistemic access and success of historically disadvantaged students at the University of Limpopo.....	212
Introduction.....	212
Background and context.....	212
Literature review.....	215
Conceptualisation of epistemic access and success.....	217
Conceptual framework.....	220
Methodology.....	223
Sampling.....	223
Profile of the faculties.....	224
Student profiles.....	226
Profile of schools.....	227
Data collection.....	227
Data analysis.....	228
Main findings and discussion.....	229
Academic challenges.....	230
Social and personal challenges.....	233
Student agency and relationships.....	235
Conclusion.....	243
References.....	244
Acknowledgements.....	249
Chapter 7: A capability approach to disadvantaged students' access and success: The case of the University of Pretoria.....	250
Introduction.....	250

Demographic transformation .....	251
Interventions for student success .....	257
Faculty-specific support services.....	258
Institutional transformation .....	258
Race and institutional culture .....	259
Transforming language policy.....	259
Faculty-based transformation initiatives .....	260
Conceptual framework: cultivating capabilities for student access and success .....	260
Capability-informed analysis an alternative to the deficit approach .....	262
Methodology .....	263
Limitations of the study.....	264
Ethical clearance.....	265
Analysis: Systemic and individual conversion factors that enable access and success .....	265
Capabilities for cultivating belonging to the university community .....	266
Capabilities for student support.....	269
Capabilities cultivated by extended degree programmes .....	270
Student experiences of academic staff.....	270
Student experiences of technology .....	271
Analysis: Systemic and individual conversion factors that constrain access and success .....	272
Unequal access to higher education.....	272
The impact of COVID-19 on student access and success .....	273
Constraining community environment .....	274
First-generation status.....	275
Student preparedness for university .....	276
Massification and student success .....	277
Staff experiences of higher education massification and resources .....	278
Confidence, mental health and academic engagement .....	279
Resources and student success .....	280
Student experiences of resource provision at the university .....	280
Institutional transformation: major issues .....	281
Staff perspectives on decolonising at the university .....	282
Student perspectives on decolonising at the university .....	283
Institutional culture and staff experiences of transformation .....	284
Racism as a systemic constraint: student and staff experiences at UP.....	285
Language policy: enablers and constraints .....	286



Conclusion: Capabilities for access and success in higher education .....	287
Capability for academic and social belonging.....	287
Capability for academic and social support.....	288
Capability for confidence .....	288
Capabilities for institutional transformation.....	289
Resource security.....	290
Capability for resilience.....	290
References .....	291
Acknowledgements .....	298
Chapter 8: The elephant in the graduation room: Contradictions of epistemic access at the University of the Western Cape .....	299
Introduction .....	299
Access and student engagement at UWC.....	300
Competing understandings of access to education.....	304
Methodology .....	310
Cultural politics of epistemic access at UWC.....	314
Between gateways and gatekeepers: Formal access to UWC .....	314
Complex social relationships at home and/in academic spaces .....	319
Pathways through the academic pipeline: Epistemic access and success .....	325
The terrain of curriculum.....	330
Conclusion.....	332
References .....	333
Chapter 9: Understanding epistemic access and success of historically disadvantaged students at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits).....	338
Introduction .....	338
Background and Historical Narratives of Wits .....	339
Wits context during the apartheid era.....	339
Wits context Post 1994 dispensation .....	339
Campus Culture vis-à-vis Epistemic Access: Theoretical Underpinnings.....	341
Epistemic Access and Cultural Dimensions.....	341
Reality of Being ‘Disadvantaged’ in the Face of Higher Education environment.....	342
Trending discourses in higher education .....	343
Conceptual and theoretical framework .....	345
Community Cultural Wealth .....	345
Campus culture .....	347

Methodological complexities .....	348
Databases and identification of participants .....	348
Making sense of the data .....	349
Limitations of the study .....	350
Contextualising Wits .....	350
Organisation of Humanities and Science Faculties and their Schools .....	350
Wits statistical overview .....	351
The Wits culture of excellence: context and trajectory .....	352
A university transforming for the 21 <sup>st</sup> century .....	354
Creation of a student success centric system: Wits' outlook 2019.....	357
Institutional agency and mediation for student support.....	359
Students' Family, Home and Community Background: Source of Cultural Capitals .....	361
Who are the participating students?.....	361
Turning Negative Experience into Positive Energy: Aspirational Capital .....	363
Thrown in the deep end: Decision-making about choice of university and programmes .....	364
On-campus experiences: what was the reality? .....	369
University support on the decolonisation and the 4IR projects: the student and staff perspective .....	371
Managing against the odds .....	377
The grand resurface .....	379
Future progression intentions: Aspirational capital.....	382
Concluding Remarks .....	383
Key drivers for student success .....	384
But, what more could be done or be done differently? .....	385
Acknowledgements .....	391
Chapter 10: Epistemic access and success of historically marginalised students in South Africa: Towards a capability and resilience model.....	392
Introduction .....	392
Institutional Mediation .....	395
Official Domain .....	395
Pedagogic Domain.....	397
Social Domain .....	403
Student Agency and Capability .....	411
Overcoming under-preparedness .....	411
Mitigating financial constraints .....	414

Navigations related to (Un)Compensatory capital .....	419
Galvanising mindsets.....	422
Overview of student agency and capability: towards a model of student resilience .....	424
Perspectives on decolonisation and 4IR.....	424
Decolonisation/decolonial theory .....	424
4IR, Covid-19 and 21 <sup>st</sup> century skills .....	428
Conclusion.....	432
Chapter 11: Conclusion.....	434
Introduction .....	434
Policy and related recommendations.....	435
The throughput conundrum .....	435
Funding.....	436
Institutional capability and support .....	437
Rethinking curriculum.....	438
Revisiting higher education language policies .....	439
Accommodation, safety and security.....	439
Issues for further research .....	440
Deepening the methodological value-add of throughput statistics.....	440
Conclusion and Brief Afterword .....	442

## List of Figures

Figure 1: National headcount undergraduate enrolment by qualification type (2014-2019)...	61
Figure 2: Headcount enrolment by field of study (2014-2019) .....	62
Figure 3: National headcount undergraduate enrolment by race [population group] (2014-2019) .....	63
Figure 4: Population group by household .....	64
Figure 5: Headcount undergraduate enrolments by gender (2014 and 2019).....	66
Figure 6: Proportion of population age cohort (participation rates) by gender (2014 -2019) .	67
Figure 7: Headcount enrolment by field of study and gender for 2014 and 2019 .....	68
Figure 8: Throughput rates for diploma qualifications for those entering for the first time in 2014 (excluding UNISA).....	69
Figure 9: Throughput rates for three-year B-degrees for those who enrolled for the first time in 2014 (excluding UNISA).....	70
Figure 10: Throughput rates for four-year B-degrees for those who enrolled for the first time in 2014 (excluding UNISA).....	71
Figure 11: Headcount of undergraduate qualifications awarded by gender for 2014 and 2019 .....	72
Figure 12: Percentage change in enrolments by population group at undergraduate level over the period 2014 to 2019 .....	75
Figure 13: Gender profile of undergraduate students in the universities in the study .....	78
Figure 14: Deviation from the average throughput of female and male students for three-year diplomas in participating institutions.....	81
Figure 15: Deviation from the average throughput of female and male students for three-year B-degrees in participating institutions .....	82
Figure 16: Deviation from the average throughput of female and male students for four-year B-degrees in participating institutions .....	84
Figure 17: Deviation from the average for three-year diplomas by NSFAS status .....	85
Figure 18: Deviation from the average throughput for three-year B-degrees by NSFAS status .....	86
Figure 19: Deviation from the average throughput for four-year B-degrees by NSFAS status .....	87
Figure 20: Gender distribution in Humanities across participating institutions .....	93
Figure 21: Gender distribution in Science faculties across participating institutions.....	93
Figure 22: Population group or race distribution in Humanities faculties across participating institutions.....	95
Figure 23: Population group or race distribution in Science faculties across participating institutions.....	96
Figure 24: Map of Bloemfontein, Welkom, Thaba Nchu and Botshabelo .....	142
Figure 25: Students' views and experiences of SI.....	152
Figure 26: Do you have enough to eat? .....	176
Figure 27: Department selection .....	180
Figure 28: Faculty Sampling (planned and actual) .....	181

Figure 29: Support Service Sampling (planned and actual) .....	181
Figure 30: Overall satisfaction with UJ .....	184
Figure 31: Agree or strongly agree with statement related to seeking help.....	194
Figure 32: Conceptual Framework .....	347

## List of Tables

Table 1: Source of income of household heads by population group.....	65
Table 2: Enrolments by population group at undergraduate level (2014 and 2019) .....	73
Table 3: Ratio of permanent instruction and research staff and undergraduate students at participating institutions.....	74
Table 4: Population group profile for undergraduate enrolments (2014 and 2019) .....	76
Table 5: Throughput rates in M+2 years for three-year diplomas by population group or race, 2014-cohort .....	79
Table 6: Throughput rates in M+2 years for three-year B-degrees by population group .....	80
Table 7: Throughput rates in M+2 years for four-year B-degrees by population group .....	80
Table 8: Throughput rates in M+2 years for three-year diplomas by gender .....	81
Table 9: Throughput rates in M+2 years for three-year B-degrees by gender.....	82
Table 10: Throughput rates in M+2 years for four-year B-degrees by gender .....	83
Table 11: Throughput rates in M+2 years for three-year diplomas by NSFAS status .....	84
Table 12: Throughput rates in M+2 years for three-year B-degrees by NSFAS status.....	85
Table 13: Throughput rates in M+2 years for four-year B-degrees by NSFAS status .....	86
Table 14: Undergraduate (UG) headcount enrolment in the humanities and natural science faculties at participating institutions .....	87
Table 15: Faculty enrolments by population group or race .....	90
Table 16: Faculty enrolments by gender at participating institutions.....	91
Table 17: Throughput rates in M+2 years for three-year diplomas by participating institution .....	96
Table 18: Throughput rates in M+2 years for three-year B-degrees by participating institution and faculty.....	97
Table 19: Throughput rates of humanities and natural science four-year B-degrees by participating institution and faculty .....	98
Table 20: Throughput rates for three-year diplomas (M+2) by participating institution, faculty and population group or race .....	99
Table 21: Throughput rates for three-year B-degrees by population group or race for undergraduate students.....	101
Table 22: Four-year B-degrees throughput rates (M+2) by participating institution, faculty and population group or race .....	103
Table 23: Four-year Diplomas throughput rates (M+2) by participating institution, faculty and gender.....	105
Table 24: Three-year B-degrees throughput rates (M+2) by participating institution, faculty and gender.....	107
Table 25: Four-year B-degrees throughput rates (M+2) by participating institution, faculty and gender.....	109
Table 26: Four-year undergraduate degrees in the 2014-2019 time period.....	133
Table 27: Four-year B-Degree throughput rates by faculty .....	135
Table 28: Four-year B-Degree throughput rates by faculty and gender .....	135
Table 29: Four-year B-Degree throughput rates by faculty and population group.....	136

Table 30: The Admission Point Score (APS) system .....	214
Table 31: Composition of the sample .....	224
Table 32: Year B-Degree throughput rates by faculty and gender .....	236
Table 33: UP headcounts per faculty (2020-2022) .....	251
Table 34: Headcount per Race Group (2020-2022).....	252
Table 35: Mamelodi headcounts per race group (2020-2022).....	252
Table 36: Total staff per race group.....	253
Table 37: Module Pass % per Race Group (2019-2021) .....	254
Table 38: Graduation rates for undergraduate contact students (2015 - 2021) for NAS.....	255
Table 39: Graduation rates for undergraduate contact students (2015 - 2021) for Humanities .....	255
Table 40: Drop-out rates for undergraduate contact students (2015 - 2021) for Humanities	256
Table 41: Drop-out rates for undergraduate contact students (2015 - 2021) for Sciences ....	256
Table 42: The capability approach.....	262
Table 43: Liberal and critical understandings of access .....	306
Table 44: Sources of Revenue .....	314
Table 45: Students Funded by NSFAS, UWC and Other Bursaries (2016 to 2020).....	315
Table 46: Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study .....	340
Table 47: Number and percentage of graduates by faculty 2016-2020 .....	351
Table 48: Wits student success rates.....	352
Table 49: Stages of student success for Wits students.....	358

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## Abbreviations and acronyms

4IR	Fourth Industrial Revolution
4IR	Fourth Industrial Revolution
AAU	Association of African Universities
ADC	Academic Development Centre
AEP	Academic Excellence Programme
AI	Artificial Intelligent
AMCHES	Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies
APS	Admission Point Score
APU	Academic Planning Unit
AT	Activity Theory
CACE	Centre for Adult Continuing Education
CAPS	<i>Curriculum and Assessment</i> Policy Statement
CCDU	Centre for Career Guidance and Counselling
CCW	Community Cultural Wealth
CHE	Council on Higher Education
CHEC	Cape Higher Education Consortium
CHWC	Campus Health & Wellness Centre
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease
CSSS	Centre for Student Support Services
CT	Capability Theory
CUT	Central University of Technology
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DIPEM	Division for Institutional Planning, Evaluation and Monitoring
DLL	Division for Lifelong Learning
DNE	Department of National Education
DoE	Department of Education
DRU	Disability Rights Unit
DSI	Department of Science and Innovation
ECP	Extended Curriculum Programme
EFF	<i>Economic Freedom Fighters</i>
EMI	English for Medium of Instruction
FASO	Financial Aid and Scholarship Office

FH	Faculty of Humanities
FHES	Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences
FMF	#FeesMustFall
FSA	Faculty Student Advisors
FTE	Full Time Equivalent
FYE	First-year Experience
FYS	First-year Seminar
FYTP	First Year Transition Programme
GA	Graduate Attributes
GEU	Gender Equity Unit
GPS	Global Positioning System
HAI	Historically Advantaged Institution
HBU	Historically Black Universities
HBU	Historically Black University
HDI	Historically Disadvantaged Institution
HDS	Historical Disadvantaged Students
HE	Higher Education
HEDA	Higher Education Data Analyzer Portal
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEMIS	Higher Education Management and Information System
HEQSF	Higher Education Qualification Sub Framework
HPCSA	Health Professions Council of South Africa
HSSREC	Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee
HWS	Historically White Universities
HWU	Historically White University
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IEB	Independent Examination Board
IEB	Independent Examinations Board
IOP	Institutional Operating Plan
LCT	Legitimation Code Theory
ORF	Official Regulative Field

ISES	Initial Student Experience Survey
ISSI	Institutional Student Success Initiative
ITS	Information Technology Systems
MEDUNSA	Medical University of South Africa
NAS	Natural and Agricultural Sciences
NCHE	National Commission on Higher Education (South Africa)
NDP	National Development Plan
NET	Nurse Entrance Test
nGAP	New Generation of Academics Programme
NPC	National Planning Commission
NRF	National Research Foundation
NSC	National Senior Certificate
NSF	National Student Fund
NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
ORF	Official Regulative Field
PMI	Priority Modules Index
POSA	Privately-Owned Student Accommodation
PPR	Progression and Pass Rates
PRD	Pedagogic Regulative Discourses
PsyCaD	Centre for Psychological Services and Career Development
PU	Potchefstroom University
PUA	Pre-University Academy
QA	Quality Assurance
RAU	Rand Afrikaans University
RMF	#RhodesMustFall
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
RT	Resilience Theory
SADAG	South African Depression and Anxiety Group
SADC	Southern African Development Countries
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SARChI	South African Research Chair
SASCO	South African Students Congress
SASO	South African Students' Organisation

SASSE	South African Student Survey of Engagement
SCA	Student-Centred Approach
SCM	Student Christian Movement
SCO	Student Christian Organisation
SI	Supplementary Instruction
SOS	Student Online Success
SP	Student Parliament
SRC	<i>Student Representative Council</i>
STARS	Student Academic Readiness Survey
STEM	Science, Technological, Engineering, and Mathematical
STEPS	Strategic Transformation of Educational Programmes and Structures
SUCA	Student Union Christian Action
SUN	Stellenbosch University
SYE	Senior-year Experience
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
TWR	Technikon Witwatersrand
UB	University of Bophuthatswana
UDW	University of Durban Westville
UFH	University of Fort Hare
UGES	Undergraduate Experience Survey
UOFS	University of the Orange Free State
UJ	University of Johannesburg
UL	University of Limpopo
UN	University of the North
UoT	University of Technology
UGES	Undergraduate Experience Survey
UP	University of Pretoria
UPE	University of Port Elizabeth
UTH	Unleashing the Hidden
UNISA	University of South Africa
UNIVEN	University of Venda
UNIZULU	University of Zululand
UT	University of Transkei

UWC University of the Western Cape  
WGS Women's and Gender Studies Department  
WIL Work Integrated Learning  
Wits University of the Witwatersrand

# **Chapter 1: Understanding epistemic access and success of historically disadvantaged students in South African universities**

Michael Cross, Zahraa McDonald and Logan Govender

## **Introduction**

An important finding of this study is the knowledge gap experienced by undergraduate students as they embark on their academic journeys. This point was underscored by the keynote speakers, Professors Tshlidzi Marwala and Saleem Badat, at the launch seminar of the DHET/NSF-DSI/NRF SARChI Teaching and Learning Chair (Professor Shireen Motala), entitled *Higher Education in the era of 4IR - Teaching and Learning beyond COVID: Promises and Peril*, held on 3 March 2022, and paraphrased as follows:

The knowledge gap between high school and university results is a tumultuous experience of many first-generation students (Prof. T Marwala); and

Universities are also underprepared for students; it is not only that students come underprepared (Prof. S Badat).

In addition to the knowledge gap conundrum, the study explodes the myth that formal access is a ‘thing of the past’, especially for students supported through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). The knowledge gap of first year students and tensions related to formal access are thus at the heart of student epistemic access and success challenges in South African higher education. The critical question that arises is why, despite the many efforts by universities to address these two conundrums over the last decades, they continue to characterise student experience. Importantly, though, the study highlights that against all odds, many historically disadvantaged students in South Africa succeed in their academic endeavours. The six case studies on which this report is based, provide common and unique answers that touch on the historical, contextual, intersectional, pedagogical and epistemological dimensions of student epistemic access and success in contemporary South Africa.

With the increasing demand for higher education, particularly in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, and the decolonisation movement pressures, student participation, access, retention and success, remain critical areas of concern in both government and university circles in South Africa. However, initiatives/interventions have to



be considered and evaluated against the legacy of apartheid and in a context of a developing country, where the optimal and rational use of limited state funds allocated to higher education, necessitates investment in initiatives/interventions based on evidence-based good practice, with proven efficacy, efficiency and effectiveness. Following previous case studies on higher education access undertaken with the Africa Higher Education Collaborative (Sabina, 2010), the Council on Higher Education (CHE) (CHE, 2010), the Association of African Universities (AAU) student mobility study, and the Steering of Student Epistemic Access study (Cross, 2018), this project set out to explore the experiences of successful university undergraduate students with a very specific background profile, that is, students who have suffered a considerable degree of marginalisation by virtue of race, gender and socio-economic location characterised by poverty and having attended relatively underprivileged schools in rural and township areas.

The Introduction to this report in this chapter, provides a brief discussion of the rationale and motivation for the research as well as the aim and key questions of the study. It also discusses key concepts that guided the research, notably ‘epistemic access and success’, ‘throughput and attrition’, as well as ‘marginalised and disadvantaged’, concepts that underpin the theoretical approach elaborated in Chapter Two and in the case studies. This is followed by a description of the methodology used, and ends with a brief outline of the report.

### **Rationale and motivation**

Since the demise of apartheid, South African higher education institutions have undergone considerable changes in the profile of staff and students and within their institutional environments. “Black students from diverse social milieus, were admitted according to a more relaxed selection procedure” in the early 1990s (Cross, 2018, p. 25). Student numbers at Wits, for example, grew from 17 884 in 1994 to 23 232 in 2005 (Cross, 2018, p. 25). While these changes have entailed unprecedented formal access of students to higher education, particularly those from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, a major challenge remains the question of epistemic access, which entails issues of student development, throughput, retention and success. Low graduation rates, high dropout rates and general academic underperformance are central problems facing South African universities, particularly after the introduction of free higher education for students from families earning below a minimum threshold income. The call for research proposals by the CHE (2010) pointed out that currently there is little understanding of why large numbers of students are dropping out of higher education institutions. It goes on to indicate that quantitative approaches to

understanding throughput in terms of systemic inefficiencies seldom address the complex ways in which students' academic experiences affect performance and retention (CHE, 2010). By privileging the survey paradigm, institutional studies have not gone far enough in this regard, and have added very little to our understanding of the roots of the low throughput rate and problems impeding academic success of a considerable number of students.

### **Project aim**

In light of the above, this project sets out to explore the experiences of successful university undergraduate students with a very specific background profile, that is students who have suffered a considerable degree of marginalisation by virtue of being black, originating from poor families and communities, and who graduated from relatively underprivileged schools in rural and township areas.

### **Key questions**

The project sets out to address the following main questions:

- How do students with the above profile negotiate their epistemic access and success within a diverse and rapidly changing university environment?
- What individual, institutional or collective resources (cultural and/or material) do they resort to in the process?
- And, how do institutions mediate this process?

This research has entailed carefully exploring the following five aspects of the interface of student agency and the university cultural web:

- Experiences that might have enabled these undergraduate students in developing coping mechanisms, self-reliance, perseverance, self-determination, adaptability and flexibility in the choices they make to enable academic success, the ability to consult and seek advice from older or more experienced people, including the impact of communal forms of life in enhancing their ability to work as a group (linked to the life in the village or township where people generally assist and support each other).
- The dispositions and pre-dispositions developed in students' past lives that enable them to adapt their *habitus* to the university environment.
- The institutional memory (histories, legacies, traditions, norms, values and ethos) that the dominant culture tends to privilege, discourses and assumptions as well as related

institutional policies and practices, which form the basis of routine processes of the university's academic and student practices.

- Effects of the changes being introduced with the advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, the decolonisation movement, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ways in which these influence student academic performance and throughput rates.
- Students' diverse university experiences of, on the one hand, racism, xenophobia, cultural isolation, crime, sexual harassment and gender-based violence, and on the other, generally positive academic and social interactions, enabling technological and human mediation for scholarly engagement.

### **Discussion of key concepts related to student access and success**

#### **Epistemic access**

With the provision of free higher education for students in need of financial support in South Africa, it was assumed at the outset of this project that the question of formal access has been significantly addressed; and that it is the question of epistemic access within a framework of epistemic justice that necessitates more attention. From this angle, the project recaptures Morrow's (1994, 2009) distinction between formal and epistemological access to focus on the institutional culture of the university in order to identify those practices, norms and values that constrain and those that enable epistemological access or successful participation in the increasingly diverse student body.

To be admitted as a student to a university is what is termed 'mere formal access'. It implies the physical entry into the university system. It is a process driven by policy (for example, where entry requirements or criteria are met) or some other agency other than the 'self', taking into consideration issues of entitlement, equity and equality of opportunity. Epistemological access, according to Morrow, is a construct that allows an understanding of the academic experience from the perspective of students.

First penned in 1994, Morrow's concept of epistemological access sheds light on the relationship between agency and structure in the context of higher education. Enslin (2009, p.vi) explains that "[e]pistemological as against formal access depends not only on the teaching but on the efforts of the learner". Morrow (1994, p.33) states, with reference to epistemological access, that "the agency of the learner is necessary to [gain] educational access, and, hence,

educational achievement”. Morrow (1994, p.40) defines epistemological access as “learning how to become a participant in an academic practice”.

Epistemological access requires an understanding by students of how the institution operates or ‘thinks’, and use of their initiative and individual responsibility - student agency, to enable them to gain entry into the rules of the trade in academic practice and the practice of searching for and working with knowledge. In this perspective, the ‘self’ or the individual student remains the main agent for gaining epistemological access. Morrow (1994, p.33) juxtaposes epistemological access with “the culture of entitlement” which he also claims is contradictory to educational achievement.

“To register as a student at a university is not yet to have gained access to the knowledge which the university distributes” (Morrow 1994, p.40). For Morrow (1994) educational achievement relates to the agent of epistemological access. Thus, entitlement to formal access is not, for Morrow (1994), tantamount to an entitlement to epistemological access. This means, for Morrow (1994, p.40) with emphasis in the original, that “my epistemological access in some academic practice is essentially dependent on what I *do*”.

Morrow (1994) uses an analogy to explain that, like running, no one can do one’s learning for you, assuming that everyone can run, everyone has the capacity and has been taught to run in the same manner. We know however, from many perspectives: cognitive, emotional, social and cultural, that running in the educational sense, is not always an individual or independent activity - it often requires support, guidance and collaboration. One of the most important differences in the South African context is the difference between institutional contexts and cultures within the education system. In this report, we therefore adapt the concept of epistemological access to epistemic access. *Epistemic* access draws fundamentally on Morrow’s construct but places more weight and emphasis on the process of student participation in academic practice and the processes students learn in order to become participants in this practice.

Cross (2018, p.15) defines academic practice as “the practice of searching for and working with knowledge”. In this context, assumptions are made by academics “about what is worth knowing and how knowledge is created, about tasks to be performed and standards of performance, as well as patterns of professional interaction” (Cross, 2018, p.60). Students also negotiate, interpret and respond to what they are confronted with by the institution and

academics (Cross, 2018). Undergraduate courses are “where the building blocks for socialisation into an academic practice are put in place” (Cross, 2018, p.223).

Whereas historical and institutional conditions might assist or hinder one to do the running or learning for oneself, it has to be done by the individual (Morrow, 1994). Although the learner is necessarily an agent in their own epistemological access, they cannot decide which knowledge must be learnt or alter curricula or evaluate their achievements (Morrow, 1994). The agency of a learner is thus limited by the practice they are trying to become a participant of (Morrow 1994). “[L]earning how to become a participant in an academic practice ... will fail to the extent that the learner is ignorant of or refuses to acknowledge the requirements of the practice, or arrogantly rejects the authority of the current standards of achievement in the practice” (Morrow 1994, p.40, 41). Morrow’s (1994) conceptualisation of epistemological access can be interpreted as placing the onus on the one granted formal access to become a participant in academic practice. Moreover, Morrow’s (1994) conceptualisation of epistemological access leaves little room for transforming existing practice. Indeed, existing practice, which could be regarded as structure, is accepted as that which must be learnt.

Jansen’s (2001 in Cross, 2018, p.15) notion of pedagogic distance, emphasises the role of the institution and its responsibility in ensuring epistemic access. How knowledge is organised, its value, politics and power all impact on epistemic access (Jansen in Cross, 2018, p.47). Knowledge organisation, politics and power does call the institution to mind. It also reminds us of the overarching knowledge structure. Gamede (2005, p.v) contends that epistemological access or access to knowledge “is strongly dependent on the history and politics of the school context and the institutional culture”. To reiterate, Morrow’s (1994) conception of epistemological access places the onus on the one who has been granted formal access to learn its practice. Gamede critiques Morrow’s (1994) emphasis on the individual student having the onus to access the epistemological in institutions.

The emphasis on hard work and a willingness to learn the rules of the academic practice, underplays the fact that epistemological access requires more than the willingness to abide by existing rules but also the willingness of the institution and teachers to provide an environment conducive to maximum learning. If it means changing the institutional culture and practices of an institution to accommodate a new social order, that should be considered. (Gamede 2005, p.54)

Gamede's conception of epistemological access can be linked to the rise of the decolonisation movement that would disrupt higher education from 2015 onwards, which critiqued, among other issues, the lingering Eurocentric curriculum and white-dominated institutional cultures (Adebajo 2020; Ndelu, 2020). On the one hand, students are being granted formal access due to the economic and political mandate to transform and on the other, they are meant to gain the knowledge provided by the institutions into which they are admitted. The culture of these institutions however, goes unchallenged and remains relatively stable (Gamede 2005). Participating in academic practice can thus be viewed as an engagement between the student and the opportunities available at and through a given institution (Cross, 2018). In order to understand epistemic access and success, one therefore has to grasp the capability of students to engage with the practices of searching for and working with knowledge made available by higher education institutions. For Cross (2018, p.156), success implies the "productive use of accurate plans, development and learning opportunities resulting in the completion of their academic goals, 'epistemical access to academic integration in its broadest sense'".

This project therefore focuses attention on individual responsibility, as well as the role of institutional mediation (through academic and non-academic support mechanisms, and availability of resources and facilities) and institutional responsibility. The project further considers how decolonisation, the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), the COVID-19 pandemic and their implications - positive or negative, impact on individual student engagement and opportunities provided by the institution with regard to academic practice, that is, the practice of searching for and working with knowledge.

While this project builds on previous studies (the Africa Collaborative Initiative, CHE, AAU and Steering Student Access studies), which were done within restricted timeframes and were driven primarily by immediate policy concerns, this study seeks to stretch its epistemological and theoretical boundaries for a better understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon of epistemic access with reference to the individual experience of students who have suffered higher degrees of marginalisation at family, community and school levels, while providing a basis for a more systematic theorisation within the research niche of epistemic access and justice.

### **Throughput and attrition**

For a long time, student attrition and throughput at university has been a concern for policy makers and educationalists in South Africa. The Council of Higher Education (CHE, 2013)

notes that concerns about attrition in the South African higher education sector go back to at least the 1960s at a time when access was increased for White students. One of these concerns relates to school-university transition. According to the Council (CHE, 2013, p.59), “there was disquiet about the school-university transition even when the intake was very small, racially exclusive, largely homogeneous and advantaged” even though this is not demonstrated by the references to concerns about attrition. Student attrition at university is thus causally linked to the school-university transition without providing a pedagogical basis. We could not find evidence in the CHE report (2013) that illustrates that what or how students learnt did not prepare them for university learning. Assumptions are made about the different environments of school and university, yet no education policy has been proposed to alter the environments of one or the other. Moreover, while throughput in South African HEIs is not 100%, the majority of students who do graduate from undergraduate programmes, have attended school in South Africa.

The Council (CHE 2013) asserts that post-1994 attrition amongst White students is also high, if not as high as amongst African and coloured students. This offers further confirmation of the mismatch between what students can do and the university expectation, or under-preparedness, according to the Council (CHE, 2013). However, there has been concern about the education at universities prior to 1994 (CHE, 2013). In 1968, a Commission was appointed to enquire into and report, insofar as universities for White people in South Africa and the University of South Africa (UNISA) are concerned, on the educational, academic, financing and developmental state of universities, and on any other matters which the Commission may deem of importance, with special reference to –

1. the steps required to ensure efficient education;
2. the range of study and quality of work - undergraduate as well as postgraduate - required for corresponding degrees, diplomas and certificates;
3. the size of classes, departments and universities;
4. the length of the academic year;
5. the main reasons for, and measures to check, the high failure rate among undergraduate students (DNE, 1973, pp.1-2).

The presence of financially disadvantaged or working-class students has increased from the early 1990s in historically advantaged institutions (HAIs), such as the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) (Cross, 2018). A Wits working, group reporting on throughput and

retention in 2003, contended that “[m]ore flexible admissions and selections criteria and the availability of financial aid led to increasing enrolments of so-called “non-traditional” or “underprepared” students; i.e. Black students from diverse social and educational backgrounds” (Cross, 2018, p.12). Literature has pointed out a related challenges of attrition and graduation:

What has become clear in recent years in South Africa, however, is that, as the number of black students from a diverse range of social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds has increased on campuses across the country, so too have problems related to attrition and graduation rates (Boughey, 2008, p.193).

Boughey (2008) cites cohort statistics from the Department of Education (DoE) in South Africa to illustrate problems related to attrition and graduation rates for students who registered for the first time in 2004. Of the 100% of students who registered at a university in 2000, 50% graduated, 38% dropped out and 12% did not complete. Boughey does not provide comparative cohort statistics for when there were not as many black students from a diverse range of social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds registered, and throughput was concomitantly not a problem. Neither does Boughey demonstrate that the registration of black students from a diverse range of social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds were in fact increasing over that period. In addition, that overall student enrolment might have been increasing, while staffing complements and space might not have increased, is not considered as contributing to the reported graduation and attrition.

The National Development Plan (NDP) states that “Enrolments have almost doubled in 18 years, yet the funding has not kept up, resulting in slow growth in the number of university lecturers, inadequate student accommodation, creaking university infrastructure and equipment shortages” (NPC, 2012, p.317). The National Planning Commission, authors of the NDP, (NPC, 2012) moreover acknowledges that the system lacks the capacity to meet the needs of students.

### **Marginalised and disadvantaged**

The terms marginalised and disadvantaged are often conflated, for example, Cross (2018, p.155) states that students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds and marginalised communities are ...

“those that by virtue of their race, gender, geographical location (rural, township or poor neighbourhood) etc., have been historically marginalised socially and economically, i.e.,



have historically been placed on the margins or periphery of the mainstream social and economic hierarchy”.

Cross’s definition of historical disadvantage and marginality echoes the notion of intersectionality. Intersectionality was initially used to demonstrate that if the single axis of gender is used, the focus is invariably on White women, and in the case of race, the focus is on black men (Anthias 2013; Crenshaw 1991; Dhamoon 2011). Intersectionality works as a heuristic device, reminding us that participants are not one-dimensional and neither are their experiences. In South Africa, the triple oppression of black women in terms of race, gender and class was repeatedly highlighted, especially during the apartheid years. As such, intersectionality reminds us that any one factor is not experienced by all individuals in the same way. As far as could be determined, intersectionality has however not been factored into the throughput rate and experiences of undergraduate students in South Africa.

The concern of research and scholarly work in the 1970s and 1980s on student epistemic access shifted significantly to focus on students from disadvantaged backgrounds who were not able to gain formal access to all universities in South Africa (discussed in Chapter 2: Literature Review). A major concern in research studies was the systemic and institutional barriers entrenched through policy and government guidelines to secure universal access to White children in historically White institutions, while segregating access to black children in historically black institutions. The idea or notion of historic disadvantage thus emanates from that context.

## **Methodology**

In this section of the Introduction, a brief overview of the project methodology is provided with further details provided in each of the case study report chapters. The research followed a qualitative multiple case study research design with supporting quantitative data. The case studies comprised two faculties: Humanities and Natural Science, or the closest approximation thereof, within a Higher Education Institution (HEI). Case studies were conducted at six institutions: University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), University of Johannesburg (UJ), University of Pretoria (UP), University of the Western Cape (UWC), University of Limpopo (UL) and Central University of Technology (CUT). The six institutions were purposely chosen to include students with varied histories, that is, some historically privileged institutions, such as Wits, historically disadvantaged institutions, such as UL and UWC, and a new technological-oriented institution such as CUT, in order to provide an array of diverse

disadvantaged student experiences.

Higher education institutions have had differing historical trajectories since their inception. Moreover, the higher education system has experienced many changes and shifts over the last five decades, which have impacted student development and success. For this reason, it was considered appropriate to select different institutions as case study sites. The differences in the institutions are highlighted in the background sections of case study chapters.

The methodology sets out to develop institutional profiles based on data collected from five data sets as follows:

- **Data Set 1:** Faculty profiles brought together data on the academic and administrative staff, curriculum orientation, the overall instructional programme, formal access arrangements for students to staff, student numbers (size) of the faculty, student distribution by race and gender, and the broad philosophy of the faculty in terms of what it sees as its distinctive mission and identity. This data was based on a combination of interviews with the faculty leadership/staff and the combing of relevant faculty documents.
- **Data Set 2:** Faculty history with respect to student progression and pass rates was statistically compiled for the period 2014-2019. The statistical profile of PPR (progression and pass rates) were specified by each faculty and disaggregated for specific programmes with traditionally high failure and dropout rates. The idea was to have a composite statistically based narrative for each faculty's PPR.
- **Data Set 3:** Selected students were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol that covered the three research foci of the study (experience, engagement, effects) and the three cultural domains (institutional, academic, student) that framed the investigation. Of specific importance for this study was an understanding of students' biography/background and the implications of campus experience. The student interviews were transcribed for both record-keeping and analysis purposes and would form the most direct and qualitative case evidence for the students' encounters with their universities.
- **Data Set 4:** Faculty administrative staff were individually interviewed to determine both the formal arrangements for access and service as well as the collective experiences of students' problems, needs, challenges and concerns from the point of view of the administrative staff. This data added another layer of evidence to explain experiences of

the student-administration encounters and the extent to which this interface facilitates or frustrates academic progress.

- **Data Set 5:** Faculty academics were interviewed to determine their understanding of the students' experience and their enumeration of the obstacles to student progression within the academic sphere. This data provided lecturers' perspectives on the students' encounters with the teaching and learning context of a particular faculty, and how lecturers identify the problems and their resolution in academic terms.
- **Data Set 6:** Faculty reports consisting of in-house analyses, institutional surveys and studies of PPR problems, their causes and resolution, such as might be available in documentary form to the research team, were collected for analysis. These documents included formal studies, in-house records of meetings where PPR issues were discussed. Key activities entailed: (i) collecting and analysing statistics on student throughput and analysing and comparing across the schools in the faculties; (ii) collecting and analysing copies of mission, strategy, policy and procedure documents at institutional, faculty and school level (where available); (iii) examining documents for underlying assumptions about access, retention and student throughput and how the institutions/faculties/schools addressed these; and (iv) collecting and analysing other relevant documents relating to any initiatives taken at institution/faculty/school level to improve or understand throughput issues.

The intention was that each data set study would present a coherent analytical narrative for each faculty in which the data points would be integrated seamlessly into an account that addressed the main research questions. The purpose was, through sustained interviews with 'non-traditional' first and third-year students, to develop 'thick descriptions' of how these students encounter, experience, engage and explain the impact of each of these three intersecting cultural phenomena (academic, student, institutional) on their sense of progress and performance in the undergraduate years. Such qualitative depth was identified as lacking in the available and impressive statistical summaries of progression or throughput rates, or in striking anecdotes of dramatic incidents of conflict or confrontation within student lives. As will be seen in the individual case studies, the data that were eventually collected varied in scope and depth due to the nature of specific institutional archives and data collection challenges, which ultimately impacted the quality of the case studies and the epistemic insights.

### **Sampling and interview logistics**

Interviews were conducted with current undergraduate students and recent graduates from the faculties of Humanities and Science. The target was 20 students from each faculty, totalling 40 student interviews per case study. The selection criteria included inter alia: belonging to poor families or communities, graduates from township or rural schools and other aspects of marginalisation. The interviews also included lecturers, course, faculty or department managers and administrative or support staff. Researchers thus aimed for an average of 45 to 50 interviews per case study. In order to ensure that the interviewees would be representative of the student body, breakdown by race, gender and place of residence was considered in the sampling process.

Interviews were conducted with final year undergraduate students, academic as well as administrative staff in both the Humanities and Science faculties. The interview targets in case studies were 17 students, 4 academic staff and 2 administrative staff for each participating faculty. Each case study chapter reports on the extent to which these targets were met. For students, an additional condition to be included in the sample was that they receive the NSFAS (National Student Financial Assistance Scheme) bursary. The NSFAS bursary is awarded to students whose parents and/or guardians have a combined income of less than R350 000.00 (Contentlist, 2021). This condition was applied in order to determine financial or economic marginality and served as a proxy for historical disadvantage, in line with the research question. Four interviews were conducted with staff in support units at each institution, such as student finance, residence office, psychosocial development unit as well as the academic support unit.

The interviews were conducted by research coordinators (senior academics) with the assistance of fieldworkers (postgraduate students) based at each institution. Data collection by academics and postgraduate students based at institutions ensured that those collecting data were familiar with the context and situation of participants. The research project commenced at the height of implementation of a nation-wide lockdown in South Africa following the worldwide outbreak of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19), which had an effect on the data collection process.

Consequently, to protect both researchers and participants, all interviews were conducted using either telephone, social media or online meeting facilities. It is the first time all research team members have conducted a research project without meeting with participants face to face. There were thus a range of limitations with regard to access of participants and the use of the various platforms on which the interviews were conducted. The limitations included

connectivity and network problems, power outages and the inability to observe body language as well as building rapport. These challenges are elaborated on in the individual case study chapters. As such, although not part of the original planning and design of the project, data collection and fieldwork were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in the project taking longer than planned to complete.

The institutional document review comprised various documents in different case studies, including institutional and faculty reports. The details of interviews and institutional document reviews are elaborated on in each case study report. Each case study report provides an analysis and discussion of the data gathered at that institution. The findings presented by each case study are synthesised and reported in the penultimate chapter of this report.

Quantitative data from the Higher Education Management and Information System (HEMIS) are also included in this report as a backdrop to the case studies. The data include national, institutional and faculty overviews of student profiles, throughput and attrition rates of the institutions where research was conducted.

### **Outline of the report**

Chapter 2, the literature review, highlights key perspectives, their underlying assumptions and implications with reference to the individual, social and institutional factors that affect successful student achievement in higher education. The intersecting domains of the student and institution, both academic and cultural, and how these domains interface with the individual agency of the student is considered in Chapter two. The institution as the social and academic context, within which the student learns to become a participant in the academic practice at university, is a crucial element of understanding student epistemic access.

Chapter 3, the quantitative overview of headcount and throughput, presents faculty progression and pass rates (PPR) compiled from statistical data of the cohort of undergraduate students who registered at participating institutions for the first time in 2014 and extended to 2019, as well as a demographic profile of students, thus providing helpful context for the chapters that follow. The chapter ends by suggesting how statistical analyses could be strengthened to contribute to understanding epistemic access and success.

Chapters 4 to 9 are case studies of the six participating institutions, CUT, UJ, UL, UP, UWC and Wits respectively. These chapters provide historical overviews of the institutions,

descriptions of their research methodology and challenges, and an analysis of the main research findings largely through a thematic discussion around the study's research questions.

Chapter 10 is a synthesis of the case studies highlighting key findings from the case studies, including the main claims and arguments.

Chapter 11 concludes the report with policy implications and suggestions for future research.

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## **Chapter 2: Student epistemic access: The dynamic interplay between agency and institutional mediation**

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### **Introduction**

This literature review maps out and critically examines the main opportunities and constraints of ‘student epistemic access’ and ‘success’ within the context of South African higher education. It highlights key perspectives, their underlying assumptions and implications with reference to the individual, social and institutional factors that affect successful student achievement in higher education. More specifically, it considers intersecting domains of the student and institution, such as academic and cultural, in terms of how these domains interface with the individual agency of the student as the participant, and the institution as the social and academic context, within which the student learns to become a participant in the academic practice at university. Of primary concern is the understanding of the interplay of individual student agency, including the range of resources at institutional level, through which students negotiate their access and success. In this regard, the notion of ‘compensatory capital’ (Cross & Atinde, 2015) that disadvantaged students draw on, is foregrounded and problematised.

The key argument in this review is that epistemic access and success is not confined to student agency, but is far more complex, encompassing collaborative efforts of multiple stakeholders, their responsibilities and effective engagement with the institutional, academic and student cultural domains to access knowledge. Epistemic access and success occur where specific domains at student and institutional levels enable, and do not constrain, access to knowledge. While the review draws from different scholars, the chapter builds on the work of the late Professor Michael Cross, who made a significant intellectual contribution to a nuanced understanding of epistemic access and success in South African higher education. Before his premature death in 2021, he had been engaged in a number of projects on the subject, including the current one, in which he was the principal investigator.

The review begins with the historical background and context from which epistemic access of disadvantaged students in South African higher education could be traced and understood. The background and context recall different waves and moments over a 50-year educational history of South Africa before and after attainment of democracy, beginning with the 1970s. This is



followed by an exploration of the notions of throughput, access and success. The review then focuses on student agency as cultural domain, in respect of compensatory capital including capability, responsibility and student background as important factors that inform participation in the academic practice and negotiation of the ever-changing university environment, to access learning and become successful. Next is the exploration of institutional frameworks, comprising the official, academic and social domains within which students need to locate themselves in the system of higher education, to learn to be participants in academic practice. Particular attention is paid to academic development programmes that have evolved to assist student epistemic access and success. Finally, the review focuses on decolonisation and decolonial approaches, and how a decolonial analytical framework could be useful in explaining epistemic access in the context of South African higher education. While the review does not include the issues of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and COVID-19, it acknowledges that these constitute additional challenges confronting student epistemic access. It is hoped that the review contributes to the understanding of factors that underlie the epistemic access and success of students, and thus provide a springboard from which the experiences of marginalised students could be further problematized and the related challenges addressed.

### **Historical background and context**

#### **Wave of limited access to higher education in South Africa: Dismantling barriers**

The era between 1970 and 1980 is significant for epistemic access and success as many doors to higher education were not completely open to historically marginalised students in South Africa. Indeed, prior to the 1970s the doors were mostly closed to these students. The system was shaped and influenced by the state ideological apparatus of the apartheid government (Lange, 2017). It was during the 1970s, when the four English-medium universities such as the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), the University of Cape Town (UCT), Rhodes University (RU) and the University of Natal (UN), driven by a liberal ideology, called themselves ‘Open Universities’ and began opening their doors.

The apartheid state had little control over these universities, which enjoyed substantial autonomy (Cross, 2015). However, though the universities claimed to be ‘open and ‘non-racial’, in practice, the institutions continued the practice of racial segregation characterised during the apartheid era, and there were no significant changes in staff and student composition in terms of race, gender and ethnicity (Cross, 2015). Thus, until 1980, these institutions

remained predominantly White and male-dominated institutions, referred to by Cross (2015) as the 'old boys' network'.

The Afrikaans-medium universities such as Stellenbosch University (SUN), Rand Afrikaans University (RAU), University of Pretoria (UP), Potchefstroom University (PU), University of the Orange Free State (UOFS), with University of Port Elizabeth (UPE) being dual-medium (English and Afrikaans), occupied a unique space and enjoyed a special status within the apartheid order. Like the 'Open Universities', these specific universities rejected any form of state interference in their institutional affairs (Lange, 2017). The state did however, have control over the historically black universities, which were established in 1959 (Lange, 2017). These were the University of the North (UN), the University of the Western Cape (UWC) (coloured students), the University of Venda (UNIVEN), the University of Zululand (UNIZULU), the University of Transkei (UT) and the University of Bophuthatswana (UB), University of Fort Hare (UFH), as well as the University of Durban Westville (UDW), (Indian students). Except for the University of the Western Cape and the University of Durban Westville, these universities were established as extensions of the Bantustans, and the apartheid state legislated policy regarding admissions, educators and curricula (Lange, 2017). In essence, institutional autonomy was limited, and they could not resist state policy and ideology.

During this wave, epistemic access was not an issue of concern. In 'Open Universities' there was no challenge because of the demographic profile of students who had access to those universities. The students, a privileged few, had the necessary social and cultural capital required to meet the academic demands and challenges of the elite institutions. In essence, the students matched the institutional culture that characterised those institutions (Cross, 2018). The few African, coloured and Indian students at these institutions were from middle class backgrounds, with the habitus necessary to absorb the academic demands and culture of those elitist institutions. With specific reference to Wits University, Cross (2018) argued that the percentage of students from working class backgrounds was negligible. However, while this background is important in understanding epistemic access and success before 1994, the throughput rates of students in universities during the wave were not documented. This is not surprising, as the throughput of historically disadvantaged students was not a matter of concern for the apartheid government.

### **Wave of diversifying formal access into higher education: Into the democratic transition of the 1990s**

The early 1990s was the period in which higher education in South Africa was focused on the notion of democratisation of knowledge and access of all students to institutions of higher education. This was enabled by the political climate of the day with its emphasis on the transition to democracy, and the fundamental goals to achieve access, equity and redress of inequalities.

The report of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) (1996), White Paper 3 (WP3) (DoE, 1997), the Higher Education Act of 1997 and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act of 1995, that created the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), were produced as policy frameworks to address these goals. The NQF in particular was fundamental to the realisation of notions of democratisation of knowledge and access to higher education institutions (HEIs) (Lange, 2017). All universities adopted new policy frameworks for equality, equity, transformation and change (Heleta, 2016). Strategic policies were developed to change some institutional cultures to include historically disadvantaged students (Cross et al., 2010). Funding provision was made for poor but deserving students, making access to higher education possible (Badat, 2010).

Previously advantaged institutions attempted to embrace an inclusive student population informed by a culture that purports to embrace diversity (Badat, 2010). The transformation and restructuring at the time enabled an expanded higher education system, with improved (expanded) opportunities of formal access for diverse students, including the historically disadvantaged (Badat, 2010; Carrim & Ouma-Wangenge, 2012; Council on Higher Education 2008; Second National Higher Education Summit, 2015). Thus, the wave in the early 1990s sought to diversify access to all students. The debates at the time bordered around the relationship between equity, redress and quality in South African higher education, so as to enhance the inclusion and promote quality of participation of particularly underprepared students (Griesel, 2004).

### **The moment of under-preparedness: ‘Access without success’**

The end of the 1990s saw a moment of broad-based formal or physical access into higher education, but with limited success. The moment was characterised by a wave of student under-preparedness. The biographies of students accessing higher education at the time, reported lack of the necessary and adequate forms of social and cultural capital to meet the

challenges of higher education. They were students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, mainly from black townships and rural communities, who were deemed doomed for failure (Czerniewicz & Brown 2011; Fataar, 2012; Jones et al. 2008; Naidoo, 2004). Faculty members were also underprepared due to increasing pressure to perform across different work-related contexts and teach an increasingly diverse student population. They were ill-equipped for the tasks they were expected to perform in dealing with the so-called ‘non-traditional’ or underprepared students (CHE, 2010; Inglis, 2005). Thus, though there was increased access and many diverse students had the opportunity of formal access into institutions of higher education, there was a wave of unpreparedness that had negative implications for epistemic access. It was during this wave and moment that the concept of epistemological access was coined by Morrow (1994), and which he later elaborated as the process of “learning how to become a successful participant in the academic practice of a tertiary institution” (Morrow, 2009, p.78). Morrow (2009) argued that it requires, *inter alia*, an understanding of how the university operates or ‘thinks’, and the use of students’ own initiative and individual responsibility, to engage with the practices of searching for and working with knowledge made available in higher education institutions.

### **Wave of tackling under-preparedness and the deficit model**

Under-preparedness of students prompted a focus on transition from schooling to university. This was in a bid to bridge the articulation gap between schooling and higher education, wherein induction was used as a strategy to enculturate students into the academic culture of institutions. Tinto (1993) suggests that there is an integral institutional need within universities to integrate orientation programmes that introduce students to university life in an atmosphere of fun and support as opposed to one that provokes stress and anxiety. Institutional factors such as institutional culture, the size of an institution, the size of specific classes, student-teacher ratios and the type and nature of a particular course may have a significant influence on student performance (Tinto, 1993). McInnis et al. (2000) viewed this as a necessary transition step, assistance and support that was required in order to facilitate the acculturation process for students entering a system of higher education for the first time, particularly for those who had attended poorly-resourced schools with a track-record of poor performance, a notion that is still highly contested.

Research on student unpreparedness, academic support, bridging programmes, including new approaches to student selection, flourished (CHE, 2010). These changes led to the proliferation of institutional climate and culture surveys and studies on different aspects of institutional

transformation (for example, Cross et al., 2003; Van Zyl et al., 2003), as well as throughput and retention studies (Alence, 2007; Van Zyl et al., 2003). The focus was on strategies to meet the needs of the so-called ‘non-traditional students’ (Cross, 2018). The first trend included studies attempting to measure student success or failure via input and output indicators (throughput rates, graduation rates, dropout rates, and so forth.). They included national and institutional surveys on student enrolment and progression, student and staff surveys on campus climate, campus diversity, institutional culture and university internationalisation. A second trend sought to explain academic performance in terms of some attribute of the individual student such as motivation, cognitive ability, personality, aptitude, time management, reading or writing skills (for example, Crous, 2004, cited in Cross, 2018; Mitchell et al., 1994; Van Rooyen, 2001). There was a focus on the individual student as a member of a certain group defined in terms of class, race or gender. This second trend thus involved studies attempting to locate the concept of epistemic access within the general normative paradigm of social justice underpinned by the values and principles of democracy, access, equality, equity and human rights (Cross, 2018) drawing on identity or culturalist perspectives.

As an effort to bridging the gap between schooling and higher education, support was provided to underprepared students in the form of extended programmes. Such interventions were an acknowledgement of the importance of sequence and progression in curriculum design and the implications it can have on performance and productivity (Muller, 2006). Extended degree programmes consisted of a re-organisation of the programmes by extending them at the foundation or at the end. Students who were not ready to negotiate the mainstream curriculum were identified, and were given extra support through those extended programmes so that they could be successful. It is argued that the restructuring of programmes provided extra scaffolding, especially in the areas of language and academic literacy, in order for students to be in a better position to successfully master university knowledge (Lange, 2017).

The design of extended programmes was however critiqued for its emphasis of a deficit model where students and their families are framed as lacking and therefore in need of ‘fixing’ (Smit, 2012). It was further argued that the model had its origins in the erstwhile education development ideology that created it (Boughey, 2007). In essence, the deficit model can be traced to the previous apartheid-spawned higher education system. Furthermore, the concept of extended programmes had roots in the academic development movement of the 1980s. Academic Development (AD) was a movement that sought to disrupt the understanding of

under-preparedness in White universities at that time, stressing that the problem lay with disadvantaged students. Further, focus shifted the burden of responsibility to the institutions, and not students, hence the need for the institutions to transform. It is in this shift of thinking that the name ‘academic support’ had to change to ‘academic development’ (Boughey, 2005). The AD movement thus sought to change the perception of students being ‘deficient’, to focus on how institutions could assist their epistemic access, as discussed below.

Implementation of academic development programmes in subsequent years however, closely approximated knowledge and curricula of the previous system (Lange, 2017). It suggests therefore that though the political climate of the day was meant to redress the inequalities of the past, indirectly the past was reproduced and perpetuated. Besides, removing the focus from curricula issues and directing attention to ‘special’ (marginalised) students could be seen as discriminatory - moving away from the contested knowledge embedded in the curriculum, to building capability of designated groups of students to access that contested knowledge. Moreover, given that the medical model used in establishing special programmes offered by special lecturers to 'special' students who need extra help to succeed in higher education (Allais, 2007), there was concern that such an approach could lead to segregation, stigmatisation and labelling, which could impact negatively on students’ academic practice and their performance.

This leaves one with the assumption that extended programmes targeted only those students identified as underprepared, which in the South Africa context, implied African and to a lesser extent, coloured and Indian students. However, the CHE (2013) took the view that potentially students from all backgrounds could require additional time given their proposal that all qualifications be extended by one year. It was not clear, however, whether extended programmes were intended for African, coloured and Indian students who did not meet the requirements for particular programmes or whether all students from disadvantaged backgrounds required extended time. The intervention could be seen as ad hoc and discriminatory, which targeted a specific group of students, essentially Africans from township and rural schools, while epistemic access and success is an issue for all diverse students in the South African higher education, including those from privileged backgrounds (Essop, 2020). This could constrain rather than enable epistemic access and success in that not all diverse students would benefit from the extended programmes.

### **The Cultural Wave: Institutional efforts beyond academic programmes (2010-present)**

Beyond academic programmes, attempts were made by institutions to become a more culturally friendly space to a diverse student body, as highlighted in the earlier waves (see, Badat, 2010, Cross et al., 2010; Inglis, 2005).

Attempts to address institutional inadequacies have manifested in the Africanisation of institutional artefacts such as songs sung on graduation days, dance, emblems and the change of names of buildings. While the purpose of seeking to transform artefacts is to legitimise changes and to include those who were historically excluded, the move has been found to be self-defeating when some of the changed artefacts have conflicting meanings. For example, Cross (2018) noted that a new name for one of the buildings in a certain school contradicted what was taking place within the building. It is however not clear how and to what extent such institutional strategies might contribute to students' epistemic success, particularly given that academic staff members continue to be unwilling to adjust the curriculum for incoming students from disadvantaged backgrounds and this affects African students the most (Carrim & Wangenge-Ouma, 2012). The issue of curriculum change at the undergraduate level remains a major challenge, as emphasised by the CHE (2013). Pietsch (2013) contends that the overarching reality is that the role of universities was to promote White supremacy, to maintain and further expand colonial society.

Inasmuch as there have always been students from disadvantaged backgrounds who entered higher education institutions and attained success, the literature has not always focused on these students. This is a relatively recent occupation of literature describing experiences of epistemic access and success. Cross and Atinde's (2015) study, for instance, identified assets and coping mechanisms amongst historically disadvantaged students that, they contend, explains their success. Similarly, Cross (2018) contends that the positionality of students determines the possibilities for their success or failure; in other words, openness to being challenged or having self-confidence to challenge or defend one's view. Cross and Atinde (2015) refer to the 'pedagogy of the marginalised' that are cognitive processes in students' experiences as well as having the ability to apply their assets to learning in new situations. The insight from this assertion is that it is not only possessing assets, but the ability to internalise them and use them appropriately, to cope within the system until one succeeds (which is needed) (Cross & Atinde, 2015). To explain the individual conditions of the possibility of epistemic success, Cross and Atinde coined the concept of 'compensatory capital' to explain how students who suffered marginalisation could utilise their social capital to achieve academic success (Cross, 2018;

Cross & Atinde 2015). However, though the notion of ‘compensatory capital’ is helpful in understanding epistemic access of disadvantaged students, the gap is that it overlooks diversity within disadvantaged students themselves, resulting in over-generalisation of the concept.

The issue of epistemic access and success has thus continued through various waves of moments, with shifts and turns from one preoccupation with an idea to another. At present, the focus is thus on the effectiveness and efficiency of the higher education system, students’ participation in the academic practice and on the efforts and intervention to improve success rates. The most popular has been the surveys that were conducted to understand throughput issues for different categories of students (Carrim & Wangenge-Ouma, 2012), as discussed in the previous historical wave. Given its centrality to this study, the next section explores the notion of ‘throughput’ in greater detail.

### **Understanding throughput, access and success**

Citing the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET, 2021), Khuluvhe and Mathibe (2021, p.3) defined throughput as the rate at which a cohort successfully completes a qualification within the stipulated timeframe for that qualification. The Council on Higher Education (CHE) continues to compile data from the studies that are meant to examine the trends of throughput rates of specific categories of students in South African higher education (CHE, 2007, 2010, 2013, 2020). On similar lines as the DHET (2021), the CHE had earlier defined throughput in terms of rates as follows:

Calculation of how many students in a given cohort completed their degree and graduated within the stipulated time, how many dropped out and how many took longer than the stipulated time to graduate (CHE, 2007, p. iii).

From the CHE’s (2007) definition, throughput rate is not only about those who complete their degrees within the stipulated time, but it includes those in the same cohort who drop out and who take longer to graduate. According to the CHE (2020), throughput rate is understood as being calculated by:

The number of first-time entry undergraduate students of a specific cohort of a specific year who have graduated either within the minimum time, or up to 2 years beyond the minimum time, to the number of students in the baseline enrolments of that cohort (p. v).



According to the CHE (2020), completion of the programme two years beyond the minimum time, has been added in calculating throughput. From the way in which throughput is calculated and determined recently, it could be argued that the concept is not static; it changes from time to time. However, calculation of throughput can be flawed as Scott et al. (2007) argue that sometimes students leave one university to complete their programmes at another institution. This would contribute to a low throughput level at the university where the student started the programme. In such a situation, throughput rates could be miscalculated and misrepresented, if such movements of students are not noted.

Throughput rates can be calculated in different ways in different higher education contexts. Some higher education institutions calculate the rates by matching the graduation rate of a cohort of students against the year of enrolment and completion for specific programmes. Others use variables of headcount or graduation cohorts versus dropouts (DHET, 2019). Different approaches give institutions an impression of whether the throughput is low or high. All variables used to calculate throughput rates by different institutions need to be considered in the context of where throughput is used as a measure of success broadly, and for historically disadvantaged students in particular.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the throughput rate was generally considered to be low across the board in South African institutions of higher education, more especially for historically disadvantaged social groups (Carrim & Ouma-Wangenge, 2012). At that time, financial exclusion, lack of resources, as well as a lack of preparedness for higher education on the part of the particular students, were advanced by the CHE as some of the underlying causes of low throughput (CHE, 2010; 2013). For example, the CHE (2013) reveals that only one in four students from formerly marginalised social groups, such as women and black persons in contact-based institutions, graduate within the minimum time with 55% of the initial intake never graduating. In light of this, in the summit on reflections on transformation in higher education, it showed that among other things, the expansive higher education system lacks growth, has low participation and low completion rates (Second Higher Education Summit, 2015). Thus, throughput could be understood as multifaceted and deeper than could be defined at face value; however, for the purposes of the scope of this study, the DHET definition above has been adopted.

The meaning of ‘access’ has evolved over time. For example, Morrow (1994) contested the notion that access was confined to formal access, or merely gaining physical entry to

universities, and introduced the notion of epistemological access as the process of learning how to become a successful participant in the academic practice of a tertiary institution, discussed earlier. He argued that it requires, *inter alia*, an understanding of how the university operates or ‘thinks’, and the use of students’ own initiative and individual responsibility, to engage with the practices of searching for and working with knowledge made available in higher education institutions (Morrow, 2009). It could be argued therefore that institutional mediation, through academic and non-academic support mechanisms, and availability of resources and facilities, is critical to a student’s learning to become a participant in the practice of learning. Epistemic access, building on the notion of epistemological access, therefore, involves both student and institution fully applying their responsibilities to achieve success in the learning of the student.

In a somewhat similar vein, ‘success’ is a term that could be defined in different ways, depending on the context within which it is used - or perspective - in which it is seen or viewed. With specific reference to student success in higher education, Baldwin et al. (2020) argued that the term should be considered more broadly because of different levels and forms that it can take. Success in general refers to achievement and accomplishment of goals. Defined by Cross (2018), in the context of higher education, success has to do with deliberate use of accurate plans, development and learning opportunities, to enable completion of academic goals (Cross, 2018). By implication, success refers to the capability of both the institution and the students, to achieve and accomplish the academic goals they have set at a particular time.

From the view that success could be used to refer to achievement and attainment at different levels and forms in higher education contexts, it could mean obtaining a pass mark, obtaining a qualification from an institution or going beyond that, including the capacity to secure employment after graduation. Thus, success can be subjective at individual or institutional level, hence what it implies varies from individual to individual or from one institution to the other. At Wits for example, student success, as illustrated in the Institutional Framework document of 2019, as a vertical structure, starting from attaining admission to the institution, to graduation and at every stage and process, achievement is marked as success. In the context of the current project, success can therefore be understood as student achievement or educational attainment that derives from active participation in the academic practice. It is also considered in part as an issue of throughput, presented and explained in detail in Chapter Three, and how it is understood and defined by individual students and academic staff members in participating institutions.

## **Student cultural domain: student agency**

### **Compensatory capital**

Recent research (see Cross, 2018) highlights the importance of ‘compensatory capital’ as the bedrock of historically disadvantaged students’ agency in navigating epistemic access and success. Student responsibility, capability and other factors discussed below, constitute key dimensions of ‘compensatory capital’, drawing on Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and social capital for epistemic access and success, which were seen to be possessed by privileged students (Czerniewicz & Brown 2011; Fataar, 2012).

However, the concept of ‘compensatory capital’ was coined as a way of explaining the disadvantaged students’ capability for epistemic access and success (Cross & Atinde, 2015). Compensatory capital describes the assets that students from marginalised or disadvantaged backgrounds draw on to participate in academic practice. The argument was that with the necessary assets (compensatory capital), and relevant dispositions and pre-dispositions, students from disadvantaged contexts are able to disrupt their habitus and adapt to the new and very often strange situations they encounter on campus in their struggles for emancipation (Cross 2018; Cross & Atinde, 2015). The compensatory capital seems to be ideal in disrupting the deficit model that students from disadvantaged backgrounds lacked for epistemic access, by way of lack of the compensatory capital and habitus for learning in higher education. Compensatory capital could be aligned to Jansen’s (1998) question, when at that time, he wondered if students who were able to gain formal access to an institution such as UCT, were not resorting to some form of compensatory capital. Jansen’s argument suggested that the institution was not fully transformed to enable the students’ epistemic access, but students themselves had other coping mechanisms they could use to be part of the practice at the institution. Thus, compensatory capital could facilitate conditions of possibility for epistemic access by both students and the institution.

While the concept of compensatory capital is important in understanding the possibility of epistemic access and success for disadvantaged students, much of the literature focuses on students who are successful in terms of developing a pedagogy of survival predicated on skills, attitudes and predispositions such as the ability to consult, self-reliance and perseverance (Cross & Atinde, 2015). However, not all disadvantaged students have recourse to compensatory capital, which could lead to over-generalisation of the concept’s value. Nevertheless, the notion of ‘compensatory capital’ offers a useful lens in the South African

context, providing a theoretical construct for exploring key aspects of students' agency, such as capability and responsibility.

### **Student capability**

Student agency is central to epistemic access as it is the student's role and individual responsibility to engage in the knowledge practice as offered by institutions of higher education, of which capability is one attribute of learning to become a participant in academic practice (Nassbaum, 2020; Sen 1985). Capability is understood as available opportunities for people to achieve certain doings and beings (Kaufman, 2006), through personal, social and environmental conversion factors (Crocker & Robeyns, 2009). This suggests that the inherent individual's capability can intersect with other factors in the social environment to enable or constrain what the student can achieve or can become. For example, a student who is intellectually capable may underachieve because of constraining social or environmental factors. Thus, supportive environments can enhance capability and the unsupportive can impede it. As such, a student does not have complete control over capability; other external support mechanisms, such as family, siblings, community and peer support may be needed to aid the student in becoming a participant in the academic practice of an institution.

Evans (2002) reiterated that capability should not be reduced to individuals but to larger cultural and social contexts as collective capability. This is because collective capability can have a bearing on the individual. Cross (2018) saw collective capability as empowering since students can share their social capital to stand up against the challenges of campus life. It is also argued that collective capability lowers transaction costs and speeds up obtaining information and transferring it quicker (Tierney, 1993). In essence, it is less costly and much easier to get information and transfer it when students belong to groups or organisations. For disadvantaged students, the collective capital in which students work together as a group is linked to communal forms of life in the village, where people assist or support each other (Cross & Atinde, 2015). Thus, collective capability could be culturally oriented, where students draw from their different cultures in their backgrounds, which enables them to learn to become participants in the practice, hence the promotion of epistemic access. Overall, the individual and the collective capability that is enabling rather than constraining a student, is necessary for epistemic access.

### **Student responsibility**

Besides capability, student responsibility plays an important role as an attribute of epistemic access. Cross (2018) argued that in order to succeed students have to take responsibility for

their learning and their own success. He saw this as leading to increased opportunities for self-development, enrichment and fulfilment. The more responsible the student is, the more the opportunity for engaging in the practice of searching for and working with knowledge made available in higher education institutions. Student responsibility is as important as capability, and both could enhance the ability of a student to learn to be an active participant, enabling academic engagement and application that is essential for epistemic access (Cross, 2018).

Increased responsibility can increase capability flowing from the opportunities for learning that are taken up in the process. Again, a student does not have control over the opportunities that are presented to them for learning. It could be argued that student agency adheres not only to the extent to which responsibility is deployed, but also in relation to the opportunities that are available at the institution. Thus, not only are the student's responsibility and capability required but also the opportunities that the institution avails for learning. Students could, therefore, understand how the university operates or 'thinks', and use their own initiative and individual responsibility to engage with the practices of searching for and working with knowledge. However, all stakeholders need to be responsible and capable. However, responsibility and capability should be by all stakeholders involved. A student's responsibility is to make use of opportunities they receive, and utilise their domain of control. While the responsibility of students is key in terms of them understanding how institutions operate, it is equally important that institutions themselves demonstrate an acute understanding of how students think and operate.

Individual and personal adjustments, as elements of a student's responsibility, have been found to enhance student access and success in higher education. Individual adjustments are regarded as supportive assets and constitute aspects of how they can do their own learning. Morrow (2009) contended that a student must realise that no one can do their learning for them and they should make positive individual and personal adjustments accordingly. As students move from school to university, they make academic, geographical, administrative and personal adjustments (Cross, 2018). In essence, students shift from the past, to embrace the present and navigate the difference between the past and present to become participants in the academic practice in higher education. Thus, students require skills such as "self-regulation, self-motivation and self-management framed by the notion of individual freedom, independence and autonomy, in addition to high performance and competitiveness" (Cross 2018, p.80). In addition, responsibility helps students to take charge of and control their learning by making the necessary personal adjustments in the way in which epistemic access and success could be

promoted. It could be argued then that background might not be the determining factor in adjusting, but rather, individual and personal determination. In that light, students from all backgrounds, including disadvantaged students, can gain access to and succeed at university, with positive individual and personal adjustments. ‘It is in this regard that emphasis on the requirement of responsibility by all students has been made in relation to succeeding at university. (It is in this regard that emphasis on the requirement of responsibility has been made in relation to succeeding at university by all students (Cross, 2018). However, while the students’ own agency may not be underestimated in the learning process, one can only learn what is available to learn, and with the capabilities one has acquired or received, not what lies beyond those limits. Inability to learn may not, in all cases, be attributed to limitation on the side of the student.

### **Student background**

Student background is another factor that impacts epistemic access. Cross (2018) understood the background of the student as the determining factor of the extent to which a student can participate in a practice. Student background encompasses many elements of social life such as the culture, socio-economic status, family, community, race, religion, gender, ethnicity as well as nationality or citizenship. These background factors form the basis of coping mechanisms, which students circumscribe in their process of affiliation and becoming members of a university, and they all shape how students initiate or induct themselves into university life (Cross, 2018). It could be argued that positive experiences of community and family support, as well as individual agency and imagination, can equip students from marginalised communities with the capacity to engage positively with the academic environment. According to Cross (2018), for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, family and community support can compensate in some ways, and aid their epistemic access. It is important therefore not to overlook the fate of those either without family support or who lack individual capacity when epistemic access matters are interrogated.

The student’s financial and personal circumstances constitute an important part of student background. Financial difficulties and other constraining personal circumstances could negatively impact student experiences and their performance. For example, Cross (2018) noted that financial problems and lack of accommodation close to campus are some of the reasons that exclude disadvantaged students from learning to become participants in the practice. Thus, background is highly laden within extant social processes as the “skills, abilities, pre-intentional assumptions, attitudes, practices, capacities, stances, perceptions and actions”

(Broekman & Pendlebury, 2002, p.291) and they shape the students' experiences of the institution and life on campus. Student background therefore, plays an important role in influencing how students engage with the practice of searching for knowledge and engaging with it within a university environment, hence learning to participate in academic practice, and attain epistemic access. In essence, previous experiences the students bring along with them from their different backgrounds, their expectations of the institution and campus life, induction, together with the student experiences of negotiating these, combine to influence epistemic access. It becomes complicated therefore as diverse student backgrounds can influence or constrain students' access in diverse and complex ways.

Student background factors can combine with capability and responsibility to inform the knowledge, skills and dispositions with which they enter universities. Attention to individual student predispositions together with the pedagogy of induction are important for describing and understanding institutional mediation (Cross, 2018). In essence, students mediate university experiences with the background inherent from their prior experiences. Diverse student backgrounds infer variant strains of negotiating campus or university life. It could be argued that negotiating campus life is dependent on the compounded experiences of students' backgrounds, drawn from family, peers, siblings, community and different schooling backgrounds from which students come. Consequently, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to experience campus life in unique ways as opposed to students from advantaged backgrounds. Academic support and services are insufficient to build a dynamic institutional culture; opportunities are also needed for students from different backgrounds to interact and negotiate "shared meaning, codes, norms and values" (Cross, 2018, p.22). For example, seeking knowledge from the elders as a background experience for disadvantaged students, could be utilised to consult lecturers and other senior students, to learn various aspects of student experiences.

Thus, a conglomeration of experiences from students' backgrounds could impact epistemic access.

### **Under-preparedness/unpreparedness as an issue of epistemic access and success**

While student agency and ways in which it enables epistemic access and success are evident, the literature also reveals, as was noted earlier, that under-preparedness, as a constraining factor, is often attributed to the 'lack' in schooling in preparing learners to be university students. It is argued that student 'under-preparedness' to engage in academic discourses form

an extensive portion of the debate relating to epistemic access and student success (Cross, 2018). In other words, schools are often blamed for not preparing students adequately, and the said student is labelled as under- or unprepared for their journey into higher education. The crux of the problem points to the poor quality of schooling in rural contexts and townships (Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2005), which results in significant knowledge gaps. Often, the knowledge gaps present curriculum challenges for HEIs which might be unable to meaningfully address them as part of curriculum change and responsiveness.

The issue of student unpreparedness is explained in the Higher Education Act no 101 of 1997, that there was a need to achieve redress and equity in access, in which the required admission policies to redress past inequalities by default has led to under-preparedness (Cross, 2018). There was then an associative narrative that equity and redress require universities to remedy the under-preparedness with supportive measures. However, this is done without demonstrations that rigour has been expended in ensuring that the students who are admitted, meet the requirements of entrance into the qualification (Wits report cited in Cross, 2018).

The acceptance of an unpreparedness narrative by institutions, over which they presumably have no control, could be regarded as deeply deficit-driven and lacking in rigour. Institutions have policies that endeavour to admit students who have the potential to succeed (Cross, 2018), yet exactly who that includes, and on what pedagogic or other grounds the criterion 'potential to succeed' is met, appears to be inadequately addressed in the literature. Moreover, when and how the 'potential to succeed' translates into under-preparedness is not explained in the literature. It should also be noted that while much scholarly work claims a disjuncture between school preparedness and what is expected at university, there is little empirical evidence to support this. For example, insufficient academic literacy is often 'blamed' for poor performance, yet there are few studies that actually track academic literacy in students' development trajectories from school to university. One related study conducted at Stellenbosch University questioned existing notions of under-prepared students, stressing that students in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, irrespective of their backgrounds, confirmed the significant challenges that entry into the academic community posed for them (Van Schalkwyk, 2008). Van Schalkwyk (2008) proposes that future research includes reviewing the extent to which first-year curricula create opportunities for the acquisition of academic literacy for a diverse student population.



Deficit approaches are not limited to individual students, but also to their contexts. These contexts are described as producing identities that are ‘other’ to the university environment. Boughey (2008), drawing on Halliday’s theory of ‘Systemic Functional Linguistics’ demonstrates that “non-traditional students’ contexts are very different from the university. The actions undertaken by students to learn are, from this perspective, related to their identities as individuals outside the university and how they understand outside contexts” (Boughey 2008, p.198). While this might not be a deficit approach in that it places no decision (derision) on the part of students, such explanations position aspects of students’ lives at the periphery of university culture. To reiterate a point made earlier, drawing on Jansen (1988), the university is not usually portrayed as having a deficit in its inability to teach all students or having produced, at worst, or at best being complicit to conditions that assume ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ students. Explanations of phenomena in the education system framed within an acceptance of ‘non-traditional’ students, concurs with the propositions of Bourdieu and Passerone (1990) who illustrate how access to higher levels of education in an education system is dependent on legitimised and legitimising arbitrary cultural practices. This refers to a situation of symbolic violence, whereby the dominant society uses sets of unconscious mechanisms to impose meaning and values on the dominated as legitimate and the dominated reproduce and conform to the ‘taken for granted’ legitimate habitus of the practice (Bourdieu & Passerone, 1990). Put simply, it means a situation in which the students would immerse themselves in the official domain and conform without question to the values and standards, including the curriculum at the institution, as they cannot identify any domination in the practice. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are thus likely to enter higher education at a disadvantage, needing to prove themselves as worthy and legitimate participants in that space.

The review now turns to the important role of institutions and their practices, overt or hidden, that mediate student epistemic access and success.

### **Institutional cultural domain**

As important as student agency is, the institutional cultural domain plays an equally important role in student access and success. Higher education institutions are “prior to individuals”, says Cross (2018, p.53), meaning that they are established before students enrol, and they are organised into faculties, schools and departments that facilitate student attainment of academic qualifications. “Institutional culture sets the boundaries about *what, how, by whom* and *for whom* teaching and academic practice occurs and in *what environment*” (Cross 2018, p.17 emphasis in original). In essence, institutions come first before students, and they set the tone

for practice. Students enrol at specific institutions because they provide particular outcomes in the form of academic qualifications. The position of the student is legitimated via enrolling or registering at an institution and the institution makes an individual a legitimate student. It could be argued therefore that students have little input into the organisational structure of institutions and when they come in, they have to negotiate the environment to learn to be active members of the practice. As such, in the South African context, the university structures are not always sensitive to the changing demographics of the student body. According to Cross (2018), institutions of higher education have three main domains that map out the context of practice, inform and shape the student experience at the university. They are the official, the academic and the social domains, which are explored next, highlighting both the enhancing and constraining institutional factors that mediate student access and success.

### **The official domain**

The official domain addresses the official recontextualisation field (following Bernstein, 1990), which draws attention to the construction of new knowledge from previously dominant discourses of knowledge production. In South Africa, recontextualising in the official domain was deemed imperative because of the exclusion and inequalities that have been previously confronted by historically disadvantaged social groups. What is being recontextualised is the issue of exclusion of formerly (historical) social groups, to consider diversity, social justice, and equality.

Bernstein defined the official recontextualisation field in the light of “specialised departments and sub-agencies of the State and local educational authorities together with their research and system of inspectors” (Bernstein, 1990, p.192). In the South African context of higher education, this refers to stakeholders who manage the departments as administrators and support staff, responsible for academic development. Cross (2018) added that it includes the policies, rules and guidelines regulating campus life. The official recontextualising field could thus be likened to the role of internal university administrative structures or entities which produce the institutional facts and constitutive rules. Besides the internal, the official recontextualising field recognises external influences on academic practice within institutions (Cross, 2018). “It is through the directives and expectations of these structures such as the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), the Council on Higher Education (CHE), the National Research Foundation (NRF)] that the university and, in particular, student life is regulated, steered or controlled” (Cross, 2018. p.31). Thus, the nature and scope of the official domain looms large in the experience of students at higher education institutions.

### **Institutional facts and constitutive rules as institutional culture**

Institutional facts and constitutive rules, as previously highlighted, are framed from the official domain and are aspects of institutional life, against which daily lives on campus are conducted. They create the very possibility of a particular form of practice and institutional rules and constitutive facts, which do not depend on students' backgrounds (Cross, 2018). For example, keeping quiet in the library is part of a constitutive rule mediated to students at the institution. Thus, as Cross (2018) argued, academic practice at the university is circumscribed by institutional facts as well as constitutive rules. Students' behaviour and practice is therefore influenced by the facts and rules, although how and to what extent depends on the students' backgrounds and dispositions (Cross, 2018). While such rules apply to all students, both advantaged and disadvantaged, student background could have a negative or a positive influence on how the students interpret the institutional facts and constitutive rules. A student who does not keep quiet and study in the library might not be successful within the practice, compared to one who abides by the constitutive rules. In essence, a student has a role to play in assimilating institutional facts and rules, to access the practice, at the same time that the institution has the role to mediate the institutional facts and constitutive rules to the student. A related problem is that induction programmes for newly-enrolled students do not highlight the constitutive rules, which are only pointed out to students once they have breached them (Cross, 2018). It implies that it is not only about having institutional facts and constitutive rules, but it is the extent to which students are made aware of them that helps enable epistemic access and success.

### **Induction as cultural practice to epistemic access**

When students enter the university, they are inducted into the system of higher education and learning to become participants in the academic practice of a particular institution. Induction is not an event but a process relating to all transitioning related to being a student, be it academic, social, cultural or personal. It is the first experience of something that is mostly unknown, and the process contributes to how students gain membership to the university community. The process includes both guidance and academic enculturation, according to Cross (2018).

The student and other stakeholders at the university, including academic staff, administrative staff, support staff and peers, may interact among each other during induction and interactions could have a positive or negative impact during the time of induction and ongoing experiences at the university. Jansen (2001) viewed induction as central, and argued that, "how it is organised, its value basis, its politics, and its power" (Jansen, 2001, p.2-3) is critical for

epistemological access. Cross (2018) agreed with Jansen that peer support contributes to the induction process and enables the students to learn to participate in academic practice.

Induction differs from one university to the other. Some institutions, such as Wits, have developed comprehensive policy instruments and constitutive rules and procedures, course structures, assessment techniques and processes, all befitting a healthy and productive campus and academic climate (Cross, 2018). It could be seen that some institutions induct students into the official and academic domains from the start and this kind of induction could enable the student to become participants of the practice from the beginning. Transition assistance and support is required in order to assist in the acculturation process for students entering a system of higher education for the first time, particularly for those whose previous school performance was poor (McInnis et al., 2000). It could be argued that the way in which students are inducted into university life is important because the transition from schooling to higher education is a critical period for students, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who find the environment from which they come, very different from the university one. It will be of importance to pay attention to induction, as an important aspect of student experience at entry, now compounded by the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown measures.

### **The pedagogic [academic] domain**

The pedagogic domain is what is most commonly referred to as the academic life at university and is fundamental for epistemic access and success. Bernstein (1990, p.198), building on the notion of the pedagogic recontextualising field, draws attention to the “principles and practices regulating the circulation of theories and texts, from the context of their production or existence to the contexts of their reproduction”. Bernstein’s theoretical understanding of the pedagogic domain largely, and the pedagogic recontextualisation field specifically, is relevant in that it provides academics with a framework to understand the production of knowledge in the community and how the knowledge could be recontextualised for the production of formal scientific and theoretical knowledge in formal institutions such as universities. Furthermore, the framework stresses the importance of recognising the prior experiences of students from disadvantaged social contexts, which could be utilised for navigating the different university environments. Thus, Bernstein’s pedagogical conceptualisation demonstrates sensitivity for the inclusion of experiences of disadvantaged students (Singh, 2002).

The pedagogic domain, moreover, comprises specialised modes of communication and interaction between knowledge communities and comprises the curriculum, teaching and

assessment that together produce and reproduce academic practice (Cross, 2018). Significantly, both the official and pedagogic domains shape the conditions of becoming a participant in academic practice or epistemic practice. Learning to become a participant in academic practice thus involves being influenced by and navigating the official and pedagogic domains associated with an institution.

However, a number of obstacles within the pedagogic domain can constrain rather than promote the conditions for students becoming participants in the academic practice. The language used for teaching and learning, which is mainly English, exclusive of methods of assessment based on competition and that measure learning and the methods of delivery that “has remained a large group lecture-method” (Maringe, 2017, p.12), all compound to limit, disadvantaged students especially, who are learning to become participants in the academic practice. Large group lectures can reduce social presence (Hostetter & Busch, 2006), and teacher immediacy (Cross, 2018), and are all against the notion of ‘transactional distance’ (Jansen, 1998). It could be argued that reducing distance between the lecturer and the student, as well as “the physical and/or psychological distance between people” (Love, 2003, p.3), has negative implications on epistemic access. In the era of COVID-19, the issue of distance has become magnified, resulting in the challenge of ‘social presence’ (Cross & Govender, 2021). Building on the scholarship of student epistemic access, the notion of ‘social presence’ emerged out of the critique of pedagogic distance displayed by some institutions that seemed to abdicate from their institutional responsibility in teaching and learning to bridge the digital divide. ‘Social presence’ (Richardson & Swan, 2003) determines “the degree to which a person is perceived as a ‘real person’ in mediated communication” (Gunawardena, 1995, p.151), that is, a person able to make an emotional connection throughout the learning transaction, express passion, laughter, sorrow, or distress related to it. As “the act of reducing the physical and/or psychological distance between people” (Love, 2003, p.3), particularly in relation to marginalised students, ‘social presence’ adds an important ethical dimension: expressions of empathy and compassion for the marginalised. Social physical presence builds greater trust and intimacy, through body language; a smile instead of frowning, direct body orientation, eye contact, gestures and positive head nods, for example (Witt et al., 2004). While some of this can be done using technology platforms (although experience has shown that videos are often switched off for various reasons), physical presence enhances ‘social presence’ far more effectively. Potentially this analysis suggests a theory of ‘social presence’ connected to the humanism embedded in the African philosophy of Ubuntu, thereby contributing to a deeper

understanding of the nuances of technological mediation under and beyond the severity of COVID-19 in several domains of teaching and learning, emotional, political, pedagogical, linguistic and physical. ‘Social presence’, therefore, constitutes an important epistemological and methodological platform for teaching the marginalised other (Cross & Govender, 2021). On the language question, though proposals have been made to use some African languages for teaching and learning and some institutions have started making efforts towards that (Metz, 2017), English has remained the medium of instruction in most universities. This constrains epistemic access and success because the language for teaching and learning is not the first language for most disadvantaged students.

The gap is in the trend in which literature on the pedagogic domain is written, which does not point to students’ agency in negotiating the details of the ‘normal’ features of this domain. The literature is focused on how students experience the institutionally-provided pedagogic domain, negating their own contribution to knowledge within the academic domain. This points to the issue of depicting the academics as the knowers and students as vessels to be filled and undermines the potential role of student agency in epistemic access and success.

### **Institutional mediation and / or responsibility**

Academic practices are “underpinned by the academic discourses within faculties as well as individual faculty members or academic staff” (Cross 2018, p.82). This could be explained in the light of cognitive and scientific concepts, abstract and scientific ways of thinking, requiring mediation by academics at institutional level so that students are able to participate in the practice. As the cultural gap could exist between discourse practices at the formal institutions, as well as the students’ cultural backgrounds, it could have negative implications on epistemic access. The role of institutional mediation therefore cannot be downplayed if students are to be enabled to learn to become successful participants in the practice at the institution. However, support structures such as tutorship programmes are found in some faculties to aid the mediation role of the institution to enhance epistemic access and “support strategies can vary from one faculty to another as well as within academic development units” (Cross 2018, p.4), as evidenced in the case studies. It is the responsibility of the institution, therefore, in its academic domain to mediate knowledge transfer to students for them to learn to become participants in the academic practice. It could be argued that epistemic access can vary thus from department to department or faculty to faculty or from institution to institution depending

on the extent to which academics mediate knowledge transfer to students in the academic practice.

While institutional mediation and responsibility is important for epistemic access, there are challenges relating to racism and sexism, racial imbalance in staff appointments, poor service from support staff, inappropriate methods of teaching and assessing, perceived lack of relevance of the curriculum as well as students' social and academic experiences of alienation (Cross, 2018). The challenges outlined compound to have a negative effect on students' performance and success. In essence, institutional mediation, responsibility or lack of, at institutional level could interplay, to negatively or positively influence epistemic access and success of students. It could be argued therefore that the institutional mediation and responsibility can differ from one institution to the other hence student performance, with either success or limited success, could be determined by the institution in which students have enrolled. Here again, this is borne out in the case study chapters.

### **Access programmes**

Specific interventions have been made in a bid to improve epistemic access in the South African context of higher education. The programmes were referred to as access programmes, which are intervention strategies "to promote access to higher education through academic preparation" (Hlalele 2008a, p.74). The programmes emerged in the 1980s, but the sector rollout was instituted from 2004 (CHE, 2013). Kapp (in Hlalele, 2008a, p.74) states that "[m]any South African Universities developed access programs (sic) as an alternative route to university admission" and he further contends that such programmes were initiated to increase access for black students, who needed to be empowered for higher level study due to apartheid disadvantage. Mabokela (in Hlalele 2008a, p.74) claims that these programmes "are underpinned by the assumption that black students are inherently deficient". Furthermore, access programmes enabled not only epistemic access but also admission into the university for those students who might not have had access into the university (Hlalele, 2008a). Noted is that Hlalele (2008a, p. 107) concluded that "learning skills acquired in the university access programmes do not appear to generally empower students to become participants in academic practice ... varied efforts need to be exerted ... in the school system." It suggests that the articulation gap between schooling and higher education needs to be taken into consideration on more serious terms if epistemic access is to be promoted.

### **Academic development programmes**

As part of access programmes for intervention, are the Academic Development (AD) programmes. Academic Development programmes are institution-led initiatives established to promote academic practices of students. It is argued that the programmes are utilised to provide academic support and skills development to address under-preparedness and enable students to successfully cope with university curricula (Scott, 2009). Furthermore, they were introduced to enhance the academic performance especially of first-year students from disadvantaged contexts of schooling (Scott, 2009). Units have been established at institutions to provide additional assistance to students during the academic writing process. Writing centres, which help students with the development of writing skills, are examples of AD programmes

The issue of the provision of AD programmes complements the issue of evaluation and monitoring in institutions of higher education. Johannes et al's (2019) study that explores AD programme evaluation at a university, is more focused on the evaluation of academic development of academics rather than of students. Thus, without adequate monitoring and evaluation, though institutions provide AD programmes, they could be underutilised, hence there is limited epistemic access at that institution.

AD programmes used to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds are not without controversy. One such debate was the academic programme being associated with the deficit model (Jansen, 1998). During that time, Jansen (1998, p.111) argued that the programmes framed disadvantaged or black students "within a deficit discourse", because what they do not have constituted the curricular response. Jansen asked if deficit could not be located elsewhere externally, for example that deficit is because of staff not being able to teach students in isiXhosa or in Afrikaans at an institution such as UCT (Jansen, 1998). From the debate that arose about the AD programmes as interventions for disadvantaged students, some saw them as self-defeating because they start from the fact that the limitation is with the student rather than with the institution. Indeed, such an approach may not yield the expected result in terms of epistemic access and success.

### **Extended curricula programmes**

When access to higher education expanded in the 1980s, extended curricula programmes emerged as another intervention meant to enable epistemic access in South African higher education (CHE, 2013). Funding for extended curricula programmes was institutionalised by



the Department of Education in 2004 (CHE 2013, p.71). Extended curricula programmes refer to the provision of “additional curriculum time for foundational learning to enable students to develop sound academic and social foundations for succeeding in higher education” (CHE 2013, p.18). The programmes thus assume that some students require additional time in which to complete a particular programme. “The purpose of extended curricula programmes therefore is to create the curriculum space needed to enable talented but underprepared students to achieve sound foundations for success in higher education” (CHE 2013, p.70). It could be argued that extended or foundation programmes therefore provide for alternative or additional conditions for students to gain epistemological access, that is, to learn to participate in academic practice. The assumptions of extended curricula programmes are congruent with Morrow’s (1994) assumption that students must learn to become participants of existing academic practice.

While there is allowance for epistemic access and success, enrolling for extended curricula programmes however, impacts the time in which a student attains a qualification. Extended or foundation or access (CHE, 2013; Hlalele, 2008a) programmes underscore the reality that some students are unable to gain epistemological access under established or official conditions within degree qualification programmes. In other words, academic support programmes imply that some students need more time to learn to become participants in an academic practice. Besides, Boughey (2005, p.232) describes this phenomenon that leads to extended or foundation programmes being introduced as a mismatch between the expectations of the institution and that of the student or to what the student has been exposed. Epistemological access is possible only if this mismatch is addressed. Furthermore, implicit in research on institutions adapting and changing to accommodate different and diverse students, is the assumption that it is necessary to accommodate those others who did not have the opportunity to enter the system, not that there must be something about institutions themselves that was inherently problematic. Rather than looking at students being unable to gain epistemic access under the established official and pedagogic domain, the institutional domains themselves should be looked at critically as Motala and Menon (2020) argued that ontological reframing is required to reimagine higher education institution spaces.

Extended curricula programmes are intended for students who do not meet the minimum entry requirements for particular programmes. The assumption made by the CHE (2013) is that most students require additional time which means that all qualifications should be extended by one year. According to the CHE (2013) only 30% of students complete in the minimum time and

that there are knowledge or curriculum gaps in the school-university transition that can only be addressed through restructuring of the undergraduate (UG) curriculum as a whole for all students.

It is argued, “From the outset, extended curricula programmes have aimed to link access with success by bridging the secondary-tertiary articulation gap” (CHE, 2013, p.71). From this assertion, it could be argued that the CHE is aware of the articulation gap between schooling and higher education, yet the extended curricula programmes have primarily targeted students who do not meet an institution’s regular admission criteria (CHE, 2013). This supports the issue of epistemic access focusing only on disadvantaged students while literature reveals that all diverse students in South African higher education have limited epistemic access and success (Essop, 2020). By implication, the issue of transition from schooling to higher education and the articulation gap needs re-visiting.

### **The social domain**

The social domain entails social interactions, intersubjective relations, attitudes and behaviour with and among students and it represents the social space in which university life occurs (Cross, 2018, p. 32), which is understood as the campus climate and is the formal and informal environment within a university in which we learn, teach, work and live (Cross, 2018). Furthermore, university stakeholders such as staff and students make up a crucial element of the social milieu of the campus climate (Cross 2018). Thus, the campus climate could change or shift depending on the manner of engagement of those who constitute it (Cross, 2018). It could be argued that the campus climate is not static, it could change and thus influence how students become members within the academic practice at different times.

Campus environments can inhibit student retention and adjustment, which happens when there is “alienation, hostility, social isolation, and invisibility associated with campus environments ... and it impacts on student academic practice” (Cross, 2018, p.180). Students who experience alienation are viewed as culturally displaced because they do not feel a sense of belonging (Cross, 2018). Some students feel the need to change their language, values, attitudes and behaviour in order to be assimilated (Cross & Johnson, 2008). Cross and Johnson (2008) reported that students experience peer pressure forces to assimilate from students who attended wealthier high schools rather than pressure from the institution. It could be argued therefore that institutional culture in terms of the social domain could be mediated by students from diverse backgrounds, which can impact on the mode and content of practice (Cross, 2018).

Cultural displacement could be viewed as symptoms of what Bourdieu and Passeron called symbolic violence, which is the “power that legitimises meaning and conceals power ... manifesting in the form of a right to impose legitimacy” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p.13). Thus, those without the right to impose legitimacy can experience cultural displacement, hence their epistemic access is constrained. Of interest is how students who become affiliated by changing their language, values, attitudes and behaviours, resulting in cultural displacement, succeed in becoming members in the academic practice.

While some campus climates are alienating, others promote belonging and a student feels part of the membership (Cross, 2018). Membership is defined as the “mastery of the common institutional language” (Coulon cited by Cross 2018, p.60). Those who have gained membership, set boundaries from the outside world (Cross, 2018), and members, as defined by Coulon (in Cross, 2018, p.60) “do not need to interrogate themselves and what they do. They know what is implicit about their behaviour and they accept their routinised social practices”. Membership thus infers affiliation and at the same time, being affiliated implies membership. Furthermore, it implies that those who are members conform and abide by the norms and values that define them. It is shown that “students whose learning orientation matches (more or less) what is expected, and carry individual resources (material and symbolic), to engage meaningfully in their studies have the opposite experiences from those who are culturally displaced” (Cross 2018, p.220), and the former become affiliated to or with the institution and succeed. It could be argued that epistemic access and success would depend on the campus climate that is conducive and not alienating, and students themselves being able to gain membership into the common institutional language. Thus, Cross (2018) considers that academic achievement and success is dependent on campus membership that entails a sense of belonging and acceptance to a community of practice. It is also important to note that the campus climate can be conducive, but students still fail to affiliate as members because of their backgrounds and some other alienating factors on the part of the student. Epistemic access is thus enabled where both the campus climate and student membership connect.

It should be noted that the social domain for students is not strictly confined to the campus. Other places and conditions such as living in residence on campus while at the institution, are critical to learning to become a participant in academic practice. For example, when students attend a university outside of their home town, their induction might stretch beyond the campus environment, to residences (Cross, 2018). It is most probable that students living in campus

residences and those residing off-campus could experience student life differently. It could be argued that how a student experiences the campus climate, including living in residence on campus, could influence the extent to which they become participants in the practice. According to Cross (2018), the social domain has been neglected and ignored in the scholarship on higher education, especially its impact on student epistemic access and success. The importance of the social life experiences of students was particularly highlighted during the lockdown period of the COVID-19 pandemic, with implications for student epistemic access and success.

### **Changing institutional culture**

Some research has focused on changing institutional culture and/or campus climate; how institutional cultures have changed to accommodate students whose backgrounds are not aligned, to “embrace, accommodate or engage difference” (Cross, 2018, p.19). Cross and Johnson (2008) listed a number of changes that some of the formerly advantaged universities such as Wits, embarked on in order to face the challenges of adapting its environment. They included among others, teaching and learning practices, and mediation strategies directed at students who do not come from a middle-class background (Cross, 2008), a move to embrace all diverse students, as informed by a culture that purports to embrace diversity (Badat, 2010). In terms of pedagogy, there are change efforts to include teaching indigenous languages and the introduction of African histories (Maringe, 2017). Strategic policies have been developed to change some institutional cultures to include historically disadvantaged students (Cross et al., 2010). Among other things, this has manifested in the Africanisation of institutional artefacts such as songs sung on graduation days, dance, emblems and change of names of buildings.

