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CHAPTER 16

STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES OF UNIVERSITY LIFE BEYOND THE CURRICULUM

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Introduction

What do we know about undergraduate students’ experiences of university and campus life beyond the curriculum, and the role of such experiences in students’ personal development and transformation? Can any aspects of that student experience be seen as contributing to the ‘public good’? This chapter offers a review of eleven years (2007–2017) of scholarly literature on students’ experiences of South African higher education ‘beyond the curriculum’. This includes all those aspects of university life which are not related to learning, teaching and academic development; they include the social, economic, political and health-related aspects of the student experience and student life on campus. In this chapter, we aim to give a sense of what has been written about these elements of students’ experiences, what this work says, and also what it does not say.

To begin, we make two observations about what we have learnt in the process of doing this review. Firstly, what struck us early on in our reading is how many of the issues that were raised in the student protests of 2015/2016 are prefigured in numerous research papers on students’ experiences from the earliest years of our review period right up to the most recent. Evidently, numerous warning bells were sounded about institutional racism and other forms of discrimination, students’ sense of institutional alienation, difficulty in adjusting to the university environment, students’ financial hardships and poverty on campus, and student leaders’ alienation from university management structures. Indeed, apart from a few positive exceptions, and acknowledging the limitations of small-sample studies which make up the bulk of this research, the scholarly literature building up to the 2015/16 student movement paints quite a bleak picture of university life as a source of anxiety and struggle for students – and a highly racialised one at that. The literature thus suggests that protesting students were not (simply) creating, but were also articulating and responding to a crisis or crises in
South African higher education that had been felt at the level of students’ experiences for quite some time.

A second observation is that the large majority of the literature we read does not itself directly pose or attempt to answer questions about the transformative potential of higher education, or to make connections between students’ experiences at university and their broader or later societal engagement towards the public good. The studies we read are mainly small-sample qualitative studies which report the experiences of a single group of purposively selected students, though there are some comparative accounts from more than one group or campus; however, they are not designed to answer questions about the impact of such experiences on students beyond their time at university. Nevertheless, in the concluding section we consider some implications that this literature may have for thinking about the relationship between students’ extra-curricular experiences and the public good.

Our systematic review method was to read the contents pages of every issue of three main South African journals publishing on higher education between 2007 and 2017: Perspectives in Education (PiE), the South African Journal of Higher Education (SAJHE), and the Journal of Student Affairs in Africa (JSAA). We did not have particular keywords in mind, but those articles whose titles suggested they were about undergraduate students’ experiences of university life outside of teaching and learning, curricular or access issues, were read, summarised and entered into a database. Initially we included a number of papers on student agency, access and transitions, but these were later excluded for reasons of both length limit and focus. We supplemented this systematic review with publications from outside this timeframe and set of journals, which we identified by snowballing from citations, further searches, and our own knowledge of the student experience literature. We also excluded some papers which were methodologically weak and therefore difficult to draw firm conclusions from. To provide a useful overview of this literature, we have grouped the papers into three main themes. After presenting the main substantive issues, we then offer our reflections on the meaning and implications of this literature for understanding the transformative potential of students’ experiences of higher education beyond the curriculum.

**Theme 1: Institutional discrimination and alienation**

Students’ experiences of race, racialisation and institutional racism, as well as classism, sexism, homophobia and xenophobia, make up one of the key themes we identify in studies of students’ experiences of university life beyond the curriculum. Much of this work echoes themes which emerged in the landmark Soudien Report (2008), commissioned by the minister of education to research the state of social cohesion in South African universities in the wake of a racist incident at the University of the Free State (UFS) in 2007/2008.20 We have grouped research

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20 This high-profile racist incident came to be known as the ‘Reitz incident’ and is documented in detail by van der Merwe and van Reenen (2016).
on racism and discrimination into two subthemes: (a) institutional racism, racialisation and racial segregation on campus; and (b) forms of discrimination other than racism. Overall, these papers suggest that universities are highly racialised spaces, but where comparative perspectives are given, they suggest that this racialisation is experienced asymmetrically and accounted for differently by students of different races (and classes). Indeed, this work suggests that many students become more acutely aware of racism and racial inequality when they arrive at university than they ever were before.

