Going to University. The Influence of Higher Education on the Lives of Young South Africans

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CHAPTER 2

NAVIGATING THE UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM

Narratives already introduced:

_Themba_  BSc completed – doing PhD overseas
_Tebogo_  BSc Actuarial Science – switch to BComm – still not completed, unemployed
_Nala_  BSc extended programme – switch to BA – still not completed, working in start-up company

Narratives to be introduced in this chapter:

_Martin_  BA (Hons) Theatre Management – working as theatre manager
_Martha_  BSc Elec Eng – switched to BSc Computer Science – motherhood – studying
_BSc Computer Science part-time_
_Hannah_  B Soc Sci completed but no academic transcript – SAPS trainee

Patterns of success and failure in higher education were considered in Chapter 1, both in terms of national statistics and individual students’ narratives. These revealed markedly different student experiences of university studies. In this chapter, we look more closely at student trajectories through the undergraduate curriculum. Although the experience of being at university is not only about academic study, as will be amply illustrated as the book unfolds, at the core of being a university student is engagement with an academic programme of study. We therefore begin our book with a look at students’ progression through the curriculum.

Undergraduate programmes in South Africa are structured into courses, and the academic year comprises two semesters. Based on the work that the student submits, including usually a final examination, the course will be passed or failed. At the end of the year there will be minimum requirements to be able to be enrolled in the following year; if these are not met a student can be academically excluded. Ultimately a certain set of courses need to be completed in order to qualify for the award of the degree. The regulation time of three years for the bachelor’s degrees considered in this study means that it is expected that a student can complete...
sufficient courses at the required levels for graduation within three years; those registered in the extended curriculum programme have a curriculum that takes four years. 46

The previous chapter made reference to a recent study by the Council on Higher Education 47 which shows that it is a small proportion (just under a third) of South African students who complete the three-year bachelor’s degree in the regulation time, and under two-thirds who complete within an additional two years. The report came to the conclusion that these poor throughput rates necessitate a change in structure in the undergraduate programme with an additional year to allow for what they termed ‘flexible’ routes through the curriculum.

In the previous chapter we also encountered the first three narratives through which the findings of this study will be presented. Themba’s is a textbook case of student success; not only completing in regulation time but also reaching the performance required for continuation to postgraduate studies and then ultimately to a prestigious overseas university. Tebogo, by contrast, has been studying for five years and is yet to complete the bachelor’s degree. Twice he had to shift programmes in order to be readmitted to the university. Ultimately he was excluded with no further options to change programmes. Now he has been advised to finish some of his outstanding courses through the national distance university and that he will then be able to return for the final course needed for his degree. Nala had a similar experience in the BSc, and after two years had to shift to a BA. Ultimately, after a further year she was excluded from the university.

Of the 73 young people who were interviewed for this study, at the time of the interview some six years on from their first year of registration, all except 13 had completed a bachelor’s degree in the programme and all except one at the institution where they had started their studies. Of the 13 who had not completed the degree, one had not received their transcript and two had changed to medicine, leaving a group of 10 young people who had not completed the academic requirements for their three-year degrees; seven of whom had been academically excluded.

It is really important to emphasise at this point that a study of this nature does not and cannot aim for statistical representivity. Thus the proportion of those who did not complete amongst our 73 students is somewhat smaller than the proportion in the overall cohort in each programme who did not complete. This is to be expected when considering the likelihood of someone who had not completed a degree agreeing to be interviewed about their experiences.

These are particularly important narratives for this study and we were very grateful to these research participants for sharing what were often difficult stories. In following through the questions that guide this book the reader will see that these narratives are drawn on substantially; individually these 10 tend to feature more than each of the 60 who completed their degrees. For further discussion on this methodological point the reader is referred to Appendix A.

Tebogo and Nala both began with a BSc at the same university. They are among the seven who had to leave their studies because they were academically excluded. What is striking is that all seven of these students who were academically excluded began with a BSc at this particular university. The chapter therefore requires a close look at the experiences in this programme.

It is worth noting that of the overall cohort who entered this particular programme at this institution in 2009, only 51% had graduated five years after commencement. Of significant concern is that when these figures are racially disaggregated, we see that only 36% of black African South African students graduated, compared to 72% of their white South African peers in this university’s BSc programme. It might seem a plausible explanation that many of these difficulties can be ascribed to students not having made appropriate choices around a programme of study. And indeed, many of them fit this description, for example, Nala, who was accepted for Medicine, but decided to do BSc and then changed to a BA but didn’t complete that. A further set of explanations might rest in the well-documented poor preparation that many South African school leavers have in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects. For the moment though, these explanations should be considered provisional, while we move to consider students’ experiences of moving through the curriculum more broadly, starting with the narrative of Martin, who enrolled for a BA at this same institution.

**Martin** was talented at schoolwork and excelled in many fields. He said:

> I come from a family where I was part of the first generation to be at university. My brother was the first person in our entire extended family to get a university degree and then I was the second person in the entire family to get a university degree. … So, there was an expectation for me to go to university and to complete a degree, but beyond that I think it was more about me accomplishing what I was set out to do.

His parents had initially thought he should be on one of those ‘solid career path degrees’ like law or accounting. During high school, he had managed to get a bursary to do part of his schooling abroad and he thinks this was the point where his parents ‘started letting go of their ideas and realised that I’d be fine in whatever industry that I am’.