There are reports on how institutions are adapting and changing to accommodate different and diverse students. Some scholars stress the need for ontological reframing to reimagine the epistemic spaces at higher education institutions (Motala & Menon, 2020). While the purpose of change of institutional culture is to legitimise the inclusion of those who were historically excluded, the move has been found to be self-defeating in some instances and making no difference to what is found in Western academic institutions. For example, Metz (2017) argued that some Africanised university symbols, artefacts, dress codes or music played during graduation, were no different from what he saw in universities in America. Thus, some of the efforts of the cultural changes are not without challenges, which could be self-defeating. It

would be important to understand how institutional culture changes in different universities to influence historically disadvantaged students in terms of epistemic access.

In summary, institutional culture, comprising the official, pedagogic and social domains, provide a broad theoretical lens for understanding institutional mediation of student epistemic access and success. Institutional responsibility and interventions in the form of providing academic development and support to historically disadvantaged or marginalised students in particular, have emerged as central to institutional efforts to advance student epistemic access and success. These efforts notwithstanding, there is a case for more fine-grained research to hone in on the effectiveness of institutional interventions in addressing both student *and institutional under-preparedness* in addressing the school to university transition as a fundamental systemic challenge.

### **Decolonisation/decolonial approaches**

Decolonial thinking and insights have had particular value for recognising the ontological and epistemological realities of the historically oppressed and marginalised people of the world. This includes the historically marginalised students in countries such as South Africa, as the obvious products of persistent coloniality. It was Brink (2021, p.404), who captured the theoretical nuance of decolonial insights, when he declared: “Coloniality is the issue, decolonisation is the aim”.

The emphasis on decolonisation and decolonial approaches in recent years have drawn attention to issues of cognitive, epistemic, and social justice (Cross & Govender, 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). This has had significant implications for higher education policy and practice. In South Africa, the student movements of 2015 to 2017, referred to as #RhodesMustFall, and #FeesMustFall respectively, further highlighted the relevance of decolonisation, decolonial approaches and decolonial theories on students’ academic experiences. It could be argued that if epistemic access is about learning to be participants in academic practice, relevant knowledge, or engaging with knowledge linked to the everyday experiences of students is critical, something that decolonisation and decolonial approaches foregrounds, including attention to whose knowledge, and to what end, as a fundamental element of epistemic access.

In South African universities, a Eurocentric curriculum has dominated and defined worthwhile knowledge (Jansen, 1998). As such, through decolonial approaches, decolonial theories and the project of decolonisation largely, the aim was to draw attention, to unveil and unmask the

invisible structure of coloniality, and its implications for epistemology and knowledge production in higher education (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013), so as to have equitable access by all in terms of the university system, epistemology, the curriculum and pedagogy (Heleta, 2016; Maserumule, 2015). Thus, decolonisation and decolonial approaches have always sought to, and continue to seek, to promote pluriversality, multiplicity and social justice (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2012), to bring into conversation all knowledge systems including indigenous knowledges and African perspectives that have previously been at the periphery (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Thus, the decolonisation and decolonial approaches have been and are about an “intellectual hospitality of ideas” (Cross & Ndofirepi, 2017, p.191). It is revealed that progress has been made in terms of epistemology as Africans have continued to claim for Africanisation and inclusion of their histories (Tella & Motala, 2020), as current debates and scholarship continue to provide new direction of multi-layered knowledges which are not fundamentalist (Cross & Ndofirepi, 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2016). While the curriculum decolonisation project remains very much a work-in-progress in terms of a clearly enunciated pedagogy and disciplinary content integration, it has the potential to address long-standing issues of social inequality, cognitive and social justice, thereby enhancing epistemic access and success of historically disadvantaged students.

The turn to decolonial approaches as a way of reimagining higher education has raised several questions. Firstly, students who were taking the lead in the decolonisation project, seem not to have a full grasp of what needed decolonising, thereby reducing the whole process to the #FeesMustFall movement. When the fees issue was addressed, they became silent. The academic staff who were opposed to the decolonisation project then used students’ ignorance to dismiss the project (Heleta, 2016). In addition, academics were divided concerning decolonisation, with the professoriate schooled during the colonial era, largely influenced by colonial thinking and working hard to maintain the old system, while African academics and administrators, indoctrinated during apartheid and proselytised by Western education, were also reluctant to repudiate their very make-up (Heleta, 2016; Maserumule, 2015). If they were to decolonise and use decolonial approaches effectively, they needed to first identify and accept ‘the colonials’ in themselves. The staff of academics and administrators with decoloniality posture were a minority at universities and under-prepared and unable to lead an effective decolonisation project (Maserumule, 2015). More so, research informed by decolonial theory is limited in the South African higher education context, with only a few scholars taking the lead, and PhD students who use the theory and approach for their research. Nevertheless, South

African universities, such as UCT (see Lange, 2021), are making efforts to embrace decolonial thinking and ideas to enhance student epistemic access and success.

### **Decolonial analytic framework and student epistemic access**

The decolonisation project in higher education is couched largely in the context of social justice. The project has been largely embraced throughout universities and has dominated research activities, debates, higher education summits, student and staff academic work and major institutional reviews. Underpinning the decolonisation project is the recognition of colonialism as a global phenomenon manifested in “the long-standing patterns of power that emerge as a result of colonialism, which define culture, labour, inter-subjectivity relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations” (Maldonado Torres 2007, p.243; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Decolonial analytical approaches came to be seen as relevant to research by foregrounding race and gender and concerns with epistemic justice, given the legacies of apartheid and colonialism still entrenched in universities. Unfortunately, very little progress has been achieved in developing decolonising methodologies of analysis.

Though there has been consciousness, enabling stakeholders to see the need to decolonise, decolonisation and decolonial approaches are not just about replacing what is there. More especially for students, whose domain is key in epistemic access and success and learning to become participants in the academic practice, there is a need to understand the logic, the thinking, the assumptions and the hidden transcript behind the decolonial approaches and decolonisation. Such an understanding and the ability to apply it identify the colonialism in the university with curriculum, epistemology, the pedagogy, the paradigms, the practices and processes, still needing to be developed. Without fully understanding, there is a danger for decolonisation approaches to be reduced to activism, which could be sensitive, resulting in irrational and emotionally charged reactions that limit learning to become participants in the academic practice. Furthermore, it could be over-sentimentalised and applied to scholarly work, without adequate intellectual vigour which could have negative implications for epistemic access and success, as a self-defeating endeavour.

As Cross and Govender (2021, p.18) suggest, what is required, perhaps “are not necessarily alternatives but, instead, alternative thinking about the epistemological, theoretical, and methodological foundations of knowledge in African higher education”. From the perspective of enhancing epistemic access and success of historically marginalised students, the decolonisation project, at the very least, can contribute to broadening the minds of students who continue to grapple with the twin challenges of, firstly, being mired in coloniality, and

secondly, having to make sense of the potential benefits and relevance of decolonisation for their own intellectual journeys.

## **Conclusion**

While this literature review is not conclusive, it has foregrounded the interplay between student agency and institutional mediation in their epistemic experiences in higher education. The Bersteinian theoretical frame is viewed as useful in underpinning the official, pedagogic and social domains, as it considers the ‘recontextualisation field’ important for consideration of prior experiences and the background knowledges of students from disadvantaged social contexts. Recontextualisation of prior experiences could assist those students in utilising their prior knowledge in negotiating the academic and social spaces for their active participation in the academic practice, hence the possibility for epistemic access. Simultaneously addressing the methodological challenges of translating decolonial ideas and insights so that they have concrete and practical value for the lived academic practice of historically marginalised students, the ‘students of coloniality’, requires greater effort, both on the part of institutions and students. There are other important issues such as the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and COVID-19, that have emerged, which have also impacted higher education and influences epistemic access and success differently, constraining and enabling it in specific and different ways.

Fundamentally, though, student agency and the institutional cultural domain need to be in sync, to enable students to learn to negotiate campus membership and acquire epistemic access and access. One without the other would not render an effective academic practice and consequently, epistemic access and success. A student cannot become a participant of academic practice in the absence of a higher education institution, neither can he or she succeed in academic practice without taking responsibility and acquiring the capabilities needed to succeed.

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## **Chapter 3: Quantitative overview of access and success in South African Higher Education**

Zahraa McDonald and Shireen Motala

### **Introduction**

The chapter presents the quantitative data gathered for the epistemic access and success project. This project comprises case studies of six universities focused on the natural science and humanities/arts faculties (hereafter referred to as science or humanities faculties respectively). The intention of this chapter is to present faculty PPRs (progression and pass rates) compiled from statistical data with respect to student progression and pass rates of the six case study institutions. The chapter presents data of the cohort of undergraduate students who registered at the case study or participating institutions for the first time in 2014. The cohort analysis extends to 2019.

The data were gathered from institutions with the assistance of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) in order to compile the progression and pass rates of the case study institutions, statistically. Institutions were asked to provide the programmes offered in each faculty, and data were then drawn from the Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS) associated with those programmes to compile the statistics of each institution.

The report commences with a brief discussion placing progression and pass rates in perspective with regard to epistemic access and success at universities. The section also defines the relevant concepts and briefly sets out the purpose of the chapter. The section is followed by the statistical analyses drawn from the data gathered. The statistical analyses begin with an overview of the national enrolment, progression and pass rates, followed by overall institutional enrolment and progression and pass rates.

Enrolment together with the progression and pass rates of the natural science and humanities faculty at each participating institution is presented thereafter. At the national, institutional and faculty level data are disaggregated by population group<sup>1</sup> as well as gender. At the institutional

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<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, population group and race are used interchangeably. In addition, terminology of the different population group or race categories are maintained based on the source. In our view, the inconsistent use of terminology for population group and race categories reflects the need to reconsider the value of race as a category of analysis. It was not possible for authors of this report to settle on consistent terminology because there is no logical reason or inherent characteristic to guide such a decision.



level, an attempt at disaggregating data by National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) recipients is made. In the final section of the statistical analyses, insights are drawn.

The key insight from the statistical analyses in this chapter of the report is that disaggregating national, institutional and faculty level headcount and throughput by population group and gender is illustrative of important trends in the South African higher education landscape. Institutionally, throughput ranges from 43% (CUT's three-year diploma qualifications) to 79% (UL's four-year B-degrees) for completion in minimum time plus 2 years. Throughput in faculties range from 37% (Natural Science, CUT and UP) and to 85% (Humanities, UL). Throughput in faculties of natural science range from 37% (CUT and UP) to 84% (UL). Throughput in faculties of humanities range from 47% (UWC) to 85% (UL). On average, of all qualification types, throughput is best in the four-year B-degrees.

The conclusion summarises the chapter, making suggestions about what case studies should be explaining and points to how statistical analyses could be strengthened to contribute to understanding epistemic access and success. Statistical analyses are important for drawing comparisons between institutions, as well as between the institutional and the higher education sectors, and thus for understanding institutional and sector contributions over time. Statistical analyses moreover greatly impact on policy decision-making as well as education reforms. Optimal statistical analyses are therefore of paramount importance for enhancing transformative practices and socially just outcomes from higher education.

### **Progression and pass rates in perspective**

Progression and pass rates, also known as throughput rates (the term that is used henceforth in the chapter) are analysed using large scale data gathered by institutions on behalf of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). Cross (2018, pp.48–53) shows that measuring throughput in higher education became an important endeavour in the sector around the year 2000 in South Africa. The Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS) was introduced in 2000 (DHET 2020a, 13). Institutions are obligated to capture student enrolment data and report to the DHET using HEMIS. Institutions therefore gather data via HEMIS to ensure compliance with the DHET. Data to illustrate whether the DHET have reached their goals emanate mainly from HEMIS (see DHET 2020). National government reporting is guided by HEMIS (CHE 2020, pp.13–14). Reporting systems such as HEMIS cannot be compared or equated to quantitative research. However, the data are in a numeric format and are used by researchers to make contributions to knowledge based on a quantitative

approach. For universities, ensuring up-to-date student throughput data is one way of securing DHET funding, a critical contributor to their sustainability.

Statistical reporting relating to progression and pass rates in higher education analyses a few key elements in the system and at institutions; in this report, specifically headcount enrolment and throughput rates of cohorts. A cohort is “[t]he first-time entry students in a given year who have enrolled for a particular higher education programme” (CHE 2021, p.ii). Headcount is “[t]he total number of students enrolled at each institution whether full-time, part-time or occasional students” (CHE 2021, p.iii). Throughput rates are calculated based on “the number of first-time entry undergraduate students of a specific cohort of a specific year who have graduated either within minimum time [M], or up to two years beyond the minimum time [M+1 and M+2], to the number of students in the baseline enrolments of that cohort” (CHE 2021, p.v).

For a long time, throughput has been considered to be low in the South African higher education sector, thus characterising the system as inefficient. This problem is assumed based on the number of those who enrol and proceed to graduate in the minimum required time together with what it costs the state to subsidise students who do not complete degrees. Throughput studies, however, generally lack pedagogical impetus and do not consider the learning and contextual issues both in terms of the extent to which one could expect a student, under particular conditions, to complete a given programme in the minimum time or what an individual might learn and contribute to society irrespective of whether they complete a particular diploma or degree programme.

Student participation, access, retention and success have been critical areas of concern for both government and university discussion and discourse in South Africa. With the increasing demand for higher education, in addition to current contexts of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and the decolonisation movement, student access and success has gained increased attention. As previously mentioned, following previous case studies on higher education access undertaken with the Africa Higher Education Collaborative (Sabina, 2010), the Council on Higher Education (CHE 2010), the Association of African Universities (AAU) student mobility study, and the Steering of Student Epistemic Access study (Cross, 2018), this project sets out to explore the experiences of successful university undergraduate students with a very specific background profile. That is, students who suffered a considerable degree of marginalisation by

virtue of race, gender, originating from poor families and communities, and who graduated from relatively underprivileged schools in rural and township areas.

The proposal for this study contended that with the provision of free higher education for students in need of financial support in South Africa, the question of formal access has been significantly addressed; and thus, it is the question of epistemic access within a framework of epistemic justice that necessitates more attention. Enrolment and throughput analyses provide a basis from which to make sense of and explain epistemic access. The statistical analyses that follow seek to provide the background to the individual case studies that follow as well as a means to further interpret their findings.

### **Selected statistical overview of headcount and throughput**

The project sets out to address the following main questions:

- How do students with the above profile negotiate their epistemic access and success within a diverse and rapidly changing university environment?
- What individual, institutional, or collective resources (cultural and/or material) do they resort to in the process?
- And, how do institutions mediate this process?

The project aimed to identify those practices, norms and values that constrain and those that enable epistemic access or successful participation amongst the student body in diverse contexts.

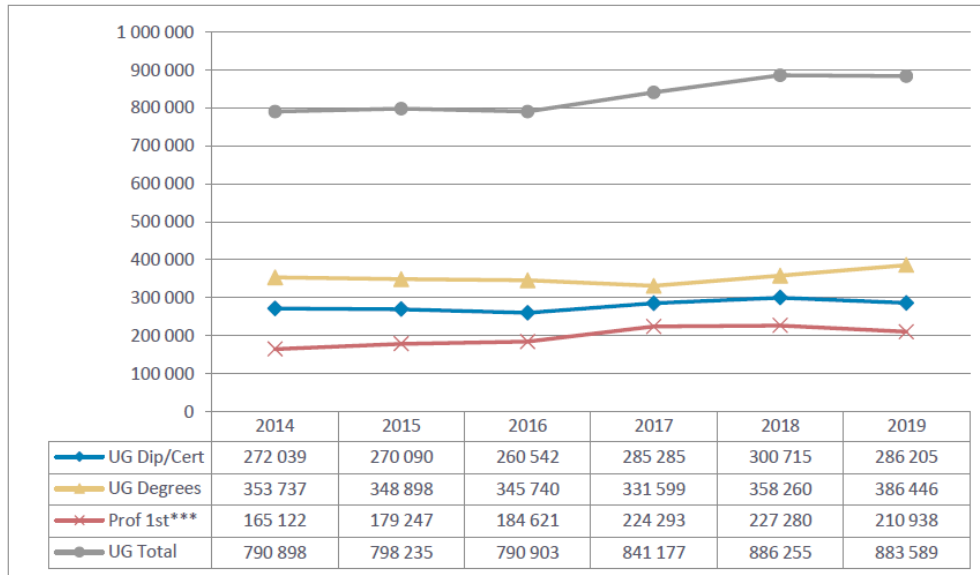
The selected statistical analyses of headcount and throughput presented here are intended to contribute to the background of answering the questions. As such, data are presented that describe enrolment and throughput at the national level of South Africa and institutional level of participating institutions and humanities/arts and natural science faculties that can help deepen our understanding of students' epistemic access issues and challenges.

### **National headcount and throughput of the South African higher education system**

This section presents national level statistical data. This means that the data are compiled from all public higher education institutions in South Africa, with the exception of UNISA. The exclusion of UNISA relates to it being the only public distance education university in South Africa. Headcount enrolment for the cohort of undergraduate students who registered for the first time in 2014 is presented first, disaggregated by population group or race as well as gender.

Throughput of the same cohort, disaggregated by population group or race as well as gender is presented thereafter.

### Undergraduate headcount enrolment at national level



**Figure 1: National headcount undergraduate enrolment by qualification type (2014-2019)**

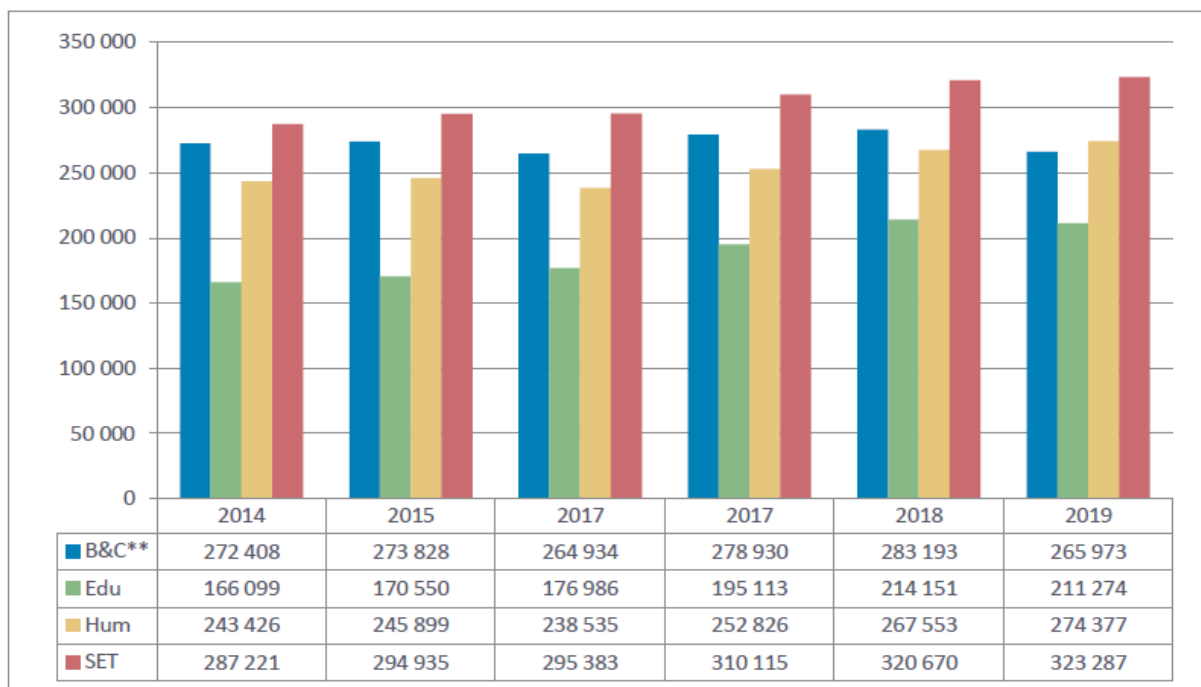
There are three different types of qualifications offered at the undergraduate level in South African higher education institutions. These are: diploma or certificate qualifications; degree qualifications; and professional first four-year qualifications, or four-year B-degrees. In this chapter, degree qualifications are referred to as three-year B-degrees and professional first qualifications as four-year B-degrees.

Figure 1, extracted from the latest ‘Vital Stats’ compiled by the CHE, illustrates that in 2019, undergraduate headcount enrolment at South African universities was 883 589 (CHE 2021, p.17). In other words, there were under one million South African students enrolled in undergraduate programmes in public universities in 2019. This includes 286 205 enrolled for undergraduate diplomas or certificates, 386 446 enrolled for undergraduate degrees and some 210 938 enrolled for undergraduate professional degrees.

Undergraduate student enrolments grew by almost 12% between 2014 and 2019. The drop in headcount enrolment from 2018 to 2019 should however be noted. Successive drops in 2020 and 2021 might be expected due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2010, there were 728 429 students enrolled in undergraduate programmes at public higher education institutions in South

Africa (CHE 2017, p.17). Between 2010 and 2019, the higher education sector grew by about 21% with respect to headcount enrolment in undergraduate qualifications.

Headcount enrolment alone does not tell us everything about the higher education sector. Extrapolation from headcount enrolments can be done by contextualising them in relation to statistical data disaggregated by additional categories, including population group or race as well as gender. These are the categories typically reported by the DHET (2020a, 2021) and CHE (2021). Historical disadvantage in South Africa is highly associated with race or population group, as is outlined in different chapters of the report. To this end, the figures below disaggregate undergraduate headcount enrolment by race or population group in South Africa. Disadvantage and marginality are best described to be experienced at an intersection, of which race or population group can be one node in South Africa. In South Africa, it is accepted to be one of the most significant. By representing the headcount enrolment by race or population group, this report is not suggesting that it is the only node. However, given the historical experience of South Africa and current empirical evidence, race or population group is recognised as a principal predictor of economic disadvantage (see Stats SA data below). First, though, enrolment data by field of study is presented.



**Figure 2: Headcount enrolment by field of study (2014-2019)**

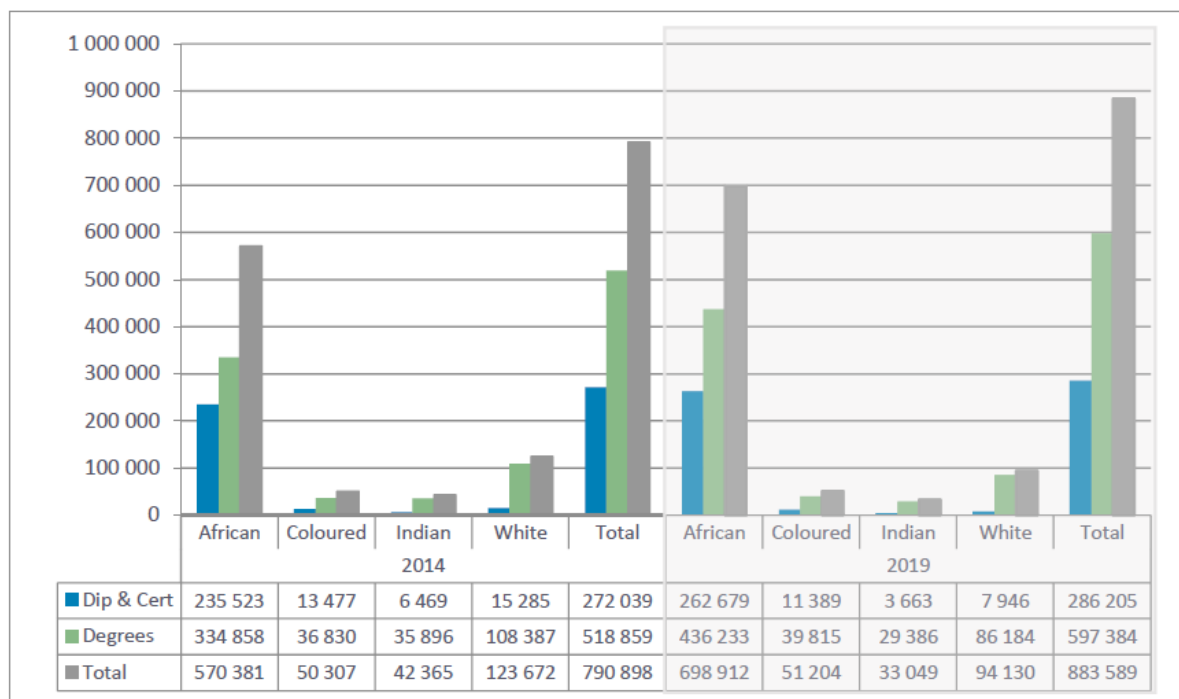
The graph above shows the proportional headcount enrolment of students in different fields of study (CHE 2021, p.25). Comparable information for undergraduate students only could

not be located. In HEMIS, data are gathered by fields of study, rather than faculty. HEMIS does gather data of programmes for which students are enrolled. The data for the section of faculty level data were therefore processed from information received by institutions about programmes in faculties. The fields in the Figure 2 refer to<sup>2</sup>: B&C – Business and Commerce, Edu – Education, Hum – Humanities and SET – Science, Engineering and Technology.

Depending on the institution, the findings in this report generally corresponded with the Education, Humanities, and Science and Technology fields. It is unlikely that the differentiation affected the outcome of the study, and hence the differences are not explained here in any depth.

### Race or population group distribution in national enrolment

In this chapter, race and population group are used interchangeably. A more extensive discussion of the concept of race can be found in the introductory chapter.

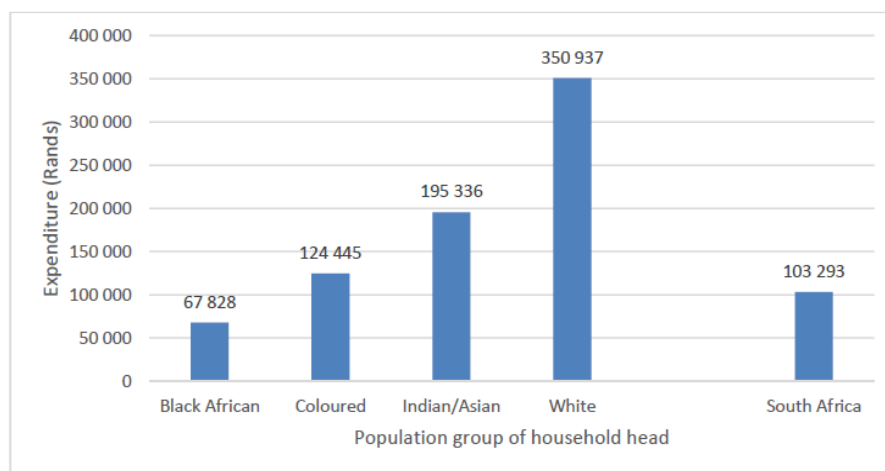


**Figure 3: National headcount undergraduate enrolment by race [population group] (2014-2019)**

African students constituted the majority of undergraduate enrolments in 2014 and 2019 (CHE 2021, p.18). Notably in the figure above, the headcount of enrolment by race or population group, with the exception of African students, declined for diploma or certificate programmes

<sup>2</sup> The explanation of fields is linked with \*\* in Figure 2.

between 2014 and 2019. In 2019, 73% of students enrolled for degrees were African and 14% were White. (CHE 2021, p.18). In 2019, 92% of students enrolled for diplomas and certificates, were African and 3% were White. At the last census, the African population group constituted 79.2% and the White population group constituted 8.9% of the South African population (StatsSA 2012, 21). Thus, with respect to degree enrolment there are fewer African and more White students enrolled in proportion to their respective population groups than there are individuals in the general population, while for diplomas and certificates, the opposite is the case. The difference is however more apparent for diplomas and certificate programmes.



**Figure 4: Population group by household**

Figure 4 is drawn from Statistics South Africa (Stats SA, 2017, p.13) and illustrates that the average annual household consumption varies between households with heads from different population groups. When a household head is White, that household consumes just over four times more, on average than households with a black African head. This means household expenditure is lower on average for households with black African heads and higher on average for households with White heads. Similarly, the Table 1 shows that the average income of household heads differs markedly depending on their population group (Stats SA 2017, p.14).

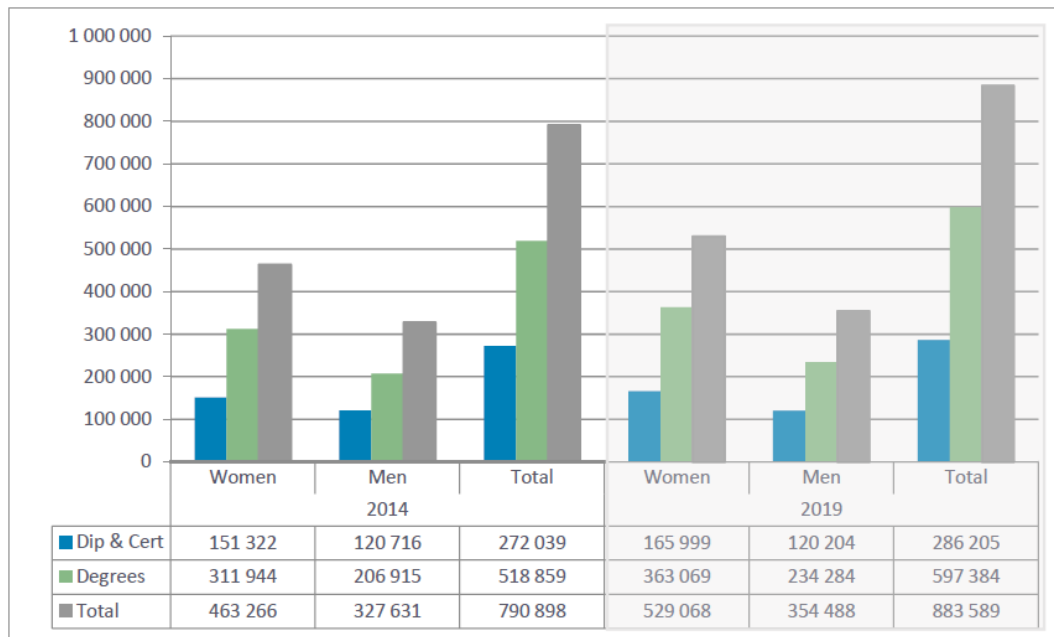
**Table 1: Source of income of household heads by population group**

Source of income	Black African		Coloured		Indian/Asian		White		Total	
	Average income	%	Average income	%	Average income	%	Average income	%	Average income	%
Income from work	69 094	74,3	131 699	76,2	215 784	79,4	300 498	67,6	100 246	72,6
Income from capital	842	0,9	1 364	0,8	2 173	0,8	16 184	3,6	2 451	1,8
Pensions, social insurance, family allowances	8 921	9,6	12 260	7,1	10 028	3,7	30 739	6,9	11 378	8,2
Income from individuals	2 194	2,4	2 430	1,4	3 309	1,2	5232	1,2	2 542	1,8
Other income	1 261	1,4	2 265	1,3	2 323	0,9	6 520	1,5	1 886	1,4
Imputed rent on owned dwelling	10 671	11,5	22 747	13,2	38 005	14,0	85 271	19,2	19 665	14,2
<b>Total</b>	<b>92 983</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>172 765</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>271 621</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>444 446</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>138 168</b>	<b>100,0</b>

Based on the income and expenditure statistics reported by Statistics South Africa in 2017, many more students from households where the head is black African are likely to be economically disadvantaged and hence eligible to receive the NSFAS grant. Indeed, at the current R350 000 threshold for eligibility to receive the NSFAS, students in the average African, Coloured and Indian households would be eligible while the average White household would not. Strikingly however, the average household income of South African households in 2017 was less than half of the NSFAS threshold. Being a NSFAS grantee was one of the requirements of the students sampled to participate in interviews for case studies.



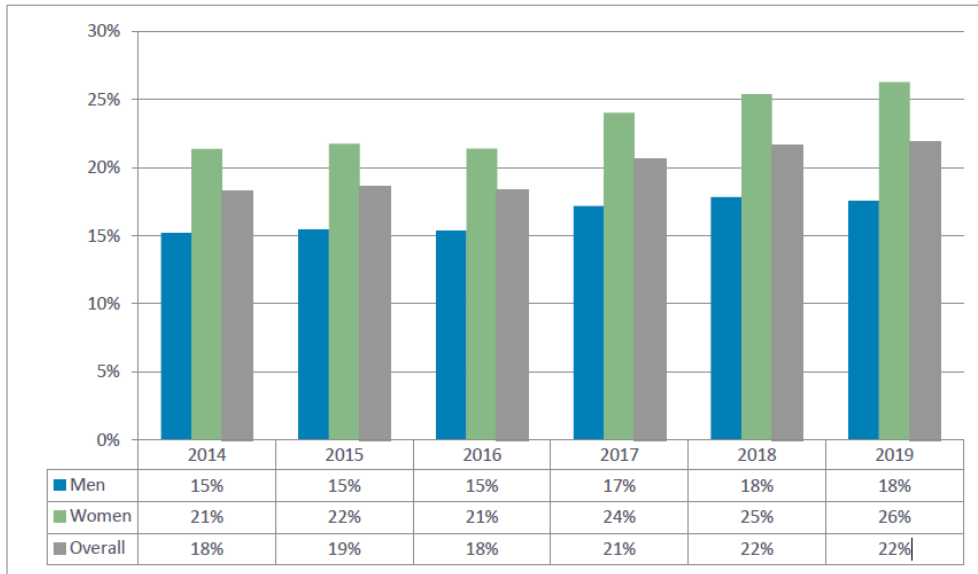
## Gender distribution in national headcount



**Figure 5: Headcount undergraduate enrolments by gender (2014 and 2019)**

Figure 5 illustrates that there were more women (529 068 or 60%) enrolled in South African universities than men (354 488 or 40%) in 2019 (CHE, 2021, p.18). In addition, it is evident from the above figure that this trend is a continuation for the duration of the cohort 2014-2019. Moreover, since 2014 there has been a very slight but increasing difference between the headcount enrolment of women (59% in 2014) and men (41% in 2014).

Figure 6 illustrates that in relation to the national age cohort, females constitute a greater proportion of the general age cohort in the population (CHE, 2021, p.6).

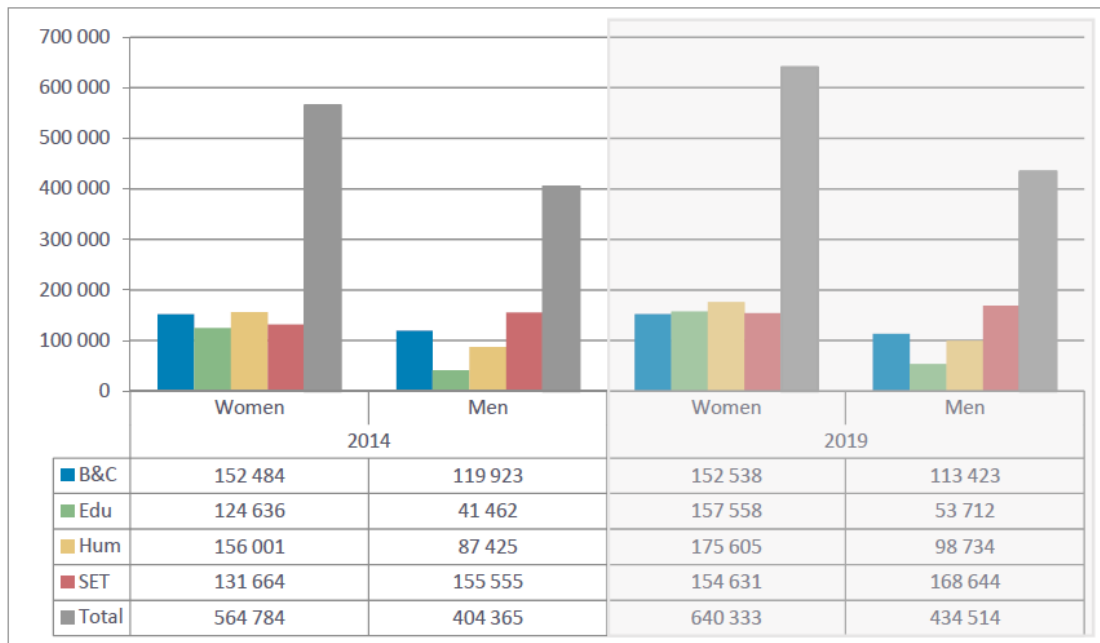


**Figure 6: Proportion of population age cohort (participation rates) by gender (2014 - 2019)**

In 2011, of those aged between 15 and 19, women constituted 4.9% of the general population, and men constituted 4.8%. (StatsSA, 2012, p.33). In 2011, for the age group 20-24, women constituted 5.1% of the general population, and men constituted 5.2%. (StatsSA, 2012, p.33). The difference in gender distribution in the general population is therefore not reflected in the gender distribution of undergraduate students. Figure 11 illustrates an even greater difference between male and female graduates (CHE, 2021, p.19).

Since 2000, the difference in headcount enrolment between men and women has been an ongoing trend in South Africa. In 2005, 54.6% of the enrolment were women and 45.4% were men (Essop 2020, 60). This was slightly lower in 2000, when 53% of the first time entering undergraduate students were women and 47% were men.

Interestingly, when considering enrolment by Classification of Educational Subject Matter (CESM) categories, the trends in gender distribution are not exactly the same as the overall gender distribution of undergraduate students.

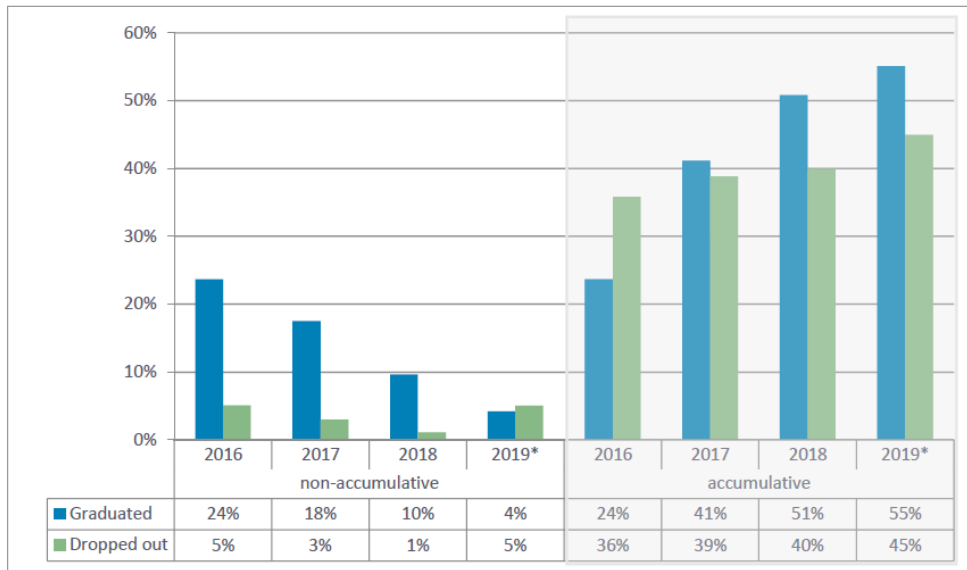


**Figure 7: Headcount enrolment by field of study and gender for 2014 and 2019**

Figure 7 is an illustration of the 2014 and 2019 headcount enrolment by field of study (CESM category) and gender (CHE, 2021, p.26). It is notable that the one field of study in 2019 where men (53%) outnumbered women (47%), is Science and Technology. Moreover, the largest proportional difference between men (25%) and women (75%) is in the field of Education. Interestingly though, in 2019, there were more women graduates (52%) in Science and Technology than men (48%) (CHE, 2021, p.27), even though in 2014 the proportion of enrolled women in SET was 46%. Less than half of the permanent instruction and research staff are women (48%) (DHET, 2021, p.105). It would be interesting to examine if this changes over time, given the current gendered pattern of graduation.

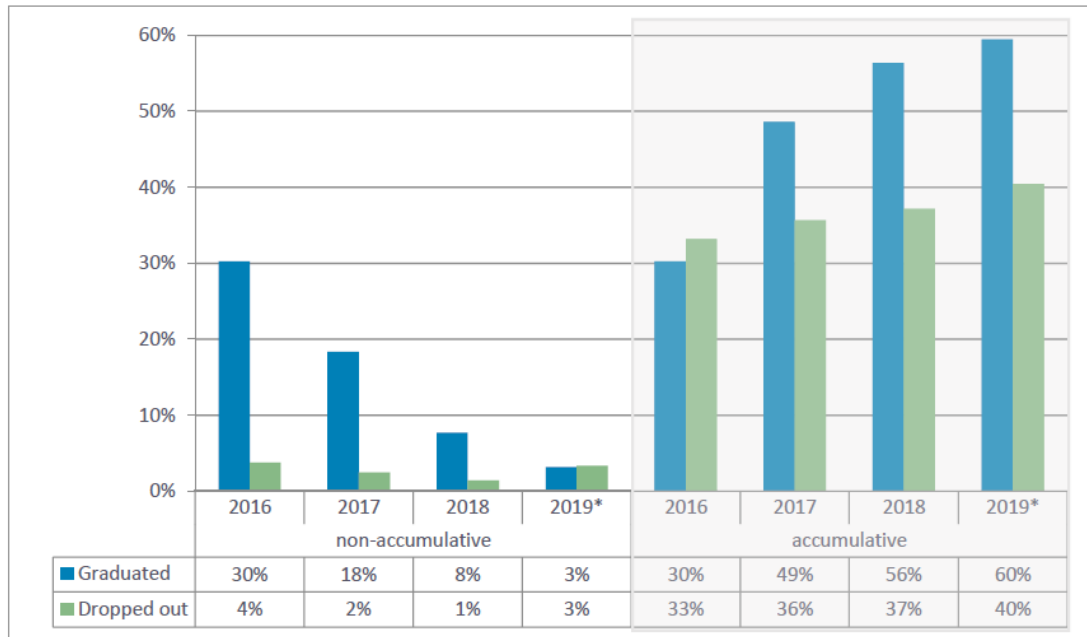
### **Throughput in higher education institutions**

In this section throughput rates for the 2014 undergraduate cohort are presented by the three qualification types, starting with diplomas, followed by three-year B-degrees and then four-year B-degrees.



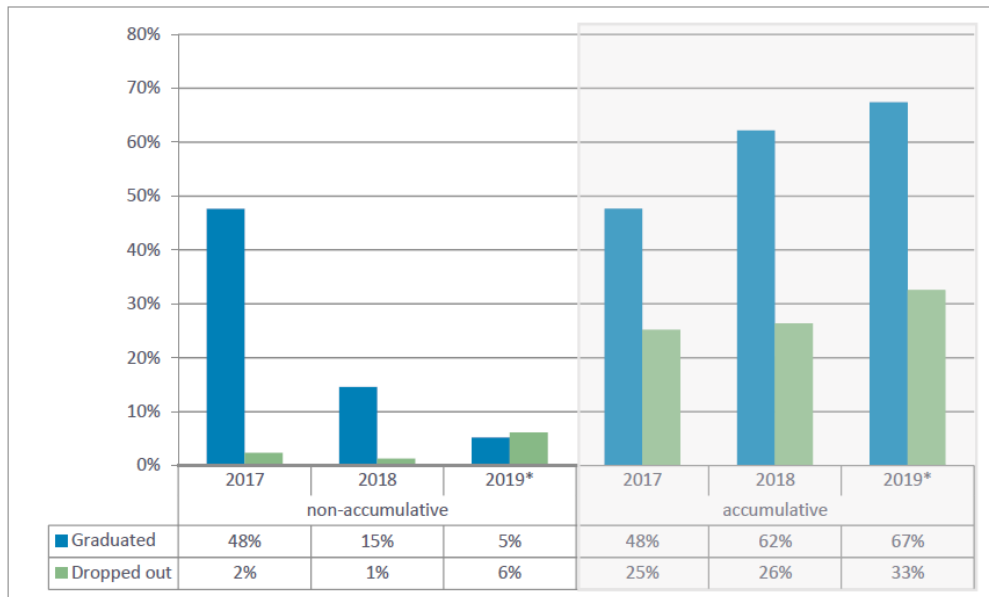
**Figure 8: Throughput rates for diploma qualifications for those entering for the first time in 2014 (excluding UNISA)**

Figure 8 illustrates the throughput rates for diplomas of those who enrolled for the first time in South African universities (except UNISA) in 2014 (CHE, 2021, p.61). The figure shows that 55% of those who enrolled graduated by 2019, whereas 45% dropped out (CHE, 2021, p.61). The figure also shows that the largest proportion of graduates (24%) do so at the end of three years of study, within regulations (CHE, 2021, p.61). That proportion is, however, under a quarter of those who enrolled for diplomas in 2014. Of the White cohort, there are more graduates (35%) after three years than the African cohort (23%) (CHE, 2021, p.62). After six years, the difference is however less marked with 55% of the African cohort and 57% of the White cohort graduating (CHE, 2021, p.62).



**Figure 9: Throughput rates for three-year B-degrees for those who enrolled for the first time in 2014 (excluding UNISA)**

Figure 9 illustrates the throughput rates for three-year B-degrees of those who enrolled for the first time in South African universities (except UNISA) in 2014 (CHE, 2021, p.62). The figure shows that 60% of those who enrolled graduated by 2019, whereas 40% dropped out (CHE, 2021, p.62). Similar to diplomas, the largest proportion of graduates (30%) do so at the end of three years of study, that is, within regulations (CHE, 2021, p.62). That proportion is however under a third of those who enrolled for three-year B-degrees in 2014.



**Figure 10: Throughput rates for four-year B-degrees for those who enrolled for the first time in 2014 (excluding UNISA)**

Figure 10 illustrates the throughput rates for four-year B-degrees of those who enrolled for the first time in South African universities (except UNISA) in 2014 (CHE, 2021, p.64). The figure shows that 67% of those who enrolled graduated by 2019, whereas 33% dropped out (CHE, 2021, p.64). As with the other two qualification types, the largest proportion of graduates (48%) do so within regulations, at the end of four years of study (CHE, 2021, p.64). This means that just under a half of those who enrolled for four-year B-degrees in 2014, graduated on time.

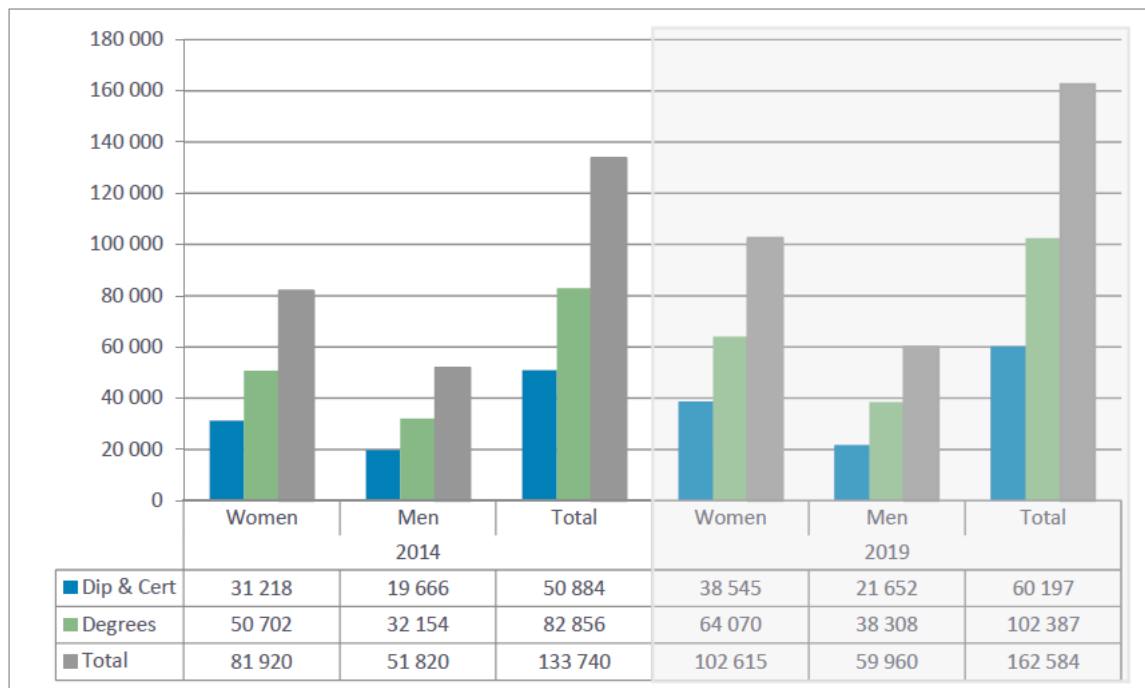
For the 2014 cohort, the throughput of four-year B-degrees is higher than both three-year B-degrees and diploma qualifications. The proportion of African graduates in the 2014 cohort of undergraduate students is also higher for four-year B-degrees than for three-year B-degrees or diplomas. Although the proportion is different for qualification types, the largest proportion of students graduate within the regulation time. At the same time, this is under 50% of the cohort in all qualification types.

If participation in academic practice is equated with rates of graduation, throughput rates for the 2014 cohort of undergraduate students in South Africa shows that at best 48% of students attain epistemic access in regulation time, and 67% after six years. In the worst scenario, 24% attain epistemic access in regulation time and 55% after 6 years.

It is further notable that the best scenario after six years (67%) is two additional years of study, while the worst (55%) is three years after regulation. It is unclear from this study why this

might be the case, given that the focus was not on comparing three- with four-year qualifications. Many four-year qualifications are however professional qualifications, and this might mean that students are more focused when entering the qualification programme as well as during the programme. On the other hand, three-year qualifications are largely more general. The reason might however be that the additional year of the degree programme allows students to settle into the university environment and learn to participate in academic practice.

It would be worth examining this phenomenon in more detail in future in order to provide some insights with regard to throughput. For example, systematically comparing entry requirements, motivations to enter the degree programmes, teaching, learning and assessment, including staff to student ratios, in the degree programmes; and, in the context of COVID, digital access and home environment conditions and support.



**Figure 11: Headcount of undergraduate qualifications awarded by gender for 2014 and 2019**

Based on the absolute numbers in Figure 11, in 2019, 63% (102 615) of graduates were women, while 37% (59 960) were men. The difference in women (62%) and men (38%) graduates has also increased slightly since 2014, according to the absolute numbers depicted in Figure 11 (CHE, 2021, p.19). In 2010, 61% of undergraduates enrolled were women and 39% were men (CHE, 2017, p.19). If as the White Paper upholds, graduation provides skills for the economy and postgraduate students for the system (DHET, 2020a, p.13), the gendered enrolment and

graduation rates should be impacting on labour market supply as well as the postgraduate pipeline. Gendered patterns of epistemic access are not the focus of this study, it should, however, be taken up as a point of investigation in further studies. The gendered distribution of educational outputs across the education spectrum can be significant in sociological terms.

The remainder of this chapter provides an overview of headcount enrolment and throughput at the institutions that form part of this research. The report then narrows the focus to the natural science and humanities faculties at those institutions.

### **Institutional level (participating institutions)**

There are six institutions that participated in this study. This section provides the overall undergraduate enrolment and throughput at those institutions, disaggregated by population group or race as well as gender. Unless otherwise indicated, the tables in this section have been extracted from HEMIS data for the purpose of this project.

### **Enrolment and population group or race distribution at participating institutions**

The tables in this section present data from participating institutions, disaggregated by population group. Table 2, presents the ratio of permanent instruction and research staff to students for participating institutions.

**Table 2: Enrolments by population group at undergraduate level (2014 and 2019)**

		<b>African</b>	<b>Coloured</b>	<b>Indian</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>CUT</b>	2014	11 879	469	39	970	13 357
	2019	18 920	391	28	564	19 903
<b>UJ</b>	2014	35 926	1 277	1 768	3 669	42 640
	2019	36 803	1 154	1 403	1 875	41 235
<b>UL</b>	2014	20 017	16	120	181	20 334
	2019	18 432	14	5	5	18 456
<b>UP</b>	2014	14 632	780	1 782	17 553	34 747
	2019	17 315	1 080	2 314	15 037	35 746
<b>UWC</b>	2014	6 775	7 857	752	775	16 159
	2019	8 617	8 924	604	710	18 855
<b>WITS</b>	2014	13 440	881	2 972	4 368	21 661
	2019	16 954	1 099	3 315	3 870	25 238



From the total headcount enrolment in the table above, the participating institutions' undergraduate headcount enrolment comprised 159 433 undergraduate students. This was about 18% of the undergraduate student population in South Africa in 2019 (883 589). UJ had the highest (41 235) and CUT the lowest headcount enrolment (19 903) of the participating institutions. UJ and UL experienced decreases in undergraduate enrolment while all other participating institutions experienced increases in enrolment between 2014 and 2019. Amongst the participating institutions, CUT experienced the most significant increase in enrolment between 2014 and 2019.

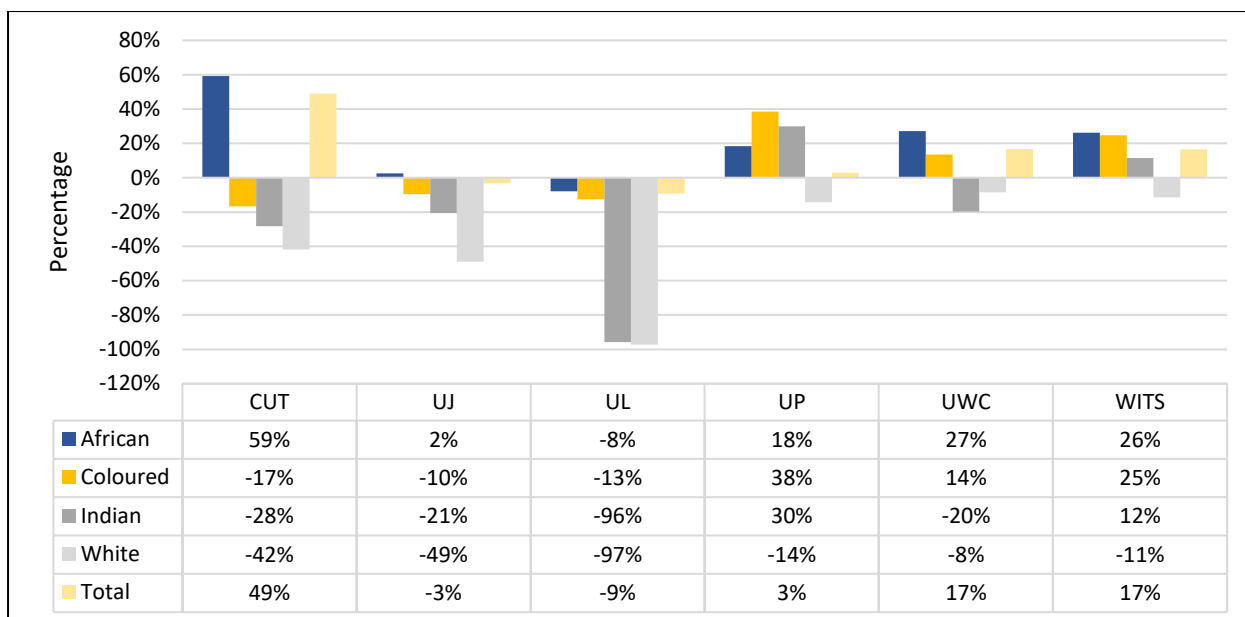
Based on data extracted from a DHET report (DHET, 2021, p.104) on Statistics on Post-School Education and Training in South Africa, staff at the participating institutions made up 28% of all such staff in public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa. When one compares the ratio of permanent instruction and research staff to undergraduate students, the differences across the participating institutions are interesting to note, as can be seen in the table below.

**Table 3: Ratio of permanent instruction and research staff and undergraduate students at participating institutions**

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Permanent Instruction and research staff<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>Undergraduate students</b>	<b>Ratio</b>
CUT	306	19 903	65.04
UJ	1 330	41 235	31
UL	615	18 456	30.01
UP	1 224	35 746	29.20
UWC	675	18 855	27.93
WITS	1 204	25 238	20.96

The highest ratio of staff to students (65.04) was at the Central University of Technology, Free State (CUT). The lowest staff to student ratio (20.96) was at the traditional, research intensive, historically white, English institution, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (Wits).

<sup>3</sup> Figures extracted from DHET (2021, 104)



**Figure 12: Percentage change in enrolments by population group at undergraduate level over the period 2014 to 2019**

The graph in Figure 12 shows increases for African student enrolments as a percentage of the total enrolment from 2014 to 2019, which is regarded as an indicator of increased equity in the population profile of students. The University of Limpopo had an overall decrease in enrolments for all population groups, which is presumably a result of the move of the former MEDUNSA campus into the newly established Sefako Makgatho Health Science University (SMU) during this period (DHET, 2020a, p.15).

There was a decline in Coloured enrolments in CUT, UJ and UL, but considerable increases in Coloured enrolments in UP (38%), UWC (14%) and Wits (25%). The percentage of Indian student enrolments declined at CUT and UWC, which was a real decrease in numbers in the case of CUT. At UWC, the number of Coloured enrolments increased from 7 857 to 8 924 which represents a 14% increase, but African students in UWC increased by 27% from 6 775 to 8 617, which led to a decrease of the Coloured students as a percentage of the total enrolment. Indian enrolments decreased in four universities over the period 2014 to 2019, while at UP, they increased in total by 305 and at Wits by 12%.

White enrolments decreased at all universities over the period 2014 to 2019, both in terms of actual numbers as well as a percentage of total enrolments. This could be attributed to a decrease in population numbers as well as large numbers of the white youth that are working overseas or that have emigrated. It is moreover possible that there was a white flight to private higher education institutions. White students made up about 17% of enrolments in private

higher education institutions in South Africa in 2019 (DHET, 2021, p.26). The difference between 14% and 17% does not appear to be large. At the same time, we do not know if there were institutional differences in private HEIs, as there were in public HEIs; that was where 42% of the UP student body was White, while 100% were African at UL (see table below).

**Table 4: Population group profile for undergraduate enrolments (2014 and 2019)**

		<b>African</b>	<b>Coloured</b>	<b>Indian</b>	<b>White</b>
<b>CUT</b>	2014	89%	4%	0%	7%
	2019	95%	2%	0%	3%
<b>UJ</b>	2014	84%	3%	4%	9%
	2019	89%	3%	3%	5%
<b>UL</b>	2014	98%	0%	1%	1%
	2019	100%	0%	0%	0%
<b>UP</b>	2014	42%	2%	5%	51%
	2019	48%	3%	7%	42%
<b>UWC</b>	2014	42%	49%	4%	5%
	2019	46%	47%	3%	4%
<b>Wits</b>	2014	62%	4%	14%	20%
	2019	67%	5%	13%	15%

Essop (2020, p.79) argues that the transformation journey with regard to the demographic profile in higher education has made striking changes. While African students made up 53% of enrolments in higher education institutions in 1993, by 2017 the enrolment of African students in the sector increased to 84.5% (Essop, 2020, p.79). This implies that at the national system level, higher education had transformed with regard to proportional racial enrolment. We have also seen from the literature review (Chapter 2) that since the early 1990s, Wits has transformed in terms of demographic profile. Here we explore the changes with respect to institutions participating in this study. The following are evident with regards to participating institutions based on the information in the above table.

Among the participating institutions, CUT, UJ and UL had the highest proportional enrolment of African students. Of the three, UL had the highest proportional enrolment of African students; in 2019, 100% of students enrolled at UL were African. It is interesting to note that

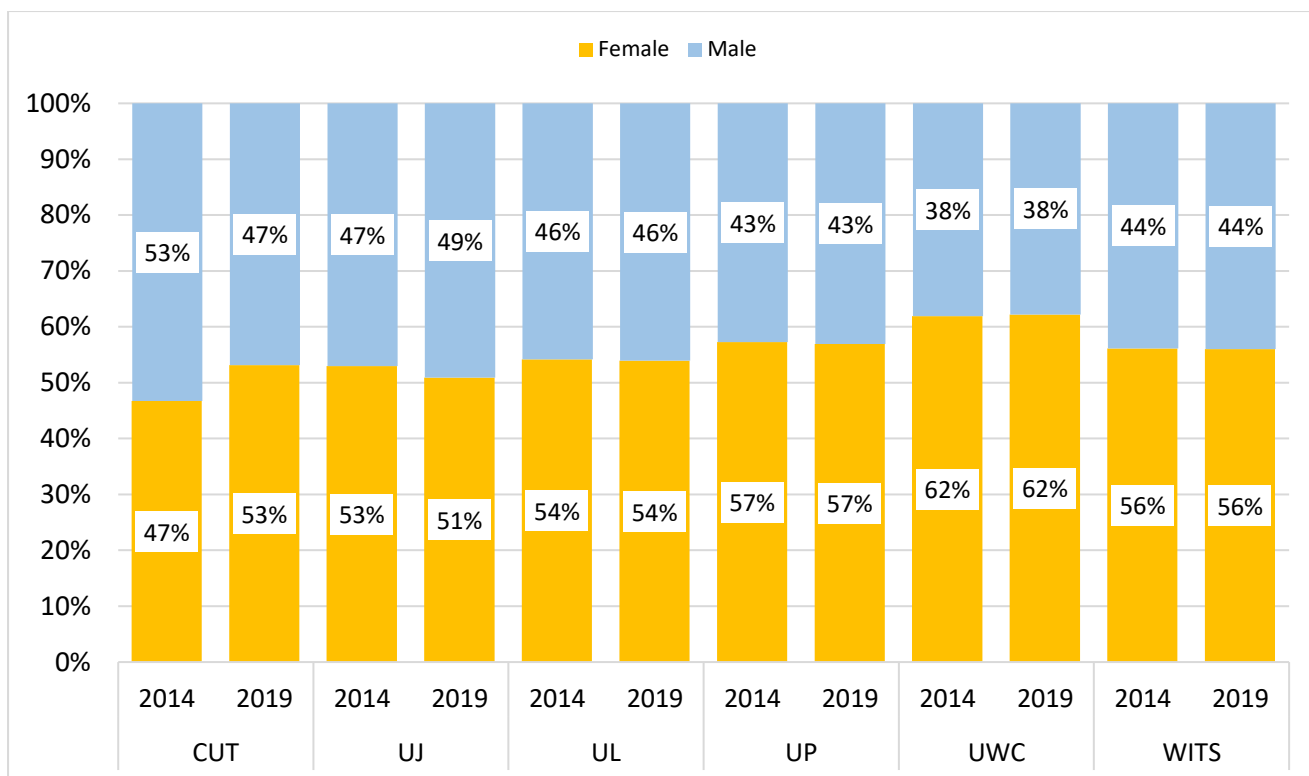
although UL is not situated in a former homeland, it is very close to the former homelands of Lebowa, Venda and Gazankulu. Moreover, UL was established under the Extension of University Education Act no 45 of 1959 that provided for the establishment, maintenance and control of university colleges for non-white persons.

UP and Wits had the highest proportional enrolment of White students among the participating institutions, with UP having had the higher proportion (42% in 2019) of the two. It is interesting to note that UP is a historically white Afrikaans institution while Wits is a historically white English institution. At both UP and Wits, the proportion of White students decreased from 2014 to 2019. From the previous table, it is evident that the proportional decrease was also a decrease in absolute numbers at both institutions.

Among the participating institutions, UWC had the highest percentage of Coloured students. UWC, situated on the Cape Flats in Belhar, was notably established as an institution designated for the Coloured population group in 1959, also in line with the provisions of the Extension of University Education Act.

### **Enrolment and gender distribution at participating institutions**

In the section that presented gender distribution in national headcount enrolment, it was evident that females outnumbered males in South African HEIs. Here we present the gender distribution in headcount at participating institutions.



**Figure 13: Gender profile of undergraduate students in the universities in the study**

Whereas female participation in university education is a concern in most African countries, it is not an equity concern in South Africa. On the contrary, the low participation rate and retention of males (especially African and Coloured males) in the university system is regarded as a concern that needs to be addressed in order to improve equity. The male and female population for the university age group were more or less the same and a higher participation rate for male students in university education would have been expected.

The proportional distribution of gender for undergraduate enrolments in 2014 and 2019 is displayed in Figure 13. The only university that had a shift in gender distribution between 2014 and 2019 was CUT, where male enrolments were proportionally higher than female enrolments in 2014 (53%). By 2019 at CUT, female enrolments were proportionally higher at 53%, matching the national trend. Of the participating institutions, UWC had the highest proportion of female enrolments in both 2014 and 2019 (62%). UJ had the most equal participation of male and female undergraduate students in 2019 with 51% females compared to 49% males.

Participation in higher education is, however, commensurate with school achievement. In this regard it is notable that female learners achieve better results throughout their school career, while male participation in higher education is lower. The phenomenon of gender distribution

in HEIs is thus not something that can be addressed in the higher education system alone. A holistic approach is required for an adequate intervention.

### **Throughput at participating institutions**

In line with the throughput analyses of the CHE (2021) presented at the national level, throughput rates for participating institutions are presented for the 2014 cohort for three-year undergraduate diplomas at participating institutions first, followed by three-year and then four-year B-degrees. Of the participating institutions, CUT however, did not offer three-year B-degrees, while UL, UP, UWC and Wits did not offer three-year diploma qualifications. Of the participating institutions, UJ was thus the only institution that offered all three types of undergraduate qualifications. Throughput rates were also disaggregated by population group, gender, NSFAS status and in the following section for programmes in the humanities and natural science.

The 2014 first-time entering cohort is presented as this is the latest data available from HEMIS. Throughput rates in minimum time plus two years (M+2) were reported, since historical data analyses have shown that the majority of students graduate within the minimum time plus two years, after which the numbers that graduate become very low.

**Table 5: Throughput rates in M+2 years for three-year diplomas by population group or race, 2014-cohort**

	<b>CUT</b>	<b>UJ</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>54%</b>
<b>African</b>	43%	54%
<b>Coloured</b>	40%	48%
<b>Indian</b>	33%	58%
<b>White</b>	44%	60%

Table 5 is an illustration of the throughput rate (%) in minimum time plus two years (M+2) for undergraduate three-year diplomas by population group for the 2014 first-time entering cohort. UJ had the highest overall throughput rate for three-year diplomas. UJ also had the highest throughput rate for all population groups. The highest throughput rate was for White students (60%) at UJ. The lowest throughput was for Indian students (33%) at CUT.

**Table 6: Throughput rates in M+2 years for three-year B-degrees by population group**

	<b>UJ</b>	<b>UL</b>	<b>UP</b>	<b>UWC</b>	<b>Wits</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>63%</b>
<b>African</b>	58%	63%	48%	47%	59%
<b>Coloured</b>	55%	100%	48%	51%	63%
<b>Indian</b>	68%	50%	50%	53%	68%
<b>White</b>	64%		60%	52%	69%

Table 6 is an illustration of the throughput rate (%) in minimum time plus two years (M+2) for undergraduate three-year B-degrees by population group for the 2014 first-time entering cohort. Among the participating institutions, UL and Wits had the highest overall throughput rate for three-year B-degrees. UWC had the lowest overall throughput rate for three-year B-degrees. UL had the highest throughput rate for African and Coloured students, UJ and Wits had the highest throughput rate for Indian students. Wits had the highest throughput rate for White students. Indian students had the highest throughput rate within UJ and UWC. White students had the highest throughput rate within UP and Wits. UL had no White students.

**Table 7: Throughput rates in M+2 years for four-year B-degrees by population group**

	<b>CUT</b>	<b>UJ</b>	<b>UL</b>	<b>UP</b>	<b>UWC</b>	<b>WITS</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>65%</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>79%</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>57%</b>
<b>African</b>	64%	59%	79%	52%	55%	51%
<b>Coloured</b>	74%	49%	89%	48%	59%	75%
<b>Indian</b>	100%	65%		55%	73%	67%
<b>White</b>	90%	59%	67%	67%	77%	72%

Table 7 is an illustration of the throughput rate (%) in minimum time plus two years (M+2) for undergraduate four-year B-degrees by population group for the 2014 first-time entering cohort. Among the participating institutions, UL had the highest overall throughput rate for four-year B-degrees. Wits had the lowest overall throughput rate for four-year B-degrees. UL had the highest throughput rate for African and Coloured students. CUT had the highest throughput rate for Indian and White students. Indian students had the highest throughput rate within UJ

and CUT. White students had the highest throughput rate within UP, Wits and UWC. UL had no White students.

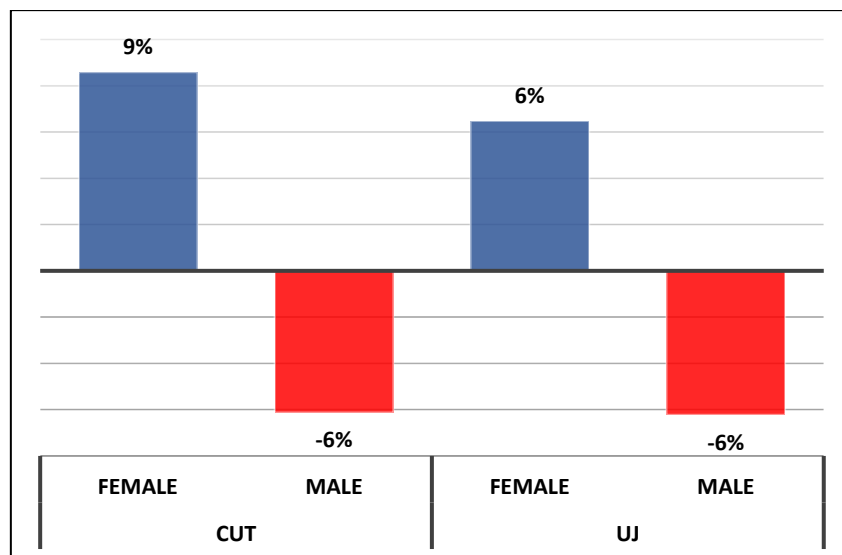
**Table 8: Throughput rates in M+2 years for three-year diplomas by gender**

	CUT	UJ
<b>Total</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>54%</b>
<b>Female</b>	51%	61%
<b>Male</b>	37%	48%

Table 8 is an illustration of the throughput rate (%) in minimum time plus two years (M+2) for undergraduate three-year diplomas by gender for the 2014 first-time entering cohort. Females had the highest throughput rate in both institutions. UJ had the highest throughput rate for both genders. The highest throughput rate was for female students at UJ. The lowest throughput rate was for male students at CUT. The difference between female and male students was however virtually the same (13%, UJ and 14%, CUT).

The following figures illustrates that deviation from the average throughput for three-year diplomas by gender.

**Figure 14: Deviation from the average throughput of female and male students for three-year diplomas in participating institutions**



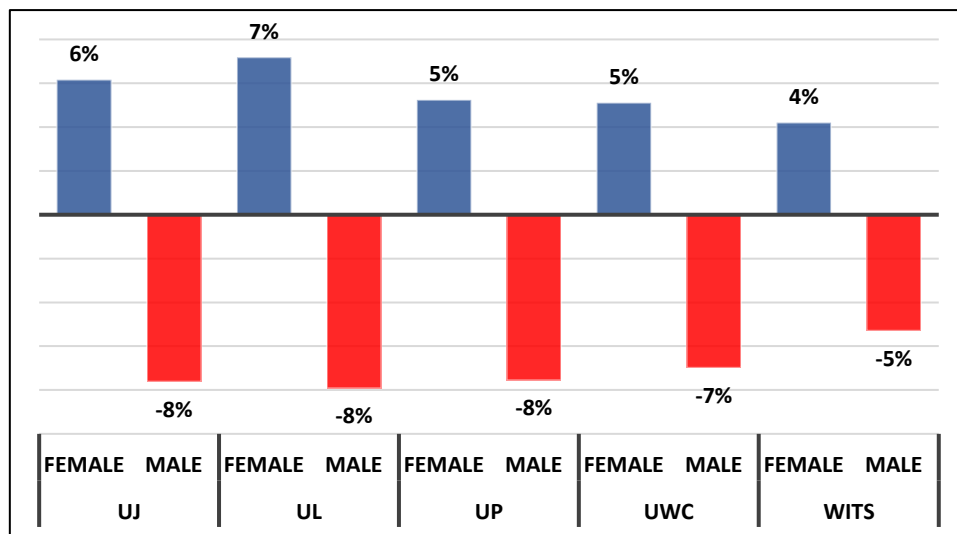


**Table 9: Throughput rates in M+2 years for three-year B-degrees by gender**

	UJ	UL	UP	UWC	WITS
<b>Total</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>63%</b>
<b>Female</b>	<b>65%</b>	<b>70%</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>67%</b>
<b>Male</b>	<b>51%</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>57%</b>

Table 9 is an illustration of the throughput rate (%) in minimum time plus two years (M+2) for undergraduate three-year B-degrees by gender for the 2014 first-time entering cohort. UL had the highest throughput rate for female students. Wits had the highest throughput rate for male students. UWC had the lowest throughput rate amongst participating institutions, and the lowest throughput rate for female and male students. Female student throughput was better than males at all institutions for three-year B-degrees. The largest range between the two was at UL at 15%, although the range was 10% or higher at all other institutions.

Figure 15 shows the deviation from the average throughput for three-year B-degrees by gender.



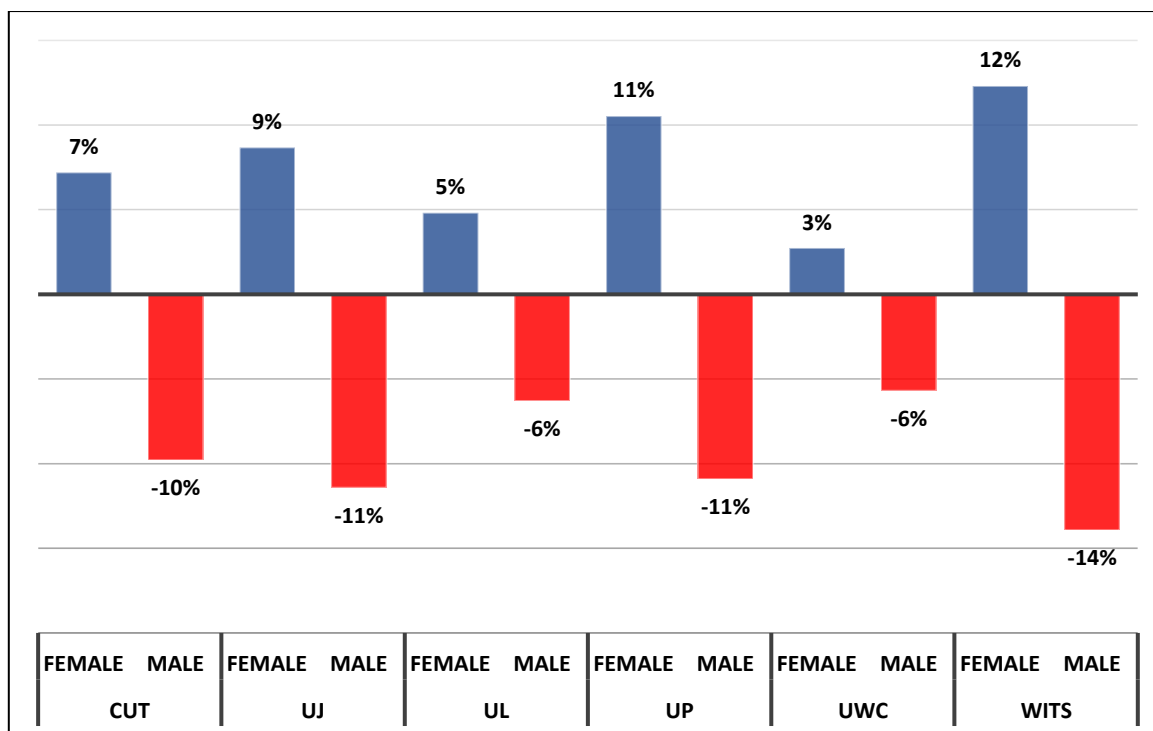
**Figure 15: Deviation from the average throughput of female and male students for three-year B-degrees in participating institutions**

**Table 10: Throughput rates in M+2 years for four-year B-degrees by gender**

	<b>CUT</b>	<b>UJ</b>	<b>UL</b>	<b>UP</b>	<b>UWC</b>	<b>WITS</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>65%</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>79%</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>57%</b>
<b>Female</b>	<b>72%</b>	<b>68%</b>	<b>84%</b>	<b>71%</b>	<b>62%</b>	<b>69%</b>
<b>Male</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>48%</b>	<b>73%</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>43%</b>

Table 10 is an illustration of the throughput rate (%) in minimum time plus two years (M+2) for undergraduate four-year B-degrees by gender for the 2014 first-time entering cohort. Among the participating institutions, UL had the highest overall throughput rate for four-year B-degrees. Wits had the lowest overall throughput rate for four-year B-degrees. UL had the highest throughput rate for female and male students. UWC had the lowest throughput rate for female students. Wits had the lowest throughput rate for male students. Female student throughput was better than males at all institutions for four-year B-degrees. The largest difference in the range between the female and male students was at Wits (26%). Interestingly, although four-year B-degrees had the highest throughput rate at the national level, the largest differences in proportional throughput between females and males at participating institutions was for four-year B-degrees.

Figure 16 indicates the deviation from the average throughput for four-year B-degrees by gender.

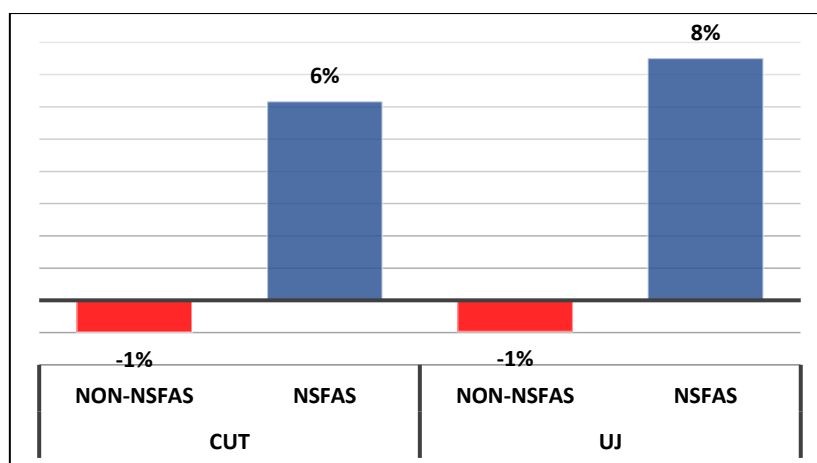


**Figure 16: Deviation from the average throughput of female and male students for four-year B-degrees in participating institutions**

**Table 11: Throughput rates in M+2 years for three-year diplomas by NSFAS status**

	CUT	UJ
<b>Total</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>54%</b>
<b>Non-NSFAS</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>53%</b>
<b>NSFAS</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>62%</b>

Table 11 is an illustration of the percentage throughput rate in minimum time plus two years (M+2) for undergraduate three-year diplomas and national diplomas by NSFAS recipients versus non-recipients for the 2014 first-time entering cohort. Students receiving NSFAS had the highest throughput rate across the participating institutions for this qualification type. NSFAS students at UJ had the highest throughput rate across all categories. The lowest throughput was for non-NSFAS students at CUT.



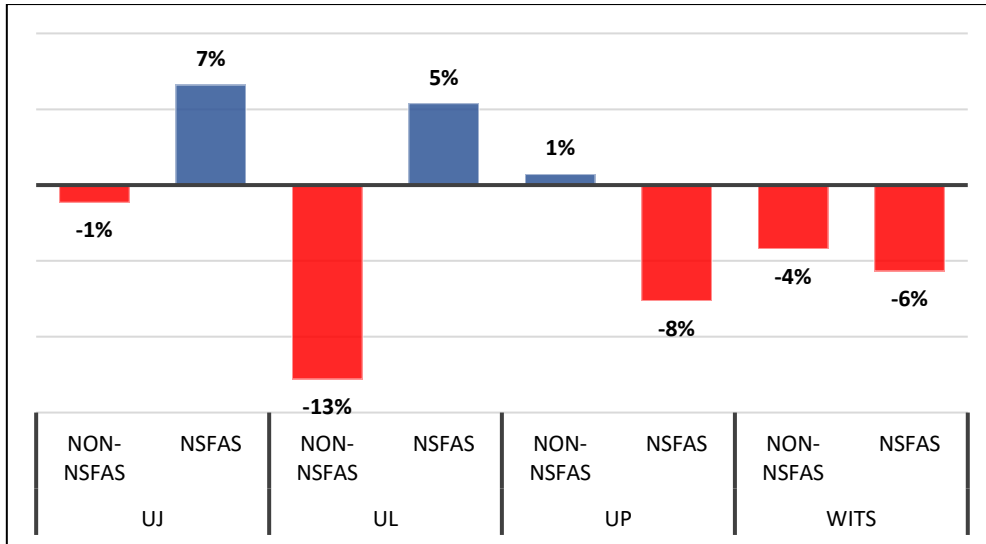
**Figure 17: Deviation from the average for three-year diplomas by NSFAS status**

**Table 12<sup>4</sup>: Throughput rates in M+2 years for three-year B-degrees by NSFAS status**

	UJ	UL	UP	WITS
<b>Total</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>63%</b>
<b>Non-NSFAS</b>	<b>57%</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>59%</b>
<b>NSFAS</b>	<b>65%</b>	<b>69%</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>58%</b>

Table 12 is an illustration of the percentage throughput rate in minimum time plus two years (M+2) for undergraduate three-year B-degrees by NSFAS recipients versus non-recipients for the 2014 first-time entering cohort. UL had the highest throughput rate for NSFAS students. Wits had the highest throughput rate for non-NSFAS students. At UJ and UL, the throughput rate amongst NSFAS students was higher than non-NSFAS students. At UP, the throughput rate of non-NSFAS students was higher than NSFAS students. At Wits, the throughputs were similar across the two categories. However, the throughput rate did not seem to match the overall throughput rate of Wits. This could be because students receiving bursaries were not included in this table. It could however be a reflection of the quality of the available data related to NSFAS.

<sup>4</sup> Tables 12 and 13, presenting the throughput rates by NSFAS recipients, do not include UWC because no data were available for this institution in this regard.

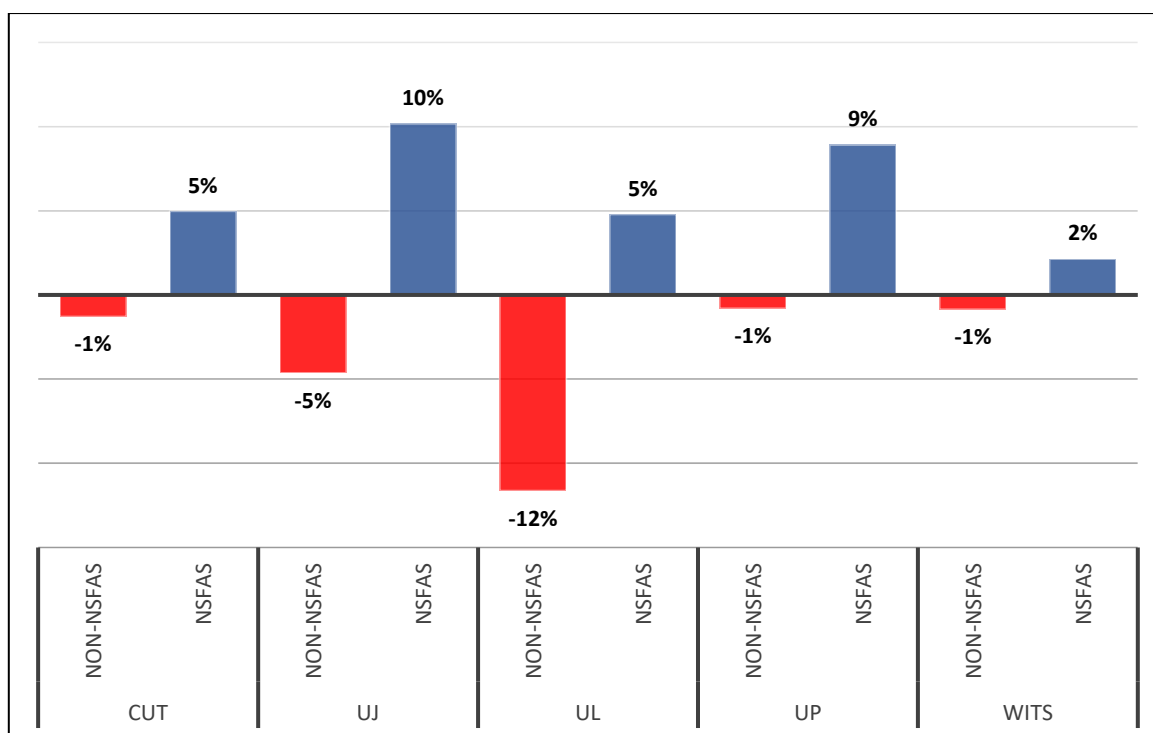


**Figure 18: Deviation from the average throughput for three-year B-degrees by NSFAS status**

**Table 13: Throughput rates in M+2 years for four-year B-degrees by NSFAS status**

	<b>CUT</b>	<b>UJ</b>	<b>UL</b>	<b>UP</b>	<b>WITS</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>65%</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>79%</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>57%</b>
<b>Non-NSFAS</b>	63%	55%	67%	60%	56%
<b>NSFAS</b>	70%	69%	84%	69%	59%

The table above is an illustration of the percentage throughput rate in minimum time plus two years (M+2) for undergraduate four-year B-degrees by NSFAS recipients versus non-recipients for the 2014 first-time entering cohort. UL had the highest throughput rate for NSFAS and non-NSFAS students. Across all participating institutions the throughput rate amongst NSFAS students was higher than non-NSFAS students in four-year B-degrees. However, the throughput rates did not seem to match the overall throughput rate at some institutions. This could be because students receiving bursaries were not included in this table. It could however, be a reflection of the quality of the available data related to NSFAS.



**Figure 19: Deviation from the average throughput for four-year B-degrees by NSFAS status**

### Faculty level

This section of the chapter presents data that relate to the humanities/arts and natural science faculties at participating institutions. As noted, HEMIS does not gather data relating to faculty but does gather data relating to programmes for which students are enrolled. The nature and scope of programmes offered in faculties differed from institution to institution. There was especially a marked difference at the Central University of Technology in this regard. As such, although the data are presented alongside each other, they are not exactly comparable in every respect.

**Table 14: Undergraduate (UG) headcount enrolment in the humanities and natural science faculties at participating institutions**

	Field of study	2014	2019	Field of study	2014	2019
<b>CUT</b>	Humanities	2 926	5 162	Natural Sciences	1 459	1 864
	% of UG enrolment	21.91	25.94	% of UG enrolment	10.92	9.37
	<b>Total UG Headcount</b>	13 357	19 903	<b>Total UG Headcount</b>	13 357	19 903
<b>UJ</b>	Humanities	5 206	4 838	Natural Sciences	3 148	3 726

	Field of study	2014	2019	Field of study	2014	2019
	% of UG enrolment	12.21	11.73	% of UG enrolment	7.38	9.04
	<b>Total UG Headcount</b>	42 640	41 235	<b>Total UG Headcount</b>	<b>42 640</b>	<b>41 235</b>
<b>UL</b>	Humanities	5 344	6 413	Natural Sciences	6 158	5 241
	% of UG enrolment	26.28	34.75	% of UG enrolment	30.28	28.40
	<b>Total UG Headcount</b>	2033 4	18456	<b>Total UG Headcount</b>	<b>20 334</b>	<b>18 456</b>
<b>UP</b>	Humanities	4 370	4 180	Natural Sciences	4 825	4 610
	% of UG enrolment	12.58	11.69	% of UG enrolment	13.89	12.90
	<b>Total UG Headcount</b>	34 747	35 746	<b>Total UG Headcount</b>	<b>34 747</b>	<b>35 746</b>
<b>UWC</b>	Humanities	3 276	3 889	Natural Sciences	1 656	2 389
	% of UG enrolment	20.27	20.63	% of UG enrolment	10.25	12.67
	<b>Total UG Headcount</b>	<b>16</b> <b>159</b>	<b>18 855</b>	<b>Total UG Headcount</b>	<b>16 159</b>	<b>18 855</b>
<b>WITS</b>	Humanities	6 031	7 224	Natural Sciences	2 823	3 611
	% of UG enrolment	27.84	28.62	% of UG enrolment	13.03	14.31
	<b>Total UG Headcount</b>	<b>21</b> <b>661</b>	<b>25 238</b>	<b>Total UG Headcount</b>	<b>21 661</b>	<b>25 238</b>

Table 14 describes the humanities and natural science undergraduate headcount enrolment at all participating institutions. In addition, the table indicates the total undergraduate headcount enrolment at all institutions together with the proportion of undergraduate students made up by the humanities and natural science faculty at each institution in 2014 and 2019.

In 2014 CUT, and in 2019 UL, had the least undergraduate students enrolled across participating institutions. It is possible that the low headcount enrolment of these institutions

accounted for their relative success at B-degrees. On the other hand, undergraduate headcount at UWC did not differ significantly from UL, and their throughput was lowest for three-year B-degrees. In 2014 and 2019, UJ had the most undergraduate students enrolled of all participating institutions.

Table 14 illustrates that, in 2019, Wits had the most and UL had the highest proportion of humanities undergraduate students across participating institutions. In 2019, UWC had the least and UJ had the lowest proportion of humanities undergraduate students across participating institutions. This did not differ markedly from 2014.

The table illustrates that, in 2014 and 2019, UL had the most and highest proportion of natural science undergraduate students across participating institutions. In 2014 and 2019, CUT had the least and UJ had the lowest proportion of natural science undergraduate students across participating institutions.



**Table 15: Faculty enrolments by population group or race**

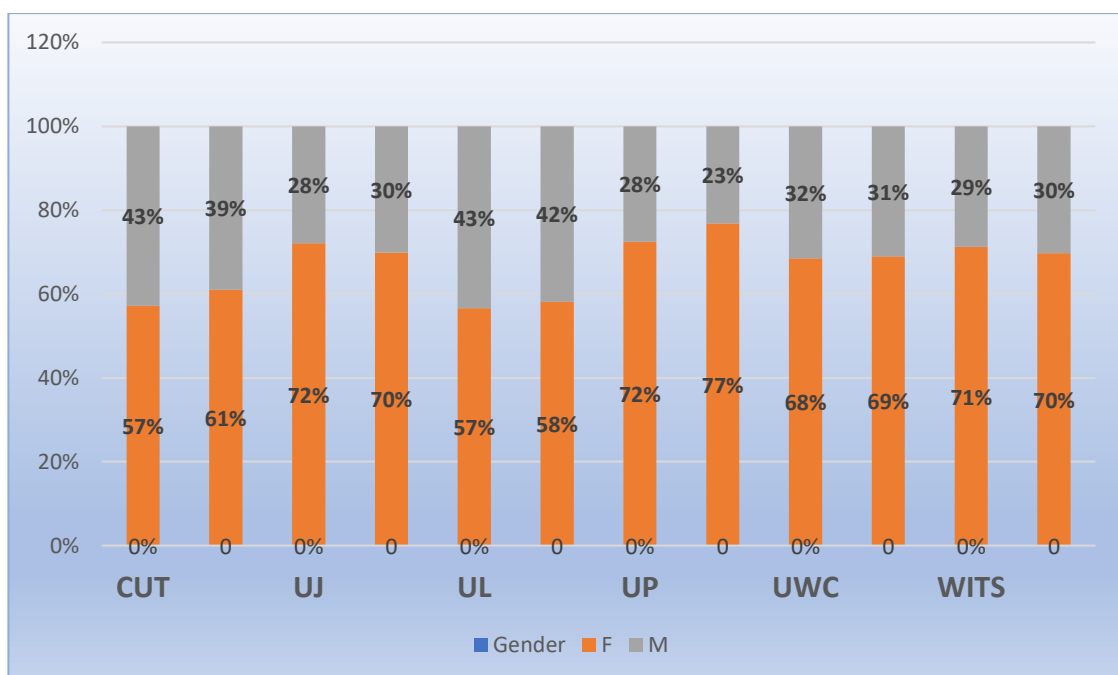
	<b>Institution</b>	<b>CUT</b>		<b>UJ</b>		<b>UL</b>		<b>UP</b>		<b>UWC</b>		<b>WITS</b>	
<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Population group</b>	<b>2014 (%)</b>	<b>2019 (%)</b>	2014 (%)	2019 (%)	2014 (%)	2019 (%)	2014 (%)	2019 (%)	2014 (%)	2019 (%)	2014 (%)	2019 (%)
<b>Humanities</b>	<b>A</b>	94%	97%	87%	93%	100%	100%	33%	45%	41%	41%	61%	67%
	<b>C</b>	3%	2%	4%	3%	0%	0%	3%	4%	55%	56%	7%	6%
	<b>I</b>	0%	0%	3%	1%			4%	5%	2%	2%	10%	10%
	<b>W</b>	3%	1%	6%	3%			60%	46%	2%	2%	23%	17%
<b>Science</b>	<b>A</b>	79%	89%	84%	91%	100%	100%	49%	50%	51%	60%	68%	73%
	<b>C</b>	4%	2%	2%	2%	0%	0%	2%	2%	36%	31%	3%	3%
	<b>I</b>	0%	0%	4%	4%	0%	0%	5%	6%	8%	5%	12%	12%
	<b>W</b>	17%	9%	10%	4%	0%	0%	45%	42%	5%	4%	18%	13%

**Table 16: Faculty enrolments by gender at participating institutions**

	<b>Institution</b>	<b>CUT</b>		<b>UJ</b>		<b>UL</b>		<b>UP</b>		<b>UWC</b>		<b>WITS</b>	
<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>2014 (%)</b>	<b>2019 (%)</b>	<b>2014 (%)</b>	<b>2019 (%)</b>	<b>2014 (%)</b>	<b>2019 (%)</b>	<b>2014 (%)</b>	<b>2019 (%)</b>	<b>2014 (%)</b>	<b>2019 (%)</b>	<b>2014 (%)</b>	<b>2019 (%)</b>
<b>Humanities</b>	F	57%	61%	72%	70%	57%	58%	72%	77%	68%	69%	71%	70%
	M	43%	39%	28%	30%	43%	42%	28%	23%	32%	31%	29%	30%
		14%	22%	44%	40%	13%	16%	45%	54%	37%	38%	42%	40%
<b>Science</b>	F	58%	68%	46%	43%	50%	46%	56%	55%	52%	50%	49%	47%
	M	42%	32%	54%	57%	50%	54%	44%	45%	48%	50%	51%	53%
		16%	37%	-8%	-15%	-1%	-9%	12%	9%	5%	0%	-2%	-6%

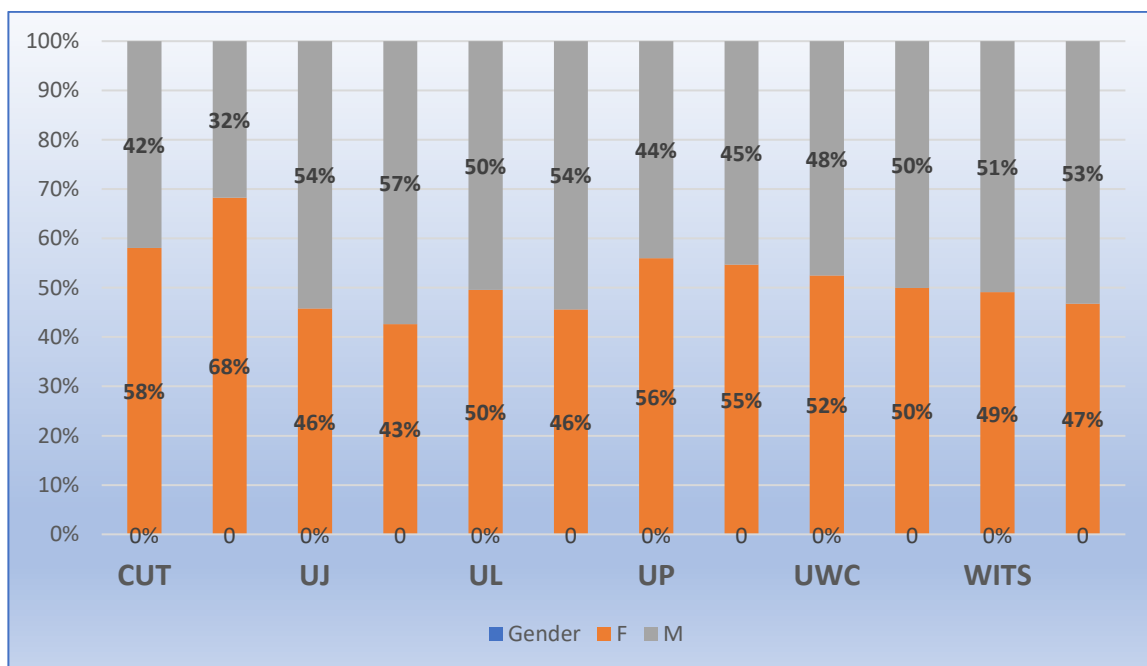
The table above presents the female and male distribution of undergraduate students in the humanities and science faculties at participating institutions for 2014 and 2019. Earlier in the report it was shown that in 2019, there were more female (60%) undergraduate students registered in public higher education institutions in South Africa than males (40%), a trend that has been evident since 2005 at least. It was moreover shown that across participating institutions, there were more female than male undergraduate students in 2019. The institution with the greatest proportional range between male and female undergraduate students was UWC (62%/38%), while UJ (51%/49%) had the greatest equality amongst participating institutions. The table above shows that, while in many instances there were more female students enrolled than males, the difference in range between female and male undergraduate students across the humanities and natural science faculties illustrate variant trends.