Institutional racism, racialisation and segregation on campus

Research on racialisation and institutional racism comes mainly from historically white universities (or merged components thereof), especially the universities of KwaZulu-Natal, Cape Town and the Free State. Overall, this work gives a view of universities as enduringly racialised and segregated spaces in which black students repeatedly come up against the normative power of whiteness. Spanning our review period are a group of papers on race and racism at the former University of Natal, now UKZN (Bhana, 2014; Durrheim & Mtose, 2006; Durrheim, Trotter, Piper, & Manicom, 2004; Pattman, 2010). Durrheim et al. (2004, pp. 143–144) argue that even though ‘the people at the University look more like the broader South African population every year, a fact that the university often cites as evidence of racial transformation’, students of all races whom they interviewed nevertheless ‘articulated a detailed and intricate knowledge of racial segregation in all aspects of campus life’ (p. 156; see also Cross & Johnson, 2008; Pattman, 2010; cf. Bhana, 2014; see Schrieff, Tredoux, Dixon, & Finchilescu, 2005 for patterns of racial segregation in UCT dining halls). Durrheim et al. (p. 144) argue that transformation by numbers at UKZN had ‘not meant the demise of many of the aspects of racism that motivated transformation in the first place’. But, while black, white and Indian students were all in agreement about the extent of racial segregation on campus, they had different understandings of the role of the institution in encouraging this. White students accounted for racial segregation as a natural outcome of students’ differing personal and cultural preferences, whereas black students understood the university to be ‘orchestrating’ segregation and sponsoring racism (Durrheim et al., 2004, p. 159; cf. Bhana, 2014; see Schrieff, Tredoux, Dixon, & Finchilescu, 2005 for patterns of racial segregation in UCT dining halls). Durrheim et al. (p. 144) argue that transformation by numbers at UKZN had ‘not meant the demise of many of the aspects of racism that motivated transformation in the first place’. But, while black, white and Indian students were all in agreement about the extent of racial segregation on campus, they had different understandings of the role of the institution in encouraging this. White students accounted for racial segregation as a natural outcome of students’ differing personal and cultural preferences, whereas black students understood the university to be ‘orchestrating’ segregation and sponsoring racism (Durrheim et al., 2004, p. 159; cf. Bhana, 2014), for instance by giving white students preference in their choice of residence, even as whites were becoming a vanishing minority at UKZN. White students also displayed casual racism in differentiating between ‘black blacks’ and ‘white blacks’ – saying the latter were ‘more developed’, and thus easier to get on with, than the former (Durrheim & Mtose, 2006). Black students thus had to grapple with the burden of ‘defining aspirations for blackness which are not made in the image of white supremacy’ (p. 167; see also Erasmus & de Wet, 2003 on black students’ burden of doing ‘race work’; and Pattman, 2010, for dilemmas experienced by black students who had been to white schools and were in danger of being accused of ‘thinking themselves white’ and being called ‘coconuts’ by other black students).
In a more recent small study of cross-race interactions at an unnamed historically Afrikaans university (Wertheim, 2014), students of all races also reported that their interactions with other-race peers were limited, despite sharing residences and classrooms: ‘we do projects with them, but we aren’t friends with them’ (p. 46). Institutionalised racism was also reported, as an Indian student explained that there were residence social events on her campus at which only white students were welcome (cf. van der Merwe & van Reenen, 2016). White students claimed that they ‘did not see race’ but then proceeded to tell anecdotes which not only involved racially identifying their peers but also contained racist assumptions about black students’ intellectual abilities (Wertheim, 2014). Moreover, Wertheim notes that white and coloured students claimed that making friends across races was easy, whereas black students said that they had expected to make cross-racial friendships when they came to university but that this had never materialised (see also Cross & Johnson, 2008; Essack & Quayle, 2007; Wilson-Strydom, 2014 for students’ accounts of surprise at the degree of informal segregation). At the University of the Free State, Pillay and McLellan (2010) show how superficial ‘diversity language’ was being used by a black and a white student leader as well as, to a lesser extent, the university management, to justify the continued separation of black and white students in residence and in other social organisations such as church and sports groups. Relevant here is Pattman (2010), one of the few authors we read who points out differences in the way race and racism work on different campuses. At UFS, for example, parts of the white university community continue to offer active and sometimes violent resistance to racial integration of residences (e.g. van der Merwe & van Reenen, 2016); whereas at UKZN, white flight occurred, and residences quickly became almost all black as white students moved out.

