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CHAPTER 9

THE CONCEPTUALISATION OF STUDENTS’ PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION THROUGH THEIR ENGAGEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICAN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

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Introduction

The chapters in this book are all concerned with the role that higher education plays in promoting the personal and public good. Underlying this way of viewing higher education is the assumption that higher education is personally transformational. Watson (2014) argues that discussing expectations of higher education to have a transformative impact on students highlights a number of questions, for example: What is it about higher education that is supposed to change students? How do these changes come about? What is needed for these changes to occur?

These questions are relevant to all higher education systems. For example, the European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education (2015) highlighted the importance of the personally transformative nature of higher education and its role in building ‘inclusive societies, founded on democratic values and human rights’. However, these questions have a particular resonance and urgency in the South African context, given its history and that higher education is recognised in legislation as playing a distinctive and crucial role in transforming society (Department of Education, 1997) and as a key driver of ‘equity, social justice and democracy’ in the state’s vision for 2030 (National Planning Commission, 2013).

There is an interesting contradiction in this positioning of higher education. On the one hand universities are identified as important actors of social change (McLean, 2015; Smith & Bauling, 2013); while on the other hand they are heavily criticised for not delivering results on
improving social justice in the country (Ellery, 2011). This again highlights questions about the meaning of the personal transformation that universities are expected to offer. In this chapter, we examine the empirical evidence relating to South African universities’ contribution to student transformation. We review research published from 2007 to 2017 that analyses the ways in which students’ senses of identity and the world are changed through their engagement with South African undergraduate education. We map where this research has been conducted and the student populations involved, as well as the outcomes of the studies. In the chapter, we will thus examine the following questions:

- How is the relationship between students and universities conceptualised in this research?
- How is the process of transformation conceptualised?
- What are the implications of these conceptualisations for our understanding of students’ experiences of studying in South African universities?

In what follows, we will first review the concept of personal transformation and the position it holds in the South African context. We then introduce our approach to analysing the literature and present the findings. We conclude by identifying the main insights that are supported by our analysis of the literature.

**Higher education and personal transformation**

As Smith and Bauling (2013) argue, understanding the ways in which higher education supports personal transformation involves thinking about the relations between the political project of transformation at a societal level and personal changes that individuals undergo in their values, beliefs, assumptions and the ways they understand themselves and their society.

In the international literature on the transformative nature of higher education for students, there are two broad approaches that are taken (Ashwin, Abbas, & McLean, 2016). First, some studies focus on the formal educational elements of students’ experiences and implicitly assume that it is the educational aspects of these experiences that lead to changes in students’ sense of who they are and their relations to the world. These studies tend to focus on the extent to which aspects of programme design support students in going through the stages of transformative experiences (Mezirow, 1991; Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012; Taylor, 2007, 2008) or they focus on how students’ experiences support students in becoming ‘independent’ (Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell, & McCune, 2008; Christie, Tett, Cree, & McCune, 2016; Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007) or ‘ideal’ learners (Gale & Parker, 2014; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2009, 2010). This approach thus tends to be narrowly focused on the formal elements of the university experience, rather than the holistic experience of being a student and tends to focus on the extent to which students meet the expectations of their educational environments.

A second approach encompasses students’ wider university experiences by analysing students’ orientations to university (e.g. Beaty, Gibbs, & Morgan, 1997; Brint, 2012; Clark, &
The conceptualisation of students’ personal transformation

To understand students’ personal transformation in higher education, it is important to examine their personal project, level of social integration, and level of intellectual engagement. Dubet’s (2000) approach to student engagement was further developed by Jary and Lebeau (2009), which involves three elements: the students’ personal project, level of social integration, and level of intellectual engagement. Based on an empirical examination of this proposed framework, Ashwin et al. (2016) argue that the transformational nature of undergraduate degrees might lie in the relations between these three elements, where students’ sense of self is changed through their engagement with education. This involves students relating their personal projects to the world and seeing themselves implicated in knowledge. This process does not always happen; it requires students to be intellectually engaged with their courses, which is dependent on both students and the quality of their educational experience.

Approach to the literature

In this chapter, we base our analysis on literature published from 2007 to 2017 that examines personal transformation in undergraduate education in South Africa. We searched for publications on Sabinet, an online database of full text South and southern African journals, and two global databases: Google Scholar and Primo Central Index. These databases were selected to give us a wide range of material from a variety of sources.