Across participating institutions, in humanities faculties, there were more female than male undergraduate students. The average difference between females and males in humanities faculties at participating institutions was 67% female and 33% male. UP had the largest difference in 2019 between females (77%) and males (23%) in the humanities faculty. CUT and UL had the least difference between female (57%) and male (43%) undergraduate humanities students in 2014. Interestingly while at the institutional level, UJ had the most equal female/male undergraduate enrolment rate, the average difference between female and male undergraduate students in the humanities faculty was 42% between 2014 and 2019. This is also illustrated in the graph in Figure 20.



**Figure 20: Gender distribution in Humanities across participating institutions**

There was a more equal spread of female and male undergraduate students in science faculties at participating institutions. The average difference between female and male undergraduate students in science faculties at participating institutions was 52% female and 48% male. Indeed, unlike the humanities faculties where all institutions had more female than male undergraduate students enrolled, in the science faculties, UJ, UL and Wits had more male than female undergraduate students enrolled in 2014 and 2019. The institution with the largest difference in enrolment numbers between females (68%) and males (32%) in the science faculty was CUT in 2019. The institution with no difference in enrolment numbers between females (50%) and males (50%) in the science faculty was UWC in 2019. Interestingly, while UWC had the greatest difference in female/male overall undergraduate enrolment, the difference in the science faculty was 2.5% on average between 2014 and 2019. This is also illustrated in the graph in Figure 21.



**Figure 21: Gender distribution in Science faculties across participating institutions**

Earlier in the report it was shown that 79% of students enrolled for undergraduate programmes were African, and almost 11% were white in 2019 (CHE, 2021, p.18). Specifically, with respect to qualification type, 73% of students enrolled for degrees were African, and 14% were White in 2019 (CHE, 2021, p.18). With regard to diplomas 92% of students were African and 3% were White in 2019. To reiterate, at the last census the African population group constituted 79.2% and the White population group constituted 8.9% of the South African population

(StatsSA, 2012, p.21). Thus, with respect to degree enrolment there were fewer African and more White students enrolled than in proportion to their respective population groups, while for diplomas and certificates, the opposite was the case. Further to this, it should be noted that, of the participating institutions, only CUT and UJ offered three-year diplomas.

The above figure also indicates that among the participating institutions, CUT, UJ and UL had the highest proportional enrolment of black students. Of the three, UL had the highest proportional enrolment of African students; in 2019, 100% of students enrolled at UL were African. UP and Wits had the highest proportional enrolment of White students among the participating institutions, with UP having had the higher proportion (42% in 2019) of the two. Among the participating institutions, UWC had the highest percentage of Coloured students. We might therefore have anticipated that there would not have been a different population group or race distribution across the two faculties at CUT, UJ and UL. Particularly at UL no difference was anticipated. What follows is a description of the extent to which this is the case.

In the humanities faculties of CUT, UJ, UL and Wits, the majority of undergraduate students enrolled were African in 2014 and 2019. At UP, the majority of enrolled students in the humanities faculty were White. At most institutions, the distribution of population group or race of undergraduate students enrolled in humanities faculties remained relatively constant. The largest shift was at UP where the majority of enrolled students were White; in 2014, the proportion was 60% and in 2019, it was 46%, just 1% more than African students. Should this trend continue, it is likely that African students will be in the majority in the humanities faculty at UP. At UWC, the majority of enrolled students in the humanities faculty were Coloured. UWC also had the largest proportion of Coloured students across participating institutions' humanities faculties. Wits had the largest proportion of Indian students across participating institutions' humanities faculties.

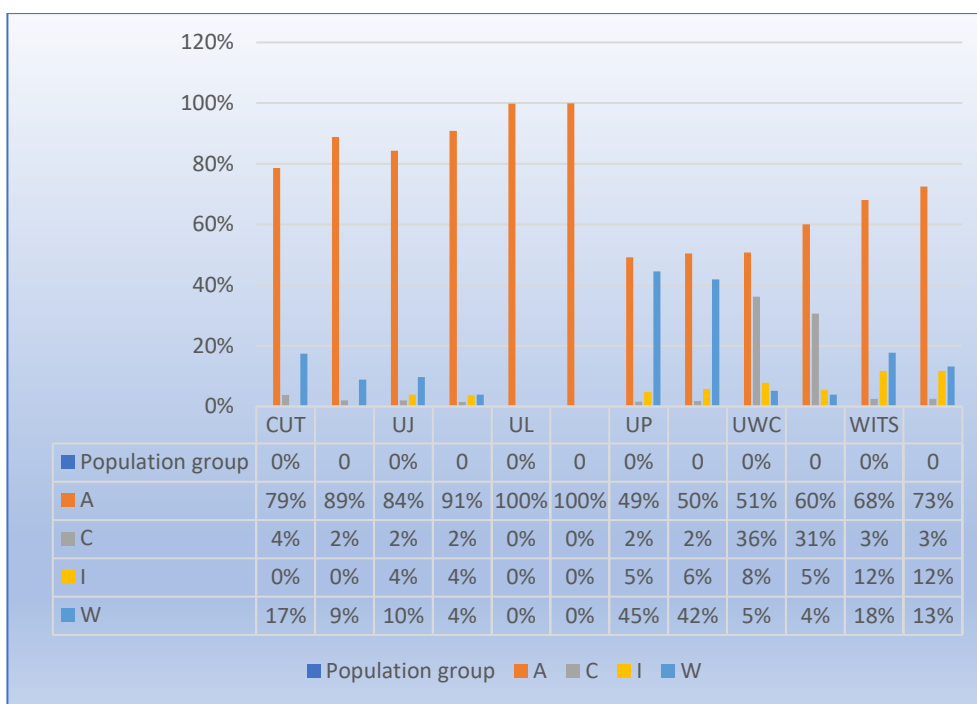
Except for UL and UWC that had 100% and 41% enrolment respectively, of African students in 2014 and 2019, the proportion of African students increased at the other participating institutions from 2014 to 2019. Similarly, the proportion of White students decreased from 2014 and 2019, except for UL that had none and UWC where the proportion of White students remained stagnant at 2%. This is also illustrated in the graph in Figure 22.



**Figure 22: Population group or race distribution in Humanities faculties across participating institutions**

Across participating institutions, in the science faculties, in 2014 and 2019, the majority of undergraduate students enrolled were African. UP had the lowest proportion of African students enrolled in the science faculty, 49% in 2014 and 50% in 2019. UP had the largest proportion of White students of any participating institution in its science faculty. UWC had the largest proportion of Coloured students of any participating institution in its science faculty. Wits had the largest proportion of Indian students of any participating institution in its science faculty.

Except for UL that had 100% African students enrolled in 2014 and 2019, the proportion of African students increased in other participating institutions' science faculties from 2014 to 2019. Similarly, the proportion of White students decreased from 2014 and 2019, except for UL that had none. This is also illustrated in the graph in Figure 23.



**Figure 23: Population group or race distribution in Science faculties across participating institutions**

**Table 17: Throughput rates in M+2 years for three-year diplomas by participating institution**

Three-year Diplomas throughput rates by participating institution and faculty				
Institution	Faculty	Throughputs		
		M	M+1	M+2
CUT	Humanities	31%	51%	60%
	Science	26%	34%	37%
UJ	Humanities	37%	54%	59%
	Science	0%	32%	54%

Table 17 illustrates the throughput rates for diplomas for undergraduate students who enrolled for the first time in CUT and UJ in 2014. The national throughput for this qualification type, illustrated earlier in the chapter, was that 55% of those who enrolled in 2014 graduated by 2019, whereas 45% dropped out (CHE, 2021, p.61). The throughput for this qualification type, illustrated in the table above, at CUT and UJ, was higher than the national average for the humanities faculties but lower than the national throughput for science faculties. The table also shows that the largest proportion of graduates did so at the end of three years of study, that is,

within the regulations. That proportion was moreover about one third of those who enrolled for diplomas in humanities faculties in 2014.

**Table 18: Throughput rates in M+2 years for three-year B-degrees by participating institution and faculty**

<b>Three-year B-degrees throughput rates by participating institution and faculty</b>				
<b>Institution</b>	<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Throughput Rate</b>		
		<b>M</b>	<b>M+1</b>	<b>M+2</b>
<b>UJ</b>	<b>Humanities</b>	40%	56%	61%
	<b>Science</b>	11%	29%	42%
<b>UL</b>	<b>Humanities</b>	57%	72%	76%
	<b>Science</b>	19%	41%	50%
<b>UP</b>	<b>Humanities</b>	41%	49%	53%
	<b>Science</b>	15%	29%	37%
<b>UWC</b>	<b>Humanities</b>	25%	38%	45%
	<b>Science</b>	21%	48%	56%
<b>WITS</b>	<b>Humanities</b>	42%	57%	61%
	<b>Science</b>	37%	54%	57%

Table 18 illustrates the throughput rates for three-year B-degrees for undergraduate students who enrolled for the first time at participating institutions in 2014. The national throughput for this qualification type, illustrated earlier in the chapter, was 60% of those who enrolled graduated by 2019, whereas 40% dropped out (CHE, 2021, p.62). The throughput for this qualification type, illustrated in the table above, at UJ, UL and Wits in the humanities faculties was higher than the national average. At UP and UWC, the throughput in the humanities faculties was lower than the national average for this qualification type. The throughput for this qualification type, illustrated in the table above, in the science faculties was lower than the national average across participating institutions. The highest throughput across institutions and faculties was the faculty of humanities at UL (76%). The lowest throughput across institutions and faculties was the natural science faculty at UP (37%). Table 18 shows that the largest proportion of graduates in humanities faculties did so at end of three years of study, that is, within the regulations.



**Table 19: Throughput rates of humanities and natural science four-year B-degrees by participating institution and faculty**

<b>Four-year B-degrees throughput rates by participating institution and faculty</b>				
		<b>Throughput Rate</b>		
<b>Institution</b>	<b>Faculty</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>M+1</b>	<b>M+2</b>
<b>CUT</b>	<b>Humanities</b>	42%	59%	64%
	<b>Science</b>	62%	77%	77%
<b>UJ</b>	<b>Humanities</b>	44%	55%	58%
<b>UL</b>	<b>Humanities</b>	73%	82%	85%
	<b>Science</b>	67%	80%	84%
<b>UP</b>	<b>Humanities</b>	61%	71%	73%
	<b>Science</b>	35%	47%	54%
<b>UWC</b>	<b>Humanities</b>	24%	42%	47%
<b>WITS</b>	<b>Humanities</b>	59%	67%	69%

Table 19 illustrates the throughput rates for four-year B-degrees for undergraduate students who enrolled for the first time across participating institutions in 2014. While all participating institutions offered this qualification type, it was not offered in all institutions (UJ, UWC and Wits science faculties in this period). The national throughput for this qualification type, illustrated earlier in the chapter, was 67% of those who enrolled graduated by 2019, whereas 33% dropped out (CHE 2021, p.64). The throughput for this qualification type, illustrated in the table above, at UL, UP and Wits in the humanities faculties was higher than the national average. The throughput for this qualification type, illustrated in the table above, at CUT and UL in the science faculties was higher than the national average. At CUT, UJ and UWC the throughput in the humanities faculties was lower than the national average for this qualification type. The throughput for this qualification type, illustrated in the table above, in the science faculties was lower than the national average at UP. The highest throughput across institutions and faculties for this qualification type was the faculty of humanities at UL (85%). The lowest throughput across institutions and faculties for this qualification type was the faculty of humanities at UWC (47%). The table also shows that the largest proportion of graduates do so at the end of four years of study, that is, in regulation.

<b>Three-year Diplomas throughput rates (M+2) by participating institution, faculty and population group or race</b>					
			<b>Throughput rate</b>		
<b>Institution</b>	<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Population Group /Race</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>M+1</b>	<b>M+2</b>
CUT	Humanities	A	28%	50%	60%
		C	20%	40%	40%
		W	55%	60%	65%
	Humanities Total		31%	51%	60%
	Science	A	29%	36%	39%
		C	21%	29%	29%
		W	15%	29%	31%
	Science Total		26%	34%	37%
UJ	Humanities	A	35%	53%	59%
		C	67%	67%	67%
		I	100%	100%	100%
		W	100%	100%	100%
	Humanities Total		37%	54%	59%
	Science	A	0%	33%	54%
		C	0%	0%	50%
		W	0%	0%	0%
	Science Total		0%	32%	54%

**Table 20: Throughput rates for three-year diplomas (M+2) by participating institution, faculty and population group or race**

The table above illustrates the throughput rates for diplomas by population group or race for undergraduate students who enrolled for the first time in CUT and UJ in 2014. The national throughput for this qualification type, illustrated earlier in the chapter, was that 55% of those who enrolled in 2014 had graduated by 2019, whereas 45% dropped out (CHE, 2021, p.61). The throughput for this qualification type, as illustrated above, at CUT and UJ was higher than the national average for the humanities faculties but lower than the national throughput for science faculties. In all instances, the proportion of White, Indian and Coloured students was very low at both CUT and UJ in the humanities and science faculties. For this reason, it is

difficult to interpret the population group or race throughput comparatively. When compared with CUT's institutional throughput for three-year diploma qualifications (43%), all population group throughput was higher in the humanities faculty, and all population group throughput was lower in the science faculty. When compared with UJ's institutional throughput for three-year diploma qualifications (54%), all population groups' throughput were higher in the UJ humanities faculty, and the only population group, African students' throughput was equal to the institutional throughput in the UJ science faculty. In other words, irrespective of population group or race, the throughput of students in humanities faculties' three-year diploma qualifications was better than students enrolled in similar qualification types in science faculties.

<b>Three-year B-degrees throughput rates (M+2) by participating institution, faculty and population group or race</b>					
			<b>Throughput rate</b>		
<b>Institution</b>	<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Population group</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>M+1</b>	<b>M+2</b>
UJ	Humanities	A	40%	57%	62%
		C	43%	61%	64%
		I	57%	66%	71%
		W	38%	42%	44%
	Humanities Total		40%	56%	61%
	Science	A	8%	25%	38%
		C	13%	53%	60%
		I	13%	47%	61%
		W	34%	52%	62%
	Science Total		11%	29%	42%
UL	Humanities	A	57%	72%	76%
	Humanities Total		57%	72%	76%
	Science	A	19%	41%	50%
		I	0%	0%	0%
	Science Total		19%	41%	50%
UP	Humanities	A	36%	46%	50%
		C	36%	43%	45%
		I	30%	34%	40%

<b>Three-year B-degrees throughput rates (M+2) by participating institution, faculty and population group or race</b>					
			<b>Throughput rate</b>		
		W	44%	53%	55%
	Humanities Total		41%	49%	53%
	Science	A	7%	22%	31%
		C	20%	31%	37%
		I	21%	36%	42%
		W	25%	38%	44%
	Science Total		15%	29%	37%
UWC	Humanities	A	20%	36%	43%
		C	27%	39%	47%
		I	37%	50%	57%
		W	35%	38%	41%
	Humanities Total		25%	38%	45%
	Science	A	19%	47%	54%
		C	22%	51%	59%
		I	24%	41%	50%
		W	42%	47%	53%
	Science Total		21%	48%	56%
WITS	Humanities	A	37%	52%	58%
		C	42%	61%	64%
		I	56%	72%	76%
		W	51%	59%	61%
	Humanities Total		42%	57%	61%
	Science	A	30%	48%	52%
		C	38%	75%	79%
		I	42%	57%	60%
		W	62%	73%	74%
	Science Total		37%	54%	57%

**Table 21: Throughput rates for three-year B-degrees by population group or race for undergraduate students**

Table 21 illustrates the throughput rates for three-year B-degrees by population group or race for undergraduate students who enrolled for the first time in participating institutions in 2014. The national throughput for this qualification type, illustrated earlier in the chapter, was that 60% of those who enrolled in 2014 and graduated by 2019, whereas 40% dropped out (CHE, 2021, p.61). The throughput for this qualification type, as illustrated above, at UJ, UL and Wits was higher than the national average in the humanities faculties. The throughput for this qualification type, as illustrated above, at UP and UWC was lower than the national average in the humanities faculties. The throughput for this qualification type, as illustrated above, was lower than the national average in the science faculties across participating institutions.

The table above shows that, in some instances, all population groups at an institution follow the same trend with respect to the national throughput. For example, the throughput of African, Coloured, Indian and White students enrolled in the humanities faculty at UWC was a lower throughput than the national throughput, as was the UWC humanities faculty throughput.

The same is not true in every instance. At the same time, it depends on how one measures and views throughput. For example, white students enrolled in the humanities faculty at UJ have a lower throughput than the faculty average. There were however only 81 White students who enrolled in 2014 for the first time; in 2015, there were only 47 White students enrolled in the humanities faculty. This means that 34 or 42% of White students dropped out in the course of the first year. Of those 47, 31 graduated in 2016, within the regulation and a further 5 in 2017 and 2018. In other words, if one discounts those who dropped out in 2014/5, the throughput becomes 77% for White students who enrolled at UJ in 2014 for the first time. When one does not discount those who dropped out, the throughput is 44%. It is unclear how many of these students were excluded on academic grounds; such students should probably be included in the throughput. However, one might consider whether students who decided to move to another programme or institution ought to be included in throughput. This case of White students suggests that the manner in which throughput was reported by the CHE might be a relatively blunt indicator of the state of the HE sector.

White, Coloured and Indian students who enrolled in the science faculty at Wits for the first time in 2014 also did not follow the same trend as the rest of the faculty in relation to the national average. Throughput at the Wits science faculty was lower (57%) than the national throughput (60%) for this qualification type, but the throughput of White, Coloured and Indian students in that faculty was higher or the same (74%, 79%, 60% respectively) than the national

average. Across three-year B-degrees in the science faculty at Wits, White students had a 7% higher throughput than the institutions' throughput for that qualification type (that is, 63%). Similarly, Indian students' throughput was 6% higher than the institutions' throughput for that qualification type. This of course means that African student throughput was lower than the institution throughput for this qualification type. There were however many more students, proportionately at Wits. The difference however requires an explanation.

**Table 22: Four-year B-degrees throughput rates (M+2) by participating institution, faculty and population group or race**

<b>Four-year B-degrees throughput rates (M+2) by participating institution, faculty and population group or race</b>						
			<b>Throughput rate</b>			
<b>Institution</b>	<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Population Group</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>M+1</b>	<b>M+2</b>	
CUT	Humanities	A	41%	58%	63%	
		C	59%	71%	71%	
		W	50%	75%	75%	
		Humanities Total		42%	59%	64%
	Science	A	53%	72%	72%	
		C	100%	100%	100%	
		I	100%	100%	100%	
		W	100%	100%	100%	
		Science Total		62%	77%	77%
	UJ	Humanities	A	44%	56%	59%
C			0%	0%	0%	
W			50%	50%	50%	
		Humanities Total		44%	55%	58%
UL	Humanities	A	73%	82%	85%	
			Humanities Total		73%	82%
	Science	A	67%	80%	84%	
			Science Total		67%	80%
UP	Humanities	A	51%	62%	63%	
		C	50%	50%	50%	

<b>Four-year B-degrees throughput rates (M+2) by participating institution, faculty and population group or race</b>					
			<b>Throughput rate</b>		
		I	33%	56%	67%
		W	71%	79%	80%
	Humanities Total		61%	71%	73%
	Science	A	11%	30%	44%
		C	0%	0%	0%
		I	67%	67%	67%
		W	39%	50%	56%
	Science Total		35%	47%	54%
UWC	Humanities	A	19%	38%	43%
		C	28%	46%	50%
		I	25%	55%	55%
		W	31%	38%	38%
	Humanities Total		24%	42%	47%
WITS	Humanities	A	55%	64%	66%
		C	61%	72%	78%
		I	77%	81%	82%
		W	63%	69%	69%
	Humanities Total		59%	67%	69%

Table 22 illustrates the throughput rates for four-year B-degrees by population group or race for undergraduate students who enrolled for the first time in participating institutions in 2014. Of the participating institutions, all had students enrolled for this type of qualification in their humanities faculties. However, UJ, UWC and Wits did not have students enrolled for this qualification type in their science faculties.

The national throughput for this qualification type, illustrated earlier in the chapter, was that 67% of undergraduate students who enrolled in 2014 graduated by 2019, whereas 33% dropped out (CHE, 2021, p.64). Overall, the throughput for this qualification type, as illustrated above, was only higher at UL than the national average for this qualification type.

The throughput for this qualification type, as illustrated above, at UP and Wits was higher than the national average for the humanities faculties. The throughput for this qualification type, as illustrated above, at CUT, UJ and UWC was lower than the national average for the humanities faculties. The throughput for this qualification type, as illustrated above, was lower than the national average for the science faculties at UP and higher at UL and CUT.

The table above shows that, in some instances, all population groups at an institution followed the same trend; that is, higher or lower than the national throughput. For example, African, Coloured, Indian and White students enrolled in the humanities faculty at UWC had a lower throughput than the national throughput, as did the humanities faculty as a whole.

The same was not true in every instance though. At the same time, it depends on how one measures and views throughput. For example, White students enrolled in the humanities faculty at CUT had a higher throughput (75%) than the faculty average (64%). White students in the CUT humanities faculty had a higher throughput than the national average while the CUT humanities faculty had a lower throughput than the national throughput. There were however only four White students who enrolled in 2014 for the first time, and by 2018, three of the four students had graduated. Throughput measured in percentages or proportions only do not provide the full picture of what the status is of a faculty, population group or race or an institution.

Similarly, at UP, Coloured students who enrolled in 2014 had a 50% throughput in the humanities faculty, while the faculty throughput was 73%. When one looks at the absolute numbers, the throughput for Coloured students tells a more nuanced story. Two Coloured students registered for four-year B-degree qualifications at UP in 2014, and by 2015 only one was still registered; the same student graduated in 2017 in the minimum time. This case, as with the case of White students at UJ for three-year B-degree qualification, suggests that the manner in which throughput is reported by the CHE might be a relatively blunt indicator of the state of the HE sector.

**Table 23: Four-year Diplomas throughput rates (M+2) by participating institution, faculty and gender**

<b>Four-year Diplomas throughput rates (M+2) by participating institution, faculty and gender</b>					
			<b>Throughput rate</b>		
<b>Institution</b>	<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>M+1</b>	<b>M+2</b>



<b>Four-year Diplomas throughput rates (M+2) by participating institution, faculty and gender</b>					
			<b>Throughput rate</b>		
CUT	Humanities	F	39%	60%	72%
		M	20%	39%	45%
	Humanities Total		31%	51%	60%
	Science	F	26%	36%	39%
		M	27%	31%	35%
	Science Total		26%	34%	37%
UJ	Humanities	F	45%	62%	70%
		M	23%	39%	40%
	Humanities Total		37%	54%	59%
	Science	F	0%	33%	55%
		M	0%	30%	52%
	Science Total		0%	32%	54%

Table 23 illustrates the throughput rates for diplomas by gender for undergraduate students who enrolled for the first time in CUT and UJ in 2014. The national throughput for this qualification type, illustrated earlier in the chapter was that 55% of those who enrolled in 2014 had graduated by 2019, whereas 45% had dropped out (CHE, 2021, p.61). The throughput for this qualification type, as is evident from the above table, at CUT (60%) and UJ (59%) was higher than the national average for the humanities faculties but lower than the national throughput for science faculties (37% and 54% respectively).

In all instances, the male student throughput was lower than female students in the same institution and faculty for three-year diploma qualifications. The difference between male and female student throughput was however greater in the humanities faculties (CUT 27%; UJ 30%) than in the science faculties (CUT 4%; UJ 3%). In all instances, the male student throughput was lower than the national throughput for this qualification type, the lowest being male students registered in the CUT science faculty (35%). In all instances, except the CUT science faculty, the female student throughput was higher than the national throughput for this qualification type, the highest being the CUT humanities faculty (72%). Irrespective of gender, however, the throughput of students in humanities faculties enrolled for three-year diplomas

was better than students enrolled in similar qualification types in science faculties at the same institution.

When compared with UJ’s institutional throughput for three-year diploma qualifications (54%), female student throughput was higher in their humanities and science faculties, while the male student throughput was lower. At CUT, both male and female students in the science faculty had throughput rates lower than the institution’s throughput (43%), while male and female student throughput in the humanities faculty was higher.

**Table 24: Three-year B-degrees throughput rates (M+2) by participating institution, faculty and gender**

Three-year B-degrees throughput rates (M+2) by participating institution, faculty and gender					
			Throughput		
Institution	Faculty	Gender	M	M+1	M+2
UJ	Humanities	F	45%	61%	65%
		M	28%	44%	51%
	Total		40%	56%	61%
		Science	F	11%	33%
		M	10%	26%	36%
	Science Total		11%	29%	42%
UL	Humanities	F	62%	77%	80%
		M	48%	66%	71%
	Total		57%	72%	76%
		Science	F	22%	46%
		M	16%	36%	44%
	Science Total		19%	41%	50%
UP	Humanities	F	45%	55%	58%
		M	29%	36%	40%
	Total		41%	49%	53%
		Science	F	17%	33%

Three-year B-degrees throughput rates (M+2) by participating institution, faculty and gender					
			Throughput		
		M	13%	25%	32%
	Science Total		15%	29%	37%
UWC	Humanities	F	27%	41%	48%
		M	21%	31%	38%
	Humanities Total		25%	38%	45%
	Science	F	26%	62%	68%
		M	16%	34%	42%
	Science Total		21%	48%	56%
WITS	Humanities	F	45%	60%	64%
		M	35%	49%	54%
	Humanities Total		42%	57%	61%
	Science	F	43%	60%	64%
		M	32%	48%	51%
	Science Total		37%	54%	57%

Table 24 illustrates the throughput rates for three-year B-degrees by gender for undergraduate students who enrolled for the first time at participating institutions in 2014. The national throughput for this qualification type, illustrated earlier in the chapter, was that 60% of those who enrolled in 2014 graduated by 2019, whereas 40% dropped out (CHE, 2021, p.61). The throughput for this qualification type, as illustrated above, at UJ (61%), UL (76%) and Wits (61%), was higher than the national average for their humanities faculties. The throughput for this qualification type, as illustrated above, at UP (53%) and UWC (45%) was lower than the national average for their humanities faculties. The throughput for this qualification type, as illustrated above, was lower than the national average for the science faculties at all participating institutions.

In all instances, the male student throughput was lower than the female student throughput in the same institution and faculty for three-year B-degree qualifications. Unlike the three-year

diploma qualifications, the difference in throughput between female and male students was large in the humanities faculties as well as in the science faculties. The largest difference in a humanities faculty was UP (18%) and in a science faculty, UWC (26%). The smallest difference in throughput between male and female students was in UP's science faculty (8%).

In all instances, except for male students enrolled in the UL humanities faculty, the male student throughput was lower than the national throughput for this qualification type, the lowest being male students registered in UP's science faculty (32%). In all instances, except the CUT and UP science faculties, the female student throughput was higher than the national throughput for this qualification type, the highest being in the UL humanities faculty (80%).

Irrespective of gender, however, the throughput of students enrolled for three-year B-degrees in humanities was better than students enrolled in similar qualification types in science faculties at the same institution. When compared with the institution's throughput for three-year B-degree qualifications, male student throughput was lower in the humanities and science faculties of all institutions, except at the UL humanities faculty.

**Table 25: Four-year B-degrees throughput rates (M+2) by participating institution, faculty and gender**

<b>Four-year B-degrees throughput rates (M+2) by participating institution, faculty and gender</b>					
			<b>Throughput Rate</b>		
<b>Institution</b>	<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>M+1</b>	<b>M+2</b>
CUT	Humanities	F	45%	64%	71%
		M	38%	51%	54%
	Humanities Total		42%	59%	64%
	Science	F	71%	82%	82%
		M	44%	67%	67%
	Science Total		62%	77%	77%
UJ	Humanities	F	46%	57%	60%
		M	35%	50%	50%
	Humanities Total		44%	55%	58%
UL	Humanities	F	76%	84%	86%
		M	69%	80%	84%
	Humanities Total		73%	82%	85%
	Science	F	73%	86%	90%
		M	59%	72%	76%

Four-year B-degrees throughput rates (M+2) by participating institution, faculty and gender					
			Throughput Rate		
	Science Total		67%	80%	84%
UP	Humanities	F	66%	75%	76%
		M	40%	54%	57%
	Humanities Total		61%	71%	73%
	Science	F	38%	50%	55%
		M	28%	40%	51%
	Science Total		35%	47%	54%
UWC	Humanities	F	25%	44%	49%
		M	22%	40%	43%
	Humanities Total		24%	42%	47%
WITS	Humanities	F	65%	73%	74%
		M	45%	52%	55%
	Humanities Total		59%	67%	69%

Table 25 illustrates the throughput rates for four-year B-degrees by gender for undergraduate students who enrolled for the first time in participating institutions in 2014. Of the participating institutions, all had students enrolled for this type of qualification in their humanities faculties. UJ, UWC and Wits did not have students enrolled for this qualification type in their science faculties.

The national throughput for this qualification type, illustrated earlier in the chapter, was that 67% of undergraduate students who enrolled in 2014 graduated by 2019, whereas 33% dropped out (CHE, 2021, p.64). Overall, the throughput for this qualification type, as illustrated above, was only higher at UL than the national average for this qualification type.

The throughput for this qualification type, as illustrated above, at UP and Wits was higher than the national average for the humanities faculties. The throughput for this qualification type, as illustrated above, at CUT, UJ and UWC was lower than the national average for the humanities faculties. The throughput for this qualification type, as illustrated above, was lower than the national average for the science faculties at UP and higher at UL and CUT.

In all instances, male student throughput was lower than female student throughput in the same institution and faculty for four-year B-degree qualifications. Similar to the three-year B-degree,

the difference in throughput between female and male students was mainly larger in the humanities faculties than in the science faculties. The exception was at UL where the difference in the science faculty between female and male student throughput was larger. The largest differences were in the humanities faculties at UP and Wits: both were 18%.

In most instances, the male student throughput was lower than the national throughput for this qualification type. The exceptions being male students enrolled in the UL humanities and science faculties as well as the CUT science faculty. The lowest male student throughput in this qualification type was the UWC humanities faculty (43%). In all instances (institution and faculty), except the UJ and UWC humanities faculties, the female student throughput was higher than the national throughput for this qualification type, the highest being the UL science faculty (90%).

When compared with the institution's throughput for four-year B-degree qualifications, male student throughput was lower in the humanities and science faculties of all institutions, except at the UL humanities faculty and CUT science faculty.

### **Important insights and implications**

The analyses of statistical data from public higher education institutions in South Africa presented here demonstrates that as one moves from the national to the institutional and faculty level, particular patterns emerge with regard to enrolment and throughput disaggregated by population group/race and gender. In other words, patterns of enrolment and throughput do not remain the same at the national, institutional and faculty levels when the data are disaggregated by population group/race and gender. While one might argue that this is counter-intuitive, that of course the same patterns cannot be replicated in all contexts, we consider here the nature of the divergent patterns, and what these might imply and mean for epistemic access and success. In addition, based on what is emerging from these patterns, we propose further categories that ought to be considered when data from the higher education sector are reported in order for policy makers and university management structures to make informed decisions about specific interventions that could enhance epistemic access and success in the sector.

At the national level, enrolment and throughput disaggregated by population group/race in the higher education sector in South Africa, mirrors the national demographic distribution. For example, African students comprise over 79% of the higher education student headcount and 79% of the demographic distribution in South Africa. With regards to population group or race, discrepancies in formal access to higher education by population groups oppressed during the

colonisation and apartheid era, have dissipated at the national level of the South African higher education sector. The patterns of headcount enrolment disaggregated by population group at participating institutions do not conform to the national trend matching demographic distribution. At three institutions, CUT, UJ and UL, over 80% of the undergraduate student population are African. At Wits, under 70% of the undergraduate student population are African. At UP and UWC, under 50% of the undergraduate student population are African. This may reflect regional demographics or relate to entry requirements at some of the former Historically Advantaged Institutions (HAIs), and the relationship between supply and demand, and the limitations of space and competition of what are perceived to be high quality public institutions.

With regard to other population groups or races, further anomalies were observed. For example, in 2019, 3.7% of the national undergraduate student population was Indian, whereas 13% of the undergraduate students at Wits were Indian. In 2019, 5.8% of the national undergraduate student population was Coloured, whereas 47% of the undergraduate students at UWC were Coloured. In 2019, 10.7% of the national undergraduate student population was White, whereas 42% of the undergraduate students at UP were White. It is of course possible that the population group or race trends observed in these institutions mirror the racial patterns of the immediate geographic location of the institution. With regard to Wits, UWC and UP this seems entirely plausible. Similarly, for CUT, UJ and UL, these population group or race headcount trends could reflect the surrounding geographic landscape.

While not the ambit of this chapter, it is important to raise an obvious question: To what extent has transformation occurred when it is measured in terms of demographic reallocation at particular institutions, and what does this mean for the South African nation? The ways in which the HEMIS data are reported have not linked socio-economic or geographic location data to population group or race. It is therefore not possible to determine the extent to which class intersects with race in relation to headcount enrolment at any of the institutions. Appreciably though, if there is an intersection, the nature of transformation might be qualitatively different with implications for individual institutions, the higher education sector and social reproduction of South African society.

Moreover, the concentration of White, Coloured and Indian students at specific HEIs does not bode well for social cohesion in South Africa. As is becoming more and more evident from various social spaces in South Africa, South Africans as a nation have not achieved unity in

their diversity. It would appear that racialised social interaction remains fundamentally ingrained in the South African education system. This phenomenon requires careful examination if the education system is likely to be a catalyst of racial redress in this country (see Department of Education 1995, 1997).

If such racialised social interaction is intersected with racialised, classist social interaction that is further intersected by geographic location, the ability of South Africans to come together as a nation becomes less and less probable. Statistical analyses of higher education ought to be drilling down to intersectional disaggregation in order to identify where the fault line in the education system lies. Continuing to assess population group or race and gender without intersecting these with additional categories such as class and geographic location, may not result in a rigorous analysis of the nature of the challenges associated with throughput, and hence in interventions that adequately redress historical inequities in this regard.

For the most part, the headcount at faculty level in participating institutions does mirror the institutional trends of population group or race, with a few exceptions. For example, 95% of the undergraduate headcount at CUT are African, whereas 10% of the headcount in the CUT science faculty is White. Some 42% of the undergraduate headcount at UWC are African, whereas 60% of the headcount in the science faculty headcount is African. It is however unclear why this might be the case. Case studies did not set out to examine the distinct population group or racial distributions between the humanities and natural science faculties. It is also not clear whether there are or might be implications. In this instance, it might also be intersecting categories that hold more meaning than population group or race on its own.

The throughput rate in undergraduate qualifications provides a somewhat different representation of educational outcomes by population group or race. At the national level, the throughput rate for African students is lower than White students for all undergraduate qualifications at minimum time (M) to completion as well as minimum time plus two years (M+2). The difference decreases for all qualification types from M to M+2. This suggests that on average African undergraduate students might require more time to settle into university life and participate in academic practice.

However, this is not true for all African undergraduate students, many of whom complete their qualification within the minimum time. Moreover, undergraduate students from all population



groups are graduating at M+2. In addition, undergraduate students from all population groups are dropping out. This trend suggests that additional categories of analysis ought to be extracted from the data in order to determine points of intersection with regard to throughput. It might for example, be insightful to interrogate throughput in relation to the extent to which students achieved the entry requirements for programmes as well as the school quintile in which they completed matric. Given that we know population group or race is a constructed social category, it would stand to reason that alternative social categories have more explanatory power with regard to any social phenomenon, including throughput trends in higher education institutions.

Most population group throughput at the institutional level for the three-year diploma and B-degree qualifications are within 6% of the institutional average. For the four-year B-degree, the ranges from the institutional average and between population groups or race are wider at all institutions. This too was not an objective that case studies set out to explain, and hence will require further examination to understand the related reasons and implications.

At the national level, enrolment and throughput disaggregated by gender in the higher education sector in South Africa, illustrated higher levels of female participation in relation to the national demographic distribution of gender. Female students comprise 60% of the headcount enrolment at HEIs and about half the population between the ages of 15 and 24; that is, the population that would generally be expected to enrol in higher education. With regard to gender, at the national level, higher education headcount has transformed from the perspective of patriarchal educational outcomes. Similar patterns of headcount distribution by gender were observed for all participating institutions. At UWC, the range was the widest, and at UJ the range the smallest. However, all institutions enrolled more female than male students.

As one moved down to the humanities and natural science level, the observations change at some institutions more than others. However, on average, the difference between female and male enrolment in humanities faculties is 42% whereas the average difference in natural science faculties is 2.5%. At UJ, UL and Wits, there were more male than female students enrolled in their natural science faculties. Thus, while the gender distribution at the national level illustrates a transformed system with regard to gender, at the humanities and natural science faculty level at participating institutions, a more nuanced picture emerges.

These findings point to the importance of intersecting national level data with faculty level or fields of study level data. The case studies are likely to shed light on what these distributions mean for experiences of participating in academic practice at the different faculties.

When throughput is considered, educational outcomes at the undergraduate level in higher education further point to a transformed system from this perspective; 63% of women completed their qualifications within the minimum time plus two years. At all participating institutions, the throughput of female students is better than male students in all qualification types. Similarly, at all participating institutions, in all faculties and across qualification types, the throughput of female students is higher than male students. These data point to gender being a valuable node of intersection to analyse other categories of analysis such as class, using school quintile or being a NSFAS recipient as a proxy as well as the extent to which entry requirements were attained.

At the national level, population group or race and gender trends for headcount enrolment and throughput demonstrate racial and gender transformation of the higher education sector. When the headcount enrolment and throughput of participating institutions are considered, these trends shift with regard to population group/race but are maintained with regard to gender. As one drills down to faculty level data within institutions, the trends for population group or race remain similar to the institutional trends but shift with regard to gender.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter provided a statistical overview of headcount and throughput in the South African higher education sector at the national, institutional and humanities and natural science levels based on data from HEMIS. Headcount and throughput were disaggregated by population group or race and gender at all levels.

At a national level, the findings reveal that in relation to population group or race and gender, headcount and throughput (particularly at M+2) present an image of a transformed higher education landscape. A level down, at participating institutions, disaggregating headcount by population group or race demonstrates continued patterns of historical and geographic legacies. When one considers the implications of the shifts in demographic profile of participating institutions, it is noteworthy that the national picture is not replicated exactly at all institutions. Similar to public schools, historically white institutions have ironically become the most racially diverse spaces. Moreover, broadly speaking with regard to population group or race,

historical legacies remain apparent in the demographic shape of most participating institutions, the only exception is UJ.

At the level of humanities and natural science faculties at participating institutions, it is demonstrated that the gender distribution is skewed in relation to the national and institutional headcount. While the proportion of female students is higher than male students at the national and participating institutional level, the difference is much higher in humanities than natural science faculties. Indeed, in three natural science faculties, male students outnumber female students. At the same time, at all levels, female students have a better throughput rate than male students.

The chapter argues that disaggregating national, institutional and faculty level headcount and throughput by population group and gender is illustrative of important trends in the South African higher education landscape, as has been outlined. At the same time, however, we surmise that additional categories, such as the extent to which students have met entry requirements, geographic location, as well as school quintile, ought to be considered as well in order to sketch a comprehensive representation of the higher education landscape. This does not mean that headcount and throughput ought not to be described in relation to gender and population group or race, only that on their own, they do not offer a complete analysis of the higher education landscape. In the narratives of students presented in the case study chapters, the importance of including additional categories of analysis will become clearer.

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## **Chapter 4: Negotiating epistemic access and success in higher education: the case of the Central University of Technology, CUT**

Isaac M Ntshoe

### **Introduction**

Post-1994 in South Africa, higher education policies were intended to widen participation and formal access especially for communities previously excluded, which necessitated opening the sector to all who qualify to study at university. Marginalised, in the context of this report, is an encompassing term referring to individuals who are side-lined, neglected and disadvantaged usually because of race, socio-economic status and/or their geopolitical location. Widening formal access triggered calls to address epistemic access and success, including enhancing retention and throughput rates, as well as institutional policies and practices that facilitate accommodating individuals from disadvantaged communities.

Formal access describes the opening of higher education to all who qualify to enter the sector, including groups that were previously denied participation on the basis of race. Epistemic access differs from formal access; it relates to student engagement with knowledge, and different understandings of science and human reasoning at university. Epistemological access goes beyond formal access (Badat, 2008; Morrow, 2009; Muller, 2016). *Episteme* therefore denotes a body of ideas that determine the knowledge that is intellectually certain at a particular time and distinguishable from opinion and belief (Muller, 2016). Epistemological access and epistemic access are regarded as central to throughput and graduation rates, to a university itself and to the role it can play in a democratic society such as South Africa (Badat, 2008). Thus, while formal access is a necessary condition for epistemological access (in respect of the kinds of knowledge distributed by universities) it is not a sufficient condition (Badat, 2008).

While advances have been made to expand formal access to higher education in the post-apartheid era, there has been a concern about the extent to which higher education institutions are advancing epistemic access and success for students from marginalised communities. The purpose of this case study of the Central University of Technology (CUT) is to contribute to the process of higher education policy development in South Africa and to the efforts of institutions of higher learning (academics and researchers) that advance epistemic access and success for students from marginalised communities.

Overarching questions underpinning the case study are:

- How do students from marginalised communities negotiate their epistemic access and success within a diverse and rapidly changing university environment?
- What individual, institutional or collective resources (cultural and/or material) have been and are more beneficial to the development and academic needs of these students?
- How do institutions mediate students' social and academic experiences?

The case study commences with a brief background and context of CUT, followed by the conceptual framing and then the methodological aspect of the study. The case study then moves to describing the findings that emerged at CUT and ends with a conclusion which highlights the key insights made in this institutional case. In addition, the conclusions offer a few recommendations drawing on the insights from the CUT case.

### **Background and context of CUT**

In 1981, the Technikon Free State, the predecessor of CUT, commenced its operations intending to produce graduates with the skills and competencies required to advance and support industrialisation of the region. The levels and intensity of these needs have changed over time, but the core socio-economic or regional development mandate of the university remains unchanged (CUT, 2016). CUT is the second-smallest of the five Universities of Technology (UoTs) in South Africa and is located in the Central Region of the Free State province of South Africa.

At the time of the mergers of higher education institutions, the uniquely South African institutional designation of 'technikon' was discarded in favour of the internationally accepted 'university-of-technology'. Transforming from a technikon to a UoT involved a change from a non-university system to a university system and subscribing to a typologically differentiated system.

CUT has two campuses, one located in Bloemfontein, the judicial capital of South Africa and capital of the Free State province, and Welkom, a major gold mining locality in the Free State province. The two campuses deliver education and training in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM); as well as Management Sciences, Humanities and Education to undergraduate and postgraduate students (CUT, 2015). CUT offers higher education and training in applied sciences in four faculties: Engineering and Information

Technology; Health and Environmental Sciences; Humanities; and Management Sciences (CUT 2016).

### **Conceptually framing the CUT case study**

This section outlines the conceptual framework that foregrounds elements that may shape students' experiences at CUT. In the context of this project, emphasis is placed on how students from marginalised communities, negotiate epistemic access and success. Student experiences and what shapes them are therefore of prime importance. Individuals become students when they enrol at an educational institution. The designation 'student' therefore presumes affiliation with an educational institution. In this case study, an educational institution is a South African higher education institution, which includes universities of technology. Students' experiences at CUT are thus shaped by the context of higher education in South African universities of technology.

Student experiences are however, also shaped by their individual circumstances. While they might become students when they enrol at an educational institution, they do not stop being who they were before. As such, their backgrounds and former experiences, be they of education or otherwise, continue to interact with their experiences at the higher education institutions.

The concepts discussed in this section therefore aim to capture potential influence and impact of both the institution and individual on student experiences. The last section focuses on the concept of decolonisation, which can impact on student experiences while at university in the sense that it contributes to changes in the official, pedagogic or social domains.

### **Concepts offering insight into the institution**

As outlined in this chapter, the distinction between official, pedagogic and social domains to delineate the various elements of educational institutions generally, and higher education institutions, specifically, is particularly useful as conceptual framers for student experience (Bernstein, 1999, 2000). This distinction of the domains offers a pragmatic framing to map the different elements or factors that mould student experience and shape their participation in academic practices. The official domain includes policies, rules, strategies, norms and symbols, the pedagogic domain, which includes teaching and learning, and the social domain, includes campus, residence, family and community relations, circumscribe student experiences in higher education. (Chapter 2 in this report presents literature that describes student experiences in each of these domains, and Chapter 10 provides a synthesis of student experiences reported in this study related to each of these domains).

The difference between the Official Regulative Field (ORF) and Pedagogic Regulative Discourses (PRD), operating in the official and pedagogic domains respectively (Bernstein, 1990), offers further conceptual framing with regard to grappling with the extent to which students learn to participate in academic practices, and thus negotiate epistemic access. The ORF comprises the “specialised departments and sub-agencies of the State and local educational authorities together with their research and system of inspectors” (Bernstein, 1990, p.192). Official regulative discourses refer to the basic concepts, theories, principles, rules and values of a discipline (Muller, 2016). For Bernstein, the official regulative field encompasses aspects such as institutional vision or mission, policies, rules and guidelines that regulate academic and social life on campus (Bernstein, 1990).

The PRD on the other hand, produces specialised modes of communication and interaction between knowledge communities, lecturers and students, and lecturers and managers/administrators, according to seniority and experience (Bernstein, 1990). The PRD is important for the role of the different structures and role players, including institutional practices, academics, academic support and student support, in ensuring that students are exposed to, and acquire, epistemic access and success. These structures and role players need to decode the ‘official regulative field’, that is, basic concepts, theories, principles, rules and values of discipline and the ‘pedagogic regulative discourses’ (sound knowledge and curriculum choices, sequencing, and ways of transmitting subject knowledge), enacting the curriculum and how learning is assessed (Bernstein, 2000).

Bernstein’s concept of official, pedagogic and social domains together with ORF and PRD, illustrate the complex environment into which a student enters when enrolling at a higher education institution. Together they highlight a context in which lecturers and other stakeholders impact on the extent to which students might negotiate epistemic access. In the context of CUT, the official and pedagogic domains take on a distinct character which guides the behaviour and actions of members of the institution, including lecturers. These are influenced by the policies and rules, as well as teaching and learning. The social domain which includes residence, family and community relations, also contributes to how students negotiate epistemic access in a particular way at CUT. Central to the pedagogic domain, and what might be accepted as ‘epistemic’, is the distinction between specialised knowledge and everyday knowledge. Specialised knowledge is distinguished from non-specialist common sense knowledge that describes the type of knowledge people draw on in their daily lives (Young & Muller, 2013). Non-specialist common sense knowledge is that which students have acquired



from their homes and other spaces which they bring to university (Young & Muller, 2013). Specialised knowledge signifies knowledge that is acquired in higher education and facilitated by academics who are specialists in their discipline (Young & Muller, 2013).

Specialised knowledge is also regarded as powerful knowledge in that it affords power to those who have acquired it (Young & Muller, 2013). Powerful knowledge “suggests that there is knowledge that has better explanatory value; is specialised and cannot be acquired from everyday life or experience” (Young & Muller, 2013, p.263). Specialised knowledge is thus transmitted at higher education institutions and students can thus only acquire it at a university. Academic lecturers who can distribute specialised knowledge are experts in their field.

However, not all specialised knowledge is purported to hold the same power, though. There is a differentiation between science, technological, engineering, and mathematical (STEM) and humanities. Young and Muller contend that in the real world whether explicitly stated or not,

science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects have come to be seen by governments as compulsory for a curriculum based on powerful knowledge, even though they may not refer to the concept itself (2013, p.232).

STEM subjects are further argued to provide the most successful ways of transforming, predicting and controlling aspects of the material world, even if they do not always predict the unintended consequences of such transformations (Young & Muller, 2013).

Following on from specialised knowledge, and also within the pedagogic domain of institutions, is the nature of curricula available to students. Curricula at UoT are shaped by generic modes including outcomes, graduate attributes, generic skills (Bennett et al., 1999), transferable skills, soft skills or key skills (Mayer, 1992), core skills and employability skills (Preece, 1990). The attainment of graduate skills by technologists and technicians produced at UoTs is a reflection of the erstwhile technikon culture. While graduate attributes are important, especially for technologists and technicians produced by UoTs such as CUT, the overemphasis on skills can result, according to some, in displacing disciplinary knowledge which students also require to function in various occupations (Monnapula et al., 2019). This emphasis on generic modes in the context of promoting epistemic access has resulted in moving the focus away from the disciplinary and knowledge bases of professional and sectoral fields of practice in qualifications and programmes offered by universities of technology (Monnapula, et al., 2019).

However, the theory and practice of student-centred pedagogy is not without its problems: Student-centred learning is often defined in contradiction to teacher-centred pedagogy. The idea that students must be active in the construction of knowledge is often understood to imply a diminishing role for the teacher in the learning process

There is evidence from the literature that the official, pedagogic, and social domains of higher education institutions are not exactly the same as at education institutions for basic education in South Africa, that is, schools. Previous studies highlighted the effects of the university environment for students from a school context when mediating epistemic access (Cross & Atinde, 2015; Cross et al., 2009). Cross et al. (2009) for example, argued that the university learning environment appears to be more open, in contrast to the learning environment at school. By way of illustration, the difference in the two environments is articulated as: *In school ... you're constantly being watched, you're being monitored, kind of so you don't break the rules. In contrast, the academic environment is attractive because of its freedom* (Cross et al., 2009, p. 25).

An Electrical Engineering student felt that the university environment “*was a completely different environment and ... I had to start from scratch in terms of adjusting*” (Cross et al., 2009, p. 29).

Presumably all students are not impacted in the same way. Cross and Atinde (2015) found that students were resilient when they entered the university. For example, one student reported that: *I have to take my own decisions and not let other people influence me negatively* (Tsepo); and another that: *I can easily adapt to any situation because I know what I want to achieve here at the university* (Lerato) Cross et al. (2015, p.316).

Yet the university environment was overwhelming for some students despite their resilience: *Gosh, everything is a barrier to me here. From the environment, the language used in lectures, the culture, the computers, the lecturers, even the attitude of some of the students here on campus . . . but I'm determined to work hard despite these. My determination to succeed is what has kept me going because it's really not easy for me* (Cross & Atinde, 2015, p.320).

These experiences need to be seen alongside the students' emphasis on the need to work hard, understand it by themselves, seek help, feeling shy or even intimidated and in the view of (some) lecturers, a belief that effort rather than hard luck is what really counts. Taken together, these disclose a sense of institutional environment that can be overwhelming (Cross et al.,

2009). Cross (2009, p.9) in previous research found that students experienced some form of alienation and ‘longlines’ at the University of the Witwatersrand, seeing themselves as numbers. Albeit minor, the students’ remarks illustrate their affiliation to a higher education institution with a much wider official, pedagogic and social reach. Students are empowered by the magnitude of the higher education environment, wherein they are expected to learn to participate in academic practices in order to negotiate epistemic access. Jacobs (2005, p.88) states that “seeing oneself as part of a larger social fabric of responsibility provides the impetus for people to consider how the exercise of their individual agency affects the world and the people in it”.

The next section considers elements of individuals’ lives that influence their student experience from beyond the higher education institution. To reiterate, individuals have histories before they become students, and these are fundamentally part of who they might become as students.

### **Concepts and factors drawing attention to the individual**

Two concepts have come to frame student experiences of higher education, particularly with regard to students from backgrounds that are disadvantaged: student diversity in addition to under-preparedness, and the articulation gap. Both concepts are suggestive of the need for adjustment, on the part of who students are as they enter institutions, and on the part of how institutions might accommodate or intervene as a result. These concepts are addressed in other case study chapters, and therefore are not discussed comprehensively here.

### **Student diversity**

In the higher education sector, diversity has become unavoidable following increasing enrolment of students from diverse backgrounds, as captured in the Constitution (Republic of South Africa 1996). Diversity has traditionally been associated with differences related to race, gender and culture, to the extent that sometimes culture can be construed differently because of historical associations with the apartheid legacy (Cross, 2018). Diversity moreover pertains to characteristics such as age and physical traits, sexual orientation, ethnic and religious background, socio-economic status, birthplace and home town, social and political affiliations, seniority and experience, education and training and so forth (Cross, 2004). The meaning an institution attaches to ‘diversity’ informs how it accommodates and becomes responsive to the student body, their social diversity, and differences within the university community (CHE, 2013; Scott, 2009).

Student diversity also implies that students might have different requirements. Examples of students' statements taken from the literature illustrate this: *We come from different backgrounds - and this obviously comes with some strain like financial problems. Some people come here without food, they are hungry, they can't even concentrate* (Cross, et al., 2009, p.29).

Students are psychological beings with individual dispositions and mental processes including emotional stress, intelligence, motivation and aptitudes. Students need to be seen as social (contextualised) beings if they are to gain epistemic access. Seeing students as social contextualised beings premises the following assumptions when negotiating epistemic access in higher education:

- Acknowledging the socially constructed nature of learning;
- Seeing all HE students as having the potential to learn;
- Acknowledging the role of context in learning;
- Learning and knowledge construction are dependent on access (or not) to social structures and disciplinary communities (Boughey & McKenna, 2016).

Boughey and McKenna (2016) challenge common practice where students are believed to be either psychological or social (contextualised) beings. Diversity is multi-faceted and how students learn to become participants in academic practice cannot be assumed to follow singular trajectories. In other words, all students are unlikely to interact with the official, pedagogic and social domains of institutions in similar ways.

### **Under-preparedness and articulation gap**

Non-preparedness, under-preparedness or the 'articulation gap' are concepts that have become commonly associated with views of students in the South African higher education system. These concepts have a direct bearing on how stakeholders interact with students and how institutions intervene to mediate student academic experiences. Generally, preparedness is used to describe what students are expected to be capable of when entering university. This can relate to knowledge, attitudes, behaviour, and values. By implication there are expectations (cultural, social and knowledge) about what students are meant to arrive with at university. A student exhibiting the absence of such expectations would be regarded as being underprepared. Under-preparedness is multi-faceted, involving not only subject knowledge but cognitive, epistemological, affective, and socio-cultural dimensions (CHE, 2007; Scott, 2009).

Under-preparedness ranges from having difficulties coping with formal (official) curricula to problems of adapting to independent study required in a university environment. This phenomenon takes different forms depending on subject areas but relates to a mismatch between the knowledge and dispositions with which students arrive at university and those expected of them at university (CHE, 2010; Scott, 2009; Scott et al., 2007).

Posited within the context of the historical, racial and geopolitical structure in South Africa, under-preparedness has been associated with ‘weak’, mostly African, students perceived to display a lower level of cognition requiring remedial interventions. It also describes the inability to grasp higher learning, and those affected are seen as not being “university material” (CHE, 2013, p.58). Views of under-preparedness have been criticised as representing a ‘deficit’ view of students that emerges when universities opened access to students from marginalised communities. The presumption of under-preparedness has resulted in a long-standing assumption that student lack of success should be attributed to them rather than the institution.

As a response to the inadequacies of the ‘deficit’ view that results in blaming students instead of structural problems including the schooling system, the term ‘articulation gap’, has been introduced into the debate to describe a mismatch between the schooling system and higher education expectations (CHE, 2013; DoE, 1997; Scott, 2009). The term ‘articulation gap’ suggests a structural problem comprising discontinuity between secondary and higher education in South Africa. Seeing this problem as an articulation gap (DoE, 1997), rather than student under-preparedness, opens up possibilities for positive action within higher education, because a gap can be closed from either side (CHE, 2013, p.62).

Whether viewed as under-preparedness or as an articulation gap, the emphasis has generally been on students’ engagement with the pedagogic domain, and specifically the official curriculum of university qualification programmes. Solution mechanisms have however generally been to introduce supplementary interventions, be they in the form of extended degree programmes or academic development programmes. Literature could not be found that reviewed formal curricula of universities’ qualification programmes and the formal school curricula, for either the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) or Independent Examination Board (IEB), in the South African context.

### **Decolonial twist and implications for knowledge produced in Higher Education**

Decolonisation in higher education has, until COVID-19, been one of the most characteristic features of the changing university environment. The decolonial movement or decolonisation

is a reaction against colonisation. Colonialism is an historical process that culminated in the invasion, conquest and direct administration of most countries in Africa. This process came to an end in the post-1945 period that witnessed the withdrawal of direct colonial administrations and with those that were reluctant to do so, facing confrontation from national liberation movements (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Coloniality, on the other hand, denotes long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjectivity relations and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Le Grange posits that "...first-generation colonialism was the conquering of the physical spaces and bodies of the colonised, and that second-generation colonialism was the colonisation of the mind through disciplines such as education, science, economics and law" (Le Grange, 2016, p.4).

At the centre of the decolonial movement in South African universities are curricula that are criticised for "reflecting colonial and apartheid world views, and being disconnected from African realities, including the lived experiences of the majority of black South Africans (students)" (Ramoupi, 2014, p.271). Current curricula seem to favour colonial and Western epistemologies and are at odds with the decolonial agenda (De Sousa Santos, 2001; Mbembe, 2015; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). For many African students, this creates a sense of "a hierarchy of superior and inferior knowledge and, thus, of superior and inferior people" (Grosfoguel, 2007:214). These narratives maintain that post-colonial and post-apartheid curricula in South Africa continue to promote white supremacy and dominance, as well as the stereotyping of Africa, which merely worsen rather than redress the injustices of the past (Badat & Sayed, 2014 cited in Monnapula-Mapesela et al., 2019).

In the South African context, a higher education curriculum is concerned with integrating indigenous African epistemologies should be "primarily concerned with empowering educators and students to gain confidence in their own capabilities and to acquire a sense of pride in their own ways of being in the world", according to Cherrington (2017, p79). hooks (1994) observes that students become empowered if attention is given to their voices, including: Who speaks, who listens, and why? She premised her claim on Giroux's (1993) notion that student experiences must be situated within the pedagogy of learning. Giroux assumed that incorporating multiple voices into the learning process opens opportunities for engaging differently with others, and with the world: "Students have memories, families, religions, feelings, languages, and cultures that give them a distinctive voice. We can critically

engage that experience and we can move beyond it. But we can't deny it" (Giroux, 1993, p.16 cited in Cherrington, 2017, p.79). To this end, decolonisation has the potential to disrupt the flow of curricula and by implication, specialised knowledge. This could moreover have consequences for how students negotiate epistemic access. Literature could however, not be found that connected decolonisation to reviewing the structure and form of qualification programmes as far as considering whether learning outcomes for qualification levels are correctly pegged. In other words, decolonisation has interrogated curricula content as being Eurocentric but has not examined the form or structure of curricula as integral to the qualification framework within the South African education system.

## **Methodology**

### **Data sources and instruments**

The methodology of the CUT case study of epistemic access and success project is primarily interpretive, drawing mainly on qualitative data, complemented with quantitative (empirical) data on throughput rates at the institution, in faculties and departments selected for study. Data collection instruments comprised interviews and documents. Data were collected from the following sources, namely: administrators, academics, students, institutional document analysis, and university archives. Institutional documents included the mission and vision, history of the institution, reports from the different structures within the institution, and faculty reports.

### **Sampling, data collection and analysis**

Students, administrative and academic staff from two faculties: Health and Environmental Science (FHES), and Humanities (FH), as well as institutional support staff were purposefully sampled for semi-structured interviews during this study.

Since the purpose of the study was to measure the extent to which students from marginalised groups are able to negotiate epistemic access, students from these backgrounds were sampled. A total of 37 students from two departments in the FHES and FH were selected for the study. Most of the student population are drawn from Quintile 1 schools and therefore are drawn from marginalised communities. Four faculty-based administration staff members, two each from the FHES and FH, as well as four academic staff members from the same faculties, were sampled.

At institutional level, four staff members from student support structures were sampled: One student support staff member involved in the mentorship programme, the Residents Academic

Mentorship Programme, Supplemental Instruction (SI), which is offered at first-, second-, and third-year levels to assist students with their academic studies; another staff member supporting students through the Writing Centre. (The latter focuses on assisting students in developing their academic writing skills); and two psychological and wellness and counselling staff members responsible for providing a number of comprehensive services, namely: health and psychological counselling services, academic support, reading development, social work services, chaplaincy services, and the selection of prospective students. The staff in the Wellness and Counselling Centre support students with their personal challenges including stumbling blocks that hinder their progress towards achieving academic success at CUT, through individual and/or group counselling sessions.

### **Data collection processes and coding procedures**

The challenge encountered was the collection of interview data through social media and sometimes phones because of the limitations imposed by COVID-19. This strategy of data collection through social media has impacted negatively on the quality of responses mainly from students, and academics in some cases. During the information collection stage, connectivity and load shedding were major challenges for both staff and students as they were working from home. However, participant confidentiality was protected and anonymity ensured.

Empirical data derived from the institution documents included histograms and tables on throughput rates at the institution and in the FHES and FH. Student profiles were analysed first, followed by content analysis which is the approach to analyse qualitative data (see Glaser & Strauss, 1952). Convergences, corroborations and divergences, conflicting views in terms of themes, issues, phrases and statements articulated by the different participants and those derived from literature and institutional documents were identified, discussed, interpreted and conclusions made.

In particular convergences, corroboration and conflicting views and opinions of the staff versus those of students were recorded and analysed in relation to how the latter interpreted epistemic access and success of students. Of particular interest in the CUT case study was how the institution, through the institutional documents and staff (administrators, academics and support staff), think they are exposing students to the formal curriculum, the university environment values, ethos, and the type of knowledge expected and that might be different from that of students. The next section elaborates on the key insights that emerged from the data.



### **Student experience at CUT: Findings and analyses**

To situate an experience, the context of that experience is important. Student experience is firmly situated in relation to and within the context of the higher education institution in which they are enrolled. This section presents findings from the CUT case study, and commences with a description of this institution.

#### **Institutional geographical location and mandate**

To reiterate, CUT is a University of Technology (UoT). CUT was born out of the institutional merger of a technikon and Vista University (Bloemfontein) in 2005. In 2019, a campus was opened in Welkom, 160 kilometres north-east of Bloemfontein. Geographically, CUT is located in the centre of South Africa with spatial proximity to mainly rural communities around the Free State, Eastern Cape and Northern Cape provinces of South Africa. While Bloemfontein is an urban area, it is, for the most part surrounded by rural to semi-rural towns. In addition, the institution has the hallmark of an Historically Disadvantaged Institution (HDI) within a differentiated higher education system.

As a UoT, CUT has a specific mandate: it is tasked with preparing students to enter specific occupations and careers as technologists and technicians. Preparing individuals for occupations therefore takes precedence over producing researchers. Curricula at UoTs, including at CUT, are underscored by the attainment of skills and competencies, whereas curricula of professional fields in research-based institutions offer both professional skills and conceptual knowledge. In other words, curricula at CUT thus favour applied knowledge intended to prepare graduates for careers in specific fields. This could mean that the academic practices in which students participate and therefore learn are not the same at CUT as at a research-based institution.

An academic staff member indicated that professionals in the field of Environmental Health are often invited as guest lecturers to share practical examples with students on what they will be expected to do when they leave the university and enter their chosen careers (01\_AC07). This corroborates the idea that the nature of the curricula at UoTs like CUT, are focused on employment requirements.

Work integrated learning (WIL) is a distinctive feature of the curricula at UoTs whose mandate is preparing students for particular employment situations and careers. WIL is intended to reinforce the applied knowledge in the curricula of UoTs. During WIL, students are placed in workspaces to gain practical knowledge on the job. Unlike traditional universities (with the exception of teacher education programmes), academic lecturers do not maintain complete

control over what is learnt by students at UoTs like CUT. The context of learning to become a participant in academic practice at CUT (and other UoTs) thus extends to the workspaces where WIL is completed.

In line with preparing students for occupations, there is an emphasis on soft 21<sup>st</sup> century skills including generic employability skills and in Graduate Attributes (GAs) that shape curriculum design at CUT. Generic modes including GAs inform policy and practice on the Curriculum design and Teaching and Learning Plan at CUT (CUT, 2014). Specialised disciplinary knowledge is thus not the only focus of curricula at CUT. These distinctive features of curricula with regard to guest lecturers from industry, WIL and GAs are important aspects of student experiences within the pedagogic domain at CUT.

The institution aims to promote access with success by attracting students with the potential to succeed, and then to support them in becoming employable and job-creating graduates. These ambitions underpin CUT's academic learning programmes, integrated through teaching and learning, curricula activities, including WIL and co-curricular activities, including sports and culture (CUT, 2016). Taken together, WIL and an emphasis on graduate attributes at CUT could limit the academic lecturers' ability to engage students to learn to participate in academic practice. This raises a tension between student success, indicated by having graduated, and learning to participate in academic practice: epistemic access. Alternatively, it could be raising a more fundamental issue about the extent to which academic practice and student success is tied to epistemic access. Indeed, it does raise the question about how much of the episteme needs to be accessed.

This institutional distinctiveness can create an impression that the curricula of UoTs concentrate exclusively on imparting skills and competencies for occupations rather than conceptual and theoretical knowledge. If this is internalised in those who design and deliver curricula, specialised disciplinary knowledge and by extension, epistemic access to knowledge which technologists and technicians require to function effectively in specific occupations, can become marginalised (see Allais, 2012, cited by Muller & Young, 2013; Bernstein, 2000; Morrow, 2007; Wheelahan, 2007). The extent to which this tension is enacted will impact on the pedagogic domain at CUT and by extension, the pedagogic regulative discourses with which students at CUT are confronted.

The tension of whether (conceptual and theoretical) knowledge, skills or competencies are foregrounded at CUT or in any institutions' pedagogic domain does however not have a direct

impact on throughput rate. In other words, the nature of knowledge transmitted and assessed has no bearing on students' success as it pertains to graduating. From this perspective, student success relates to academic progression in programmes and ultimately graduation. Student success could thus be isolated from epistemic access at CUT. This might then disrupt the definition of epistemic access - as learning how to participate in academic practice - or the definition of academic practice ( see Chapter 1).

The next section examines the extent of student success at CUT in completing the academic qualification programmes. Undergraduate pass rates, and student throughput, permanent staff and full-time equivalent. FTE student staff ratio, enrolments by group and permanent academic staff by group and by rank are all significant for understanding student experiences and their participation in academic practice. Throughput rates are therefore discussed next in order to gain an overarching impression of student success at CUT. The extent to which students pass is a measure of student success and participation in academic practice.

#### **Throughput rates, enrolment practices and teaching strategies**

CUT recruits and enrolls students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds and Quintile 1 schools.

Tables 26 to 29 below provide throughput rates for four-year Bachelor's degrees for 2014-2019.

**Table 26: Four-year undergraduate degrees in the 2014-2019 time period**

	Enrolments						Graduates			Throughput Rates		
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2017	2018	2019	Min Time	Min Time + 1 yr	Min Time +2 yrs
<b>CUT</b>	798	632	612	605	246	108	343	134	38	43%	60%	65%
African	768	606	586	579	241	107	322	131	38	42%	59%	64%
Coloured	19	15	15	15	3		12	2		63%	74%	74%
Indian	1	1	1	1			1			100%	100%	100%
White	10	10	10	10	2	1	8	1		80%	90%	90%

Table 26 above shows the absolute number of enrolled and graduated students for the cohort that enrolled for the first time in 2014. In addition, the cumulative throughput rate in percentages for students completing programmes in minimum time, minimum plus one year and minimum plus two years is shown. The table illustrates that the Indian student has the highest throughput rate at 100% in minimum time, followed by the white students at 80%, the Coloured students at 63%, and African students at 42%. The completion rates of students with minimum time plus one, and minimum time plus two show a slight improvement of African students while the percentages for other population groups remain almost the same for all periods.

Table 27 below shows that the throughput rate in terms of minimum completion, minimum completion plus one and plus two is higher in Science, compared to completion in Humanities during the same period and Table 28 indicates that the percentage of female students who completed their programme in minimum plus one and minimum plus two is higher than those of their male counterparts.

**Table 27: Four-year B-Degree throughput rates by faculty**

		Enrolments						Graduates			Throughput Rate		
	Faculties	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2017	2018	2019	M	M+1	M+2
CUT	Humanities	746	586	570	562	237	106	311	126	38	42%	59%	64%
	Science	52	46	42	43	9	2	32	8		62%	77%	77%

**Table 28: Four-year B-Degree throughput rates by faculty and gender**

			Enrolments						Graduates			Throughput Rate		
		Gender	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2017	2018	2019	M	M+1	M+2
CUT	Humanities	Female	426	359	353	354	150	67	191	82	29	45%	64%	71%
		Male	320	227	217	208	87	39	120	44	9	38%	51%	54%
	<b>Total</b>		<b>746</b>	<b>586</b>	<b>570</b>	<b>562</b>	<b>237</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>311</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>64%</b>
	Science	Female	34	29	28	29	5	1	24	4		71%	82%	82%
		Male	18	17	14	14	4	1	8	4		44%	67%	67%
	<b>Total</b>		<b>52</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>8</b>		<b>62%</b>	<b>77%</b>	<b>77%</b>

**Table 29: Four-year B-Degree throughput rates by faculty and population group**

		Population Group	Enrolments						Graduates			Throughput Rate		
			2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2017	2018	2019	M	M+1	M+2
CUT	Humanities	A	725	569	553	545	232	105	299	123	38	41%	58%	63%
		C	17	13	13	13	3		10	2		59%	71%	71%
		W	4	4	4	4	2	1	2	1		50%	75%	75%
	<b>Humanities</b>		<b>746</b>	<b>586</b>	<b>570</b>	<b>562</b>	<b>237</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>311</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>64%</b>
	Science	A	43	37	33	34	9	2	23	8		53%	72%	72%
		C	2	2	2	2			2			100%	100%	100%
		I	1	1	1	1			1			100%	100%	100%
		W	6	6	6	6			6			100%	100%	100%
	<b>Science</b>		<b>52</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>8</b>		<b>62%</b>	<b>77%</b>	<b>77%</b>

Table 29 above shows overall that at CUT, the throughput in minimum time, minimum plus one and minimum plus two are higher in Science than in Humanities regardless of the population group. In addition, the throughput for White students is higher compared to those of Indian, Coloured and African students.

Tables 26 to 29 suggest a generally low percentage of students completing their degrees within the prescribed four years, with the majority taking one or two additional years. At CUT, the throughput of White students is generally higher than those of other population groups, with the throughput of African students being the lowest. At the same time, the proportion of African students is 82% in the Science faculty and 97% in the Humanities faculty. This means that there is perhaps little validity in comparing throughput by population group at CUT.

Furthermore, the throughput rate in Science is generally higher than those in Humanities. This could be attributed to the higher matric scores required for admission into Science programmes. For example: *For our specific programme [Clinical Technology], students need minimum points of about 30 and at least have level 4 for Math as well as Physical Sciences and Life Sciences if they wish to be considered for certain programmes in the FHES.* (01\_AC05)

The academic further explained that: *... since their programmes deals with human subjects, students who are strong in Sciences, Mathematics, Physical Science, Life Sciences are targeted ... students should have a good understanding and grasp of specific subjects.* (01\_AC05)

According to academic staff, the FHES does not have a problem attracting students with a strong scientific background to be part of Clinical Technology (01\_AC05). A support staff member, referring to students who performed well academically with entry scores above 30 points, explained that the FHES are recruiting the cream of the crop (01\_AD01). An administrator at FHES reported that students adjust quite well and fast to the Science faculty since they come with, or already have, a background in the Science subjects (01\_AD04).

Conversely, the general admission requirements in FH are that the candidate should have a National Senior Certificate (NSC) with endorsement for admission to a Bachelor's degree and a minimum pass mark of 50% pass in Mathematics (CUT, 2017). Humanities enrol students with generally low scores in Mathematics and Sciences, according to one support staff member (01\_AD01).

The enrolment rate of the Science faculty is much lower than the Humanities faculty. The Humanities faculty enrolled over 14 times more students than the Science faculty in four-year



B-degrees in 2014. Given the much lower enrolment, it stands to reason that class sizes are smaller, and students get more personal and individualised attention. According to one lecturer, in Bio-Medical Technology: *We have a total amount of 40 students per year group and about two to three students failing the subject in total.* (01\_AC05)

The Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) caps the intake of students into Bio-Medical Technology to 40 per year group. A lecturer in the FHES further indicated that during classes, they are able to interact with students on a personal level and therefore this enables the lecturers to get to know students and their personalities quite easily (01\_AC05). The significance of keeping a good rapport between the lecturers and students in the context of the knowledge structure of Clinical Technology was articulated as follows by an academic staff member in the programme: *Because there is a good connection between the theoretical and the practical part in my specific subject, it is easy to address the gap between ourselves and students. This makes it quite easy for myself because when I teach theory, I provide pictures and perform practical demonstration physically showing students in the class about a specific procedure and students then immediately make that connection between the theory and the practical.* (01\_AC05)

Consequently, it is not feasible to interpret the difference in throughput between the two faculties in relation to matric scores alone. This is not to say that entry requirements are not important to explaining the throughput rate, but that it is not the only dimension. These throughput rates also disrupt the efficacy of the concepts of under-preparedness and the articulation gap. Clearly in the FHES at CUT, students who have met the entry requirements are able to cope with the programme requirements, given the throughput rate of the B-degree at CUT: 62% complete the programme in the minimum time. Of course, these students are in smaller classes and are exposed to the practical knowledge associated with the requirements of the qualification programme. It does however beg the question: why are requirements for the Humanities faculty not increased, and why is enrolment not capped in the same way, if it clearly enables success?

The question raised earlier about the relationship between academic practice, epistemic access and student success is thus problematised by the FHES throughput rates. To add a further dimension to this tension, the HPCSA limits student enrolment. The professional body therefore has a direct impact on the student experience of learning to become a participant in academic practice, and academic practice is tied to practical knowledge.

A lecturer in the National Diploma in Environmental Health module offered in the FHES indicated that the throughput rate is relatively high, about 80% in that department even though some students are struggling in other subjects such as Epidemiology and Microbiology (01\_AC02). Another lecturer in the Bio-Medical Technology department and programme, agreed that the throughput rate is high – in the region of 80%. However, pass rates differ from module to module or subject to subject in the Faculty of Health and Environmental Science.

The difficulties experienced by students in some modules were attributed to English as the medium of instruction in these courses whereas English was not the students' mother tongue. Students are given the opportunity to learn better from a group in their mother tongue, according to one lecturer. While the medium of instruction is definitely a challenge in the South African education system, including higher education, one has to wonder why throughput is not equally affected by language in all programmes. Additional research comparing high throughput and low throughput programmes is required to identify critical levers and mechanisms.

Another lecturer in the same module, but at a different level in Environmental Health, concurred with her colleague that: *90% of our students graduate on time although students often face the challenge of placement of the work integrated learning [WIL]. However, students who are absorbed and gain work experience qualified as environmental practitioners.* (01\_AC07)

Student experiences of teaching and learning are shaped by pedagogic approaches at CUT. The pedagogic domain is thus impacted by particularities within faculties as well as overarching institutional teaching and learning strategies. CUT has adopted an approach or philosophy to teaching and learning, and has instituted a specific plan, the Teaching and Learning Plan (CUT, 2014).

The Student-Centred Approach (SCA) is the philosophy at the foundation of all teaching and learning practices and grounds the institution's conviction that every student can become a graduate and every lecturer an agent of change (CUT, 2014). By nurturing an engaged student, a scholarly academic and a rich learning environment, the belief at CUT is that throughput rates will progressively increase, and more importantly, graduates will be well-rounded individuals (CUT, 2014). In order to pursue its vision, CUT has adopted a student-centred approach (SCA) as an official philosophy to guide policy and practice on teaching and learning. Notably, improvement of lecturers' qualifications and a supportive environment have been highlighted

as critical to supporting this teaching and learning philosophy. The purpose of implementing an SCA to teaching is broadly summarised by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) as follows: Curriculum development, especially the development of learning programmes and materials, should put students first, recognising and building on their knowledge and experience, and responding to their needs (CUT, 2014).

Student retention to promote epistemic access is driven through the Teaching and Learning Plan at CUT. In particular, goals and strategies in the Teaching and Learning Plan seek to improve access for and retention of students, while the objective is to identify, evaluate and address impediments to access and retention of students as well as identify and address barriers to student success. Strategies are intended to provide appropriate academic support to all students in need and targeting improvement of the first-year student experience by introducing a student mentorship programme in the faculty to mentor first-year students (CUT, 2014). By targeting experiences of students at first-year levels, the strategies are critical in supporting students in a foreign university environment.

This section has examined the throughput rates of students together with the institution's pedagogic approaches which underpin the student experiences. In the next section, the experiences of students at CUT are highlighted from the perspective of staff members and students at this institution.

### **Student experiences at CUT**

The context of the university is one aspect that shapes student experiences of university life, thereby situating their participation in academic practice; another is their background. One cannot leave one's background at the door of an institution; even when one enters it to learn. According to social constructivist theories, this is even more important when one enters the institution to learn. In this section findings that emerge about student backgrounds are discussed.

### **Geography and socio-economic conditions**

The participants observed that students enrolled at CUT are generally from disadvantaged backgrounds. A support staff member stated: ... *given the context or where we find ourselves, we do have a lot of students from poor disadvantaged communities entering university and some of whom would never be admitted elsewhere.* (01\_AD01)

In the context of CUT, this includes students from rural villages, single parent families and dysfunctional schools. The academic, administrative and support staff reported that in general, students in the FHES and FH at CUT come from socially and economically deprived areas and are historically disadvantaged students, the majority being African. In terms of racial breakdown, an academic staff member in one of the modules in the FHES revealed that the majority of students in the modules are African and that only recently has one White student registered. She noted that it was the first time in seven or eight years that she has had a White student in her class (01\_AC02). The racial demographic of students in Tables 26 and 29 above illustrate that on average the proportion of the black students enrolled in the two faculties included in this study is higher than 95%.

The racial group or identity of a student is not defining of their experiences on campus. Their socio-economic position, related to the distinct intersection of geographic and economic location, demarcates the capability of students at CUT to engage in academic practice. The distinct intersection emerged from the interview data of students and staff, who report that limited access to public transport and Wi-Fi connectivity together with an environment not conducive to studying, are critical features associated with this intersection. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds bear a large load of domestic responsibility that contributes to their home environments not being conducive to studying or focusing on academic practices. Features of students' background relate to their location in low socio-economic, rural and/or semi-urban areas in the Free State province of South Africa.

As the institution's name suggests, and noted above, the Central University of Technology was established to cater for the central geographic area of South Africa - the Free State province and parts of the Northern and Eastern Cape provinces. A support staff member (01\_AD01\_09) confirmed this intention has been realised with regard to the Free State province, reporting that CUT draws students from Phuthaditjhaba, QwaQwa area, and Botshabelo, all in the Free State province. In addition, the staff member observed that students are from predominantly disadvantaged areas of Bloemfontein, Welkom, Waterville and Hermann, all in the Free State province. Phuthaditjhaba, QwaQwa, Thaba Nchu and Botshabelo are mainly rural areas situated far from the Bloemfontein campus of CUT and characterised by unemployment and poverty. Bloemfontein is surrounded by townships and informal settlements from where the university recruits its students. Welkom is a rural mining area surrounded by a number of townships and informal settlements.



**Figure 24: Map of Bloemfontein, Welkom, Thaba Nchu and Botshabelo**

A support staff member (01\_AD01) surmised that there is a difference between students in the two faculties: *more of the students that are from privileged backgrounds are in Health Sciences as compared to Humanities that enrolls predominantly the students from rural areas.*

While a student from Health Sciences, endorsed the geographic and economic background during an interview: *I grew up in Thaba Nchu, a small town in the Free State with my grandmother and my other cousins. My grandmother was a shebeen owner and that's how we managed to survive through high school.* (01\_SS03)

Thus, while the support staff member might be correct in reporting that more students from the Humanities faculty are from rural backgrounds, it is not true in all cases. Students' geographic and economic backgrounds have consequences for how they are able to navigate the official, pedagogic and social domains of campus life.

In areas like Phuthaditjhaba and Botshabelo, where the majority of students come from, there are a lot of taverns and some old schools erected by the former Homeland Governments. In contrast, students from towns are more exposed to quality health care and, and apparently, these students are the ones who often make use of psychological services on campus.

One student revealed that she comes from a big family of four children and her mother is a single parent. This BEd student revealed that her mother was a street vendor but *ensured that every day [they] have a meal- - - we struggled a lot when I was still young* (01\_HS08).

The significance of understanding student backgrounds was articulated by a support staff member, who stressed that when teaching students from marginalised backgrounds it is important to acknowledge the challenges that students face: *An example of a student arriving late in class or not attending classes but as a lecturer you are not aware of the challenges that are contributing to this student missing classes. The lecturer might not be aware that students may not have resources or accommodation or things that are the supporting structure for them to succeed.* (01\_AD01).

The challenges of transport, accommodation and finance were highlighted. An academic reported on an interaction they had had with one of the students, which revealed that public transport from villages situated at a distance from the university campus mitigated seamless access to lectures, particularly those early in the morning and later in the afternoon. For example, if students miss the bus in the morning, the next bus would arrive much later and they would thus arrive late for class. Some students do not want to attend the afternoon classes ending at 4pm, especially during winter, because the last bus would have left by the time the lecture ends (01\_AC01). This means that students finding themselves in this position, often miss late classes to travel home.

Transport challenges could be mitigated by making sufficient accommodation available on or close to campus. The institution has acknowledged that student accommodation is a problem at CUT and that the institution does not have the land to build new student residences. Thus, CUT, like other universities, is currently negotiating the allocation of NSFAS to students who do not reside in university accommodation. This would allow students to use their NSFAS allocation to buy bus tickets or fund other forms of transport. Money for the bus would however not resolve the limitation in bus scheduling, which presumably relates to the limited demand from specific rural areas that students come from. If there is no bus after 4pm, no amount of money will manifest a bus.

On the other hand, as a Clinical Technology student points out, she applied to CUT because it was going to cost her less as she stays in a township near Bloemfontein (01\_SS05). Thus, while public transport is a challenge, the student is fortunate that there is an institution within

traveling distance that provides an opportunity for formal access, and by implication the potential to participate in the academic practices of that institution.

Since CUT has limited student accommodation, students travel almost 50 kilometres to and from the university to places such as Thaba Nchu, with the consequence that some students would arrive late for classes, or they may not even attend classes if there are bus strikes taking place. The students' problems are compounded by a lack of technological equipment and Wi-Fi connectivity to catch up on their own, when in these areas.

Students from such backgrounds have experienced challenges with technology, that would have been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. A female Clinical Technology student (01\_SS03) raised this challenge. She indicated that she had never been exposed to technology as she comes from a small town, Thaba Nchu, that has limited access to technology and a general lack of opportunities and infrastructure. The student indicated that they struggle to use technology as they had only come into contact with a computer when they were enrolled at the university. The difficulties of adapting to a university environment where computers are used, was flagged by the student as well (01\_SS03).

A Mathematics student teacher validated the technological barriers students from rural areas and villages face when starting at CUT: *I didn't have experience in using technology, because I grew up, I attended those schools where we didn't have computers, laptops ... So, when I was applying to varsity, I asked someone to apply for me.* (01\_HS16)

Staff and students interviewed at CUT illustrate that the social domain of an institution stretches beyond its boundaries to all spaces inhabited by students, to the extent that it affects their engagement with the pedagogic domain. For many students enrolled at CUT, their socio-economic situation has implications for how they engage with the pedagogic domain of CUT. The logistical limitations related to students' geographic location and socio-economic status impinge on their ability to engage in academic activities and therefore, having to learn how to participate in academic practices. These challenges include limited access to public transport which impacts on lecture attendance, as well as other amenities (such as the library) after hours and limited access to technology, including devices and internet connectivity, which could potentially be mitigated by sufficient student accommodation close to campus, as well as adequate, safe public transport supplied by municipalities or the institution.

Student accommodation would also provide a solution to students living in conditions that might not be conducive for academic practices. Some participants raised the issue of unacceptable accommodation, which includes residing in overcrowded homes located in noisy neighbourhoods characterised by gangsterism, or poor households where a student might not have adequate food. The participants corroborated the challenge of student accommodation at the institution related to an inadequate number of students being accommodated at the CUT campus, and the absence of any (university-owned) student accommodation on the Welkom campus. An academic staff member agreed, articulating that: *Some of the students for example come to me and tell me that they are struggling because they stay in accommodation that is not conducive to studying, including studying at some homes. Some live far away, as far as Botshabelo and Thaba Nchu and they have to travel to school.* (01\_AC07)

Given its history as a disadvantaged institution, CUT acknowledges that it faces challenges regarding student accommodation. A total of 830 students are currently accommodated in student residences on the Bloemfontein campus. The institution acknowledges that the shortfall in affordable accommodation for students is detrimental to students' experience of university life [and the retention rate] (CUT, 2015).

Findings relating to student experiences at CUT highlight that limited access to public transport and Wi-Fi connectivity together with living conditions that are not conducive to studying, are features that shape their experiences of university life. A Clinical Technology student described typical socio-economic effects from the environment disclosing that she: *grew up seeing her parents fighting all the time, growing up in a shebeen where you see people fighting all the time, people being drunk and killing each other all the time.* (01\_SS03)

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds living in conditions not conducive to studying face many barriers with regard to learning how to participate in academic practices. For most students, these experiences are compounded. The following excerpt is from an academic staff member: *From a social perspective I think it's very important and that we've seen in our programme is to understand the background of the students. ... there are really students that struggle and if you don't know why they struggle, then you can't solve their problem. Some students have to look after their families. They have to leave at 5 o'clock in the morning to be at the campus at 8 o'clock and leaves the campus at 15hrs or 16hrs.* (01\_AC05)



This excerpt highlights students' domestic responsibilities, in addition to the lack of public transport and Wi-Fi connectivity, which could impact on their participation in academic activities. The academic staff member narrated the experience of a female student who had to look after a family and had to travel 40 - 50 kilometres daily from home to CUT and back again (01\_AC05).

The excerpt further illustrates the cognisance that academic staff have of students' experience to navigate their participation in academic activities. The academic staff member emphasised the significance of identifying students early so that they are assisted by both the institution and the faculties. The academic staff member stated that: *I think we facing the challenge of understanding students' background and the difficulties they face. I don't always have the answers in the sense of how to address it.* (01\_AC05)

The challenges students face relating to geographic location and socio-economic background are not insurmountable. The effect it has on engaging with the pedagogic domain at CUT and thus learning how to participate in academic practice however, remains something that requires continuous investigation in novel and rigorous ways. At the same time, given that the students interviewed for this project are in their final year of study, they have negotiated these challenges in order to progress academically. A low socio-economic background is thus not insurmountable in all instances. Although this research study tried to highlight the success of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, a comparative rigorous analysis is required of students who succeed in completing academic programmes in the minimum time frame, minimum plus one and two, as well as those who drop out, in order to fully grasp the point at which socio-economic background is insurmountable.

### **Transitioning to university**

A Clinical Technology student (01\_SS03) disclosed that initially she was expecting the values and culture of a high school where she was pushed to do everything by the school but discovered that this was no longer the case at university. She experienced difficulties adapting to the changes from high school life to university life.

Given the differences between home and university, students report needing to change who they are in order to succeed. A National Diploma student recalled how she had to abandon her experiences in favour of the university's ethos and values. This frustration was captured as follows: *One thing that I don't like about university, it changes you, it wants you to adopt its own lifestyle, if you are coming with your own lifestyle, I had to change the way I dressed, the*

*way I appear but it took me time, maybe a year then I had to adjust because I was coming with my own style from kasi<sup>5</sup>, now I feel like I don't fit in because the way that I am, the way that I dress and whatsoever. (01\_SS07)*

Interestingly the excerpt above does not relate to a change that can be associated with the pedagogic domain of school versus university. Rather, it can be connected to the social domain of university versus that of the students' community. This student had to make an adjustment that she did not like in order to succeed at university.

Other students experienced a more welcoming environment at university. A student from FHES (01\_HS04) appreciates the benefits gained from the university environment. The university environment is creating: *a positive environment in the sense that it pulls us together with a common goal that you must achieve and there is a lot that you are taught there and you are able to apply it. At the end, you will be graduating and transferring the knowledge further or facilitating the knowledge and assist people who are often exposed to gangsterism. (01\_HS04)*

A BEd Commerce student from FH also portrayed a welcoming university environment: *I feel at home because the staff are very friendly and the rules that they have set for the students are the best. (01\_HS08)*

An administrator in the FHES addressed the issue of belonging, underlying the fact that as administrators, one of their responsibilities is to give students a sense of belonging and comfort in the faculty. This includes supporting and guiding them where there is a need, such as facilities management. The administrator further indicated that their role is also to ensure that the venues are always in good order and that the teaching and learning technology is working properly in the lecture rooms (01\_AD04). Such actions are not necessarily scripted into the formal programme submitted to the Council on Higher Education (CHE) for approval and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) for accreditation. These acts of ensuring belonging and comfort for students are however, paramount in enabling students' continued participation in academic activities.

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<sup>5</sup> *Kasi* is a colloquial term used with reference to townships in South Africa. The word is a derivative of the Afrikaans word for township; *lokasie*. Townships were established and developed during the forced removals resulting from the implementation of the Group Areas Act of 1953 during apartheid in South Africa. Townships are located remotely from the central business districts in all towns and cities in South Africa with devastating effects on the mobility of those residing there - a feature of apartheid spatial planning that is yet to be corrected.

Ironically, students from the Humanities faculty reported a more welcoming environment than the faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences. The FHES has a much higher throughput rate than the FH. The data did not allow an elaboration on this point. Also, it does not match up well with what the academic staff member from FHES indicated above about the ability to engage students on a personal level. At the same time, how academic staff engage students at a personal level, might not necessarily translate into a welcoming experience for all students. The excerpt from the administrative staff members also reminds us that students interact with a number of staff members, and thus their success or failure cannot be explained by interactions with a particular staff member. What is key here is that, 'fitting in' or feeling 'unwelcome' does not determine student success, not on its own, in any event. As with geographic location and socio-economic background, a rigorous comparative study is required to understand the complex pathways that might lead to students completing academic programmes or not.

### **Challenges students face**

Students interviewed for this study had progressed to the final year in their programmes. They had achieved this despite the marginalised backgrounds which challenged their participation in academic activities. In addition, the official and pedagogic domains of the institution posed further challenges. Students reported dissatisfaction both with administrative procedures as well as interactions with academic staff.

Students reported that the CUT environment was not bad because they have almost everything. However, problems with institutional level administration were highlighted. A student articulated this change thus: *Our laboratories and lecture halls are fine but the admin part of CUT is really not good. We have a problem of getting our results, a problem getting allowances and the limited access to the computer lab. I wish they could get at least, more computer labs, since there's a lot of us at campus but the computers are very few for all of us.* (01\_SS11).

Many students interviewed raised the administration of NSFAS as the main concern at CUT. A total of 3 827 (of the 14 192 total enrolment) students are supported by means of the NSFAS bursary scheme.

One student expressed frustration about a lecturer who used to downgrade students when it comes to their marks. This was expressed as follows: *It was more like the lecturer wanted them to fail as students. Most of them were not happy about the situation because they were frustrated, and that some of them, it was their first time getting such marks and everything.* (01\_SS11)

The student indicated that the academic part of 2019 was frustrating (01\_SS11). From this student's account, there is a worrying pedagogical distancing between students and some academic staff members, and this is being experienced by most students in the class, as she indicated. Again, this does not match with reports from the academic staff members, who have explained that they are both engaging students in class and attempting to accommodate students' backgrounds. On the other hand, the sample of academic staff interviewed was not large, and neither are academic staff likely to report in an interview to treating students badly.

Contrary to students who felt a sense of belonging in the FH, another pointed out that: *Our lecturers do not care that much about us. You have to do things on our own. They will be saying one in class encouraging us to feel free to come their offices if they encounter problem. But then the person will be different when you come to his or her own office. He / she will be shouting and he will be having a bad attitude and all that, so you have got to do some things on your own or have groups to study.* (01\_HS07).

However, another student's experience in the FHES was more positive as she felt that her lecturer was more caring. According to this student, a female lecturer creates a welcoming social space between herself and students by always inviting them to approach her whether at home or at school when they have any problem. *She always avails herself to talk to and even helps us with our way to the courses, the life after the qualifications and job opportunities* (01\_SS13).

Students' diverse backgrounds are clearly intersected by diverse experiences of academic process, infrastructure and interactions with staff, academic and others. The exact permutation of consequences is not possible to determine, unless a more comparative study is conducted. What can be deduced here though, is that students can succeed irrespective of challenges related to their geographic location or socio-economic background, experiences of transition to university, or challenges experienced at university.

### **Institutional and faculty level interventions at CUT**

Given the background of students recruited and enrolled at CUT, a number of interventions have been introduced to mediate epistemic access and success. To accommodate under-preparedness, unpreparedness and the articulation gap, CUT has established student support services that reflect the university's commitment to create a vibrant teaching and learning environment for staff and students.

The range of programmes offered to students includes academic support (including supplementary instruction and student-peer mentorship), student counselling and health/wellness services and support to student governance structures at both institutional level and in the faculties (CUT, 2016). The interventions and pedagogical strategies to mitigate the effect of or deal with academic challenges brought about as a result of transition from school to university, were highlighted and include the following: Student-Peer Mentorship Programme, Supplementary Instruction (SI), a project on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Graduate Attributes Project, Academic Advising, the Writing Centre for undergraduate students, Extended Curriculum Programmes (ECPs), the Mentorship Programme for New Academics, and a year-long training and development programme (CUT, 2015).

The support programmes and interventions represent the activities beyond the formal programme. Interestingly, participants did not have much to say about these core programmatic activities. In the process of providing for the formal programmes offered by the institution, whether core or supplementary, students interact with all staff at a personal level.

Apart from student-staff interactions in the lectures, intervention programmes and other daily activities, CUT has created several extra-curricular platforms, fora, support units on campus to develop as part of the broader institutional community. These include: Student Leadership Development and Training to inculcating democratic values and ethos, independent thinking and critical inquiry (CUT, 2015); Student Parliament (SP) forum established to serve as an advisory body to the SRC etc. and Unleashing the Hidden [UTH] for character-building (CUT, 2015). With regard to these interventions, participants did not have much to say about how they supported their experience on campus. This might be due to the participants in this study having limited experience with these programmes or it could be related to how they perceived the questions; that is, questions were not asked about these specific programmes, although they were asked about extra-curricular experiences.

The importance of university staff and their interaction with students cannot be overestimated in creating a safe environment for students to navigate epistemic access. A healthy social distance between academic staff and students will prevail by developing and maintaining dialogue and interaction where students feel safe to approach the lecturers whenever they experience problems in learning.