Researchers at UCT have also addressed the enduring power of ‘whiteness’ as a construct against which black students find themselves being continually measured (Cornell, Ratele, & Kessi, 2016; Kessi & Cornell, 2015). Students in Kessi and colleagues’ research said that coming to UCT was the first time they had ever felt so black (also see Cross & Johnson, 2008; Essack & Quayle, 2007), and also the first time that they became aware of the benefits and social capital that come with being white or familiar with the white world. Students of colour spoke of worries that they were only ‘allowed in’ to UCT in order to fill racial transformation quotas. Kessi and Cornell (2015, p. 2) argue that discourses of transformation at UCT continue to ‘present black students as the problem rather than as rightful co-beneficiaries of transformation’. They argue that it is black students who must take responsibility for addressing stereotypes about black students and defending their right to be at UCT: black students ‘are excluded by transformation discourses and simultaneously take on the burden of transformation’ (p. 12). It is striking that a similar argument was made as early as 2003 in Erasmus and de Wet’s study of institutional culture at the UCT Health Sciences Faculty. Further feelings of race-based alienation from the university were expressed by Kessi and colleagues’ participants in photos that UCT students took of statue and artworks around campus which they argued glorified white people (including the infamous statue of Cecil John Rhodes, now removed) and denigrate black people, including a
Collectively, these papers give an account of how black students often feel like the racialised, derogated ‘other’ in historically white universities. By contrast, positive accounts of racial interactions are the minority in this literature. First-year UFS students interviewed by Wilson-Strydom (2014) about their experiences of racial and language diversity on campus gave mixed accounts. Some noted that informal segregation had not been as pronounced at their high schools as it was at UFS; others reported that they felt excluded and/or distant when trying to live with others who were different from them; others again reported that mixing with people of different languages and races was an amazingly positive experience and that everyone should learn to speak a variety of languages (English, Afrikaans and Sotho) in order to be able to connect with more people. Ambivalence about racial interactions was also captured by a black first-year student at Stellenbosch University, whose account suggests that encountering white students at close quarters for the first time can be both intimidating and liberating for black students:

“For me it was just scary to interact with the white children all the time, you know, except that they are also normal, you think that they’re from this Model C [historically white] schools, that they are so intelligent and so cool, and stuff, and you see ‘oh my gosh, I can beat them’, and then you like, ‘oh, okay, we’re normal’… Afterwards you see that, but first, initially you think, there’s no way I’m gonna be all these things … I don’t know what it is, I’m sorry to say, but white children just look clever. (cited in Nel, Troskie-de Bruin, & Bitzer, 2009, p. 981)

We found one study focusing on white students’ experiences of living alongside black students in historically white Afrikaans university residences. Jackson, van der Vijver, and Biela (2013) measured the psychological well-being of white students in a context of growing ‘diversity’. They claim that ‘on average, white male and female students … are in a good psychological state; this sample did not suffer from the existential trouble’ (p. 304) that has elsewhere been claimed to exist among white South Africans after apartheid.

Finally, a critical counterpoint to the race work comes from Bhana (2014), the only author we read who addresses the importance of analysing race by class. She argues that, although important, the focus on race in universities obscures ongoing class inequality, and the fact that the middle and upper-middle classes have been largely deracialised, while the working classes have not. Working class black students that she interviewed at UKZN had a heightened awareness of what they were excluded from – for example having less access to technology and safe accommodation, never being able to patronise a campus coffee shop, and so on; but the appearance of a racially mixed campus obscures such underlying class divisions.
Experiences of institutional discrimination other than racism

Studies on students’ experiences of forms of discrimination other than racism are relatively sparse. The exception is a 2017 special issue of SAJHE which addresses the experiences of LGBTI students at different types of universities in southern Africa. Overall, the studies suggest that campus communities (including student residences) are not places where LGBTI students feel fully safe or comfortable: ‘Most of the research findings … [in this issue] indicate that the institutions of higher education in SADC are still heteronormative and LGBTI staff and students are marginalized, prejudiced and discriminated against’ (Nduna, Mthombeni, Mavhandu-Mudzusi, & Mogotsi, 2017, p. 1; see also Munyuki & Vincent, 2017). LGBTI students at an unnamed rural university reported regular threats of violence and theft (Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Sandy, 2017); black gay men living in all-male residences at Wits reported institutionalised homophobia in student residence house committees (Kiguwa & Langa, 2017). Lesch, Brits, and Naidu (2017) show how same-sex couples have to monitor their behaviour on campus, knowing precisely which parts of campus are gay-friendly and which are not, and are nervous to publicly display affection for fear of backlash or of causing offence.