The terms that were used as search criteria were ‘personal transformation’, ‘South Africa’, ‘undergraduate’, ‘student’, ‘identity’ and ‘identity change’. The search string applied to each
specific database was based on the following query (‘personal transformation’ AND ‘South Africa’ AND undergraduate), (‘personal transformation’ AND ‘student’ AND ‘South Africa’), (‘identity change’ AND ‘South Africa’ AND undergraduate) and (‘identity’ AND ‘South Africa’ AND undergraduate). The searches were done between October 2016 and January 2017.

In our search we focused on identifying books and papers published between 2007 and 2017, which reported on empirical studies at the undergraduate higher education level in South Africa. The following exclusion criteria were applied:

- Publications outside of our selected timescale (e.g. Bangeni & Kapp, 2005; McKenna, 2004);
- Publications focused on postgraduates (e.g. Naudé, 2015);
- Non-empirical publications such as literature reviews, conceptual studies and general reviews (Essa & Hoffman, 2014; Smith & Bauling, 2013; van Schoor, 2011);
- Publications not focused on transformation that occurred through students’ higher education experiences (Ndimande & Neville, 2015; Sonday, 2015).

In total, 21 texts were included in our final sample and analysed. It is important to note that we deliberately use the word ‘text’ rather than ‘study’ because in two cases there were texts that appeared to be based on the same overall study (Rohleder, Swartz, Bozalek, Carolissen, & Leibowitz, 2008 and Leibowitz, Bozalek, Rohleder, Carolissen, & Swartz, 2010; Kapp & Bangeni, 2009, 2011). We decided to include these as separate texts rather than merging them because, as separate texts, they add to the weight of what we know about students’ personal transformation through engagement in higher education. We wanted to maintain this sense of how much has been published about different aspects of this transformation in the discussion of our analysis.

Each of the final 21 texts was carefully read and analysed in terms of three broad categories. First, the approach to researching personal transformation was analysed in terms of the institutional and disciplinary location of the research and the sources of data for the text in terms of the method of data generation and the size of the sample. Second, the process of transformation was analysed in terms of the site of transformation (the structure or experience through which transformation happened) and the primary object of transformation (was it student identities or student understanding that was intended to be transformed). Third, we drew these elements together to develop three overall models of student personal transformation through engagement with their undergraduate education.

The approach to researching personal transformation

The vast majority of texts (over 80%) were focused within a single institution. Only three texts included two institutions; and one text focused on students’ experiences across three
Institutions. Where the type of institution could be identified, over three quarters of these were focused on historically white institutions (HWIs). This means that the evidence we have about students’ transformation through engagement with undergraduate education largely excludes the experiences of students from historically disadvantaged institutions. In terms of the academic subjects, around a third of the texts were focused on students studying the social sciences and a third on students studying medical sciences. The remaining texts were split equally between the arts and humanities, the natural sciences and engineering and projects that were not focused on particular academic subjects.

In relation to the sources of data for the texts, over 80% of the texts were based on the qualitative analysis of interview data, although in most cases these were supported by the qualitative analysis of other forms of data such as student assignments or written accounts. Only three of the texts were based on the analysis of survey data, although this is not surprising given the dynamic nature of students’ transformational experiences. In terms of sample size, two thirds of the texts involved data generated from fewer than thirty students.

Overall, the picture that these texts offer us of students’ transformative experiences through South African higher education is mainly based on small qualitative studies in HWIs, with a tendency to focus on the social and medical sciences. It is important that the partial picture that this creates is recognised in the next section where we discuss the way in which the processes of personal transformation are conceptualised.

The process of personal transformation

In examining the process of transformation, we looked at the site of personal transformation and the object of personal transformation.

In terms of the site of the personal transformation, around two thirds of the texts focused on how students were transformed by their engagement with a particular course or module that was an integral part of their overall programme. The other third of texts analysed how students were transformed by their engagement in service learning or a collaborative project that was in some way separate from their overall degree programme. Whilst these could be modules that formed part of the programme, they were explicitly positioned as something outside of the mainstream of the programme students were studying. The site of personal transformation tended to vary by academic subject, with 80% of the texts focused on the medical sciences examining service learning or collaborative projects, and with over 80% of those focused on the social sciences, engineering and the natural sciences examining students’ engagement with particular courses or modules.