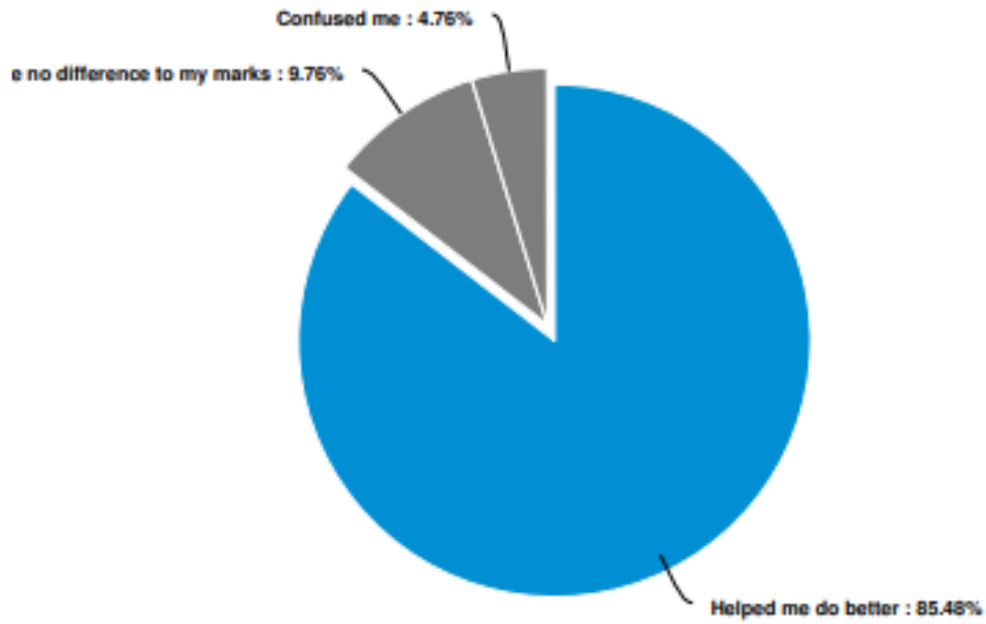
Academic, administrative and support staff were more vocal than students about the relevance of institutional and faculty-led interventions in negotiating epistemic access. Based on staff assertions, these interventions have become indispensable given the background and profile of students recruited and enrolled at the institution, who are affected by an articulation gap and may thus experience barriers when navigating epistemic access.

### **Supplementary Instruction (SI)**

Supplementary Instruction (SI) is an academic assistance programme that aims to enhance student performance and retention. More importantly, SI at the institution does not identify high-risk students, but rather identifies high-risk subjects with the aim of increasing student performance and retention. SI sessions, which commence during the first week of the term, are part of an academic assistance programme offered at first-, second-, and third-year levels to assist students with their academic studies.

- SI targets high-risk courses rather than high-risk students and aims to improve the pass rate of students.
- SI is presented in the form of peer-facilitated sessions and incorporates principles of peer-collaborative learning.
- SI aims to improve learning skills such as thinking and reasoning, responsibility and reflection (CUT, 2015).

The throughput at the institution could be attributed to a strong student support programme, including mentorship programmes and SI to support students in specific programmes where they are not performing. A support staff member in charge of the mentorship programme and SI pointed out that he has experienced cases whereby: *Students who were performing at a range of 50 and 40% the same students often, start picking up the performance towards 60 and 70%, after being through the programme (01\_AD04).*



**Figure 25: Students' views and experiences of SI**

The above figure corroborates the claim by the support staff member about the efficacy of SI. In terms of the figure above, 4.76% of the students indicated that SI confused them, 9.76% felt that SI did not make any difference to their marks, and 85.45% indicated that the programme helped improve their marks. The description above and the figure highlights the significance of specific roles of academic support structures in support of students to acquire epistemic access and success.

### **Language, learning and academic literacy at CUT**

The university environment comprising its values, culture and ethos, is generally foreign and alienating to most students as the majority of them come from marginalised environments. Two problems relating to a disjuncture between the university environment and the students' school and home environment are the language used as a medium of instruction at university versus languages spoken at home and common-sense knowledge (mundane), knowledge they bring from home as opposed to scientific, structured and esoteric knowledge (Bernstein 2000) terms, and formal and written language.

Inevitably, the medium of instruction in higher education is critical in determining whether students will gain epistemic access or not. In particular, while the medium of instruction is generally a barrier to accessing epistemic access in higher education, this is more so in historically disadvantaged institutions that mainly recruit students from township or rural

schools. This issue was articulated by an administrator in the FHES who observed that: *some of the students were not really used to being taught for example in English full time and when they get to the university, they now get themselves or see themselves being taught in English full time and some do have student problems during lecturing times.* (Administrator 01\_AD04).

A support staff member raised the challenge of language to negotiate epistemic access and student experiences. The staff member lamented the absence of the student voice as part of writing skills, arguing that students seem not to know that they have a voice (01\_AD04). The staff member noted that, while students need to draw from other people, their own opinions are important in academia for them to be heard (01\_AD04). The absence of voice is attributed to an inability of students to cope with English as the medium of instruction at university versus their home language and in particular, the challenge of grammatical structures of the university (Bernstein, 2000). According to an academic, students in the FHES are African and are mostly Sesotho speaking, with a few coming from Lesotho (01\_AC02). The students' voices are particularly critical, if their experiences are to be enhanced.

CUT recognises academic literacy as an indispensable tool in negotiating epistemic access for students. In particular, the institution observed that a large number of students, irrespective of their level of achievement in high school, are generally not sufficiently equipped in academic English language proficiency and personal competencies (life skills) to successfully pursue studies in higher education. It is further reasoned that even students with high academic potential often struggle to progress in their studies due to a general low level of academic English proficiency. For this reason, CUT decided to introduce compulsory fundamental modules to improve the entry-level proficiency of all first-year students. These modules include academic English learning experiences in language proficiency, academic literacy and personal competencies/life skills (CUT, 2020).

Academic literacy is described as knowing how to speak and act within a particular discourse, and the reading and writing that occur within the academic discipline at large and within particular fields (CUT, 2016). The institution asserts that while some students acquire academic literacy by virtue of their participation in the discourse of the relevant discipline, this is not always the case for students who are less prepared for higher education studies (CUT, 2016). Academic literacy is an indispensable practice necessary to negotiate epistemic access and success for students. As discussed below, many students are excluded from epistemic access because they often do not have the required academic literacy of their particular disciplines.



Closely tied to academic literacy in negotiating epistemic access to students are the threshold concepts in particular disciplines. The support staff articulate this concern thus: *Social problems, academic problems such as problems with threshold concepts because some students fail because they don't understand the academic jargon - - - we are therefore trying to do is to create an enabling environment by appointing the senior students so that they can take them through and help them to transitionally manage because our view is, if we can manage first year then it will be much easier to graduate and complete the program within the minimum space.* (01\_AD01)

An academic in Clinical Technology suggested that African languages could be an effective tool for navigating epistemic access to students for whom English is not their home language. The academic did admit that the content of Clinical Technology does not accommodate the use of the African languages with regard to specific anatomical parts or anatomy (01\_AC05). However, this academic praised the initiative by the university to develop a dictionary specifically for some of the African languages and expressed the hope that this will be a benefit for the students. This will specifically assist students with scientific language (01\_AC05).

### **Peer mentorship programme**

The aim of the Peer Mentorship Programme is to provide CUT students with a supportive environment that will motivate and assist them in developing and reaching their maximum personal and academic potential. This programme provides a framework for positive interaction between students, mentors and lecturing staff. More importantly, trained peer-mentors provide leadership and support to students during mentoring sessions designed to help connect learners, provide them with information on campus resources, and give them a sense of belonging and open possibilities of connectedness to the world.

In particular, peer assistance and peer mentoring where another student assists have, according to one academic, been effective because students in a one-to-one situation sometimes talk the same language rather than English (01\_AC05): *So, ever since then, whenever I face a problem, I'll go to him. If I don't understand in the lecture hall, I would just go to him privately and talk to him like, I did not understand this and that. So, he's the one who showed me a good impression Maths.* (01\_HS08)

Peer-mentoring, where students are supported by their peers using mother tongue, if necessary, is critical to bridge the gap between the language used at home and English as the medium of instruction at university. Thus, peer-mentoring provides a safe environment for students who

are not coping with the formal curriculum. The use of the student's home language to decode formal content and threshold concepts, goes a long way to mediate epistemic access to students whose home language is not English. Peer-mentor students trained to work with their fellow peers can discuss content in the students' home language.

The participants validated the institutional documents by saying that these support structures which exist at institutional level and in departments, play a critical role in the retention rate. One support staff member noted that one of the responsibilities in the mentorship programme is to *identify early warnings that can help to identify students at risk before they actually fall through the grade and not make it, and provide a peer mentorship programme for first year students as a strategy to retain in the system* (01\_AD01). The support staff member explained that support structures: *support first years in their transition from high school to university but what it also has is such that it is able to give students somebody who is a mentor who has been in the system, who understands because we also look at the qualities of mentors when we select mentors, somebody that they can talk to, somebody that will be able to guide them through their studies and their journey of university.* (01\_AD01)

The impact of the mentorships was captured as follows by the same support staff member: *If you get a student performing at the range of 50 and 40, this student often starts picking up the performance towards 60 and 70%, after being through the programme. However, there are many variables that affect students, higher the results of failing or passing such as social problems that they may have you find the child is grappling in performance.* (01\_AD01)

The participants referred specifically to the mentorship programme, the peer mentoring and supplementary instruction (SI) coordinated at institutional level. At the faculty in FHES and Clinical Technology programme, peer learning where senior students are used to mentor young students, was considered to be particularly useful. Peer assistance with leaders being identified within the group, are requested to assist students, and extra classes are provided where additional information is provided. (AD02).

### **Special programmes**

Academics in the FHES pointed out that they have in their different courses organised tutorial classes and WhatsApp groups to support students not only to remain in the system but also help them succeed (01\_AC03, 01\_AC04). In addition, various special support programmes and strategies are implemented to ensure that students remain in the system and succeed according to an administrator in the FHES. These special projects are not organised at institutional level

but rather at faculty/departmental levels. Apparently, these special programmes have been developed over and above the normal contact time between lecturers and students and seem to apply to certain courses. For example, a Mathematics special programme has been developed to safeguard student retention (01\_AD04). The latter pointed out that: *retention of students is important because we built an enabling environment to keep our students in the system and by so doing increase throughput and completion studies within the stipulated qualification minimum period.* (01\_AD01).

An enabling environment complements efforts by institutions in supporting students to gain epistemic access given the often-unwelcoming university environment to some students from marginalised communities.

### **Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP)**

One of the interventions to address the articulation gap and negotiate epistemic access and success in higher education, particularly for students from marginalised communities and schools in the South African context, and also implemented at CUT, is the Extended Curriculum Project (ECP) that gained prominence with three decades of experience (CHE, 2013). While the articulation gap is a sectoral problem in South Africa, the adoption of ECP in universities in general, as well as at CUT, signals efforts to mitigate the negative effects of larger structural challenges that directly affect the promotion of epistemic access to students from marginalised communities. Students from the latter communities are often blamed for being underprepared and of lacking the ‘appropriate’ knowledge and dispositions required by the university sector (see, Higher Education Monitor 6) (CHE, 2010; Scott, 2009; Scott et al., 2007).

Thus, ECP has been recommended at national level to broaden access to the higher education sector for students who, because of historical inequalities and inequities in society in general, and in the schooling system, do not possess the required matric scores to enter mainstream programmes at universities. Thus, the widespread endorsement of ECP at CUT is not coincidental but rather consistent with the background and profile of students recruited and enrolled at the university (see CUT, 2016; 2020). Contrary to some misgivings that ECP could reinforce historical inequities by extending the study period of students from marginalised communities, the programme seems to become a norm rather than an exception at CUT and therefore accepted as a normal route to expose students to epistemic access.

The Compulsory Academic Literacy and Personal Competencies Module for all first-year students is consistent with the concerns raised by the institution, academics, administrative and support staff who all lament the fact that academic literacy is a barrier to acquiring epistemic access (see Cross & Atinde, 2015; CUT, 2020). In particular, making this module a compulsory aspect of ECP at CUT is justified as a tool to negotiate the difference between common sense home language, and a specialised academic of the university.

In highlighting the effects of the perceived articulation gap, one of the academics said: *Because we recognise the gap between school and university, we introduce some basics that will assist students to blend into the programme ... we conduct pre-tests to prepare students for what we expect ... the questions in pre-tests inquire into what students have learnt from high school especially the new students.* (01\_AC01)

The above view was endorsed by a colleague: *The big problem is the basics, the problem will be the basics from high school when they come to us, they lack a lot of basics involving concepts students need to understand Math 1<sup>st</sup> year, 2<sup>nd</sup> year and 3<sup>rd</sup> year at university.* (01\_AC03)

In particular, the views of academics signify an appreciation of the existing articulation gaps between disciplinary knowledge acquired in schools versus knowledge of the university. These strategies have to do with careful selection, sequencing and pacing in curriculum design if students are to gain epistemic access.

The ECP at CUT has been designed to promote epistemic access to students who do not meet the minimum requirements with the necessary competencies to be successful in their studies. The purpose of this programme is to support educationally disadvantaged students who are underprepared despite meeting minimum admission criteria, by enabling them to be placed in an extended curriculum programme that will provide them with the academic foundation to successfully complete their studies. The ECP therefore means an additional year added to a three-year programme.

This programme is provided in the four faculties for applicants who were denied direct access to mainstream programmes. The programme provides students with the requisite skills and the subsequent year of study in particular fields. The university rule stipulates that students must pass all instructional offerings of the first year of the ECP in order to continue with the subsequent year of study in the ECP. A student enrolled in the ECP may not change to the

regular programme even after successfully completing the first year of the ECP. The student must complete the ECP in full (CUT, 2020).

Academics in the sampled programmes indicated that the majority of students initially register for the ECP, which prepares them for first year studies. Students are expected to do most of the subjects that are generic in order to gain entry into their first year of studies (01\_AC07). Students are expected to meet CUT's general admission requirements, as well as programme-specific minimum admission requirements.

One element of the ECP germane to promotion of epistemic access at CUT is the Compulsory Academic Literacy and Personal Competencies Module. All first-year students are tested at the beginning of the academic year in terms of their language proficiency and thereafter, if necessary, students are enrolled in the Language Proficiency Module. The module includes learning experiences in language proficiency, academic literacy, and personal competencies/life skills. Personal competencies/life skills expose students to, amongst other things, learning experiences in effective study methods, critical and creative thinking skills, and analytical decision-making skills. Provision of this compulsory module corroborate concerns of academics, administrative staff, and students in the sampled faculties about the centrality of language literacy as the cornerstone of the epistemic access project at CUT.

### **Psychological and Counselling services**

Psychological and counselling services are an institutional intervention not targeted directly at academic subjects and programmes. The psychological support staff describe their role as that of inculcating a sense of belonging by empowering students to navigate adversity without becoming despondent (01\_AS02).

While these interventions target mainly the social, psychological and emotional aspects, these services have been put in place to facilitate student learning and help them negotiate knowledge disseminated at university. A staff member in the psychological services articulates the significance of the services thus *we develop students psycho-socially to enable them to relate with other people. We refer them to a social worker if they have questions that are beyond our scope of practice. I would say holistically we try to provide services that give them that ability to navigate and to succeed in their education.* (01\_AS03)

The general assumption held by the institutions is that the retention of students could be enhanced through institutional psychological services focusing on students' social and

academic life. The staff member in the psychological services maintained that psychological services: *contribute first and foremost to retention because we have students who come from different backgrounds. Some enter higher education without proper knowledge at least how to write ... we therefore ensure that students are orientated into different services that provided, help them with adjustments through workshops, help them to navigate their campuses. We also assist them with skills to survive higher education. Students are also assisted emotionally or psycho-socially.* (01\_AD01)

Students with social problems are referred to psychological services and counselling while students with academic problems are referred to the institutional mentorship programme and SI (01\_AC05).

Contrary to positive views by academics and administration staff, one student from National Diploma in the FHES indicated that she had psychological and social problems but did not make use of the services provided by the university (01\_SS14). The majority of the students indicated that they had not experienced such psychological and social challenges. However, it could be that more students experienced both psychological and social problems but shun these services to avoid being stigmatised by their peers.

Institutional and faculty levels of teaching and learning as well as psychological and counselling interventions at CUT are intended to play a pivotal role in mediating learning. However, counselling services did not emerge in the data as an intervention drawn on by the students in this sample to enhance their participation in academic practice.

### **Economic support**

Some 2 741 students received bursaries from CUT funds in 2015 (CUT, 2015) to promote not only access to higher education but specifically for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. From its meagre budget, CUT allocated R16 446 000 (CUT, 2015). Furthermore, retention and the throughput rate at CUT were linked with funding or lack thereof. The staff concurred that NSFAS has a direct bearing on retention and the throughput rate arguing further that students are likely to drop out or discontinue their studies without this government funding scheme.

### **Decolonisation, Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and epistemic access**

Decolonisation and the 4IR (including 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills) were intentionally examined in this research project as phenomena that are shaping actions and behaviour in higher education institutions, including CUT. The institution has pledged to contribute to international and

national issues of decoloniality and the 4IR in its Vision 2030 (CUT, 2020). This is despite the fact that decoloniality and the 4IR are different in terms of their purposes and history. Participants voiced diverse opinions relating to decolonisation and the 4IR with implications for epistemic access and success. Two observations are made in this regard: Firstly, decolonisation means interrogating the Western canons of knowledge and enabling epistemologies from the multiple origins including African societies and marginalised communities. Secondly, the 4IR was conceptualised by the participants in very general terms but correctly associated with new technologies available or absent in the context of the CUT campus. For example, access to internet connectivity on campuses, in student residence as well as in their homes.

### **Decolonial debate at CUT**

The participants were asked about their conceptualisation of decolonisation as a movement intended to disrupt the current curriculum which reflects and reinforces canons of Western knowledge as opposed to reflecting multiple knowledges and epistemologies grounded within African communities. This was to examine the CUT narrative related to the #RhodesMustFall student movement and a growing scholarly debate that decolonisation should not be interpreted to mean replacing Western with African canons but rather recognising both knowledge and epistemologies (see De Sousa Santos, 2001; Mbembe, 2015; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

The institutional mission describes CUT as ‘a leading African University of Technology’ that should be seen against the background of the university’s aspiration to be socially relevant and to have a positive impact on the socio-economic conditions of the community it serves. The institution aspires:

to be a leading African UoT is to recognise the location of the university geographically but also, more importantly, to recognise its location within the matrix of social and economic challenges that the continent faces. It talks to indigenous knowledge, a de-colonised curriculum, and distinctively African values such as Ubuntu (CUT, 2020, p.7)

The administration, academic staff and students in the CUT case explicitly but also implicitly, recalled that the term decolonisation challenges Western canon including knowledge, curriculum, cultures, values and ethos, and that these need to be replaced with African canon of knowledge (01\_AS01; 01\_AD01). Without making reference to CUT, the administrator went further to argue that decolonisation means questioning the current curriculum and the

irrelevant knowledge imparted in higher education in general. The staff member asserted that this is why students say the university does not know who it is - that it is out of touch and does not know who their students are (01\_AS01). An administrator in the FHES pointed out that interaction with students suggests that students believe that the current system does not serve their needs as it does not ensure that the decolonisation project empowers them: *Students believe that decolonised university environment would allow them to express their own views, different ways of doing things, such as being allowed to write theses in their home language.* (01\_AD02)

A support staff member calls for the need to decolonise the minds of professors arguing that if the young generation and even students are to: *achieve decolonisation, then professors themselves who taught the content from North and view things from the Northern perspective, need to be decolonised.* (01\_AD01)

This point is illustrated below: *The philosophies they're still referring to even used as theoretical and conceptual frameworks for masters and doctoral levels are drawn from the North. I am still expected to quote Vygotsky and those old philosophers that come from the North. Now we need to start decolonising those professors and doctors.* (01\_AD01).

Another academic from the FHES observed that students are thinking more of our concepts at large including African or South African concepts when they talk about decolonising the curriculum. It was pointed out that: *Most of the students believe the concepts they learned previously are outdated ... so, when they say we should decolonise, they mean making curriculum more current and more South African. Students should learn in their own native languages, not only in English and Afrikaans but should be made possible that they can study in Zulu for example.* (01\_AC07)

On the questions of how the institution is responding to student calls for decolonisation, the support staff observed that although the institution is creating an enabling environment, some still feel uncomfortable talking about the decolonisation of a curriculum because they are from the West or North: *The institution could approach this problem by putting enablers like policies in place and by initiating conversations on decolonisation.* (01\_AD01).

A Mathematics student teacher was even more scathing towards colonialism that does not take the students' experiences into account, including what they are taught, what knowledge is included in the curriculum, and therefore be replaced during decolonisation. The student had



this to say: *I think we need decolonisation in South Africa because our content is Eurocentric the things we are taught; we don't encounter them when we go for experience. So, our content is very Eurocentric whereas we are living in Africa.* (01\_HS07)

In response to the question of his view of how the curriculum has been changed, the student responded as follows: *I haven't experienced it because my entire curriculum talks about the people who are Eurocentric. There's not even one person, even Professor Jansen, I haven't heard about him in our education curriculum.* (01\_HS07)

Some observations regarding the decolonisation process are: Firstly, the participants agreed with the institution that there is an urgent need to decolonise curricula in higher education both nationally and in the African context. Notably, the call for decolonisation by the institution and participants seems to follow national trends that curricula in higher education will remain irrelevant unless they are decolonised. Secondly, it became apparent from the responses by the academics, administrators and support staff that although the decolonisation movement dominated the discourses in higher education transformation, this movement seems to be taking a back seat. Most of the participants demonstrated awareness of the international and national debates about the decolonisation movement with no details in terms of articulation of deeper epistemological issues. For example, what does replacing Western canons of knowledge with indigenous African knowledge mean? How could multiple African epistemologies be accommodated in the decolonised curriculum? Thirdly, there were one or two exceptions where participants could engage with such epistemological questions around decolonisation, how this movement is unfolding at CUT, and what the institution could do to fast-track this critical issue that forms part of the higher education transformational agenda. These exceptions emerged from the student support staff. Fourthly, it was surprising that only three to four students could relate to the decolonisation movement articulating the similar misgiving about this movement and in particular, attempting to engage with epistemological issues such as what they are taught and learn and their relevance. One explanation about the seeming apathy from students about the decolonisation movement could be attributed partly to the institutional culture where robust debates regarding decolonisation do not exist. In particular, the technikon culture that encouraged the acquisition of usable skills and practical application for employers/industry requirements as opposed to community/human needs could be stifling philosophical debates focused on the decolonial knowledge project in higher education.

In contrast, this means that UoTs and CUT need to critique Western scholars on epistemologies of knowledge to understand African epistemologies in order to design hybrid curricula that will expose students to epistemic knowledge. Thus, a deeper engagement by UoTs and CUT with theories of the North and South, as well as orientations and values that underpin curricula are lacking in the discussions of promoting epistemic access (Manathunga, 2018). Notably, the curiosity in interrogating and engaging issues of epistemology, episteme and epistemic access to curriculum design is generally negligible in UoTs including CUT. This lack of interest could be attributed to the influence of the technikon culture where priority was given to practical skills often to the exclusion of knowledge. Furthermore, the lack of curiosity to interrogate knowledge in curriculum design at CUT could also be attributed to the national push towards re-curriculating, which has so far focused on repackaging curricula according to the HEQSF (Barnett, 1994; Monnapula-Mapesela et al., 2019). The current transformation of curricula, including the development of new programmes at CUT, are guided by the Strategic Transformation of Educational Programmes and Structures (STEPS) (CUT, 2016). The latter by definition, seeks to address the issue of rationalisation of programmes and has little to do with attempts to engage deeper curriculum and knowledge issues. Furthermore, seeing compliance with the HEQSF as a technical requirement rather than an opportunity to critically interrogate their curricula using theoretical lenses, is problematic in the processes of negotiating spaces to expose students to epistemic access.

#### **Fourth Industrial Revolution and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills**

Compared to the discussion on the decolonisation movement, the participants (academics, administration staff, support staff, and students) were more vocal about the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR): how it was unfolding at CUT, students' experiences, the institutional response, as well as merits and demerits of the 4IR. Institutional documents and participants described the 4IR as a global phenomenon that is unlikely to be reversed. In particular, participants conceptualised the 4IR within the geopolitical location of CUT as an HDI and the demographic profile of students recruited and enrolled at the institution.

The academics, administrative and support staff corroborated CUT's Vision that the 4IR is unavoidable following global trends on the burgeoning demands for artificial intelligence and that the generation of students currently entering higher education have access to various social media including the 4IR and will therefore benefit from it. An administrative staff member in the FHES reminds us that the introduction and use of technology is unavoidable because technology is taking over most of our lifestyle and because of the type of students that has

changed over the last few years. In the context of higher education, and the CUT context is no different, technology has shaped pedagogy, affecting approaches to teaching and assessment regimes. These students, according to the administrative staff member, require changes in teaching strategies to replace traditional modes of teaching. One academic affirmed that: *Definitely the students will suffer, and the university too will lose out from the students, so the 4IR is encouraging adopting the technology into our load and our students also to get involved in using the technology platform that the university is providing like Blackboard. Our examinations and assessments should not always be paper and pen based; should not be always be traditional exams.* (01\_AC01a)

An administrator also expressed optimism because the university is adopting technology and gradually migrating towards digitalisation: *For example, the university is by all means now trying to become paperless. A number of workshops for staff members are being organised in order to empower them with knowledge as well as to emphasise the importance of the 4IR.* (01\_AD04)

However, while there is a gradual move towards online registration, many things are still done manually (01\_AD02). An academic advised that the 4IR: *is not the way people think about it. It does not mean that we are no longer going to teach, and machines will be teaching for us. Rather it is about using the technology in an effective way, especially when it comes to teaching. The question is how we can use technology so that we can teach effectively.* (01\_AC03)

The academic further claimed that: *it's quite important for CUT to try to support this thing of the 4IR especially when it comes to teaching by academics. And even our students must be connected so that it's easy for us to do a lot of things because we can sit and work from home.* (01\_AC03)

The above endorsed the view that the 4IR represents more than just technology-driven change but rather an opportunity for leaders and policy makers at universities to manage data better.

A student agrees with the staff members that the 4IR at CUT means that one should acquire skills focused on technology one can use, for example computer literacy and how to use software, like Microsoft Word, PowerPoint and Excel (01\_HS07).

However, some participants underlined concerns and what appears to be an idealistic view regarding the implementation of the 4IR at CUT. The academic from Clinical Technology, for example, advised that: *We should not overemphasise the 4IR because in Clinical Technology*

*for example, you are still going to physically work with the patient. There is going to be that contact between a health professional and the patient and sometimes virtual reality and digital platforms can only teach you so much, but it can provide you with the confidence to go into that realm where you are physically going to work with a real-life patient (01\_AC05).*

The above statement implicitly touches on the significance of considering the structure of disciplines and the limitations of the 4IR in curriculum design (see Bernstein, 2000; Muller, 2016).

However, another student studying Computer Science, was cautiously optimistic about the 4IR, arguing that it is *a good development even though the institution is not there yet (01\_HS04)*. In particular, the student is of the opinion that: *We are implementing it and we are beginning to use it, yes there are weaknesses in it, there are weaknesses and we experience problems but we are still getting there because like the 4IR is the future of the world and people must learn to implement it more in the future instead. (01\_HS04)*

Some misgivings about the status of the 4IR at CUT was further expressed by another student from Environmental Health (EHealth). The student claimed that: *the 4IR has brought like skills in even though South Africa is still lagging behind compared to the other countries in terms of technology and artificial intelligence, we are trying. (01\_SS12)*

Notably, some participants comprising both students and staff, indicated that while the 4IR is irreversible and useful, the latter has unintended and hidden negative outcomes. One of the students articulated some of the general misgivings many people have against the 4IR as follows: *My uncle lost a job because of that, they had to employ robots and remove them from their work so, it's good to evolve but cutting out certain people and pushing them over the edge. People need to be provided with skill that they can use instead of just replacing them with robots. (01\_SS07)*

The student, also from Environmental Health, concurs that the introduction of the 4IR will lead to improvements but most people are going to lose their jobs because they will be replaced with machines (01\_SS13). However, the student felt that the 4IR is very relevant in the security industry (01\_SS13).

The students' view seems to reflect the general perception that the 4IR is likely to perpetuate inequalities between the advantaged communities, mostly Western nations, and the indigenous

African communities. According to this view, therefore, the 4IR can be alienating marginalised students and the general African community, from meaningful participation in economic growth in South Africa.

An interesting comment came from one of the support staff who problematised the 4IR. This participant expressed rhetoric about the 4IR in terms of its merits and demerits and brought up more complex issues about the 4IR: Two aspects of the 4IR were highlighted: Firstly, the 4IR in South Africa is far-fetched and quite challenging to respond to because *maybe we are on the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> stages of the 4IR, while other countries in the North, China, Brazil have made substantial progress in the 4IR* (01\_AD01).

Secondly, there are a number of things still to be done in South Africa including policies on the 4IR (01\_AD01). Thus, there are *a number of things we are doing to support the students in the 4IR but the institution and the country are still behind* (01\_AD01).

With reference to the CUT, a support staff member advised that the efforts to introduce the 4IR should be tempered with a careful consideration of students, and staff contexts and background. The staff member insisted that: *the use of the technology itself might be a bigger barrier, because if you are not exposed to working with computers physically in your high school environment, then it can be quite overwhelming - a first year student simply sinks or swims, as nobody takes you by the hand and tells you that you are on this site, this is the power button. However, faculties do assist first year students to upload their assignments on tutor zone and it can be quite stressful if you are stranded with something and you are not prepared.* (01\_AS02).

Furthermore, it has been asserted that the changing technology and its use in curriculum design and in teaching and learning can only apply in some disciplines (01\_AC05). For example, the use of equipment either to diagnose or to treat the patient in Clinical Technology remains the same in the sense that the work that the students are doing within the hospital stays the same. The staff member debated that students in a medical environment need to be exposed to the latest knowledge, latest procedures but also the latest use of all the different digital formats because the curriculum in medicine has a strong foundational core (01\_AC05).

Closely associated with the 4IR are 21<sup>st</sup> century skills in the context of promoting epistemic access and success for students at CUT. The storyline running through the responses of all the participants is the conceptualisation of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills to mean soft skills which students

need in addition to hard knowledge of respective disciplines. Soft skills are generic in nature and are required by students to function in a work environment. The assumption is that students would have acquired these skills that will make them employable after completing their programmes and will make them better people in society, such as entrepreneurship and being technologically astute.

The dominance of soft skills that inform policy and practice on curriculum design and the Teaching and Learning Plan at CUT are Graduate Attributes (GAs) (CUT, 2020). These include: being environmentally sensitive, being socially engaged in your communities; being entrepreneurial; being innovative; thinking creatively and critically, and applying a range of strategies to solve / find solutions; using information and communication technologies effectively; using basic mathematics; budgeting and financial management skills; demonstrating a depth of specialised disciplinary knowledge and skills and being able to apply them in different contexts to solve problems; working independently and in teams, to manage your own learning; working and taking responsibility for one's self while contributing to teams such as learning communities: citizenship, and global leadership.

However, the generic modes approach to curriculum design practiced at CUT is not unique to CUT but permeates higher education in South Africa (Griesel & Parker, 2009). The intention is to ensure that all the attributes are to be achieved throughout the graduates' journey. The GAs should be integrated in the curriculum and actioned in teaching and learning. Examples of GAs highlighted by the participants are technology and computer literacy and entrepreneurial skills. The participants endorsed the institutional view that 21<sup>st</sup> century skills are critical to enable students to succeed during the information age: *Without a successful Fourth Industrial Revolution, you can't have a somebody ready to tackle the 21<sup>st</sup> century or to acquire the 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills.* (01\_AD02).

An administrative staff member argued that the attributes expose students to work with technology and innovation, and the skills they require to function in future employment. He asserted that: *these skills are not only required by the market, but for even yourself as a person to develop and grow.* (01\_AD01)

Another example of how the various GAs are integrated in curriculum design practices and teaching and learning at the institution was articulated by an academic for Clinical Technology. It was claimed that there is a need: *... to produce students that are able to think critically, to use digital platforms to communicate, digital literacy. This GA is apparently easy to inculcate*

*in students through the simulation laboratory that can easily be taught to a student, because as soon as you put a student in an environment where you almost create a real-life situation, they have to start thinking critically, they have to think about, not just about one thing. We are currently investigating case studies where you physically put a patient on a computer and you tell the student, ok you are now in charge of this patient, you have to physically assess the patient and you have to treat the patient. (01\_AC05)*

Computer literacy, entrepreneurial skills and technological developments which students need to function in a workplace were skills highlighted by a support staff member. Communication was justified thus: *As a graduate you need communication to find a job in an environment where you have to interact with professionals and colleagues. (01\_AS01)*

The extent to which generic attributes facilitate epistemic access was not explicitly stated by the majority of the participants in the sampled faculties. The general trend was the preparation of students for employment by developing usable skills they will need when they enter the market. However, the frontiers of knowledge of Clinical Technology, Epidemiology and Microbiology and Mathematics were acknowledged by academics as an important consideration when negotiating epistemic access and success in these disciplines. This thinking is consistent with some reservations of using generic attributes irrespective of the structure and the nature of disciplines (see for example, Allais, 2012, cited by Muller & Young, 2013; Bernstein, 2000; Wheelahan, 2007).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has presented the answers found at CUT to the following questions:

1. How do students from marginalised communities negotiate their epistemic access and success within a diverse and rapidly changing university environment?
2. What individual, institutional or collective resources (cultural and/or material) have been and are more beneficial to the development and academic needs of these students?
3. How do institutions mediate students' social and academic experiences?

Students from marginalised communities enrol at CUT and complete their academic qualifications programmes. They do so despite and in spite of challenges they face with regard to their backgrounds and within the university itself. CUT has also established a number of interventions that enable students to mediate their social and academic experiences.

The case study has also illuminated elements of epistemic access in the context of CUT that are unique to UoTs. The backdrop of distinctive types of specialist and applied disciplinary knowledge offered to students for particular careers and occupations as technologists is one such unique feature. The majority of students at CUT register for Certificates, National Diplomas and Bachelor of Technology programmes where applied, usable knowledge, skills and competencies are paramount compared to theoretical disciplinary knowledge offered at traditional universities. In terms of its mandate therefore, CUT offers programmes that are not intended to expose students to traditional disciplinary knowledge such as Philosophy, Physics and Chemistry.

This uniqueness does not detract from student success, and therefore the presumption that they have learned to become participants in academic practice. It does however raise the question about whether the ‘epistemic’ that is accessed, is the same for students at different institutions. This might be something research would want to engage with going forward.

All participants, including students, pointed out that the 4IR needs to be placed within the context of global technological advancement and its influence in South African society and higher education. It was further noted by the participants that the 4IR and technological development are indispensable not only in the current demand for technological advancement and economic development, but also in the current environment of COVID-19. For example, academics, administrative staff and students in the CUT case alike noticed an increasing demand for the use of social media including WhatsApp and online chats in teaching and learning. More importantly, the participants, including students, highlighted that technology tends to recreate historical inequities for CUT students from marginalised environments by having connectivity challenges.

However, the participants acknowledged that while CUT is making concerted efforts to embrace the 4IR and technology, there is a seemingly unrealistic expectation and ambition on the part of the institution for academic staff to enhance teaching and learning in line with the 4IR. The 4IR is, according to the findings, an ambitious project given the uncertainties about supply of technology and internet connectivity. Institutions such as CUT experience the problem of a reliable electricity supply. Accordingly, it is the type of student registered at CUT who is inadvertently denied access to epistemic access because of the connectivity challenges.

While technology is critical in the current conditions of technological advancement, the latter has the latent effect of recreating historical inequities as students from marginalised and rural



communities are often excluded whenever these technologies are used under normal circumstances, and more recently, in the COVID-19 environment.

### **Recommendations**

The implications of this CUT case study do not suggest recommendations on the part of the institution or students that is not already occurring. It is clear that students, staff and the institution do as much as they can to ensure that as many students succeed at their academic programmes as possible.

The challenges faced by students are suggestive though of a macro-economic shift that is required at the level of South African, and perhaps global, society. Those with power to shift inequality and the consequences thereof for the most vulnerable and marginalised communities are what is needed to make massive inroads in the lives of the students in this study, and those who were not able to navigate their challenging situations.

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## **Chapter 5: It takes a village to ensure epistemic access and success: The case of historically disadvantaged students at the University of Johannesburg (UJ)**

Ke Yu

### **Introduction**

Historically disadvantaged students encounter greater challenges when they enter universities. However, similar to Cross and Atinde's (2015) finding, they do possess *compensational capital* that facilitates success, including resilience, determination, self-efficacy, self-reliance, ownership, flexibility and adaptability. One key ingredient of this *compensational capital* is an ability to turn 'negative' capital (for example, uncondusive environment or situation) to a positive one where a critical attitude (awareness and critical appraisal) is at the core.

Data suggest that *compensational capital* largely arises from the students' upbringing, but the universities can further and deliberately provide opportunities to cultivate them. However, providing opportunities does not necessarily translate into uptake of such opportunities, as the uneven and suboptimal utilisation of various academic development support at UJ attests. Similarly, the reported overwhelming positive student experience at UJ does not seem to automatically translate to a high throughput rate. This suggests that the whole (system) is not merely a compilation of its parts.

### **Background: The UJ Context**

UJ is among the youngest universities in South Africa. It emerged as a unified entity in 2005, a result of the merger as part of the transformation drive. Due to this history, UJ, on one hand, has to manage and achieve some unification from its three distinctively different predecessors - Rand Afrikaans University (RAU), the Technikon Witwatersrand (TWR) and the Soweto and East Rand campuses of Vista University. On the other hand, the merger offers UJ a chance to reinvent itself. This integration marks the backbone of UJ's diversity and inclusiveness. UJ distinguishes itself as a new, adaptable and progressive institution. As a symbol to depart from the past, UJ rejects coats of arms - a custom for other tertiary education institutions in SA - and adopts a logo and brand identity instead. To celebrate diversity, UJ hosts diversity week and a diversity day in September.

Two of UJ's strategic thrusts relevant to this study are *Excellence in Teaching and Learning* and *Enriching Student-Friendly Learning and Living Experience*. To achieve these strategic thrusts, the Vice-Chancellor's Award for Teacher Excellence is awarded each year. In addition,

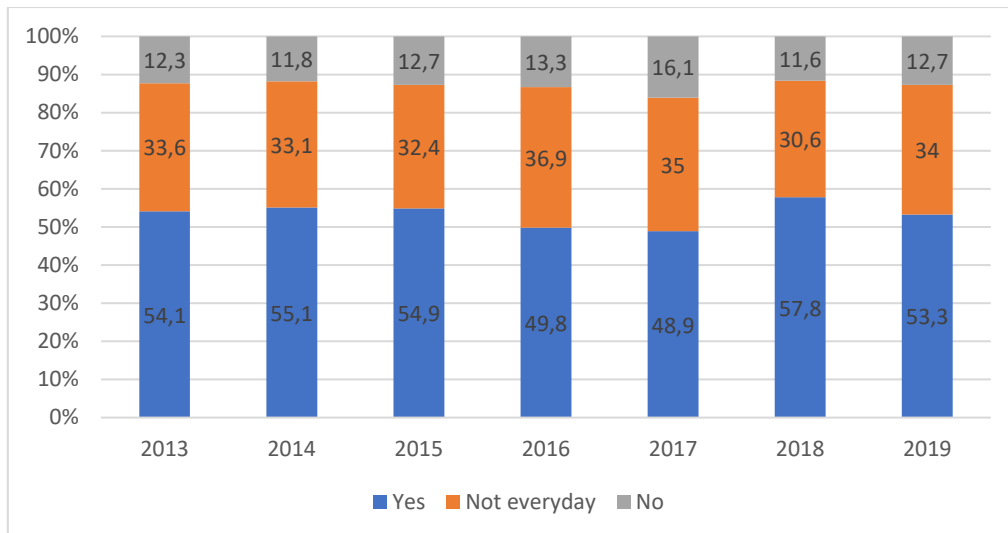
teaching is a “weighted category within applications for promotion, which allows for excellent teachers to be promoted to the highest levels by accentuating their teaching profiles” (UJ, 2016, p11). The UJ Teaching Innovation Fund provides grants for academic members of staff to publish in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. UJ is at the forefront of South Africa’s Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) initiatives. In 2017, fully online degree courses in various faculties started at UJ with blended modules being fully implemented in all faculties.

UJ has eight faculties (Art, Design and Architecture; College of Business and Economics; Education; Engineering and the Built Environment; Health Sciences; Humanities; Law; Science) spread over four campuses. UJ Higher Education Data Analyzer Portal (HEDA) data shows that in 2021, its annual first-year intake was 14 131, an increase from about 10 000 students in earlier years (Van Zyl, 2013). UJ’s undergraduate headcount to permanent staff ratio is 38:1, higher than any of the traditional universities (Dhunpath & Subbaya, 2018). According to UJ’s Undergraduate Experience Survey (UGES)<sup>6</sup>, some 94% of the UJ undergraduate population are South African nationals. About 3% self-report a disability of some kind. The racial profile overall has seen a dramatic increase of the African population over the years (from 59.3% in 2007 to 86.7% in 2019) with females constituting about 55%-60% (increasing over the years). Bachelor three-year degrees consistently count for about 35%-42% of the total UJ undergraduate population.

The proportion of historically disadvantaged students at UJ is high. More than half the students at UJ are the first persons in the family to attend university and an additional 30% has one or more siblings who have attended university. The percentage of not having enough to eat also remains worryingly high, as reported in the figure below.

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<sup>6</sup> Unless specified otherwise, the institutional figures in this report are reconstructed from UGES. UGES’s original data set is reported annually. This report aggregates data from 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 reports.



(Source: UGES, 2016-2019)

**Figure 26: Do you have enough to eat?**

### Literature Review

As in the broader study, this case study directly challenges Bourdieu's (1984, 2005) social reproduction prediction where economic capital is depicted as the root for all other capitals. According to this prediction, working-class students are at a much higher risk of not completing their degrees than middle-class students (Smith & Zhang, 2010, cited in Van Zyl, 2013). A large body of research does show an association between socio-economic status (SES) and success (Van Zyl, 2016), due to both academic and psychosocial factors (Van Breda, 2017). However, some students do manage to excel despite the odds. This study aims to unpack their experience leading to their academic success.

Challenges for disadvantaged students are well-documented in literature, including lack of adequate access to finance, family issues (Van Breda, 2017), difficulties in 'fitting in' or the ability to make needed social links (Thiele et al., 2017; Van Zyl, 2016), lack of academic guidance, academic or social support from home, uncondusive academic practices (e.g., time spent on task) (Van Zyl, 2013). In addition, Cross and Atinde (2015) also outline challenges such as:

- language competence which impacts negatively on 'developing conceptual confidence';
- schooling experience that relied on 'spoon-fed' is at odds with higher education institution (HEI)'s expectation for self-regulation and greater freedom;

- university environment often embodies explicit and implicit norms that are unfamiliar to these students;
- limited exposure to Information and communications technology (ICT) which are central to university learning; and
- the stigma associated with their socio-economic background.

Literature also points out that many of these students are aware of their background and have a sense that they are different. However, they often show a higher sense of self-conception than their more privileged counterparts (Soares & Soares, 1970). Some readily turn the challenges to their advantage, for example, commitment to learning when they are “downplaying the importance of socialising at school and focusing more on the educational aspects of schools” (Thiele et al. 2017, p.56). There are also other encouraging examples of how frustration becomes motivation, e.g., to ‘escape... unsettled living conditions’, to “prove others wrong” (Thiele et al., 2017, p.58, 62) becomes an important driver for retention. Cross and Atinde (2015) similarly point to *compensational capital* including resilience, determination, self-efficacy, self-reliance, ownership, flexibility and adaptability. Cross and Atinde (2015) also point to the importance of an awareness of one’s strengths and weaknesses and use them appropriately (for example, knowing when and how to seek support). Li (2019) similarly highlights the importance of the working-class mentality with an ‘inclination towards practicality’, which is found to be critical to many of these parents’ commitment to children’s schooling and students’ determination to upgrade their lives through their own efforts (Cross, 2018).

At the institutional level, one immediate implication from the above is a need for greater willingness to understand who the students are. Besides pedagogy and administrative purposes, this understanding practically helps to direct the resources they need to cultivate “contextualised academic support” Van Zyl (2013, p.2), tailor-made to student needs and goals. This is best done proactively and in a coordinated manner (Tinto, 2013) so that one does not only know problems when students have failed modules and are issued warnings. The lecturers and institutions need to be aware that lack of engagement might arise from discomfort and lack of sense of belonging, and not necessarily a lack of interest. This calls for empathy (Winberg & Makua, 2019) and willingness from the institutions to be more deliberate and conscious about embracing the diverse culture to achieve a greater sense of belonging (Badat, 2010), for example, through making the curriculum more responsive or inducting students better.



In addition to any factors that lie at the individual level or where the institutions can assist, Cross (2018) finds and argues for the importance of collective resources to empower students' individual agency, for example, through membership of groups or organisations or from similar backgrounds. Collaboration is also found to motivate students to learn (Maniram & Maistry, 2018).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This case study is guided by two theoretical frameworks: the capability approach (Sen, 1992) and the notion of different kinds of knowledges (Barnett, 2009; Bruner, 1966). In terms of the capability approach, while the focus of Sen usually implies a focus on the individual, 'agency freedom' (Sen, 1992), "capabilities are realised relationally and socially" (Walker, 2018, p.562). This is similar to the underlying design for the research instrument used in this study that emphasises the interplay of individual, collective agency and external conditions and structures. In addition, this case study adopts Sen's differentiation of capabilities and functioning. Functioning here refers to the actual experience and behaviour while capabilities capture the opportunities people have and their ability to tap into the opportunities. "Even when the functioning looks broadly similar and appears fair, the underlying opportunities for achievement and future opportunities ... may be unequal" (Walker, 2018, p.559). Both functioning and capabilities are impacted by conversion factors - often social and institutional conditions and structures - which people use to convert their resources (Nambiar, 2013). Adopting this framework means that this analysis first reports functioning (student experience), then investigates capabilities that might have contributed to the functioning. In addition to pinpointing the capabilities themselves, this report interrogates what might have given rise to the capabilities.

Similar to Morrow's notion (2009, p.435) of epistemic access, Barnett insists that full access to higher education involves both knowing and becoming comprising *know-that* (propositional knowledge) and *know-how* (procedural knowledge) (Muller, 2014, 2015; Ryle, 1945). Know-how includes how to use resources "and conceptual understanding the purpose for doing so" (Liccardo et al., 2015, p.378) and knowing how and when to apply the rules. However, as Brenner (2015) demonstrates, historically disadvantaged students often wrongly think that proficiency in a discipline *primarily* involves know-that. Similar to this *know-that* and *know-how* distinction, Amory et al. (2008) suggest the distinction of *learning about* and *learning to be*, initially conceptualised by Jerome Bruner.

*Learning about*, which involves learning of facts, concepts and procedures, is not sufficient for developing effective ways of ‘seeing’. Learning to be requires learning of the practices of the knowledge domain (discipline or profession), which includes the principles, dispositions, attributes, competencies, activities, skills, procedures and values of the knowledge domain. In learning how to be a physicist or a football player entails how to act as one, talk as one, and be recognised as one (Amory et al., 2008, p.3)

This explanation suggests the similarity between learning about and know-that, as well as between learning to be and know-how. However, it also hints at an additional emphasis from learning to be that stresses learners’ identity. Gravett (2012) explains this further: With his ‘learning to be’ notion, Bruner stresses that learning should also be understood concerning the development of a social identity. ‘Learning to be’ is about “developing the disposition, demeanour and outlook (‘the eye’) of a competent practitioner (Gravett, 2012, p 5).

This framework is used to categorise the different capacities identified in this study.

## **Methodology**

This case study adopts the methodology designed for the overall multi-institutional project. Among the documents we obtained, one important and useful to this study is the UGES: a comprehensive survey completed by a representative sample of all undergraduate students, with a sample size of around 8 000, implemented since 2015.

For empirical data, after obtaining ethics clearance from the faculty Ethics Committee and research permission from the UJ Research Office, requests were sent to UJ’s Division for Institutional Planning, Evaluation and Monitoring (DIPEM) which conducts UGES and hosts UJ official statistics, namely Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS). As one aim of the study is to compare experiences from the high and low throughput departments, a request was sent to DIPEM for throughput statistics of the two faculties and their department<sup>7</sup>. Cumulative drop out and cumulative graduate data for 2016 and 2017 (as the target student group is in their 3<sup>rd</sup> year in 2020) were drawn to compare faculty statistics with the departments’ statistics. The following two departments (department grouping as reported in HEMIS data) within each faculty with higher or lower than faculty average, were selected from this process (see Appendix A).

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<sup>7</sup> The department definition used here is ‘department groups’ as reported in DIPEM data.

**Figure 27: Department selection**

	<b>Faculty of Science</b>	<b>Faculty of Humanities</b>
High throughput	Geography environmental and energy study	Social work
	Geology	Strategic communication
Low throughput	Mathematics and applied mathematics	Language, culture study and applied linguistics
	Statistics	Politics and international relations

As the main focus of the study is on epistemological access, we only collected data from those students who have progressed to the final year of their degree (those have almost made it through the system). From this database, Microsoft Excel sheets were created for each of further selection criteria: gender, rural/urban schools. Race was not a selection criterion as African is the overwhelming majority student population at UJ. DIPEM provided the contacts for students who fall within these departments as well as the sampling framework.

For lecturers, the same departments were used to draw on academic staff to interview. However, access to academic staff was more challenging than access to students, partly due to lecturers' hectic work schedules (online teaching) due to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as there being fewer communication channels available. To reach more academic staff, the sampling frame was relaxed to include other lecturers in the faculties based upon interviewed students' recommendations<sup>8</sup>.

For administrative and support staff, requests for recommended names were made to the Dean or Head of Administration's office and the director or managers responsible for the support services targeted. Additional interviews were conducted when other key stakeholders were identified during the process, including one person from the Academic Development Centre (ADC, the champion of academic support at UJ) and one person in charge of the extended programme in the Faculty of Humanities.

The following table provides a summary of planned and actual interview samples:

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<sup>8</sup> The final sample from this group might also be biased, as good academic staff tends to be either recommended by the students or they agree to the interviews.

**Figure 28: Faculty Sampling (planned and actual)**

	Faculty of Science		Faculty of Humanities	
	Planned	Actual	Planned	Actual
Students	17	16	17	16
Academics	4	3	4	3
Administrative	2	2	2	4 (1 extended programme)

The demographics of the students interviewed is as follows:

Gender: male 14; female 18

Race: African 32

Residency (pre-COVID-19): on-campus 12; off-campus: 20

For the support services, the planned and actual sample is as follows:

**Figure 29: Support Service Sampling (planned and actual)**

	Planned	Actual
Finance	1	1
Psychological (Centre for Psychological Services and Career Development, PsyCaD)	1	1
Academic Writing	1	1
Residence	1	0
ADC		1

All interviews were conducted online, via Microsoft Teams or other platforms.

As the key focus of this study is students' experience, the presentation of the data in this case study liberally draws on direct quotes, to allow the interviewees to 'speak for themselves'. For direct quotes from students included in the analysis, reference is made to transcripts codes: HS refers to students from the Faculty of Humanities; SS students from the Faculty of Science. Unless otherwise indicated specifically, the quotes below are from the student interviewees.

## **Journeying through UJ**

### **Context, preparedness, expectations and aspirations before university**

Student preparedness is related to student background, context and articulation gap. As many underprivileged students grow up in villages, informal settlements or townships, or small towns, often far from the big metropolitan area in which UJ is based, their experience during their upbringing directly impacts their preparedness including financial, social, emotional and academic state of readiness. Financial constraints remain one of the main challenges during the lives of many of these students, where their families often relied on child grants, social grants, pensions or single income, like many others in their community. Many have not had reliable electricity at home. Regular and reliable access to the internet was even less common. A few even grew up in more difficult situations, such as domestic abuse (03\_HS13). Good academic support systems from their immediate families in these contexts were often lacking. In addition, many of these students often take on a larger number of responsibilities at home: many are expected to look after the siblings; sometimes sending what they have (National Student Financial Aid Scheme, NSFAS, or any other income) back home (PsyCaD Officer).

Most, however, recalled a broad conviction from an early age, often reinforced by their family and teachers that “education is what you need to succeed” (03\_SS08). A perceived link between (tertiary) education and a better job/life, as well as a sense that graduation would change one’s future is evident. This link is often an important motivation for the students to study hard and do well, e.g., passing or obtaining good marks. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that a fair number of students want to get a good job after completion of their degree, able to *afford the lifestyle...provide for your family* (03\_SS04). HS01 unapologetically claimed: *I cannot...prize academia over financial livelihood... Only once the career is established, I can begin to think about pursuing post-grad.*

The majority of students we interviewed attended public schools, HS12 with a traumatic experience of witnessing a stabbing and being robbed in class. While some high schools had computers, most others lacked basic learning materials like textbooks or science laboratories. Exposure and access to technology were wanting. Many only learned how to use a computer once at UJ. Many were not prepared for the degree of self-study and workload expected at university level. Except for a few, the majority of students we interviewed expected university life to be easy as at high school, *roses and strawberries – strolling through university life at ease*” (03\_HS09), *“a fun place... partying and all that* (03\_HS14). Much of this hearsay was from TV, movies and from others, possibly constituting another dimension of the articulation

gap. One student recalls a shock *when I went there [UJ], some were smoking, some were drinking... I was expecting something strict as in high school. They don't allow you to smoke, they don't allow you to drink* (03\_HS02). Another compares high school and university: *at school, we did the same things together...in university, everyone is doing their own thing* (03\_SS01). Language is a challenge too. For those who attended high schools that primarily used home language, understanding and expressing themselves in English (medium of instruction at UJ) is difficult. Sometimes the lecturer speaks too fast; others speak with an unfamiliar accent or dialect. Besides language, some students have never been exposed to lecturers of a different skin colour (Science lecturer).

### **A new life in a large city**

The majority of students came from closely-knit and homogenous communities where everyone knows everyone else. One change at UJ is the variety and diversity of people they meet. Johannesburg is an *ocean of everything and almost everyone is here* (03\_SS10). It is overwhelmingly individualistic: *you don't actually see people greet* (SS09). Most students were simply overwhelmed by a sense of overstimulation and confusion during their first few months. *It felt as though I was out of place* (03\_SS11). This experience also has a spatial dimension. Johannesburg is big where one has to learn to find their way around. It has a temporal dimension too. *Everything here is just 10 times faster* (03\_SS10), *it is difficult to form bonds because everyone is on the move. Everyone is in a rush* (03\_SS11). It also imposes a hastened expectation that the students should adjust quickly, secure accommodation or be able to navigate and find the necessities one needs to be comfortable. Most importantly, this new life is emotionally challenging because many students are completely independent having to learn to live without their parents for the first time: *everything is all up to you* (03\_HS14). For many, the university is the first time they experience freedom and academic independence. All contributes to a sense of being overwhelmed and unsettled: *I felt like I was learning to walk again* (03\_SS10).

### **Functioning at UJ: academics, opportunities and experience**

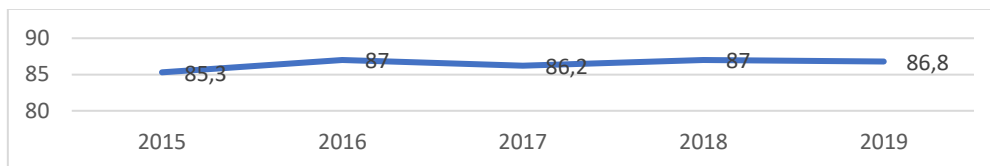
#### **Campus culture and environment**

Given the concerns over South African university campus culture (Badat, 2010; Soudien et al., 2008), institutional culture, environment and support should certainly be among the top considerations when investigating throughput. Campus culture and environment set the tone for how one behaves and what opportunities one can access (Strange & Banning, 2015). In this

section, campus culture and environment refer to both the supply side (such as institutional atmosphere and culture, available support) and the students' expectations and experiences regarding academic support and sense of belonging.

No matter what reasons students chose to study at UJ, many take pride in being UJ students. They consider themselves privileged because *it is a once in a lifetime opportunity* (HS11). Practically, *it is an opportunity to achieve whatever I want in my life* (03\_SS08). Emotionally, *it was a turning point* (03\_SS09), “life-changing” (SS10).

Consistent with UJ statistics, many student interviewees compliment UJ's friendly atmosphere: *a really great institution* (03\_HS07) and *very fine university* (03\_SS01). *I love everything about the place* (03\_SS04). *UJ really attend to the needs of the students* (03\_SS01). *UJ on its own just stands out* (03\_HS07). *I'm enjoying it every moment there* (03\_HS12). Many interviewees also comment on UJ's diversity. After the initial surprise of meeting so many people, *as the years progressed, I got over it and it was I would say one of the most beautiful things to happen to me* (03\_SS04). Once they overcome the initial shock and sense of overwhelming, they felt *part of the family* (03\_SS02), *I feel like it is home* (03\_HS16). Diversity is one of the main reasons why one Faculty of Humanities administrator chose to work at UJ. Most students concur with this family orientation. Between 88% and 92% of students at UJ agree or strongly agree that UJ is tolerant of all forms of diversity. Incidents of racism or prejudice were rarely reported by the students we interviewed<sup>9</sup>.



(Source: UGES 2016-2019)

### Figure 30: Overall satisfaction with UJ

Another indication that corroborates this satisfaction level is the years that staff members have been at UJ, as many started as UJ students.

Most students have *heard* of crimes during their years at UJ, but the percentage of personal encounters is relatively low (seven reported off-campus crimes, three on-campus incidents, things stolen or the boys' prank of stealing girls' bags during exams and taking them to the boys' toilet). Over 80% of students at UJ feel safe on campus, although for those on campus at

<sup>9</sup> Among those who reported racism, the majority only referred to those among the students themselves.

night, this drops by about 10%. There is no gender difference in the students' feelings of safety on campus.

### **Academic experience at UJ**

Academic experience is at the centre of a student's university life; it is why they come to higher education institutions. Many students, particularly those from the Science<sup>10</sup> faculty, claim their workload to be heavy: UJ is *all about studying and being serious* (03\_SS03), *I am always in my room doing my schoolwork* (03\_SS09), *barely have time for lunch* (Science Administrator).

Students' perceptions of the lecturers differ from lecturer to lecturer and whether they are experiencing good or bad days. Overall, the majority of students reported their lecturers as welcoming, helpful and considerate, professional, *very passionate about their job* (03\_SS15) and their interaction *smooth sailing* (03\_HS09, 03\_HS11). UGES statistics show that 'lecturers care about me as a person' is at 60%, but other aspects, including 'earned my respect', 'made me excited about learning', 'are helpful', 'approachable, 'well prepared for lecture' are over 80%.

Most students found the curriculum content, especially those in their majors, informative, interesting and stimulating. 03\_SS10 even described *going to class is like going home... there is that part of you that gets excited to go to a lecture*. Other students also discussed curriculum content in terms of workplace relevance, while one Humanities lecturer also associated it with the 21<sup>st</sup> century in terms of a need for diverse exposures. Curriculum relevance is even more complicated in Science as *there are certain concepts that simply cannot be changed and there's curriculum that has to remain fixed* (Science Lecturer). Some 93% to 94% of students at UJ agree or strongly agree that lecturers use relevant examples in class. An experiment started in 2019 in the Faculty of Humanities is using home language in some classes. In addition to class participation in their home language, students can also *write in any South African language because they would try to provide tutors that could also understand their language* (Humanities Lecturer). Not all students use these opportunities, however. One lecturer observed that some *think it's [using home language] not cool. Maybe because of stigma from high school*. In Science, an online course for mathematics ('language of science') has been developed. In addition, the Faculty of Science has *created a mathematics learning centre that is open to students...where they can go walk into a group of tutors* (Science Lecturer).

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<sup>10</sup> Few Humanities students discussed workload directly.



Consistent with students' overall evaluation of course relevance, about 55% to 67% of students at UJ claim that they attend all lectures, while another 30% to 38% attend more than half of the lectures. Quite a few students we interviewed loved attending class and have never missed one. Asking questions in class comes naturally to some students. More often however, students preferred to ask classmates or request one-on-one consultation with the lecturer rather than asking questions in class. Confidence in asking questions in class remains at about 56% to 61% (UGES, 2016-2019), skewed towards senior year and male students over the junior year and female students, self-sanctioned and exacerbated by students' accents (Writing Centre Officer).

### **Academic support and usage**

Academic support is critical to bridge the articulation gap for student success (Kuh et al., 2011). At UJ, the ADC plays a crucial role in coordinating academic support. Since 2017, the ADC's work has become more systematic and institutionalised through Institutional Student Success Initiative (ISSI). Student support has also been escalated to the *sub-committee of Senate Teaching and Learning Committee [through student success committee]* ... *each faculty now has a Vice-Dean in Teaching and Learning* (ADC Officer). A data analysis unit has been established within the ADC to provide data support and the centre is moving towards data-informed work. Other main projects and initiatives over the years include.

- First-year experience (FYE): since 2010<sup>11</sup>, a combination of curricular and co-curricular activities to assist transition into university life. The FYE website, and social media such as Facebook and Twitter were also used to reach more students. Initial Student Experience Survey (ISES, at week 6) was developed in addition to the Student Profile Questionnaire (SPQ, upon students' arrival at UJ) as part of the UJ's FYE initiative. FYE also include the First-year Seminar (FYS, student orientation/induction). There are faculty-specific variations: for example, the FYS at the Science faculty is credit-bearing (Jacobs & Pretorius, 2016; Van Zyl, 2015). The Science faculty also has the First-year Academy where lecturers discuss and contemplate similar challenges they encounter teaching first-year students;
- Senior-year experience (SYE): implemented since 2015, focusing on senior year students' experience;
- Priority modules index (PMI), developed around 2009, provides a list of the lowest throughput modules in a faculty and presents the list to faculties to investigate further.

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<sup>11</sup> formally (externally) evaluated in 2013

After the faculties decide on the final list to intervene, ADC works with the faculties to co-develop intervention (45 modules per semester at UJ). Some students enrolled in these modules also receive e-textbooks and tablets (UJ, 2016, p.13). In 2019, ADC calculated an additional 2 000 passes as a result of these interventions.

Regarding the various services and support available, the library is crucial to a UJ student's academic life. Usage of the UJ library is high: over 75% of students at UJ use it more than once a month. Overall satisfaction with the library's service is high and consistent at about 91%. Access to laptops or the internet at UJ has consistently improved from just above 60% in 2016 to 85% in 2019. Many students receive a laptop when they register, although a large number of students still rely on the library or computer laboratories to learn outside the classroom or complete assignments. Laboratory usage trails slightly below that for the library: 70% to 75% of students at UJ use laboratories more than once a month. Another important part of academic support at UJ is the Writing Centres – one on each of UJ's four campuses. Usage of the Writing Centre at UJ is not optimal: more than 60% of students have never used the Writing Centre, although this figure is slowly declining (63% in 2016 & 60.5% in 2019). However, those who have used the service were all satisfied: the people there were helpful and nice, *patient... They help you step by step and they make sure that you understand* (03\_SS09).

Usage of tutors and tutorials is high: about 70% to 75% of students at UJ access tutors more than once a month. Tutorials are much smaller than the classes so one is also more confident to speak out. Tutorials also tend to be more practical and are run by tutors of similar age to the students, making them *more easily relatable*.

### **Residence and social experiences**

The social experience is an important aspect of a student's university life (Fitzgibbon & Prior, 2010). As many students come from afar, some who live near the campuses might have an unconducive environment when studying at home, thus demand for UJ residence accommodation is high (Science Lecturer). UGES statistics confirm that campus residence capacity is stable at about 17% (2016-2019). To address the on-campus residence shortage (35 campus residences for about 6 000 placements), a list of accredited off-campus accommodation (Privately-owned student accommodation, POSA) is offered to students. UGES statistics (2016-2019) show that the majority of the students are satisfied with their accommodation situation. The on-campus residences are generally safe. Although some have heard of theft (for example, shoes, washing), the majority of interviewees have not experienced it themselves.

Incidents of prejudice at residence are rare too. With few exceptions, most of the students were happy with their residence arrangement (on or off campus).

The success rate for on-campus students is slightly higher than those in POSA (87% versus 83% in 2019) (UJ, 2019). In the interviews, those living in off-campus residence report more distracting incidents such as TV and other noises, as well as challenges related to traffic and transportation which impact their class attendance. This is also related to a relatively low satisfaction rate with UJ's inter-campus bus services (around 50%, UGES).

Many students we interviewed grew up with churches and music. Some also participate in dance, sports and poetry in high schools. For many students, religion remains an important part of their university life: many continue to attend church at the residence. However, few directly associated this with what pulls them through: their study or success. This contrasts with a common practice of many postgraduate students who openly acknowledge the presence of God in their dissertations. The absence of such attribution in this study might have been an omission of data rather than negative data, however.

Many students engage in solo activities in their free time, including reading books, practising meditation, and listening to music. Many socialise with friends and some continue to participate in sports. The UJ Arts Academy offers various extracurricular opportunities, including *UJ choir, UniJoh Chorale, a jazz band, and an African drumming group* (UJ, 2019, p. 45). There are other activities and groups, including music, poetry, dance, drama groups or organising *going to children's homes or old age homes, collecting food for shelters* (Humanities Lecturer). There are a few who are part of a residence committee<sup>12</sup> or Student Representative Council (SRC). These social activities serve both socialising (networking) and relaxation purposes. This is where students *refresh your mind* (SS13) or learn about tolerance. A few students considered this to be an essential part of their university experience. Some, particularly Humanities students, took initiatives for leadership, in group work or student organisations, or serving as class representatives. About 80% of students at UJ agree or strongly agree that there is a wide range of social activities/clubs/interest groups as well as sufficient sports facilities at UJ, although actual participation in sports events and cultural events was reported to be about 20% to 24% in 2016 and 30% to 33% in 2019. Politically, *UJ students are not that active politically* (Science Administrator) compared to other universities. This is corroborated by a few of our survey interviewees mentioning participation in protests. It is unclear, however,

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<sup>12</sup> Senior year students helping those from junior years, or fundraising committees for first-year students

whether this lack of political involvement is due to underprivileged students' economic and family pressure to complete their studies as soon as possible.

### **Other support and usage**

The university experience is not limited to the above. Students need to access other support services, interact with administrators and have other basic needs. This is particularly important for underprivileged students as they are generally more in need of these services (Kunlin, 2012).

Finance is a fundamental challenge for underprivileged students. UJ had about 26 000 students under NSFAS in 2020, over 60% of the total UJ undergraduate population<sup>13</sup>. Many students would not be able to study or would have dropped out if it were not for NSFAS. Financial constraint prevents students from *channel[ing] all of my energy towards my studies* (03\_HS01). It sometimes also impacts basic needs, such as accommodation and food, lack of which makes it more challenging to concentrate on their studies. The majority of the interviewed students were satisfied with their NSFAS allowance. For other basic needs, UJ has a number of food and shelter-related support programmes, some of which are associated with the student residences. Student Affairs helps with finding accommodation for students.

Observation of students helping one another is inconsistent with our data. While some students claimed that they do not help others, while others gave examples of relaying financial assistance information. Overall, borrowing/giving money directly seems uncommon. The high number of students reporting hunger or lack of food despite these initiatives, indicates either the inadequacy of the programme scale or inadequate student access to the programme (due to communication or stigma<sup>14</sup>).

With regard to interaction with the NSFAS office, the majority of the students we interviewed listed delays in the granting of NSFAS funds as their biggest frustration. Besides NSFAS, complaints about the interactions with the financial support are rife. It is concerning that other financial support beyond NSFAS such as those from UJ SRC, faculty, Eduloan, external funders were only mentioned by the lecturers, administration and other support staff, not the students we interviewed. Instead, from the students' point of view, family members are usually their first call when they struggle with money when their NSFAS funds are inadequate.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.uj.ac.za/about/Pages/uj-key-statistics.aspx>

<sup>14</sup> "They are ashamed of their position to come and stand in a queue to wait for food as if I am a beggar" (Writing Centre Officer)

Approaching administration is generally described by our student interviewees as simple and straightforward. The majority of the interviewed students found the administration support friendly and efficient. Some administrators went beyond the query and helped the student to *understood it [the matter of query] better and I made a better decision* (03\_SS15). About 75% to 80% of students at UJ agree or strongly agree that faculty-based administration is efficient (UGES, 2016-2018), with 85% considering these staff members being accessible and helpful.

Emotional and psychological support is critical to student success. From the interviews, it is clear that family and community remain the students' emotional backbones. The family offers encouragement, inspiration or a channel to outpour one's struggles: *They refuel you when you are down and out* (03\_SS03). Other role models, including previous teachers, UJ lecturers or administrators, also offer emotional support. Another important venue for emotional support at UJ is PsyCaD, situated in all four UJ campuses, which collaborates (often through referrals) with faculties, ADC, Campus Clinic, and residence. *PsyCaD helps individuals adjust to the university personally, develop self-esteem and also managing their time if they lack motivation* (PsyCaD officer). One challenge related to utilising this service, according to some staff members, however, is the stigma that some (parents and students) *don't want to take medication or their parents might not allow them to* (Science Administrator); *the students have fear... there is another misconception about coming to PsyCaD. They think that other students will think something is wrong with them* (PsyCaD Officer). This low usage is reflected in the UGES statistics, especially compared to the use of other support, where close to 80% have never used PsyCaD. Often, students use support *in desperation and often at times when it is too late* (Humanities administrator). Among the students we interviewed, however, usage of PsyCaD is alright; many recalled good experiences interacting with PsyCaD.

### **Institutional Changes and Impact**

The institutional change also impacts students' experience and success (London et al., 2007). When asked to recount changes encountered after starting at UJ, however, few pointed to specific changes except those brought about by COVID-19. Few interviewees, both the students and staff members, directly discussed the implication of any changes (except that of COVID-19) in relation to academic performance or throughput. There is also evidence that awareness and understanding of some concepts (for example, 4IR and decolonisation) are greater than others (for example, 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills).

When specifically asked about decolonisation and 4IR, many interviewees acknowledged that they have heard about the terms and that they *expand my knowledge... encouraged me to think beyond* (03\_HS13), but often their understanding tends to be broad and generic. Some interviewees showed limited understanding of these concepts, such as associating curriculum decolonisation with moving curriculum online or 4IR with student control, surprising given UJ's claims of "set[ting] itself a mission to position itself as a modern African city university, which is cosmopolitan in character, and asserts academic freedom in the liberal, progressive and transformative values it espouses" (Barnard & van der Merwe, 2014, p.312). A number of lecturers (both from Science and Humanities Faculties) offered that many (sometimes including themselves) do not know what these terms meant when they used them. Science students generally talked more about 4IR while Humanities students spoke more about decolonisation. Topics typically discussed when interviewees discussed decolonisation included: workplace relevance, more black students entering university, fair treatment, or renaming residences. Some also associated it with a broader social movement towards equality or broad social changes, *economic freedom for those who were oppressed by the colonisation* (03\_HS14), *the mindset and the structures and culture of colonial pressures or colonial things* (03\_HS03), *Africans learn to do things for ourselves* (03\_SS07), and *learn about our own cultures and see the value of it* (03\_HS10).

Many students linked 4IR to technology and a changing and faster world as a whole, or more specifically online learning, social media, voice recognition, eBooks, fingerprint security, (talking) robots, Global Positioning System (GPS), Wi-Fi, data analysis, and working from home. Staff members largely associated 4IR with online teaching and paperless administration. Some saw it as an opportunity, others were concerned about potential job replacement and other potential losses. One PsyCaD officer cautioned 4IR with regard to social isolation and lack of *a sense of belonging. Everyone is busy in the digital world.* The UJ Vice-Chancellor's role in championing the 4IR was recognised by most interviewees: one applauded UJ to be *ahead of the curve* (03\_SS11). Others, on the other hand, maintained a critical view, especially regarding implementation, for example, the reliable function of the online system (Humanities Lecturer).

African Insight and Artificial intelligence courses were introduced at UJ (2017 & 2020 respectively), one of which the undergraduate students are required to take. Some considered *this step in the right direction* (03\_HS01), although *most of the students in Science see it as a drag... the majority of our students, unfortunately, couldn't care less* (Science Administrator).

During COVID-19, UJ quickly moved to online teaching. *The circumstances of COVID-19 almost forced everybody to buy into 4IR and how it could help us* (Writing Centre Officer). However, some found teaching and learning during COVID-19 more difficult while others were *thrilled that online learning is actually quite better than being in class* (03\_SS04). *It's easier to monitor and to see students when you know that they are sitting in front of you"* (Humanities lecturer). Most students found COVID-19 as a hard hit because they had to stay at home and often their home environment was not conducive to being productive as a student. *You can't really focus... 'you time', there is nothing like that. You can't lock yourself in your room* (03\_SS03). Some had no reliable electricity supply, even just to charge the devices; many struggled with inadequate data. The online environment also *forces them to kind of take responsibility for their own learning and their own understanding* (Humanities Lecturer). *This transition also impacted interaction, especially when accessing lecturers, support or administration become different and often less* (03\_SS09). For example, *a student would feel comfortable coming to me and speaking to me personally. Now they're not going to be comfortable airing their personal information on an email* (Humanities Administrator).

### **Capability**

Capability drives and explains the functioning (Sen, 1992). It concerns student agency and the underlying features of the agency, including student awareness and ability to tap into their environment for whatever opportunities and support provided, and it also refers to the ability to avoid any toxic or unproductive influences. As much as the importance of environment shaping one's exposure to opportunities, agency mediates and translates external stimuli to internal responses. This is particularly critical for the historically disadvantaged students as their environment is by definition challenging (Case, 2015).

Among Barnett (2009) and Bruner's (1966) different knowledge notions, *know-that* and *learning about* are essentially about the content knowledge itself, the content knowledge that the students learn. This differs from *know-how* and *learning to be* which drive *know-that* and *learning about*. Know-how is the crucial ingredient of epistemic success according to one Humanities lecturer. She claimed that know-how boils down to self-motivation and taking responsibility for one's own work. The students we interviewed on the other hand, outlined a much fuller spectrum of the facilitating factors. In addition, this study suggests that compensation capital, such as resilience and determination, often pointed out in literature as know-how or learning to be, more related to personal traits not specifically or exclusively about learning, which *know-thyself* describes better. It proposes separating the understanding of

know-how in literature where it includes both how to use resources and “conceptual understanding the purpose for doing so” (Liccardo et al., 2015, p.378). This study acknowledges the first part of the understanding that emphasises *how* but proposes that the second part of this understanding is better labelled as *know why*, which differs from concrete studying tips and conducive habits on knowing how to do things and serving as an underlying resource that drives know-how and know-thyself.

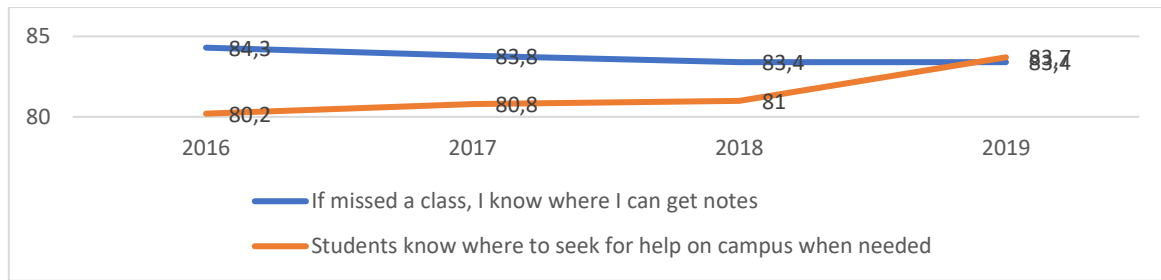
In addition, this study demonstrates that what the students draw on is not necessarily their identity formation towards the professionals they are learning to be (Gravett, 2012), such as a geologist, but to becoming a broader well-rounded human being. Lastly, this section further interrogates where know-how and know-thyself might come from.

### **Collective agency: Ubuntu**

Know-how is the epistemic capacity to know-that (Ryle, 1945), especially self-regulated abilities to achieve know-that (Elzinga, 2021). Unlike Brenner’s (2015) assertion that historically disadvantaged students often wrongly place too much emphasis on know-that at the expense of know-how, ample evidence of know-how is detected in this study. However, know-how is not only how to do things oneself, but also about collaborative know-how: knowing how to be resourceful, when, where and whom to ask for help (Simonin, 1997). “Capabilities are realised relationally and socially” (Walker, 2018, p.562).

Ubuntu, an important African phrase referring to collective disposition and interdependency, is invoked in many studies of African student success (see Masehela, 2016; Wright Fields, 2020). Without any prompting, many students we interviewed pointed to solidarity, *stay together and make sure that everyone was okay (03\_SS12), through everything, we are always together” (03\_HS14)* as some key values during their upbringing. Related notions included compassion, sharing and helping each other (*you can’t be your own person, 03\_SS08; you can’t know it all, 03\_SS10; we are one, 03\_SS10; being in a team is better than doing something alone, 03\_SS12*) and respect (*never look down on people, 03\_SS06; I don’t judge people the first day, I don’t judge people at all, 03\_HS03*). Ubuntu is both about giving and receiving: *I do not live for myself, but I live for others as well (03\_HS01); I am facing something, we come together and find a quick solution together (03\_HS14)*. To some, this is actually what the family, community and friends are for. During COVID-19, students reported reaching out more to classmates or study buddies to help. In general, UGES statistics suggest that students perceive to know where to seek support when needed.





(Source: UGES, 2016 – 2019)

### Figure 31: Agree or strongly agree with statement related to seeking help

One worrying observation, however, is students' suboptimal use of support services and awareness of some information, for example, funding resources. Although a few mentioned the assistance from organisations like the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and South African Students Congress (SASCO), few students specifically discussed the SRC's role in their experience (which the staff members claimed to be instrumental in assisting historically disadvantaged students)<sup>15</sup>. Quite a few students have a positive view about the EFF, claiming them to be helpful with registration, *quickly respond to students' needs... they fight for us for our allowance* (03\_SS13), *they provide us with a voice to file our complaints... they make a bridge between the upper class or the big guys from the university and us as students* (03\_SS10). SASCO was complimented less than the EFF. All support functions are presented and explained to the students during FYS, however, no students specifically mentioned FYS in terms of helping them access the information they needed. One reason might be that not all students attend FYS. Another possible reason is information overload during that week (Science Administrator). FYS happens during the initial transition and adaptation phase when the students are still settling in, where an overwhelming sense might distract the usefulness of FYS. There might also be ignorance on the students' part as some do not pay attention to the messages communicated to them (Science Administrator). One Humanities lecturer had a similar observation when she lamented that some students even ignore the various study guides. As mentioned in the earlier section, additional resistance might also arise from stigma or other more deeply rooted perceptions.

### Individual know-how

The expectation to work hard is acknowledged without any dispute. Translating into practice, work hard often means *study[ing] every day* (03\_SS17). Another more concrete study tactic

<sup>15</sup> For example, in providing funds, in helping with meals and accommodation, in motivating against F7 appeals etc.

pointed out by many of the student interviewees is time management as *once you fall behind it is going to be very difficult to catch up* (03\_HS10). Specific strategies students pointed to include making a schedule (03\_SS14, 03\_HS09), *always on top of your work* (03\_SS04) *being proactive... so when they lecture about this section, I already have some information on it* (03\_SS03). This study habit, however, is mentioned primarily by the Science students, probably because it is included in its FYS (Jacobs & Pretorius, 2014).

Hard work and managing one's time wisely require self-discipline, which includes being punctual and knowing *what to do, when to do it* (03\_SS03). Prioritising becomes even more critical when there is a lot going on, and one is overwhelmed. One student even offered that those who are *unable to finish their studies because they cannot fix their priorities yet, they feel like they can go everywhere at once but it's not possible* (03\_HS03).

Literature readily agrees that finance is a main challenge for epistemic access for historically disadvantaged students (Kuh et al., 2006), but it seldom points to financial skills (how to manage finance) in their discussion. Along a similar line, NSFAS's recently introduced offering of cash instead of channelling it for different categories places additional responsibility on the students for financial management skills. One Science administrator observed that many students struggle to manage this change, although she added that sometimes this challenge is not necessarily a result of poor financial management skills, but an expectation that the money is shared with the student's family. Some students we interviewed admitted *misus[ing] money* (HS10) sometimes. Paradoxically, however, *living beyond their means* (03\_SS05) tends to occur to those not dependent on NSFAS. Among the students we interviewed, all claimed managing NSFAS funds well. HS09 recalled that temptation in the beginning, *I need that. I need that. (laughs)... Now I have adjusted. That money is solely for me to buy food to last me the whole month*. Many students budget, plan and prioritise, *eliminate the things that can wait or that are not important* (SS11). HS12 was proud of her saving skills and knowing *how to stay with maybe a R100 for two weeks straight*. Quite a few save for emergencies; a few even *invest a few rands* when they can. HS02 even *help where I can, donate where I can*.

### **Know-thyself**

Literature indicates that many historically disadvantaged students tend to have a heightened sense of self and maturity (Soares & Soares, 1970). Self-awareness is often the basis of this heightened sense of self, but it also often includes self-awareness and acceptance, open-mindedness and adaptability, critical attitude, ownership and independence, determination and

persistence, self-discipline, gratitude, to confidence (Cross & Atinde, 2015), as our student interviewees demonstrate.

### **Self-awareness and acceptance**

Self-awareness includes how one sees oneself and others (Dymond & Barnes, 1997). In addition to self-awareness about ones' differences, awareness also refers to where one comes from and how that relates to one's family and surroundings, which the majority of our interviewees show with a strong sense of self-acceptance. Our interviewees are keenly aware of their differences. The majority claimed that *background is a background, you don't need to defend it, you don't need to make it better* (03\_HS03), *there is nothing wrong with me being different because that is how things are and me being different does not mean that I don't belong* (03\_SS03). Some learned to be more social and interact with others during their tenure at UJ, sometimes 'forced' by some courses (speak out or work with others). They adjusted and adapted when they needed to or considered fit, sometimes led to *doing things that I didn't think I will do, things that I didn't think I was capable of doing... keeping my mind open has allowed me to go, has allowed me to experience more than I thought I would* (03\_HS01).

Many, however, *stay true to myself* (03\_HS09), *at all times, you should be you* (03\_SS10), *be a person that looks into themselves for answers* (03\_HS11), *not try to be someone else* (03\_HS04). Many also showed a high level of critical reflection, towards themselves as well as any uncondusive aspects in their surroundings or upbringing. A few commented on their communities who *always pry into your business* (03\_HS04), or *made sure that a girl is supposed to do this, and a boy is supposed to do that* (03\_HS10). 03\_HS03 questioned why his parents would *prefer to go to church and pray than actually coming together and put much effort into taking action*. Some found the church they grew up in to be judgemental and unlearned *most of the things were very narrow* (03\_HS01). 03\_SS10 reflected upon their generation: *we are really stubborn, we are opinionated, we really love our voice to be heard... No one wants to bow down to the other*.

Our interviewees also showed a sense of awareness of their limits. 03\_SS10 claimed the danger of putting too much pressure on themselves, *because with too much pressure, you stress yourself out... it leads to depression*. A few students similarly recognised the need to balance independence (do it oneself, not 'nag' others to help) and interdependence (ask for information so that one can do it). 03\_HS09 suggested to strive for halfway.

### **Ownership, determination and persistence**

Overall, our interviewees showed a strong sense of ownership of their attitudes and actions. It is about not blaming the circumstance or making excuses: *if the environment that you came to find yourself in is not going to help you to get to where you want to, you just have to get things into your own hands* (03\_HS01). It also means to own up to one's emotions, *if you give positive vibes you gonna get positive vibes* (03\_HS03). One does not wait for opportunities to present themselves to me (03\_HS13). Similar attitudes proliferated our interviews: *we choose our path* (03\_HS07), *it is my own decision to make for me to be where I want to be* (03\_HS16), *what I went through boosts me in a way, and it makes me what I am today* (03\_HS13).

For one Humanities lecturer, this is essential because those who take responsibility for their own learning *tend to excel...because they will ask questions, they will go and do an extra reading after the lecture*. The Financial Officer similarly observed that these students often *go out there and they seek help...they make follow-ups, if you are not doing what you said you were going to do, they will take it up*.

Ownership often leads to determination and persistence (Knaggs et al., 2015): committed and focusing on what one comes to university for and do what is needed to achieve that goal. *You have to find a way through...I have to make sure that I finish what I have to do* (03\_HS15) *because sitting around and not doing anything is going to be costly* (03\_SS14). *We fight till the end* (03\_HS06), *just keep on trying and eventually I will understand* (03\_SS09), *we pave our own future* (03\_HS08). Learned patience often accompanies a high level of determination. Applying this to handling demands, 03\_SS01 believed that the university *is for everyone, as long as you are determined to go ...At the end of the day, they [lecturers] wouldn't teach me something that is impossible [to learn]*. Students gave advice to others in similar situations: *don't be stopped by anything* (03\_HS02), *give things a go multiple times* (03\_SS09), *never lose sight of what he desires* (03\_HS04), *focus on the bigger picture* (03\_HS09) and find a balance between social and academic life, manage the temptation from social media and its psychological impact on lifestyle and a sense of competition.

### **Positive attitudes and gratitude**

For 03\_HS12, who experienced violence in high school, *being able to push past that moment was eye-opening for me because it showed me that I can be strong as an individual*. There are many other examples of positive thinking, even if the circumstances are harsh, even if there are not many material resources or opportunities, *I was fortunate because it forces me to work*

*extra hard* (03\_SS04). *Regardless of anything, I always have a positive mindset* (03\_HS04) *to use the little that I have ... and to appreciate* (03\_HS08). 03\_HS03 came to understand and appreciate why families and UJ have pushed them *like super soldiers... so that when we get out, we are prepared, even though it does not always feel necessary or great at the time. Failure is a second chance to achieve a goal* (03\_SS13). *I shouldn't be feeling sorry for myself* (03\_HS13).

One result of all the above is often a quiet confidence that one can *deal with as best you can in whatever ways you can. If it works out, it is fine; if it doesn't work out it is also fine* (03\_SS11). UGES statistics confirm a generally high level of self-confidence (about 80% to 75%, although a slight decline has been discernible over the years).

### **What drives the capabilities?**

Some students deliberated on the myriad sources of where know-how, collective agency and know-thyself capabilities is derived. As all our student interviewees are African, the invocation of Ubuntu, the most famous African philosophy, is hardly surprising.

The expectation of working hard is said to often arise from earlier years of schooling or learned from their families: *recognition of people [in school] who work hard* (03\_SS01); *they [family] don't mind if you do fail especially if you worked hard and gave it all* (03\_SS04). Few students, however, directly explained where their study habits and time management come from. Science students' daily studying habits might have simply been the way to cope with their workload, coupled with their acceptance of the necessity of working hard. For time management, 03\_HS08 mentioned techniques and strategies from *YouTube video...on how to maximise your time whilst studying*.

For financial management skills, most students did not have pocket money to practise financial management when they grew up, but learned by observing other family members, helping managing finances or doing shopping for the family. Occasionally such skills came from more deliberate training from their parents (03\_HS13). Others *picked up along the way* (03\_SS11) when their family struggled, or when they themselves struggled. Participant 03\_SS03 learned from her boarding school experience; 03\_HS12 had *brochures of how to manage your money* from her high school. 03\_SS10 and 03\_HS16 directly attributed their learning to UJ (FYS and first year course on financial management respectively).

For now-thyself traits, some seem to originate from the working-class's inclination towards practicality as Li (2019) suggests: they *always have a backup plan* (03\_HS09). People of working class accept who they are and the situation they are in, try their best but also accept when it does not work out. Maturity largely stems from upbringing, for example, through observing family members or other role models, as well as religion. A few directly related their maturity to their UJ experience, *when I first got in UJ I wasn't sure of the things I know, I keep doubting ... Now I know the things I know because I can prove it* (03\_HS03), *it taught me responsibility and how to engage in different social circles* (03\_HS12), 03\_HS10 specifically attributed his growth to his Social Work classes. A similar pattern is observed for self-discipline and other aspects: most students attribute these to their upbringing with fewer attributing them to their experience at UJ.

Another critical source driving the capacities is motivation (*know-why* as in Garud, 1997) and a sense of hope. As one Humanities administrator observed that when the students *can see the finish line, they push themselves more*. Possibly due to the inclination towards practicality (Li, 2019), often an overarching motivation for our interviewees is an aspiration to change their life (for themselves, their parents and communities): *I'm going to make sure that when I come back and change the background, I'm in* (03\_HS15). Similar to the many examples of adverse environment emerging as an important driver for students' retention and success motivation (Thiele et al., 2017), striving for success, realising their dreams and *giving my family a better life* (03\_SS09) remain key motivator to push these students along. Another important motivator is the realisation that the students themselves are role models that others look up to, *those people look up to you to graduate and set an example* (03\_SS03), *everyone is proud of you* (03\_HS16).

### **Recommendations for UJ: Towards an Optimally Functioning University**

Despite an overall positive experience many interviewees reported that UJ has room to further improve towards becoming a more optionally functioning university. Below are some recommendations from either the interviewees themselves or what emerged from the study.

#### **Curriculum implications**

- There is a need to revisit the content that lecturers are under pressure to cover. This requires a university-wide discussion and re-conceptualisation of what attributes graduates need for employment and other possible further society needs and what UJ wants to produce by focusing on more selected topics/curriculum content.

- Lecturers should be more sensitive to gaps in learning and in experience, for example not all students know how to use science laboratories, or many students are not used to academic languages or English as the medium of instruction. Lecturers, particularly those for first-year modules, should also consider deliberately speaking slower and enunciating more clearly.
- There is a need to revisit UJ's decolonisation aim and achievement. UJ should make more deliberate appointment and promotion of African scholars and multilingual lecturers to further enhance diversity at UJ. UJ should also do more in conscientising the students and staff about decolonisation, 4IR and 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills.

### **Financial implications**

- Information on other finance opportunities should be distributed better.
- Consider setting up a study aid, apart from the NSFAS, where the students are allowed to continue their studies regardless of what is owed by them until they have completed their degree.

### **Implications for better support**

- In addition to providing support, UJ should consider easier access and deliberate encouragement to use the various available support systems, for example through an open-door policy or open hours. UJ can consider making use of support services such as the Writing Centres and PsyCaD which should be compulsory for all first-year students to remove stigma (since everyone will be using the support services) and let students practically experience the benefit of these services. To further 'encourage' support usage, one could also list all services on a card as part of the FYE where the students are required to visit each facility and get the card stamped in exchange for a small gift or lottery and prize entry.
- UJ should explore more innovative ways to retain students for the first six months. The University can further tap into both residential and other organisations who organise support groups or cultural visits around Johannesburg to help students to acclimatise. Technology such as WhatsApp and robots (for example, a chatbot for where to go in the city or an interactive map for the campuses or bus schedules) can also be considered. To mitigate ignorance, UJ should alert and prepare students for the challenges through the first six months. To mitigate information overload, UJ can consider a short video as opposed to an entire book and little reminders once in a while for information distributed during FYS.

- Speed up data-informed PMI or other artificial intelligent (AI)-aided student information data mining, for example to provide student backgrounds and profiles before classes start to help lecturers provide relevant contextualised academic support tailor-made to needy students.
- Academic support should be formally evaluated, especially in terms of their effectiveness to student success.
- Academics should be encouraged to learn about academic support (what is available, but also best advice in terms of how best to provide academic support).
- Use of tutors for pre-marking and feedback before official submission to assist lecturers in large classes. Tutor support should also be provided for Y2 or 3 classes if they are large. Tutorials in home language should also be considered.
- UJ should investigate further student access to support mechanisms such as food or physiological wellbeing as well as usage of home languages in the classes, especially reasons for stigma and any other reasons for suboptimal support and services usage.
- UJ should take further steps to ensure that the campus is more inclusive such as providing more buses and drivers; further prioritising student safety, not just inside UJ premises, but also on surrounding premises; providing more space for student interactions beyond the classroom and the student centre, such as chairs around the campus, or an open park; further promote social activities, inviting inspiring role models to speak, organising events to connect students to their profession or other future opportunities.
- Prioritise and prefer first-year historically disadvantaged students for on-campus accommodation while senior students are encouraged to seek off-campus accommodation. In the longer run, UJ should consider expanding on-campus accommodation in the nearby neighbourhood.

## **Conclusion**

There are two main findings from this case study. One relates to the relationship between student experience and throughput, another is the importance of a collective effort to achieve student success for historically disadvantaged students.

### **Student experience versus throughput**

What is surprising is a lack of discernible difference in terms of the student experience at UJ after specific separation and analysis of data from high and low throughput departments or the



two faculties. A disaggregated analysis of throughput in terms of gender and high school locations shows that differences clearly exist, such as the different happy or angry/frustrating moments when interviewees were asked to recall. Cross-comparison in terms of perceptions/experience at UJ and demographic characteristics result in limited categorical differences. For example, those from rural areas do not necessarily find the transition to a university more difficult than those from urban areas (mainly township); females or those from rural areas do not necessarily report lesser confidence or claimed to be introvert; extroverts do not necessarily find socialisation into the new environment easier<sup>16</sup>. Instead, the main notable difference is only found in terms of one's accommodation status where off-campus students report significantly greater encounters of crime-related events and lesser participation in activities (especially social), often due to transport challenges.

Another puzzle from the data is an overwhelming positive 'assessment' of interviewees' experience at UJ, found from different data sources such as from students, academics, administration and support staff; interviews as well as quantitative surveys collected over the years, which does not correlate with throughput rate. Positive reporting merely due to social desirability bias is likely to use more conservative words rather than *amazing* (many interviewees), *brilliant* (Science Administrator), *I love everything about the place* (SS04). *UJ is very up there...when a student comes, it's like they come to a family away from their own personal families* (Finance Officer), *already close to being ideal* (Humanities Administrator).

Exploring additional reasons for students' positive experience suggests the following:

These students are all under NSFAS and have indicated their appreciation toward the opportunities they were given, and the achievement achieved so far. So, their perspectives might be coloured by their own appreciative and humble outlook.

Having successfully progressed to the final year, these students are all survivors of the system. Therefore, their experience reflects a skewed 'winners' bias which might be qualitatively different from those who were unsuccessful and dropped out of the system.

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<sup>16</sup> Instead, one self-claimed extrovert (HS04), found his first six months *quite a nightmare* because of his expectation that extroverts will find it easy to make friends. Introverts generally learned social skills and become more social during their time at UJ. SS16 self-claims to be shy but has friends everywhere.

Department grouping used to sample high- and low-throughput departments are not particularly useful in differentiating throughput. Further investigation of student majors and subjects indicate that all students are exposed to a wide range of subjects and therefore a variety of academic experiences. As students interact with a wide range of curricula and lecturers, their experience is bound to show a variety of encounters and therefore greater chances for positive encounters.

Lastly, experience, opportunities, support and throughput are correlated, but not in a linear fashion. Instead, throughput is an efficiency term while experience incorporates a much greater affective dimension (Cross & Carpentier, 2009; Schwarz et al., 2016), which might be more impacted by different factors other than student experience. A Science administrator and lecturer pointed to one factor that might be important to consider: throughput for the service modules the faculty offers to other faculties generally have lower throughput. An ADC officer also pointed out the *priority qualification if you fail a semester module, we will already extend your qualification by a year*. These might not directly relate to experience, but impact throughput, nonetheless. This suggests that factors typically investigated to understand throughput, such as institutional culture, socio-cultural background and capital, and student experience, are necessary but insufficient factors (Tinto, 2013). Instead, meso- and macro-level structural challenges, such as ‘high-risk’ modules or priority qualifications, which cannot be directly resolved by ‘optimising’ micro-level student experience, could be crucial in the examination of throughput.

### **It takes the whole village**

This case study suggests a chain of factors account for this positive student experience: undercurrents such as motivation, drives capability including know-how, collective agency, which sometimes assists and sometimes drives students to learn (Maniram & Maistry, 2018) - and know-thyself, which in turn drives functioning (experience). In this chain of factors, both institutional and individual agency are crucial (Sen, 1992; Walker, 2018). While the institution directly impacts campus culture (including institutional changes) and offering of academic and social services, individual agencies, including self-awareness and open-mindedness, on the other hand, are central to translate any institutional offering into individual experience and success.