Apart from this landmark special issue, papers on LGBTI students’ experiences were relatively few. Msibi (2013) describes his own experiences of homophobia as an undergraduate student from university staff, both black and white. He expresses surprise and disappointment that homophobia came from black staff whom he respected and from whom he had expected support as a black gay student. Homophobic and transphobic student experiences are also described by Cornell et al. (2016) and Qambela (2016), including protests by transgendered students over having to identify with binary gender categories in residences and bathrooms. Studies also point to the extreme pseudo-religious language that often accompanies homophobia, such as claims that gay students are ‘demon-possessed’ (Msibi, 2013; Nkosi & Masson, 2017).

We found very few papers addressing sexism or heterosexual harassment. Mudaly and van Wyk (2015) discuss institutional sexism in the medical profession and how this trickles down to universities, differently shaping female and male medical students’ experiences of their medical training and community service, as well as their aspirations to practise and specialise. Adams, Mabusela, and Dlamini (2013) attempted to research the prevalence of sexual harassment of female students by male staff members at one anonymous, historically black university. Van der Merwe and van Reenen (2016) show how extreme sexism and rape culture are institutionalised in some male residences at UFS; and Meth recalls how students tried to address rape culture at Rhodes University with #RUReferencelist (Meth, 2017, cited in Langa, 2017; see also Qambela, 2016; Shefer, Clowes, & Vergnani, 2012, below).

We also found only two papers addressing xenophobia (Pithouse-Morgan, Morojele, Pillay, Naicker, Chikoko, Ramkelawan, & Rajpal, 2012; Singh & Francis, 2010), which has become a disturbing public bad in the post-apartheid era. Pithouse-Morgan et al. offer a case study of
a single international student who recounts his fears and experiences of xenophobic harassment on campus, and his consequent choice to isolate himself socially. Singh and Francis’s paper is actually about using a drama exercise to address xenophobia with South African students, but it seems important to note in this discussion of students’ experiences of institutional discrimination that many of the South African students who participated in the drama exercise spoke freely about their own dislike of ‘foreigners’.

To conclude, this section suggests that racism and racialisation on campuses have been quite extensively researched, but, with the partial exception of literature on gay students’ experiences and homophobic persecution, other forms of discrimination have not been nearly as extensively researched. Of course, the literature itself cannot tell us whether this is because these are in fact not serious problems on university campuses; or because South African researchers have blind spots about sexism and xenophobia; or because our search methods did not capture papers that do exist; or for some other reason. However, we can reiterate that concerns about the racialisation of historically white universities evidently have a long history. Almost all the work reviewed here dates from before the student protests of 2015/2016, in some cases long before. Reading about these issues in the immediate post-protest period thus felt, at times, eerily familiar.

**Theme 2: Student health, well-being and poverty**

A second and smaller theme in the literature we termed student health, well-being and poverty is discussed in this section. This includes papers on student poverty, food insecurity, experiences of students with disabilities, student physical and mental health, drinking, and transactional sex. Overall, this literature is probably too patchy to give a comprehensive view of the overall state of student health; however, a number of red flags are raised, especially about poverty and its knock-on effects. Two studies researched food insecurity, both at UKZN and published in 2013. Munro, Quayle, Simpson, and Barnsley’s (2013) survey of over 1,000 students found that more than a third of students reported food insecurity to a degree which affected their academic performance. Almost half of them experienced serious or severe food insecurity. Students on financial aid and those in access programs reported greater food insecurity than those who were not. The authors argue that food insecurity may be undermining the academic aims of the UKZN access programmes, and affecting throughput and graduation rates (see also Kassier & Veldman, 2013). Furthermore, there is some evidence from a study of student eating and exercise habits at Nelson Mandela University (NMU) to suggest that students living in residence are relatively less healthy than others; but that students do not always make wise choices about what to spend their limited grocery money on (Gresse, Steenkamp, & Pietersen, 2015). Concerns are also raised about the dangers of, and reasons for, student drinking and binge-drinking (Du Preez, Pentz, & Lategan, 2016; Lategan, Du Preez, & Pentz, 2017).