In examining the object of students’ transformation, around two thirds of texts primarily analysed changes to students’ identity, with over half of these relating to these changes in identity to changes in students’ understanding of society, and a third primarily examined changes to students’ academic knowledge. All but one of the texts examining medical sciences primarily focused on identity, whereas in the other subjects there was an equal split between a
primary focus on knowledge and a primary focus on identity. This appeared to be related to the medical sciences tendency to focus on service learning and collaborative projects, as all of the texts examining service learning and collaborative projects were focused on changes to students’ identities.

**The overall models of students’ personal transformation**

Drawing together the analysis on the research approach and process of personal transformation, we constructed three overall models of personal transformation from the literature. The first foregrounds the changes to students’ identities when they come to university; the second is focused on how students’ engagement with knowledge is supported by the institutional arrangements of their education; while the third foregrounds the ways in which students’ views of the world are changed by their engagement in unusual educational settings.

The first model of personal transformation tends to be found in texts that focus on the social sciences and examines how students’ identities change when they come to the university (Kapp & Bangeni, 2009, 2011; Leibowitz et al., 2005; Makalela, 2014; Vincent & Idahosa, 2014). These texts examine how students from underprivileged backgrounds engage with a process of identity change. They tend to focus on black students, who are first generation at university, from rural areas and for whom English is not their first language. In these texts, identity is understood as complex, multiple and fluid, while the process of identity change is positioned as hard, full of struggles and challenges. The broad narrative in this model is that at the beginning of their academic studies, disadvantaged students are normally positioned as ‘other’ by their academic environment. Struggling with the English language as well as with the academic discourse, they often feel under stress. If they persist and conform to the academic environment, they increasingly integrate with academic and urban identities over time. These two identities (the ‘home’ and the ‘academic’ ones) are seen as separated and importantly different. These texts highlight how students’ home environments (pre-university friends and family) start rejecting the students in time as they are seen to be ‘becoming white’ and ‘becoming the other’, which even further alienates students to their home environments. As a consequence, students develop nomadic and hybrid identities as they integrate elements from both their home and new environments, and often feel that they are foreign to both of them. Language and identity are strongly connected. Students increasingly use English when they go to the university, but their own language(s) stay an important part of who they are. ‘Translanguaging’ is the concept that can accommodate practices when students use several languages at the same time in thinking, writing, communicating and so on. In this broad approach, academic success is very much connected to identity change and compliance with academic and disciplinary discourses (more than to motivation, for example). The texts find that while students resist academic and disciplinary discourses, they also adopt them and increasingly in time become integrated with the academic
discourse. This means that this group of texts tends to focus on the ways in which students are changed by the process of going to university, but are less focused on examining alternative institutional arrangements that might better support students’ personal transformation.

The second model of personal transformation is similar to the first, and again is primarily located in the social sciences. However, this model is more focused on the role students’ engagement with knowledge plays in their personal transformation and on the kinds of institutional arrangements that would better support this transformation (Calitz, 2018; Case, 2013; Ellery, 2011; Green-Thompson, McInerney, Manning, Mapukata-Sondzaba, Chipamaunga, & Maswanganyi, 2012; Leibowitz et al., 2010; McLean, 2015; Manyonga, 2016; Rohleder et al., 2008; Walker, 2016). These texts examine the ways that the education environment and pedagogic practices can positively impact on students’ interpretations, understandings and beliefs and the practices that inhibit students’ opportunities to engage productively with their educational settings. A number of these studies look at the ways in which educational settings support or inhibit the development of key capabilities that can help to address inequalities in South African society (Calitz, 2018; McLean, 2015; Manyonga, 2016; Walker, 2016), including questions around the ways in which students can recognise themselves in the knowledge that makes up their curricula.

The third model, which was found primarily in texts looking at the medical sciences, is focused on how personal transformation comes from unusual situations or special educational practices, as are found in service learning and collaborative projects. In a number of studies these are positioned as only coming from outside the traditional curriculum and experiences of students (Berman & Allan, 2012; Efthimiadis-Keith, 2007; Janse van Rensburg, Poggenpoel, & Myburgh, 2012; Moagi, van Rensburg, & Maritz, 2013; Stears, 2009; Sutherland, 2013). As the innovations explored in these texts are largely situated outside of the academic curriculum, they tend to focus on how students’ experiences help them to develop a new understanding of South African society, rather than how this is informed by their engagement with academic knowledge. Within these texts there can be a tendency to adopt an implicit position that exposing students to a wider range of people and circumstances will lead to them developing more inclusive outlooks, rather than considering whether this might also lead to the confirmation of attitudes that perpetuate exclusion.