Similar to the famous African proverb that ‘it takes a village to raise a child’, this case study suggests that it also takes a whole village to ensure student success, particularly for the

historically disadvantaged students. It also suggests a limitation either side can achieve, therefore it is important to recognise both limitations and facilitating capability students bring from their upbringing. Likewise, it is important to consider both academic and social aspects of a student's life and success. This study distils the following three aspects regarding 'the whole village' metaphor.

The first is a need for a wide range of stakeholders to work together, take an extra step and meet the others halfway. In this study, it includes the students themselves, their homes and community, UJ's lecturers, tutors, administration and support staff as well as fellow students.

The second is temporal. This can be seen from the sources for the articulation gap and success facilitating factors. The articulation gap emerges from student backgrounds. All these social-economic-technological-psychological challenges matter in their UJ experience; however, much of know-how, know-thyself, collective agency and motivation arise from their upbringing. Students repeatedly draw on habits or lessons from earlier life to account for their resilience. However, UJ clearly has further developed some of the facilitating factors. Neither background nor UJ can claim full credit (or be blamed) for where a student is at today. Another example is those stigmas that could further widen the articulation gap. Although often not pointed out in articulation gap literature, this case study suggests that students' perception of language and counselling could be part of their cultural baggage they bring to the universities. Decolonisation in this sense is more challenging as *the entire education system from primary to high school is not yet decolonised* (Humanities Lecturer).

Broadening the metaphor of 'whole village' to include not just physical space and stakeholders, but also experience in different times, this temporal dimension can also be seen in terms of the most critical first six months/year of a student's overall success. After passing the modules for the first semester, a sense of achievement and greater confidence that *now I have managed to do these things now and nothing is impossible for me now* (03\_HS04) often serves as a booster that triggers the virtuous loop for retention for later years because some students only started to *communicate more with the lecturers* or *started falling in love with the course* after this initial phase (03\_HS04; 03\_HS16). Although life post these six months might still be challenging, as time goes by, *it became easy* (03\_HS04, 03\_HS10). *Once they get into the second semester, they have kind of caught up with the rhythm of it* (Humanities Lecturer). One key consideration is how to keep the students in the game until they reach that point.

The third aspect refers to the goal of tertiary education. Academics and education clearly remain crucial in what universities offer. However, the university experience is not only about academics. An empty stomach cannot concentrate on studying. A worry of unable to get an academic record when one owes fees, demotivates the students. A fuller and rounded experience with other social engagements enriches students' university experience. This is particularly important in the contemporary world with greater and faster technological breakthroughs and disruptions. In this sense, developing a student's all-round abilities might have greater impact on epistemic access and success than a narrow focus on academic work.

The Writing Centre Officer summarises this notion of the whole village well in one of his finishing remarks: *We are all sort of linked like a chain ... your [student] failure is not just your failure, it's a failure for your tutors, it's a failure for your lecturers, it's a failure for your Department, a failure for the faculty and a failure for UJ ... we are making it one person's problem when it comes to failing, but it is a collective failure, actually. So, I am saying that all these people should work together... Epistemic access, knowledge access is with all of us.*

Noteworthy, however, that while a village makes one person, individuals also make the village. A person is more than a mere passive product of the village, but through individual agency can actively interpret and interact with the surroundings to make where one is.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Department selection

	2016 Baseline Enrolment			2017 Baseline Enrolment		
	% Cumulative Drop-outs (Third year-Min time)	% Cumulative Graduates (Third year)	% Cumulative Graduates (Fourth Year)	% Cumulative Drop-outs (Third year)	% Cumulative Graduates (Third year)	% Cumulative Graduates (Fourth Year)
Science	27%	11%	32%	29%	11%	11%
Compt sci & softw engi	22%	12%	42%	27%	7%	7%
Deans office: science	29%	10%	26%	0	0	0
Geoge env & energy study	17%	17%	72%	0	25%	25%
Math & appl mathematics	25%	0%	0%	32%	6%	7%
Zoology	33%	25%	67%	22%	17%	17%
Biochemistry				30%	19%	19%
Bot & plant bio-technol				18%	6%	6%
Chemical sciences				31%	11%	11%
Geology				24%	31%	31%
Physics				36%	8%	8%
Statistics				71%	0%	0%
Humanities	21%	44%	64%	20%	44%	48%
Anthrop & dev studies	20%	43%	65%	23%	40%	40%
Journalism, film & televi	25%	48%	58%	26%	43%	48%
Lang, cul stud & sppl lin	24%	22%	35%	22%	26%	29%
Politics & internat relat	26%	30%	47%	24%	50%	55%
Psychology	18%	59%	71%	16%	54%	58%
Social work	18%	58%	69%	19%	55%	59%
Strategic communication	16%	67%	77%	16%	55%	60%

### Appendix B: Additional UJ institutional survey instruments

Student Profile Questionnaire (SPQ): since 2006, “completed during the orientation period and the first week of class” (Van Zyl, 2013). The sample size is usually around 3000, although it was increased to 6 000 in 2019.

Initial Student Experience Survey (ISES): Since 2010, a one-page survey issued to first-year UJ students “during the sixth week of class to investigate various aspects of the student experience and interaction with the institution during their initial entry into the institution” (Van Zyl, 2013). This was later discontinued as some of its most important questions were incorporated in the Undergraduate Student Experience Survey (UGES).

#### Appendix C: Additional ADC initiatives

Student dashboard: this has been experimented and is in revising stage. The idea is that in a few years from now, “you would be able to choose a tab and then it extracts all the data for your students from all these different databases [e.g., student profile questionnaire, the DIPEM data, the data on the Information technology systems (ITS) etc] and provide you with a dashboard overview of your students... not individually, but about your group... so that you have a good sense of who your students are (ADC).

SOS (Student Online Success): On-the-go module, a virtual academic development centre, created during COVID-19

Blackboard Predict: used it for almost 3 years, and found to be an inappropriate product for UJ, so no longer in use. New predictive software is being researched now.

## **Chapter 6: Epistemic access and success of historically disadvantaged students at the University of Limpopo**

**Mahlapahlapana Themane**

### **Introduction**

The overall objective of the study was to explore the experiences of successful university undergraduate students with a very specific background profile; that is, students who have suffered a considerable degree of marginalisation by virtue of being African, originating from poor families and communities, and who have graduated from relatively underprivileged schools in rural and township areas, with specific reference to the University of Limpopo.

This study follows previous case studies on higher education epistemic access and success undertaken by the Africa Higher Education Collaborative (Wekullo, 2019), the Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2009), the Association of African Universities (AAU) student mobility study, and the Steering of Student Epistemic Access study (Cross & Adam, 2007). This chapter evaluates the progress made in terms of student access and success over the past 25 years at UL. More specifically, it provides an analysis of the pre-1994 period, characterised by segregation along racial lines. It then shifts its focus to the post-1994 period of transformation, which saw various measures introduced, including legislative and policy frameworks on opening access to the higher education system. So far, no substantial studies have been conducted on the history of UL, except one by Nkondo (1976) and another by White (1997). This chapter adds to the limited body of knowledge relating to student epistemic access and success, with particular reference to an institution located in a rural province in South Africa.

### **Background and context**

This chapter argues against the commonly held view that students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds are doomed to failure because of a lack of, or inadequate forms of, social capital (Czerniewicz & Brown, 2014; Green & Naidoo 2008). UL presents a compelling case given its historical role in facilitating the struggle for free education. Of course, there are many problems the institution has been grappling with; not unique challenges, but widely manifested nonetheless (White, 1997). There is no doubt as to what role UL has played in shaping the historical landscape of higher education in South Africa. This is evidenced in the number of prominent people it has produced in varied important positions in the country.

The underlying reasons for this success indicate that there is something that distinguishes UL from the other universities. This could be the self-regulatory traditions, such as honing the leadership skills of its student body during the apartheid years where the student body was highly politicised. For example, student organisations such as the Student Christian Movement (SCM), now the Student Christian Organisation (SCO), the Student Union Christian Action (SUCA), the South African Students Congress (SASCO), and others of their kind played a significant role in empowering and supporting students in varied ways (White, 1997). The current President of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa, was one such student who was active in the SCM, together with Reverend Frank Chikane. The former would become chairman of the Turfloop South African Students' Organisation (SASO) branch, which espoused a broad black consciousness ideology (Butler, 2007). However, there is no doubt that today students from historically disadvantaged universities like UL have unique needs compared to their counterparts. The educational needs manifested in South African universities include addressing a general lack of academic preparedness, multilingual needs in English medium settings, large class sizes and inadequate curriculum design (Jaffer et al., 2007).

However, despite the students' impoverished socio-economic backgrounds, the study reveals that when students receive adequate support, for example from student organisations and religious or political groups, they are able to succeed at university. This chapter highlights concerns of higher education policymakers and practitioners, including what Morrow (2009) calls stakeholder politics, institutional cultures and curriculum transformation and interrogation of the function of higher education institutions in modern societies. This study reveals that conceptual underpinnings of the notion of epistemic access and success are broader than just the physical presence of students in an institution of higher learning and that it is about how students learn, their capabilities and support received, thus echoing Muller (2014) and Cross and Atinde (2015).

In understanding the academic access and success of the HDS, there is a need to explain how they are admitted to the academic programmes, which varies from university to university.

Table 30 below presents the admission point score requirements at UL

**Table 30: The Admission Point Score (APS) system**

<b>NSC Achievement Level</b>	<b>NSC%</b>	<b>Senior Certificate Higher Grade</b>	<b>Senior Certificate Standard Grade</b>	<b>APS</b>
7	80-99	A		7
6	70-79	B	A	6
5	60-69	C	B	5
4	50-59	D	C	4
3	40-49	E	D	3
2	30-39	F	E	2
1	0-29	G	F	1

The prospective students with an NSC who wish to gain entry to any undergraduate programme at the University of Limpopo, should comply with the following:

- a) Life Orientation with an achievement level of at least three (3) (40-49%).
- b) Aligned with the language policy of the university, English as a language of learning and teaching with an achievement level of at least three (3) (40-49%).
- c) The required minimum levels of achievement in specific subjects as stipulated in the calendars of each faculty, provided that:
  - Four 20-credit subjects were achieved with a minimum NSC achievement level of four (4) (50-59%) for degree programmes and Four 20-credit subjects were achieved with a minimum NSC achievement level of three (3) (40-49%) for diploma programmes.
  - The required Admission Point Score (APS) as stipulated in the calendars of each faculty. For the School of Education, the minimum APS requirement of 24 and for the Faculty of Science and Agriculture is 25.
- d) Matriculation Certificate (prior to 2008)
  - Students who successfully completed Grade 12 before 2008 can apply for admission to the university with the normal Grade 12 Senior Certificate with full university exemption by converting their grade symbols to an APS.
- e) National Certificate (Vocational)
  - Students who have successfully completed a National Certificate Vocational NC(V) level four qualification will require the following and will be subject to Faculty

#### Admission Specifications and Placement Tests:

- NC (V) level four certificate with Level 3 fundamental subjects 60% (Life Orientation included) and four relevant vocational subjects at 70% for degree programmes.
- NC (V) level four certificate with three fundamental subjects 50% (Life Orientation included) and three compulsory vocational subjects at 60% for diploma programmes. (Adapted from the UL General Calendar).
- Students who fail to make up the required APS of 24, and normal are channelled through the extended programmes.

#### **Literature review**

Firstly, an historical context is provided, followed by a discussion of the concepts of epistemic access. For a long time, UL has been the epicentre of student struggles for epistemic access to higher education and success. The section ends with a conceptual framework that draws on the Capability Theory.

In 1972, continuous boycotts and confrontation with police led to the establishment of a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the underlying causes of unrest at the University of the North (Nkondo, 1976). The main finding of the Commission was that the unrest was of a political nature. Of particular interest in the debate over epistemic access and success are the remarks highlighted by White:

Resistance to the contrary nature of the apartheid policy, resistance to the oppression of Black persons in South Africa, and to the fact that they were not even recognised as citizens in the country of their birth - all this discontent manifested itself at Turfloop from its very inception and was to form the basis of distrust, conflict and the systematic destruction of a culture of teaching and learning (1997, p.99).

Despite the difficult volatile circumstances under which students studied, they benefited from university education. This is evidenced by the fact that UL has made a significant contribution to South Africa's socio-economic development (judges, lawyers, teachers, nurses) and that of the Southern African Development Countries (SADC).

In 1994, South Africa entered a new epoch, which promised a new dawn for the majority of the historically disadvantaged groups, including students. UL, like other HBUs became the

targets of transformation. A number of legislations such as The White Paper No.3, (DoE, 1997); National Plan for Higher Education, 2001 (DoE, 2001); (DoE, 2016); Post School Education and Training Articulation Policy (Department of Education, 2016), were passed to enable these institutions to succeed.

As part of the transformation agenda, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET, 2013) recommended that the higher education system should be reconfigured as a differentiated and diverse system so that there could be effective responses from institutions to the varied social needs of the country (DHET, 2014). This move affected a number of universities, including the erstwhile University of the North, and resulted in the establishment of the University of Limpopo. The University of Limpopo was born out of the merging of two universities, namely University of the North and Medical University of South Africa (MEDUNSA) in 2005.

Despite this transformation agenda to increase epistemic access to higher education, especially by the previously disadvantaged students, the student profile at UL remains predominantly from a low socio-economic status; people who come from poor families and communities, and who graduated from relatively underprivileged schools in rural and township areas. Thus, students from these backgrounds are marginalised on the grounds of being black and/or being female. For this reason, the growth gains of post-1994 have not translated into graduations and jobs for these students. For most, pathways into higher education (HE) do not lead to successful completion and employment, but rather to failure and debt, therefore the widening of access into higher education has exacerbated social and epistemic injustice, compounding the frustration, alienation and disaffection of students from under-represented groups (Cooper, 2015). This reality, therefore, does not reflect the aspirations of The White Paper 3 (DoE, 2001, pp.14, 27), which seeks among others to:

- Provide a full spectrum of advanced educational opportunities for an expanding range of the population irrespective of race, gender, age, creed or class or other forms of discrimination.
- Promote equity of access and fair chances for success to all who are seeking to realise their potential through higher education, while eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination and advancing redress for past inequalities.

This narrative has been well documented elsewhere (Cooper, 2015; Essop, 2020). Policies

that are meant to mitigate against these challenges seem to fail. They fail because of a variety of reasons, including a lack of competent personnel to implement policies. For example, tertiary education in South Africa faces several challenges at each beginning of the academic year where there are always contestations between students and university management (Muller, 2020; Müller & Rijcke, 2017). Another related reason is the nature of policies being implemented. Most policies ignore context and therefore are not responsive to the needs of communities where they should be applied. A good example is the online teaching policies that leave the majority of students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds behind (Eja & Ramegowda, 2020). In 2020, with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, many students struggled to adjust to online learning because of lack of internet connectivity and unavailability of mobile data. Therefore, the policy on the migration to the multimodal approach to teaching and learning was a challenge to most students. Finally, some policies cannot be successfully implemented because of lack of proper monitoring and evaluation of policies (Howes et al., 2017). However, despite this stark reality, certain students from disadvantaged backgrounds succeed and graduate in record time (Cross, 2018).

In the 25 years of democracy, the question of who the students from disadvantaged backgrounds are, is slowly becoming difficult to resolve. Traditionally, disadvantage has been defined by race. This has now become complicated by the fact that there is an emerging black middle class that cannot be labelled disadvantaged. Factors such as schooling and educational background (for example, Quintile 1 and 2 schools, rurality and socio-economic circumstances, have of late been included as indicators of disadvantage.) According to Van der Merwe et al. (2016), the concept is further complicated by other factors such as the emerging middle class, and the children of domestic workers, who sometimes attend good schools in the area where their parents are employed. Therefore, it appears as if the definition of disadvantage needs to be operationalised according to a specific context. Igbo et al. (2011) for example, in their study on an innovative, multidisciplinary strategy to improve the retention of nursing students from disadvantaged backgrounds, identified specific factors as a lineament of what disadvantaged means. They included features such as: first in family to attend college; incoming grade point average; financial needs according to federal guidelines; and nurse entrance test (NET) scores.

### **Conceptualisation of epistemic access and success**

This section offers a critical analysis of the concept of epistemic access and success in order to situate the study in its proper theoretical context. As alluded to earlier, this chapter works



from the premise that what constitutes epistemological access still remains fairly under-researched in South Africa (Boughey, 2010), particularly at UL. Therefore, it is argued that epistemological access, as coined by Morrow (2009), was borne out of a particular historical political need in higher education (White, 1997).

This section discusses epistemic access and success in order to understand how they apply to historically disadvantaged students at UL; in particular, to democratise access to higher education (Morrow, 2009). Before delving into its unique application at UL, one needs to sketch out its meaning from a broad or a generic application.

Different meanings of the concept of epistemic access and success exist. Broadly, these meanings can be grouped into two categories: Those that see access as merely a physical entry into an institution of higher learning, and another being those that go beyond physical access to include support that goes with it. This is quite a narrow view of epistemological access. For example, in the first category, Alexander (2008) explains epistemic access and success as only physical entry into an institution of learning, where admission to a university is not based on the colour of the skin but on merit. This view is well captured by Antia and Dyers (2016, p.3) when they reflectively argue that: “It is well documented that students who are educationally and economically disadvantaged are less likely to enrol in postsecondary education, and if they do enrol, they are less likely to receive a degree”. In this study, a broader concept of epistemic success is adopted, as espoused by Cross and Atinde when they say:

We confine the idea of student ‘success’ to productive use of accurate plans, development, and learning opportunities resulting in the completion of their academic goals. Broadly, we conceptualise academic integration and success as ‘epistemic access’ (2015, p.308).

Contrary to the narrow view, some scholars (see Badat, 2014; Cross & Atiende, 2015; du Plooy & Zilindile, 2014) explain access as a process that involves both the integration into university life and success or completion of the programme. This chapter subscribes to this latter view, which sees access as a process that goes beyond mere physical access or admission to a university, to one that involves integration into university life and success or completion of the programme by students who need support in order to succeed. This calls for the creation of an enabling environment which is conducive to success such as the provision of tutorials, and academic support services to these students. Using the Capability Theory (Teece, 2017) to

understand the epistemic access of these students, we could say that their actual capability needed to be called on to achieve their success rather than lament their predicament and mere right to tertiary education. The theory not only look at how people function, but also how they use their capability, which is a practical choice, to achieve outcomes that they value and reason to value. Thus, students from disadvantaged backgrounds may overcome their challenges against all odds. For example, where they can leverage their efforts on the where, they can leverage their efforts from interacting with those around them.

Thus, in the context of this study, the concept of epistemic access and success refers to a situation where students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, succeed academically against all odds because of the support that they receive. I argue that although providing access to higher education is a laudable idea, without the success of the enrolled students such an increase in enrolments maybe futile. I argue as others (see Aluko, 2011; Cooper et al., 2015) do, that access should go beyond just an increase in numbers of those who enrol for university or any higher education institution to match with success or completion of these students. Access to higher education that does not consider the completion of studies by these students is inadequate and narrow. It lacks what Samoff (2001, p.25) calls "expanded access" (post-enrolment experiences). Du Plooy and Zilindile (2014) lament that access to Higher Education has not always been followed by success. Alexander (2008) has earlier argued that student completion of their educational goals is a key gauge of student success. HE institutions need to create conditions for students to adapt, innovate and improve all the time. Such conditions can include how to use time and money effectively and the use of people capacity to create social connections (Hatch, 2013).

In South Africa, in terms of an increase in access to the HE sector, it is important to acknowledge significant achievements. There has been an expansion of the sector and it is clear that the focus on widening access has borne some fruit (Essop, 2020). However, accompanying this growth is an increasing diversity amongst the student population. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds come with different experiences and varying levels of education, different needs and academic potential. This growth has not been supported by significant improvements in throughput rates (Jones, 2014). It becomes interesting as to how some fraction of this cohort of students are successful and graduate (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001).

## **Conceptual framework**

There are a number of theories that have been used in researching students' epistemic access and success in higher education, such as: Social Realism (Archer & Archer, 1995), Activity Theory (AT), (Engeström, 1999), Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) (Bernstein, 2000), Resilience Theory (RT) (Garmezy, 1993) and Capability Theory (CT) (Garmezy, 1993).

Within these theories, there are a number of variables that are used to explain why students succeed or fail to complete their studies at university. One of these variables is the one that seeks to explain the gap between high school education and university education (Ladson-Billings, 2006). For example, it could explain that students who come from Quintile 1 and 2 schools find the transition too stressful to handle, which may lead to dropout or poor performance, especially during the first year of study (Cross, 2018). Other variables include student age (Smith, 2016), maturity and life experience (Cross & Atinde 2015; Gu, 2009).

These factors are complex and difficult to explain through a single explanation. Some of the explanations that have been used in the past include: (i) student age, maturity and life experience (Cross & Atinde, 2015; Martinez et al., 2020; Zhang, 2016;); (ii) institutional cultural differences between the school and the university; (iii) gender differences, (iv) socio-economic status; (v) previous school performance; (vi) long-term goals; (vii) mode of entry into the university institution; and (viii) institutional forms of mediation or more specifically institutional responsiveness and the notion of pedagogical distance (Abbott-Chapman, 2011).

This chapter uses the Capability Theory (CT) to understand how students from impoverished backgrounds such as the ones described above, cope with university life and succeed. The Capability Theory (also referred to as the capabilities approach) is a normative approach to human welfare that concentrates on the actual capability of persons to achieve their well-being rather than only on their right or freedom to do so. CT was developed by Amartya Sen (2008) to bring together a range of ideas that were previously excluded from traditional approaches in the economics of welfare. The core focus of the capability approach is on what individuals are able to do in dealing with adversity. CT has three tenets that constitute its core, namely functioning, agency, and capabilities.

By functioning, Sen (2008) talks about 'beings and doings'. He argues that living may be seen as a set of interrelated functionings. They are the states and activities constitutive of a person's being. For example, functionings may refer to elementary things, such as being healthy, having

a good job and being safe, to more complex states, such as being happy, having self-respect and being calm. Moreover, Sen (2008) contends that the functionings are crucial to an adequate understanding of the capability approach; capability is conceptualised as a reflection of the freedom to achieve valuable functionings. The construct of functionings is useful in understanding students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and are able to succeed at university. It has helped to understand what factors constituted students' daily lives to help them survive. The experiences of these students may mirror many others at UL. For example, most students were unfamiliar with online teaching and learning, which drew attention to the unpreparedness of both staff and students to prepare for online teaching. More relevant examples of this are discussed fully under the discussion section.

Sen (2008) refers to an agent as someone who acts and brings about change, whose achievement can be evaluated in terms of values and goals. Agency depends on the ability to personally choose the functionings one values, a choice that may not correlate with personal well-being. For example, when a person chooses to engage in studying when their friends are partying may be choosing something that may not please their friends. Such a decision is exercising their ability to pursue a goal that one values, though such a choice may negatively affect them. Sen (2008) explains that a person, as an agent, need not be guided by the pursuit of well-being; agency achievement considers a person's success in terms of their pursuit of goals. The Capability Theory was thus relevant because it helped to describe the sampled students' resilience in facing harsh and trying circumstances. For example, where a student had no prescribed textbook to study from and had to rely on borrowing from others in order to survive, but managed to succeed.

Research (Hatch, 2013) conducted on student learning outcomes stresses the importance of taking context into account when investigating student success. Contrary to this, previous studies on the problem of disadvantaged students' throughput in higher education in South Africa has tended to work within the paradigm of understanding which outcome of research is portrayed as objective and predetermined. Unfortunately, such approaches produce models and theoretical frameworks that disregard the historical and the contextual in people's lives. On the other hand, deductive perspectives that assume that people's lived-experiences and realities are neutral and value-free similarly fail to account for university students' success or failure that emanate from the dynamic and unique nature of the culture and the context in which they live and work. White articulates the following about UL students when he says:

Student bodies at Turfloop operated under stringent control and restrictions ...Centres of organised student activities such as the SRC were to be periodically forced to dissolve and their members were often faced with imprisonment. This fostered a negative attitude towards SRC elections among students, largely due to fear (1997, p.100).

These and other factors impinged the epistemic access and success of students at UL. Themane and Osher (2014) speak of situations where some students are able to thrive against disruptive circumstances whereas others succumb to them. This could be due to genetic-based sensitivity or lack of social support. Disruptive encounters could include poverty, but to certain students, such encounters could invoke learning in them and the tenacity to succeed (Masten et al., 2014). This can be seen in cases where adverse circumstances such as lack of food, which should normally discourage a student to study, instead may invoke the student to want to beat the odds and succeed under all circumstances. Such students could be labelled as resilient.

Regarding capabilities, Nussbaum (2000) argues that capabilities denote a person's opportunity and ability to generate desired outcomes, taking into account relevant personal characteristics and external factors. It is a combination of the individual capabilities and the external factors that enable or inhibit a person's ability to succeed. The important part of this definition is the 'freedom to achieve'. The Capability Theory argues that freedom to achieve well-being in the midst of stressful circumstances is a matter of what people are able to do and to be, and thus are able to lead. This tenet of the theory is appropriate for students who experience trauma and stress, because instead of succumbing to stressful conditions, choose to soldier on and thus choose to achieve. For example, students at UL may spend days without warm water for washing, but they tolerate the situation and choose to achieve. In this sense, freedom has no instrumental value (valuable as a means to achieve an end) and no intrinsic value (valuable in and of itself) to a person's well-being, instrumental value (valuable as a means to achieve an end) and no intrinsic value (valuable in and of itself) to a person's well-being, then the value of the capability set as a whole would simply be defined by the value of a person's actual combination of functionings.

Moreover, adverse factors, that is, the external factors, did not override the freedom to choose what was beneficial to these students. Their functionings, agency and capabilities served as a theoretical lens to understand the phenomenon of epistemic access. For example, where the students owed the university large amounts of money, they had the choice to drop out of their

studies, but they made a choice to continue, despite the financial difficulties they encountered. This kind of resilience could explain the epistemic access and success of these students.

Another construct that is worthy of review is historically disadvantaged students. This term carries multiple shades of meaning depending on the context under which the term is used. Historically, in South Africa, the term originated from educational inequalities in the education system under the apartheid era where there was unequal distribution of academic resources, including but not limited to: school funding, qualified and experienced teachers, books, and technologies to assist socially excluded communities (White, 1997). The distribution was skewed to favour White children against their African counterparts. Thus, the division was mainly on the basis of race.

Higher education in South Africa was designed and developed alongside Black and White racial lines. Thus, by virtue of being from an African background, normally from a rural village or township, you were classified as having come from a disadvantaged background. However, post-1994 the term has gained an expanded meaning to include gender, geography, socio-economic status and high school background. Cross and Atinde (2015) use the term marginalised groups. This view of students holds the notion that because of these students' poor social capital, they are doomed to failure in their academic careers. Within this view, Bourdieu's theory of social capital is normally applied to explain the fate of these students. Contrary to this view, this chapter contends for an alternative position: that there are students from these backgrounds who are able to access higher education and succeed.

## **Methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative research approach where an interpretive phenomenological research design was used. The design was found to be appropriate to unearth the experiences of how students coped with their studies amidst myriad challenges. As advised by Leedy and Ormrod (2013), the design was appropriate to understand experiences from the participants' point of view.

## **Sampling**

The purposive sampling strategy was used to select a total of 46 participants in the study. The sample was divided into four categories. The first was the category of students. This was made up of 34 students, 17 from each faculty. The students were labelled either Humanities Student (HS) or Science Student (SS). Each student was given a number ranging from 1 to 17 as a code, respectively.

The second category was the administrative staff. The category was made up of four participants, two from each faculty, either Humanities Administration (HA) or Science Administration (SA), labelled HA 1-2 and SA 1-2.

The third category was made up of eight academic staff, that is, four from each faculty. For the Humanities they were designated Humanities Academic Staff (HAS) and for the Sciences, Sciences Academic Staff (SAS) labelled HAS 1-4 and SAS 1-4 respectively.

The last category was made up of four participants from the support staff (finance, residence, psychological and academic writing), designated as Support Staff (SS), and labelled SS 1-4.

Table 31 below provides a summarised picture of this composition.

**Table 31: Composition of the sample**

<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Number</b>
Humanities	Students	17
	Academic staff	04
	Administrative staff	02
	<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>23</b>
Science and Agriculture	Students	17
	Academic staff	04
	Administrative staff	02
	<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>23</b>
	Support staff (finance, residence, psychological and academic)	04
<b>Grand total</b>		<b>50</b>

### **Profile of the faculties**

UL has four faculties: the Faculty of Management and Law, the Faculty of Science and Agriculture, the Faculty of Humanities and the Faculty of Health Sciences. This study was confined to two faculties, Humanities and Science and Agriculture.

The Faculty of Humanities comprises three Schools: The School of Languages and Communication Studies, the School of Education and the School of Social Sciences. The faculty offers a range of programmes leading to degrees which equip students with knowledge, skills and values needed for an ever-changing world. For example, the School of Education

envisions to be a leading African Centre of Excellence that produces highly skilled and competent educators of international standard in a rural setting. The faculty takes into account rurality as a main challenge that students bring to the university.

Thus, rural conditions, especially those emanating since the apartheid era such as extreme poverty, high unemployment, dependency levels where four to five people depend on one person for their livelihoods, and more importantly, where innumeracy and illiteracy levels are very high. These and other factors lead to the potential students, including teacher trainees, coming to UL underprepared. However, the conceptualisation of rurality is not necessarily tied to apartheid as rurality is a worldwide phenomenon that cuts across all historical epochs (Balfour, 2012). In this chapter, it is argued that the creation of UL, and other historically disadvantaged universities in South Africa, was a direct product of the apartheid system, premised on capitalist principles that sought to create a working class of predominantly Black citizens. However, it is noted that the concept of class is complex, as noted in the literature (see Hlalele, 2014; Nkambule et al., 2011). The chapter suggests that students from the working class and rural backgrounds confront major epistemological access and success challenges. They require among other things, the ability to negotiate group and intergroup social relationships and need to acquire important capacities that may enable them to thrive (Osher et al., 2014).

To counteract these adversities, the capability approach is useful. Thus, the Faculty of Humanities is driven by values of care, empowerment, and development in order to accommodate these students. This can be drawn from a quotation from one of the UL students who reflected on one of his survival strategies as follows: *Ja. I was also part of the school choir and then we were also engaged in different projects, for example, we would be provided with skills about STDs, HIV and the like. It was more of a mentorship (HS2).*

Equally, there are only four schools in this faculty, and four are listed below:

1. The School of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences,
2. The School of Mathematical and Computer Sciences,
3. The School of Molecular and Life Sciences and
4. The School of Physical and Mineral Sciences.

The faculty is cognisant of the challenges that face prospective students. For example, the School of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences is aimed at transforming the lives of



students, especially those from poor rural communities. One of its efforts to accommodate these students is to strengthen their academic skills in facilitating experiential learning and action-research.

### **Student profiles**

In this study, the majority of students enrolled at UL, including those who did not form part of this study, come from the remote rural areas, mostly from Limpopo and Mpumalanga provinces. The students came from villages that are characterised by poverty and poor infrastructure (poor roads, lack of clean running water, no electricity, for example). Most come from households run by single mothers who struggle daily to make ends meet. The students matriculated from Quintile 1 secondary schools. Quintile 1 is the group of schools catering for the poorest 20% of learners. These poverty rankings are determined nationally according to the poverty of the community around the school, as well as certain infrastructural factors. Schools in Quintile 1, 2 and 3 have been declared no-fee schools, while schools in Quintiles 4 and 5 are fee-paying schools. The family size of the students ranged between five and seven people per house, excluding extended families. All students in the sample maintained that only one of their parents was a breadwinner. Due to their dire situation at home, they reported that once their household experienced financial problems, they applied for National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), which is mainly to help the working class with their studies. The ‘working class’ is tied to the NSFAS threshold of R350 000 earnings per annum.

The students were either the first or the second family member to have attended university. This alludes to why most only developed an interest in going to university when they were in Grades 11 or 12 as they were only exposed to information and help about university through their school teachers and/or family friends (Modipa & Dambisa, 2008).

Due to this family background, most students in the sample only experienced full exposure to internet usage, computer usage and library for the first time when they first enrolled with the University of Limpopo. Their schools and communities were characterised by underdevelopment and visible shortage of infrastructure such as libraries and laboratories. However, despite this poor social background, the students possessed a rich social capital because of their culture of active participation in community activities such as politics, sports and church services. This shows that students from disadvantaged backgrounds face multiple challenges as compared to their counterparts from advantaged backgrounds,

### **Profile of schools**

The majority of students described above come from rural schools. In South Africa, rural schools face severe challenges that are unique to their environment. Most have poor infrastructure and a lack of resources (classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and toilets), lack of learner-support materials, lack of parental interest in children's education, insufficient funding from the state, underqualified teachers and multi-grade teaching. These are some of the barriers to effective education. These challenges can be attributed to numerous sources from within school structures and from the external environment, including local communities and education authorities (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Fleisch, 2008). Even after 25 years of democracy, educational standards and learner performance in rural schooling has shown little improvement.

### **Data collection**

Data was constructed through six data sets as follows:

**Data Set 1:** Data on the profile of the faculty was constructed by bringing together data on the academic and administrative staff, the curriculum orientation, the overall instructional programme, the formal access arrangements for students to staff, the student numbers (size) of the faculty, the student distribution by race and gender, and the broad philosophy of the faculty in terms of what it sees as its distinctive mission and identity. This data came from a combination of interviews with the faculty leadership and the combing of relevant faculty documents.

**Data Set 2:** The faculty history with respect to student progression and pass rates was statistically compiled for the period 2012-2019. The statistical profile of progression and pass rates (PPR) are available for the institution as a whole, but was specified by faculty and disaggregated for specific programmes (Humanities, School of Education, Bachelor of Education, Foundation Phase) with traditionally high failure and dropout rates. This was intended to provide a composite statistically-based narrative for each faculty's PPR.

**Data Set 3:** Sampled students were interviewed individually, using a semi-structured interview protocol that covers the three research foci of the study (experience, engagement, and effects) and the three cultural domains (institutional, academic, and student) that frame the investigation. Of specific importance for this study was an understanding of their biography / background and the implications of campus experience.

**Data Set 4:** Faculty administration staff were individually interviewed to determine both the formal arrangements for access and service as well as the collective experiences of student problems, needs, challenges and concerns from the point of view of the administrative staff. This evidence was meant to triangulate the data in order to explain experiences of the student-administration encounter and the extent to which this interface facilitates or frustrates academic progress.

**Data Set 5:** Faculty academic staff were interviewed to determine their understandings of the student experience and their enumeration of the obstacles to student progression within the academic sphere. This data provided a lecturer perspective on the student encounter with the teaching and learning context of a particular faculty, and how lecturers identified the problems and their resolution in academic terms.

**Data Set 6:** Faculty reports consisting of in-house analyses, institutional surveys and studies of PPR problems, their causes and resolution, such as might be available in document form to the research team. This took the form of in-house records of meetings etc. where PPR issues were discussed. Key activities entailed: (i) collecting and analysing statistics on student throughput and analysing and comparing across the schools in the faculties; (ii) collecting and analysing copies of mission, strategy, policy and procedure documents at institutional, faculty and school level; (iii) examining documents for underlying assumptions about access, retention and student throughput and how the two faculties and schools addressed the issues; (iv) collecting and analysing other relevant documents relating to any initiatives taken at the two faculties and schools to address their throughput issues.

### **Data analysis**

Qualitative data analysis was followed to analyse the data. De Casterlé et al. (2012, p.360) argue that qualitative data analysis can be a complex, laborious and time-consuming process. Firstly, Miles and Huberman's (1994, p.11) recommendations were followed. That is, the process of data analysis should follow three concurrent processes, namely, data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification. Thus, data transcripts were read through several times and distilled into manageable data. Then the data were coded in a data matrix. According to Miles and Huberman (1994, p.11), codes are tags or labels which are assigned to whole documents or segments of documents (that is, paragraphs, sentences or words) to help catalogue key concepts while preserving the context in which these concepts occur. The coding process included development, finalisation and application of the code structure.

Using the Capability Theory and drawing on the codes, it was possible to identify emerging concepts as Azungah (2018) advises, which enabled the empirical evidence from the data to be merged with theoretical explanations (Miles et al., 2014). This oscillation between the past literature on epistemic success, and the data to develop themes, was conducted in order to answer the research question. The past literature helped to leverage data analysis on the Capability Theory. Therefore, it was possible to distil the essences, meanings and norms, order, patterns and rules, which led to the themes that emerged.

The use of the qualitative data helped to supplement the interpretation of the data. The Capability Theory helped to understand how students from disadvantaged backgrounds could succeed despite the odds they faced.

From the pieces of the vignettes gleaned from the interviews with students, it was found that over and above the academic support that students received from the university, they also leveraged their support from other enabling factors such as faith-based organisations, such as the Student Christian Organisation (SCO) and other religious bodies where they were trained in life skills on how to handle stress, teenage pregnancy and public speaking. Furthermore, one important factor that seemed to impact on their epistemic success and access was their high school training in skills such as study skills and on students taking charge of their own fate. One student, when asked about how the high school she had attended had helped her, remarked as follows: *All I learnt about at high school is that you just have to work hard on your own because there's no one who is going to tell you do this and do that. Like make your own life goal because as I said this village is so poor so it is up to the person whether you want to stay here forever or do you want to go out there and experience life?* (05\_SS10).

### **Main findings and discussion**

This section presents the overall findings of this case study from documents and interviews. The section gives a synthesis of the reviewed literature, the empirical data from the participants and the Theory of Capability.

The overall findings were that at UL, students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds encountered challenges with their academic life as well as their social life. However, it was found that they had developed coping skills to navigate through these challenges, and that the university provided an enabling environment to mitigate against these adversities.

In addition, the support staff had this commentary about financial support: *Well, we had two groups. I think the current group of... (Inaudible) they only have limited programmes. In the previous generation the pre-NSFAS... they had financial problems which affected them because some of them... (Inaudible) and that also affects performance. And also (inaudible)... you can see this one is hungry in class.* (05\_AC02). The NSFAS bursary scheme has provided much needed support to most of the students in the sample.

Although the schools, communities and households of these students encountered enormous challenges in providing for the funding for their children's education, there were other types of support in the form of social and cultural capital that proved to be useful for their success. For example, some students indicated that they were inspired by their families who inculcated values such as respect, hard work, independence and career orientation in their studies. One student (05\_SS13) remarked that her parents *always taught me hard work, patience, and compassion.* Such values and other experiences worked as foundational motivation for their easier university integration. This was captured in one of the students' responses to the interview as follows: *Because in a certain way I come from ... I took my family values and beliefs to the university and what I can say when you are in that environment you must choose the people that you want to be with.* (05\_HS08)

Students and some of the staff members in the sample indicated that they had selected the University of Limpopo because it was closer to home, which limited their financial distress.

### **Academic challenges**

The academic challenges can be divided into three categories: heavy workload, lack of basic academic literacy skills, and the use of English as a medium of instruction.

### **Workload**

Firstly, the academic challenges that students experienced included a heavy workload. Both the students and the academic staff revealed that they found the curriculum to be covered in a semester too heavy to cope with, given that they were underprepared by their secondary schools. For example, students especially those from the Faculty of Science and Agriculture pointed out that lecturers demanded a huge amount of work within a short space of time. On this challenge of heavy workload, one lecturer from the Faculty of Science and Agriculture remarked: *It is very difficult. It is very difficult. It is very confusing because it is a combination of stuff and the culture. And mostly, it is because the curriculum... you know you get it at a later stage because you missed a lot of stages. So, they have to learn a lot of things in a short*

space (05\_AC02).

Another lecturer from the same faculty indicated that students from rural areas found it difficult to adjust to the curriculum. He said: *Most are from rural areas. Most of them are actually clueless about some of the processes we assess especially in our department. This could be defining the background of their schools and their minimal exposure to technologically related teaching and learning methods and procedures within the university environment. This might make some of the staff members to be of the view that these poor students are not serious about school work* (05\_AC03).

This citation reveals that curriculum issues are interconnected to the context in which the curriculum is being implemented. Cornbleth (2000) speaks of curriculum as a contextualised social process. This perspective of curriculum requires that mechanisms be put in place to adjust aspects of the university environment such as the mentorship programmes to enable students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds to succeed. When the curriculum is implemented without due consideration of the context, it is likely to fail (Young, 1999).

### **Lack of basic academic writing and reading**

Secondly, it was revealed that these students lack basic academic writing and reading skills, which are pertinent for academic success at university. This was well captured by an academic staff member who remarked that: *Some difficulty comes when they have to present their work or they have to write. Some of them are rephrasing ... is not necessarily... and some of them end up writing... you know there's also the spoken language so some tends to write the way they speak* (05\_AS02).

Again, it emerged from the interviews that students struggled with the use of English as a medium of instruction. When asked about how the use of English contributed to students' preparedness for university education, one lecturer remarked that: *I think it contributes a lot because if they are unable to correctly understand a question that actually makes them answer wrong although they would know the answer to the question. It is just that language barrier of English sometimes; I feel that it is still a challenge* (05\_AS12).

Another remarked about the same issue as follows: *Unfortunately, you cannot teach in Sepedi or teach in another language, otherwise you leave a lot of students out. But you are trying to always cover everything with English so that we accommodate everyone. But the medium of instruction I think it is challenge for the students* (05\_AC04). The support staff related that the

English that the students came with from secondary school was not at a proficiency level high enough for the students to cope with their studies.’

This finding is consistent with other findings elsewhere in the world. Ebad (2014) on the role and impact of English as a medium of instruction in higher education institutions across the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a debatable subject. He found that the shift from the use of Arabic to English as a medium of instruction produced a barrier which created chaos and repulsive issues with the medium of instruction. (Brown 2014)

However, despite its challenges, Brown (2014) in his Asian study, found the use of English for Medium of Instruction (EMI) was seen as a possible benefit to domestic students, making them more competitive in the labour market or better preparing them for further study. Finally, language educators in Japan are turning to EMI pedagogies for authenticity and validity in language learning, and to strengthen their own professional identities

### **Teaching and learning with technology**

The first issue noted in this regard was that most students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds were unable to use computers or any form of technology such as the internet. The students reported that in their first year, they struggled to make use of computers such as when writing assignments, writing online tests and accessing learning materials.

On the question of the availability of technological resources, it was found that most had received laptops from the University and had access to the internet. However, the challenge was for those who lived outside campus as they had a problem with Wi-Fi access. With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, gaps created by the use of blended learning began to manifest. Regulations like social distancing, required that students be sent home, and they had to rely on online teaching. It was during this period that it was discovered that many had no laptops. The university was faced with a huge challenge to supply them with laptops and allocate mobile data bundles. One student expressed his problems with the online registration as follows: *Ja, it is not a bad place though the system needs to be upgraded and improved. Like our online application system sometimes you apply online when you get there it seems you did not apply. You go up and down. And then also things like accessing your proof of registration online. They can accept it ... but there's challenges. You will find they only take the original. Then you cannot take it anywhere (05\_SS12).*

From these excerpts it appears that the University has done its bit to support students to succeed in their studies. The only issue though appears to be delays in receiving data and problems with connectivity.

### **Social and personal challenges**

Besides the academic challenges that students had to contend with, they experienced difficulties in coping with their own personal and social lives. These can be grouped into two categories, namely: balancing their relaxation and entertainment with academic work, and safety and security matters.

Since most students experienced freedom from their parents for the first time, some of them tended to go to the extreme. They find university life appealing and too fast for them. University life gives them freedom to engage in social entertainment including partying, in contrast to the surveillance of their parents when at home. But they find that if such entertainment is not properly regulated, the academic workload increases rapidly and becomes too fast to cope with the pace. When one of the support staff was asked what kind of difficulties, apart from academic, she thought students experienced at the University of Limpopo, she replied: *I think just their lifestyle adaptation. I think to a large extent actually [the part]. I think it is actually a problem in our institution. I think the general behaviour of students, for example, the tendency to strike and disrupt classes, we can at a certain point hamper their academic progress* (05\_AD01).

One lecturer remarked as follows: *Most of our students are from the disadvantaged or maybe from the rural areas whereby there is no access into maybe internet, access into, what is it, what can I say into this (inaudible) that they are no longer under the guardian of their parents. So, we are now experiencing freedom that they never had at home. They are experiencing too much independence and then whereby they do not think to go to classes or whatever. So though as first years, the majority of them in their first year they are a bit struggling because they are finding it difficult to strike a balance between their studies and their personal freedom. See those students are achieving but not at their best optimal because they still have issues in terms of balancing the new environment they're finding themselves in* (05\_AD03).

On the above citation, one academic staff member remarked as follows: *Another issue that appeared on this theme, was the inability of most students from disadvantaged background to balance their independence at university with their academic work. One of the staff members*



*in the humanities faculty indicated this to be the major factor behind poor students repeating their first-year modules (05\_AC04).*

Although the issue of lack of balance between freedom and academic work is a common challenge for students, even for those who do not come from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, it becomes a unique feature for UL students because the majority come from remote rural areas where there are no entertainment opportunities and facilities such as cinemas and nightclubs. So, when they see these for the first time, they become easily distracted.

Besides, most of the students come from families and schools where there are still strict moral regulations such as tight control over the use of cell phones, times to come back at home, etc. Such strict rules and regulations are enforced by dominant patriarchal and religious rules. These rules tend to be ignored by students experiencing the freedom of campus life for first time. Such restrictions are better off in urban areas.

Regarding the second issue, safety and security, it appears that the students from disadvantaged backgrounds face a huge challenge concerning their safety. Due to lack of funding most of them do not manage to find accommodation on campus and therefore are forced to look for accommodation outside campus where it is not always safe. When one student was asked about safety and security outside campus, she remarked as follows: *What other kinds of difficulties apart from academic problems do you think students experience at the university these days? They have their own social challenges, but the main challenge is when... especially those ones that are not on campus. The issue of rapes, the issue of abuse (inaudible) what should be done I will also recommend that all students should be involved (inaudible) (05\_SS11).*

Living outside campus is a stumbling block to reaching or accessing facilities (library, computer laboratory, internet facilities.) on campus. However, to address these challenges, the university has provided transport and security to escort these students.

When asked, one of those who used the transport indicated that the transport system was beset with myriad problems such as the buses being the targets of robbers, drivers not picking students up in time. However, he pointed out that there were more benefits than negatives. He contended that students could otherwise not access the facilities. Besides the issue of transport, students raised other concerns which were obstacles to a positive learning environment. One student remarked: *... and also the residences, the issues of hot water and the infrastructure... and also they are not enough. And I feel like there's like a lot of things... that can like ... so*

*they can accommodate more students on campus (05\_HS10). Overall, the data suggest that both individual agency and institutional support are crucial. Here individual strategies include something like keep “open-minded about varsity life so that I can adapt so well” or for introverts, a necessity to make some adaptation in terms of their social orientation. Institutional support includes communication and other accommodative measures (05\_SS11).*

### **Student agency and relationships**

This section addresses the following two research questions: How do students leverage on their agency and social relationships to negotiate their epistemic access and success within a diverse and rapidly changing university environment? And what institutional or collective resources (cultural and / or material) do students resort to in order to succeed?

There is evidence that most of the students manage to complete their qualifications in record time, and even go beyond a junior degree/qualifications to obtain an honours degree or an equivalent thereof. The successful throughput rate can be evidenced in the table below. This suggests students’ self-agency. Daniel Merton Wegner (1948–2013) introduced the concept of self-agency. By self-agency he referred to the phenomenal will, that is, the sense that some actions in people are self-generated by people who displayed this attribute (Osher et al., 2020). These people had the capacity to self-direct in order to overcome their situation. They were resilient in the face of myriad challenges that are outlined above; that threatened their survival at UL.

**Table 32: Year B-Degree throughput rates by faculty and gender**

		Gender	Enrolments						Graduates				Throughput Rate		
			2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2016	2017	2018	2019	M	M+1	M+2
UL	Humanities	F	352	288	291	69	9	7	219	51	11	5	62%	77%	80%
		M	227	178	172	57	15	3	110	39	12	2	48%	66%	71%
	Humanities Total		579	466	463	126	24	10	329	90	23	7	57%	72%	76%
	Science	F	688	566	509	337	161	66	151	167	79	38	22%	46%	58%
		M	785	612	534	358	173	80	127	157	62	47	16%	36%	44%
	Science Total		1473	1178	1043	695	334	146	278	324	141	85	19%	41%	50%

(Source: UL Institutional Planning)

Table 32 table reveals that besides UL being classified as a historically black university (HBU) with unique challenges (for example, its profile being predominantly from historically black backgrounds), it has relatively impressive throughput rates. The table shows that during the same period, the university had throughput rates of 80% females and 71% male students in the Faculty of Humanities. The Faculty of Science and Agriculture had relatively low rates of 58% female students and 44% male students. Of interest is that in both faculties, female students performed better than their male counterparts. It may be interesting to investigate the factors behind this difference. In addition, there is a significant difference between the Faculty of Science and Agriculture and the Faculty of Humanities performance; for females 22% difference and 27% for male students. There is also a significant difference in performance between the Faculty of Humanities (22% female students and 27% male students) and the Faculty of Science and Agriculture (22% female students and 16% male students). The Faculty of Humanities outperformed the Faculty of Science and Agriculture by 14% female students and 6% male students.

Besides leveraging on their individual strength, the students used their relationships with family, school, community, and other social and political organisations to overcome their situation. The prelude of this resource is fully explained by Osher et al. (2020) who show relationships and context shape learning and development. This is also supported by what Cantor et al. (2019) say about the power of relationships in context as key to human development - the Capability Theory framework was used to make sense of relationships with parents, siblings, peers, caregivers, and teachers in making students succeed. This is exemplified by what one student said: *I was a class representative during my first year. I volunteered to be a class representative because most of my classmates had a fear of what being a class representative will cost them at the university. They said it is some difficult task, so I volunteered to be one and then again while I was doing my second year I volunteered because no one wanted to and again, I was also taking part in the ICT department as a computer lab assistant. So, I was basically having two extra activities, being a class representative and being a computer lab assistant at the same time. So, when I'm free after attending classes and it is time to go to the computer labs and assist those needy students that are not familiar with computer devices. Though I come from a village that doesn't have services like internet café where I can* (05\_HS10).

A student said this about the campus environment: *Okay on campus it is very much safe. It is a safe environment actually ja, as compared to off campus. Off campus there are a lot of robberies going on, students are being killed, are being raped and all those stuff. If you are on campus, then none of those you get to experience them (05\_SS11).*

However, a lecturer had this to say about NSFAS: *What is this body? It's NSFAS I think. It is now they were able to ... bursary and after graduation they still have to pay. Because I know before... So now it is a bursary. And also, that they have increased the amount. It helps a lot of students to actually breathe and be able to focus on their studies. And one other thing, the cultures which was introduced because, unfortunately the opinion of it was above this university... I am of the belief that it is actually a destructive idea which was instrumental because now students are more prone not to focus on their studies but actually on weekend go into these bars. (05\_AC03).*

### **Self-regulation**

This was a common narrative for most of these students. They displayed self-agency in their response to adversity. The evidence above affirms what self-regulation can do to help one mitigate against adversity such as poverty. There is doctrine here, especially instructive, that when resources are pulled together and mobilised, students are enabled to succeed. Indeed, here we see how contexts and individuals combined to conquer adversity. Where professional resources alone could not reach, community partnerships (schools, churches, families, political organisations for example) succeeded. Professional resources alone are insufficient or undermine community partnerships by being highly individualised and disabling (Themane, 2020).

### **Social capital**

With regard to social capital, the study noticed that the students leveraged their social capital to gain epistemic access and success. The notion of social capital evolved from the work of sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu, who explained it as the average of the actual or potential resources, which are linked to possession of a durable network (Anheier et al., 1995). This claim can be gleaned from what the students said during the interviews. For example, students had this to say: *So, what can you say you have learnt from the ZCC church? Like the values or the lessons or the beliefs that you learnt from church what are they? To always be kind and humble and respect your parents and elders (05\_SS13). What values, beliefs and lessons have you learnt from your community in general? I've learnt that you are... I believe that you are*

*who you are because of our society, right? So, I believe everything I mean values and norms and everything we share and we learn everything through our society and through the groups that you are living in. So, I believe the community has contributed a lot as you said where I am right now today (05\_HS11).*

These two conversations underscore the importance of social capital. According to the foregoing quotation (05\_HS11), the student saw herself as an integral part of the community she came from. The value of *simunye* (we are one) or *botho* (kindness) seem to have taught the students to support one another and to seek support when needed. Forming group discussions in the lecture hall or doing group work must be an easy thing to do with this calibre of student.

### **Support available at UL**

To put this section into perspective, it is important give a global picture of the global developments on student support. Smit (2012) avers that changes, such as diversification in higher education, are calling for new measures to support students, especially those who come from historically disadvantaged backgrounds.

I agree with Osher et al. (2017) who offer powerful support for beliefs that understanding the context of learning and relationships cannot be disentangled from how learning works and that the emotional is fundamentally intertwined with the cognitive.

As I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, these students do not always enter higher education with the requisite academic and cultural resources necessary to succeed. For this reason, universities are required to put in place support systems to scaffold their students' learning (Tomlinson & Jarvis, 2014). I also concur that a student's development is nested within micro-ecological contexts (families, peers, schools, communities, neighbourhoods) as well as macro-ecological contexts (economic and cultural systems). These contexts encompass relationships, environments and societal structures (Osher et al., 2020).

UL appears to be cognisant of this reality. For example, the Faculty of Science and Agriculture, which has seen an upsurge in enrolments, including female students, has put in place support systems. This growth has led to increasing calls for a focus on student support especially for those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Similarly, there has been an exponential growth in the Faculty of Humanities, such as in the School of Education. To meet this growth, student participants indicated that the university has gone a long way in supporting students with technology in the form of laptops and mobile data to support online learning. In addition,

students who are struggling with internet connectivity have computer laboratories and library e-resources to support their learning.

When comparing the campus experiences of students from the two faculties being studied, it emerged from the data (interviews) that students from the Faculty of Science and Agriculture were harder at work and spend more of their time with their books than those from the Faculty of Humanities, who showed an inclination to pass time relaxing with friends.

Students acknowledged that they were supplied with laptops and there was a computer laboratory to support their studies. From this we can infer that adequate technology and support in its usage, is one of the reasons for the success of these students. When the student was asked what technological support she had received from the university, she stated that she was supplied with a laptop and that there were also computers from the computer laboratories on campus. From this answer, one can deduce that the university has attempted to close the poverty deficit to ensure that all students are on par. The supply of laptops and mobile data bundles has proven to be useful during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for students such as those at UL whose parents cannot afford to equip them with laptops.

I agree with Frayer (1999) that no individual faculty member, department or campus will be able to fully realise the potential of educational technology to enhance teaching and learning without a robust information technology infrastructure. This structure is available at UL. Faculty access to hardware and software for the development and use of educational applications, student access to computers and the internet both on and off campus, multimedia-capable classrooms with internet access, training and technical support are available. However, these elements are not sufficient to create the desired revolution in teaching and learning unless the individual students and staff take the opportunities and use them. Here the Capability Theory is appropriate as it explains the concepts of functionings, capabilities, and agency as key to success. For example, the students' ability to use computers, their ability to form discussion groups and their ability extricate themselves from difficult conditions such as lack of food and fancy clothing can be best explained by the Capability Theory.

### **Institutional interventions**

From the analysis of the data, the common narrative was that the University of Limpopo has put in place several structures and programmes to bridge the gap between those who are from well-to-do families and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The discussion below highlights some of the interventions initiated by the university for each of the challenges

mentioned above. The section below fleshes some of the key views from both students and staff members pertaining to the interventions.

The unique UL campus culture of communal life, where students eat in groups, attend religious services, such as the Student Christian Organisation, which is dominant, the Zion Christian Church Choir and other clusters, provide a unique culture that is not found on many campuses in the country. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds use these groups to escape from loneliness and boredom. In addition, UL has a vibrant student social life in politics and sport. These and other social activities serve as breathers from the stressful academic life. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory provides the best model to conceptualise learning as a series of elements in a learning environment. For example, students who experience stress resort to religious beliefs or physical activities to de-stress. Several studies (see Dixson et al., 2016; Sommer & Dumont, 2011) have shown that academic achievement is linked to psychosocial factors.

In addition, most of the students indicated that UL was the first choice because it provided a haven in many ways. Some felt that its social culture (language, food) was in tandem with their home backgrounds, and thus felt more at home than being in Cape Town, for example. In addition, some felt that UL was their place of choice because it was near their homes and therefore cheap to travel to and from campus.

One student said: *UL is my personal preference because it is closer to home; closer to family members and all this but besides it is nice to work in a, what is it, what can I call it, is it a semi-remote or peri-urban area?* (05\_HS12).

Regarding the overloaded curriculum, on this challenge the university has initiated several programmes to help bridge the gap. The first programme is mentorship and tutorship which were predominantly implemented in the Faculty of Agriculture and Sciences. This was found to be helpful for students who were struggling with their studies. The lecturers and students had this to share about this programme. *Yes, we have tutors. For every course there's ... lecturer going to the class and teach and there are tutoring sessions where you come and sit with the students with the help of a postgrad... in that way postgrad especially those ones who are on Ph.D. levels... they come and assist with the concepts. They assist the lecturer; they address issues one by one. They go to bench by bench and talking to the students giving them some extra assignment and clues and... and helping them with everything that they need to be*



*helping with. That's one of the things that we are actually doing in the department (05-AS\_AC02). Tutors are helpful very much helpful. (05\_SS12)*

In addition, at the beginning of each year, the university conducts a one-week compulsory freshmen orientation with all the newly-registered first-year students. This programme is meant to familiarise the newly-admitted students with all the university departments, rules, values, goals, mission, and the key staff. This was brought to light by one of the Faculty of Humanities staff members: *The academic support is well-provided. Although we have tutorials, they are not enough to cover all modules. According to me, we lack the part whereby we can give it to students – those who feel like they are falling behind in the academic side. But from the administrative side everything is in place. We have got administrators who are in the school throughout the year, and they give anything that the students need. Our offices are always open. And we start supporting them from the beginning when we give out their orientation. And then when you move out to where we distribute and talk to them from the school side rules and everything (05\_AS03).*

Faculty Administrator had this to say: *But in terms of administrative action, I can say it is because the students are well-guided through their orientation from the beginning. When the students start from the university they are orientated into their own programme. And their rules, the general university rules are more clarified to them. Even when they do their registration - so they are guided according to their module selection and everything and then therefore during the course of the year if ever we see that this particular student they are at risk in terms of their marks or whatever, when we can see that this student is at risk and then we call the student. We identify the student and call them that you know what pay attention to your academic work because you will be affected by (G.10) or you'll be affected by (G.25) or (G.26) at the end of the year. So put your ... and if the students, what can they say, when they do open up then maybe they explain their challenges or whatever and then we refer them to the other section of the university just like counselling in D block I don't know what they call it (05\_AD03).*

Regarding resources, the university makes available several resources such as computer laboratory assistants to help the students in their use of the computers. Although some of the participants lamented about the state of the computer laboratories, they seemed happy that they have them. In addition, we were made aware that the university through the ICT division, offer computer literacy classes to all first-entering students across the campus. Below are the views

of the participants with regard to this issue: *In the computer labs, there's actually there's people who assist those which cannot access or don't know how to use the computer. They are the ones who help* (05\_AS02).

## **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that in the past 25 years of democracy, there has been a significant positive shift in terms of size and shape of enrolments in higher education institutions. This shift is an overtly observable change in the demographic profile of the higher education system. In 1993, African students constituted 53% of the total headcount enrolments whereas in 2017, this had increased to 84.8% (Essop, 2020, p.23). This is particularly interesting for students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds. In the same tone, the graduation rate from these students has been improving year on year. This is evident from the UL case study outlined in this study.

Three messages emerge from this study. Firstly, that student academic success not only depends on cognitive prowess, but also on the emotional or social environment where students learn (Zins, 2004). Secondly, according to the capability approach individuals not only rely on a free gift, but on an individual effort to turn things around in their favour. Thirdly, for students in higher education, there is a need for support in the form of physical resources and good teaching.

These findings have exposed the limitations of the deficit model that reinforces a perception that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are doomed to failure at universities. This study has found that despite their impoverished backgrounds, many of these students do succeed. Some of the key challenges students have sought to overcome include the adaptation to a life of independence and freedom, given that many come from cloistered rural home environments characterised by tradition and discipline, safety and security for students living outside campus and language and school under-preparedness challenges.

This chapter has drawn attention to the legacy of listening to the voices of the disadvantaged students and how they understand their own experiences of university life, like at UL, which is always in a state of flux. It is hoped that the stories presented here, though not generalisable to a wider population, point to some of the transformative agendas in the South African Higher Education system and can inform critical pedagogies, community partnerships and schooling and the importance of social-cultural learning.

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## **Chapter 7: A capability approach to disadvantaged students' access and success: The case of the University of Pretoria**

Talita Calitz

### **Introduction**

The focus of this case study is a capability-informed analysis of disadvantaged students' experiences at a South African university. As part of a broader project of student access and success, this case study is situated alongside five other institutional reports that examine how marginalised students navigate the space of higher education with relatively constrained resources. The aim of the study is to offer an in-depth analysis of how students draw on their individual and institutional agency, resilience and resources to navigate their academic journey.

The main questions being addressed by the report are detailed below:

1. How do students from marginalised communities negotiate their epistemic access and success within a diverse and rapidly changing university environment?
2. What individual, institutional or collective resources (cultural and/or material) have been and are more beneficial to the development and academic needs of these students?
3. How do institutions mediate students' social and academic experiences?

The report focuses on a historically White, Afrikaans-medium institution. Specific emphasis is given to the transformation of institutional culture, language policy and racial inclusion in the past decade. The findings are conceptually framed using a capability approach, which highlights the enabling and constraining factors related to disadvantaged students' access and success. Based on qualitative data collected from students and staff, as well as quantitative data related to student performance, the report shows the importance of arrangements that enable individuals and structures to enhance their agentic and resilient responses to challenges and opportunities.

A number of descriptors are used to refer to students in this report, which I define briefly. 'Disadvantaged' refers to the notion of being socio-economically, politically, academically and socially impacted by the extreme inequalities that define South Africa's post-apartheid landscape. The term is used critically in that it does not make any deficit assumptions about individual or collective resilience, agency or potential, while acknowledging that educational opportunities and access to resources are unevenly distributed. The impact of inequality

disproportionately affects African<sup>17</sup>, ‘Coloured’, and Indian students, families and communities, because of the way that colonial and apartheid policies and legislation constrained legal freedoms and opportunities within these communities. ‘Marginalised’: due to the realities of disadvantage described above, some students, their families, and their communities may occupy a marginal position within a society, institution or group. For example, a student who is unable to afford textbooks may occupy a marginal position within her cohort, when compared to other students who are able to afford textbooks.

### **Demographic transformation**

The University of Pretoria (UP) is a research-intensive university with 53 972 students registered across nine Faculties in 2022 (Table 33 below). In 2022, the Humanities faculty has a total headcount of 5 933 students, while Natural and Agricultural Sciences (NAS) has 6 319 students.

**Table 33: UP headcounts per faculty (2020-2022)**

<b>Faculty</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>
	<b>Headcount</b>	<b>Headcount</b>	<b>Headcount</b>
<b>00001 - HUM</b>	<b>5 806</b>	<b>6 129</b>	<b>5 933</b>
<b>00002 - NAS</b>	<b>6 594</b>	<b>6 803</b>	<b>6 316</b>
00004 - LAW	2 474	2 793	2 744
00005 - THEO	753	767	676
00007 - EMS	7 900	8 202	7 922
00008 - VET	1 424	1 533	1 438
00009 - EDU	8 240	9 387	9 784
00010 - HEALTH	7 783	8 259	7 275

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<sup>17</sup> The use of racial categories reflects the persistent classification of race according to categories used during South Africa’s apartheid past. Critical scholars sometimes use the term black to include racial categories such as ‘Coloured’ and ‘Indian’ South Africans, who were also subjected to the systems of racist segregation, exclusion and violence under apartheid, which is how I will refer to the participants in this chapter.

Faculty	2020	2021	2022
	Headcount	Headcount	Headcount
00012 - EBIT	11 053	11 259	10 626
00018 - GIBS	1 318	1 826	1 258
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>53 345</b>	<b>56 958</b>	<b>53 972</b>

The composition of the UP student cohort by racial group in 2022 is summarised in Table 34 below. In 2022, African, Coloured and Indian students constitute 67.2 % of all students, with white students at 32.6% of the student cohort. In 2021, African, Coloured and Indian students accounted for 69 % of the 6 324 placements at the university's residences.

**Table 34: Headcount per Race Group (2020-2022)**

Race Group Description	2020	2021	2022
	Headcount	Headcount	Headcount
African	28 753	31 997	31 230
Coloured	1 599	1 746	1 721
Indian	3 265	3 610	3 361
Unknown	100	42	29
White	19 628	19 563	17 631
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>53 345</b>	<b>56 958</b>	<b>53 972</b>

At the Mamelodi satellite campus, which offers extended degree programmes, African, Coloured and Indian student enrolments account for 79.7% of total undergraduate student enrolments.

**Table 35: Mamelodi headcounts per race group (2020-2022)**

Race Group Description	2020	2021	2022
	Headcount	Headcount	Headcount
African	585	624	699
Coloured	29	30	29
Indian	47	64	57
White	159	195	199
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>820</b>	<b>913</b>	<b>984</b>

In 2021, the university's staff demographic includes 26% African, Coloured' and Indian permanent staff members in 2021, and 30% African, Coloured and Indian temporary staff members, which constitutes 56% of the total staff complement.

**Table 36: Total staff per race group**

	2019	2020	2021
	Staff Headcount	Staff Headcount	Staff Headcount
African	6 438	6 109	6 291
Permanent Staff	3 009	3 040	3 030
Temporary Staff	3 429	3 069	3 261
Coloured	457	416	427
Permanent Staff	198	195	194
Temporary Staff	259	221	233
Indian	598	609	632
Permanent Staff	142	154	168
Temporary Staff	456	455	464
No Information	80	55	66

	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>
	<b>Staff Headcount</b>	<b>Staff Headcount</b>	<b>Staff Headcount</b>
Permanent Staff	8	3	2
Temporary Staff	72	52	64
White	6 241	5 647	5 552
Permanent Staff	1 666	1 616	1 555
Temporary Staff	4 575	4 031	3 997
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>13 814</b>	<b>12 836</b>	<b>12 968</b>

A comparative analysis of module pass rates by race group for the 2015-2021 undergraduate cohort is shown below (Table 37 below). In 2021, the lowest module pass rate was African students at NAS, with a pass rate of 67.9%, while the highest pass rate in 2021 was Indian students at Humanities at 94.2%.

**Table 37: Module Pass % per Race Group (2019-2021)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>
	<b>Module Pass %</b>	<b>Module Pass %</b>	<b>Module Pass %</b>
African	79.5%	82.9%	81.5%
00001 - HUM	84.3%	87.4%	84.8%
00002 - NAS	67.7%	71.7%	<b>67.9%</b>
Coloured	81.6%	88.4%	85.7%
00001 - HUM	81.7%	89.5%	86.9%
00002 - NAS	72.3%	84.8%	78.8%
Indian	85.7%	91.9%	90.3%
00001 - HUM	89.9%	94.2%	<b>94.2%</b>
00002 - NAS	75.8%	88.0%	83.1%

Year	2019	2020	2021
	Module Pass %	Module Pass %	Module Pass %
Unknown	78.1%	74.9%	71.4%
00001 - HUM	91.1%	100.0%	50.0%
00002 - NAS	61.2%	74.2%	100.0%
White	88.8%	93.1%	91.7%
00001 - HUM	89.9%	94.3%	93.0%
00002 - NAS	82.1%	89.7%	86.2%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>83.9%</b>	<b>87.9%</b>	<b>86.2%</b>

It was interesting to note that for the 2015-2021 cohort, the lowest graduation rates by the sixth year of study (2020) were African students at 45% at NAS, compared to 71% for White students. At Humanities, the lowest graduation rate was for Coloured students at 66% in 2020, and the highest rate of graduation was obtained by Indian students at 80%.

**Table 38: Graduation rates for undergraduate contact students (2015 - 2021) for NAS**

Year	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>	6 <sup>th</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>
Race group	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
African	0%	1%	11%	25%	37%	<b>45%</b>	51%
Coloured	0%	0%	11%	34%	45%	<b>53%</b>	55%
Indian	0%	0%	15%	33%	46%	<b>52%</b>	56%
White	0%	0%	23%	51%	63%	<b>71%</b>	75%

An analysis of cumulative drop-out rates for the 2015-2021 Humanities undergraduate student cohort shows relative similar rates of graduation by the 6<sup>th</sup> year (2020) (Table 39 below): African students 71%; Coloured students 66%; Indian students 80%; and White students 71%.

**Table 39: Graduation rates for undergraduate contact students (2015 - 2021) for Humanities**

Year	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>	6 <sup>th</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>
Race group	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
African	0%	1%	32%	59%	68%	<b>71%</b>	71%
Coloured	0%	0%	41%	54%	62%	<b>66%</b>	66%
Indian	0%	4%	35%	65%	78%	<b>80%</b>	n/a
White	1%	3%	38%	64%	70%	<b>71%</b>	72%

Drop-out rates for the 2015-2021 cohort reflect the highest drop-out rate at Humanities is 30% of ‘Coloured’ students, and the lowest rate of drop out is amongst Indian students at 20% (Table 8 below). At NAS, the highest dropout rate in 2020 is 39% of African students, and the lowest drop-out rate is 22% of White students.

**Table 40: Drop-out rates for undergraduate contact students (2015 - 2021) for Humanities**

Year	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>	6 <sup>th</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>
Race group	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
African	0%	12%	18%	24%	27%	28%	28%
Coloured	0%	11%	15%	26%	30%	30%	31%
Indian	0%	12%	14%	16%	20%	20%	20%
White	0%	14%	20%	25%	27%	28%	28%

**Table 41: Drop-out rates for undergraduate contact students (2015 - 2021) for Sciences**

Year	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>	6 <sup>th</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>
Race group	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
African	0%	11%	19%	25%	33%	39%	41%
Coloured	0%	16%	24%	29%	34%	34%	34%
Indian	0%	19%	23%	28%	35%	37%	38%
White	0%	12%	18%	20%	21%	22%	23%

These figures offer a snapshot of student performance at NAS and Humanities, and some insight into performance according to race grouping. Student performance, however, is an

incomplete measure of student success, which is why this project includes staff and student experiences of higher education.

### **Interventions for student success**

The university's response to student access and success includes initiatives such as student engagement with Faculty Student Advisors (FSA) who provide academic advising, study skills training, and psychosocial support. The University's Higher Education Research and Innovation unit administers the South African Student Survey of Engagement (SASSE) once every two years, to track student engagement across all faculties. Other initiatives include the Student Academic Readiness Survey (STARS) that identifies which first-year entrants require academic, financial and social support<sup>18</sup>.

The university's satellite campus houses its four-year programme, or extended degree programmes, where B.Sc. and B.Com degrees are offered over the course of four years, which may offer academically underprepared students time to adapt to the demanding pace and workload of tertiary studies. The satellite campus was part of a former university established by the apartheid government in 1981 to provide higher education in mainly secondary teacher training for the black population (Ogude et al., 2020). Following the South African higher education mergers of 2002, the campus became a satellite campus located close to a large urban informal settlement. Given its geographic location on the urban periphery, which is typical of South Africa's post-apartheid racially segregated landscape, the university has orientated this satellite campus's academic focus towards the provision of bridging programmes, extended degree courses and after-school initiatives for students and learners from disadvantaged backgrounds (Ogude et al., 2020). Initiatives for potential university applicants include the Pre-University Academy (PUA), which from 2021 offers academic literacy, numeracy and other academic skills development courses for high school learners.<sup>19</sup> Winter and summer school<sup>20</sup> programmes are aimed at Grades 9 - 12 and offer school enrichment courses in subjects such as physics and calculus for Grade 12 learners. This speaks to the important gap in making the transition to university, which remains a major challenge for many first-generation students.

In response to mental health and student well-being, the university has partnered with the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) to establish a dedicated student crisis

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<sup>18</sup> Source: <https://www.up.ac.za/education-innovation/article/257745/he-research-and-innovation>

<sup>19</sup> Source: [https://www.up.ac.za/mamelodi-campus/news/post\\_2940091-application-process-for-the-pre-university-academy-2021](https://www.up.ac.za/mamelodi-campus/news/post_2940091-application-process-for-the-pre-university-academy-2021)

<sup>20</sup> Source: <https://www.up.ac.za/juniortukkie>



hotline, particularly given concerns about student well-being. Student well-being is the focus of a multidisciplinary research study into undergraduate student well-being at the University. Peer counselling and mentorship programmes, which pair vulnerable students with a peer who is able to assist with their transition to university life, are available on campus and at residences. The Student Counselling Unit is staffed with clinical and counselling psychologists who provide free consultations for undergraduate and postgraduate students on different campuses.

### **Faculty-specific support services**

As the qualitative data reflect, all faculties across main and satellite campuses provide the services of one or more Faculty Student Advisors, who are trained to provide such services as career guidance, advice on module changes, and student skills. Both faculties provide tutorials, which are typically prioritised for first- and second-year students. The university has an academic writing unit, which provides academic literacy support across faculties. The university offers psychosocial counselling and support as well as health services as part of student services, for students with disabilities. These support services are mostly centralised and provided to all students across faculties, and not based specifically at faculty level.

### **Institutional transformation**

A predominant focus for historically White, Afrikaans-medium universities in the post-apartheid period is the transformation of institutional practices and cultures that could potentially alienate a diverse staff and student population (Le Roux, 2018; Van der Merwe & Reenen, 2016; Suransky & Van der Merwe, 2016). Institutional transformation is a slow process that is often met with resistance and co-exists alongside institutional priorities such as enhancing graduation rates, modernising teaching and learning facilities, responding to the increased demand for enrolments, expanding financial assistance for poor students and securing sustainable income for research.

In reaction to the slow pace of transformation, the student-led #FeesMustFall protests foregrounded the transformation of institutional cultures. While the primary focus was on poor students' demand for fee-free higher education, student demands included amongst other issues: the need for racially diverse lecturing staff; the interrogation of racism in residences and on campus; removing Afrikaans as a language of instruction; removing symbols, names and statues on campus that were reminiscent of colonialism and apartheid; and a response to gender-based violence on campus (Luescher, 2016; Mahlangu, 2019).

In 2019, the university appointed its first black Vice-Chancellor. In response to student calls for decolonising higher education, university management initiated a public lecture series that

addresses various aspects of decolonisation'. The university's curriculum transformation framework (University of Pretoria, 2017) outlines four drivers of curriculum transformation which are: responsiveness to social context; epistemological diversity; renewal of pedagogy and classroom practices; and an institutional culture of openness and critical reflection. In a broad statement of inclusivity and the protection of vulnerable groups' rights, the university anti-discrimination Policy (UP, 2019) prohibits unfair discrimination, hate speech, harassment, and violence, based on a wide range of identity markers<sup>21</sup>. In practice, the university's Transformation Office has been established to address the transformation of residence cultures into more welcoming and inclusive spaces, and to address incidents of violence, racism and gender-based violence at residences. As part of this initiative, the university hosts annual diversity leadership training for student leaders at residences to enable student leaders to develop capabilities for transformation.

### **Race and institutional culture**

Research into race and institutional cultures at the university (Jansen, 2005; Soudien, 2008) has been expanded to include a proliferation of research at the university into academics' whiteness, complicity and racial privilege (Jansen, 2009; Müller & Trahar, 2017; Van Niekerk, 2016; Visser, 2018). This is an important shift towards academics claiming individual and collective responsibility for privilege and embedded cultures and historical inequalities. Institutional research also examines diverse student experiences of residence culture at the university (Mohale, 2013) and widening access for marginalised students (Mathekga, 2012) and deeply embedded artistic and cultural artefacts that define the university's culture (Le Roux, 2018). Critical scholarship has also interrogated the question of racialised identities in relation to the university's historical and ongoing community engagement projects with disadvantaged communities (Thumbran, 2018).

### **Transforming language policy**

Resistance to Afrikaans as a language of instruction was a prominent feature of the #FeesMustFall and #AfrikaansMustFall protests in 2015 and 2016. In response, the university's language policy (2016)<sup>22</sup> phased out Afrikaans as a language of instruction and adopted English as the only language of instruction. Afrikaans and Sepedi remain in use for ceremonial purposes and students enrolled prior to 2019, will continue to receive Afrikaans

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<sup>21</sup> "Race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language, and birth; or other comparable grounds including country of origin, HIV status, socio-economic status, albinism, gender identity, gender expression, intersex status, class, political opinion, year of study, physical appearance, body shape, mental health status, or occupation" (UP, 2019).

<sup>22</sup> Source: [https://www.up.ac.za/news/post\\_2302842-up-council-supports-adoption-of-new-language-policy](https://www.up.ac.za/news/post_2302842-up-council-supports-adoption-of-new-language-policy)

study material where feasible until the completion of their degrees. Online Sepedi courses are offered to staff and students free of charge, to encourage multilingualism and social cohesion. Critical analyses of the language policy and student resistance points out ideological contradictions in replacing Afrikaans with another oppressive, colonial language, while the development of indigenous languages is neglected (Dube, 2017) and multilingualism as a feasible alternative in South Africa remains under-researched (Bassey & Van der Merwe, 2019; Rudwick, 2018).

### **Faculty-based transformation initiatives**

Notable faculty-based transformation initiatives include an institutional survey<sup>23</sup> on curriculum transformation at the university, administered in 2017 in the aftermath of the #FeesMustFall protests in 2015 and 2016. The survey results illustrate the diverse perspectives and contentious views held concerning curriculum transformation, particularly amongst the undergraduate student cohort.

Students' perspectives concerning curriculum transformation show interrelated interpretations around transformation in that some students associate curriculum transformation with decolonisation, while others focus on indigenous knowledge and Africanisation of the curriculum. Other students hold negative perceptions around curriculum transformation, citing anxieties about lowering standards and damaging the university's international relevance and reputation. Of all the respondents, 34.4% believed that the university should be transformed, while 27.5% responded that the university should not be transformed, and 38% were unsure. Uncertainties around the need for transformation included concerns about curriculum relevance that is confined to a particular geographic area such as the African continent; loss of international and global acceptance; the belief that the university's curriculum is sufficiently transformed; an overemphasis on African knowledge excludes knowledge in other marginalised regions such as South America and Asia; concerns that students do not have enough information about the transformation process; fear that the process would be disruptive to the academic programme and create confusion; and concern that the process lacked transparency about who is meant to benefit from the transformation.

### **Conceptual framework: cultivating capabilities for student access and success**

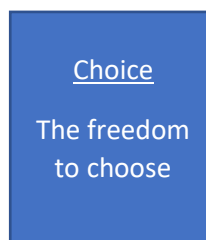
The university's student body reflects the complex diversity of South Africa's undergraduate student cohort. The extended degree programme and wide range of undergraduate degrees

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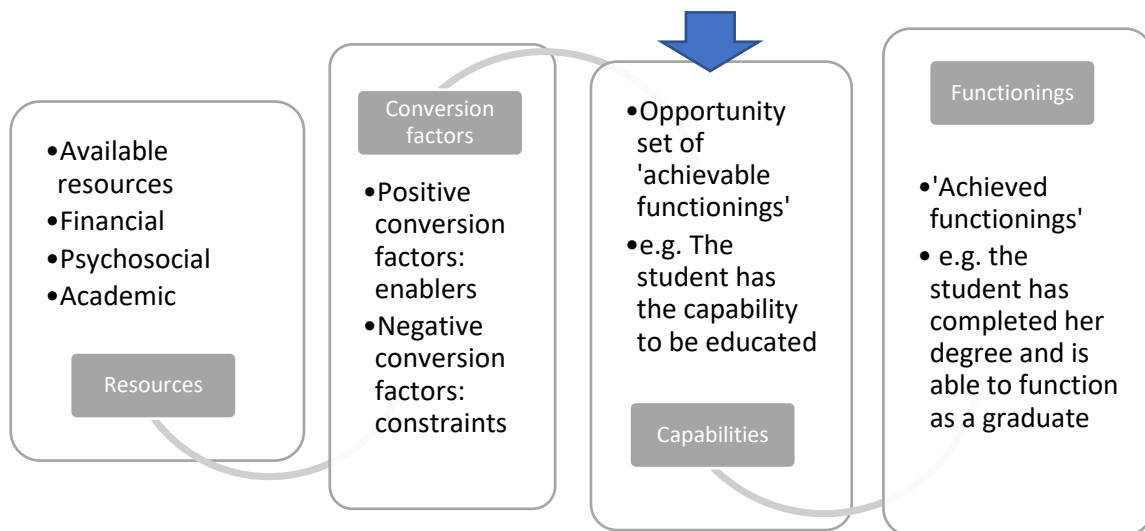
<sup>23</sup> *Curriculum Transformation in the Faculty of Humanities: Student Voices* (2017).

attract students within a wide spectrum of high school achievement, which means that university support and academic structures are tasked with responding to very different levels of preparedness at an undergraduate level. The systemic constraints that many first-generation students navigate in their trajectory to higher education, includes high levels of poverty, socio-economic inequality and exposure to violence and trauma (Stebbleton et al., 2014). Once access to higher education is attained, students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds navigate a plethora of financial, social and academic constraints that threaten the freedom that they have to convert educational opportunities into valued outcomes, such as caring for extended family members financially, securing employment, and social mobility (Ashwin & Case, 2018). The struggle to secure funding throughout the degree is a major concern, and much research has been conducted on student preparedness for the academic demands of higher education, given South Africa's unequal basic education system. Particular focus has been given to challenges related to academic literacy, numeracy and technology skills (Andrews, 2015; Boughey & McKenna, 2016).

In my analysis, I draw on the capability approach (CA) to analyse the enablers and constraints to student access and success at the university. The capability approach is an interpretative framework that interrogates the well-being and freedom of individuals and groups (Sen, 1999). The CA evaluates whether institutional arrangements enable individuals to achieve the capabilities and functioning that they have reason to value (Robeyns, 2005; Walker & Boni, 2020). Drawing on the perspectives of staff and students, this capability-informed analysis outlines how individual and systemic enablers lead to a resilient response to the complex demands placed on staff and students at the university. This capability-informed analysis demonstrates persistent structural constraints that inhibit access and success for marginalised students. In the figure below, I summarise the capability-informed concepts that I use to interpret student and staff experiences of access and success across the data.



Choice  
The freedom  
to choose



(Source: Adapted from Robeyns, 2005)

### **Table 42: The capability approach**

The focus of this case study is on identifying examples of resources, interventions and agency in the experiences of individual students and staff despite the challenges facing institutions and individuals. The student and staff interviews in this case study give evidence of individual and institutional agency in the face of significant systemic challenges. Vulnerable South African university students rely on community-based social resources and a commitment to education in response to the stressful transition to higher education (Van Breda, 2018).

#### **Capability-informed analysis an alternative to the deficit approach**

Capability-informed analysis of vulnerable students offers a conceptual alternative to stereotyped images of academically deficient and struggling students by focusing on evidence of students' resilient responses to adverse conditions (Walker & Boni, 2020). Research into higher education has experienced a shift in the past couple of decades from deficit analyses of student preparedness to exosystemic analyses that interrogate how structural conditions enable and constrain educational outcomes for disadvantaged students (Gorski 2011; Harper 2010; Hurst 2015; Kim & Hargrove 2013; McKay & Devlin 2016; O'Shea et al., 2016; Pym & Kapp 2013; Reed et al., 2019; Smit 2012; Valencia 2010). Instead of asking whether students are academically and socially prepared for higher education, critical scholars have asked how institutions and individuals can work collaboratively to enable success for students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. Such conceptual focus shifts a discourse of student blame to a wider structural analysis of intersecting factors that leave students marginalised (Williams et al., 2019).

The debate on widening participation and equity in higher education has developed to include a nuanced, intersectional critique of the deficit approach. Recent debates in higher education focus on socio-economic inequalities alongside students' need for institutional recognition. Scholars investigate student experiences using multidimensional analyses that examine how race, class, gender, disability, language, culture and other identity markers impact on an individual's freedom to participate in higher education. While scholars have been questioning the deficit approach for many decades - in South Africa, since the 1980s - recent scholarship proposes alternatives to the deficit approach. Scholars who challenge the deficit approach illustrate that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds demonstrate high levels of determination and motivation to succeed, perform well despite challenges, actively seek help and are independent learners, given their experience of tough public-school settings where little support is offered (McKay & Devlin, 2016).

Alongside a critique of a deficit approach, research into student access and success explores alternatives that focus on student agency, student empowerment, student resources and student resilience (Daniel 2018; Harper et al., 2018; Portnoi & Kwong 2019). Some studies have investigated how to enable student agency using theoretical frameworks such as the capability approach that takes a multidimensional approach to access and participation in higher education (Martinez-Vargas et al., 2019). A focus on student agency foregrounds the creative, transformative actions that students enact to navigate challenges and limited resources, and the everyday acts of resistance that enable success despite systemic constraints.

## **Methodology**

Data were collected from two faculties at the university, the Arts and the Science faculties. Six datasets were used to compile the report, as outlined below:

**Data Set 1:** Faculty-specific data include available policy documents on the curriculum orientation, transformation and student demographics. Given the focus on decolonising and institutional transformation, requested policy documents focused on these issues. One faculty provided detailed reports on their response to institutional transformation initiatives, while the other faculty did not provide any policies on transformation.

**Data Set 2:** The second data set focuses on progression and pass rates for the 2012-2017 student cohort across the two selected faculties.

**Data Set 3:** Across the two faculties, undergraduate students were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol. Five postgraduate fieldworkers conducted the interviews between August and November 2020. The student interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically.

**Data Set 4:** Across the two faculties, support and administrative staff were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol. Five postgraduate fieldworkers conducted the interviews between August and November 2020. The staff interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically.

**Data Set 5:** Across the two faculties, academic (lecturing) staff were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol. Five postgraduate fieldworkers conducted the interviews between August and November 2020. The staff interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically.

**Data Set 6:** Faculty reports such as institutional surveys and studies were requested and incorporated into the analysis. Only one faculty responded to the request for relevant documents.

### **Limitations of the study**

The data collection phase of the project coincided with the COVID-19 lockdown, which meant that most students and staff members were studying and working from home. This created significant challenges in recruiting participants for interviews. In particular, since students were not on campus and interviews would need to be conducted online, it was difficult to secure appointments with students, who faced both social and technological challenges. Due to high levels of reported stress, anxiety and personal challenges, students often cancelled scheduled interviews or were difficult to reach. Most student participants had little to no access to mobile data and needed to be provided with mobile data before an interview. Interviews were often interrupted due to network issues, and there were frequent issues with sound quality of recordings which made the transcripts more difficult to interpret. In this case study, fieldworkers were able to record interviews via a user-friendly online interview platform, to which students and staff had access. During the course of the data collection, this availability changed due to licensing issues, which in turn created difficulties in finding a replacement interview platform that fieldworkers, staff, and students with minimal technical knowledge could access. In light of these challenges, it may have been useful to foreground the provision of mobile data for students or staff who may have been hesitant to participate due to mobile

data constraints. In future, fieldworkers and potential participants would also require more training and information on various digital platforms used for online interviews.

### **Ethical clearance**

Ethical clearance was sought from the institution, which due to COVID-19, delayed the process of data collection. The institutional ethical review process posed significant delays and participation was uneven across the two faculties. Despite permission being granted to conduct research at both sites, one faculty did not follow up on requests or provide requested documents, which limited any comparative analysis of policy documents and initiatives at a faculty level.

### **Analysis: Systemic and individual conversion factors that enable access and success**

The next section of the case study is the analysis of the qualitative interview data collected from staff and students, using the capability-informed concept of conversion factors. The analysis is split into two sections: the first takes a closer look at positive or enabling conversion factors, that is, individual or institutional factors that enabled students to convert available resources and opportunities into achievements or functionings. The second section of the data analysis looks at the negative or constraining factors, that corrode students' freedom to convert available opportunities and resources into valued achievements.

As mapped out in the introduction, university students negotiate a network of historical, political, community, familial and institutional structures that complicate their journey into and through higher education. The freedom to participate at university is more complex for students with precarious access to financial resources, even when students have access to bursaries. Finances remain a major obstacle to success in higher education (Kezar et al., 2014) and achieving equal participation is more complicated for students with limited financial resources (Ashwin & Case, 2018). Bursaries do not always cover all the costs associated with university life, and poor students with unemployed relatives at home may share resources to help cover basic living costs. At the same time, students may compensate for limited financial resources by using prosocial strategies such as sharing resources, knowledge and skills (Landers, 2018). In response to these challenges, university support structures play a strategic role in supporting vulnerable students' efforts to succeed.

The first section of the analysis below illustrates examples of individual and institutional arrangements that enable access and success for historically marginalised university students.



### **Capabilities for cultivating belonging to the university community**

Student participants staying at university residences described residence life as an enabling part of their university experience. This could mean that there has been some transformation of residence culture, which has historically been particularly alienating for black students (CHE, 2010). In this group of students, being part of residence life has enabled meaningful social networks and relationships, which is an important aspect of access and success in higher education, particularly for students with limited financial resources: *For the past two years I've been living at the university residences and it is quite fine. You interact a lot. You get to do activities together, build relationships and so forth* (06\_SS01\_0828).

*It is a very connected community because you meet people that you are going to form bonds for the rest of your life with. People who are going to help you through certain situations. So, I think it is a very, very, very connected university. They make sure that you get the assistance that you need* (06\_HS02\_0813).

Across the student narratives, social connection emerged as a capability that enhances experiences of belonging to the university, and which students had reason to value. Being integrated as part of an academic community is a social resource that helped students mitigate stressors and challenges. Valued social support networks identified in the interviews were both formal (for example, an appointment with a faculty advisor or residence mentor) and informal (for example, a friendship with a more experienced peer).

While the students shared positive experiences of residence life, spaces in residence are limited, and not all students might have reason to enjoy the social commitments and involvement required as part of residence life. This means that some students' academic success may be enhanced by the support structures built into residence life (for example, study space, 'house parents', and peer mentors), while others may experience residence accommodation arrangements as distracting, culturally misaligned and therefore less enabling.

Some students described that the visibility of peers working long hours at communal residence study spaces motivated students to deepen their commitment to their studies and inspired their desire for academic success. The student below identifies the importance of peers and belonging in creating aspirations: *Everyone is determined... but the people that I surround myself with are determined to achieve their goals. I think it is a safe space for in terms of*

*academics...I think it is easy for me to fit in... Because the university as a whole we have a common ground so I can work from that (06\_SS05).*

Some students described the residence environment as a welcoming and supportive second home, due to an ethic of care embodied by peers and residence staff (Bozalek et al., 2014). The capability set embodied in the interviews below includes a sense of belonging, access to caring adult mentors, a safe space to share challenges and problems and social connections with diverse students: *[Residence life] really helped me with my studies... it was just my second home, even the [residence] parents that we had, they were like my own parents. I can still tell them whatever, because I believe that my parents left me in their care and that I shouldn't suffer...it was a huge family tree, because we had international students, we were learning things from them as well, so for me it was easier, because I am an outgoing person and it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be (06\_HS04).*

*[The university] is welcoming... it is actually like a nice experience because the first time I came here like to this community yoh, I felt like I was blessed to be here obviously compared to where I was from... I can spend the rest of my...degrees and further education here... [on campus]. We were like a family; so, it is easy...for a teacher [lecturer] to actually know you as a person (06\_SS07).*

*I'm happy with the arrangements...it is like your home here. They actually do care for you. When you need assistance, you can actually go to somebody in the res, one of the administrators and they will help you when you need help (06\_HS02).*

The positive experience of residence life for first-generation students reflects the university's commitment to transforming alienating and racially segregated residence cultures associated with historically White universities. However, other students who were less keen on residence life, valued a quieter living environment and described themselves as introverts who preferred 'doing their own thing' to the frenetic pace of social activities at residences.

The campus environment beyond residence life also enabled students to cultivate belonging by participating in university societies, and spending time in communal spaces on campus. In the quote below, the freedom to pursue cultural-specific social connections is a valued part of cultivating belonging. The freedom to speak one's home language is a crucial part of developing academic identity, without losing a connection to home and community: *The main*

*reason behind [the university society] is to help other Tshonga people to adjust to university life as soon as they get here. ...spending time with my people who are speaking the same language makes me to realise that, hey, I must not forget where I'm coming from (06\_SS08)*

Spatial arrangements in the quote below point to the arrangements on main campus, where well-maintained and welcoming public spaces facilitate social connection, and foster a sense of belonging: *I can sit down anywhere on campus, and I can see people walking past and I can get up, greet, and I can make ten friends in a day, you know (06\_HS01).*

Students described the campus-wide Wi-Fi access as an advantage, compared to having to wait in line to use the computer laboratory. Students also described how quiet spaces on campus facilitated their learning, supported by access to spaces that are clean and beautiful: *The campus is...large and ...quite beautiful. And also, the cleanness of campus - ja that's great. It's clean... it is accommodative...because if you like your quiet space, there's a place for that (06\_SS07).*

While students who are able to access campus benefit from these spatial arrangements, it is important to note that research into vulnerable students in higher education identifies loneliness, alienation and social isolation as problems for students who cannot afford the transport needed to attend lectures regularly, or who can only afford accommodation far from campus.

For first-generation students in particular, social integration mitigated the anxiety associated with navigating university life with limited financial resources. The experience of belonging to the university community is a valued capability for students whose struggle for recognition by university staff and peers is located at the intersection of race and class identities (Crozier et al., 2019): *It was a bit intimidating coming where I come from going to the university... and you know you're going to find people with different backgrounds there and they may not understand the position that you come from...Am I going to find people that are going to like me there? Am I going to be alone for the rest of my academic career? So yes, it was daunting to think of (06\_HS02).*

For first-generation students, it was important to make friends who shared the challenges associated with limited financial resources, which creates a sense of shared purpose. Instead of trying to adopt the spending habits of more privileged peers, poorer students created a community focused on their shared priorities. However, some students found the university culture alienating, especially in comparison to their experience at a different institution which

was more reflective of their community environment: *Because I have been to [university X]... it really didn't feel like I am in a different place than I am when I am at home, but when I came to [this university]... it was very different....I think the climate and the culture...because where I come from, we get excited over football games, and here, I have never heard anyone talking about football, or they don't know anyone who plays football. It's all about rugby. It's a very unrelatable. When I came here, I could not relate to anything.* (06\_HS03)

The quote above reflects an institutional culture that is inherently alienating for black students in particular, who are separated from their cultural identity and familiarity. The silence of culturally significant symbols in the quote above, may refer to other silenced knowledge, symbols or ways of being that contribute to students who experience a lack of belonging, or who feel pressurised to assimilate with dominant cultures. An in-depth understanding of how cultural identity is marginalised or silenced could be included in institutional transformation initiatives.

### **Capabilities for student support**

Students described access to psychosocial support as a valuable aspect of their transition to university life. The students' preferred method of support was to build a therapeutic relationship with a Faculty Student Advisor (FSA) or a campus-based psychologist over time. To ensure the continuity of care and to maintain the relationship, some students described how they would travel to a different campus for consultations with a psychologist they are familiar with instead of seeking out a new psychologist on main campus: *I want to underline and bold that: student support. The beginning of first year at [satellite] campus I met [campus psychologist]. She's the psychologist at [satellite] campus so that's where I actually went for help. and she helped me with... emotional support, academics, career guidance, time management... that played a big role in my education life. Being able to manage time - that was the biggest thing that opened doors and my eyes* (06\_SS04).

Access to psychosocial support played an important role in the emotional and academic transition to university life. The role of FSAs and psychologists was crucial given the time constraints faced by lecturers, who struggle to balance their academic workloads with students' emotional needs: *[The] exhausting part of teaching is really what I call the 'pastoral care of students', caring for their psychic well-being and their emotional well-being. Students come...talk to me about the challenges that they face. Increasingly, it's a lot of psychological issues, whether it's clinical depression, bipolar or whether its other challenges; abuse - physical, sexual, etc., and this of course impacts on their ability to perform* (06\_AC04).