Two qualitative studies provide students’ own accounts of living in poverty (Firfirey & Carolissen, 2010; Machika & Johnson, 2015). Poor students benefiting from a university
food programme discussed effects of poverty that ranged from food insecurity and lack of personal hygiene (e.g. showering without soap), to academic effects such as difficulty in keeping up with academic work due to unaffordability of textbooks, and psychological effects including chronic anxiety and depression over finances, feelings of shame for being poor and wanting to hide or disguise one's poverty from friends and housemates. Poor students who could not afford to live in close proximity to their university reported a long daily commute, which, compounded by care responsibilities for younger siblings and children at home, left little time for university work, thus adding ‘time-poverty’ to their multiple challenges (Machika & Johnson, 2015; see also Wilson-Strydom, Strydom, & Hen-Boisen, 2016). Despite receiving accommodation, food, book and fee allowances, students on the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) cannot totally escape the effects of financial insecurity: NSFAS fee payments to the universities are often late, so that some students are not allowed to re-register for subsequent years of study despite passing their modules; and the NSFAS food allowance is also limited (Machika & Johnson, 2015). Indeed, van Zyl (2014, p. 1663) argues that rather than thinking of ‘disadvantaged’ students as ‘non-traditional’, they should be seen as the new normal: ‘desperation defines the neo-mainstream’ in South African higher education. Conversely, however, Langa (2017, p. 10) finds that students’ experiences of poverty may be differentiated by university type and location: ‘It appears that students at the universities of Limpopo and Zululand, both historically black universities, are satisfied with NSFAS while students at historically white universities feel that NSFAS is insufficient in meeting their exorbitant fees’.

At the intersection of gender and poverty is Shefer, Clowes, and Vergnani’s (2012) paper on transactional sex among students at the University of the Western Cape. Student participants suggest that transactional sex is widespread on campus, and typically takes place between younger women students and older male students or working men from outside of the university. As transactional relationships take place ‘across the urban-rural and local-foreigner’ divides, and across differences of wealth, age and status which intersect with gender in multiple, complex ways’, the authors are concerned that these unequal power dynamics may be ‘exacerbating unsafe and coercive sexual practices’ (p. 435) among students.

We found two papers on disabled students’ experiences of campus life (Matshediso, 2010; Mutanga, 2017). Students with disabilities emphasised the importance of support from the campus disability office, from friends, and from lecturers who are sensitive to their specific needs. Some students said they had difficulty accessing buildings and facilities and blind students said that they were often uninformed about campus events because they cannot read most notices (see Mutanga, 2017, for a review).

Finally, with the exception of an early study by Schreiber (2007), who examined the presenting concerns of students using the UCT student counselling centre in the early 2000s and noted that the incidence of self-reported depression was high, student mental health barely made an appearance in this literature corpus.
Theme 3: The emancipatory potential of student politics

The last theme we identify is student politics, which is one of the longest-studied topics related to the student experience beyond the curriculum. The early studies tended to focus on key student organisations’ and students’ roles in the anti-apartheid struggle (Badat, 1999; Bundy, 1989; Maseko, 1994; Muller, 1991; Nkomo, 1984). In the post-apartheid period, only a few studies continued to address this topic (Koen, Cele, & Libhaber, 2006; Luescher, 2009; Luescher-Mamashela, 2010) until the 2015/2016 student movement sparked a great number of new studies on student politics.