Framework of students’ personal transformation in South Africa

If we examine the three models of personal transformation using Dubet’s (2000) concepts of personal project, social integration and intellectual engagement, it becomes clear that whilst they offer a useful way of framing personal transformation, they are in need of some extension to make sense of the South African research.

All three of the models can be understood in terms of Dubet’s concepts. The first model is focused on the development of students’ personal projects as they enter university, the
second model foregrounds the relationship between students’ intellectual engagement and their social integration into their universities. The third model examines how students’ personal projects are developed by engagement in unusual education settings. However, there are important elements of the South African research that are not covered by Dubet’s concepts. The first model of personal transformation highlights the ways in which students have an ongoing relationship with their ‘home’ environments during their time as university students. This relationship goes beyond what is captured by their personal projects and appears to play an important role in students’ experiences of university. The second model of transformation highlights the ways in which students can recognise themselves in the knowledge they engage with at university. This goes beyond intellectual engagement with knowledge to raise questions about whose identities are included and excluded by this knowledge. The third model of personal transformation highlights the ways in which students’ understanding of their wider society is shaped by their educational experiences. Whilst this is partly captured by the idea of social integration, it goes beyond students’ integration into their university context to highlight students’ understanding of how they are positioned and integrated in South African society.

All of these ways of extending Dubet’s (2000) concepts highlight the dangers of considering students’ engagement with higher education separately from their engagement with their lives and societies outside of higher education. Whilst the stark inequalities within South African society bring these issues to the foreground, they are likely to be equally relevant to an understanding of students’ experiences of personal transformation in other higher education systems. The tendency to consider higher education and universities as separate from society rather than an integrated part of society, can be seen to limit the kinds of questions that we ask about the role of higher education in personal transformation. It is highlighted in the tension identified earlier between the presentation of the higher education system as negative and conservative, whilst the transformation of students through higher education largely is positioned as positive and radical. It also means that across the international and South African literature there is very little consideration of the ways in which students might be transformed that reinforce, rather than challenge, existing inequalities.

This separation of higher education from society also highlights the difficulties in linking personal transformation to the wider political project of the transformation of South African society. Whilst some studies examine the ways in which graduates might develop capabilities that contribute to the development of a more equal society, this tends to be focused at an individual level, rather than examining what structures might be developed that support personally transformed graduates to contribute to the development of a more equal society. The tendency for research to be conducted in single, historically advantaged institutions further exacerbates the sense that we only know about the experiences of personal transformation for students within a small number of relatively privileged South African universities and do not know how engagement with higher education impacts on the identities of students from other institutions.
Conclusion

In concluding this chapter, we want to consider both how the research into students’ personal transformation might be developed further, both in terms of extending what is currently done in South Africa and in terms of approaching this research in ways that that does not separate higher education from society.

In relation to the South African research, there is clearly a need for more studies that examine students’ experiences across a range of institutions and academic subjects, rather than within single institutional and disciplinary settings. There is also a need for more studies that examine the nature of curriculum and the challenges of offering students access to academic knowledge in ways that do not deny or ignore who they are in terms of their backgrounds and identities. It is notable that most of the existing studies that tackle these questions are in the humanities and social sciences. It is far more difficult to develop a sense of what it might mean to develop a curriculum that accepts who students are, but also gives them access to academic knowledge in the natural sciences and engineering.

In relation to approaching this research in ways that do not separate higher education and society, there is also a need to examine the consequence of going to university by studying exactly that – how graduates engage with society after their higher education. Whilst recent studies have begun to examine this with positive findings about graduates’ commitment to the public good (e.g. Case, Marshall, McKenna, & Mogashana, 2018; Ndimande & Neville, 2015), there is a need to consider the ways in which graduates and non-graduates come together in society. Doing so would allow a consideration of whether higher education primarily represents a way of insulating individuals from the challenges of their society or can offer a way of addressing these challenges for the benefit of all members of that society.

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