While students value the opportunity of being able to share challenges with adult mentors such as lecturers, heavy workloads mean that overcommitted staff members juggle academic demands while wanting to create a caring environment for their students. Initiatives that prioritise student well-being and psychosocial support could respond to students' need for psychological support and guidance.

### **Capabilities cultivated by extended degree programmes**

Extended degree programmes offered on the university's satellite campus provided first-generation students with a structured, supportive environment that enabled them to adjust to university. Student experiences of the extended degree programme were predominantly positive, and most students reported that the bridging approach contributed to their academic success: *Then because it was an extended programme... we are giving you that bridging gap of saying you didn't qualify for a first option you, now need to ensure... you are ready for varsity. In the extended programme yes, things are hard but ... they try to ensure that everything is sorted. You are ready for varsity (06\_SS06).*

*Like at [satellite campus], they treated us as special kids. They used to attend to like all of our needs. So, whenever I needed help, I got the help that I needed. Like we were not too many in our class, so they were able to attend to all of us. Ja, I think [satellite campus] was a very good start for me. I adjusted to the system (06\_SS02).*

*At first, I thought they abandoned us by taking us to [satellite] campus... you always saw the main campus in the prospectus... But as time when by I realised that I was mistaken because at [satellite campus] the support that was there is much greater than the one that is in the main campus because that side there's faculty student advisors that always advise people. When they see your grades, they always come to your aid and support you (06\_SS08).*

Students describe how they had reason to value being part of extended degree programmes, where 'special treatment' and additional time and attention were framed as valued opportunities. This challenges the notion of an extended degree environment as being potentially negative due to lowered expectations or a deficit framing of students and their academic potential. Students in this study framed their position in an extended degree as an opportunity to reach valued aspirations, instead of viewing themselves as less capable.

### **Student experiences of academic staff**

Students at both faculties perceived staff members as approachable, friendly and willing to assist with academic and administrative queries. In the interviews, students spent more time

describing enabling and positive encounters with academic staff members than recounting negative experiences. Students did not report experiences of staff members who expressed negative attitudes related to student failure or incompetence, something which has been found to be a significant constraint to participation in research on vulnerable students (Calitz 2019; CHE 2010). However, students identified shyness, fear and anxiety as significant obstacles to approaching lecturers and participating in lectures. Vulnerable students' fear of participation and embarrassment is a persistent concern in creating access to powerful knowledge in higher education (Respondek et al., 2017). Being too scared or shy to participate is a complex issue that could be partly understood as an expected part of the transition to a new academic environment. At the same time, students with access to fewer resources and opportunities for academic preparation have to compete on an unequal playing field, which could exacerbate their reluctance to participate and their invisibility in large and overwhelming classrooms. One possible institutional response to address student fear, anxiety and shyness could be to facilitate open dialogues about these issues in existing undergraduate academic support and mentoring programmes, in order to challenge shame and silence around these issues.

### **Student experiences of technology**

Access to capabilities for technological access is a pivotal part of academic success. First-generation students with fewer resources at school were less likely to have been prepared to work with computers, for example, and valued the opportunity to convert technology training into valued ways of being computer literate. The university provides a compulsory module for incoming first-years that teaches basic computer skills, which students identified as instrumental in their ability to use technology: *There is a module that we do that actually helps us ... like it familiarises ourselves with computers and everything so I was able to get to learn (06\_SS02). They teach you about computers. So, you become computer literate through the module. So that helped me a lot (06\_SS05). I can only do very basic things on a computer and coming to university I think the {IT} module really has helped me a lot and university has honestly made me realise how important computer literacy is (06\_HS01).*

Some lecturers used technology such as clickers, which enabled participation for students who lacked the confidence to speak up in class: *But when you're pressing a clicker...nobody can see that you are the one that got it wrong. And I think that has opened up a window ... when it comes to education (06\_SS03). Ja, I felt like I learning a bit of like more online because now a lot of students actually ask a lot of questions online so it is easy for you to get questions that you also want to ask or it is easier to ask questions and interact more online (06\_SS07).*

However, the use of technology in the classroom posed challenges for students with limited resources: *I can only do very basic things on a computer and coming to university I think the [technology] module really has helped me a lot and university has honestly made me realise how important computer literacy is* (06\_HS01). *And we didn't even have the books. The library at my school wouldn't even have computer lessons. I saw a computer first time when I got to the university* (06\_SS04).

Incorporating technology in the classroom might be another way to enable greater participation for students who are shy or hesitant to interact in the classroom, or to approach lecturers face to face.

### **Analysis: Systemic and individual conversion factors that constrain access and success**

Despite widening access to higher education and an increasingly diverse student body, social inequalities are often mirrored in student experiences of university. High levels of inequality and poverty threaten vulnerable students' access to higher education (Atherton 2016; Berg, 2016; Ilie & Rose 2016; Jerrim & Vignoles 2015; Mngomezulu et al., 2017). In South Africa, higher education policy prioritises access and success for vulnerable students, but universities face complex and persistent challenges in enabling access, participation and outcomes for students from marginalised backgrounds. This section of the analysis looks at the negative, or constraining factors that corrode students' freedom to convert available opportunities and resources into valued achievements.

#### **Unequal access to higher education**

Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to face many disadvantages when trying to participate in higher education, as financial pressures intersect with institutional cultures, which may alienate non-traditional students (Cloete 2016; Sabi et al., 2018; Schendel & McCowan 2016; Sikhwari et al., 2019; Walker 2018).

For students with constrained resources, access is not a once-off achievement, that is, entry into the university, but consists of several precarious points of access that must be secured throughout the degree programme (Hoppener & Calitz, 2018). These include access to funds to apply to the university, sufficient resources to ensure tuition payments, access to textbooks, transport, accommodation, and other basic living costs. The uncertainty around maintaining access was a source of anxiety for vulnerable students: *My mom had to borrow money from my uncle and stuff like that and after a while they opened for NSFAS students to register. It was really stressful. ... (in) 2017...NSFAS dropped me. I had to submit an appeal* (06\_SS03).

*In my second year of physics, I ended up failing because I was very demotivated, and finances were not there. I almost got financially excluded at a point and I was still waiting on NSFAS... (06\_SS04).*

*So it is actually like a one-bedroom flat and we're currently at 11 [people living at home]...when I get to struggle financially at res maybe when my food allowance finishes I can't depend on my parents (06\_SS07).*

First-generation students' access to university was influenced by their perceptions about gaining access, and a lack of information about how to apply to university: *I didn't apply at the university...because...in high school there was this thing "oh it is hard to get into university..." (06\_SS03).*

*I didn't have much information about like degrees, applications and stuff like that. My parents also have no knowledge about these things (06\_SS07).*

*So, where I'm from we didn't have a whole lot of resources or role models and so on. So, at a point university was not even part of my plans...My peers were dating taxi drivers and that was the in-thing around that time (06\_SS04).*

*I wasn't absolutely sure what career field I wanted to go into...It was a decision I couldn't really make because I wasn't exposed to a lot of things...I didn't have a role model (06\_HS01).*

A significant constraint to access is limited exposure to insider information about what is required to get into university (Mishra, 2020). Few students mention the role of formal career guidance at school, so it is unclear what role, if any, career guidance played in their trajectory to university. Students value personal role models such as family or friends who act as mentors. The absence of such role models, together with limited resources, means that physical access to higher education remains a significant structural constraint for many school graduates.

### **The impact of COVID-19 on student access and success**

While the impact of COVID-19 was not included as a specific research question, students spoke about adverse conditions and challenges surrounding lockdown and the impact on teaching and learning. For students from marginalised backgrounds, going back home while having to adapt to an online learning model exacerbated their vulnerability. While many reported that residence and private accommodation provided stability and a routine that is conducive to learning, having to go back home during the university year created significant disruption: *It was a situation of data issues. I can say like March (2020) we were sent back home and two weeks*



*later, three weeks later we were sent emails, no learning must continue and all those things. But seeing that hey I don't think that my home environment was very much conducive. Because one I have network issues. Two, I have data issues. So, you basically you cannot attend live lectures during the day and we have to like...study during the night so you know at night the network is free and all those things...That was one issue that's why I applied to come back to res so that I don't have that for this second semester (06\_SS06). ... due to the coronavirus epidemic, it's also been stressful because having to learn new modules on your own without have a tutor or a lecturer is a very, very stressful situation (06\_HS02).*

While the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on all university students who make the sudden shift to an online learning environment, poor students are more reliant on access to resources at university such as Wi-Fi, mobile data, meals, library access and study space, compared with peers who are able to compensate for the lack of these resources using family and community resources. The negative and disabling community environments that some students describe below then become part of an online learning reality. Further research would be needed to gauge the impact on access and success for students who had to adjust to an online learning environment in conditions that were unfavourable and severely resource-constrained.

### **Constraining community environment**

Family and social support structures outside the university offer important coping mechanisms for students (Roksa & Kinsley 2019; Roksa et al., 2020; Sullivan et al., 2018). While research into vulnerable students has found that community resources can offer support (van Breda, 2017), some students in this study described their home communities as negative, toxic or disabling, while university life provided an escape from adverse conditions and an opportunity to cultivate aspirations and an independent identity: *So now as a young one you don't get inspiration; you don't get inspired [by the community]...So now the inspiration is being dragged down, more like we're just surviving (06\_SS01).*

*[M]ost people that lived in my community were unemployed. They were alcoholics. They were drug users...there were no role models, people you can look up to and say hey that person is doing something with their life. So, it is not a positive community experience (06\_HS02).*

*The sad thing is that the values and beliefs that I've learnt from high school are not positive ones... I don't think I've learnt much from my community (SS03\_0826).*

*So, it is just respect for the people that you're living with is lacking and obviously the high violence (06\_SS07).*

*[My community] is very much depressing (06\_SS06).*

These adverse conditions at home reflect socio-economic inequalities within communities, which are grappling with the long-term impact of historical injustices, marginalisation and exclusion. It would be interesting to understand how first-generation students balance their emerging academic identities with the perceptions of a dysfunctional community environment. Some narratives hint at an identity struggle as students seek to adjust to the requirements of an independent, successful individual, while remaining loyal to a community identity that has been historically projected as deficit or inferior. For instance, to prove their academic worth and competence, students are expected to navigate academic knowledge using English as the medium of instruction, which creates a barrier between the individual and their community.

### **First-generation status**

First-generation students from low-income families experience unique challenges in making the transition to university (McGhie 2015). Students' experiences and expectations are often disconnected, which impacts on their success (Pather & Dorasamy 2018). First-generation status intensifies the pressure to succeed as part of family expectations: *None of the older generation have gone to study further, which actually in a way, puts me under a lot of pressure, because I sometimes feel like I have to meet a certain amount of requirements in order to satisfy my family and I don't want to be in a situation where if I don't achieve this, then it means that everything that they have done for me, everything that they have done to support me through school, and now through university, I don't want that to be in vain (06\_HS01).*

An academic speaks of the experience as a student making the transition to main campus from one of the university's satellite campuses, and the impact on student identity: *You will see [main campus] is a whole new environment and the physical space itself, the buildings, yes, I think it's an imposing space, you know, and suddenly one becomes aware of their own position, both in terms of academically and socially and in any other way and from you can think of how one then stands...I mean now most of lecturers and conversations have been in English [compared to] where you can switch to talking with your friends in the vernacular like you would when you are at [satellite] campus. Here the space has its own logic; its own demands in terms of how one is supposed to behave and how one is supposed to sound like. So that whole experience was daunting, to be honest it was a bit unsettling (06\_AS03).*

Many first-generation students have to navigate a marginalised status at the intersection of race and class, which leaves students vulnerable to social isolation. First-generation students may

be less likely to have access to support structures at home, as an academic explains: *I think because there's an increase in first-generation students at university... I was a first-generation university student myself... If no one in your family has been at university it means no one really understands how hard you do have to work and it's important to get I think somebody who when you do well on an assignment you can go home and say, I did really well in this assignment, and somebody says that's fantastic and really cares* (06\_AC01).

At the same time, the transition from achievement in a school environment to being one of thousands of university students challenges individual identity: *... students who come from deprived communities are obviously exceptionally bright, because they wouldn't have overcome the difficulties they've overcome if they weren't. But they come from communities where their brightness is recognised... This becomes their identity... and they arrive at university and it takes them a long time to work out that they're now in a community where it's just such a leap in expectation and to have to change your whole view of yourself to having been the star of your school, you suddenly have got to accept that there's areas you need help with it. I mean it's taking the core of your identity* (06\_AC01).

*You know they're the achievers in the school that they come out and then they come into this big institution that they're not prepared for, and they find themselves falling to the bottom* (06\_AS01).

### **Student preparedness for university**

Student preparedness for higher education is complicated by questions about institutional arrangements that could enable student success (Schademan & Thompson, 2016) as part of the broader question of how first-generation students manage their transition to higher education. The question of academic preparedness loomed large in staff experiences of undergraduate teaching and learning, and also emerged in student interviews. Student experiences of academic preparedness focused on the anxiety about being underprepared academically, compared with their peers: *My first laboratory work was very difficult because I didn't know most of the apparatus that I have to use. So ja I didn't know like the names, so it was very hard to locate my things ja like that because there were no labs back at high school* (06\_SS02). *I remember first year was my hardest year because they wanted the submissions typed, and assignments that are done online, I didn't even know how to switch on a computer, and I was still struggling with maths* (06\_SS03).

Staff were frustrated by the systemic reasons that students are underprepared for the demands of university education, the foremost being South African's historically segregated schooling system that continues to offer poor quality education to many black learners. Most staff experiences of student preparedness reflected a nuanced understanding of the systemic conditions that create skills gaps for vulnerable undergraduates. This is an important shift away from a deficit approach to student underperformance in higher education. Instead of individualising the students' struggle to adjust to the academic demands of university life, lecturers reflected in depth on the social injustices that continue to disproportionately marginalise black students: *Our education system, the basic and higher education, disadvantages black students who were disadvantaged in the past under apartheid, and they are continued to be disadvantaged now...So it's made me very angry that this government has failed black people in the same way in terms of disadvantage. Not so much the prejudice, but the disadvantage and the oppression that comes with poverty and with disadvantage, how this government has failed black people in the same way as the previous government (06\_AC04).*

*But for the majority of the students the transition isn't easy because of the level of unpreparedness for which it isn't also their fault, the poor students as well. It is the hand that's been dealt and that's it (06\_AS03).*

Besides systemic injustices, staff identified alternative reasons for students' changing literacy skills, such as the use of social media, which is a constraint relevant to a broader spectrum of university students: *I think the level of basic writing ability has changed. And I think this is actually across the board and the students who are under-prepared for using English who perhaps have not had much exposure to first-language English speakers ... I think kids generally in schools are writing less and reading less and WhatsApping more and this has had an impact on concentration spans across the board and the ability to formulate an argument (06\_AC01).*

### **Massification and student success**

Another persistent challenge to student success is the increasing pressure on staff to balance commitments to undergraduate teaching with research outputs and administrative tasks. Since most academic staff participants in the sample were from the Arts faculty, the interview data reflect their responses, although it is likely that the realities of massification also impact on staff and students from the Science faculty. With rapidly expanding student numbers, lecturers struggle to provide individualised feedback and engagement, given the reality of higher

education massification: *[T]he government has been pushing massification, increasing student numbers and universities have been complying with this, but university resources haven't been increasing to keep pace with the growing numbers of students (06\_AC04).*

*I know that one of the reasons why we are being pushed in this hybrid sort of direction, is...to cope with increasing numbers of students and firstly, as a country, we do not have the resources (06\_AC04).*

*[N]umbers in the...department has quadrupled since 2012 of students and I think... we may be a particularly bad case but generally student numbers have exploded at the university and there has not been matching investment in resources (06\_AC01).*

There is also criticism of the university's focus on performance targets, which staff believe could be counterproductive to meaningful student engagement: *I think it's very easy for managers and academic staff to get very quickly bogged down in the number-crunching, and miss, or marginalise what I believe to be the core function of the university which is actual teaching and sort of engagement (06\_AC04).*

### **Staff experiences of higher education massification and resources**

In contrast to students' perception of available university resources, academic and support staff reported that rapidly increasing student numbers meant trying to address a much larger demand, without an equal increase in resources. For example, one academic believed that available support such as academic writing services were deliberately 'under-advertised' because of limited capacity to meet student demand. Staff at both faculties agreed that resource provision and massification are systemic issues that need to be urgently addressed: *You know, a lot of things are outside of the power of the institutions themselves. As a country, we need many more universities to deal with the increasing number of students, but we certainly have to look at the issue of massification, or if we continue to massify, we need to look at increasing human resources, the capacities of universities, to deal with these resources (06\_AC04).*

*...the department is not actually prepared to take on that many students and provide the support that the students need (06\_AC01).*

*And I always refer [students] to the university counselling and well-being services, and when they come and give me feedback on whether they followed through, they would tell me things like, ja they went, but there's a 3-week or a 5-week waiting period to see the counsellor or the psychologist or whatever. So, I think the university certainly is trying, but it is under-resourced (06\_AC04).*

*I mean look in my department...about 3 000 students and there's 12 [lecturers]... you cannot give the focused, individual, emotional and academic support that under-prepared students in particular need when you've got that kind of student/staff ratio (06\_AC01).*

Staff members expressed frustration and a sense of loss or failure when they identified student need for individualised assistance but were unable to provide more than limited lecture and consultation hours. In some cases, lecturers were teaching undergraduate classes of one thousand or more students, which meant that marking has to be partially outsourced, in that way limiting the lecturers' freedom to provide feedback and academic engagement to their students. Despite these systemic constraints, lecturers carved out moments of engagement with students who took the initiative to approach them.

### **Confidence, mental health and academic engagement**

Some students pointed out that their shyness inhibited their participation in class and that they preferred indirect methods of communicating, not because lecturers were unapproachable, but because they lacked confidence. Students were afraid to embarrass themselves when speaking up in a large classroom, particularly if they felt that their accent and communication skills were inadequate: *I'm a shy person. I have to face people at some point. I know that. But hey... it is kind of hard trying to adjust to that (06\_SS05).*

*I'm shy. I'd rather write an email to my lecturer or to my tutor than to raise my hand up and ask a question (06\_SS05).*

*I didn't know who to meet and so forth but then once I started applying this thing of not being shy and going for what I find interesting ... I could see around my peers and other students that they were too reluctant in trying some things (06\_SS01).*

One academic confirms this view on student shyness and academic participation: *Our first years tend to be very shy creatures. They don't like to put up anything where someone might see them looking stupid. They're much happier to email privately and so then very often we actually transfer good questions onto the bulletin boards ourselves and say without a name somebody has asked this very good question - here's the answer (06\_AC01).*

Students and staff described mental health problems as a significant constraint to their success, especially when combined with financial stress: *Within the first six months of university, I was diagnosed with depression. It got to a point where I used to sit under a tree and do nothing the whole day (06\_SS03).* *The majority of students come in ... especially now with lockdown it is emphasised well, they're coming in with really more social problems - negotiating friendships,*

*negotiating romantic relationships, negotiating their time management. I think a lot of them get quite overwhelmed with the academic expectations (06\_AS01).*

### **Resources and student success**

Despite the provision of bursaries, persistent financial challenges remain for poor students. Since the costs associated with university success exceed tuition, textbooks, accommodation and food, many students struggle to cover additional costs associated with participation. Students' primary concern was access to financial resources that would sustain their degree programme until graduation, especially since disadvantaged students are more likely to require additional years to complete their degrees.

### **Student experiences of resource provision at the university**

Most students described the university as a resource-rich environment that provided sufficient opportunities for academic success, psychosocial support, computer laboratories, laptops and tutorials. Students were not always able to make optimal use of these available resources, however, due to time constraints, being overwhelmed by academic pressures and competing social or personal interests. So, while students believed that the university provided many useful opportunities - such as career fairs, skills development, and academic advising - not all students converted these opportunities into capabilities.

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds described serious obstacles to securing basic resources such as food and accommodation. This created stress and anxiety around maintaining access to higher education throughout the course of their degree, and not losing funding due to academic exclusion (Hoppener & Calitz, 2018): *So later in the year around this time September/October now your meal account starts running out and now you need to chase food and all of that. Ja, that was a challenge. (06\_SS01). So when stuff like when I get to struggle financially at res maybe when my food allowance finishes I can't depend on my parents because they have a lot of things to do (06\_SS07).*

While all students who were interviewed received NSFAS funding, their experiences indicate a significant socio-economic divide. While some students struggled to meet basic needs such as food, electricity and transport, other students with greater access to financial support resources at home aspired to university-related expenses such as stationery, entertainment, clothing and social activities. This was to mitigate their first-generation status and the associated anxiety about fitting in with peers on campus: *Now having to transfer to [main campus] ja I would feel out of place, number one the factor of finance. You know not having*

*the nice clothes that affect us as teenagers or youth at that time. So not having nice clothes and not being able to speak fluently in English that would make me feel left out a bit. (06\_SS04)*

Overall, poor students struggled to navigate their limited financial capacity relative to peers with more resources. This relates to academic and social identity formation, particularly for undergraduate students for whom university is a space to cultivate an independent identity. Because the resources required for identity development are distributed unevenly for poor students, this complicates their successful transition to university life. However, the interviews also show how students found creative alternatives to explore their emerging identities, as suggested in student interviews below: *Very often during class, I would tap the person sitting next to me, other than that, I try to take notes as much as I can, it helps to refer back and also formulate questions to ask the lecturer. If you are sitting with a blank piece of paper in front of you, you are not going to get anything out of the lecture... (06\_HS01).*

*I even got a module called financial management so that's where I learnt. Because I also saved some of the money during the process. So I would like save between 500 sorry between 200 and 500 a month depending on my expenses. [Interviewer: Is that how you were able to buy yourself a laptop?] Yes most definitely (06\_SS04).*

### **Institutional transformation: major issues**

In the past decade, the university has transitioned through several moments of transformation, particularly in response to student protests which ignited debates about questions of historical injustice and inequality (Fataar, 2018; Moloji et al., 2009). Since the #FeesMustFall protests, the university has intensified the visibility of decolonising initiatives and has made notable progress in cultivating a critical institutional discourse. In essence, decolonisation of higher education challenges the predominance of knowledge and theory from the Global North, and the marginalisation of knowledge from the Global South (Higgs 2016; Le Grange 2016). Indigenous knowledge systems are re-evaluated as part of university curricula, while knowledge produced in local contexts enhances responsiveness to local problems. The decolonising discourse addresses institutional hierarchies and their role in separating communities from powerful knowledge and resources. A number of university departments and faculties have undertaken specific projects to operationalise transformation policy transforming institutional practices and cultures and improving the representation of black scholars and students at the institution. This includes initiatives to Africanise the curriculum



(Duncan, 2016), a curriculum renewal project (Irons et al., 2017) and decolonisation of an Honours curriculum (Macqueen, 2019).

### **Staff perspectives on decolonising at the university**

Lecturers' views of the university's decolonisation interventions show marked tensions and disagreements. Some staff agreed that curricula, institutional spaces and cultures should be decolonised. Overall, staff conceptualise the decolonising project as a continuation of the university's ongoing transformation. Staff responses suggest that the decolonising project demands focus, energy and commitment. Most lecturers acknowledged decolonising as an institutional project that they support. However, some lecturers suggested there is an uneven commitment to the project, while others felt that decolonising is an empty policy exercise: ... *because I served as Chair on the faculty's transformation committee ... at the institutional level, the transformational response is less inward and more outward ... My sense and my observation is that the institution's transformation emphasis is on responding to transformation indicators and agendas set by the State, rather than actual on the ground institutional transformation ... so the government said it has a particular transformation agenda, it has a particular kind of equity quota ... so the university's transformation priority is geared towards meeting that, rather than being responsive to the lived experience of non-transformation, that many staff members experienced* (06\_AC04).

*When we had a faculty review last year, one of the questions they asked was "are you decolonising?" Now obviously, no one wants to report that we have done nothing on decolonisation, so everyone is making it clear for that purpose...as you are preparing for your promotion interview, you think about potential questions, and you realise that is one of the questions. These are all very subtle, it's explicitly saying in your study guide "we focus on decolonisation"* (06\_AC06).

Other lecturers who are concerned about the needs of 'underprepared' students question the relevance of decolonising and believe that resources and time should rather be invested developing students' academic competencies, which fuels scepticism about the underlying aim of the decolonising project: *I was actually called in and told to decolonise [my module]... My answer was simply: how do you decolonise [a scientific subject]? ... What is scary for me is that a lot [of black students] they're sending me these hidden messages that "Dear Dr [X] let's not have too much decolonisation because we are tired of the whole decolonisation discussion". So, my question is again: for whom are we doing it? I truly don't know what the aim is with the whole decolonisation exercise but some of my colleagues, when we were sitting*

*on the transformation committee, what is scary for me is I hear their voices. Not the students' voices. So, it is very important for me what you're doing going back to the students and hearing what are their needs... (06\_AC02)*

Staff members were decolonising their curricula using various strategies: *I guess first and foremost the decolonisation project has to start with the realisation and the acceptance that the whole university concept is a colonial concept... I mean you open a textbook and...try and find anything on Africa and you'll be lucky if you see a picture...from Namibia. That's the extent that the vast majority of textbooks recognise this entire continent...by and large you tell a student go and buy this textbook. It costs him R1 100 and there's nothing in there about Africa. It is all American, Northern hemisphere stuff which is totally irrelevant (06\_AC03).*

*I think a more refined component of the decolonisation debate is about drawing attention to the ways in which knowledge is not neutral, and a challenge to lecturers to be critical about what they are teaching and why they are teaching it ... it is a challenge to that chain of teaching, because you as the lecturer, you have to rethink what you are teaching and look for new material and new voices (06\_AC05).*

*A lot of what I teach and what I teach and the way I teach it, makes a lot of white students very uncomfortable... because it undermines their idea of western civilisation. ...and on the flip side, when there's opportunity to address the sort of nativist direction that the decolonisation debate frequently takes, and I say something like "oh, you know we have to critique and look carefully at this romanticised idea of a pre-colonial Africa." Pre-colonial Africa wasn't all that great either, and then that makes the black students squirm a little bit. So, it works both ways (06\_AC04).*

### **Student perspectives on decolonising at the university**

While staff appear to have more sophisticated conceptual and practical understanding of decolonising, students' understanding, experiences of decolonising were marked by uncertainty about the definition. The interviews show that student and staff engagement in the classroom and informal campus spaces is an important part of mediating student anxiety around transformation, and students' ability to make sense of their role in institutional transformation. Most students were not familiar with the concept of decolonisation and did not engage with the concept as part of the interview. Some students shared their experiences or perceptions of changes around decolonising, which was often associated with the language policy and racial inclusion: *I think ever since I've gotten here, I think the university has quite transformed*

*because now it is more inclusive...My experience has been okay no problem. I had been able to interact. I didn't feel like we still need to do more work here in this certain space. (06\_SS01)*

*There is nothing much that I would want to change about the university (06\_HS02).*

*There is no one exacting prejudice over me or stopping me from learning, from affecting the world, from making changes (06\_HS01).*

*I have never experienced where somebody was being racist, so it is a good change. I can see that there is change because I have never experienced anything unpleasant (06\_HS05).*

### **Institutional culture and staff experiences of transformation**

A university's institutional culture is pivotal to systemic transformation and student success. Historically White, Afrikaans-medium universities face particular challenges in transforming their institutional culture to be more inclusive of a diverse student body. Staff members with a longer institutional memory reflected on how the institution has transformed during the past decade: *I really think that the spaces become warm, but overall, where they have acceded to some of the demands from the student population and from the black lecturers there have been some improvement. The institution is definitely changing and trying to widen access and to decolonise its own image. I mean obviously decolonisation in terms of teaching that would generally depend on individual's own internal calibrations. But the institution itself has tried to go a long way in democratising access in some of the spaces there (06\_AS03).*

*I mean when I got here, we were lily white student body; predominantly Afrikaans-speaking, occasional black or Indian student who would really stand out in a class. Now in certainly in first and second year we're majority African. We are still not a majority mother-tongue department by any means. But we now have a range of languages (06\_AC01).*

*I worked in [X] and I used to visit the campus from time to time and then obviously then it was pure white Afrikaans kids and when I came here five years ago it didn't strike me at that time of being white anymore. It was like a normal cross-section and it is not as high a number of black students as there are in many other universities but that's changing rapidly...I've been really encouraged also from what I've seen when I've been on campus normal times the number of mixed-race relationships I'm seeing (06\_AC03).*

*So, for example, if I think back to 2012, and to 2020, I would say I feel there's a greater sense of inclusion and acknowledgement of new, younger, black staff. I would say that there is some recognition on the part of managers, management, university executives, some HODs at the Dean level, etc., there is recognition and a sincere will to effect transformation (06\_AC04).*

*Generally, I found the university a positive space and I have enjoyed the openness with which discussions around transformation are taking place. (06\_AC04)*

Staff members experienced significant institutional change driven by university management, which in some cases encouraged their own commitment to transformation of their modules. Yet while important demographic shifts have occurred, institutional cultures require ongoing transformation.

### **Racism as a systemic constraint: student and staff experiences at UP**

Despite reports of positive institutional change, students and staff acknowledged that persistent forms of racialised social engagement and divisions existed on campus. Racial discrimination is often part of an institutional culture that marginalises individuals on the basis of racial identity. This is particularly relevant at historically white universities that have a history of race-based exclusion. Race-based discrimination can affect student success by decreasing their sense of belonging to the university (Kessi & Cornell, 2015; Morales 2020). Racialised discrimination is complicated for rural students whose identities create an intersectional vulnerability related to stereotypes about race, class and academic competence (O'Shea et al., 2016). While overt instances of racism were not reported in student interviews as a part of the daily experience at the institution, some students and staff described subtle or downplayed forms of racialised discrimination: *[the university] has this tendency of preferring like white people to blacks. So I'd say they must remove this thing of their whiteness and be welcoming to each and every nation...that is one situation that they need to deal with...they must remove their racist undertones. (06\_SS06)*

Although the student does not elaborate on the experience of racist undertones, research into race as an underlying part of institutional culture suggests that it is difficult to articulate the nature of racism: *There's a polarisation that becomes very apparent in class where people sit, their body language, how they engage with one another. (06\_AC04)*

The student experience of race-based spatial segregation in a lecture hall speaks to persistent and complex remnants of a long history of institutional segregation. How do students at post-apartheid universities make sense of racism amidst claims of a post-racial ethos? Does the

relative silence on race as an issue on campus reflect significant transformation, or does it point to a post-racial situation where race is perceived to be a less prominent part of student and staff experiences?

### **Language policy: enablers and constraints**

The university adopted a new language policy in 2016, which led to the official removal of Afrikaans as a language of instruction in 2019. Because many students associate decolonising with the language policy, this is a significant change to a previously alienating institutional culture: *I was saying that my issue at the university was the Afrikaans. When in class a lecturer would communicate with another student in Afrikaans. That would trouble me a lot because somehow my mind would switch off. Already English is not my mother tongue and I taught myself English. And I was still inferior because I had never been in class with other races so I would feel very uncomfortable which then made me not concentrate fully or hear what the lecturer has to say. Now I have to like switch back after they're done speaking.* (06\_SS04)

*[At residence] they used a lot of Afrikaans so I don't understand Afrikaans.* (06\_SS02)

*I think doing away with Afrikaans and having an English education ... I think that was a good thing.* (06\_AC03)

*There have been attempts to drop Afrikaans ... but also they have gone some way in promoting Sepedi as one aspect of communication wherever information is published they will come in both English and Afrikaans and Sepedi as well.* (06\_AS03)

Although the revised language policy positions English as the language of instruction, the use of Afrikaans in some situations described above was a constraint that excluded students from participation in the academic and social life of the institution. The example above of a lecturer communicating with a student in Afrikaans excludes non-Afrikaans speakers from engagement with knowledge, while also recreating an environment in which being able to understand and speak Afrikaans is a form of privilege that denies students an equal opportunity to engage in higher education.

While students and staff agree that the removal of Afrikaans is a significant part of the university's transformation, other language issues remain unresolved, such as English as a language of instruction that remains a barrier to student success: *You have to adapt to speaking English because most people are from different backgrounds and speak different languages*

*and they both know that the language that I naturally speak so I had to adjust my language.*  
(06\_HS02)

*Well, language is a big issue.... when someone delivers information in a language for which you then have to receive it and you then have to process it into a different language for people to follow so that's part of where they struggle the most ... It adds to their learning challenge.*  
(06\_AS03)

*It was the most incredible experience...suddenly the whole class became alive and she came alive and it just brought home to me how important it is when you're struggling with something to be able to communicate in your own language. I was not getting through to these students. And all it took was this one student to go up there and speak to them in their own language and I could follow because she was doing calculations and she got it perfectly and they were all sort of gasping with a-ha moment that they perceived.* (06\_AS01)

### **Conclusion: Capabilities for access and success in higher education**

The university remains a complex space where students and staff navigate academic and social identities, opportunities and aspirations. The snapshot of staff and student experiences in this report point to capabilities that are important for academic success, particularly for first-generation students with precarious access to financial resources. The capability set discussed below is not an exhaustive list but captures significant freedom that students and staff have reason to value, as they pursue academic and personal aspirations at the university. The capability set considers structural aspects that impact on individual and collective freedoms, specifically institutional transformation and the challenges associated with the massification of higher education.

### **Capability for academic and social belonging**

First-generation students value opportunities to cultivate a meaningful and sustained sense of belonging, which they described as being part of a family, having access to reliable adult mentors, and receiving consistent psychosocial care and support (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021; Potter et al., 2020). Residence mentorship programmes play a pivotal role in cultivating belonging for students, who value the structured support and guidance available at the university residences. While some students draw support from family members, others describe their family and community as toxic and disabling, and instead seek support from caring adults at the university.

Lecturers, on the other hand, are concerned about their capacity to respond to students' psychosocial needs. They describe a situation where there are too many undergraduate students, too few hours in the day, and too many competing academic demands to fulfil a sustainable pastoral role. Another challenge is that only some undergraduates are accommodated at the university's residences, which raises the question: how do commuter students cultivate a sense of belonging (Pokorny et al., 2017)? Support structures might seek to expand the sense of belonging for first-generation students, especially for students who feel isolated and overwhelmed.

### **Capability for academic and social support**

Student and staff interviews give evidence of cooperation and collaboration between undergraduate students, lecturers and support staff in their attempts to enable access and success (Means & Pyne, 2017). Students who report entering the university underprepared for the academic, technological and social demands of university life have access to resources aimed at academic success. The role of support staff such as academic advisors is important, and mental health services are a resource that enable coping with high levels of anxiety, stress and academic pressure (Stones & Glazzard, 2019). First-generation students value academic guidance and staggered support as instrumental to their success. Students registered for extended degree programmes value the scaffolded support provided on the satellite campus, where receiving additional support and 'special treatment' are experienced as an enabling arrangement that enhances academic success.

Students emphasised the importance of faculty-specific advisors and campus psychologists in providing career guidance, motivation and academic skills such as time management (Quyoun et al., 2021). This psychosocial support extends beyond skills training, and also enabled an ethic of care that students valued (Sykes & Gachago, 2018). Psychosocial services provided by psychologists, tutors and mentors communicate the message that the institution offers help despite academic problems or financial constraints.

### **Capability for confidence**

While students value being able to function as confident and articulate members of the university, they describe fear of embarrassment, self-doubt and anxiety as constraints to belonging in the classroom. It is striking how many students shared that they are not confident in their ability to contribute to debates in a classroom, to ask a question or to approach a lecturer

or peers. This is an important area that could become the focus of institutional support and development initiatives that target first-generation students.

While students emphasise the importance of support-seeking behaviour, how could the university ensure that students know how and where to access support, and that such support is culturally appropriate and inclusive (Ungar, 2015)?

Given the importance of belonging and through the use of social networks, support programmes like peer support groups and mentorship could be prioritised for students who may be at risk academically or socially (John et al., 2018). Students who are hesitant to approach lecturers or tutors may need access to interventions that recognise how anxiety, the fear of being perceived as inadequate, or the fear of being embarrassed, play a role in student silence or lack of participation. Here, lecturers, tutors and other support staff could address anxiety and fear of embarrassment in their pedagogical approach and support structures.

### **Capabilities for institutional transformation**

The university's transformation agenda is implementing significant shifts in its culture, curriculum and pedagogy. Individual and institutional efforts to transform and navigate institutions rely on the everyday individual and collective agentic actions of students, lecturers, support staff and administrative staff. The language question remains a contentious issue on campus, with examples of the use of Afrikaans in pedagogical spaces that exclude African students from access to knowledge and a sense of belonging on campus. As part of the university's ongoing transformation agenda, it is important to address the often hidden and implicit ways that language use still has the power to alienate and exclude. Transformation initiatives could consider how the intersectionality of race and class emerge in student and staff experiences, and the impact on student access and success. In response, it might be helpful to create support systems for students who are navigating the transition to an academic and social environment in which racial, class, gender and other identities merge to create invisible forms of exclusion. The university's language policy is explicit about respecting and including indigenous languages. However, the language issue across higher education in South Africa remains complicated by the fact that English is prioritised as the formal language of instruction, while home languages are secondary and only symbolically included as part of the university culture (Mayaba et al., 2018). Given the importance of home language recognition as part of a transformed and inclusive ethos, how could structural and pedagogical arrangements expand the inclusion and recognition of students' home language?



### **Resource security**

First-generation students, lecturers and support staff confirm that physical access is still a constraint for many students: bursaries do not necessarily cover the expenses needed to successfully participate in the academic and social life of the university (Potter et al., 2020). Students without sufficient resources practise resource sharing, particularly within residences. Food and academic information emerged as the two most important shared commodities. Resource sharing also created opportunities for social networks, solidarity and support. Students describe poverty and adverse living conditions as a normal part of daily life that impacts their participation but without the suggestion that these conditions jeopardise aspirations and success for education and careers. Students positioned themselves in relation to family and community in reflecting on their privileged position as a university student. However, not all student experiences of community were perceived as either positive or enabling, which means that students may feel doubly alienated and lonely while trying to adapt to the new university environment, they are simultaneously grappling with constrained financial and emotional support within their family or community.

### **Capability for resilience**

Students' narratives offer many examples of resilient responses to environments that may not be conducive to academic success. Emphasising student resilience and the agency to effect change within an institution is an important shift from descriptions of students as victims of institutional injustice. Evidence of staff agency includes evidence of staff creating opportunities for engagement with students, despite the challenge of reduced resources and massification. Lecturers are committed to assisting vulnerable students, but due to resource constraints, their capabilities to assist vulnerable students are limited. How could institutional arrangements enable students to understand, embrace and navigate the complex task of developing an academic identity, without compromising students' connection to home, culture and ethnicity?

Staff interviews focused on how to provide quality teaching and learning experiences and support to students to large student numbers. How could the university ensure that the resources allocated to higher education institutions are applied to support programmes that present a strong evidence base for disadvantaged student success? Staff who design support programmes could interrogate implicit theoretical underpinnings, to ensure that the complex socio-cultural needs of the diverse student body are taken into consideration. More research is required to

understand how massification of higher education - while providing greater access for first-generation students - creates pedagogical arrangements such as large classrooms and staff to student ratios that are more likely to hamper academic success for students who are less prepared for the demands of higher education. Participatory research could be one way to contribute towards institutional transformation by including first-generation student voices, perspectives, and narratives on aspects of institutional culture, pedagogical arrangements, and residence life.

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## Chapter 8: The elephant in the graduation room: Contradictions of epistemic access at the University of the Western Cape

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### Introduction

Contradictions continue to permeate apartheid-created institutions. The colonial order created the first South African universities as clones of European universities.<sup>24</sup> Teaching and research closely followed the knowledge traditions of Europe, whose subject of knowledge production was generally white, heterosexual and male; all others were seen to be incomplete variations. Subaltern bodies, knowledges and languages were excluded. This hierarchical relationship defined the founding of the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in 1960. Post-apartheid, like other South African universities trying to break their apartheid-scripted trajectories, UWC approaches the knowledge question in contradictory ways. This influences how we understand access to higher education: first, *physical access*, bodies on seats, or virtual seats in the current COVID-19 pandemic context of online education; and second, *epistemic access*, which is less concrete and subtler because we are trying to understand students' minds. It requires substantive engagement and debate across the inherited and excluded knowledge and language traditions.

This project investigates epistemic access. The empirical case is UWC. Based mainly on institutional documents and interviews with final year students in two faculties (Science; Arts and Humanities), we simultaneously explore students' academic experiences and institutional practices (to a limited extent) to understand: How do we know what, or even that, students are learning? What resources (individual, institutional or other collective cultural and/or material resources) do students draw on to successfully 'negotiate' their epistemic access? How do teaching arrangements at UWC support students' rigorous intellectual engagement?

Three main arguments emerge, related to specific contradictions around ongoing inequalities in physical access, the nature of the academic experience, the different ways of understanding

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<sup>24</sup> See Lewis Pyenson's trilogy *Civilizing Mission: Exact Sciences and French Overseas Expansion, 1830-1940* (The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London 1993); *Empire of Reason: Exact Sciences in Indonesia, 1840-1940* (E.J. Brill, Leiden 1989); and *Cultural Imperialism and Exact Sciences: German Expansion Overseas 1900-1930* (Peter Lang, New York 1985).

epistemic access. This is what we will show in this chapter. Firstly, physical access remains an ongoing project. Despite targeted state funding to expand access, higher education participation rates remain low, and skewed by race and gender. This raises questions about capacity of the individual-level focus of the NSFAS funding model, in addition to its ongoing internal inefficiencies (such as the late payment of stipends), to address the structural problem of skewed participation rates. Secondly, while students generally enjoyed positive social and academic interactions, sometimes these were problematic, involving feelings of not fitting in, not belonging, sometime violent encounters, or related to the online nature of learning in the context of massive digital divides.

Thirdly, epistemic access can be understood in multiple ways: on the one hand, in relation to the efficiency of the existing academic programmes and involving questions about attrition, retention and throughput, and on the other, in relation to the nature of the curriculum and questions about what is taught, how it is taught, who decides, and using what criteria. Both meanings are relevant to understand the nature of the academic experience and how students ‘negotiate’ their epistemic access, which may mean different things in each case. The former focuses on the efficiency of student pathways through the academic pipeline; the latter poses questions about the nature of the pipeline itself – the learning environment and the knowledge question, especially contestations around excluded and included knowledges in higher education curricula.

With regard to student pathways through the academic pipeline, we found that success rates remain low, and were skewed by race and gender. However, the persistence of this pattern since the 1990s, despite increased funding and other resources and countless support interventions, remains a puzzle. How do we explain it? This is not a new finding, and reflects a national trend, a crisis in the system, that may be illustrative of a broader condition plaguing South African higher education. When considering the complex combination of interrelated factors influencing students’ success rates – these are around financial factors, academic under preparedness, uneasy transitions from school to university life, and institutional factors and cultures – our data suggest that the significance of institutional factors, including models of change, is generally under-appreciated.

### **Access and student engagement at UWC**

The 1959 *Extension of University Education Act* established South Africa’s historically black universities as racial/ethnic institutions to reproduce the apartheid project; to further entrench

the ideas of ‘own community’ that apartheid policies wanted to instil around the idea ‘race’ (Tabata 1958). The University of the Western Cape was established in 1960 as a predominantly undergraduate teaching institution to train ‘Coloured’ professionals to work in the racially divided school system, health system, civil service, social work, economy, recreational areas, ... covering all aspects of life.

In essence, the separate tribal institutions endorsed the infantilisation of the ‘other’. In the June 1966 volume of *Alpha*, a publication of the-then Department of Coloured Affairs, the rector, J. G. Meiring, paternalistically defends the creation of separate universities based on a racially-defined “guardian-ward” hierarchy:

This relationship requires an honest desire on the part of the guardian to create circumstances and opportunities which will enable the ward to progress in accordance with his [sic] abilities. This can be brought about best by acceptance of the principle of separate development. The political development is promoted by the establishment of homelands and the gradual conferment of political responsibility. The development of educational facilities and the improvement of social and economic conditions will ensure development in the educational, social, and economic spheres. But this can only be achieved with the cordial cooperation of the ward, and to this end devoted and enthusiastic leaders must be drafted from the ranks of the non-White peoples. These leaders must be endowed with the necessary knowledge and skills but, above all else, they must be imbued with a fervent desire to serve their own communities. ... an institution of higher education must be established for the Coloureds, a university which would provide a thorough academic training and inspire them with the ambition to serve their fellow men. The White guardian was obliged to provide these facilities for his Coloured ward (Meiring, 1966, pp. 5 & 8).

However, the academic programmes designed to create passive racially defined professionals – docile bodies of apartheid ideology – also sowed the seeds of resistance among many UWC students. By the early 1970s, inspired by the South African Student Organisation’s black consciousness philosophy, and black community programmes, many UWC students joined off-campus study cells in churches or people’s houses, inspired by Steve Biko, Frans Fanon, Karl Marx, James Matthews, Amilcar Cabral, Paulo Freire, and many others about the necessity for critical reflection as a constant process of becoming conscious of our position in

the Manichean colonial world, as a first step to changing it. Students also initiated literacy and other community projects, including leadership camps and symposia on university and community transformation (Hames, 2021; Swanson-Jacobs, 2009; Thomas, 2014), this, under constant threat of state violence or expulsion from the University. When the idea of an independent and autonomous SRC was finally recognised by the University administration in 1975, SRC-linked student societies also flourished (for example, the Social Sciences Society; the Drama Society). They sparked debate on how broader systemic forces shape our individual stories and experiences, including our consciousness and agency:

... in other words, joining the dots, understanding that if you don't have money to pay ... for your child's school fees, fees at medical school, you do not have adequate housing, you have poor transport, how those things all form a single continuum; that all those things are actually connected. They are embedded in the system, that your position in society is not isolated but it is systemic (Mokoape, cited in Sefatsa, 2020, p. 3).

By the 1980s and early 1990s, UWC had become well known for resisting its official script. Its 1982 Mission Statement and open access admissions policy defied apartheid policies (Wolpe, 1995). Student and staff organisations attempted to rethink university research and teaching in relation to broader societal transformation (Gerwel, 1991a, 1991b). This is evident in the short-lived curriculum discussions linked to the *People's Education* and *Education for Liberation* discourses, for example, in liberation theology, People's History Project, People's Mathematics, the Public Health Project, and other fields.

However, we guard against a romanticised view of UWC students and staff as a homogenous and unified group opposing apartheid. While UWC as a participatory institution may have been the formal model at specific times in its history (parts of the 1970s and 1980s), its civic culture reflected elements of the inherited colonial, patriarchal, heteronormative, and authoritarian institutional culture and the ideological orientations of its members and competing interests. Our findings suggest that these elements of the inherited institutional culture somehow manage to endure in the fabric of the institution, to influence everyday social and academic practices and relationships, as discussed later in the chapter. The organisational skeleton of the western university – its systems and academic structures such as the Senate, Council, the committee system, selection of students, staff appointments – are reproduced

despite the change of language (of transformation, inclusivity, democracy) in formal institutional reports and documents, including vision and mission statements.

By the mid-1990s, and into the 2000s, discourses of academic development, globalisation and techno-corporate models of institutional change became visible. They displaced the earlier discussions on the meanings of 'open' access. Dwindling participation in student organisations and in the SRC elections, and the demise of the academic staff union in 2002 resulted in fewer open campus debates about university transformation and its role building a new post-apartheid society. Instead, we witness a reliance on formal faculty structures through a "role-player" model:

... where each 'constituency' has a structure representing its interests. It is also the dominant model informing the notion of shared governance (between institutional elites, staff and students) in South African universities. [It results in] academic cultures reluctant to deal in open forums with contestations about student learning [and] with the inherited colonial and hetero-patriarchal cultures of South African universities. ... Alternatives to the prevalent 'role player' model would be a deliberative model [which] ... not only teaches us about democratic living but may be the key to shaping institutional strategies for change (Ravjee et al., 2010, pp.167 & 146-147).

By 2020, it was unclear whether one might be able to describe the dominant academic culture of UWC outside of a role-player model of participation, even if briefly interrupted during the 2015 and 2016 student protests, and the smaller scale annual finance-related protests outside the administration building at the beginning of each academic year. In March 2020, most if not all student organisations and residences ceased campus activities due to the national lockdown and social distancing requirements of the COVID-19 pandemic. Students and staff were required to vacate the campus, except for few students staying in residences. As with other public universities, full-time permanent staff received their full salaries throughout the lockdown. Security and cleaning staff remained on campus as essential workers in empty buildings. Academic work moved from the physical campus space to online modes of communication. Currently in 2022, only a few courses are taught face-to-face physically on campus in the Science, Dentistry and Community and Health Sciences faculties and even fewer in the other faculties.

Finally, a note on the staff and student composition. The teaching and senior administrative staff up to the late 1980s was predominantly White and male and the student population was largely Coloured and Afrikaans speaking. By 2020, 57% of the staff was Coloured and 55% female, and non-teaching administrative, management and support posts outnumbered teaching/research posts (UWC 2022, p26-27). There was also an increase in contract staff, often linked to outsourced functions such as printing, cleaning, gardening, security, and in recent years, teaching. Similar to other institutions, selection processes ensure that only a small proportion of the thousands of applicants each year is actually accepted. By 2020, of the 23 730 students enrolled at UWC, 61% were female (UWC, 2020, p.34). This is a radical change from 1966, when 12.5% of students were women. The statistics in Chapter 3 show that by 2019, the Science Faculty had an equal proportion of male and female students (50% each), but enrolments in the Arts and Humanities Faculty were still skewed by gender, with about twice as many female students (69%) as males (31%). Undergraduate enrolments, according to the apartheid race classifications in 2019 were, as follows; for the Science Faculty: African 60%; Coloured 31%; Indian 5%; White 4%; and for the Arts and Humanities Faculty: African 41%; Coloured 56%; Indian 2%; White 2%.

### **Competing understandings of access to education**

The nature of access is generally problematised in the higher education scholarship. In the 1990s, large classes and low throughput at UWC – and in other South African universities (NPHE, 2001) – provoked considerable institutional research to understand how students could achieve what Morrow (1994, p. 40) termed epistemological access. This idea has been a founding cornerstone of the academic development discourse post-1994. Access, in this view, is understood as a more substantive and rigorous engagement in/with/across the disciplines than merely adding more diverse ‘bodies on seats’. Writing in the context of teaching large first year classes at UWC, Morrow distinguishes between formal or physical access to a university, and epistemological access, which he defines as “learning how to become a participant in an academic practice” (Morrow, 1994, p.40). This, he says, requires the assertion of individual agency:

Seeing that academic practices have developed around the search for knowledge, we might say that what we have in view here is ‘epistemological access’ ... Learning how to become a participant in an academic practice might also be described in terms of "gaining access" to the practice in question, ... To learn how to become a participant in an academic practice is to learn the intrinsic disciplines

and constitutive standards of the practice. ... my epistemological access in some academic practice is essentially dependent on what I do. ... There are, of course, many things which might help me to do it, or to do it more effectively. ... But all of these things can, at best, only facilitate, and never *guarantee*, my epistemological access; I must be *trying* to learn (Morrow, 1994, pp.39–40).

Morrow (1994, p.43) acknowledges, on the one hand, that academic practices “are themselves aspects of the framework which serves to maintain relations and structures of oppression and domination in society”; on the other, he seems to cast academic practices as neutral non-ideological tools:

The skills, materials and tools of building might be used to build either torture chambers or schools, but the fact that they can be used to build torture chambers is no reason to throw away those skills, materials and tools. Similarly, that academic practices can be misused to serve sectional interests is not any reason to think that this is an inherent feature of academic practices as such, rather than a corruption of those practices. ... Can it then be the case that academic practices as such serve to maintain asymmetrical relations of power, in short, that they are ideological? ... Academic practices do not rest on substantive foundations, immune from revision, nor are they bodies of "content". Academic practices are disciplines in terms of which it is possible to think rigorously (Morrow, 1994, pp.44–45).

However, is it possible to easily separate out academic practices from other social practices, such as the choice of curriculum materials or language? Academic practices are shaped by historical power relations around who is taught, who teaches, what is taught, how it is taught, in what language it is taught, who decides and using what criteria. It is therefore possible to argue that by underscoring the power dynamics shaping academic practices, the epistemological access position is unable to challenge dominant techno-corporate models of higher education change or constructions of students in terms of deficit – around the underprepared student, the disadvantaged student/school and the dysfunctional school. This limitation functions to shift the impetus for change away from the university, and to the individual student. By doing so, it ignores the nature of the (contested, not static) university space to which access is being sought (CHE, 2010). It therefore becomes necessary to distinguish between different ways of understanding access to higher education – as an



unproblematic integration into the existing university space, or as influencing the nature of the space itself.

Alternatively, when we take contemporary struggles and contestations in the university space as our analytical starting point – instead of academic practices viewed as neutral – then at least two competing theoretical approaches to understand epistemic access become visible. On one end of the spectrum, a liberal framework views access as assimilation into the mainstream of the existing university space, viewed as neutral. At the other end, a view of educational institutions as non-neutral terrains of struggle.

**Table 43: Liberal and critical understandings of access**

	<b>LIBERAL FRAMINGS</b> <i>Affirmative approaches</i>	<b>CRITICAL FRAMINGS</b> <i>Transformative approaches</i>
<b>Physical access</b>	Affirmative action approaches (aim to affirm, or at best, reform the status quo)	Open access approaches (aim to change the status quo; attention to political economy of higher education)
<b>Epistemic access</b>	Integrationist approaches to existing curriculum (add-on approaches; mainstream multiculturalism)	Critical cultural approaches to curriculum (intersectional approaches embracing, class, de/anticolonial, feminist and other deconstructionist sensibilities)
<b>Conception of the university and the academic project</b>	Neutral non-ideological space	Non-neutral terrain of struggle and contestation

(Source: Adapted from Fraser, 1995)

Critical frameworks provide the conceptual tools for a more rigorous analysis of epistemic access. They consider access to higher education in relation to historical exclusions – of people, of knowledges, of languages – in South African higher education due to, for example, deliberate policy choices, or specific understandings of ‘quality’ (for example, the idea that ‘quality’ resides in whiteness). These considerations allow us to understand how the power dynamics of a teaching practice may influence the learning process itself. For example, teaching the close reading of texts in English when most students’ first language is either

Afrikaans or isiXhosa, or how being labelled disadvantaged, or underprepared to complete a normal three-year Bachelor's degree programme in three years – as in the logic of the Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) – may promote a deficit conception of self among young first year students. Importantly, an intersectional analytical lens offers a useful alternative to the 'barriers to learning' discourse.

Hence, crucial to our research project is to explore and open up for discussion the terminology and language we use to describe students and institutions. For example, historically, university admissions policies required that applicants be systematically included or excluded from a university's applicant pool on the basis of their apartheid race classification *before* their academic achievement and preparedness was considered. Inclusion and exclusion, in this case, was on the basis of an education policy, and not on the basis of academic preparedness. Consider a second example; UWC is sometimes framed as a 'historically disadvantaged university' which opens the debate on what is meant by, and who is seen as, disadvantaged. Does 'historically disadvantaged' translate into 'continuously disadvantaged'? Terminology such as 'disadvantaged' and 'marginalised' may take on different meanings in different university contexts. Spivak (1993) questions such 'clinging to marginality,' provoking us to ask: In what ways do we as researchers internalise the construction of 'marginality'? What does 'marginality' mean in the seeking of academic validation and recognition? How can 'marginality' be differently experienced and interpreted (for example, when analysing interview transcripts). Similarly, the study interrogates the concept 'epistemic access' in relation to 'epistemological access' (Morrow, 1994). As Mirza notes,

The politics of recognition enabled those who had been marginalized to find a voice. It is liberating but not without its problems. It has been translated into a bureaucratic approach to diversity which monitors our progress and tracks our differences. Good intentions remain locked in an institutional paper trail (Mirza, 2009, p.151).

Critical approaches (see CHE, 2010, pp.178-181) also emphasise the extent to which institutions themselves change as they grapple with competing policy imperatives: of redressing historical imbalances, teaching democratic citizenship, and teaching skills for the global information and communications technologies-driven knowledge economy. Understanding access and success in higher education, in this view, requires attention to the material *and* cultural dimensions of the intersecting factors influencing academic performance. This requires simultaneously analysing physical access (addressing issues of

redistribution and the political economy of higher education) *and* epistemic access (addressing issues of recognition and the cultural politics of higher education). Both issues partly provoked the student protests in 2015 and 2016. The #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) protests were about issues of recognition and the cultural politics of higher education involving questions of decolonising education and society. The #FeesMustFall (#FMF) protests included the prior question of democratising physical access, which requires attention to the political economy of higher education and fees and funding issues. The #FMF protests insisted on a *critical recognition* that refuses to understand decolonisation independently of issues of democratisation and redistribution.

The above understandings inform the conceptual framing of this study: the distinction between physical and more substantive access (what we refer to in this project as epistemological or epistemic access); the distinction between liberal and critical understandings of access to education; and a critical cultural approach based on an understanding of education as a form of cultural politics and educational institutions as sites of contestation and struggle (Freire, 1985; hooks, 1990, 1994). This requires constant vigilance through a deliberative process to teaching. It is attentive to the historical, institutional and national power dynamics of curriculum politics, and the relationship between historically included and excluded epistemological traditions. The metaphor of *the gate* captures this framework for thinking about formal and epistemic access at UWC.

To illustrate how this metaphor works to simultaneously include and exclude, consider the example of UWC's once vibrant part-time programme as a key strategy to expand access to higher education. Other examples could just as easily illustrate this, including limitations on accepting number of applicants, language of lectures and readings, accommodation in residences, online applications, limitation on number of years to complete degree, or transport.

It may be possible to think of teaching and administrative staff at the University as simultaneously gateways to and gatekeepers of institutional access, especially as multiple and contested understandings of epistemic access exist at the institution. For example, present changes in admissions criteria may result in narrowing the opportunity of access to the kind of student who has historically been accepted at the university (and this would be an example of institutional gatekeeping). At the same time, changes in admission criteria may result in widening the opportunity of access to the kind of student who may not have considered the university as part of their educational choices (and this would be an example of providing an

institutional gateway). Therefore, the skilful integration of institutional interventions to provide epistemic access might warrant university-wide consultation and ongoing structured conversation.

Let us consider UWC as a *gateway*. Historically, UWC planned and offered part-time classes as part of its flexible teaching and learning arrangements and the ethos of lifelong learning which prevailed institutionally into the 2000s (DLL, 1999; Watters et al., 2003). UWC prides itself on establishing interventions such as the Centre for Continuing Adult Education (CACE) which implemented strategies such as the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and was the founder the Division of Life Long Learning (DLL). The DLL allowed students the opportunity to further studies who otherwise would not have had access to the university. By 2007, an after-hours learning zone in the B-Block promised the beginnings of an important after-hours learning community. An after-hours office was also open to students who might have wanted various kinds of assistance concerning their studies. Part-time provision could be considered an important gateway to the students historically served by the University. Presently, it is not entirely clear how it could become an epistemic access gateway to the largest possible circle of students, and which aspects of lifelong learning and flexible provision, historically reserved for part-time students at a particular moment, could now usefully serve a wider layer of students who may have overlapping ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ student identities and academic needs.

Staying with the metaphor of the gate, in which sense may the University be regarded as a *gatekeeper* of physical access? In the last decade, part-time provision has dwindled and it would be important to obtain institutional data that could reveal how this came about. Insights from teaching staff about how this changed provision may have affected student well-being would present an opportunity to reflect on the idea of the University as gatekeeper.

In the space between gateways and gatekeepers, it would be worthwhile to know from teaching staff whether they thought the University is currently trying to find ways of both promoting its legacy and promoting new institutional pathways, and whether institutional debates currently lean more towards cutting new paths rather than being at a crossroads. Lecturers’ reflections on when they perceived themselves as institutional gatekeepers and institutional gateways in relation to epistemic access could directly shed light on specific teaching arrangements, including curriculum matters. Presently the University embraces lifelong learning as part of its mission statement, and commits itself to the flexible provision

of programmes and courses. Interestingly, while lifelong learning is considered an important attribute of a UWC graduate, a current unknown seems to be: what are the kinds of lifelong learning conversations currently taking place at our University, and how are teaching and learning arrangements informed by seminal institutional texts in this regard? What kind of lifelong learning is being promoted institutionally, and how does it inform epistemic access?

### **Methodology**

This case study of epistemic access at UWC is a follow-up to an earlier study conducted with third-year students at UWC (Ravjee, et al., 2010). While this is not a longitudinal study, it was insightful to use the previous data as a reference point to appreciate national and institutional changes in the last decade. By 2018, the Department of Higher Education and Training expanded its Student Financial Aid (NSFAS) scheme to include full scholarships for South African students from families whose combined annual household income was less than R350 000. In this project, we wanted to understand how students from this cohort were able to successfully navigate their academic journeys. While we treat this as a single case study, we also acknowledge that this case is part of a six-way comparative research design of the academic experiences of the 2018 cohort, as described in Chapter 4.

The research team analysed two sets of primary data: semi-structured interviews with thirty final year students (fourteen in the Arts and Humanities Faculty and sixteen in the Science Faculty), and six staff members in different areas of student affairs (administrative, teaching-related and student support) partially identified through snowball sampling methods; and relevant institutional documents, such as UWC annual reports and reports generated at faculty-level or at other institutional sites (many were accessible directly from the UWC website). The secondary sources consulted, included journal articles, books, theses and other scholarly work that gave insight to the intellectual, activist and bureaucratic life of the university. When reporting directly from the interview transcripts, we followed the same alpha-numeric coding system as the other case studies.

The original data collection plan included face-to-face interviews but following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown protocols – the first lockdown was imposed during the week in which we had planned our first project workshop – technological platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom, and WhatsApp formed the basis of the research communication. In 2020 and 2021, neither students nor staff were physically on campus and due to the pandemic restrictions and social distancing, the research participants were not

readily accessible. It was therefore almost impossible to conduct face-to-face interviews. Most interviews were conducted and recorded on Google Meet, stored in a secure Google Drive folder, and transcribed at the University of Johannesburg. Two were conducted via WhatsApp calls, and three were face-to-face with a laptop recorder, which was only possible as both the researcher and respondent live at a UWC residence on campus. However, the social distancing protocols for face-to-face interviews, resulted in the sound files not being too clear.

The student respondents came from diverse linguistic, educational, class and race/ethnic backgrounds, different genders and sexual orientations. They were highly motivated, and many viewed education as the great equalizer, a means to change their families' material circumstances. Most were first-generation university students who had attended public schools and two, private schools. All but three of the student interviewees were NSFAS funded students in their final year of study. The three respondents who were not recipients of NSFAS bursaries raised significant issues around funding the 'missing middle', international students, the range of financial aid options available at UWC, the resilience of students and the many religious influences on campus. We excluded their transcripts from the data pack, but the research team intends analysing the transcripts in a follow-up study on the funding options available to students who have refugee status in South Africa. Note, refugees do not qualify for NSFAS funding and universities generally lump them together in the same category as international students with study permits and funding (Davis, 2019).

The virtual interviews presented a few additional challenges. Firstly, the lack of data and connectivity (on a few occasions, researchers bought data for student participants), limited access to the internet, and often the absence of privacy influenced the research process. It was sometimes difficult to connect with identified students who had returned to their homes. Curiously, and possibly related to the research culture in the Science Faculty, many students from the Science Faculty requested that data be provided, and queried whether they would be remunerated for their participation. While it is unethical to pay people to participate in a research project, on hindsight, given the huge digital divide, the project should have covered the connectivity costs to participate, and not passed these on to the participants themselves. Secondly, although the case study provides a large volume of in-depth data that gives insight into participants' experiences, it required an extended time to conduct. Most interviews generally lasted between forty-five minutes and one hour, although a few were considerably longer than an hour. Another aspect is the pandemic time constraints in actually reaching the

participants for an interview. These were related to illness, loss, anxiety, stress and many more pandemic related factors, including the absence of connectivity when off campus.

Finally, a key challenge of the study was that *the student* was unintentionally regarded as a homogenous subject. This oversight resulted in insufficient effort being made to specifically include students with (dis)abilities or non-heteronormative sexual identities and complexities around race, gender, and nationality. The interpretation of the narratives will also indicate whether the student participants were academically or historically Third Year students. This may be attributed to the remote nature of our data collection strategy, which presented a challenge to attract a diverse group of student participants.

An anti/decolonial feminist analytical lens was used to interpret and analyse the case study data. The UWC research team employed a feminist lens to interrogate the power modalities within the university and emphasising the subjugated knowledges located in the two faculties that had never had female Deans. Both the Arts and Humanities and the Science faculties had supposedly certain historic advantages which should have made it possible for female people to be in leadership positions. The Women's and Gender Studies (WGS) Department is in the Arts/and Humanities faculty and the Science Faculty had a designated female Deputy Dean for Gender for several years. Interestingly, by 2020, the Science Faculty had 50% female and male students, while the Arts and Humanities Faculty had 69% female and 31% male students. However, the team was equally interested in the experiences and understandings of the participants of their environment and institution. An intersectional approach formed the nexus of the arguments. Intersectionality, as an analytical tool or lens not only allowed us to view how intersecting power dynamics around race/ethnicity, class, gender, nationality, sexuality, age and other axes of exclusion work to shape social relationships and are "interrelated and mutually shaping one another" (Collins & Bilge, 2020, p.4), but as Collins and Bilge note, it also connects local struggles with struggles elsewhere. In this instance, the #RMF, #FMF student struggles could find similarities with the #BlackLivesMatter protests in the UK and USA.

While the above insights provide a useful interpretive lens for the study, we rely equally on a critical grounded theory approach to the data; allowing the data speak to us from outside our own theoretical lenses, as much as that is possible. The validity of the research data and findings is endorsed by peers in the broader research group hosted by UJ. The conceptual work involved all members of the six-person research team: the two lead researchers, one

post-doctoral researcher and lecturer in Adult Education, two PhD candidates in the Sociology of Education and one master's student in Women and Gender Studies, all of whom conducted at least two or more interviews. The research team met weekly (during most weeks) to assess the research progress, share insights and analysis from our research journals, and ensure that the research team was not overwhelmed by the 'abnormal' challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, including illness, loss, anxiety, stress, social and academic isolation, intermittent unemployment, 24/7 online teaching, meetings or never-ending administrative paperwork, and remote communication and technical interaction with other researchers and the research participants. The qualitative research allowed the research team to assess the differential epistemic access of female and male students. The all-female research team also reflected on their own participation in the research process when they had multiple responsibilities as researchers, lecturers, project or department leaders, primary caregivers, partners and parents working online from home. The team recognised the fact that positionality is not a static condition and further deconstruction of the researcher and participant positionality is discussed in the next section.

The research ethics clearance was obtained from UWC by the overall comparative project team led by colleagues at UJ. Each interview participant was emailed a copy of the project information sheet after which they were requested to sign an informed consent form, which also assured them of the confidentiality and anonymity in reporting and informed them that they could withdraw from the research at any time. Ethics were of great concern due to the electronic nature of the data collection and cloud data storage and the possibility of hacking of sensitive and confidential information. We successfully addressed a number of challenges to protect the anonymity of the virtual interview participants by following the 2020 ethics statement from the UWC Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) on protocols for remote data collection during the lockdown. Initial testing to conduct interviews on Google Meet raised concerns about anonymity because the name of the interviewee could be seen on the recording. To ensure the anonymity of the interviewee, a separate email address was created for participants, and the password was changed for each interviewee before conducting the interview. Another strategy was to make a voice-only recording of the interview conducted on Google Meet to ensure anonymity. Interviews were recorded and then backed up, saved and stored in a secure password protected internet cloud account as well as encrypted remote files and shared with the project coordinator, who initially downloaded the file for transcription and uploaded the transcripts as they became available.



This strategy proved to be impossible with large sound files, which were then shared via Google Drive. Each transcript was ‘cleaned’ to remove references to specific individuals, and the real names of interviewees do not appear in the file names or anywhere on the interview transcripts.

A possible limitation of the study could be that data obtained at this stage are predominantly from student participants as opposed to a comparable spread of data both from staff. What guides current institutional thinking about how epistemic access ought to be thought of at the University. How does the University think of epistemic access both as a point of entry as well as in terms of the curriculum? Obtaining appreciable data also from teaching staff would have made greater understandings possible of the ways in which they themselves understand epistemic access, reveal how teaching staff may be experiencing epistemic access challenges themselves in current teaching and learning arrangements. Therefore, understanding what epistemic access might mean within the university community currently would potentially be institutionally meaningful both to academic teaching staff as well as our students, and the ways in which they locate themselves in relation to the institutional ecology. Insights from teaching staff may also reveal many complexities associated with epistemic access and it may be possible to encounter a spectrum of epistemic standpoints within the University community. These concerns require further study.

## **Cultural politics of epistemic access at UWC**

### **Between gateways and gatekeepers: Formal access to UWC**

Formally accessing higher education depends on many intersecting psycho-social, historical and institutional factors peculiar to specific contexts. These include students’ pre-university interest, motivation and preparation, universities’ admissions policies and choice of ‘feeder’ schools, sustained resources for undergraduate programmes, and national and institutional policies and innovative strategies to fund students, from full scholarships to tuition waivers, work-study programmes, internships, fees on a sliding scale and tax rebates on fees. In this regard, UWC prides itself on its equitable access policy, through its relatively low fee structure, its once booming part-time study programme and the numerous funding options for students, despite the fluctuating state subsidy. In 2020, UWC received 58% of its revenue from government grants, down from 60% in 2019 but about 10% higher than a decade ago as indicated in Table 44.

#### **Table 44: Sources of Revenue**

### Sources of Revenue: UWC

2011: state subsidy (49%), student fees (25%) and third-stream income\* (26%)

2019: state subsidy (60%), student fees (21%) and third-stream income (19%)

2020: state subsidy (58%), student fees (23%) and third-stream income (19%)

(Source: UWC Annual Report, 2020, p. 69 and Statistics South Africa, 2019)

\* Third stream income items include contract income, donations and other recurrent and non-recurrent income

In 2020, almost 86% of students received some type of funding, either through NSFAS, UWC bursaries or other sponsors. NSFAS bursaries represented the largest category of funding, followed by UWC bursaries, and a smaller category of other bursaries (Table 45). The latter category shows a decreasing trend in recent years, despite a spike in 2019. It includes corporate sponsors, municipalities, philanthropic organisations and individual trust funds, non-governmental organisations, religious organisations, and funding from semi-state or other government departments. The ‘UWC Bursaries’ category includes tuition waivers for permanent staff and their dependents, first year merit awards, senior year merit awards. A well-established, ever-expanding and efficient work-study programme employs high performing students as tutors, mentors or to provide administrative support in academic departments, research and community-based programmes and across the numerous student support services on campus, including student residences. The work-study model links financial support with a critical conditionality – that the student maintains a good academic record *and* works on campus for a maximum of ten hours a week – and an institutional network of social and academic support.

**Table 45: Students Funded by NSFAS, UWC and Other Bursaries (2016 to 2020)**

Number of student beneficiaries per year					
Fund	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
NSFAS	7 185	5 734	7 856	9 119	10 728

UWC Bursaries	5 783	6 060	5 957	6 136	6 266
Other Bursaries	6 343	4 858	3 474	4 224	3 373
Total Number of Funded Students	<b>19 311</b>	<b>16 652</b>	<b>17 287</b>	<b>19 479</b>	<b>20 367</b>
Total Number of Registered Students	<b>21 796</b>	<b>22 443</b>	<b>22 835</b>	<b>23 784</b>	<b>23 730</b>
Funded Students as a Proportion of Registered Students	<b>88.6%</b>	<b>74.2%</b>	<b>75.7%</b>	<b>81.9%</b>	<b>85.8%</b>

(Source: UWC Annual Report, 2020, pp. 26 and 33)

This is a remarkable change in funding patterns from just over a decade ago, in 2010, when 60.1% of all registered UWC students were funded, and ‘UWC Bursaries’ was the largest category of sponsorship (42.4%), followed by NSFAS and ‘Other Bursaries’ at 33.6% and 24.0% respectively (Ngalo-Morrison 2010, p.78, 83). Importantly, Ngalo-Morrison’s (2017, p.90) study of the experiences of funded students at UWC found that 74% of students who received some form of funding in 2010. were academically successful in that year. The highest performing group were those supported by the University administered funds. This would be important to explore further, with the 2018 first-time entering cohort, to assess the effectiveness of different funding models - the planning, organisation and efficient management of the different types of financial support that the University sources for its students each year. We note that there are no similar work-related conditionalities attached to NSFAS awards.

Despite having been awarded NSFAS bursaries, some students still faced financial or other resource-related challenges which may have directly or indirectly affected their academic work. Firstly, inefficiencies around the management of the fund, such as the late payment of registration fees and monthly stipends, often led to confusion and frustration during registration periods, in some cases delaying the registration of students well into the first term. Students who fail to meet the criteria to renew their funded registrations negotiate a payment plan of fees from their own resources. The Financial Aid Office supports them to do that. Secondly, many students claimed that the amount of the stipends was often insufficient to cover the cost of study and living expenses. They often relied on institutional safety nets for food and accommodation. Some received groceries from the *Nutrition and Wellness Office* coordinated by the SRC, but did not receive Course Readers with the required core course

texts: *I have been to the nutritional people, support service. There was a time in 2019 when I did not have funding and my mother was paying for my accommodation and there was pressure for food, so then I went to a nutritional program where they assisted me with food every month, the basics. Your pastas, peanut butter, noodles, corned meat. I think it was twice a month or depending on the supply that they have. That really, really helped.* (07\_SS13)

*Living off campus often led to the incurring of expenses such as having to pay for electricity and water, having to pay for accommodation, having to pay for data connection. Some of it (NSFAS) would go towards savings, and some of the money would go to little things that just come up, like if I need papers to be printed, or if I need those pages to be laminated or to be bound, those extra expenses that just came up, some of the money would go towards that. Because we did not have prescribed books, so we would print from online, so most of it would go towards printing and binding. ... The major financial challenge I had was when I was staying off-campus and having to travel with 4 taxis a day. I had to manage it by cutting the grocery money and using the grocery money for transport, and then I get food from the nutritional programme.* (07\_SS13)

In 2020 and 2021, students living in UWC residences during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown received monthly food packs from the Centre for Student Support Services. Note, some students were unable to secure accommodation in a university residence, and felt that the University administration should prioritise comfortable accommodation, especially for students from other provinces. In such cases, staff in the Residential Services office should assist in finding private accommodation, or at the least check if the accommodation is secure and conducive to academic work.

Thirdly, UWC students have access to a wide range of academic, advising, mentoring, technological and psycho-social resources. However, some interviewees stated that when they first arrived at UWC, they were not aware of the range of resources available for students or the university rules (for instance, about the admission process, and the rules around formally changing one's course of study). One student described the value of academic advising for first year students, while another complained about the lack of information about support services on campus; *The first year you can go and consult people before you make your timetable. Like you could talk to these people: what is sociology? what is it about? They would explain sociology and stuff and then you will know if you want to do the course or something else. They were very good at explaining and consulting.* (07\_HS08)

*The institution has numerous programmes on campus and that is one of the things that I spoke to her about. I said you have all these programmes; you have all these resources, but students do not know about it. I would discover things because I would maybe go with a student for food. The student does not have food, has not eaten in days and then I would discover oh! But here is a programme on campus that is giving students food parcels. There is a student that is suicidal and then I would discover oh! But there is a psychologist you know. The thing is, it is not generally known to the public. I mean a lot of the students did not know that we have a fairy godmother on campus. Students don't know where to go really when they need assistance. ... Basically, there are things on campus, but not just being utilised, or it is not being public knowledge. (07\_HS07)*

A third respondent reported receiving little career guidance in high school and poor academic advice in their first year: *In terms of choosing a degree..... in both my high schools, the only careers I knew was law, accounting, engineering and being a doctor. I did commercial subjects in school and then ... but again with those commercial subjects no one would really tell us about other things we could do because most of the time they'd ask us what we would do and obviously we will all say lawyer, doctor, engineer and whatever and they wouldn't expose us to different things. ... [Currently] I'm not doing the degree that I really wanted but that's fine, like just kicking it off on that note kind of sucked but I quickly forgot about that. (07\_HS01)*

One suggestion was that the university website be redesigned to make it more 'user friendly' to navigate the links to the wide range of academic, administrative and psycho-social support services available for students. However, three recent mentorship initiatives, while too early to assess their effectiveness, may clarify some of these ambiguities for students, and contribute to a sense of campus community. The first two – called the *First Year Transition Programme* (FYTP) and the *First Year Experience* (FYE) – aim to motivate, support and integrate first-year undergraduates into the social and academic life of the University. The third, the *Academic Excellence Programme* (AEP), a leadership series mentoring second year students through monthly lunchtime meetings and a residential module once a term (UWC, 2019, p.6).

A few respondents said that they found it difficult to access counselling services. Since March 2020, long waiting lists for consultations with psychologists at the Centre for Student Support Services (CSSS) added to the anxiousness, stress and sense of isolation that many students (and staff) experienced around the intersecting issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic:

concern with their own health; illness, or worse, loss of loved ones; working online with limited (or late-night only) connectivity; problems with laptop (or no laptop or access to a computer lab); additional financial burdens; and balancing multiple clashing deadlines for assignment submissions with other aspects of their family and social lives, including care work or part-time employment responsibilities.

The challenges that some students experienced around academic advising, the inability to timeously access student support services, and NSFAS (late payments of stipends; insufficient stipends), directly challenges the underprepared student thesis, a key argument of the deficit model on student access and success. Instead, it points to aspects of under preparedness on the part of the university. Is it possible that while UWC provides many educational resources and staff are generally very supportive, what may be lacking is an overall coordinated integrated system of support to enhance the academic experience? This aspect requires further exploration and analysis, which we begin to pursue in the next two sections.

Finally, national higher education participation rates are still unequally skewed by 'race': Coloured 14.6%; African 15.6%; Indian/Asian 49.3% and White 52.8% (SAIRR 2018, p.578). This disturbing imbalance leads us to question the individual-level focus of a funding model designed to address structural systemic issues. A related policy dilemma is that while we must unfortunately hold on to the apartheid race classifications in order to measure changes in these historical inequalities, we must problematise them in the academic space. An impossible task.

### **Complex social relationships at home and/in academic spaces**

Most respondents described their experiences and interactions with other students and staff as generally pleasant and respectful. They experienced the campus environment as safe and friendly, and many found it easy to fit in to the university community. Some mentioned the improvements they noticed in the campus physical environment since their first year of study. Changes included building renovations, improved residence entrances (new locks), new traffic lights and security cameras, special provisions for people with disabilities (ramps for wheelchair access), and improvements in social, sport and other recreational activities facilities.

Students generally interact with a range of staff around teaching, research and administrative student support-related queries or issues. Interactions in lectures often depend on the size of the module. In 2020, about ten courses (modules) in the Science Faculty had student numbers over 300; with just over 900 students in the largest class and about 550 in the second largest

class. The Arts and Humanities Faculty had over thirty modules in which student enrolment was more than 300. The largest classes had 820 students, followed by about six courses with 700 to 800 students. Both faculties also had many small classes, making it easier, in theory at least, for lecturers to make a connection with individual students. A respondent from the Science Faculty noted that many lecturers encouraged students to participate in class, and often called upon individual students by name, to answer a question in a lecture or laboratory session.

In both faculties, most large first year modules offered tutorials. A few second and third-year modules also offered tutorials, although the criteria for the allocation of tutors was not too clear. In many modules, a small percentage of the total module marks is allocated for tutorial attendance and tutorial exercises, to encourage students to attend and participate. Most respondents felt that tutorial attendance was usually good, and appreciated the opportunity to revise key concepts and readings discussed in lectures, or, in some cases, the opportunity to catch-up with lectures they had missed. Many said they felt relaxed, comfortable and enjoyed the discussions with their tutors and the other students in their small tutorial groups.

For many years the lunch hour was used as an undergraduate lecture period. In 2020, UWC reinstated the lunch hour for students. Many sports and student societies often organise activities during the lunchtime period. It is often the time when off-campus and residence students connect, across their many differences, socialise, find commonalities, have fun, form life-long friendships, even fall in love. Some students in the Science Faculty complained that their almost full timetables leave little space for extracurricular activities on campus.

However, none of this mattered when the physical campus space closed down towards the end of March 2020, with the national lockdown provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Remote teaching and learning made such ‘connecting’ challenging, if not impossible. Many of the students we interviewed showed no interest in joining student organisations on campus, given that the social distancing protocols of the various national lockdown levels were planned to continue. The University’s immediate and complete move to digital technologies and fully online eLearning platforms had disrupted physical face-to-face communication in all academic, administrative and social spaces, except for the few students who had requested to remain in the residences. Students said they missed the social interaction but enjoyed developing their digital skills and engaging with the prepared materials that lecturers used to teach on various online platforms. The *UWC Data and Devices Project* raised funds for

laptops and data for students who faced digital divides. However, many students were unable to function optimally in the rush to emergency remote teaching for most of 2020 and in 2021. The introduction of online learning may have facilitated the continuation of teaching, but many students (and staff) struggled to stay connected for online lectures, which were often poorly attended. Some students felt they were left behind.

Differential access to ICT infrastructure limited students' online participation. The online teaching approaches relied largely on the resources of the individual student or staff members, and not on the public resources and infrastructure of the university such as the library, WiFi, and computer laboratories. Yet, the national ICT policy and regulatory environment restricts connectivity in various ways, with high data costs; downloading costs in zero-rated sites; the idea of data *expiration*; online platform licensing costs, which in 2021 (but not 2020) restricted access to online classes by limiting to the number of participants in iKamva, Zoom and Google Meet platforms); and copyright restrictions and licensing fees paid by individual universities and/or regional consortia, such as CHEC, that increase the costs to access online databases and journals. These market-friendly policy and regulatory environment's restrictions on online access privilege the profit motives of private technology, telecommunications and publishing companies over the academic project. They illustrate the techno-corporate model of higher education change in action.

Personal safety remains a challenge for students in private accommodation, or in off-campus university accommodation. Some interviewees said they did not feel safe on and around campus, especially when travelling to and from campus during the day and early evening. Sometimes this meant missing afternoon classes and tests and instead travelled to their homes earlier out of fear that they might be attacked when using public transport. Many students leave the University before the evening, hence reducing their time to access materials in the library or participate in some sporting or other recreational activity. Others said they did not bring their laptops while coming to the campus. They appreciated the alternative of using one of the many computer laboratories in the different faculties and the library. This is an indication of the safety issue as a societal problem. Respondents cited fear of hijacking, theft, bullying, sexual harassment or rape.

Not all interactions were consistently courteous. Some staff were rude, or unapproachable, which frustrated students, and possibly also staff: *Some of the days you would find them helpful, some days you would find them very rude. I don't want to lie, the other day ... last*



*year, I went to [Office X], and there was this lady in front, and she was very rude and then I went inside, and no one could help me. On that day, as I left [Office X], I was crying. It was like they were all rude. I don't know if they were rude or if I was not emotionally okay. Since that day, I have never been to [Office X] again. (07\_SS15)*

*... the lecturer wants to give you an understanding of what he wants you to know. But the female lecturer was more in terms of 'why can't you understand this?' when for them it is like too easy and you can't understand. Maybe it is not your place to be. ... so most of the time I didn't really go for consultation if it was a female lecturer but when it was a male lecturer it was okay. (inaudible) there was no feeling ... make you feel that you are not able to maintain the level of study that you do and stuff like that. It was mainly with the main course because the main course in [Department X] is female teaching. So those females they are tough especially a specific department in the school. It is a tough female ... you're getting even scared to approach a person because of the way they are portraying themselves – that's the thing. (07\_HS12)*

Some students felt alienated, that they 'don't fit in' because, in their view, of their 'race' or class: *I think during the past, [The University] had only the coloured people. So now, as you can see, there are more people that are black, so I think it has changed in that way. (07\_SS15)*

*It's not easy to fit in when you are a black child, because here are a lot of coloured people. It's so hard to adapt, especially when you are coming from the Eastern Cape, where there are no facilities like the computer lab. (07\_SS16)*

*I quarrelled with a coloured student, but it was over something silly ... I don't know, maybe it's because I am poor, I don't know, but she made some comments about my food and the clothes I was wearing.*

The perceived discomfort with difference captured in the above quotations emerged in previous studies (Koen & Roux, 1995; Barnes, 2007; Ravjee et al., 2010) showing a preference for racial/ethnic social interactions among students. An intersectional lens allows us to understand students' individual perceptions of their social-academic experiences in relation to the broader intersecting webs of domination and privilege of which they, and us as the researchers, are a part. They also provoke questions about the type of university education and campus environment adequate to the task of transgressing apartheid era sensibilities. Addressing similar issues at the University of Stellenbosch, Jansen points out the value of engaging with these issues directly at the level of the curriculum, from the first year onwards:

When a university curriculum challenges already embedded notions about race and society amongst undergraduates, for example, it can have three effects. It affirms what some students already know (e.g. that race is a construction), it evokes resistance (e.g. that there are races and that they are different, end of story) and it troubles familiar knowledge (e.g. that maybe what I know about race could be wrong). The pedagogical task is not to provide students with “the right answers”, but to enable them to question cherished knowledge and to revisit those certainties about race, science and society (Jansen 2020, p.14).

Outside the lecture space, social, sport and other recreational activities build friendships and campus community. These activities, as well as membership in student organisations and clubs and societies, are spaces for understanding the ‘other’. They allow students to connect with each other around different identities – for example, as history society member, debating society member, soccer club member, or member of a volunteer programme or a specific project – than their perceived differences, allowing new common identities to emerge, and a chance to flourish. They also create awareness of campus resources and other activities by circulating information among students, and play a positive role in dealing with and overcoming personal challenges while on campus.

Students who joined volunteer programmes on campus found these spaces to be empowering catalysts for self-discovery, which can have a positive impact on their relationship with each other and with the institution. For example, several students knew about and formed part of the programmes at the Gender Equity Unit on campus. They saw this is a safe space where students who identify with non-normative gender identities and sexual identities have a place which they deeply value and make connections. Participation in other campus activities may improve their academic work, students also get exposed to opportunities to develop a sense of social and political responsibility beyond their academics, which serves greater society through community development work.

These examples in this section also illustrate a key limitation of Tinto’s (1987, 2000) widely cited thesis that increasing opportunities for social and academic integration is a key factor in student success. It is certainly useful to understand student success within the existing curriculum. But, because it underscores questions of power, knowledge and history, the emphasis on *integration* may be of limited relevance to efforts seeking to transform these spaces, and the curriculum, the inherited disciplines themselves. To illustrate this limitation,

consider Koen's (2001) use of Tinto's academic and social integration framework to understand the factors influencing time-to-degree in postgraduate education at UWC. Important academic practices ensuring such integration include student participation in department research projects, seminars, conferences, co-authoring research papers and other opportunities for interaction. However, focusing only on 'integration' – at postgraduate or undergraduate level – underscores the power dynamics of the language, texts, research foci, engaged with, and may require disrupting 'familiar' knowledge – the received view – or viewing it relationally, as Koen does, looking at the how broader socio-economic structural conditions influence students' academic experiences. Similarly, Hames and Lewis (2021) question the integrationist food security discourse dominant in South African universities, which, by focusing only at the individual level, neglects the structural problem of ongoing poverty in educational institutions and in broader society.

Finally, traces of the multiple identities in UWC's historical narrative – from 'tribal college' and 'bush college' to 'struggle university', 'People's university', 'university of the working class' and 'home of the intellectual left' – are faintly visible in its current re-positioning as 'a place of quality, a place to grow: from hope to action through knowledge'. The University website describes UWC as a "research-led, learning and teaching African university with a legacy of social justice, community engagement and graduate employability (<https://www.uwc.ac.za>).” Former students describe UWC as “an ongoing project in fair opportunity and equality, social development, non-racialism and the transformation of an oppressive society into a just one” (Thomas, 2010, pp.xii). Jansen (2022), in contrast, has this to say:

Like all institutions, the university has a chequered history of white racism and Coloured nationalism that still haunts the campus. It had long periods of serious dysfunctionality in battles still not resolved between its council and senior management. There is an ethnic protectionist streak that still runs through some of its staffing appointments. And the extreme violence of its protesting students continues to plague the university as witnessed in late 2021. [and] ... for the most part, the institutional curriculum remains largely untransformed except on the margins of disciplinary knowledge (Jansen, 2022, p.4)

Surprisingly, Jansen's comments provoked no open debate in 2022. Perhaps in private conversations among colleagues, or in (virtual) corridor talk, but no seminar or webinar or

other open forum. While we could argue that student violence must be understood in relation to institutional violence (of the university; of the state), it is puzzling that, given the many opportunities for change and transformation in the turbulence of 1973, 1976 and into the 1980s, and again in 2015 and 2016, how were these opportunities for a decolonised knowledge missed? Instead, the institutional processes stay the same; the institution reproduces itself. What Jansen does not ask is: What can we learn from the case of UWC about South African higher education? What does this case tell us about higher education change, and also the reproduction and ossification of old patterns? Is this a classic case of how an institution remains the same? What explains this reproduction? How does this happen? Is silence and instrumentalism part of the institutional culture? The persisting low success rates (discussed in the next section) is another example of the same phenomenon being reproduced across universities. How do we explain it?

The next two sections expand on the dual meanings of access and success: in relation to the efficiency of the existing academic programmes and questions about attrition, retention and throughput and in relation to the nature of the curriculum and questions about what is taught, how it is taught, who decides, and using what criteria. Both are relevant to understand how students ‘negotiate’ their epistemic access, which may mean different things in each case. The former focuses on the efficiency of student pathways through the academic pipeline; the latter poses questions about the nature of the pipeline itself – the learning environment and the knowledge question; contestations around excluded and included knowledges in higher education curricula.

### **Pathways through the academic pipeline: Epistemic access and success**

The *Post-School Education and Training Monitor* (DHET 2021, p. 67-68) reports that average graduation rates in South African public universities remain low, increasing from around 17% in 2010 to 21% by 2019. Unfortunately, UWC did not avoid this disturbing trend. The Academic Planning Unit’s cohort analysis of the time-to-degree of the first-time entering students into selected three-year Bachelor degree programmes in 2018 (the faculty and programmes are not specified) found that by 2020 only 26% had graduated on time, 47% were still in the system, intending to complete their degrees, and 28% had dropped out (APU, 2022, p.19). By 2021, the corresponding figures were 26%, 45% and 30% respectively. Almost half were still studying and fewer students had graduated than had dropped out. Given past patterns identified by Breier (2010) and Mohlakoana (2015) on students who stop out or change

programmes, it is likely that some may have changed their course of study, or stopped out and were planning to return at a stage to complete their degrees.

However, the problem of academic underachievement in South African higher education, or at UWC, is not a new phenomenon. In fact, has been a persisting pattern since the 1990s (we were unable to find throughput data before then). In the early 2000s the UWC Institutional Operating Plan (IOP) (UWC, 2004, p.36) expressed concern with the “low throughput, prolonged time-to-degree and high attrition rates” of undergraduate and postgraduate students. A few years later, the Academic Planning Unit’s analysis of the time-to-degree for the UWC 2010 first time entering cohort again found that “undergraduate student performance at UWC is characterised by low on time completion, high attrition and delayed completion. ... The data ... for Foundation programmes presents an even bleaker picture” (APU 2017, p.8, 9). More recently, the UWC Retention and Success Document (UWC, 2019) acknowledges the scale and persistence of the problem:

Our retention data show that on average UWC loses around 20% of students by the start of their second year; and an additional 20% of students in the following two years. Our success data shows that on average, at UWC, less than 25% of an average three-year degree cohort completes within regulation time; while a total of 50% drop out. By graduation time, which is the third year of a three-year degree, we would have lost significantly more students (40%) than we graduate (24%). ... We also know that around 80% of students who do not return at the start of their second year, leave UWC despite being academically and financially able to register for a second year of study. (UWC, 2019, p.2)

As shown in Chapter 3, for the UWC 2014 first-time entering cohort, 21% of students registered for three-year undergraduate degrees had graduated after three years, increasing to 49% graduating after five years of study. The corresponding figures for four-year undergraduate degrees are: 33% graduated in four years, increasing to 60% after six years. The time-to-degree for students in the Science and the Arts and Humanities faculties follow the patterns in the national and institutional pictures, and are also differentiated by race and gender (see Chapter 3).

The elephant in the graduation room is that despite increased student funding, institutional resources and support interventions in recent years, the phenomenon of low undergraduate throughput persists, since the 1990s. Why? What is the explanation?

The 2020 UWC Annual Report directly links First Year attrition to students' COVID-19 pandemic-related experiences and their unsuccessful NSFAS application:

First-time entering mainstream and extended curriculum (Foundation provision) enrolment was affected significantly by COVID-19, resulting in higher attrition in these enrolment categories. Annually, the first-time enrolment targets are also affected by students who drop out if they are not successful in terms of their National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) applications (UWC Annual Report, 2020, p.33).

The current Institutional Operating Plan (UWC, 2021, p.24) acknowledges and suggests ways to address this persisting problem. It partly identifies the problem with large modules having low pass rates or with student under-preparedness due to inadequate high school preparation for rigorous academic work.

UWC's student success rates do not compare favourably with the broader national sector, and work has already been done to better understand the factors affecting student success. For example, data shows that early failure increases the chances of drop-out – meaning that students who fail modules at the first-year level, even when promoted to the following year of study, are more likely to drop out in later years. The University has been monitoring modules with low pass rates over a number of years and this has led to the identification of modules with failure rates of between 20% and 29%, and those with failure rates greater than 29%. Of particular concern in the latter group are modules with high enrolment (150 or more students), which are offered in more than one programme, which are prerequisites, and which have experienced low pass rates over time (not just in one year). These modules will receive concerted attention in this IOP cycle (UWC 2021, p.24).

UWC remains committed to the widening and broadening of access to higher education. However, we recognise that students entering university come from very different and unequal schooling environments and, in general, there is a lack of academic preparedness for university studies. These factors have a direct influence on student retention and success. We will continue to make every effort to find effective ways to address the articulation gap between school and university studies. This will include renewed attention being paid to improve the provision of quality

extended curriculum programmes, along with information literacy, computer and e-literacy skills (UWC 2021, p. 24).

Note that in 2020, the Science Faculty taught 134 modules. The pass rate for most modules was over 75% and of these most were over 90%. Only twelve modules had pass rates between 60% and 74%, and one module had a pass rate of 48%. This was a small class with about forty students. The large classes had pass rates between 78% and 98%. The Arts and Humanities Faculty taught 231 modules in 2020. Most module pass rates were also over 75%. About forty modules had pass rates between 55% and 74%. One module had a pass rate of 39%. Two modules, each with one and two students, had a 0% pass rate. Five modules with pass rates less than 70% were large first or second year modules, with more than 300 students (Institutional Planning Office, QA, 2020).

Both faculties monitor this pattern of performance annually, which introduces a related puzzle: if annual pass rates are relatively high, then statistically how is it possible for graduation rates to be extremely low? Could it be in how throughput is calculated? Are students in the mainstream and extended curriculum programme lumped together in the calculations? Note, students enrolled in the ECP complete their first-year modules over two years and therefore complete a three-year Bachelor's degree in four years and a four-year Bachelor's degree over five years. Does the deficit logic around the idea of an 'extended' curriculum and 'ECP student' label which many students carry with them throughout their academic lives, play a role? Alternatively, it may also be related to students being stuck in the system, at the academic-administrative interface. For example, it seems that students who change their programme of study, or who stop-out, are counted under the category 'drop out'. Other factors involve students who work full-time, but also enrol in a full-time programme in order to access the residence. Finally, an area for further study is the degree to which current state interventions to enhance research and build the next generation of academics contradictorily works against undergraduate teaching as a core university function. A good example is the nGAP programme, which requires new academics to do very little teaching when initially hired.