Interestingly, student leaders interviewed a few years before the 2015/2016 protests by Keet and Nel (2016) described feeling suffocated and misrecognised by their university management, as if they were being used to simply ‘act out a script’ that had already been decided on by others, rather than being taken seriously as agents of change in their own right. Otherwise, neither the older nor the newer studies focus much on students’ experiences of student politics itself. They mostly take for granted that the student experience of higher education and beyond is a source of student discontent and anger that leads to student protests. In the case of the recent literature, this includes students’ personal experiences of alienation, discrimination and exclusion; students’ interpretation thereof in terms of the prevailing social injustices in South African society and the effects of certain higher education policies and practices; and student discontent and pessimism about broader political and socio-economic developments in the country (e.g. Badat, 2017; Booysen, 2016; Jansen, 2017; Karodia, Soni, & Soni, 2016; Lukhele, 2015; Molefe, 2016; Nel, 2016; Nyamnjoh, 2015). We find that students’ experiences of participating in student politics feature mainly in studies that look at the practices, strategies and tactics of the student movement, its internal organisation and internal divisions (Baragwanath, 2016; Langa, 2017; Luescher & Klemenčič, 2017; Naidoo, 2015; O’Halloran, 2016; Qambela, 2016). Some studies look at specifics, for example social media activism (Bosch, 2017; de Jager, 2016; Luescher, Loader, & Mugume, 2017); and others at the violence that accompanied the protests, particularly traumatising and racialised police violence and the securitisation of campuses, as well as violence from protestors (Langa, 2017 and contributors; Hodes, 2016; see also Metz, 2016).

While student activism is a collective and public expression of student interest in addressing educational and/or social issues, participation therein is very much a personal experience and entails a personal process of transformation. In this respect, both the older and newer literature show how black students in particular, emerging from experiences of racism and exclusion, learn in the process of student activism to centre and assert a positive black identity, and conceptualise and theorise the black experience on and off campus, along with a critique of the education system and rejection of the racialised structure of society and white supremacy (Luescher, 2009; Naidoo, 2015; also see Badat, 1999, 2015; Gibson, 2017; Mbembe, 2015). The recent studies have added an intersectional perspective to the
race-based critique, involving gendered and working class perspectives, LGBTI students’ experiences, critiques of xenophobia, and so forth (Langa, 2017; Qambela, 2016).

As for the biographical impact of the experience of student activism in South Africa – and thus the realisation of its transformative potential in terms of a pathway to the public good – we have not been able to uncover any relevant studies. We also did not find studies addressing the experiences of those students not directly involved in protest action themselves. To date, the emancipatory potential of student activism is perhaps most evident in studies that are conceptualising #RhodesMustFall and other ‘decolonisation campaigns’ as part of a critical pedagogical process whereby students take charge of their own learning, construct their own ‘counter-curriculum’, and engage in a new praxis of addressing the unfinished project of decolonisation (cf. Mangcu, 2015; Naidoo, 2015; Nyamnjoh, 2015).

Discussion and implications

This review of literature spans the period leading up to and immediately after the largest student activist movement in democratic South Africa to date, which was a defining part of students’ experiences beyond the curriculum on most South African university campuses in 2015 and 2016. Starting with #RhodesMustFall at UCT and rapidly spreading across universities, South African higher education experienced the onset of a ‘decolonial moment’ which brought into mainstream political discourse issues of institutional (and intersectional) alienation (see also Chapter 10) and – with #FeesMustFall – the unaffordability of university education, issues which researchers and the students they interviewed had evidently already been pointing out for many years. Although the literature we read gives only a partial view of the whole picture of students’ experiences of campus life – and it may be that important counter-perspectives were not caught in the net of our search methods – this review has been a process of ‘connecting the dots’ and finding that numerous red flags were raised as far back as our review period goes. Evidently, historically white universities have long been experienced as indifferent, if not actively hostile, to many ‘new mainstream’ students. In this sense, the protests and the issues they raised appear as a crisis that was waiting to happen, rather than as something that blew up without warning.

A second implication derives from the size and skewness of the literature reviewed here. Our research assembled a considerable dataset of over 120 articles, chapters and reports; yet, this literature almost exclusively tells the story of students at urban and historically white universities. We know very little about students at rural and historically black universities. This bias reflects the predominance of authors from a familiar subset of universities: UCT, UKZN, UWC, Wits, UFS, Stellenbosch, Pretoria, Rhodes and UNISA (in that order). This skewness is further exacerbated by the prevalence of single-institution, small-sample studies, some of which do not provide comparative perspectives from more than one group of purposively selected students. There is also typically a lack of thorough theoretical engagement in the papers; they tend to be largely problem-driven and empirical, and at best consider relevant
conceptual lenses. Moreover, a number of papers are quite weak methodologically, with results sections consisting of a few quotes from students, with little attempt to justify this selection or the overall plausibility of the author’s knowledge claims. Finally, we note that with the exception of the student politics literature, there is in fact very little research on organised campus activities, such as student associations, student participation in residence structures, sport, or student media – even though such activities are arguably crucial in the formation of student networks and skills that may live on beyond graduation and in fostering certain graduate attributes. Absence of evidence cannot be treated as evidence of absence, however, and there are likely many student experiences – both good and bad – beyond the curriculum that have not been captured here. The shape and size of the literature is therefore itself a call to action for researchers to conduct larger, comparative and perhaps historical studies on students’ experiences at different campuses, in a variety of domains of student life, and over time.

Thirdly, while the studies about black students’ experiences of racialisation and institutional alienation may not give us a direct answer about how higher education contributes to the public good – as this is not a question they were attempting to address – the studies do show that many of the problems of South African society at large are rehearsed and replicated – if not amplified – in universities. South African universities are not neutral enclaves or ivory towers where social cleavages are bridged or suspended. Indeed, some literature suggests that students experience inequality and racial and ethnic divides in a more powerful way when they attend universities than they did in high school. If the public good is conceptualised as sustainable social cohesion and social justice, what is the long-term effect of these experiences of what we may call these ‘public bads’? Are they contributing to the public good insofar as the process of becoming aware of inequality is the first step towards opposing and addressing it? Or are they producing hurt and cynical students?

Direct evidence from the literature itself is only partially helpful. A small subset of studies in our dataset considered the contribution of higher education to democratisation in Africa. Starting with a wholesale view of students’ experience of higher education, two studies show that higher education’s distinct contribution to democracy is predominantly evident in graduates’ critical thinking (Mattes & Mughogho, 2010) and their greater ability to navigate the highly complex institutions of modern democracy (Mattes & Mozaffar, 2011). Later, related studies disaggregate the student experience and its impact on different kinds of citizenship competences to show the importance of political engagement during campus life, participation in specific skills trainings (e.g. leadership training, diversity workshops), and active membership and leadership in student associations, as well as organisations of civil society off campus, in accounting for the development of citizenship competences and for graduates’ more active and critical, democratic citizenship (Luescher-Mamashela et al., 2011, 2015; Mattes & Luescher-Mamashela, 2012). This set of studies thus builds on earlier studies on the civic role of higher education in South Africa (e.g. Cross, Cloete, Beckham, Harper, Indiresan, & Musil, 1999) as well as policy-related discourse on the public good dimension of higher education (Council on Higher Education, 2004, 2016; Department of Education, 1997).
We can infer some further transformative experiences from the literature. Positively transformative experiences include students appreciating greater cultural and racial exposure; becoming more self-aware and articulate; learning to better form and express their opinions; learning to navigate their university in all its complexity (Cloete & Duncan, 2016); and participating and taking charge in student organisations and student activism, on matters that personally affect them and in solidarity with others. This kind of ‘student engagement’ is also known to positively correlate with academic success (Kuh, 2009; Tinto, 2014). Conversely, negatively transformative experiences of university may include heightened anxieties about one’s own race and identity; greater awareness of one’s own economic and social disadvantage, compared to more wealthy students with whom one might never have mixed before, and how this class inequality continues to correlate with race; continued racial segregation on campus and in student life and personal experiences of discrimination; as well as indications that living in residence has some health and personal risks. Curiously, this also suggests that positive and the negatively transformative student experiences beyond the curriculum lie side by side.

Finally, an important counter-perspective to the predominantly pessimistic tone of the literature reviewed here is offered by Hodes (2016), who argues that the claim that universities are racist, classist, alienating places which have failed at transformation has become an orthodoxy that does not acknowledge the large body of South African scholarship that has been producing a sustained critique of the transition all along. Since the academics who write such critiques also teach and supervise in the universities, this then raises the question about the extent to which the critical capacities of the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall student campaigns were at least partially a product of the teaching of these same institutions. In other words, were students drawing both on their own experiences and on the critical discourses of the university when launching their rebellion against it?

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