Clearly, this disturbing finding requires further investigation to understand the success rates (defined here as time-to-degree), disaggregated by type of funding, for the Science Faculty and the Arts and Humanities Faculty. Is there a correlation between the type of funding and success rate? What is the success rate of students funded by NSFAS in relation to other fully

funded students in the 2018 cohort, and in relation to non-funded students? More urgently, what specific support do the 45% of students still enrolled in the selected programmes in 2022 require to successfully complete their undergraduate degrees? Such an intervention can positively influence how students negotiate their academic pathways, and may positively change students' academic trajectories towards more intellectually rigorous engagement necessary for academic success. However, it is not clear from our data whether the teaching teams in each academic programme have access to academic performance data for each student from their first year of enrolment.

The Academic Planning Office suggests constant reflection, discussion and vigilance – like the constant gardener, or Schon's reflective practitioner – of academic practices at programme-level, to follow individual student pathways through the academic pipeline:

Therefore, our concern must not be directed only at students who drop out at 1st year, but also for those who continue without having performed well enough. Our promotion codes clearly mask the first-year problem; and when these at-risk students are allowed to proceed while carrying 1st year modules, we may be setting them up for failure when, in the interest of progression, we allow them to take credit loads which may be unmanageable (UWC APU, 2017, p.7).

The APU will continue to provide similar cohort studies for subsequent cohorts, and will disseminate findings to faculties through regular Faculty roadshows in order to direct attention to the dire need to understand the patterns of retention and success in the University and to persuade all of the need to direct our intentional action to improving student retention and success for our undergraduate students (UWC APU, 2017, p. 9).

The focus is simultaneously on student retention and on-time graduation (the pipeline metaphor is helpful to understand this process), and the quality and rigour of engagement in individual courses of academic programmes and courses. In this process, the agency of staff is to engage with, and not lose touch with, individual students in their intellectual journeys from their first year to their graduation. This approach may be the beginnings of a deliberative model of academic engagement around students' epistemic access. It is evident in the supportive networks around the work-study programme, and in research that moves beyond the 'barriers to learning' discourse, and towards building academic community focused on student success. An instructive example is Ngalo-Morrison's study (2017). Her interviews



with students who succeeded against all odds, found – not deficit, or lack (of funds; of skills; of motivation; of preparedness; of cultural capital) that casts students as docile bodies without agency – but resilience, nurtured by positive relationships, coordinated interventions, and community cultural wealth. She borrows the latter concept from Yosso (2005) to recognise students’ diverse strengths in, staying with the Marxist metaphor, what she calls aspirational, social, navigational, familial, resistant and linguistic capital. Such a strengths-based approach, which partly influenced our own research approach, provides an alternative starting point to understand student success:

While it is important to understand factors contributing to the low throughput rates in the undergraduate and postgraduate studies, it is equally important to identify what works for those who succeed. This is what is unique about this case study even though it focuses only on undergraduate sponsored students at UWC. ... participants in this study attributed their success to nurtured resilience across the institution, and the supportive relationships established through structured intervention programmes in and out of class. It is important to note, contrary to findings in other studies, that low socio-economic background was more of a motivational factor and being resourceful for social mobility (Ngalo-Morrison 2017, p.78).

This type of a more open deliberative model, instead of the currently dominant role-plier model of communication, may be better able to address the contradictions of epistemic access. It can increase opportunities to expand the meanings of ‘insider’ in a vibrant and diverse campus community, and building academic community around this, at different levels, through: reflections on curriculum; the rethinking of normal practice inspired by pandemic (for example, the sit-down examination; the three-hour lecture); monitoring student engagement; and expanding opportunities for social interactions across campus spaces.

### **The terrain of curriculum**

The ambiguity of epistemic access becomes evident when we think about what may or may not be considered to be successful kinds of epistemic access. Take the example of the knowing subject, and consider a student who, following the usual conventions and doing the necessary academic work of seriously and closely studying the inherited colonial, patriarchal and heteronormative curriculum, achieves an 80% pass. Does that student have epistemic access? Now consider a second student, who on the basis of critiquing the inherited disciplinary

traditions using counter-narratives to the dominant epistemological traditions, also achieves an 80% pass. Does this student have epistemic access? Both students have successfully passed the course, Student 1 on the basis of affirming the inherited tradition, and Student 2 on the basis of critiquing it.

You may ask: what is the point of this example? The example illustrates, first, that the focus on epistemic access necessarily also raises questions about which epistemes, and to whose epistemic traditions, access is being sought. This is an important curriculum debate, with which we did not engage given the theoretical demarcation of our project.<sup>25</sup> These questions about epistemic access fall outside the theoretical scope of the current investigation. They require further probing in follow-up interviews with academic staff, and will allow us to also focus on the meanings of access and of success in different disciplinary regimes. They provoke us to ask, “access to which episteme, and whose knowledge”. The focus shifts from pathways through the academic pipeline, and steps in the student walk, to the nature of the pipeline. Here, the metaphor of the gate, as opposed to a ‘barriers to learning’ discourse, is helpful to understand the contestations in this process, as illustrated in the earlier discussion of UWCs once vibrant the part-time programme.

Secondly, the critical cultural lens makes visible how everyday academic practices and academic cultures can construct, or set up, different kinds of subject positions – the knowing subject; the underprepared subject; the heterosexual subject; the racial subject; the gendered subject; the national subject; the ECP student; the literate subject; and so on. For example, the subject position of ‘underprepared student’ was not visible in the South African higher education scholarship until the 1990s when the racial construction of students as underprepared first emerged. Yet, low throughput and high attrition rates were evident among White students in South African universities since the 1930s (Ngalo-Morrison’s 2017, p.123). The alternative interpretation opens up space to problematise these categories, see them discursively, a view that dominant techno-corporate models of change do not make visible. For example, an ongoing policy dilemma of change is that, on the one hand, we need to hold on to the apartheid language and practice of race classifications in order to ‘measure’ change in participation and graduation rates. But, on the other, in holding on to them are we not

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<sup>25</sup> We need to tease out the meanings of epistemological access, epistemic access, dominant epistemologies, counter narratives and episteme; or at least clarify our working definition in this project.

perpetuating what Alexander (2007) refers to as race-thinking or what Ramose (2016), in relating this practice to questions of epistemic justice, calls skin-colour-oriented reasoning?

Thirdly, this kind of critical approach to understand the terrain of education emphasises the extent to which institutions to which access is sought are themselves changing. Creating institutional spaces for historically excluded knowledges to re-emerge cannot ignore the power relations between knowledge traditions set up as hierarchical dichotomies (for example, mainstream botany versus ethnobotany). The exclusion of subaltern knowledges and languages from university curricula occurred as part of the same historical processes that shaped the growth of disciplinary knowledge, determined patterns of inclusion and exclusion and defined academic practices and relationships. If the end goal is to better understand the human condition, then the point may be neither to ‘purge’ racist, sexist or homophobic content from curricula, nor to exclude knowledge traditions from other contexts, but to view them relationally. Therefore, addressing the knowledge question in the contested terrain of curriculum construction takes us back to a Freirean pedagogy of dialogical encounters between knowing subjects, evident in the South African Students Organisation (SASO) leadership schools of the late 1960s and early 1970s and, more recently, in the evening teach-ins during the student protests in 2015 and 2016. Viewing academic practices as neutral too easily ignores, or focuses attention away from, contestations around knowledge. Critical frameworks allow us to re-focus attention on the power relationships that created the knowledge dichotomies in the first place.

### **Conclusion**

Epistemic access can be understood in at least two ways. The first meaning emphasises the efficiency of student pathways through the academic pipeline, and involves questions about access and success. We found that success rates are low, and are skewed by race and gender. The persistence of this pattern since the 1990s, despite increased funding and other resources and countless support interventions, remains a puzzle. How do we explain it? This is not a new finding, and reflects a national trend – it is not a uniquely UWC phenomenon – a crisis in the system, that may be illustrative of a broader condition plaguing South African higher education. When considering the complex interrelated factors influencing students’ success rates – around financial factors, academic under preparedness, uneasy transitions from school to university life, and institutional factors and cultures – our data suggest that the significance of institutional factors, including models of change, is generally under-appreciated.

The second meanings of epistemic access poses questions about the nature of the pipeline itself including the learning environment and the knowledge question, especially contestations around the relationship between excluded and included bodies, knowledges and languages in higher education curricula; about what is taught, how it is taught, who decides, and using what criteria. In short, questions around decolonising the curriculum. Both meanings are relevant to understand the nature of the academic experience and how students ‘negotiate’ their epistemic access, which may mean different things in each case.

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## **Chapter 9: Understanding epistemic access and success of historically disadvantaged students at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits)**

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### **Introduction**

Since 1994 there has been a significant number of transformation initiatives in higher education in South Africa. Among these initiatives has been a focus on promoting equal access and success in higher education to everyone despite their race and background. The three principles of “equitable distribution of resources and opportunities; the redress of historical inequity; and the need for quality” are central to the access and success project (NCHE, 1996, p. 28). Although we now witness a significant number of historically disadvantaged students being enrolled (formal entry) into higher education following the institutionalisation of free higher education for this group of students, there are epistemic challenges that were born out of this. Of major concern are the persistent inequalities characterised by differentiated student performance, which have always tended to follow the contours of race, social class and ethnicity in our universities and have continued to pose challenges to the majority of the black students. It is now more important than ever to make progress on access and success for all students, regardless of their race and background. However, universities can only venture into this project meaningfully when they make an effort to comprehensively understand the experiences of students from their pre-enrolment experiences through their university and academic experiences, up to their intentions for the future. Their experiences prior to enrolment are likely to impact on how they experience university life and are likely to provide insights into how universities determine the kinds of interventions needed for disadvantaged students.

Thus, in this study we capture the experiences of the disadvantaged groups from their pre-enrolment experiences of home background, high school experiences, decision-making to join universities, choice of universities and their expectations of what the university life might be like exploring their university environment and academic experiences up to their future intentions. We argue that their experiences prior to enrolment have an impact on how they experience life at the university and that consequently contributes to their future. Our argument is threefold: Firstly, apart from the internal strategies used to promote access and success in universities, students’ pre-enrolment experiences are not utilised in determining

the extent to which they might be related to access and success. Secondly, despite the tremendous progress in widening epistemic access to the formerly disadvantaged groups, epistemological access is largely still an uphill task and for those who succeed, they do so against the odds (Masten, 2011) and by inspiration. We posit that both the disadvantaged students and the institution need to work more in unison for the students to have positive experiences on campus. We concur with Baldwin et al. (2020, p.26) arguing that “efforts on both fronts need to work in tandem to maximise the potential for success for students”.

## **Background and Historical Narratives of Wits**

### **Wits context during the apartheid era**

The history of education in South Africa is as differentiated along racial lines as the South African society itself. The first universities to be built from around the 1820s were predominantly White universities, also referred to as Historically White Universities (HWU). The University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) being one of such and the third oldest, established in 1896. The first university established for black South Africans was the University of Fort Hare, in 1916.

### **Wits context Post 1994 dispensation**

As a former HWU, Wits has largely maintained its culture that corresponds more to the ‘highbrow’ middle class culture, to which most of the students coming from black and especially disadvantaged backgrounds do not subscribe or relate. The cultural shock that comes with finding oneself in such an environment is daunting for most of these students. The resultant effects have been the increased number of incompletions through dropouts. According to the Council for Higher Education report (CHE, 2010), 20% of students enrolled at Wits were excluded mainly on academic or financial grounds. The combination of such an historical background of an institution such as Wits and the concerning statistics of students failing to complete their programmes of study, is what prompted this study. The calibre of these students from disadvantaged backgrounds who fall into the category of those excluded brings to the fore the situations surrounding these students who will form the centre of the study.

With regard to students from township and rural areas accessing higher education, the probability of this happening is significantly low. According to the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) report of 2016, out of 200 black students that start off in primary school, only one is expected to do well enough and study programmes such as

engineering (Macha, 2017). Largely, this is attributed to the poorly-resourced schools they attended, characterised by the lack of basic resources that enhance the learning of sciences, including well-resourced laboratories, chemicals to facilitate laboratory work as well as adequately-qualified teachers to conduct science lessons. Reddy et al. (2015) carried out a comparison of performance in the TIMSS between township and rural schools, which are public no-fee schools qualifying for Quintiles 1 to 3, and other fee-paying and independent types of school. The summary of their results is in Table 46, below:’

**Table 46: Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study**

	<b>Public no-fee schools</b>	<b>Public fee-paying schools</b>	<b>Independent Schools</b>
Mathematics	19%	60%	81%
Science	16%	58%	81%

(Source: Reddy et al., 2015, p.8)

It is therefore in light of students from such backgrounds that thrive and find themselves in institutions of higher education, and in the case of this study, a former HWU, that the study seeks to explore the phenomena of access and success. The World Bank (2017) reporting on education in South Africa, explains how only a small number of ‘outliers’ in schools in Quintiles 1 to 3 produced good enough results to earn them entry into university, with a slim chance of 12% of Grade 8 entrants in Quintile 1 to 3 schools making it to achieve a Bachelor pass in Matric 2008 (Moses et al., 2017). According to Van Broekhuizen et al. (2016) close to a third of students that matriculated and qualified for university entrance, never made it to university in 2008. Part of this challenge was resolved in the aftermath of the 2015 #FeesMustFall movement that saw a reversal of the planned 10.5% fee hike and later the turning of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) from a loan to a bursary. The NSFAS plays a significant role in enabling poor learners to attend HEIs. According to Van Broekhuizen et al. (2016), the NSFAS has supported 48% and 46% of students, from Quintile 1 and 2 schools respectively, who had enrolled at university. With such progress in having ensured the access for these students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the next step in this study is in exploring their epistemic access and success in higher education.

### **Campus Culture vis-à-vis Epistemic Access: Theoretical Underpinnings**

Issues of access and success at university closely relate to culture and its various facets that interplay between the higher education institutions, the staff and the students. Literature points out that organisational culture impacts on its members “since it includes a system of rules and work guidelines, both formal and informal, as well as a range of rituals and traditions, behavioural patterns of the employees working within the given structure, management style and levels of cooperation” (Vasyakin et al., 2016, p.11516). The implication here is that organisational culture has an effect on employees’ work attitude, and sense of obligation and responsibility towards each other and the organisation at large. The ways these aspects play out are likely to affect student interactions on campus. Based on numerous iterations, we singled out campus culture as worth theorising. Campus culture is a combination of various cultures created jointly by all university persons and accumulated in the long-term process of institution governance (Shen & Tian, 2012). Campus culture is characterised by certain ways of doing things, communicating, and merging of new cultures. The construction of campus culture could be constrained in various ways. Literature points out that these constraints include restrictions from people, their abilities and capabilities determine the quality of academic activities, restrictions from the humanities environments of the campus value systems and policy orientation, regulations and interpersonal relations; and restrictions from material conditions. (Shen & Tian, 2012).

### **Epistemic Access and Cultural Dimensions**

Efforts to widen access into higher education to include disadvantaged groups in society have been faced with challenges. In addition to the financial challenges that directly affect the formal access of these students into higher education institutions, are the social and cultural challenges they face. In the discourse around access, there has been the concept of epistemological access which addresses the ability of students to “learn how to become successful participants in the academic practice” (Morrow, 2009, p.78). The description provides two sides of viewing epistemic access: first is the learning part which is the responsibility of the student, and second is the space in which this is to occur, which is the tertiary institution. Both aspects of epistemological access concur with Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 1986).

The university that is the subject of this case study, the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) is among the oldest universities in the country and was one of the Historically White

Universities (HWU). The university has, to a large extent, held on to a culture that would be considered ‘highbrow’ or middle class (Sullivan, 2001). The expectation is for students to assimilate this culture and disposition (*habitus*) that will enhance their learning and ensure their survival. Students coming from working class backgrounds (township and rural areas) experience the shock of finding themselves in an environment where the culture is alien. Getting accustomed to the medium of communication (English) and developing academic skills such as writing, analytical and critical thinking, ICT capability and independent learning, proves to be a struggle for most students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. (Cross & Atinde, 2015).

### **Reality of Being ‘Disadvantaged’ in the Face of Higher Education environment**

The majority of students deemed as disadvantaged come from backgrounds that are characterised by resource constraints and inadequacy. This is reflected in the home environment and the quality of education that they are subjected to prior to entering higher education. Unlike their counterparts from middle-class families who attend well-resourced urban schools and mostly former Model C schools, those from rural and township areas bring with them experiences from schools that were under-resourced, with teachers that were mostly underqualified (Jones et al., 2008).

The above issues have a way of denying these students the epistemic access that they need to navigate higher education successfully. In the case of Wits, a system of fair discrimination in its admission policy was adopted, realising the struggles, and uneven opportunities that rural and township students have over their counterparts from advantaged backgrounds. Wits has a particular quota apportioned to top-performing rural learners as well as those from Quintile 1 and 2 schools (Matsepe et al., 2020).

Despite the seemingly positive move towards ensuring access to disadvantaged students, there are still trends that reflect the gap in epistemic access evidenced by student throughput, retention and success. These tend to favour historical patterns of privilege. The experience in most universities, including Wits, could be what Dawes et al. (1999) described as the ‘revolving door syndrome,’ where the efforts made to incorporate disadvantaged students result in their being pushed out of the system as a result of failure to negotiate the system (epistemic access). Letseka and Maile (2008) revealed that as much as 70% of university dropouts came from disadvantaged backgrounds. In terms of throughput, the CHE (2010) reported 30% of students across faculties at Wits graduating within the recommended time,

with 70% graduating within two years beyond the expected time. According to the report, African students continue to lag behind White students in completing their programmes. The question to ask is what makes the disadvantaged students succeed against all odds?

### **Trending discourses in higher education**

The higher education landscape is changing in accordance with changes in the student body and student needs. Discourses that are trending in current debates in higher education worth noting include decolonisation, transformation, and the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR).

### **Decolonisation movement**

Decolonisation is one of the key priorities for higher education to contribute to significant transformation, social cohesion, and addressing the difficult past (Heleta, 2018; Osman & Maringe, 2019). Current debates focus on curriculum decolonisation (Heleta, 2018; Ndamane, 2018). However, a compelling body of empirical evidence demonstrates that the university curriculum is still mainly Eurocentric and androcentric, deep-rooted in the oppressive colonial rule, apartheid dispossession, looting and humiliation of Africa and its people (Heleta, 2016; Ndamane, 2018; Osman & Maringe, 2019). A substantial amount of research concurs that a complete overhaul through a decolonisation education approach is a useful way to provide universities in South Africa with the type of educational access that is the emerging Afrocentric humanness (Fataar, 2018; Heleta, 2016; Ndamane, 2018).

We have witnessed some efforts in expanding physical access to higher education to the disadvantaged students, however, epistemological access remains a nightmare for this group of students in South Africa (Osman & Maringe, 2019). This is exacerbated by the decline in government university subsidy since 1994. For example, in 1994, the University of the Witwatersrand had 70% of its expenses covered by government subsidies; but in 2013 it had been reduced to 30% (Griffiths, 2019). The reduction in subsidy has meant that students would largely pay huge amounts of fees and that sparked the #FeesMustFall movement. Both the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements are an indication that students felt that there is still a lot to be done in the decolonisation project.

### **Transformation agenda**

While the notion of transformation has become an overarching and central discourse through which higher education institutions aim to implement contemporary policy directives with the goal to stir their agendas, this discourse has complexity. Transformation is said to be

dissimilar and multifaceted, “vague and indistinct” (Shariffuddin et al., 2017, p.65). When used interchangeably with the two concepts of change and reform, transformation becomes loosely defined (Maringe, 2017) and is “neither a single objective nor an orderly process,” it rather encompasses multiple efforts and challenges (Botsis et al., 2013, p.130). How transformation is currently conceptualised within institutions, especially in former colonies, does not bring radical and necessary change. In fact, despite the efforts to transform, higher education institutions worldwide lag behind in meeting their goals (Leal Filho et al., 2018). Maringe described this kind of transformation in universities in Africa as cosmetic because it is largely only aimed at:

...replacing Whites with Blacks in senior leadership positions, however because of their previous training and experience or inexperience, they often replicate the old ways which in turn promote institutional stagnation rather than transformation (2017, p.3).

Some available literature reports of much reform in the universities. For example, introducing and giving new titles to the courses and developing “new names and forms of assessment” (Sharriffudin et al, 2017, p.127). However, it is further argued that what hinders true transformation is that “the central purpose of this new curriculum and forms of assessment” still replicate those of colonial education. Stakeholders lack the skills and expertise for fundamental transformation. Africanisation should be the guiding philosophy or principle of this transformation (Maringe, 2017, p.4).

Wits has however, put in place seven critical focus areas that promote transformation of the curriculum (Wits, 2020). The plans include among others, increased flexible and lifelong learning, strengthening institutional capacity for curriculum development and renewal, and diversifying assessment methods (Wits, 2020).

#### **The fourth industrial revolution (4IR)**

A substantial amount of research discusses how the 4IR is a step forward in equipping students with 21<sup>st</sup> century skills for future effective participation in the global economy. The skills that universities teach should have a major aim to “reflect complex, competitive, knowledge-based, information age, technology driven economy and society” (Cantwell & Salmon, 2019, p.60). The 21<sup>st</sup> century skills are categorised by Ama and Emetarom (2000) into three major groups: The first group is learning skills which involve critical thinking, creative thinking, collaboration, and communication. The second group is literacy skills which involve

information literacy, media literacy and technology literacy. The third group is life skills which involves flexibility, initiative, social skills, productivity, and leadership (Ama & Emetarom, 2000 p.364). This aligns with Wits' list of planned skills meant to equip learners with skills relevant for the ever-evolving world (Wits, 2020). However, we also note that the description of 'the Wits graduate' almost meets the relevant skills of the 4IR. For example, a Wits graduate is described as "equipped with skills to become an active agent of change" and is also "a global leader who believes in innovation as a vehicle for transformation" (Wits, 2020 p.15). Thus, we argue in this report that universities should be in a position to harness the potential of the 4IR in equipping the learners with what is needed now and in the future. It has been argued that digital transformation will destroy jobs but also create new ones with a new set of skills which if we wish students to remain relevant to the context, universities should begin to be serious in imparting those skills.

### **Conceptual and theoretical framework**

The Theory of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) by Yosso ((2005), the Theory of Resilience and the concept of campus culture were used to conceptualise the experiences of successful disadvantaged students. We deployed these to gain a deeper understanding of how successful but disadvantaged students negotiate their epistemic access and success. There is an overlap in how campus culture and some aspects deemed as cultural capital, enhance the sense of resilience, as discussed in the findings and analysis of the study. Students in the targeted group have been excluded from previous studies that put emphasis on the deficit models and theories; hence the experiences of successful disadvantaged students have not been sufficiently captured.

### **Community Cultural Wealth**

In her theory of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW), Yosso (2005) argues that how, despite not possessing the capitals deemed necessary for successful navigation of higher education (Bourdieu's (1990) economic, social, and cultural capitals), students from disadvantaged backgrounds acquire 'compensatory capital' through their communities. These capitals come in six forms: Aspirational, Familial, Linguistic, Navigational, Social and Resistance capitals. According to Yosso, regardless of the challenges encountered by disadvantaged families, they still possess aspirational capital, that is, the power to aspire for a better life. This argument explains why they would go ahead against the negative prognosis on their performance and excel. The second is familial capital which includes non-material support from family in the



form of strong bonds, expectations and aspirational support. The third form of cultural capital which ties closely to aspirational capital is linguistic capital characterised by the wealth of knowledge obtained through activities such as story-telling that in return provides an edge when it comes to memorisation and attention to detail, both of which are worthwhile in their academics. Navigational capital has some semblance to determination in the face of hostile and unfamiliar terrain. For students from disadvantaged backgrounds finding themselves in university environments, which in more than one way are alien to them, learn to discover ways of getting around and accustoming themselves to the environment. Then there is social capital which has to do with interactions and intimate relations with family, friends, the community and others. Finally, resistance capital, which Yosso considers as having historical roots especially among people of colour who from time immemorial, have been subjected to various forms of oppression. To this, Yosso considers such people to have over time, developed a thick skin to withstand opposition of any sort (Yosso, 2005).

By interrogating students' experiences throughout their years from childhood, some aspects that may shed light on how they may have successfully navigated higher education as disadvantaged students, may be revealed. Within Yosso's cultural capitals, there is an element of resilience (Nishimi, Choi, Cerutti., Powers, Bradley, & Dunn 2021).

### **Theory of resilience**

Chiramba (2020) demonstrated how the refugee students in higher education exhibited various dimensions of resilience and ascribed the circumstances around them to have played a significant role in their development of resilience. The dimensions include adaptive, adoptive, anticipative and transformative capacities (Bahudur et al., 2015; Jeans et al., 2017). Resilience implies "mindsets, behaviours and resources that can be cultivated and developed, but it also entails a sense of self as someone who recovers from setbacks" (Baldwin et al., 2020, p.19). We therefore argue that in order to understand the concept of resilience and make it contribute more to a socially just higher education, we should consider exploring its multi-layered nature, which of course gives us its various capacities. We further argue that social structure plays a significant role in individual resilience so we should shy away from presenting resilience as exclusive to individuals.

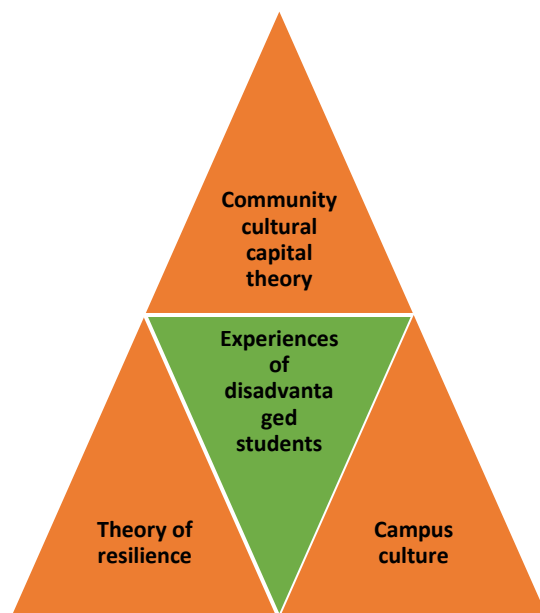
We draw on the theory of resilience to analyse how students from disadvantaged communities negotiate the seemingly alien university space and succeed. On this score, our argument is threefold; firstly, we explore how students exhibit resilience in stressful and difficult

situations; secondly, we scrutinise how universities help to boost the students' resilience, and thirdly, we inspect how and to what extent universities are resilient in transforming their structures to promote access and success to students.

### **Campus culture**

Yosso's CCW framework allows us to view universities as agents with the ability to provide support to students, thus reverse the view of them as institutional gatekeepers for the privileged students. We also draw on the concept of campus culture to understand the successes of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Campus culture comprises three aspects: institutional culture, which involves the systems' operational rules and regulations, rituals, traditions, management, and restriction mechanisms that guarantees the orderly development of campus culture, with goals and mission defining institutional values, institutional culture impacts on its members; material culture involving facilities and the environment; and spiritual culture involving individual cultural activities showing values and behaviours (Shen & Tian, 2012). "With different culture values, different forms of activity, plus different forms of culture converging on campus, campus culture becomes diverse (Shen & Tian, 2012, p.62) and dynamic." We explore how campus culture plays out to promote or hinder student success.

According to Figure 32 below, there is an overlap in how campus culture and some aspects deemed as cultural capital enhance the sense of resilience, as discussed in the findings and analysis of the study.



**Figure 32: Conceptual Framework**

## **Methodological complexities**

To gain an understanding of the experiences of successful students from disadvantaged communities, we deployed a qualitative methodological case study with an interpretive approach. It is based on data drawn from two of the five faculties at Wits, namely the Faculty of Humanities and the Faculty of Science. Due to the challenges posed by the Coronavirus diseases, this study ended up being a technology-mediated research resulting in the shifting of the relationship between the subject and object of research, as discussed in the sections below.

## **Databases and identification of participants**

The main project for this case study identified two participating faculties - Humanities and Sciences and six data sets from where the data was to be drawn. Purposive sampling of participants was confined to undergraduate students from the two faculties. A matrix of the selection criteria comprised of black South African students from disadvantaged backgrounds (from rural or township schools who are on the NSFAS programme) who are in their final year of study and were succeeding by virtue of them being in their final year (either third or fourth year) of undergraduate studies.

## **Accessing participants - Fieldworkers' experience**

Access to participants was complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and restrictions, and the subsequent shut down of the institution. Fieldworkers had a torrid task to identify participants for the project, since contacting the students took longer than expected. The one-hour interviews intended as face-to-face changed to virtual and remote sessions. Scheduling interviews did not automatically guarantee that the interviews would be conducted as some potential participants would not honour the schedules. Those who participated complained of the length of the interviews to the point that some would leave in the middle of the interview. A few would agree to complete the remaining part at a later stage but in most cases, were not reachable to complete the interview. Two students did not fully engage in the process and so they opted out during the interviews. There were also problems of network connectivity on the part of the participants which at times, was so bad that some sessions had to be rescheduled. This gave rise to having segmented transcriptions like 08\_HS03a\_0917; 08\_HS03b\_0917 and 08\_HS03c\_0917.

However, not all of this was a bad experience. Some students were excited to be interviewed since this enabled them to air their views and that amidst lockdown, they were contacted to talk about their university, thus giving them hope and a sense of belonging. The interviews were digitally recorded in an audio setup, as per signed consent form. In some cases, consent was given verbally before the commencement of the interview.

### **Making sense of the data**

This case study's methodology is skewed towards the use of digital infrastructure, ways of doing the research and analysing data - 'the new normal'. The preliminary analysis was done using the MaxQDA software. We began by importing the interview transcriptions into MaxQDA. We created cases for each of the thirty-four students and ten staff members (six academic and four support). Each case had an interview transcript. We read the transcriptions many times to grasp the content. We generated ten coloured codes for each group of participants that we used to begin generating meaning from the transcriptions. The codes were:

Code: ● Students' family, home, and community background

Code: ● Students' high school background

Code: ● Decision, expectation, and choice of university

Code: ● University environment / support

Code: ● Academic experience

Code: ● Residence life

Code: ● Financial situation

Code: ● Extra-curricular experiences

Code: ● Changing university experience

Code: ● Future progression

After coding all the interview transcripts, the coded segments were retrieved separately and the researchers generated narratives on each of the retrieved segments. There was regular communication among the researchers, where thoughts and analyses were shared and interrogated - some form of triangulation. This was followed by thematic analysis.

## **Limitations of the study**

The major limitation was difficulty in accessing university personnel in order to gain access to relevant documents and reports since staff were working from home due to the lockdown. This was exacerbated by the fact that they could only be reached by email, and this took time. In some cases, one resorted to purposive data collection comprising online visits to university websites, but only a few documents could be sourced. The slow pace in data collection affected the ethical issues, which however, could not be compromised. The ethics letter that was to expire in April 2021 had to be extended to December 2021.

## **Contextualising Wits**

Full university status was granted to the University of the Witwatersrand, popularly known as Wits, in 1922. Wits is a research-intensive university situated in the metropolitan city of Johannesburg (Joburg), or 'Egoli', meaning City of Gold. This geographical location puts the university in the limelight considering that the city of Johannesburg is not only the largest city in South Africa but also is among the top populous African cities. The University is not far removed from the grime and precarity of Joburg's city centre and can capitalise on the many dynamic opportunities in the space - this is unique in this country (Amato, 2021, 12 August, Curiosity magazine).

Wits comprises five faculties, each with a number of schools. For this study, attention is on the faculties of Humanities and Science. The polarisation of these two faculties in terms of geographical location, student enrolment, performance and throughput among other differences, warranted the choice.

In terms of accommodation, Wits has 18 residences across campuses that house "20% of the university population" (Facts and Figures 2020-2021, p.3). On the matter of residences, the Vice Chancellor reported (Wits, 2019a, p.17) that "we have managed to increase student accommodation with assistance from private companies but financing for private accommodation supply does remain an issue".

## **Organisation of Humanities and Science Faculties and their Schools**

The Faculty of Humanities has six schools while the Faculty of Science has nine. Geographically, both faculties are in the Braamfontein area with Humanities based on the East Campus and Science on the West Campus. The striking situation is that while the two faculties share the infrastructure to the extent that you find students from each of the faculties

in both campuses, the students do not mingle, they maintain their faculty identities - Humanities: smart, outgoing and professional and Sciences: serious, laboratory-bound and industrious (Ndofirepi, 2015). While this is not surprising, it will be interesting to see if student epistemic access and success can be enhanced if humanities students mingle more with science students.

### **Wits statistical overview**

Different statistical data sets paint a picture of where Wits currently stands in terms of headcount enrolments, gender, race, graduation rates and student success (Facts and Figures, 2020-2021). The data reflect on how the institution is faring in meeting the higher education policies that address issues of equality, redress and equity. What is worth noting in this report are the graduation rates and course pass rates of the two faculties in question.

### **Graduation rates**

When students enrol for a programme, it is expected that they will graduate. The table below shows the number and percentage of students who graduated at Wits by faculty from 2016 to 2020. The graduation rate is the number of students that graduate against those that enrolled.

**Table 47: Number and percentage of graduates by faculty 2016-2020**

Faculty	Total Number and Percentage of Graduates by Faculty 2016-2020									
	2016		2017		2018		2019		2020	
Humanities	2 231	25.94 %	2 613	28.62 %	2 641	27.40 %	2 780	27.89 %	2 731	26.84 %
Sciences	1 271	14.78 %	1 319	14.45 %	1 326	13.76 %	1 369	13.74 %	1 430	14.06 %

(Source: Adopted from Facts and Figures 2020-2021)

From 2014 to 2020, the Faculty of Humanities maintained an average graduation rate of 27% while the Faculty of Science had an average graduation rate of 14%. However, Wits graduates get employed almost immediately upon graduation. According to the Wits Graduate Exit Survey of 2019, “93% of the Wits employed graduates were employed within 6 months of graduation” (Facts and Figures, 2020-2021).

## Student Success Rates

The enrolment of individual courses is calculated as the number of courses passed as a percentage of courses enrolled for.

**Table 48: Wits student success rates**

	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>
<b>Undergraduates</b>	83.16%	82.90%	82.60%	83.39%	86.96%
<b>Postgraduates</b>	76.72%	76.04%	76.46%	78.04	77.17%
<b>Total</b>	<b>81.72%</b>	<b>81.36%</b>	<b>81.22%</b>	<b>82.13%</b>	<b>84.61%</b>

(Adopted from Facts and Figures 2020 - 2021)

There has been a steady increase in success rates for Wits as a whole (see Table 34 above). Of the total number of courses undergraduate students took in 2016, a pass rate of 83.16% was realised in 2016 and 86.96% in 2020.

## The Wits culture of excellence: context and trajectory

An analysis of available university documents and reports indicates that the university has transformed drastically in accordance with the higher education landscape in South Africa and student support initiatives at Wits. Plans are continuously drawn, implemented and evaluated, revealing key moments of institutional trajectories in epistemic access and success.

### Planning and implementation of the student epistemic access and success agenda

Wits' three key features of being "locally embedded, nationally responsive and globally competitive", are reflected in its policy documents that are developmental in nature (Wits, 2019a, p.5). The Wits policy frameworks and reports provide guidelines to the mandate of the university and its key areas of concern as well as its successes or failures. The university's Annual Performance Plans, as directed by the Strategic Frameworks (university visions and missions), and, partly guided by the Teaching and Learning Plans and the Enrolments Plans, correlate to the trajectories the university is taking in meeting the mandates of the Department of Higher Education and Training.

For this study, it is important to reflect on the historical changes and innovations that have taken place at Wits in the last 10 years because this affects enrolment, teaching and learning as well as social experiences of the group of students included in this study. One such change

is in enrolment, which addresses the access agenda. According to the Five-Year Review of Teaching and Learning 2015-2019 (Wits, 2019a), the enrolment figures have increased steeply from over 29 000 in 2009 to about 38 000 in 2019, of which over half were women. The Review points out that:

The thrust of the 2009-2013 Teaching and Learning Plan, linked closely to the University's enrolment plan, thus centred on facilitating access to higher education for students from all backgrounds, and transforming the student body in terms of race and gender to broadly reflect the demographics of South Africa (Wits, 2019a, p.5).

This quotation suggests that until 2013, the university aimed at enabling access to students from disadvantaged communities as well as emphasising issues of race and gender in informing the composition of the student body to match with the country's demographics. This is a great achievement for the university. Nevertheless, the issue of success for the diverse group of students has posed a challenge in terms of providing "high-quality and satisfying student experiences based on the entire learning environment" (Wits, 2018 p.10). There was an increase in undergraduate student enrolments with a mismatch in student success rates due to the lowering of financial barriers and the announcement of free education following the #FeesMustFall protests in 2016-2017. According to the Five-Year Review of Teaching and Learning 2015-2019:

Wits was at the epicentre of the protests that swept across the country. The #FeesMustFall protests resulted in a significant disruption of the higher education system, and while Wits did not technically lose many teaching days, the national mood impacted adversely on the well-being of the Wits community and beyond and influenced the academic performance of some students (Wits 2019a, p.7).

This scenario specifically affected the university's Vision 2022 Strategic Framework where Wits envisioned itself as an internationally championing research-intense university situated in Africa and its mission being to expand globally and "become a gateway to research and engagement and international achievement in Africa" (Wits 2018, p.8). To work towards fulfilling its vision, two main Wits policy documents, the Wits Enrolment Plan 2013-2019 (Wits, 2012) and the 2015-2019 Learning and Teaching Plan (Wits, 2014), mapped out the shape and size of the university concerning its student enrolment, throughput rates and student success and staffing arrangements. With reference to enrolment size and shape, there is a



carefully strategised plan for a gradual year-by-year increase in postgraduate student enrolments and a subsequent decrease in undergraduate student enrolments to a point where the ratio of undergraduates to postgraduates reached 55:45, a deliberate move towards addressing the research-intensive agenda. The-then Vice Chancellor further reiterated that “[T]he University continues on an upward trajectory in terms of our mandate as a research-intensive university...” (Wits, 2018, p.17). Thus, “[i]mportant to the institution’s academic excellence, reputation, financial strength and values, as per the Strategic Framework 2022 is how the university manages its size, quality and diversity of its enrolment” (Wits, 2018, p 12).

So, unlike the 2009-2013 Teaching and Learning Plan that mainly focused on enabling access, the thrust of the 2015-2019 Learning and Teaching Plan was ensuring access with success. This major shift and development, we argue, has informed the current Wits’ success in increased graduation figures and success rates (see Tables 47 and 48).

### **A university transforming for the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

Available university documents indicate that there has been a considerable effort by Wits to transform the 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching and learning methods by adopting a holistic approach to propelling its mandate of a commitment to diversity, inclusivity and high-quality education. One such endeavour is an effort in positioning itself as an information technology-savvy university through blended learning, a mix of contact and online course offerings (Wits, 2018). This move has meant that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, innovative ways to engage staff and students in digital learning were already being pursued as campus culture but amid teething problems of access to consistent ICT infrastructure for anywhere, anytime teaching and learning activities and ICT technical support coupled with capacity development of students and staff. In terms of e-learning, an achievement worth celebrating is the well-equipped 21<sup>st</sup> century state-of-the-art Science Stadium (Wits, 2018) among others, which serves not only the Science faculty departments but also others across the university.

Another university undertaking aimed to address issues of inclusivity and diversity is the adoption of two African languages, isiZulu and Sesotho as its official local languages. Not only did the university adopt a language policy, but also ensured its implementation. The two African languages are included on the university’s important documents, signage, banners and stationery. The Wits Language School offers language courses to members of staff to upskill themselves. As for the students, the Faculty of Humanities is reported to have significantly transformed some of its programmes, as evidenced in the following quotation:

The current implementation phase focuses on embedding language skills within every day practices as well as in the curriculum to ensure that African languages are mainstreamed. For example, all students who enrol in the Bachelor of Arts programme are now required to learn an African language or South African Sign Language (Wits, 2018, p.9).

However, the major concern is that English continues to be the only medium of instruction in the majority of the university programmes. This, as is reported by participating staff and students in this study, negatively affects the learning of students from disadvantaged communities since the teachers in high schools teach learners in their home language even though the language of instruction is English or Afrikaans.

Upon entering university for the first time, the first difference that the students noted was the dominance of English as the medium of communication and instruction. For most of these students, the thought of communicating in English was a daunting task, one that brought with it a sense of anxiety, shame and loss of confidence to express themselves both in and out of the learning environment. On the latter, one respondent made the following remarks: *So, the challenges that I came across when I got to the university that the type of language that they the lectures use especially in English classes because in a way, I don't think they really catered for us students who use English as first additional language. So, at first, it is very difficult for me to understand the terms and the concepts that they were using, because I was used to the simpler kind of English the one that we were exposed to and advanced, the concepts are very, very, very deep and so confusing (08\_HS09).*

This challenge was even more dire when it came to academic writing, where students were expected to apply their knowledge of English in writing., It was evident that although students had insight into some of the content, the inability to articulate what they knew in coherent English drew them back academically: *...things like the lectures, language barriers there, because now imagine, if you don't understand, you have to first contemplate and, then or rather prepare yourself as to how you're going to phrase the question. How you're going to go about approaching the lecturer in relation to what you have not understood in class. So, it was a little bit too much on my side because now everything is in English. And then bearing in mind for us who are from rural areas, even the subject English, was taught in our mother tongue. So you can just imagine how the transition of language was a challenge on my side.*

*So those are some of the things that I can recall and then that were a little bit challenging, that were a challenge in relation to what I've envisioned university to be. (08\_HS06)*

Participants report that the issue of English being used as the language of instruction even to the non-English speakers has been presented as posing challenges on how students engage and answer questions and this has been raised by one of the academic staff: *They don't always read for meaning. So, is this because of language? In other words, because they're not English speakers, I'm not an English speaker that's not my home language in the first place. I know that I've had my own difficulties back in the past. But is it about that? In other words, is it because they're not English speakers? (08\_AC06)*

Another academic staff member strongly supports decolonisation of the language of instruction given the majority of students are from non-English speaking communities: *Well language is a problem and not just a problem ... it is a major problem especially academic language. Like I said earlier that the majority of the students that we had got at the School of Education come from the low socio-economic backgrounds and they come from township schools where English is not their first language. So, they do not have complete command of the English language let alone you know the academic English and or language that is required of them when they are at varsity. And that is a problem, and which is why some of these kids decided that they want to decolonise the education at Wits because of language (08\_AC05).*

The challenge in the use of language not only affected students in their ability to write but it also affected their level of participation in the lecture room, both in their ability to grasp concepts when being taught, as well as engaging with the content in the lecture room. One respondent lamented on how the inadequacy of their grasp of the English language robbed them of the opportunity to make a meaningful contribution within the lecture room setup: *And with the lecturers, I find some of them too fast especially coming from a township school, but when you go and consult afterward, it's much better. Moreover, at first, it was difficult to listen and take notes as the lecturers seemed too fast, and then as years went by, I started mastering the technique (08\_HS14).*

Jansen et al. (2007) argue on how the possession of language skills affords students the opportunity to gain an upper edge on others that have not mastered the skill. In the case of this study, because the respondents were lagging behind in language skills, they had to play catch-up to try to reach the same level as their counterparts, who either because of their

background socio-economically or their pre-university experience, had managed to acquire and master the language.

The experiences of these respondents resonated with the findings from Van Dyk et al. (2009), who observed low levels of academic literacy in relation to language acquisition for writing and communicating as one of the factors leading the struggles experienced by most disadvantaged undergraduate students despite the academic potential that they would have.

Another transformation initiative is how Wits has responded to the change of the curricula. Not only did faculties discuss this on various faculty-based platforms, but also implemented curriculum changes as proven by substantial curriculum initiatives such as:

The introduction of a common first year in engineering programme is one of the outstanding examples. It makes it possible for students to change from one branch of Engineering to another after the first year of study, or to switch from Engineering to a Science programme (Wits, 2018, p.8).

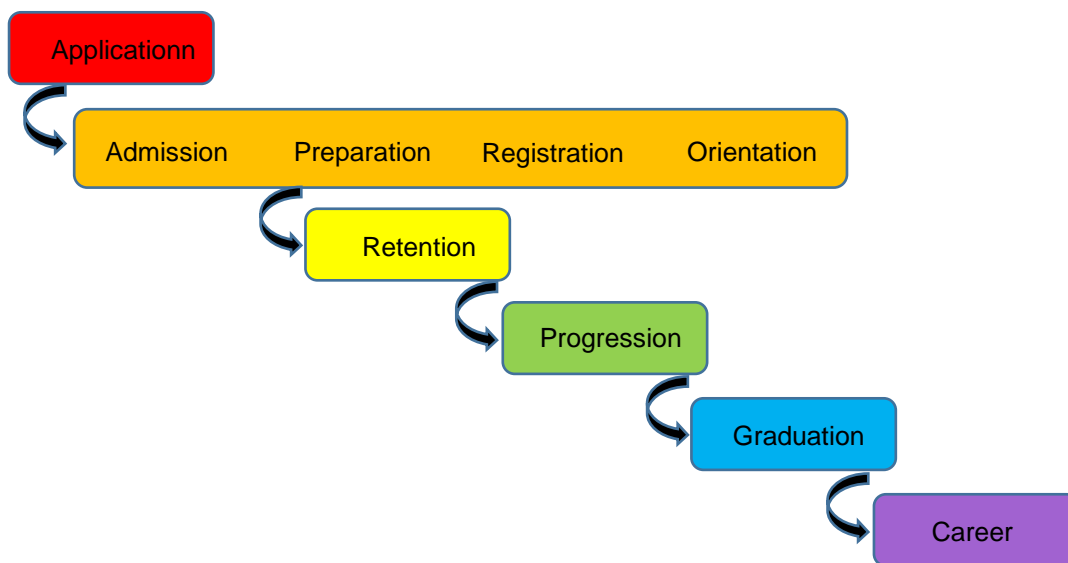
Thus, the setup provides opportunities for students who had initially failed to enrol for an Engineering or Science course to do so. However, the transformation agenda is far from being accomplished. In his inauguration speech on 29 April 2021, Professor Zeblon Vilakazi, the university's Vice Chancellor, reiterated that transformation challenges at Wits include that necessity and agency for knowledge production remains racially biased; the paradigm of scholarship needs to be revisited to necessitate transforming of relationships among the racial groups. He also called for a need to seek excellence and innovations, not new technology but creative ideas to deal with the challenges of today (Vilakazi, 2021).

### **Creation of a student success centric system: Wits' outlook 2019**

Tinto reiterated that:

Improvement in institutional rates of student success does not arise by chance. It is not simply the result of good intentions; although good intentions are clearly a requirement, improvement in rates of student success requires more. It requires an intentional, structured and coherent set of policies and actions that coordinate the work of many programmes and people across campus; actions that are sustained and scaled up over time and to which resources are allocated. There is no magic cure to improvement. It simply takes time and sustained effort (2014, p.6).

This quotation highlights the need for concerted efforts across the university structures to enable student success. Student success is viewed from different perspectives depending on the focus of attention. For Wits, student success goes beyond academic marks to include success from the point of application to success at the point of getting a job - employability. In the Wits Institutional Framework for Student Success (Wits, 2019b), Professor Diana Grayson, the Senior Director of Teaching and Learning at Wits, illustrated the wide and tiered meaning of student success for Wits students, as shown in Figure 49.



(Source: Wits, 2019b, p.7)

**Table 49: Stages of student success for Wits students**

According to Figure 49 above, student success is viewed from the application stage through to the career stage. Each node is very important as it informs success in the next stage. The implication is that student support initiatives should aim to enable success of students at each of the different nodes. However, while the success framework seems to suggest that student success starts at application stage, there are other university-wide student support initiatives like the Targeting Talent Programme. However, despite the positivity, these initiatives portray narratives from the responding students which hold contrary views (see following sections). Literature contends that, “mounting evidence from Higher Education research strongly point to the need to view student success from a much broader perspective” (Baldwin et al., 2020, p.2).

## **Institutional agency and mediation for student support**

Available university documents indicate that from 2013 there has been rigorous reframing of university activities towards promoting epistemic access with success, as spelt out by the Wits Vision 2022 Strategic Framework goals (Wits, 2010). This reframing of student success occurred through collaboration and synchronisation of student support initiatives across the university's five faculties. This took the form of a tiered and deeper structural mapping wherein at the top is the Teaching and Learning Committee whose mandate is to promote learning and teaching initiatives. Then there is the Student Success Steering Committee that takes charge of "both faculty-based and institution-wide efforts to promote student success and identify areas in which student support is needed and opportunities for synergy among existing initiatives" (Wits, 2019a, p.11). The First Year Experience Committee, created in 2017, attends to student issues of transitioning from the high school environment to that of the university. This committee, together with other representatives from the faculties, run a number of student support initiatives ranging from orientation to using digital literacy for first-year first-time entering students in the first few weeks of the start of the year. This is on the premise that "successfully navigating the change is the first step towards being a successful student" (Wits, 2019a, p.11).

Other university-wide student support structures in place include the Wits Writing Centre, the Counselling and Careers Development Unit (CCDU), the Disability Rights Unit (DRU), the Financial Aid and Scholarship Office (FASO), and the Campus Health & Wellness Centre (CHWC). The university has a very strong data analytics office that provides statistics that inform student support interventions. Each faculty now has support staff (previously called 'at risk coordinators', but now called 'academic advisors' or 'student advisors') to serve as the first port of call for students who need help and are at risk of failing. "This tiered committee structure is intended to encourage widespread participation of staff and students at multiple levels in the institution in promoting good teaching and student learning" (Wits, 2019a, p.12). It is reported that each stakeholder "in the student learning experience has a role to play in helping students to develop the discipline-specific and generic knowledge, and lifelong learning skills they will require when they graduate" (Wits, 2018, p.12). Prior to the university implementing this systems approach to student support, activities and initiatives took a diverse and decentralised mode, as per faculty and thus, faculties working in silos, which was a challenge.

The university-wide student support programmes include but are not limited to the First Year Mentoring Programme, the First Year Orientation programme, the Early Warning System - for identifying students who are potential failures, and the Targeting Talent Programme - a pre-university enrichment initiative for Grades 10 and 11 learners selected from different schools across South Africa. The aim of this programme is to increase the academic and psychosocial “preparation of learners from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds” for admission to any South African university, not specifically Wits. The programme also assists high school educators from the same schools with pedagogic and content skills in the teaching of mathematics and science” (Wits, 2019a, p.6).

A number of participants are happy about what the university offers in terms of supporting students around the university: *I realised that the campus has a calm and friendly environment because whenever you need help on campus, the help is always there.* (08\_HS14)

Some students have the general idea that the university is trying its best to support the students: *In that sense, in terms of services rendered to me by the university, I can't complain.* (08\_SS01)

They also appreciated the welcoming nature of the university and the presence of facilities like computer laboratories and libraries: *The campus environment is friendly really an environment, it's really environment friendly. Because you can be where, like you can be at whatever place that you really, really like, like you can, you can hang out, we can sit at the place that you want to sit whenever you're having a break. Like wherever you want to hang out with your friends. The campus is environment friendly there are libraries, computer labs, and tutor rooms, like there is nothing that the campus really lacks, but then everything within the campus is within reach.* (08\_HS15)

CCDU has been frequently mentioned by the participants as a welcoming space for students, that enhances their well-being as well as contributing to their success: *Well, with the CCDU they used to have those programmes where they would teach you how to manage your time, because I used to be very bad at managing my time. So, you know I would go for the trainings to know how to manage my time and also like how to keep mental health in a good, you know space all the time and they would also have those seminars of exam stress you know when exams come, people become so stressed. Ja, so they had so many programmes that were so beneficial to me.* (08\_HS05)

*I think the CCDU also does help. I have never been there, but other students do say it's very productive because most of the time they send helplines or any information about any mental health issue. I think it was early last year they were in the corridor with a big sheet where we had to draw, I found that very interesting, and it was in a way for us to de-stress. (08\_HS14)*

Other structures that were seen as aiding their success are the Writing Centres, Wits food parcels and the Students Representative Committee (SRC): One participant echoed: *I am grateful to be here Wits has food parcels and we also have Wozani Gift of [the] Givers (08\_HS14).*

### **Students' Family, Home and Community Background: Source of Cultural Capitals**

The participants gave very rich narratives about their background. They chronicled their experiences in their families, the home and the community which resulted in some sources of capitals.

#### **Who are the participating students?**

The majority of the participants are students from rural areas and are the first in the family to come to university. This concurs with the Wits Five-Year Review 2015-2019 (Wits 2019(b), p. 6), that "[F]ive years ago, fewer than 20% of Wits students were the first in their families to attend a university. Today, this applies to almost 48% of first-year entering students". The participants' narratives about their home, community and school backgrounds portray a homogeneous group. More than 80% of the responding students come from households headed by either the mother or the grandmother. In most cases, the households are very large, comprising siblings, nieces and cousins. Finance is a huge issue. The mother is usually the breadwinner, and, in some cases, they survive on the grandmother's social grant. The participants' narratives reveal a manifestation of familial and social capitals coupled with bonds and emotional support from the mothers and grandmothers. Baldwin et al. (2020, p. 18) maintain that families reinforced certain values and qualities. Students tended to uphold these and followed them as undergraduates.

The rural communities are characterised by low income and experience high levels of unemployment exacerbated by low socio-economic development. Students who come from these rural settings report poor but supportive communities in terms of imparting morals and values, and insofar as the general well-being of the people is concerned, some familial capital (Yosso, 2005). The students promise to uphold these when away from their communities. On



the contrary, township communities are not supportive of the youth. As a result, responding students reported a high prevalence of drug and substance abuse, teenage pregnancy and theft.

One striking emerging issue is that both the rural and the township communities are reported as not being supportive of students going to the university: *The responding students point out that by going to university, they become vulnerable and face the risk of resentment and exclusion by their communities ... And then the stigma around the community will get to you because like, now they feel like you are more important, you think you are more important since you are at varsity.* (08\_HS04)

This points to a lack of social networks that are supposed to provide both embodied and practical support - social capital (Yosso, 2005, p.79). During semester breaks, some students involve themselves in their communities to show their allegiance to the community, preserve their membership and regain community trust.

The challenges that students face at home are viewed as drivers for a better life. The responding students drew their aspirations and hope from the challenges they face. According to Baldwin et al. (2020), some individuals have the ability to maintain hope from actual and perceived challenges and this is a form of resilience and involves “nurturing a culture of possibilities” Yosso (2005, p.78). The majority of the participating students come from poorly-resourced rural schools. In some cases where resources are available, they are never used: *... the school was not so well resourced...we had laboratories, computers, but then we lacked teachers who could teach such subjects.* [08\_HS04]

The majority of the participants were high-flyers at high school. Some teachers were reported as either socially absent, disengaged or not qualified to teach some subjects. Some students had to be resourceful, and others ended up failing. One participant said: *the learning was...more of a rote learning, where you have to cram, cram and then not necessarily learning taking place. So, I had to reflect on how I take charge of my own learning.* (08\_HS13)

Another of the participants echoed the previous comment: *In my community, I think most of the teachers who were teaching there, it's either they hated their job, or they did not want to teach there at all. Sometimes learners in the classrooms we used to teach ourselves. [The teacher] would just get into class... and then just write notes for us on the board.* [08\_HS04]

*Teachers at school were busy with their lives. I don't think they took time to ask are you ok? Are you coping? Do you understand? Sometimes, I would just ask myself why can't she*

*(teacher) just ask what's wrong? Why am I not coping? Why are my marks like this? At high school, they just touch and go, and at the end of the day what did I learn? [08\_HS13]*

The more the participants lack and struggle, the more they draw on their aspirational capital. The students learnt to not only be resourceful but to also be determined and to persevere - some form of resilience: *... So, it was like a motivating element for me ... and, then say; I want to achieve way more than being enrolled or studying at the college. Hence, I was able to push harder, to ensure that I get access to university and then fortunate enough, it was one of the best universities that I got enrolled in. [08\_HS06]*

*... the most important lesson that I've learned is to make the most out of everything that I get. No matter how much it is, like try to do something out of everything that I get, even if there are no resources, I should try to like give my best and the outcomes will always be good if I put in the hard effort. [08\_HS08]*

The above is evidence of the prevalence of adversity in the students' home environment. However, Masters (as cited in Baldwin et al., 2020, p. 0) points out that "adversity is the context in which we recognise resilience". Resilience comes from simple processes and resources such as parents, unconditional love, support or caring by the community or "mediated by psychosocial processes" like an attached grandmother (Masters cited in Baldwin et al. 2020, p.21).

### **Turning Negative Experience into Positive Energy: Aspirational Capital**

One emerging issue was the way students were able to change their mindsets and find inspiration from their negative experiences: *... from there, it's a matter of looking back and then saying .... you don't want your kids to experience what you went through ... these were the conditions that I encountered, these were the challenges that I went through, but then for future purposes, I should shape my mind in this way. I had to change my mindset just to be; this is what I want to change, this is what I want my future to look like. Hence, those challenges kind of shaped the way that I perceive things ... my immediate context ... to say: this is what can be transpiring at the moment but that does not mean it's what should transpire in the coming years. So that's how the challenges came in shape in my frame of mind... [08\_HS06]*

What is noticeable is the issue of the students' mindset, that is, how they view and interpret their social and academic experiences, form ideas about their capacity to succeed, and get an understanding of the value of success. Baldwin et al. (2020, p.11) contend that research "show(s) that successful students are gritty, feel at home in the learning environment, believe

they can get smarter, and overcome a variety of challenges”. Although the participants had financial difficulties and went to poorly-resourced schools, they gained familial and aspirational capital as they strove to work harder and dreamt to become better people.

### **Thrown in the deep end: Decision-making about choice of university and programmes**

The experience of students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds coming into the university could be described as bittersweet, taking on the descriptions of being thrown in the deep end, one that was filled with excitement, uncertainties, as well as misconceived expectations. This depicts what Reay et al. (2009) referred to as ‘strangers in paradise’.

According to Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000)’s decision-making model, key dimensions of the pre-enrolment stage include; the context of decision-making, when the decision was made and, the influences in the decision-making process (Cubillo et al., 2006). Though this literature pertains to international students, we utilised it here to understand the pre-enrolment decision-making of the underprivileged students. It is common in several interviews that the disadvantaged students entertained thoughts about gaining access to university at different stages of their lives before they enrolled at the university. Decision-making for these students entailed three critical steps when they considered joining the university, the factors that influenced their choice of university and choice of programme. For some students, thoughts about enrolling in university came earlier than expected: *Ever since I was in primary school, I’ve always wanted to go to university* (08\_SS09).

For other students the thought came during their early grades of high school, as highlighted by one participant: *For me I wanted to go to university when I was in high school some people I got from motivation from went to university, the brothers and sisters around the community. I wanted to improve the situation at home and because my mum told me you have to go to school and study so that you can live a better life compared to mine* (08\_SS03).

The last part of the above excerpt concurs with Gofen (2009) on how being first generation students, their parents’ aspirations motivated them to enter university. While there has been research that points to the correlation between the parental level of education and the prospects of children progressing in education, Gofen argues that this observation does not apply to all. Therefore, one should not view all parents with low education levels as homogenous as some parents’ desires would have been to pursue education but due to poverty and other restrictions, these dreams could not be realised. As such, though lacking the experience, parents have an appreciation of the value of education that in return is used to encourage their children to aim

higher. The lack of experiential knowledge is indicative of a lack of some form of capital that is engraved in cultural capital, as purported by Bourdieu (1990).

Taking gap years has been growing in popularity in South Africa and is viewed as an alternative and opportunity for those who need to think and reflect on their choices and growth. Many studies have considered taking gap years as important as it prepares students through introspection and a much more developed sense of self and improved practical life skills (for example, Coetzee & Bester, 2009; Dalby, 2020). Thus, a number of the students in this study took gap years to find time to decide where they want to go and what they want to do in life. One participant attested that: *The gap year helped me to become sane...made me see the reality of life, that if I don't better my life then I'd be sitting here from morning until dusk looking at the sun* (08\_HS01).

Another participant had this to say: *But mentally I wasn't ready to go to university. So, when I took my gap year, I saw the importance of going to the university because I couldn't do anything with my matric certificate. I just thought having a degree might help me gain more knowledge. I think mentally I have grown so much and life after matric is so different from what we anticipated* (08\_HS14).

Some students had little understanding of the programmes offered. They were ignorant about these, as expressed by this respondent who thought they were into Medicine yet it was Science: *I have wanted to be a medical doctor ever since I started high school. So, I applied for it. And I applied for other things within the medical sector* (08\_SS11).

A member of staff in this study confirmed the same when they made the following remark with reference to the Science programme: *I feel like number one, students in the Faculty of Science come into the faculty for all of the wrong ... Most of them come in with the intention that after BSc biological science, they're going to go on and be doctors. So, what we found is that most of them don't even understand why they are doing the degree that they are doing* (08\_AD02).

For the most part, the choices of the programmes were either based on the professions that surrounded them in their communities, the most common of which were teachers (Cross & Ndofirepi, 2015). Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) observed that most students from disadvantaged backgrounds tended to opt for programmes that were considered less prestigious. Appadurai (2004) referred to the capacity to aspire, which he noted as lacking among students from disadvantaged backgrounds, mainly due to a lack of role models and

social connections. In the case of this study, the participants admitted regretting choosing the programmes they had, thinking that had they received more information on the offers of other programmes, they would have gone for areas that were either more challenging to them or areas which had higher prospects of upward mobility.

For most of the participants, the decision-making process to go to university was not always an individual choice but people in their community heavily influenced it. A study carried out on Vietnam students by Robinson and Dobele (2020) indicated that the choice of students to join universities was heavily informed by word of mouth. Likewise, in this study, students took advice from friends (08\_SS10\_0517; 08\_SS07\_0520) and relatives: *I decided to choose Wits because my auntie, my mum, my mum and uncles, people thought that it would be the most convenient* (08\_SS06).

Teachers also played a critical role: *used to say go ... this is your last push, this is your last push to have a nice life and then for me it was like okay* (08\_HS06).

Thus, parents, friends, siblings and teachers all have a big influence on how these students chose institutions. Familial capital (Yosso, 2005) was a currency used for making choices. In some cases, the influence was just by looking at their role models and emulating them: *I saw my uncle and my aunt coming home with the university things, with the pens and the t-shirts, so that's when I said I also want to see myself going to university and my uncle would come home with the university prospectus, and he would give it to me and say go through this and just look at it and you come and tell me what you see, on that prospectus, and I would go with it to school, tell my friends about it* (08\_HS07).

For others, the initiative to go to university was internal even before they matriculated: *Ok so since grade 10 I had an interest in studying about the stars. I was interested in physics. I wanted to know more about what other scientists know. So, I decided to take Mathematics and Physics and then I made it in grade 12 into Wits University and then they took me on with my first choice which was astrophysics* (08\_SS08).

For most of them, the decision to go to university was accompanied by the choice of university. The choice was informed by the university's ranking, people's perceptions, and social media: *It's in the top 1% in Africa so I thought coming to this university would maximise my opportunities of getting a job as soon as I finish my degree* (08\_SS08).

*This is the best university. So, for me it is a privilege for me to be studying in this university. I feel like it's a great privilege for me. In fact, it's just an advantage for me to be in this University. So, I feel great to be in this university (08\_SS08).*

The idea of Wits being a prestigious university and many students aspiring to get a certificate from such a university has been raised and supported by literature (Ndofirepi, 2015) as well as of the participant, a member of academic staff: *Majority come to Wits, because they still feel it's a prestigious university and they want to be there, they think that they're going to walk away with the certificate that is going to open doors for them (08\_AC06).*

However, the students knew that getting access to the universities was never going to be smooth sailing because some could not afford the registration fees. Reaching out to more knowledgeable people made their lives a bit easier because they gained useful information that they were not aware of previously: *I remembered that the second born (my sister) has a friend who is doing Mechanical Engineering here at Wits. I decided to reach out and I was like "hey can you help me with applying". She was like: I can come to Wits and I will help you waver the registration because I didn't have the registration fee (08\_HS13).*

Their applications were rejected in some of the universities they chose. The fact then remains that admission has always been the universities' choice not the other way round. The students are not quite sure what ensures acceptance at one university and get rejected at another: *I got into Wits because I applied at UJ and Wits so the preliminary results like the ones we use for grade 12 were accepted at UJ and also Wits, oh UJ was like waiting for the final results and they put me on the waiting list and also Wits was like we will respond after your matric results but for now you are accepted so when they came out our results, the December results uh, UJ kinda, rejected me and I was like okay then I went to Wits and I was accepted at Wits. So was rejected at UJ and accepted at Wits (08\_SS05).*

An understanding of students' choices and influences will not only inform university stakeholders on how, prior to enrolment, students make an effort to gain access to higher education, but will also equip them with strategies to make universities accessible as well as securing the long-term success of the university (Chiramba, 2020, Cubillo et al., 2006).

Prior to the actual enrolment, students have expectations and look forward to their experience. Those who expected the university experiences to be similar to that in high schools faced even more challenges because they joined the university, they were not fully prepared for the

transition: *I thought at university it would be easy to make friends, but it is so different, and I don't need to be this person that they know. But it was totally different like I had to fit in to have friends, it was different from what I expected* (08\_HS13).

*So, I expected university to be like high school really, where we knew one another. When I had my first day in high school, I already knew some people. So, I expected them to tell us each and everything that we had to do, so I thought it would be easy for me to manoeuvre around university, but then jah, my expectations were not met* (08\_HS07).

*if I had excelled in Grade 12, therefore, I would excel even in university. So that was my imagination of how university life would be. That I'm going to ace everything, that I'm going to have a smooth sail and all that and then in terms of res life and all that, I'll have my own freedom and then I can do what I want in the time that I stay there* (08\_HS06).

Some students' expectations were informed by the advice which was negative but useful to make them better prepared for the hostile university environment (08\_HS07\_0623). This was useful advice because that is what most of them came across at the university. What comes out is manifestation and use of familial, negational and resistance capital (Yosso, 2005): *Our teachers used to scare us on like, 'yeah, you guys are like playing right now, university is going to be really hard. You're going to be competing with students from Model C schools and everything will be really difficult'. So, I was kind of scared and had anxiety. But I feel like that helped me a lot because I really focused a lot and I studied too much because like the things that they told me about university kept on like coming to my mind like yoh, I will fail here, and I will go back home and just start over and be poor* (08\_SS09).

*Yes, a lot of pressure and, yes, the transitional part obviously was going to be problematic because of coming from a public school. You know, I was not familiar a lot of things such as ICT in literacy, you know. I lacked a lot of skills. You know, computer skills. So, I expected the worst actually. And I knew it was not going to be an easy thing* (08\_HS03).

One participant alluded to the false hope informed by university brochures and advertisements: *I expected it to be more inclusive. And I also liked because on TV on the university brochures on magazine you see this unity and inclusiveness amongst students among like, in the university communities, so I expected unity and also inclusiveness* (08\_HS08).

It is important to note that previous studies have ignored the aspect of pre-enrolment experiences of students, especially those from disadvantaged communities. Learning about the students' choices, influences and expectations, has been indicated to be crucial for university planning as well as preparing students for academic success. The previous experiences always have an impact on the experiences to come. In a study about the experiences of refugee students in higher education in South Africa, Chiramba (2020) has indicated that premigration experiences of those students played a significant role in their accessing and becoming successful in their studies, hence universities need to understand them. Thus, this study has prioritised disadvantaged students' experiences prior to enrolling at the universities.

### **On-campus experiences: what was the reality?**

Post-enrolment experiences also have an effect on students' expectations. The challenges begin with the transitioning process itself. A study by McMillan (2013) showed that such challenges involve loneliness and homesickness, academic challenges and increased workload, among others. Thus, the author recommended that students in transition need a roadmap and a guide (McMillan, 2013). Likewise in this study, most of the students indicated that the transitioning process from high school to university was not an easy one: *... so, it took me time to adapt, and it was very hard to adapt. It took me time to adapt. And things were harsh but then as time moved on, I started adapting to the lifestyle at the university. I started managing my things and everything was starting to go as planned (08\_SS08).*

Despite its hostility, they knew what an inviting university should look like from their pre-enrolment assessment: *I think what makes an environment positive is that the environment should support, be able or try to support every learner need and be a very comfortable environment where anyone can just ask and not feel like or be you know intimidated or maybe like maybe feel like their question is dumb (08\_HS05).*

This was true for some of them who felt the university environment helped in facilitating their growth. One participant had indicated that within the university one meets with people from various backgrounds. Some people have negative thoughts about certain groups of people, but others are accommodating, wise and help one to do self-introspection and work towards one's own growth: *... in varsity you meet people who are wiser than you, you meet people who will enlighten you about certain things. And you get to learn more about yourself, who is this person that you are dealing with, what are your goals, what do you want in life. Are*



*you working towards achieving that, and are you a follower or a leader, and what are the values that you hold in life and, what are the ethics that you have? So that transition changed me for a better person because I clearly did not know who I was and then coming to varsity I self-realised that oh, okay, I am this person and I'm working towards being the person I want to be (08\_HS04).*

However, a number of participants had frightening experiences while transitioning, such as lack of confidence with one's way of dressing, lack of know-how in using the access cards and lack of confidence to approach people. One participant made this comment: *I was scared. Really. In terms of clothing-wise, you know, like you are raggedly dressed, and people are looking fine, and you are just looking around, you don't even know the directions, you don't even know how to use a student card to access the labs. And you don't even know how to approach people. Like you'll be like, oh hello, and then this person looks at you and then you are like, oh my God, I just hope they respond nicely and calmly. Ja so, I was scared. I don't want to lie. I was like, oh my gosh, so I'm in Wits (08\_HS04).*

Despite the negative experiences, most disadvantaged students tend to be resilient and overlook the challenges and focus on the bigger picture of their ability to have accessed a prestigious university. They tapped into their aspirational capital. For instance, despite the odds, most of them are proud to be part of the Wits community: *Every time I would arrive on campus I would be like, okay, I'm in Wits. That's what happened on a daily basis. Oh, it's cool, oh I'm in Wits (08\_HS04).*

In spite of the university's alienating nature, the participants of this study make an effort to turn their experiences into positive ones. They come up with survival tactics, used navigational and social capital in an environment that overlooks and undermines their background experiences (Yosso, 2005). For example, they would make social circles with other students of similar backgrounds to theirs and share survival strategies in potentially alienating spaces: *I had friends, as I told you. Like most of my friends I met them at Bree taxi rank because we used to travel together to Wits University, coming from Bree, walking past Mandela Bridge. And most of us our experiences were the same. We came from backgrounds, economic situations which were not ideal. So, having them in my life really changed me because they helped me to adapt. They were there for me and they helped me to cope with my fears as well, like the fear of failing, the fear of being not accepted fully, that social steps of diversity. Ja, they were there. So, I used to talk to them about what did they experience on a*

*daily basis and they would give me strategies as to how should I deal with such. So, it really helped me a lot (08\_HS04).*

### **University support on the decolonisation and the 4IR projects: the student and staff perspective**

The university has put in place practical ways of supporting students in the Decolonial project. For example, they try to accommodate the disadvantaged groups in the historically White universities: *... the university at this moment is trying ... I don't know if they are really trying, but it's really trying to accommodate everyone making education inclusive for everyone, hence they have like opened a study group and other additional curriculum for students coming from poor backgrounds so that they can fit into the university system (08\_HS04).*

We witness a significant number of black staff and students gaining access to historically White universities, however, Scott et al. (2007) and Chiramba and Maringe (2022) argue that considerable effort to accommodate such students is still required especially in terms of epistemological access. They further argued that the opportunities to become successful in higher education are still racially skewed (Chiramba & Maringe, 2022; Scott et al., 2007).

Likewise, participants in this study think the decolonial project is happening at a very slow pace and there is still a tendency of prioritising whiteness within the university environment: *Okay, with the buildings I feel like they're still very much colonial. They still look like they are created for privileged white kids. I've seen that some of the buildings' names have been changed, Solomon Mahlangu. All that I've seen that okay. They are making attempts to sort of rename the buildings, statues ornament still the same, still like apartheid colonialism. Students' dress code, it all depends. Some people are more liberated than others, depending on who you are, depending on where you come from. Depending on your fashion sense, the kind of money you have, so it all depends (08\_HS10).*

It is well documented in available literature that the decolonial project has resulted in the renaming of the university buildings and allowing physical access to those disadvantaged but beyond that we are still grappling with issues of epistemological access and success for that group of students (Maldonado-Torres, 2015; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

The most important thing is that the universities have embedded the decolonisation discourse in teaching and learning and a number of students are gaining interest in the subject: *Universities have come up to think of different ways in which we can decolonise especially*

*the way you teach ... as a student teacher I look at how we would teach. I have been reading a piece on decolonisation and thinking how this can be achieved. I think this is something that I will pursue further in my undergraduate studies (08\_HS02).*

For some participants, decolonisation has to go beyond symbolic change to also interrogate what is involved in the content and methods of teaching within the university (Maringe & Chiramba, 2021). This is what one of the participants had to say: *For me, I want to remain in high school and be part of decolonising education in terms of language. I want to be one of the people that will be leading that issue to make sure that we are really decolonising education, language-wise and even content-wise (08\_HS02).*

The students realised that there are some colleagues who are not concerned about the plight the underprivileged students are in: *And I must be honest with you. Is that even the lecturers at Wits not all of them, but the system itself, it is not helping but hurting because they are happy to see these kids coming and they are also happy to see them drop out, which affects or speaks to your question earlier which is the question of throughput (08\_AC05).*

On another note, with the focus on the 4IR the participants of this study feel that the coming of the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the 4IR imperatives. Compared to other universities they felt that their university was more prepared for remote teaching and learning: *And then in terms of the 4th Industrial Revolution, given the pandemic the university has shown that it is ready for it as it was the first one to do online learning on a full-time basis. And it like, it gave [mobile] data to the students and delivered like study materials such as laptops. Ja, so it is ready for the 4<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution as more classes are held on Microsoft Teams, Zoom sessions are there, some lectures are held on Microsoft Teams and announcements are being made on Sakai. Students can access their resources on the university platform. So ja, I believe it's ready for the 4<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution (08\_HS04).*

This is supported by one academic staff member who emphasised the fact that COVID-19 came when he was already into blended teaching and learning, as a result, students were already used to online platforms and engagement: *You know, I didn't change things just because of COVID, I was already doing blended learning before. Thank God I was because it would be difficult to, you know, transfer everything on to online (08\_AC06).*

However, the same academic staff member outlined systemic barriers associated with implementing the 4IR in universities in South Africa and beyond: *Colleagues, you know, involved in teaching and South Africa is not alone, let me just tell you that there's a lot of*

*issues, internet issues, bandwidth issues all over the world. It's not just us. I mean, I think we are probably in a worse position to some extent. But, you know, with the load shedding is another nonsense that we don't need in our lives. But, you know, overseas people struggle with a lot of what we struggle with (08\_AC06).*

Although the 4IR is linked to imparting 21st century skills, some students think that even though the skills are emphasised, the university graduates lack such skills resulting in universities failing to impart such skills. One academic staff member suggested that if we really want to realise the impact of the 4IR in our African universities, we should redefine 4IR in our own contexts and refrain from replicating how they do it in the global north because of varied contextual realities: *We can never be on par with the first world especially when we have the education system that we have in South Africa where we have IEB education and working education. So, we cannot talk about the Fourth Industrial Revolution in the same way it is understood by the first world. That is why we need our own or we to create our own Fourth Industrial Revolution because five years ago at least we had the students in class, and we had the students on campus. And we tried by all means to work with them to introduce them to this so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution even though that came from the rural of the rural places (08\_AC05).*

In comparing the two discourses of decolonisation and the 4IR, participants feel that universities are prioritising the 4IR more than the decolonial project. This is what one participant had to say: *It's (the 4IR) still an idea though, but it's more on the motion than that one of decolonisation (08\_HS06).*

It is common in higher education literature that universities are now focused on gaining global competitiveness and by doing so. the discourses like decolonisation that prioritise what is local, are ignored (Mayo, 2019; Walton, 2018). An important argument has been raised by Maringe et al. (forthcoming):

The discourses are both complementary and oppositional. The 4IR is broadly an ideology for economic development through digital and technological advances. Decolonisation is an ideology focused on correcting the past and more precisely aims at recalibrating development in terms of the local indigenous populations primarily through re-establishing peoples' dignity and self-determination (Maringe et al., forthcoming, p.17).

Learning from the argument, there is no doubt that both discourses are critical for our education system in South Africa. The next section addresses structures set to support students within the university.

### **Support from university staff**

In terms of staff members supporting the access and success, participants felt that some staff members tend to be helpful. However, others are unfriendly to such an extent that students felt afraid to ask about things that concern their education: *It is very mixed. There are some people who are very good, and there are some horrible, rude people. I think it is mixed. I remember an issue when we had a mentor, a person who was mentoring us, and it was just the rudest person I have ever met. You would get some people, like when you are looking for res, at administration, the receptionists, those people are rude. Not at all of them, there are a few friendly ones, but some of them, the way they talk to you, is like they expect you to know what is going on already and they just attack you, instead of helping you, and if they can't help you, at least direct you to where you can get help. So yes, some of them are very rude* (08\_SS01).

One academic staff member, who mentioned that they have an open-door policy in support of students, endorses the issue of supporting students. They are aware that students have unique challenges, so they are open to one-on-one sessions: *But I've always had an open-door policy and I therefore deal with lots of students. I have very much dealt with the academic development programme tutorials for years and that's in fact, where you have a lot of contact with students, you get to know them by their first names. You get to know what the problems are. You then can set up appointments and you know, assist one-on-one. Students with, I mean, a lot of issues. Remember what we deal with at that level and in first year, it's not just academics, there's a lot of, you know, social issues going on as well. Of course, you know, the difficulties with bursaries and whatnot* (08\_AC06).

Drawing from one of the students' narratives, it seems some staff members are not supportive of the access and success project, as a result some strategies as to how they should do this should be put in place.

### **Major setbacks within the university environment**

The major challenges that are always within and around universities are discussed below:

## **Crime**

Crime around and within the university has been frequently referred to by the participants as a hindering factor in freely accessing the campus and its useful facilities: *Then, I was going home from this residence, and the guys took out a knife, and they said they want my phone and I told them that I don't have my phone, even though like I had it, but it wasn't my bag, because like, my bag was too big for me to like, go in to open like dig up for my phone? ... I've witnessed a lot of people. Like I have witnessed the people like, especially in Johannesburg. I have witness like someone getting, like people getting robbed, like, they stop and search that person and they take money from that person, I've witnessed a person getting shot (08\_HS15).*

*... and the labs, this one time, I left my bag, and when I went back, there was no bag, and I went to campus control and the story was they couldn't help me. I remember this one time when I was at Sunnyside, this other guy who was a cleaner at the university, he came and stole someone's laptop through the window, and I saw. I chased them, and I caught the guy and I took the laptop from him, so there was a few, but when it happened, I thought ok, there is theft here. I know a couple of friends that have lost laptops at the library (08\_SS01).*

## **Covert discrimination**

Students felt that there was an uninviting kind of atmosphere for black students that they could not pinpoint but could just feel uncomfortable about because of the continuous prioritisation of whiteness within historically White universities: *And in some lecture, you'll find that okay, when you enter the classroom, like 90% of the white people are sitting in front and then black people are sitting in the back. And you feel that, you know what ... you could feel the atmosphere, you know what, I'm not invited in this (08\_HS04).*

## **Funding**

The issue of financing disadvantaged students' learning is widely known at the university. The current Dean of Student Affairs, Jerome September contends that:

The traditional university funding model - that of students being able to pay - is misaligned with our real-life context. In fact, we have many more 'non-traditional' students enrolling ... poor students and poor rural students. [W]e need to make funding available for these academically-deserving students and we need to find innovative ways to do this, whether it is with a low-interest government loan

scheme, or through other means ... (Amato, 2021 in Curiosity magazine, Reinventing higher education 12 August 2021).

For the participating students, funding was a major barrier that has been present ever since their pre-enrolment experiences: ... *in matric I knew very well that my parents did not have the money to send me to varsity, so that on its own affected how I thought. Like it took me steps back to say, you know what, you are inferior, you'll never go to varsity and even if you study hard, you won't get funding as easily. And while other learners were applying during the course of the year to various varsities, I did not have funds to apply. So that on its own was like a big disappointment to me to say people are applying to varsity, and you are there, you are not applying. Even though you are doing good, but you are not applying* (08\_HS04).

With funding from NSFAS and the Funza Lushaka Bursary, many participants felt grateful that such bursaries will help them succeed and move out of their misery: *So, things got better when I had financial assistance from NSFAS. My mother as well was also relieved in a sense* (08\_HS04).

It is important to note that some students use the funding to support the family back home. However, realising that the funds are insufficient to cover their needs and their families' needs, they embark on part-time jobs, which compromises the time they should spend studying: *So, I had to have like a second job other than being a student. Like I used to work on weekends, go out tutoring learners and getting paid like...how much was it? R400. So, I used to use that money to support my family and my siblings at home* (08\_HS04).

The above narratives show that most of the students get some funding at university. What could be lacking are skills in managing the funds. According to university documents:

About a fifth of the Wits student body now qualifies for funding from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), but this does not address the issues of students who fall into the 'missing middle' category – those who do not qualify for NSFAS but are also not wealthy enough to pay their own way. Students in the "missing middle" make up the majority of students at Wits. On average, about 25 000 of Wits' 38 000 students enjoy some form of scholarship, grant or bursary, with the university administering over R1-billion in student funding annually (Wits, 2019, p.7).

Students from underprivileged communities seem to be confronted by more challenges than opportunities and below we try to synthesise how they tackle some of the challenges head on.

### **Managing against the odds**

Most of the participants felt that the university environment alienates them, but they choose to engage their circle of influence. It is important to note that early literature on disadvantaged groups of students has, to a large extent, presented them as victims, yet recent literature has started to document them as survivors through their persistence and determination (McBrien, 2011; Msaba, 2019). Most participants of this study have developed social circles with other students who have the similar backgrounds. For example, this is what one of the participants had to say: *I don't think it possible, because, who I hang around with, I have common things in. So, I find that small community that I have things in common with, and I feel at home, but at the same time, when I am not with that group, you can feel that you are not part of what is happening here, especially with the lifestyle that people live* (08\_SS01).

One participant said that at times it was not easy to make friends, but the opportunity to make friends was presented during co-curricular activities: *I played soccer and had group study and then became friends obviously. We would play games, go out for braais or for ice cream, or for coffee. I think I have made so many connections* (08\_SS01).

The expectations of a good friend vary from trustworthiness, helpfulness and showing concern, among other factors: *That comes with having good friends that you trust, who know your troubles, and they help you. I think that is how many people manage* (08\_SS01).

The other factor that helps them survive against the odds is acknowledgement that they do not know and as a result seek help: *I didn't really like asking for help and stuff so, I think the only thing I changed was me asking for help and realising that if I don't ask then I won't know* (08\_SS04).

For some, self-upliftment and self-study have been the main skills that helped these students survive in a rather uninviting environment: *I learnt study methods which I'm using now from YouTube so that helps, which is active recall, so I use a lot of YouTube to learn more study techniques that actually work* (08\_SS04).

Self-discipline and time management skills also played a significant role in helping the students adjust: *Since I've been in university, I can say, university for me, it's an environment that needs us to be disciplined. I also learnt how to work through time management also...its*



*time because also it challenges you psychologically because sometimes you might think that you are doing well, but there are factors that challenges you outside university which will influence how you learn also academically. So yeah, I think time management and discipline (08\_SS05).*

Social capital through strong belief in their religious affiliation, gave students strength to continue navigating higher education, despite the barriers. Turning to friends and family was what most of them did during these challenges: *I prayed a lot and talked to my sisters for they are my support system (08\_HS13).*

Many of the participants had to make a deliberate effort to stay strong despite the odds, as reported by this participant: *I feel like at secondary they all knew me, that [x] stayed at this house, that at home they didn't have food or parents. So, at the University, I had to be a completely new person. I had to be tough like there is no crying, there is no saying I am a victim here; I don't have food and all (08\_HS13).*

Other participants got inspiration to persevere by just looking at the lives of those who had dropped out of university and noted that they are now facing even more challenges: *I've learned from hard work. I've learned that hard work from home and perseverance ... I should not give up on my studies, ja that's what I've learned. Since if you are from ... some of the people are at home, or maybe have dropped out or ja, I can see that they are not doing well in life, so I get perseverance and hard work (08\_SS03).*

Resilience in students has featured as a characteristic that refutes the participants as passive and dependent, but they also make efforts to fight their challenges (Bailey & Inanc, 2018). Although this effort on the part of students is helpful in navigating university life with success, we argue that it is not enough: *And I was expecting varsity to be like, oh, a place of self-realisation, a place of professionals, a place of young people who are there to inspire and empower others. I saw varsity as like an opportunity to beat poverty (08\_HS04).*

We therefore further argue that universities should provide a relevant and holistic approach in support of these students. Universities need to be resilient in promoting agency rather than passivity within the student populations (Earnest et al., 2010). In almost all the responses from the study, there was excitement that came with gaining admission to university (Ndofirepi, 2015). This feeling of exhilaration would later be short-lived by most of them upon arriving at the institution. The cultural shock of reconciling their lives from the rural and townships as

well as the academic experiences from their former high schools to the university environment were two worlds apart, as one of the staff members commented: *And then students are from different backgrounds such that once they start the university experience some of them don't do so great, when they start, and then it brings them down their matric mark was not so good. But once...they start I think those students that are from...location or rural areas, and then when they come here, they feel like they're not so great, and it brings most of them down. Then, you find that they want to now change their qualification (08\_AD03).*

### **Involvement in extra-curricular activities**

Students posed mixed feelings about their involvement in extra-curricular activities. Some were afraid of the university environment, and some were afraid of academic failure, or they participated and then decided to quit after failing their assessments: *... of events which are done on campus I hardly attend them really. is coming, I would not attend because I think I have a phobia of crowds. I normally don't go to places I hardly attend [laughs], even if I see a poster saying, oh, the famous DJ of the country where people are so populated, like there are so many, you can't even count. So that intimidates me. So, I hardly attend such events. Ja, I would say that I'm not sociable at all because [laughs]...I don't go there [08\_HS04]. I did join drama; I think it was in the second year but the pressure got too much due to schoolwork. So, I left it as I had to concentrate on my school work. [08\_HS13]*

However, a common complaint by most of the participating students is the issue of high affiliation fees. Most of the students maintain the view that involvement in extra-curricular activities assists in socialising and dealing with stress: *...at first it was daunting. It was like I had my reservation. I had my doubts, because now you're thinking new church from home and all that. What if they are those churches that do other stuff that you are not in line with? So that was it, that was about it. But, from there onwards, like I can say, I really grew in terms of character. I really grew in terms of my involvement with others, my interaction, because from you know if we were to talk of church sphere. It's where people come together for one cause, for one purpose, and that really helped a lot in being, in relating to other things academics [08\_HS06b\_1015].*

### **The grand resurface**

The following section describes how, in spite of the unpleasantness of being thrown in the deep end, translated into the grand resurface as they get the feel of what university life and life as a university student entails. In the context of the study, this is referred to as gaining

epistemic access. Their ability to resurface from the deep end was a factor of various experiences including changes that they, as subjects, had to undergo, and their ability to manipulate resources around them, including institutionally provided for and from their peers. It is in this section that much of Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth manifests.

### **Determination**

Thus far, the students' initial experience in navigating university was one characterised by hardship and challenges that were likened to them being thrown at the deep end. While most literature has characterised this experience with a generalisation that has put these students in a negative light as failures and having higher chances of withdrawing and not graduating, these students have used resources from within, around and beyond them to overcome and emerge on the surface. One such instance is the experience narrated by respondent (08\_SS02\_0519) on their academic experience during their first year in university: *I've struggled with most of those, like maths, physical maths and chemistry during first year. But, then I made sure that I studied hard towards the end of the semester so that I can get good grades, like I failed a lot of tests during that first year but I made sure that during the exam I go all out and pass at the end and I did that.* (08\_SS02)

McKay and Devlin (2016) emphasised the determination with which students from disadvantaged backgrounds apply to overcome the adversities that they encounter in their academic life. They showed how the deficit misconception with which these students are characterised as possessing, is not a result of intellectual incapability but rather the inability to equally access resources that their counterparts possess. These students have a fighting spirit, refusing to submit to failure through manifest determination. In the case of this study, the determination was driven by the goals and aspirations that these students had set and their prospects of breaking through the poverty ceiling.

### **Adjustment – Agency**

The ability of students from disadvantaged communities to negotiate their epistemic access and success within a diverse and rapidly changing university environment has been looked at in the above section where their ability reflected elements of agency on their part. According to Crocker and Robeyns (2010), agency entails the freedom of an individual to decide their own reasoned goals and choices, and to draw on their resources to act towards realising these goals. In the midst of the challenges faced by the participants based on their disadvantaged background, rather than giving in to the deficit expectations, the students

made some effort towards changing the course of their academic journey to ensure that their intended goals and aspirations would be realised. Part of the agency was in making adjustments in their lives, dispositions, and culture to fit in with the expectations of the institution. One respondent expressed the following: *I could say first and second year my participation was not so good because I was still trying to adjust, you know, and getting used to how things are done at university level. But then third and fourth year I then started to engage most of the time. That's when I enjoyed engaging. I enjoyed participating.* (08\_HS03)

Part of the respondents' agency involved self-reflection to identify what was going on both right and wrong and for the latter, to find ways of changing the course. Bandura (2018) regards self-reflection as a major part of agency. In order to change the situations through the exercise of human agency, students need to evaluate their lives and areas requiring change. This is evident in the admission made by respondent 08\_HS03c\_0917 in explaining the academic journey through the years at university: *... so there was a lot of shifting and change which occurred in terms of my academic performance. I would say that during my first-year level of study I would obtain fifties. I would perform maybe up to sixty which would basically be the maximum mark which I got. And then as I got used to the university life, you know, consulting, associating, talk to people, I saw how things are done, how can I change my study methods and stuff like that there was change regarding how I performed. I then managed to obtain distinctions which actually made me feel proud of myself because I could then realise that, you know what, I'm also capable and able.* (08\_HS03)

Insofar as the university environment is set against the conditions in which students from disadvantaged backgrounds are concerned, according to some literature, no one would give them much chance of survival. Largely, this is a result of an oversight on the role that individuals are capable of playing in turning situations around for themselves. Bandura (2018) refers to the intrapersonal influence as well as the individual personal behaviour as determinants of whether or not humans could exercise their agency in spite of the environment that may dictate the contrary.

### **Peer Support**

The other force that drove respondents in the study to resurface despite being thrown in the deep end was the capital obtained from peers. Yosso (2005) identifies a form of capital that those regarded as disadvantaged possess, which enables them to thrive under challenging

situations. She refers to this capital as familial capital, a form of social capital derived from family and peers. The ability to pool together resources, and to mitigate challenges, which if encountered individually would result in failure, is what participants in the study admitted to having used. Both in their academic endeavours as well as their general survival at university, these students developed dependence on one another. They complemented each other by filling in their perceived gaps of inadequacy. This was witnessed with regard to challenges in academic work, skills deficit and basic need inadequacies such as food, accommodation and companionship.

During the entry experience, most respondents admitted to drawing strength and confidence from their networking with others from similar backgrounds. There was a sense of security even about food in realising that they were not alone in the deep end. Being able to encourage and support one another enabled them to resurface, as one of the participants commented: *I could say, God. I prayed a lot sometimes I would go to school and come back only to find that there is no food and my roommate is eating pizza. On the other hand, I am tired, hungry and I still have to study because there is an exam tomorrow. I would be like God I give up. But I would then pray and say I know why I came to the University and so I need to push. I prayed a lot and talked to my sisters for they are my support system. At a later stage, I found friends at res and we could help each other, in case I needed help with food, bathing soap, etc.* (08\_HS13)

The excerpt above highlights some of Yosso's community cultural wealth that enable the students to pull through regardless of the challenges encountered. Amidst the challenge of lack, students maintained focus on their goal, which Yosso (2005) refers to as the aspirational capital. The role of familial capital is evident both in the strength drawn from talking to their sister as well as the support shown by friends. It was these capitals which Bourdieu (1986), in his theory that has informed most studies that make a conclusion of the grim end of disadvantaged students in universities, that fails to recognise the other sources of capital beyond those of Bourdieu (1986). Despite the challenges, students make a deliberate effort to focus on the future. Some of their anticipations of the future are discussed in the following section.

### **Future progression intentions: Aspirational capital**

What makes this group of students persevere amidst the challenges is their future focus. Chiramba (2020) argued that the groups of underprivileged students tend to ignore the

challenges that surround them now and imagine a future with no hurdles, as echoed by two of the participants: *So, I want to be a Professor especially for Languages, I love languages. So, that's something I am looking into. I just hope responsibilities won't stand in my way* (08\_HS13\_1015). *Oh, my aspirations for the future. I want to live really comfortably; I want to live a very comfortable life. I want to make sure I get my education and I work the job I like.* (08\_SS09)

Some participants have plans to continue with their studies and even have plans beyond the PhD: *Well next year I'll be doing my honours if everything goes to plan. Then next year I'll be doing my Master's. Then after my Master's I will go and work at SK Capital and now Cape Town and then do my PhD. Four years later I would like to move to the USA to work for NASA if everything goes to plan for stop that's what my plan is* (08\_SS08).

Other participants have hopes of starting their own small businesses as echoed by these two participants: *My aspirations really are more economically inclined rather than academics really ... I love their ideas and taking those ideas and making them a reality ... I aspire to own like a market that is owned by Africans only* (08\_HS04). *For my future I want it to be like okay...I want to be my own boss I want to make a big business.* (08\_SS10)

Some participants look forward to becoming game-changers in their own communities and beyond: *Maybe if I become...maybe if I become what I want to be and I have money to donate, maybe to help our people who have been in the same situation as I am* (08\_SS03). *I'm going to change my background, my family situation of course and it means more doors are gonna be open for me more opportunities and being open. And I'll get to grow academically yeah* (08\_HS09).

Dreams such as these become a strong currency that the students have and use to see themselves succeed in their studies. Baldwin et al. (2020, p.21) posit that resilience could be mediated by psychosocial processes such as hope for a better future, current problems and active coping strategies.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This report reveals some key drivers (see next section) that enable the success of disadvantaged students against all odds. However, the fact that some students fail to succeed implies that, despite the efforts discussed earlier on, there is still a gap, or an unresolved equation where universities fall short of effectiveness.

## **Key drivers for student success**

A number of salient issues that have enabled the success of disadvantaged students have emerged from this study. Some pertaining solely to the students and others to both the students and the university and its stakeholders. One such issue is the huge shift occurring within the university's teaching and learning space. The student success agenda is gathering momentum as all stakeholders collaborate (Baldwin et al., 2020) in matters of student support and is not only informed by policy but by the way student support initiatives are planned. The other is negative experiences that have propelled students to develop resilience, perseverance, self-reliance and coping mechanisms. This negative experience forms some form of capital that the students trade with in their academic journey. The students bring some of this capital from home as they interact with the family, friends and the community at large. Student backgrounds mirrored as dire situations at home, become some form of hard-earned capital as students change their poverty into opportunities for success. Resilience and a university environment that has an enabling campus culture further strengthen this.

Thus, campus culture is being reconceptualised to accommodate students from disadvantaged communities. An analysis of the university documents indicates that Wits has adopted a deep structural mapping of the student success agenda. There is evidence that reframing of student successes had to happen through collaboration and synchronisation of initiatives across the university structures, at both institutional and faculty level, to build student success bridges. Thus, coming to the fore is the unprecedented shift or turnaround in the way the university conceptualises, plans, aligns and implements student support projects and initiatives. This is augmented by the view of success as shared responsibility between the student and the institution (Baldwin et al., 2020). The university's policy frameworks zeroed in on students' needs and successes such that the student success agenda which has become everyone's responsibility.

We argue that by offering student support initiatives to meet student needs, the university refrains from being a doorkeeper for students from advantaged backgrounds and becomes a useful agent that promotes students from disadvantaged backgrounds. We see a convergence of institutional plans of action and student agency where university support intersects with and reinforces students' capitals and values and there is an emergence of a culture of collaboration. This challenges how an institution commits to assisting its students and how students are receptive to the university support offerings.

### **But, what more could be done or be done differently?**

A result of this report is that students' backgrounds become a source of capital that disadvantaged students tap into so that they succeed against all odds. Baldwin et al. contend that students from disadvantaged communities embrace academic challenges as a way to develop their intellectual abilities "...as an opportunity for growth not a potential threat that will reveal their lack of ability" (2020, p.17). There is a need by the university to recognise and respect familial, social, negotiational, resistance, linguistic and aspirational capitals that students from disadvantaged backgrounds possess. We argue that the university becomes a conduit to these capitals by providing an environment that activates and nurtures these capitals, resilience, and experiences. This involves creating an environment where students' cultural knowledge, values and norms, and abilities thrive. Brooks cited in Baldwin et al. (2020, p.19) asserts that resilience is "developed through interaction within the environment - family, schools, neighbourhoods and the community at large". The implication is that universities can train students to be resilient since "adversity is the soil through which resilience grows" (Baldwin et al., 2020, p.19). Thus, universities can teach resilience skills to those students who lack them.

We settle with Ndofirepi and Cross (forthcoming 2022, p.52), on the assertion that "successful student epistemological access and success require effective institutional mediation strategies within a value framework of inclusion, collaboration and social cohesion to maximise the role of students' individual and collective agency".

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## **Chapter 10: Epistemic access and success of historically marginalised students in South Africa: Towards a capability and resilience model**

Logan Govender and Zahraa McDonald

### **Introduction**

This chapter provides a synthesis of the main themes and challenges of historically marginalised undergraduate students' epistemic access and success in the faculties of humanities and sciences, drawing on the six university case studies. Overall, the data suggests that students' epistemic journey is a function of their integrated, co-created experiences comprising student agency and institutional mediation activities. While student responsibility and agency emerge as critical, the evidence points to the crucial role of institutional mediation or capability in the official and pedagogic domains, with the social domain of student life emerging as quite significant, the domain that requires far greater attention than has been the case in the past. Several important themes have emerged from the data, notably, student under-preparedness and the school-to-university knowledge gap, the continuing importance attached to academic development (AD) programmes, the notion of 'compensatory capital', the 'NSFAS funding dependency problematic', first-generation status pressure, the curriculum status of African languages and, not least of all, student resilience. From a curriculum and teaching perspective, the following themes on students' experiences have been highlighted: study workload, rural specific challenges, language issues and academic literacy, use of tutors, computer literacy and the turn to online/blended learning, shyness and lack of confidence, class size and student-centred approach (SCA). Social domain themes include: accommodation, linked to transport and security concerns; social connection or belonging, linked to institutional culture; mental health issues and the importance of extra-curricular participation; and balancing independence at university with academic work.

The UWC case study usefully encapsulates many of these themes in its identification of four arguments, namely, the academic under-preparedness argument; the financial factors argument; the school-to-university transition argument and the institutional factors and cultures arguments. Across the case studies, a key problematic identified, and one that has persisted in the democratic era in South Africa, is the articulation or knowledge gap between the school to university transition, linked to student under-preparedness. This has impacted student access and success especially in their first year of under-graduate study. Linked to the knowledge gap, a key problematic is that as long as English remains the medium of instruction

at universities without African languages also accorded this important pedagogic function, many historically disadvantaged African students will continue to struggle in achieving excellence in their academic work – in this regard, it might be useful for future studies to explore more closely the link between student drop-out rates and the various curriculum challenges encountered.

While students' capability and responsibility accounts for much of students' success and throughput, institutional mediation and capability, especially through academic support, continues to shape the quality of students' academic experiences and associated outcomes. Cross's notion of 'compensatory capital' (2018) also looms large in the well of students' capabilities that they draw on; however, there are indications that the peer, family and community support networks that students rely on are coming under increasing pressure in the face of rapidly changing university environments which reflect the challenging and dynamic social and economic contexts of 21<sup>st</sup> century societies. The situation in South Africa is exacerbated by high unemployment levels especially among the youth, and low economic growth. Thus, the notion of 'it takes a village' (as described in the UJ case study), to enable the epistemic access and success of historically disadvantaged students might not be sustainable in the immediate future.

The current educational and socio-economic complexity has been accentuated by the student protests of the Fallist movements, COVID-19, the 4IR and the push towards decolonisation of higher education. The notion of 'super student' emerges in this context as an important facet of epistemic access and success, thereby drawing greater attention to the notion of 'student resilience', which in the wake of COVID-19 has seen HEIs refocusing their research priorities accordingly. One example of this is the joint call for papers by UJ's Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies and the Journal of Educational Studies hosted by the University of Venda (UV) on the theme: Disadvantaged Students' Resilience in Higher Education during Crisis at the beginning of 2022. Institutional interventions too, through various AD and psycho-social support programmes, emerge as a significant factor related to student access and success; however, the picture is somewhat mixed, as in at least one case study, student experience with AD programmes were largely negative; moreover, there appears to be little monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of academic development programmes and establishing conclusively the causal links with student performance, suggesting an area of future research to help inform targeted interventions.



An important finding relating to students' epistemic access is the 'NSFAS funding dependency problematic' or what might be referred to as the 'constant precariousness of formal access'. Data from most case studies highlight the persistent material and financial difficulties students encounter despite NSFAS funding – many students struggle to make ends meet and are constantly worrying about whether the NSFAS funding will reach them on time. This not only raises questions about the efficiency of NSFAS administrative and management systems, it questions a central assumption of the study, namely, that formal access has been achieved for South Africa's historically marginalised students and that ongoing complexities and challenges only relate to epistemic or epistemological access, that is, the content and quality of their academic experiences. It would appear, therefore, that the constant struggle to hold on to formal access is having a deleterious effect on student participation in academic practice. In this regard, NSFAS students enrolled at a university close to their homes might experience fewer physical access problems, as illustrated in the UL case study. Moreover, redressing historical inequalities of access in South African higher education, although fairly advanced, is quite nuanced and, thus remains an ongoing project across the case studies, as highlighted in the UWC case study. These nuances are reflected in continuing challenges around the issues of race, class and gender.

As highlighted in the literature review chapter, invoking a decolonial theoretical lens highlights the need for epistemic justice in respect of disadvantaged students. However, data from the case studies suggest that the focus on decolonialism is often a mere distraction for students; and that the real challenge around epistemic access and success is how best to come to terms with the traditional Eurocentric curriculum, while gradually adapting to decolonial curriculum imperatives. Methodologically, the study drew attention to the dynamic nature of conducting higher education research, where change and surprise are constant companions. This has been aptly underlined by the empirical disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the forced move to digital forms of engagement with research participants, and the attendant technology challenges of connectivity and adequate data. In some ways, student epistemic access and success has been enhanced because of the turn to digitisation; on the other hand, it has highlighted persistent inequalities of South African higher education provision.

A key question that needs answering relates to the persistent phenomenon of low throughput in South African higher education, as evidenced in the statistical data in some of the case studies (see Chapter Three). This general trend notwithstanding, many historically

marginalised students are able to achieve epistemic access and success. The analysis and discussion that follows interrogates the data from the case studies more closely.

### **Institutional Mediation**

When historically disadvantaged students enter university for the first time, they are confronted by a complex socio-economic and institutional cultural edifice. This complexity has been explored through three lenses or domains: the official, pedagogic and social domains. For the purposes of analysis, academic development (AD) programmes are discussed under the official domain although they overlap considerably and are both directly and indirectly related to the pedagogic domain. As noted in Chapter 2, both the official and pedagogic domains shape the conditions of becoming a participant in academic practice which in turn, informs epistemic access. Learning to become a participant in academic practice thus involves being influenced by and navigating the official and pedagogic domains associated with an institution. The third important domain, which seemingly has not received as much emphasis in epistemic access research, is the social domain, as is apparent from the findings of this study. It should also be noted that this report encompasses six case studies, with diverse institutional contexts. In particular, the distinction between historically White institutions, such as Wits and UP, and the historically Black institutions, such as UL and UWC, is pertinent, as is the context and academic focus of CUT as a university of technology. UJ presents another unique institutional context, given its merging of a formally white Afrikaans-medium institution, with a technikon and a black distance learning entity. Notwithstanding these differences, the synthesis that follows identifies several common threads that have a bearing on historically marginalised students' epistemic access and success.

### **Official Domain**

This domain addresses the official recontextualisation field (following Bernstein, 1990), which draws attention to the construction of new knowledge from previously dominant discourses of knowledge production. In South Africa, recontextualising of the official domain has entailed confronting the issue of exclusion of historical social groups, to consider diversity, social justice and equality. One important way in which the institutions in this study deal with this fundamental historical challenge of marginalisation is through AD programmes, which is also a way of dealing with the ongoing knowledge gap school-to-university transition challenge. Recontextualisation also entails reference to government departments and state agencies (Bernstein, 1990), including department managers, administrators and support staff responsible for academic development. Cross (2018) added that the official domain includes

the policies, rules and guidelines regulating campus life, or the institutional facts and constitutive rules known as institutional culture. The data, however, was scant with regard to institutional policies, rules and guidelines as a mediating factor of student epistemic access and success. One reason is the proportional distribution of data concentration: from students (68% of intended interviews), faculty academic and administrative staff (24% of intended interviews) and support staff (8% of intended interviews). If university management were interviewed, the insights of the research might have been different. Significantly, it was not clear in any case study the extent to which students are accepted without meeting the entry requirements, and thus the extent to which the official domain might be permeable. This issue could warrant further exploration. While policies, rules and guidelines were not reported on during interviews, reference to documentary evidence illustrates that this is not an absent feature of universities. Neither did participants suggest that rules and guidelines were non-existent; their responses merely did not infer anything notable in this regard.

Among the most important AD programmes that impact student access and success positively are writing centres, tutoring (although this relates more directly to the pedagogic domain) and psychological support services across the institutions. Nevertheless, there are unique AD institutional initiatives, such as UP's Pre-University Academy (PUA), which since 2021 has offered academic literacy, numeracy and other academic skills development courses for high school learners; CUT's Student-Peer Mentorship Programme where students are supported by their peers using mother tongue if necessary as critical to bridging the gap between home language and English as the medium of instruction at university; and Wits University's First Year Experience Committee created in 2017 to address student issues of transitioning from the stringent high school environment to university - the committee together with other representatives from the faculties run a number of student support initiatives ranging from orientation to the use of digital literacy for first year first time entering students, on the premise that "Successfully navigating the change is the first step towards being a successful student" (Wits, 2019 p.11, cited in Chapter 9). UWC however, presents an opposite perspective on AD programmes, arguing that the "lack of information about Student Support Services and academic advising at university level directly challenges the underprepared student thesis, a key argument of the deficit model on student access and success. Instead, it supports the underprepared university thesis" (see Chapter 8).

Overall, institutions provide a range of AD programmes based on institutional need and resources, as illustrated in the case of CUT: Student-Peer Mentorship Programme,

Supplementary Instruction (SI), a project on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Graduate Attributes Project, Academic Advising, the Writing Centre for undergraduate students, Extended Curriculum Programmes (ECPs), the Mentorship Programme for New Academics, and a year-long training and development programme.

### **Pedagogic Domain**

Structurally, the pedagogic domain of universities is demarcated by faculties. In order to attain a degree or qualification, students register for programmes that are offered in faculties. For each degree or qualification programme, faculties define the parameters; that is, the admission requirements of who gains entry, the curriculum content and who teaches it. Those who teach courses in faculties make decisions about the content, its teaching methods and assessment practices. In other words, although institutions confirm degrees, faculties authorise the confirmation thereof. As observed by Cross (2018), the pedagogic domain comprises specialised modes of communication and interaction between knowledge communities and is made up of the curriculum and teaching and assessment that together produce and reproduce academic practice. From a curriculum and teaching perspective, the following themes on student experiences have been highlighted in the case studies: study workload, rural specific challenges, language issues and academic literacy, use of tutors, computer literacy and the turn to online/blended learning, shyness and lack of confidence, class size, applied/technical skills vs conceptual knowledge, student-centred approach (SCA) and having a sense of belonging.

With regard to workload, despite, or maybe, because the participants in this study had succeeded in the academic programme, they concluded that the workload of the programmes was quite heavy. This is one of the recurrent themes in case studies. One lecturer from the Faculty of Science and Agriculture at the UL remarked as follows: *It is very difficult... very confusing because it is a combination of stuff and the culture. And mostly, it is because the curriculum... you know you get it at a later stage because you missed a lot of stages. So, they have to learn a lot of things in a short space* (05\_AC02).

This lecturer seems to be suggesting that the workload is overwhelming because students have to make up for what they had missed at earlier stages of the education journey. Similarly, many students, particularly those from the Science faculty at UJ, claimed that their workload to be heavy: UJ is *all about studying and being serious* (03\_SS03), *I am always in my room doing my schoolwork* (03\_SS09), *barely have time for lunch* (Science Administrator). Another lecturer from the UL indicated that students from rural areas found it difficult to adjust to the

curriculum: *Most are from rural areas. Most of them are actually clueless about some of the processes we assess especially in our department. This could be defining the background of their schools and their minimal exposure to technologically related teaching and learning methods and procedures within the university environment. This might make some of the staff members to be of the view that these poor students are not serious about school work (05\_AC03).*

Here again, rurality emerges as a factor in accessing the university. Within this context however, it relates to the pedagogic domain of the institution. Students from rural areas are not regarded as prepared for the university environment due to their lack of exposure to technologically-orientated teaching and learning. The excerpt here does however, not match with the data on positive throughput trends, and thus adds credence to there being a disconnect between the orientation of lecturers and what students are achieving. Alternatively, lecturers might be focusing their attention on weaker/struggling students only, while being oblivious to successful students. It might be that a closer look at the curriculum and its delivery, including assessment practices, are required to elicit a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. Focusing on struggling students might have unintended consequences of poor stimulation of stronger students, thereby thwarting their epistemic access.

The teaching and learning challenges associated with language and the medium of instruction are a common theme. However, the language policy and reforms at universities to date have remained stoic and at a cosmetic level, as indigenous languages have not developed sufficiently to become the language of teaching and learning, English continues to enjoy that role. This is regarded as a major obstacle to both advantaged and disadvantaged African students at African universities in general, as highlighted by Prof. Babuuzibwa Luutu, from the Marcus Garvey Pan-Afrikan University, Uganda at a webinar hosted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) on the subject 'Reimagining the African University: Purpose, Support and Context' (23 March 2022). The language conundrum was expressed as follows in the Wits case study (see Chapter 9): *Coming to university, the first difference that the students noted was the dominance of the English language as the medium of communication. For most of these students, the thought of communicating in English was a daunting task, one that brought with it a sense of anxiety, shame and loss of confidence to express themselves both in and out of the learning environment.*

UP has been making efforts to address the language-in-pedagogy challenges, given its unique history as a White, Afrikaans-medium institution. This has been done through the phasing out of Afrikaans as a language of instruction and adopting English as the only language of instruction. Afrikaans and Sepedi remain in use for ceremonial purposes, and students enrolled prior to 2019 continue to receive Afrikaans study material where feasible, until the completion of their degrees. Online Sepedi courses are offered to staff and students free of charge, to encourage multilingualism and social cohesion. However, as noted in the case study, while the removal of Afrikaans is a significant part of the university's transformation, other language issues remain unresolved, such as English as a language of instruction that remains a barrier to student success.

At CUT, academic literacy is seen as an indispensable tool in negotiating epistemic access for students. In particular, the institution observed that a large number of students, irrespective of their level of achievement in high school, are generally not sufficiently equipped in academic English language proficiency and personal competencies (life skills) to successfully pursue studies in higher education. As a result, the university has introduced compulsory fundamental modules to improve the entry-level proficiency of all first-year students. Academic literacy is described as knowing how to speak and act within a particular discourse, and the reading and writing that occur within the academic discipline at large and within particular fields (CUT, 2016, as cited in Chapter 4). The institution asserts that while some students acquire academic literacy by virtue of their participation in the discourse of the relevant discipline, this is not always the case for students who are less prepared for higher education studies (CUT, 2016, as cited in Chapter 4). Based on the evidence from the case studies, a study that scrutinises curriculum delivery should have a particular focus on language in context, including the translation of course material into African languages and the cost implications.

From the student data, shyness, lack of confidence, fear and anxiety emerge as significant obstacles in teaching and learning, preventing students from approaching lecturers and participating in lectures, as stressed in the UP case study. Some students pointed out that their shyness inhibited their participation in class and that they preferred indirect methods of communicating, not because lecturers were unapproachable, but because they lacked confidence. Students were afraid to embarrass themselves when speaking up in a large classroom, particularly if they felt that their accent and communication skills were inadequate. Vulnerable students' fear of participation and embarrassment is a persistent concern in creating access to powerful knowledge in higher education (Respondek et al., 2017, cited in

Chapter Seven). Being too scared or shy to participate is a complex issue, but not new from a human characteristic or behaviour perspective, that could be partly understood as an expected part of the transition to a new academic environment.

The issue of class size has also been identified as an ongoing pedagogical challenge. This was highlighted in the UP case study given the rapidly expanding student numbers as lecturers struggle to provide individualised feedback and engagement. The problem is linked to government's push for the massification of higher education, as universities are pressured to increase student numbers with limited resources. There is also the related criticism of the university's focus on performance targets given the increasing commodification of higher education, which staff believe could be counterproductive to meaningful student engagement: *I think it's very easy for managers and academic staff to get very quickly bogged down in the number-crunching, and miss, or marginalise what I believe to be the core function of the university which is actual teaching and sort of engagement (06\_AC04).*

For example, the academic believed that available support such as academic writing services were deliberately 'under-advertised' because of limited capacity to meet student demand. Staff at both faculties at UP agreed that resource provision and massification are systemic issues that need to be addressed urgently: *...a lot of things are outside of the power of the institutions themselves. As a country, we need many more universities to deal with the increasing number of students, but we certainly have to look at the issue of massification, or if we continue to massify, we need to look at increasing human resources, the capacities of universities, to deal with these resources (06\_AC04).*

In some cases, lecturers were teaching undergraduate classes of one thousand and more students, which meant that marking has to be partially outsourced, in that way limiting the lecturers' freedom to provide feedback and academic engagement to their students. Thus, in many ways, confidence and class size issues suggest that the pedagogical challenges facing universities are not new, and perhaps, what is needed, is getting back to the basics: a student-centred learning approach, as is being emphasised at CUT.

The challenges experienced at CUT may be regarded in some ways as unique given its status as a university of technology. This is underscored in the curriculum bias towards attainment of skills and competencies, whereas curricula of professional fields in research-based institutions offer both professional skills and conceptual knowledge. The case study suggests that work integrated learning (WIL) is a distinctive feature of curricula at UoTs whose

mandate is preparing students for particular employment situations and careers. The authors argue that WIL and its emphasis on graduate attributes (soft skills) at CUT could limit the academic lecturers' ability to engage students in learning to participate in academic practice, resulting in academic success that is qualifications-driven, with little experience of the broader activities that constitute epistemic practice at research-based institutions. This institutional distinctiveness can create an impression that the curricula of UoTs concentrate exclusively on imparting skills and competencies for occupations rather than conceptual and theoretical knowledge. If this is internalised in those who design and deliver curricula, specialised disciplinary knowledge and by extension, epistemic access to knowledge which technologists and technicians require to function effectively in specific occupations, can be undermined. On the other hand, CUT's adoption of the Student-Centred Approach (SCA) as the philosophy at the foundation of all teaching and learning practices, suggests the nurturing of engaged students in a scholarly academic and a rich learning environment, leading graduates who will be well-rounded individuals (CUT, 2014). In order to pursue its vision, CUT has adopted SCA as an official philosophy to guide policy and practice on teaching and learning. Notably, improvement of lecturers' qualifications and a supportive environment have been highlighted as critical to supporting this teaching and learning philosophy.

The issue of belonging has also been highlighted. Contrary to students who felt a sense of belonging in the Faculty of Humanities at CUT, another pointed out that: *Our lecturers do not care that much about us. You have to do things on our own. They will be saying one thing in class encouraging us to feel free to come their offices if they encounter problem. But then the person will be different when you come to his or her own office. He/she will be shouting and he will be having a bad attitude and all that, so you have got to do some things on your own or have groups to study (01\_HS07).*

At UWC, students' interactions with lecturers and tutors differ in the two faculties. Science students attend lectures more often than students in the Arts and Humanities Faculty, which fuels the view that Science students are more committed and that their workloads are more demanding. Arts and Humanities students prefer consultation with their tutors while Science students prefer direct consultation with their lecturers. Science students believe that lecturers are older, more knowledgeable and more experienced than tutors. On the other hand, Arts and Humanities students attend tutorials to catch-up on lectures they did not attend or to develop a better understanding of what has been taught in class. According to some Arts and Humanities students, they feel relaxed and comfortable while speaking to their tutors, as



tutorial classes are small, and students can easily interact with tutors and fellow learners. Participation of students during lectures raises a concern for manageable class size as institutional factors like the size of specific classes, according to Tinto (1993), and student-teacher ratios, may have a significant influence on student performance. A class size manageable for lecturers and suitable for learning will enhance students' epistemological access. It should be noted that use of tutors continues to be an important intervention across the case studies, with about 70%-75% of students at UJ accessing tutors more than once a month. The university also uses tutors to address the language challenge, appointing tutors that speak the students' home languages. As highlighted earlier, a 'back to basics' approach which focuses on individual student attention through the use of tutors and other interventions, appears to be bearing fruit.

With the move to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and the move into the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), students' IT skills have become the focus of attention. For example, UP provides a compulsory module for incoming first-years that teaches basic computer skills, which students identified as instrumental in their ability to use technology. At UWC, remote teaching and learning made such 'connecting' challenging, if not impossible; online lectures were poorly attended and many students and lecturers were unable to function optimally in the rush to emergency remote teaching in 2020, with devastating effects for many students, as captured in the UWC Report:

First-time entering mainstream and extended curriculum (Foundation provision) enrolment was affected significantly by COVID-19, resulting in higher attrition in these enrolment categories. Annually, the first-time enrolment targets are also affected by students who drop out if they are not successful in terms of their National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) applications (UWC Annual Report, 2020, p.33).

Finally, faculty entry requirements may have implications for the pedagogical domain. It is not clear from the case studies, nor from the available quantitative data how many students are granted access to university not having met the academic entry requirements. Moreover, it is not clear what this means for the curriculum, assessment and student as well as staff well-being, suggesting an area for further research. An evaluation of this aspect at selected institutions would be particularly revealing, and speak authoritatively to rhetorical assertions that are made regarding the so-called school-university gap as well as 'low' throughput levels.

In this regard, HEMIS should make provision for gathering data on the status of students having met the requirement as well as whether they had been accepted for extended curricula programmes. These disaggregations should moreover be captured in the Vital stats, thereby providing an evidence base for a more nuanced analysis of the sector to enable shifting practices that can address the country's fragmented and unequal character.

### **Social Domain**

As noted in Chapter 2, the social domain entails social interactions, intersubjective relations, attitudes, and behaviour with and among students, and it represents the social space in which university life occurs, understood as the campus climate and comprising the formal and informal environment within a university in which we learn, teach, work, and live (Cross, 2018). It could be argued that the campus climate is not static, it could change and thus influence how students become members within the academic practice at different times. While some campus climates are alienating, others promote belonging and a student feels part of the membership (Cross, 2018). Epistemic access is thus enabled where both the campus climate and student membership connect. Moreover, the social domain for students is not strictly confined to the campus. According to Cross (2018), the social domain has been neglected and ignored in the scholarship on higher education, especially its impact on student epistemic access and success.

Overall, the findings from the case studies demonstrate that, to the extent that it impacts on epistemic access, the social domain of institutions stretches beyond the physical space of the institution. The findings further illustrate that the social domain is impacted by students' backgrounds, as well as the capability of the institution to accommodate students both on and off campus. The institution does not have the same level of control over the social domain as it has over the official and pedagogic domains because it involves processes that the institution cannot apply policies to, the location of the Bree Taxi rank and associated taxi routes (Wits case study, Chapter 9), for example. However, it is clear that institutions need to recognise the immense influence that the social domain has on students' epistemic access and success, and that, where possible, appropriate interventions are considered. This is especially pertinent, given the increasing emphasis on the university's community engagement role if it were to remain relevant (see, for example, Brink, 2021); and the renewed attention being given to an examination of the core purposes of the university (for example, the current national universities histories' project coordinated by Professor Saleem Badat, UKZN and his team).

The following issues/themes relating to the social domain were highlighted in the data: accommodation, linked to transport and security concerns; social connection or belonging, linked to institutional culture; mental health issues and the importance of extra-curricular participation and balancing independence at university with academic work.

**Student accommodation, linked to safety and security**, is probably one of the major concerns for students, especially off-campus, as observed by a UL student: *Okay on campus it is very much safe. It is a safe environment actually ja, as compared to off campus. Off campus there are a lot of robberies going on, students are being killed, are being raped and all those stuff. If you are on campus, then none of those you get to experience them (05\_SS11).*

Thus, as asserted in the UL Case study, living off campus poses a stumbling block to reaching or accessing facilities (library, computer laboratory, internet facilities, etc.) on campus. However, to address this challenge the UL has provided transport and security to escort affected students (see Chapter 6).

Similarly, accommodation was highlighted as a barrier to students' formal and epistemic access at CUT, explained as lack of accommodation around campus having a knock-on effect related to public transport times and class attendance, especially public transport during mornings and late afternoons for students from villages situated far away from the university campus. The situation is compounded at CUT given the lack of affordable accommodation for students. Students, mostly female, at UWC also raised security concerns in off-campus university accommodation. Fear of hijacking, theft, bullying, sexual harassment or rape has forced students to leave the university before it gets dark, hence reducing their time to access university library and/or extra-curricular activities, such as sports. This is an indication of safety as a societal problem, and once again, underlines the importance of the university's broader community engagement role. Student experiences at UJ were somewhat different as most of the students were happy with their residence arrangement (on or off campus). In the interviews, those living in off-campus residence reported more distracting incidents (such as TV and other noise) as well as challenges related to traffic and transportation which impact their class attendance. This is also related to a relatively low satisfaction rate with UJ's inter-campus bus services (around 50%, Undergraduate Experience Survey). These concerns are, however, minor in relation to the more serious concerns relating to violence against female students.

On the more positive side, students at UP described residence life as an enabling part of their university experience. This could mean that there has been some transformation of residence culture, which has historically been particularly alienating for black students (CHE, 2010). In this group of students, being part of residence life has enabled meaningful social networks and relationships, which is an important aspect of access and success in higher education, particularly for students with limited financial resources: *For the past two years I've been living at the university residences and it is quite fine. You interact a lot. You get to do activities together, build relationships and so forth* (06\_SS01).

However, as is also the case at CUT, spaces in residences are limited, and not all students are able to enjoy the social benefits of residence life. According to the UP study, some students' academic success may be enhanced by the support structures built into residence life (for example, study space, 'house parents' and peer mentors), while others may experience residence accommodation arrangements as distracting, culturally misaligned and therefore less enabling. Some students explained that the visibility of peers working long hours in communal residence study spaces motivated them to deepen their commitment to their studies and inspired their desire for academic success. Students at Wits adopted a positive approach in relation to transport, stressing that the use of public transport throws them into a shared physical space which then enabled particular relationships to build around related shared activities and experiences. While institutions might not have absolute control over dynamics in its social domain, institutions ought to remain cognisant of what they mean for the overall culture of the institution, in what ways it might contribute to or be a mediating factor in feelings of alienation, for example, and impacting epistemic access and success.

By way of addressing accommodation and security-related challenges, there was a strong call from students and staff for safe and conducive student accommodation as critical for students' epistemic access and success. While universities have been responding to student concerns within budgetary constraints, it is clear that a lot more can be done. One area that needs more nuanced and context-specific response is in the provision of student transport, for example in the case of UL and CUT. Some respondents felt that university management should make access to comfortable accommodation a priority, especially for students coming from other provinces. Moreover, given the significance accommodation and security challenges present for student experiences, it certainly warrants more research focus.

Probably the most important social issue for student centres around **belonging or social connection**, which resonates with **institutional culture and diversity**. This emerged quite strongly in the UP case study, with students stressing social connection as a capability that enhances experiences of belonging to the university, and which students had reason to value. Valued social support networks identified in the interviews were both formal (for example, an appointment with a faculty advisor or residence mentor) and informal (for example, friendship with a more experienced peer). Students identified the importance of a sense of belonging, access to caring adult mentors, a safe space to share challenges and problems and social connections with diverse students: *Everyone is determined... but the people that I surround myself with are determined to achieve their goals. I think it is a safe space in terms of academics...I think it is easy for me to fit in... Because the university as a whole, we have a common ground so I can work from that (06\_SS05). [Residence life] really helped me with my studies... it was just my second home, even the [residence] parents that we had, they were like my own parents. I can still tell them whatever, because I believe that my parents left me in their care and that I shouldn't suffer...it was a huge family tree, because we had international students, we were learning things from them as well, so for me it was easier, because I am an outgoing person and it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be (06\_HS04).*

The UP case study stressed the positive experience of residence life for first-generation students as reflective of the university's commitment to transforming an alienating and racially segregated residence culture associated with historically white universities. However, other students who were less keen on residence life, valued a quieter living environment and described themselves as introverts who preferred 'doing their own thing' to the frenetic pace of social activities at residences. Others found the university culture alienating, especially in comparison to their experience at a different institution, which was more reflective of their community environment: *Because I have been to [university X] ... it really didn't feel like I am in a different place than I am when I am at home, but when I came to [this university] ... it was very different.... I think the climate and the culture...because where I come from, we get excited over football games, and here, I have never heard anyone talking about football, or they don't know anyone who plays football. It's all about rugby. It's a very unrelatable. When I came here, I could not relate to anything [06\_HS03].*

The quote above reflects an institutional culture that is inherently alienating for students when they are separated from their cultural identity and familiarity in the university's social domain. The silence of culturally significant symbols in the quote above, may refer to other silenced

knowledge, symbols or ways of being that contribute to students who experience a lack of belonging, or who feel pressurised to assimilate with dominant cultures. This suggests that a deeper understanding of how cultural identity is marginalised or silenced could be included in institutional transformation initiatives. Students at CUT had similar experiences, with family, support from staff and community relations highlighted as contributing to how students negotiate epistemic access. The following excerpt is from an academic staff member: *From a social perspective I think it's very important and that we've seen in our programme is to understand the background of the students. ... there are really students that struggle and if you don't know why they struggle, then you can't solve their problem. Some students have to look after their families. They have to leave at 5 o'clock in the morning to be at the campus at 8 o'clock and leaves the campus at 15hrs or 16hrs (01\_AC05).*

A student portrayed a welcoming university environment: *feel at home because the staff are very friendly and the rules that they have set for the students are for the best (01\_HS08).* An administrator in addressing the issue of belonging, underlined the fact that as administrators, one of their responsibilities is to give students a sense of belonging and comfort in the faculty.

The excerpt below from the Wits case speaks volumes about how students navigate the social domain of HEIs via peer support: *I had friends as I told you. Like most of my friends I met them at Bree taxi rank because we used to travel together to Wits University, coming from Bree, walking passed Mandela Bridge. And most of us our experiences were the same. We came from backgrounds, economic situations which were not ideal. So, having them in my life really changed me because they helped me to adapt. They were there for me and they helped me to cope with my fears as well, like the fear of failing, the fear of being not accepted fully, that social steps of diversity. Ja, they were there. So, I used to talk to them about what they experienced on a daily basis and they would give me strategies as to how should I deal with such. So, it really helped me a lot (08\_HS04).*

The excerpt demonstrates that the social domain of institutions stretches beyond the physical space of campuses. To this end, it demonstrates that, at the same time, social domains of institutions are therefore circumscribed by the socio-economic backgrounds of those who attend them. This was also highlighted at UJ, where the challenge of belonging was expressed in terms of student diversity as many students came from closely-knit and homogenous communities where everyone knows everyone else. This was aptly captured by a student: *Johannesburg is an ocean of everything and almost everyone is here (03\_SS10).* It is

overwhelmingly individualistic: *you don't actually see people greet* (03\_SS09). As argued in Chapter Five, given the concerns over South African university campus culture (citing Badat, 2010; Soudien et al., 2008), institutional culture, environment and support should certainly be among the top considerations when investigating throughput. Campus culture and environment set the tone for how one behaves and what opportunities one can access (Strange & Banning, 2015, cited in Chapter 5).

When students do not experience a sense of belonging or find the institutional culture alienating, **mental stress** may result. At UP, students and staff described mental health problems as a significant constraint to their success, especially when combined with financial stress: *Within the first six months of university, I was diagnosed with depression. It got to a point where I used to sit under a tree and do nothing the whole day* (06\_SS03). *The majority of students come in ... especially now with lockdown it is emphasised well, they're coming in with really more social problems - negotiating friendships, negotiating romantic relationships, negotiating their time management. I think a lot of them get quite overwhelmed with the academic expectations* (06\_AS01).

At UWC, in order to deal with mental stress and isolation, students engaged in **extra-circular activities** on campus such as sports. Students attested that access to recreation activities at UWC does help in some cases in dealing with and overcoming challenges while on campus. It is also generally known that universities such as UP, Wits and UJ place a high priority on extra-curricular activities to ensure that students enjoy a well-rounded student life on campus. The availability of volunteer programmes at UWC also provide opportunities for self-discovery, which can have a positive impact on their relationship with the institution. For example, several students knew about and formed part of the programmes at the Gender Equity Unit on campus. They saw this as a safe environment where students who identify with non-normative gender identities and sexual identities have a place that they deeply value and where they make connections. Students also get exposed to opportunities in developing a sense of social and political responsibility beyond their academics, which serves the greater society through community development work. Similarly, at UP, the campus environment beyond residence life also enables students to cultivate a sense of belonging by participating in university societies, and spending time in communal spaces on campus. In the quote below, the freedom to pursue cultural-specific social connections is a valued part of cultivating belonging. The freedom to speak one's home language is a crucial part of developing academic identity, without losing a connection to home and community: *The main reason*

*behind [the university society] is to help other Tshonga people to adjust to university life as soon as they get here. ...spending time with my people who are speaking the same language makes me to realise that, hey, I must not forget where I'm coming from (06\_SS08).*

Very little emerged in the data with regard to students' political activism. For example, at UJ *students are not that active politically* (Science Administrator) compared to other universities. As noted in the UJ case study, it is unclear whether this lack of political involvement is due to underprivileged students' economic and family pressure to complete their studies as soon as possible, which would not be surprising, given that many are first generation students.

Finally, an important theme in many of the case studies was the challenge for students to **balance their newly-found independence at university with the demands and rigour of academic work, which relates to the school-to-university transition gap**. As one of the lecturers at UL observed: *So though as first years, the majority of them in their first year they are a bit struggling because they are finding it difficult to strike a balance between their studies and their personal freedom. See those students are achieving but not at their best optimal because they still have issues in terms of balancing the new environment, they're finding themselves in (05\_AD03).*

Thus, in broad terms, accommodation, transport and security concerns, the issue of belonging, linked to institutional culture, mental health and the importance of extra-curricular participation, and balancing independence at university with academic work are some of the major social domain themes that have been highlighted in the case studies.

### **Tying the official, pedagogic and social domains together**

The intersecting nature of the three domains discussed above, is aptly captured in the UP case study (see Chapter 7): "For students with constrained resources, access is not a once-off achievement, that is, entry into the university, but consists of several precarious points of access that must be secured throughout the degree programme ... These include access to funds to apply to university, sufficient resources to ensure tuition payments, access to textbooks, transport, accommodation, and other basic living costs".

In the official domain, participating in academic development programmes is an important entry point to epistemic access that has an enabling and empowering effect on student capability, while in the pedagogic domain, there are benefits for students from individual attention in tutorials and smaller class sizes. Academic, administrative and support staff were more vocal than students about the relevance of institutional and faculty-led interventions in



negotiating epistemic access across all three domains. Based on staff assertions, these interventions have become indispensable given the background and profile of students recruited and enrolled at the institution, specifically the knowledge gap dynamic, and may thus experience barriers when navigating epistemic access. For historically marginalised students, moreover, there remain many challenges in the social domain, particularly around safe and secure accommodation. Student resilience emerges as a critical factor, given the mental stress associated with academic practice and family and societal pressure to succeed.

That institutions do not have the same kind of control over the social domain as the official and pedagogic domains does not mean paying less attention to problems associated with it, and not factoring it in in addressing institutional culture. Culture is created by all at the institution, in all of their spaces which then ties them to the institution. In other words, the Bree taxi rank is clearly a social space of Wits for the students for whom it forms part of their commute. The issue of access to transport and ensuring that spaces such as taxi ranks are safe spaces for students should constitute part of the broader community relations of universities through engagement with relevant government and municipal departments. As such, the university's community engagement role takes on greater meaning, and something that warrants critical scrutiny by institutions. Moreover, not only in a formal sense of physical access to the institution, but in an epistemic sense of being integral to accessing the knowledge opportunities or academic practices of the institution. Knowledge is not confined to disciplinary knowledge, but the navigational knowledge that students require to gain physical access to academic practices of the institution. This would include available and efficient transport systems to ensure that students get to lectures on time, thereby underlining the importance of efficient socio-economic systems. The critical role of peers is highlighted in the social domain of institutions. Here the institution need not interfere, but this role needs to be made visible and emphasised as an important enabler of epistemic access and student success. As such, highlighting Ubuntu as part of students' social capital in university messaging and information documents, not as a 'nice to have' aspirational philosophy, but a real tangible, and necessary element of higher education experience, may require greater exploration and investment.

Building on the above, the next section explores the data from a student agency and capability perspective, underlining many of the institutional mediation themes, and providing a student perspective of epistemic access and success challenges and solutions.

## **Student Agency and Capability**

In this study, student agency manifested largely within the notion of capability, which emerged as a key element of the project's theoretical framing. As argued in the Wits case study in Chapter 9, capability "concerns students' agency and the underlying features of the agency, including students' awareness and ability to tap into their environment for whatever opportunities and support provided, and also refers to the ability to avoid any toxic or uncondusive influences". Self-motivation, taking responsibility for one's own work, drawing on compensatory capital, such as resilience and determination, are among the many resources that students depend on. Reflecting on the institutional mediation data above, student agency and capability of historically marginalised students not surprisingly sought to address the issue of under-preparedness and the knowledge gap, drawing on compensatory capital and making individual adjustments. Somewhat surprising, though, was the huge impact that deepening financial constraints have on students' epistemic access and success. The section begins with an analysis of under-preparedness, which is linked to the key problematic underpinning student access and success, namely, the knowledge gap from school to university.

### **Overcoming under-preparedness**

While financial challenges faced by historically marginalised students have economic and social systemic roots, as discussed in the previous section, the challenge of student under-preparedness is rooted largely in the education system, specifically at the school and early childhood development phases. This emerged in several of the case studies. At UP, staff expressed frustration by the systemic reasons that students are underprepared for the demands of university education, pointing to South African's historically segregated schooling system that continues to offer poor quality education to many black learners. The UP case study suggests there is an important shift away from a deficit, individualised approach to student underperformance and demands of academic life by lecturers, to one reflecting an understanding of the social injustices that continue to disproportionately marginalise black students: *Our education system, the basic and higher education, disadvantages black students who were disadvantaged in the past under apartheid, and they are continued to be disadvantaged now... So it's made me very angry that this government has failed black people in the same way in terms of disadvantage. Not so much the prejudice, but the disadvantage and the oppression that comes with poverty and with disadvantage, how this government has failed black people in the same way as the previous government (06\_AC04)*

Similarly, at UWC, there is the view that the current institutional plan partly identifies the problem of student under-preparedness arising from schools' failure to inadequately prepare students for rigorous academic work: *UWC remains committed to the widening and broadening of access to higher education. However, we recognise that students entering university come from very different and unequal schooling environments and, in general, there is a lack of academic preparedness for university studies. These factors have a direct influence on student retention and success. We will continue to make every effort to find effective ways to address the articulation gap between school and university studies. This will include renewed attention being paid to improve the provision of quality extended curriculum programmes, along with information literacy, computer and e-literacy skills* (UWC 2021, p.24).

UWC's focus on e-literacy and computer skills featured across the case studies. At CUT, while recognising systemic injustices, under-preparedness was related to students' changing literacy skills, such as the use of social media and writing competence, which is a constraint relevant to a broader spectrum of university students: *I think the level of basic writing ability has changed. And I think this is actually across the board and the students who are under-prepared for using English who perhaps have not had much exposure to first-language English speakers ... I think kids generally in schools are writing less and reading less and WhatsApping more and this has had an impact on concentration spans across the board and the ability to formulate an argument* (06\_AC01).

Additionally, at CUT, student under-preparedness is associated with language proficiency and life skills, arguing that 'language has the potential to exclude students from gaining epistemic access'. Significantly, CUT has introduced a number of interventions to mitigate students' shortfalls, or 'to create an enabling environment' including appointing senior students to mentor first year students. (see Chapter 4)

Students at WITS further underlined the writing difficulties linked to under-preparedness: *I really didn't know how to write an essay because at school when you write an essay the only ones you know were writing English essays which are different from academic essay and academic essays you have to reference and all those things which are new to us* (08\_HS02).

Student respondent (08\_HS03), admitted to not realising how essay writing in high school was different from university and then only after receiving a failed grade for an assignment. A different strand of under-preparedness thus emerges from students' inability to engage with

academic writing. This strand of literature assumes under-preparedness because students cannot write academically. At the same time, given they were in their final year, they had managed to navigate this ‘obstacle’. At the same time, it does not happen without distress on the part of students. Whether this is a problem, and the extent to which it is a problem, requires much more engagement in research as well as the implementation of academic practices by departments, institutions and academic and support staff.

Additionally, the UJ case study identified exposure and access to technology as one area of under-preparedness, observing that many students only learned how to use a computer at university. And for some science students, as highlighted by a UP student, under-preparedness was linked to laboratory work, which harks back to school shortcomings: *My first laboratory work was very difficult because I didn't know most of the apparatus that I have to use. So ja, I didn't know like the names, so it was very hard to locate my things ja like that because there were no labs back at high school (06\_SS02).*

Anecdotally there is lots of ‘corridor’ conversation about students being spoon fed at school and thus unprepared for university where to succeed, independent learning is required. The excerpt from the Wits case study below illustrates that, while distressing for learners, students from disadvantaged backgrounds might indeed have an advantage in this regard. It appeared some students lacked ‘teacher presence’ as teachers seemed not to care about their learners and what they were experiencing: *I feel like at school, tjo it was another mess again. Teachers at school were busy with their lives. I don't think they took time to ask are you ok? Are you coping? Do you understand? They just came I don't know; I think it's because in townships we are overcrowded. In my class we were fifty-something, so the teachers would just come to teach and then they go. Sometimes, I would just ask myself why can't she (teacher) just ask what's wrong? Why am I not coping? Why are my marks like this...? I feel it was another life that I had to cope with and adapt to, it was not home for me ... At high school, they just touch and go, and at the end of the day what did I learn? (08\_HS13)*

In the same way that negative experiences of teacher disengagement could be a catalyst for independent learning, so too could it be catalyst to do better. The excerpt below from a student teacher at Wits is an illustration of this. Frustrated by the poor teachers motivated one to become a teacher: *And most of them [teachers], I think they did not care, hence I decided to be a teacher (08\_HS04).*

Of course, this chapter is not claiming that ‘independence’ should be ‘taught’ in this uncaring manner. However, this excerpt demonstrates that students who experienced a lack of support from teachers and ‘make it’ against the odds, can be at a pedagogic advantage when they arrive at HEIs. This also means that where the university environment is conducive, and addresses other needs, students will succeed academically. Ironically, in the case of this student, and perhaps many others, the need to mitigate teacher disengagement at school, and learn independently with peers could have been the catalyst for their success at university.

### **Mitigating financial constraints**

Within the context of this research project, disadvantage was, to a large extent, conceived of as being financially constrained and thus, being a NSFAS recipient was one of the sampling requirements for student participants. It is therefore not altogether surprising that financial constraints, together with the mechanisms to mitigate and mediate financial constraint would emerge as a resounding theme in this study. Although student financial difficulties in South African universities are not new, this ‘knowledge’ has not been engaged with comprehensively in the literature drawing on evidence from the field of student experiences of higher education. In this section of the synthesis chapter, we do not consolidate the many layers of financial constraint that define students’ backgrounds. These are illustrated in other sections in relation to dimensions such as the social domain of universities and the 4IR. The key points to take away is firstly that students’ financial or economic backgrounds are not ‘simply’ disadvantaged, there are many permutations. The second point is that students have formally accessed higher education, and proceeded to final year despite this.

One of the ways in which students have mitigated their financial constraints is with the assistance of the NSFAS bursary scheme. While generally derided by the popular press and by others, the findings that emerge from the case studies in this report illustrate unequivocally, that the NSFAS bursary scheme is instrumental in students’ enrolment in and completion of their qualifications. Of course, critique of the NSFAS is not unwarranted; the administrative glitches in the system lead to anxiety and trials for many students and their families. Without the NSFAS however, many institutions might well be empty, because students would have had no other means of attaining a tertiary education.

An important finding relating to students’ epistemic access is the ‘NSFAS funding dependency problematic’ or what might be referred to as the ‘constant precariousness of formal access’. Data from most case studies highlight the persistent material and financial difficulties students encounter despite NSFAS funding – many students struggle to make ends

meet and are constantly worrying about whether the NSFAS funding will reach them on time. This not only raises questions about the efficiency of NSFAS administrative and management systems, it questions a central assumption of the study, namely, that physical access has been achieved for South Africa's historically marginalised students and that ongoing complexities and challenges only relate to epistemic or epistemological access, that is, the content and quality of their academic experiences. It would appear, therefore, that the constant struggle to hold on to formal access is having a deleterious effect on students' participation in academic practice. In this regard, NSFAS students enrolled at a university close to their homes might experience fewer physical access problems, as illustrated in the University of Limpopo case study. Moreover, redressing historical inequalities of access in South African higher education, although fairly advanced, is quite nuanced and, thus remains an ongoing project across the case studies, as highlighted in the UWC case study. These nuances are reflected in continuing challenges around the issues of race, class and gender.

A significant insight, in our view, related to mitigating financial constraint that we have not come across in the literature is the proximity and choice to attend a university closest to home. Both the centrality of NSFAS and institutional geographic location are enabling mechanisms for formal access to higher education institution as highlighted in the case study reports focused on students' backgrounds.

Mitigating financial constraint by attending an institution that is closest to home emerged in the UL case study. Students and some of the staff members in the sample indicated that they selected UL because it was closer to home which limited their financial distress. Having an institution closer to home, negated the challenges associated with being in university accommodation, could therefore be regarded as an enabling factor in individuals firstly attaining formal access, and secondly then having the capability to attain epistemic access. In the same way that having a university close to home could be an enabling factor in the process to epistemic access, the opposite might be equally true.

Herein lie the conundrum of 'counting' bodies in the higher education sector, reported on in Chapter 3; the quantitative overview. From the shift in headcount enrolment in the higher education sector, one might conclude that nothing more needs to occur except increasing throughput. Yet we cannot tell if this 'transformed' landscape has been random to the extent that any individual who wanted to attend a higher education institution was capable of it, or whether groups of individuals, those living in remote rural areas, far from any higher

education institution, for example, have been offered the same opportunities. The strides that have therefore been made in the higher education sector with regards to formal access cannot be considered complete. This further points to a data gap, either in how HEMIS gathers data, or which data are being reported.

The general financial challenges experienced by many students was captured by a UJ PsyCaD Officer: *Financial constraints remain one of the main challenges during the lives of many of these students, where their families often relied on child grants, social grants, pensions or single income, like many others in their community... In addition, many of these students often take on a larger number of responsibilities at home: many are expected to look after the siblings; sometimes sending what they have (National Student Financial Aid Scheme, NSFAS, or any other income) back home* (PsyCaD Officer).

In a few case studies, students' frustration and strife with NSFAS was articulated. The majority of UJ students interviewed listed delays in NSFAS grant disbursement of funds as their biggest frustration. Along a similar line, NSFAS's recently introduced offering of cash instead of channelling funds to different categories has placed additional responsibility on the students to have financial management skills. One Science administrator observed that many students struggled to manage this change, although she added that sometimes this challenge is not necessarily a result of poor financial management skills, but an expectation that the money is shared with the student's family. For students at CUT, one of the main concerns was with the administration of NSFAS, as well. CUT students from disadvantaged backgrounds, moreover, bear a large load of domestic responsibility that contributes to their home environments not being conducive to studying or focusing on academic practices. Features of students' background relate to their location in low socio-economic, rural and/or semi-urban areas in the Free State province of South Africa. The UWC case study stressed how students' financial challenges often affected their academic progress. Like at UJ, at UWC NSFAS's overall fund management, including insufficient amounts, and the late payment of stipends, especially at the beginning of the year when registration processes were under way, was noted by students. Some students occasionally addressed financial challenges by getting groceries from the Nutrition and Wellness Office run by the SRC or financial help from the Research and Innovation Office. During 2020, students living in UWC residences received monthly food packs from the Centre for Student Support Services. UWC also sought to assist students by providing work-study opportunities so they could clear accumulated debts. Paradoxically, however, *living beyond their means* (03\_SS05) tends to occur with those not dependent on

NSFAS, according to one student interviewed at UJ. Nevertheless, UJ students interviewed, claimed to be managing NSFAS funds well.

Besides NSFAS, complaints about the interactions with financial support are rife. At UP, students faced financial challenges relating to basic and other needs. Students' primary concern was access to financial resources that would sustain their degree programme until graduation, especially since disadvantaged students are more likely to require additional years to complete their degrees. As was the case at UJ, having enough money to cover basic costs, such as food and accommodation featured highly on students' list of concerns, resulting in added stress and anxiety: *So later in the year around this time September/October now your meal account starts running out and now you need to chase food and all of that. Ja, that was a challenge (06\_SS01). So, when stuff like when I get to struggle financially at res maybe when my food allowance finishes, I can't depend on my parents because they have a lot of things to do (06\_SS07).*

While all students who were interviewed received NSFAS funding, their experiences indicate a significant socio-economic divide. From the students' point of view, family members are usually their first call when they struggle with money when their NSFAS funds are inadequate (see section on Compensatory Capital). While some students struggled to meet basic needs such as food, electricity and transport, other students with greater access to financial support resources at home aspired to university-related expenses such as stationery, entertainment, clothing and social activities. At UP, students also struggled to navigate their limited financial capacity relative to peers with more resources. Students struggled to cover additional costs associated with participation in campus life, such as going out or dressing fashionably.

The Wits case study, echoing the PsyCad officer at UJ, drew attention to a widespread practice of students, using funds to support their families. At times, students would also get part time jobs that affected time that could be devoted to studying, as expressed by one student: *So, I had to have like a second job other than being a student. Like I used to work on weekends, go out tutoring learners and getting paid like ... [how much was it?] R400. So, I used to use that money to support my family and my siblings at home (08\_HS04).*

The excerpt below from the Wits case study speaks poignantly to how students' basic needs can intersect with academic practice: *I could say, God. I prayed a lot sometimes I would go to school and come back only to find that there is no food and my roommate is eating pizza. On the other hand, I am tired, hungry and I still have to study because there is an exam*



*tomorrow. I would be like God I give up. But I would then pray and say I know why I came to the University and so I need to push. I prayed a lot and talked to my sisters for they are my support system. At a later stage, I found friends at res and we could help each other, in case I needed help with food, bathing soap, etc. (08\_HS13)*

Besides the anguish experienced by this student, there is a resilience and agency founded on religious faith and the support from family and friends.

One student explained how they learnt financial management by taking a course: *I even got a module called financial management so that's where I learnt. Because I also saved some of the money during the process. So, I would like save between 500 sorry between 200 and 500 a month depending on my expenses. [Interviewer: Is that how you were able to buy yourself a laptop?] Yes, most definitely (06\_SS04).*

It is therefore clear from the above experiences of students as reported in the case studies, that state funding, while essential, is far from adequate to mitigate the myriad financial challenges they face. Significantly, the energy expended in coping with these challenges could be taking a high toll on their ability to succeed in their academic practices at the highest level. The reality of financial constraints for students from disadvantaged backgrounds means that students' formal access to university is never absolute. Moreover, while this project focused on one criteria of financial disadvantage, NSFAS compliance, two factors have to be borne in mind practically by institutions. Firstly, NSFAS provided financial bursaries to those whose households earn less than R350 000. Less than R350 000 can be anything ranging from R0 to R350 000, but students receive the same grant. Secondly, the 'missing middle' student category is not catered for. Given what we know about the economic situation in South Africa, this means that, contrary to what was claimed in the proposal submitted to the CHE for this project, formal access is not dealt with at a level of lived-experience, albeit that it is not a policy barrier. In other words, higher education is, in theory formally accessible by all South African citizens. In practice, financial constraints, continue to be a barrier to formal access to HEIs. This moreover is a critical barrier not only to epistemic access but also student success and the nature of transformation in higher education and beyond.

Despite the financial constraints and challenges observed in case studies, the student participants were in their final year of study. It could be possible that the ability to manage their financial situations, however dire, is what contributed to their capacity to learn to participate in academic practice. The converse may be equally true, that those unable to

manage their financial situations are not able to learn to participate in academic practice. While this appears almost intuitive, it is significant to the extent that it points out that access to financial resources is insufficient; a student also needs to manage those financial resources adequately. In addition, students have to be able to cope under the financial pressures they experience in order to learn to participate in academic practice. The relationship between financial management, coping mechanisms when under financial pressure, academic practice and epistemic access could be explored in greater depth. An implication being that students should be provided with more financial literacy at university, and even at high school.

### **Navigations related to (Un)Compensatory capital**

Coined by Cross and Atinde (2015), the concept of ‘compensatory capital’ was used to explain how students who suffered marginalisation, could utilise their social capital to achieve academic success. It describes the assets that students from marginalised or disadvantaged backgrounds draw on to participate in academic practice, and is seen as a useful counter to the deficit model. However, though the notion of ‘compensatory capital’ is helpful in understanding epistemic access of disadvantaged students, the gap is that it overlooks diversity within disadvantaged students themselves, resulting in over-generalisation of the concept (see Chapter 2 for details).

In this study, ‘compensatory capital’ was described largely in relation to family and community. This was especially apparent in the experiences of students at UL: *They [parents] always taught me hard work patience, and compassion (05\_SS13). I took my family values and beliefs to the university and what I can say when you are in that environment you must choose the people that you want to be with (05\_HS08).*

With regards to values, beliefs and lessons they had learnt from their community, a student pointed out that: *I believe that you are who you are because of our society, right? So, I believe everything I mean values and norms and everything we share and we learn everything through our society and through the groups that you are living in. So, I believe the community has contributed a lot as you said to where I am right now today (05\_HS11).*

Similarly, at UJ, students compared the importance of family and community in relation to Ubuntu. Ubuntu is both about giving and receiving: *I do not live for myself, but I live for others as well (03\_HS01). I am facing something, we come together and find a quick solution together (03\_HS14).*

The WITS case study chronicled students' experiences with their families, the home and the community which resulted in some sources of capitals. The participant narratives revealed familial and social capitals coupled with bonds and emotional support from the mothers and grandmothers.

At UP, however, some students described their home communities as negative, toxic or disabling, while university life provided an escape from adverse conditions and an opportunity to cultivate aspirations and an independent identity: *So now as a young one you don't get inspiration; you don't get inspired [by the community] ... So now the inspiration is being dragged down, more like we're just surviving* (06\_SS01). *[M]ost people that lived in my community were unemployed. They were alcoholics. They were drug users ... there were no role models, people you can look up to and say hey that person is doing something with their life. So, it is not a positive community experience* (06\_HS02).

Similarly, at CUT, students interviewed from the Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences (FHEs) and Faculty of Humanities (FH) also shared how their surroundings and family environments consisted of overcrowding, lack of study spaces at home and lack of connectivity, which impacted negatively on their studies.

In the WITS case study, while some students expressed support from families, it also emerged that both the rural and the township communities can be unsupportive of students going to the university. Students pointed out that by going to university, they become vulnerable and face the risk of resentment and exclusion by their communities: *And then the stigma around the community will get to you because like, now they feel like you are more important, you think you are more important since you are at varsity.* (08\_HS04)

During semester breaks, some students involve themselves in their communities to show their allegiance to the community, preserve their membership and regain community trust. It would be interesting to understand how first-generation students balance their emerging academic identities with the perceptions of diverse community environments. It could be that students experience identity struggles as they seek to adjust to the requirements of an independent, successful individual, while remaining loyal to a community identity that has been historically projected as deficit or inferior.

Given the differences between home and university, students report needing to change who they are in order to succeed. A student recalled how she had to abandon her experiences in favour of the university's ethos and values. This frustration was captured as follows: *One*

*thing that I don't like about university, it changes you, it wants you to adopt its own lifestyle, if you are coming with your own lifestyle, I had to change the way I dressed, the way I appear but it took me time, maybe a year then I had to adjust because I was coming with my own style from kasi<sup>26</sup>, now I feel like I don't fit in because the way that I am, the way that I dress and whatsoever (01\_SS07).*

It is also possible that families and communities are just not able to support students because they do not know how. First-generation students may be less likely to have access to support structures at home, as an academic explains: *I think because there's an increase in first-generation students at university ... I was a first-generation university student myself ... If no one in your family has been at university it means no one really understands how hard you do have to work and it's important to get I think somebody who when you do well on an assignment you can go home and say, I did really well in this assignment, and somebody says that's fantastic and really cares (06\_AC01).*

What emerges from the data is that compensatory capital can just as easily be uncompensatory capital. From the case studies, narratives emerged of students being supported by families and communities, needing to support families and communities and being hindered by family and communities. Similarly, it appears that succeeding at university might remove one from one's community. As has been emphasised in this chapter, the students that participated in this study have succeeded and reached their final year, and have thus coped with whatever hand they have been dealt.

The Wits case study makes the following observation, 'What sticks out is the issue of student's mindset, that is, how they view and interpret their social and academic experiences, form ideas about their capacity to succeed and get an understanding of the value of success.' It is possible that fundamentally this is what it is about – mindset – and that this matters for all students, irrespective of financial or other background. The question that emerges then is whether they view and interpret their social and academic experiences in a manner that allows them to succeed. Students who succeed at HEIs thus have many assets that can be shared, not only with other students but with the HEI communities at large, and indeed the broader society. If success breeds success, those who succeed have to be recognised not only for the academic

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<sup>26</sup> *Kasi* is a colloquial term used with reference to townships in South Africa. The word is a derivative of the Afrikaans word for township; *lokasie*. Townships were established and developed during the forced removals resulting from the implementation of the Group Areas Act of 1953 during apartheid in South Africa. Townships are located remotely from the central business districts in all towns and cities in South Africa with devastating effects on the mobility of those residing there - a feature of apartheid spatial planning that is yet to be corrected.

achievement and success, but the motivation and mindset that allowed them to achieve. It should however also be borne in mind that students might have had to sacrifice belonging to particular communities in order to succeed.

### **Galvanising mindsets**

The term galvanising mindsets perhaps best describes the ideas students have about themselves and their situation that contributed to them learning to participate in academic practice. Student mindsets about campus life appeared to be crucial to the outcome of their experience at university. One student at UL explained that he had to be *open-minded about varsity life so that [he] can adapt so well* (05\_SSH).

The UJ case study shows how the expectation to work hard is acknowledged by all students. Translated into practice, work hard often means *study[ing] every day* (03\_SS17). Another more concrete study tactic pointed out by many of the student interviewed in the UJ case study is time management. One student explained that *once you fall behind it is going to be very difficult to catch up* (03\_HS10). This study habit, however, was mentioned particularly by the Science students. Fundamentally students demonstrate an awareness of their agency, ownership and responsibility that leads to determination and persistence. One student explained that *we pave our own future* (03\_HS08).

The UJ case study also demonstrate that students had an inclination towards practicality; they *always have a backup plan* (03\_HS09), for example. One result is a quiet confidence that one can *deal with [things] as best you can in whatever ways you can* (03\_SS11).

The pressure to succeed as first-generation students could be a contributing factor to the galvanised mindset. One student explains: *None of the older generation have gone to study further, which actually in a way, puts me under a lot of pressure, because I sometimes feel like I have to meet a certain amount of requirements in order to satisfy my family and I don't want to be in a situation where if I don't achieve this, then it means that everything that they have done for me, everything that they have done to support me through school, and now through university, I don't want that to be in vain* (06\_HS01).

The students at Wits university (see Chapter 9) learnt resourcefulness and the determination to persevere from difficult family situations: *So, it [challenging home life] was like a motivating element for me ... and, then say; I want to achieve way more than being enrolled or studying at the college. Hence, I was able to push harder, to ensure that I get access to*

*university and then fortunate enough, it was one of the best universities that I got enrolled in.*  
[08\_HS06]

Citing Masters (as cited in Baldwin et al., 2020, p.20-21), the Wits case study (see Chapter 9) points out that “adversity is the context in which we recognise resilience”; and that resilience comes from simple processes and resources such as parents, unconditional love, support or caring by the community or “mediated by psychosocial processes” like an attached grandmother.

One emerging issue was the way students were able to change their mindsets and find inspiration from their negative experiences: *... from there, it's a matter of looking back and then saying ... you don't want your kids to experience what you went through ... these were the conditions that I encountered, these were the challenges that I went through, but then for future purposes, I should shape my mind in this way. I had to change my mindset just to be; this is what I want to change, this is what I want my future to look like. Hence, those challenges kind of shaped the way that I perceive things ... my immediate context ... to say: this is what can be transpiring at the moment but that does not mean it's what should transpire in the coming years. So that's how the challenges came in shape in my frame of mind...* [08\_HS06]

What is noticeable is the issue of the students' mindset, that is, how they view and interpret their social and academic experiences, form ideas about their capacity to succeed, and form an understanding of the value of success.

Part of the participants' agency involved self-reflection to identify what was going on both right and wrong and for the latter, to find ways of changing the course. Bandura (2018) regards self-reflection as a major part of agency. In order to change the situations through the exercise of human agency, students need to evaluate their lives and areas requiring change. This is evident in the admission made by a participant in explaining the academic journey through the years at university: *... so, there was a lot of shifting and change which occurred in terms of my academic performance. I would say that during my first-year level of study I would obtain fifties. I would perform maybe up to sixty which would basically be the maximum mark which I got. And then as I got used to the university life, you know, consulting, associating, talk to people, I saw how things are done, how can I change my study methods and stuff like that there was change regarding how I performed. I then managed to obtain distinctions which actually made me feel proud of myself because I could then realise that, you know what, I'm also capable and able* (08\_HS03).

Overall, it would appear that students undergo a process of mental resilience development in their academic journeys, which becomes critical to their eventual success.

### **Overview of student agency and capability: towards a model of student resilience**

The themes drawn out in this section contribute to a notion of super student as an element of epistemic access. From the findings presented in the case studies, students from disadvantaged backgrounds require the capability to rise above the odds by overcoming under-preparedness, mitigating financial constraints, navigating uncompensatory capital or using compensatory capital to navigate their university experience and drawing on a galvanising mindset.

This might bode well for the students who succeed, that they have the wherewithal to traverse the higher education journey. Success, however, appears to come at a high cost, including student mental health; more so for students who do not succeed as well as those who do. Of course, this process might be empowering for many students who emerge in the labour market with the necessary agency and capability to succeed there as well. The question is are there added conditions required for this to be a positive effect, and at what expense to themselves, their relationships and support networks? Research examining mental health and resilience with cohorts of students longitudinally could prove insightful for a clearer understanding of this phenomenon.

### **Perspectives on decolonisation and 4IR**

The last part of the research question for this study was on the ‘rapidly changing university environment’ – the study asked, how do students from disadvantaged backgrounds negotiate their epistemic access and success within a diverse and rapidly changing university environment? The two phenomena that were defining the rapidly changing university environment when the study was conceptualised was decolonisation and the Fourth Industrial revolution (4IR). The semi-structured interview guide thus sought to elicit participants’ views about both phenomena. This section of the synthesis chapter highlights the key themes that emerged with respect to both phenomena in the case study chapters.

#### **Decolonisation/decolonial theory**

On the whole, participants were less vocal about decolonisation than the 4IR. One case study that engaged with decolonisation was UP, although from the perspective of academic staff and the institution, rather than students. At UP, most students were not familiar with the concept of decolonisation and did not engage with the concept as part of the interview. Some

students shared their experiences or perceptions of changes around decolonising, which was often associated with the language policy and racial inclusion.

Since the #FeesMustFall protests, UP has however intensified the visibility of decolonising initiatives and made notable progress in cultivating a critical institutional discourse. A number of university departments and faculties have undertaken specific projects to operationalise transformation policy in order to transform institutional practices and cultures and improve the representation of black scholars and students at the institution. As noted in the UP case study, this includes initiatives to Africanise the curriculum (Duncan, 2016), a curriculum renewal project (Irons et al., 2017), and decolonisation of an Honours curriculum (Macqueen, 2019) (cited in Chapter 7).

Lecturers' views of the university's decolonisation interventions show marked tensions and disagreements. Some staff agreed that curricula, institutional spaces and cultures should be decolonised. Overall, staff conceptualise the decolonising project as a continuation of the university's ongoing transformation. Staff responses suggest that the decolonising project demands focus, energy and commitment. Most lecturers acknowledged decolonising as an institutional project that they support. However, some lecturers suggested there is an uneven commitment to the project, while others felt that decolonising is an empty policy exercise: *When we had a faculty review last year, one of the questions they asked was "are you decolonising?" Now obviously, no one wants to report that we have done nothing on decolonisation, so everyone is making it clear for that purpose ... as you are preparing for your promotion interview, you think about potential questions, and you realise that is one of the questions. These are all very subtle, it's explicitly saying in your study guide 'we focus on decolonisation' (06\_AC06).*

Other lecturers, who are concerned about the needs of 'underprepared' students, question the relevance of decolonising and believe that resources and time should rather be invested in developing students' academic competencies: *I think a more refined component of the decolonisation debate is about drawing attention to the ways in which knowledge is not neutral, and a challenge to lecturers to be critical about what they are teaching and why they are teaching it ... It is a challenge to that chain of teaching, because you as the lecturer, you have to rethink what you are teaching and look for new material and new voices (06\_AC05).*

*A lot of what I teach and what I teach and the way I teach it, makes a lot of white students very uncomfortable... because it undermines their idea of western civilisation. ...and on the*



*flip side, when there's opportunity to address the sort of nativist direction that the decolonisation debate frequently takes, and I say something like "Oh, you know we have to critique and look carefully at this romanticised idea of a pre-colonial Africa." Pre-colonial Africa wasn't all that great either, and then that makes the black students squirm a little bit. So, it works both ways (06\_AC04).*

While staff appear to have more sophisticated conceptual and practical understanding of decolonising, students' understanding and experiences of decolonising were marked by uncertainty about the definition. Some students shared their experiences or perceptions of changes around decolonising, which was often associated with the language policy and racial inclusion: *I think ever since I've gotten here, I think the university has quite transformed because now it is more inclusive ... My experience has been okay no problem. I had been able to interact. I didn't feel like we still need to do more work here in this certain space (06\_SS01).*

UP adopted a new language policy in 2016, which led to the removal of Afrikaans as an official language of instruction in 2019. Because many students associate decolonising with the language policy, this is a significant change to an institutional culture that was perceived as alienating.

Interestingly at UJ, it was noted that science students generally talked more about the 4IR while Humanities students spoke more about decolonisation. It was not entirely clear in the case study why this might be the case, although it could be surmised that science students are more technologically savvy, and decolonisation is more closely associated with subjects such as political science. Similarly, at UWC, science students were reluctant to engage with the idea of decolonisation' of society and education, preferring to speak about the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and Fifth Industrial Revolution (5IR) and stay with the dominant understanding of the science curriculum as 'objective' and 'scientific' and 'neutral' without problematising the history and politics of the science curriculum or the findings of research in science. On the other hand, Humanities and Arts students address the structural aspect of decolonisation at UWC, and higher education in general.

At CUT, similar to UP, staff were more vocal about decolonisation than students. Staff however referred to students' views. An administrator in the FHES at CUT pointed out that interaction with students suggests that students believe that the current system does not serve their needs as it does not ensure that the decolonisation project empowers them: *Students believe that decolonised university environment would allow them to express their own views,*

*different ways of doing things, such as being allowed to write theses in their home language (01\_AD02).*

Students at CUT however did not express this view. It is possible that this staff member is expressing the perspective of a few students with whom they have interacted or that students were preoccupied with other matters at the time of being interviewed. On the question of how the institution is responding to student calls for decolonisation, the support staff observed that although the institution is creating an enabling environment, some still feel uncomfortable talking about the decolonisation of a curriculum because they are from the West or North: *The institution could approach this problem by putting enablers like policies in place and by initiating conversations on decolonisation (01\_AD01).*

Unlike other institution, Wits students were more vocal about decolonisation. Indeed, Wits students who participated in this study thought that the decolonial project was happening at a very slow pace and the tendency of prioritising whiteness within the university environment continues: *Okay, with the buildings I feel like they're still very much colonial. They still look like they are created for privileged white kids. I've seen that some of the buildings' names have been changed, Solomon Mahlangu. All that I've seen that okay. They are making attempts to sort of rename the buildings, statues ornament still the same, still like apartheid colonialism. Students' dress code, it all depends. Some people are more liberated than others, depending on who you are, depending on where you come from. Depending on your fashion sense, the kind of money you have, so it all depends (08\_HS10).*

The most important thing is that the university has embedded the decolonisation discourse in teaching and learning and a number of students are gaining interest in the subject: *Universities have come up to think of different ways in which we can decolonise especially the way you teach ... as a student teacher I look at how we would teach. I have been reading a piece on decolonisation and thinking how this can be achieved. I think this is something that I will pursue further in my undergraduate studies (08\_HS02)*

For some participants, decolonisation has to go beyond symbolic change to interrogate what is involved in the content and methods of teaching within the university (Maringe & Chiramba, 2021, cited in Chapter 9). This is what one of the participants had to say: *For me, I want to remain in high school and be part of decolonising education in terms of language. I want to be one of the people that will be leading that issue to make sure that we are really decolonising education, language-wise and even content-wise (08\_HS02)*

A shared student voice about decolonisation could however not be determined in the case studies. The views from staff and student participants were linked to both the university context and faculty in which they were enrolled. For example, the Wits humanities students expressed the likelihood of continuing the decolonisation project, while at both UJ and UWC science students were reportedly not interested in decolonisation. Given the fragmented coverage of decolonisation in the case studies, it is unclear how it will continue to impact on students' epistemic access going forward, or whether it will have any relevance for their academic success, beyond providing a context to understand their histories.

#### **4IR, Covid-19 and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills**

Two main components of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) emerged as important for participants. The first was automation and the second, connectivity. In the context of COVID-19, connectivity was especially acute.

Automation for participants in the case studies however, equated loss of employment. One student from CUT articulated how automation has impacted a family member: *My uncle lost a job because of that, they had to employ robots and remove them from their work so, it's good to evolve but cutting out certain people and pushing them over the edge. People need to be provided with skill that they can use instead of just replacing them with robots* (01\_SS07)

Similarly, at UWC, a participant cited the example of how the automated machine used in uploading credit on student cards in the library, makes academic life easier, but sadly staff lost their jobs due to this transformation. In the UWC example, the link between automation and academic practice is easier to identify than the CUT example. The implications between automation, and the processes of accessing and (re)producing knowledge however needs more examination than this study allowed for.

If one's academic practice within the context of the 4IR is determined by access to ICT devices and connectivity to the internet, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and those from rural areas in particular, are at a disadvantage compared to those from middle-class suburban areas of metropolitan cities. Students from rural areas reported that they engaged with computers and accessed the internet for the first time after they had enrolled at that institution. In addition, the lack of connectivity became specifically acute when the COVID-19 pandemic struck in 2020.

An excerpt from a student at CUT repeated here, aptly describes the experience of students from rural areas: *I didn't have experience in using technology, because I grew up, I attended those schools where we didn't have computers, laptops, I didn't. So, when I was applying to varsity, I asked someone to apply for me (01\_HS16).*

At UJ, most students found the COVID-19 pandemic a hard hit because they had to stay at home and often their home environment was not conducive to being productive as a student. *You can't really focus... 'your time'; there is nothing like that. You can't lock yourself in your room (03\_SS03).* Some students had no reliable electricity supply, even just to charge the devices and many students struggled with inadequate data.

UP students from marginalised backgrounds, found that going back home while having to adapt to an online learning model exacerbated their vulnerability. Many students reported that residence and private accommodation provided stability and a routine that is conducive to learning. The need to go back home during the university year in 2020 created significant disruption: *It was a situation of data issues. I can say like March (2020) we were sent back home and two weeks later, three weeks later we were sent emails; learning must continue and all those things. But seeing that hey I don't think that my home environment was very much conducive. Because one I have network issues. Two, I have data issues. So, you basically you cannot attend live lectures during the day and we have to like...study during the night so you know at night the network is free and all those things ...That was one issue that's why I applied to come back to res so that I don't have that for this second semester (06\_SS06).*

While the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on all university students who made the sudden shift to an online learning environment, poor students are more reliant on access to resources at university such as Wi-Fi, mobile data, meals, library access and study space, compared with peers who are able to compensate for the lack of these resources using family and community resources. On another note, with the focus on the 4IR, participants of this study feel that the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the 4IR imperatives. As with students, institutions are not equal with respect to the 4IR readiness. In addition to ICT backlogs some students experience from home, institutions can also be lacking in this regard.

At CUT, for example, although 4IR is a priority, many institutional and structural factors including weak and unreliable connectivity, remain barriers. On the other hand, compared to other universities, participants at Wits felt that their university was more prepared for remote teaching and learning: *And then in terms of the 4th Industrial Revolution, given the pandemic,*

*the university has shown that it is ready for it as it was the first one to do online learning on a full-time basis. And it like, it gave [mobile] data to the students and delivered like study materials such as laptops. Ja, so it is ready for the 4<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution as more classes are held on Microsoft Teams, Zoom sessions are there, some lectures are held on Microsoft Teams and announcements are being made on Sakai. Students can access their resources on the university platform. So ja, I believe it's ready for the 4<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution (08\_HS04).*

This is supported by one academic staff member who emphasised the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic came when he was already into blended teaching and learning, as a result, students were already used to online platforms and engagement: *You know, I didn't change things just because of COVID, I was already doing blended learning before. Thank God I was because it would be difficult to, you know, transfer everything on to online (08\_AC06).*

However, the same academic staff member outlined systemic barriers associated with implementing the 4IR in universities in South Africa and beyond: *Colleagues, you know, involved in teaching and South Africa is not alone, let me just tell you that there's a lot of issues, internet issues, bandwidth issues all over the world. It's not just us. I mean, I think we are probably in a worse position to some extent. But, you know, with the load shedding is another nonsense that we don't need in our lives. But, you know, overseas people struggle with a lot of what we struggle with (08\_AC06).*

The 4IR is likely to perpetuate inequalities between the advantaged communities, mostly Western nations, and the indigenous African communities. According to this view, therefore, the 4IR can be alienating to marginalised students and the general African community, from meaningful participation in economic growth in South Africa. One academic staff member suggested that if we really want to realise the impact of the 4IR in our African universities, we should redefine 4IR in our own contexts and refrain from replicating how they do it in the global north because of varied contextual realities: *We can never be on par with the first world especially when we have the education system that we have in South Africa where we have IEB [proxy for private] education and working-class education. So, we cannot talk about the Fourth Industrial Revolution in the same way it is understood by the first world. That is why we need our own or we need to create our own Fourth Industrial Revolution because five years ago at least we had the students in class, and we had the students on campus. And we tried by all means to work with them to introduce them to this so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution even though that came from the rural of the rural places (08\_AC05).*

Closely associated with the 4IR are 21<sup>st</sup> century skills in the context of promoting epistemic access and success for students at CUT. The storyline running through the responses of all the participants is the conceptualisation of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills to mean soft skills which students need in addition to hard knowledge of respective disciplines. Soft skills are generic in nature and are required by students to function in a work environment. The assumption is that students would have acquired these skills that will make them employable after completing their programmes and will make them better people in society, such as being entrepreneurs and being technologically astute.

The dominance of soft skills that inform policy and practice on curriculum design and the Teaching and Learning Plan at CUT are Graduate Attributes (GAs) (CUT, 2020). These include: being environmentally sensitive, being socially engaged in your communities; being entrepreneurial; being innovative; thinking creatively and critically, and applying a range of strategies to solve/find solutions; using information and communication technologies effectively; using basic mathematics; budgeting and financial management skills; demonstrating a depth of specialised disciplinary knowledge and skills and being able to apply them in different contexts to solve problems; working independently and in teams, to manage your own learning; working and taking responsibility for one's self while contributing to teams such as learning communities; citizenship, and global leadership.

The findings show that both staff and students have appreciated the use of digital technology and application. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic forced universities to increase the use online platforms and on a larger scale than before. This has changed the way students used to learn and interact face-to-face with peers. Students miss the social interaction but have developed computational skills and their applications. The staff also developed and prepared materials on various online platforms which meant that students were able to access to course materials, academic staff and support staff and progress in their pursuits. However, the implication of these changes is yet to be understood. However, staff have become more innovative and creative, and have developed a collaborative and team working spirit to solve problems. Therefore, it can be said the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills application at institutions has become more evident, which can be viewed as achievement and progress. Although the 4IR is linked to imparting 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, some students think that even though the skills are emphasised, university graduates lack such skills as universities are seen to be failing in imparting such skills.

## **Conclusion**

Case studies typically highlight unique features of the case, and make generalisations across the cases difficult. In this study, however, the data points to a substantive degree of commonality. This does not mean that there are no differences unique to the case studies – indeed, institutional mediation and student agency and capability together point to multiple factors that combine to enable students to negotiate epistemic access and success at the different universities; hence, the diversity and uniqueness of case studies are evident. Nevertheless, experiences of disadvantaged students at historically advantaged institutions, such as Wits, and historically disadvantaged institutions such as UL, point to a remarkable degree of consistency across key thematic areas.

Following earlier studies (for example, Cross & Atinde, 2015), historically disadvantaged students continue to draw extensively on their compensatory capital resources to navigate their epistemic access and success. Simultaneously, however, there is a strong sense of disadvantaged students' compensatory capital coming under severe strain, especially the over-reliance on parental and community support at a time of economic and social crises. While academic development interventions on the part of institutions provide the glue that is needed for addressing the perennial challenge of student under-preparedness and knowledge gap issues, there is a need for a granular appreciation of the effectiveness of AD programmes. This means careful monitoring and evaluation of the exact numbers of students that regularly access AD offerings, ensuring the requisite competencies of AD providers in specific programmes, such as psychological support or extension courses, and undertaking cause and effect studies. Moreover, the continued reliance on AD programmes, and given the increasing student numbers each year, suggest an expanding financial burden on institutions to sustain their capability in this regard. Additionally, students' dependency on NSFAS funding constitutes another important ingredient of the epistemic glue. This raises questions about the sustainability of the student funding model given the worsening economic challenges confronting the South African state and a government under siege for failing to deliver basic services to citizens. The most telling finding in this regard is that the earlier assumption that physical or formal access is no longer an issue, and the focus should be more on the academic experiences of students, has been called into question. Historically disadvantaged students appear to be precariously poised, constantly worrying about economic survival, thereby adding to their mental stress and anxiety arising from their conventional epistemic challenges. This is compounded by students' concerns around safety and security linked to student

accommodation, especially off-campus. The data, ultimately points to the growing importance of student resilience in navigating their epistemic access and success, together with institutional capability and support.

Finally, the data has implications for policy and future research, which is addressed in the concluding chapter of the report.

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## Chapter 11: Conclusion

Logan Govender and Zahraa McDonald

### Introduction

As indicated in the previous chapter, which synthesised key insights from the case studies, while many of the findings confirm much that is already known about epistemic access and success of historically marginalised undergraduate students, it highlights them in new and more nuanced ways; some of which have implications for policymakers, while others point to areas of future research and more in-depth study.

To recap, this project intended to move beyond examining formal access to higher education and investigate how epistemic access and success was navigated by students from disadvantaged backgrounds who have been historically marginalised from accessing quality higher education experiences. The exploration of the experiences of successful university undergraduate students who have suffered a considerable degree of marginalisation by virtue of race, gender and socio-economic location characterised by poverty and having attended relatively underprivileged schools in rural and township areas, has been discussed and analysed in the case studies in this report and synthesised in the chapter preceding this. The case studies illustrate that while students from disadvantaged backgrounds succeed at university against many odds, there are a complex array of factors at play, comprising student agency and institutional interventions. In this regard, the overarching conceptual lens, combining student capability as well as institutional capability (see Chapter 2), was extremely useful in unpacking the intersectional and intersecting nature of students' academic experiences.

Of overall significance, is the persistent student under-preparedness or knowledge gap challenge experience in the first year of study. In this regard, we concur with many advocates emphasising a systemic approach, where the entire education system from ECD to schools to universities, is examined in a holistic manner, instead of the different phases of the system adopting their own, independent approaches and interventions to address the knowledge gap challenge. The systems-wide approach in addressing education challenges generally in South Africa seems to have receded in recent years, and should be revisited (see for example, McLennan, 2017).

The question of under-preparedness has a direct bearing on student throughput and success. The data generally points to historically marginalised student success in spite of debilitating backgrounds and histories, with the exception of the UWC case study. This success is attributed to the cultural and compensatory capital and capability of students, as well as an expanded institutional capability, specifically in the area of academic development and related support. The overall national picture of undergraduate throughput (see Chapter 3) corroborates the first-year knowledge gap challenge. While the overall throughput of just over 60% occurs over six years after entry, the throughput in minimum time (three or four years) is about 34%. In other words, on average, 34% of students graduate in the minimum time required for undergraduate qualifications. On the other hand, more than 90% of dropouts have occurred in the first two years after registration, a matter for grave concern, and requiring further investigation.

While this study does not provide comprehensive answers to this throughput conundrum (given its focus), the data raises important related questions around knowledge recognition, curriculum change, funding, student accommodation, safety and security, among others, which require greater institutional, epistemological and pedagogical scrutiny. The rest of this chapter explores these questions further in relation to policy recommendations and issues for further research. A particularly important recommendation in this regard is the emphasis on more granular data analysis, which overlays the national quantitative throughput data over the results of this largely qualitative study, to arrive at a more realistic picture of student epistemic access and success.

## **Policy and related recommendations**

### **The throughput conundrum**

In many of the case studies, such as UJ, UL and CUT, there is a positive assessment of interviewees' experiences based on the views of students, whereas academics, administration and support staff, focus on challenges. This correlates with the throughput rates discussed in Chapter 3 as well as the research design and its limitations (see Chapter 1). As final year students, on the brink of graduation, were interviewed, it is not altogether surprising that they would have a somewhat positive interpretation of their academic experiences. Academics, administrative and support staff, on the other hand, would be more likely to remember the interventions made to support struggling students. In order to fully grasp the nuances of throughput, mixed method longitudinal cohort analyses are required at different institutions following those at points of entry and graduation, as well as those, who drop out.

As suggested in the UJ case study (citing, Tinto, 2013), factors investigated to understand throughput, such as institutional culture, socio-cultural background and capital, and student experience, are necessary but insufficient factors. Instead, meso- and macro-level structural challenges, such as ‘high-risk’ modules or priority qualifications, which cannot be directly resolved by ‘optimising’ micro-level student experience, warrant more careful scrutiny. Mixed method longitudinal cohort analyses would be able to hone in on these different levels and contribute to identifying how they operate in an integrated manner. The UWC case study is an exception, which shows that success rates have been low since the 1990s, and are skewed by race and gender, making the case that this is a national trend plaguing South African higher education and arguing that the significance of institutional factors, including models of change, is generally under-appreciated. This demonstrates why institutional comparisons are important to highlight how mechanisms might have varying context dependent effects.

### **Funding**

There is little doubt that funding of historically marginalised students will remain a persistent challenge and that the over-reliance on NSFAS requires ongoing examination. As suggested by the UWC case study, it would be important to ‘assess the effectiveness of different funding models - the planning, organisation and efficient management of the different types of financial support that the University sources for its students each year’ (see Chapter 8). As such, it is strongly recommended that the higher education sector continues to explore various student funding models to ensure funding sustainability given the anticipated financial burden on marginalised families and communities due to a deepening national and global economic crisis.

Two funding issues require serious consideration with regard to policy and practice: collective subsidies for basic needs and the governance of NSFAS. Food security and transport loom large as crucial elements that threaten the extent to which students are able to learn to become participants in academic practices. While NSFAS grants make formal access possible for many students, the grants are far from adequate to meet the socio-economic needs of historically marginalised students. When these students, moreover, are also expected to assist their families with those grants, the subsidies invariably do not always last, both in terms of students managing monthly or annual budgets. Bulk funding which could contribute to subsidising food and transport for students could go a long way in ensuring hunger and mobility do not become concerns for students that impact on their capacity to participate in academic activities.

In the lives of marginalised students, NSFAS holds the key to their futures. NSFAS, while being a pivotal source of funds for students, is also notorious for not ensuring that grants are paid over timeously. NSFAS administrative challenges need closer scrutiny, while it might be useful to examine whether the broader governance challenges which are plaguing state institutions are affecting the capacity of NSFAS to deliver on its mandate. These NSFAS challenges, as underlined in this report, and their consequential adverse effects on students' academic lives, question the assumption that formal or physical access has been achieved for historically marginalised students in South African higher education.

### **Institutional capability and support**

Academic development programmes remain the mainstay of institutional capability in supporting the epistemic access and success of historically marginalised students. However, the case studies have not presented a nuanced understanding of the effectiveness of AD programmes, specifically which interventions and under what conditions, are having the greatest impact. Instead, some case studies have questioned their effectiveness. Firstly, as stressed in the UJ and UWC case studies, Chapters 5 and 8 respectively, there is a need to promote more vigorously the benefits of students participating in AD programmes – students are in many cases not aware of what is available. Academic staff can also play an important role by advising students on what is available. Case studies also suggest that academic development is not the only need students have. Given the challenges encountered by students in their first year of study, the UJ suggestion to draw on both residential and other organisations to organise support groups or cultural visits around the city to help students acclimatise, is worth noting.

Secondly, greater monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of AD programmes and establishing conclusively the causal links with student performance is needed (suggesting an area of future research) to help inform targeted interventions. For example, the Wits case study, Chapter 9, does not report on the differential success of students who have completed the Targeting Talent Programme and those who have not – an evaluation of this and similar programmes at HEIs could be potentially insightful for understanding epistemic access in greater depth. UWC's Student Mental Health and Wellness policy offers clear processes for tracking student progress and offering support with a range of possible accommodations (see Chapter 5). Monitoring the implementation of this and similar policies would go a long way in generating evidence about what is required in different contexts to enhance epistemic

access. Given the emphasis on student resilience, evidence from such programmes may offer useful insights.

### **Rethinking curriculum**

The concept epistemic access does not automatically question the knowledge ‘offered’ by institutions. Morrow’s definition of epistemological access, learning to become a participant in the academic practices of an institution, does not open the space to question the academic practices of an institution. Epistemic access as a co-constructing process combining student and institution efforts to facilitate students’ ability to access the knowledge also assumes, to some degree, the knowledge ‘offered’ by that institution is sacrosanct. While there is a greater acknowledgement, within the definition of epistemic access, that such knowledge is hedged within specific cultural practices that may be closer or further from any individual’s realm of experience, the knowledge that is offered is not interrogated as the essence of the episteme. Here the decolonisation movement has pushed the furthest and the hardest to force an examination of knowledge, whose knowledge and for whom.

Overall, students reported general satisfaction with their academic programmes in the Humanities and Science faculties, including their relations with lecturers and the quality of teaching. However, lecturers feel that they are under pressure to cover curriculum content, while there is disquiet around the content itself, particularly in the context of decolonisation and moving away from a predominantly Eurocentric curriculum. This was best captured in the UWC case study, which argued for the inclusion of subaltern knowledges and languages in curricula, noting that the ‘exclusion of curricula occurred as part of the same historical processes that shaped the growth of disciplinary knowledge, determined patterns of inclusion and exclusion and defined academic practices and relationships’ (see Chapter 8). At a practical level, the UJ case study, Chapter 5, drew attention to lecturers being more sensitive to student learning gaps; for example, not all students know how to use science laboratories, and lecturers, particularly those for first-year modules, should also consider deliberately speaking slower and enunciating more clearly. While at CUT, the adoption of a student-centred approach, use of tutors and other interventions for more individualised attention, suggests that a ‘back to basics’ approach is worth remembering (see Chapter 4).

Critical questions about the nature of knowledge, in relation to skills and competence are emerging in the context of 4IR. The CUT case study’s reference to graduate attributes is a case in point; pitting disciplinary knowledge against workplace skills and competences. It was

not clear from the case studies whether institutions are examining or re-examining the parameters of the episteme, who can access it, and which practices allow access to it. This, in addition, has to be the ambit of higher education institutions to pursue; that is, examining the parameters of the episteme. In the interest of transformation, addressing questions of epistemic access as it relates to variable parameters might never be good enough to facilitate social justice and equality for all. Accessing an episteme established and constituted by the powerful in the interest of the powerful might forever hold society in the grips of present barriers to equality and social justice. Rethinking the curriculum thus continues to be a process, which the decolonisation movement reinvigorated, but it remains a work in progress.

### **Revisiting higher education language policies**

The language question looms large in the data relating to curriculum pedagogy across the case studies. As noted in the UJ case study, ‘students are not considered sufficiently adept at the English language to engage competently with the curriculum’, and the ‘historical maldistribution of language competency in the South African education sector is fundamentally misrecognised’, arguing that ‘there has been little by way of policy interventions to remedy the situation’, and that the ‘absence of African languages as central to teaching and learning remain one of the starkest bastions of coloniality in higher education’ (see Chapter 5).

Here the CHE, together with universities, could explore more carefully the possibilities of a dual/multi-medium language and teaching policy, to cater for the diverse student populations, including historically disadvantaged students. This exploration should engage with language research programmes currently underway, such as the Human Sciences Research Council’s (HSRC) ‘Imprint of Education’ programme, and similar studies at universities, such as UJ on ‘Reimagining the African University’. In this regard, universities may wish to reconsider the role and function of writing centres, which are largely to upskill English and academic writing skills, but little or no attention to expanding indigenous language competency of students and staff. This work has been started at some HEIs, but there is much more that can be done. Tutorials in home language should also be considered, as well as the appointment and promotion of African scholars and multilingual lecturers to further enhance diversity.

### **Accommodation, safety and security**

Following on the proposition in Chapter 10 that physical access is far more complex and nuanced, some of the suggestions from the UJ case study are worth reiterating (see Chapter

5). These include additional institutional steps to ensure the safety and comfort of students, such as providing more buses and drivers and ensuring student safety, not just within the institutions, but also on surrounding premises and travel routes. In terms of accommodation, first-year historically disadvantaged students should be prioritised for on-campus accommodation while senior students are encouraged to seek off-campus accommodation.

### **Issues for further research**

#### **Deepening the methodological value-add of throughput statistics**

Quantitative data should be sufficiently textured to account for intersections that nuance (dis)advantage. While race continues to appear to be an important identity marker with regard to marginalisation and disadvantage, it also does not operate on its own. This report argues that intersecting racial or population group categories with additional analytical categories of analysis will reveal insights which are more likely to inform relevant interventions. Geographical origin (province and rural-urban), school quintile and access to university accommodation are shown to contribute to explaining students' formal access to higher education in this report. These in turn also shape their capability to engage with the knowledge project and participate in academic practices on campus. Including these three categories in HEMIS data gathering allows for enrolment and throughput data to be disaggregated from a broader matrix with the potential for deeper, more nuanced analyses.

Chapter 3 illustrates that, as an indicator, race on its own does not provide sufficient explanation for the extent to which transformation has been achieved. Class positions are highly fractured and tenuous in the South African context. Moreover, given the large proportion of Black people in South Africa, the increased proportions in all higher education institutions can no longer be considered as an indicator of transformation in the higher education landscape on its own. The intersection of geographic origin, school quintile, university accommodation, institutional type as well as qualification type in relation to headcount enrolment and throughput, would offer more nuanced indicators and thus representation of transformation in the higher education sector.

HEMIS could also make provision for gathering data on the status of students having met admission requirements. Faculty entry requirements may have implications for the pedagogical domain. It is not clear from the case studies, nor from the available quantitative data, how many students are granted access to university not having met the academic entry requirements. These disaggregations should moreover be captured in the CHE's VitalStats:

Public Higher Education series publication, which provides up-to-date, audited data on the sector for research and monitoring purposes. Providing a nuanced analysis of the sector in a country as fragmented and unequal as South Africa, suggests the need for a more comprehensive database to enable the shifting of practices to advance innovations and solutions to the complex challenges of student epistemic access and success.

### **Throughput complexities**

The UWC case study raises some pertinent questions relating to throughput that might have relevance for the sector as a whole (see Chapter 8). These questions include the following: Is there a correlation between the type of funding and success rate? What is the success rate of students funded by NSFAS in relation to other fully funded students in the 2018 cohort, and in relation to non-funded students? What specific support do the 45% of UWC students still enrolled in the selected programmes in 2022 require to successfully complete their undergraduate degrees? Why, despite increased student funding, institutional resources and support interventions in recent years, does the phenomenon of low undergraduate throughput persist? If annual pass rates are relatively high, then statistically how is it possible for graduation rates to be extremely low? Could it be in how throughput is calculated? Are students in the mainstream and extended curriculum programme lumped together in the calculations? Although the study has not engaged with the above questions in much detail, they raise important issues that subsequent studies could pursue, such as the link between type of funding and success rates.

### **Student socio-economic backgrounds: Expanding insights**

Socio-economic backgrounds of students emerge as central to their success. In this regard, the CUT case study proposes a comparative rigorous analysis of students who succeed in completing academic programmes in the minimum time frame, minimum plus one and two, as well as those who drop out, in order to fully grasp the point at which socio-economic background is insurmountable (see Chapter 4). The case study further suggests that while students' diverse backgrounds intersect with diverse experiences of the academic process, infrastructure and interactions with staff, the exact permutation of consequences is not possible to determine, unless a comparative study is conducted. Drawing on several of the case studies, the issue of first-generation student pressure is likely to persist, given the increasing socio-economic inequality gap in the country and it emerges as an area for specific ongoing research.



## **Massification**

The UP case study, Chapter 7, draws attention to the consequences of massification of higher education in the sector, such as large classrooms and staff to student ratios that are more likely to hamper academic success for students who are less prepared for the demands of higher education. Participatory research could be one way to contribute towards institutional transformation by including first-generation student voices, perspectives and narratives on aspects of institutional culture, pedagogical arrangements and residence life. It might be worthwhile revisiting related research to acquire a more nuanced understanding around massification and student epistemic access and success.

## **Tracer studies**

The Wits case study, Chapter 9, based on the ‘Wits Institutional Strategy for Student Success’, proposes a broader approach to student success to the extent that it follows the student to graduation and into their careers. Future research could engage with success into employment and the labour market. This might result in different dimensions of understanding epistemic access.

## **Conclusion**

In this short, concluding chapter, an attempt has been made to highlight key issues with potential policy and further research implications. The chapter must be read with the previous synthesis chapter which lays the deeper analytical foundation for the recommendations contained herein. However, it is in the nature of syntheses and conclusions, that some of the richness and specifics of the case study data gets lost; as such, the case studies should also be reviewed as individual contributions to the overall discourse of, and response to, student epistemic access and success challenges.

## **Brief Afterword**

Towards the end of 2021, the Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies (AMCHES) was informed by the National Research Foundation (NRF) that a funding application by Prof. Michael Cross to extend this project to another four universities (University of Cape Town, Nelson Mandela University, University of Fort Hare and University of KwaZulu Natal) had been approved. Owing to the passing of Prof. Cross, the three-year NRF-funded project on Steering Epistemic Access and Success of Historically Marginalised Students, now led by Dr Logan Govender, is now in its first year and due to be completed in 2024. This latter project

will have a much stronger focus on the impact of COVID-19, the turn to blended learning and teaching and related issues on student epistemic access and success, given the period it will cover. As such, together with this completed CHE-funded project, the higher education sector will have a wider database of evidence on which to consider policy and strategic decision-making to enhance student epistemic access and success, both in the short term and over longer periods.