He started his BA with a plan to major in Law and Politics (maybe a lingering influence of the parental ambitions). However, in the second week of study he realised that ‘Law was not for me’ and decided he wouldn’t take more courses in this area. He changed his majors to Politics, Italian Literature and Drama:

> Then in my second year Politics was killing me so it was around that time when things were starting to fall apart in terms of my academics; for the first time I was

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worried about my academics. So in an effort for self-preservation I dropped Politics as a major. … I took Spanish because it was a close enough a language and I was interested to learn it, I went straight into second year of that as well. I ended up graduating with a degree in Italian literature, Spanish literature and Drama.

During this second year of academic crisis, as well as swapping his majors, he scaled back slightly on his very extensive extra-curricular involvements. He also took a wide range of elective subjects:

*I was one of those people who were always ready to take electives in my undergrad studies because I valued that lateral knowledge base and understanding that skills can develop out of very strange courses. Like I'd take Religious Studies as an elective, Word Power and that because I was interested in certain things and I thought this was the time to do it and [it was] a reason [not] to take one of the named degrees because I wanted the freedom to diversify my curriculum.*

On completion of his BA (in regulation time despite these shifts) he knew he wanted to continue with honours but decided he needed to do something with this ‘huge time’ of the summer vacation between the degrees and so he approached the Department of Arts and Culture and asked them what programmes they had in that period. They recommended him to the Arts Festival and he got a position as a marketing and operations intern.

When he reflects on the honours in Drama Education and Theatre Management which he then did, he said:

*I narrowed down exactly how and what the skills were that were going to help me in my professional life.*

At the conclusion of this year he applied for, and got accepted into, an international internship in the USA and while there he applied for and got the position he now occupies in theatre production, which he feels totally suits who he is and what he wants to do.

**Finding your strengths and passions – the possibilities for changing disciplinary direction**

Martin’s experience of changing his disciplinary focus over the course of the degree was seen in many of the narratives in this study. In fact, the experience of knowing what you want to do, coming to university and seamlessly doing it, was very rare across the 73 young people we spoke to. In this section, we first explore in a little more detail this trajectory of changing direction during the degree.
We found that flexibility in the degree structure of BA and BSc degrees was important in enabling students to find their strengths and passions, and to allow them to change direction during the degree. However, the curriculum structure of the degrees varied substantially across the three institutions. On the one extreme was an institution with a flexible, ‘liberal arts’-type approach, enabling students to take a combination of BA and BSc subjects alongside many others. Another institution was rather less flexible than this, but did allow some cross-over of BA and BSc subjects. At the other extreme was the third institution, which implemented a thorough programmatisation of its degree structure in the late 1990s, with almost no possibility for BA subjects in a BSc degree, or vice versa. Furthermore, core modules were specified within each degree programme at this third institution, which left very little flexibility to choose between elective modules.

We noted that students in BA programmes experienced more latitude in being able to change direction of study than in BSc programmes, even in the institution which generally allowed significant flexibility in degree structure. This is unsurprising as the sciences have hierarchical knowledge structures, which often lead to senior courses having junior courses as prerequisites. The cumulative nature of the knowledge means that to acquire more advanced levels of knowledge the student already has to have a good grasp of previous levels. In Arts and Humanities, many disciplines involve horizontal knowledge structures where senior courses do not necessarily require the knowledge in junior courses. Senior courses may draw on concepts introduced at more junior levels but they do not necessarily depend much on pre-existing knowledge. Thus, the BA rules of combination allow more for wrong choices and changes in direction. The BA rules also generally allow for straightforward strategic moves if one is failing in a particular area of study. If you find that you can’t succeed in a particular disciplinary direction then you can always shift direction and this doesn’t necessarily mean an extra year of study, as was seen above in Martin’s experience. There is a very wide range of subjects and they make very different academic demands on students.

One thing that could be seen in many of these trajectories were students’ clear expressions of likes and dislikes, even verging on the language of love and hate, as seen in this comment:

When I started studying I wanted to do Clinical Psychology … And then I got introduced into Biological Psychology and I fell in love and I was like, ‘Oh my goodness. I don’t want to do Clinical Psychology any more.’ I’m like over it and you

49 Government policy in the late 1990s encouraged all universities to ‘programmatise’ their curricula, as a means to promote greater interdisciplinarity and so-called ‘relevance’. Some institutions engaged fully with this proposal, while in other institutions the curricula structure remained virtually unchanged. For a fuller description of this ‘programmatisation’ process and its effects on curriculum structure see: Muller, J. (2003). Knowledge and the limits to institutional restructuring: The case of South African higher education, *Journal of Education*, 30: 101–126.

know other things that I thought I would love I ended up hating, you know, like Philosophy. I honestly thought that I would love it and I didn't. It was interesting for like the first three months and then I was so over it. [9]

It is important to note that the experience of changing from one subject to another is not always prompted by academic difficulty as was the case in Martin's story. Here is a student who had thought she wanted to major in Psychology but then:

I found it unchallenging. Maybe it was just the stage at which you go in at Psychology 101. At least for me, I found it incredibly boring. I didn't see the challenge in it. I didn't see the interpretive value in it. Just seemed a little bit, like, literal. Which obviously is not representative of psychology as a whole or ... but at the time I just thought, 'No, I can't pursue this for almost three years.' [10]

This student took journalism as a subject in first year and then applied to join the BA Journalism programme in her second year. To do this you need to achieve at a certain level in your first-year subjects. She commented:

So, the journalism stream kind of creates these little hurdles for you to jump through, which I'm sure makes them feel very cool. [10]

Quite a few students talked about this hurdle of high marks required for getting into journalism. The key thing though, with regard to issues of flexibility and throughput, is that if you don't get into the Journalism programme, you can still continue with the regular BA.

Most of the BA students had examples of 'trying out' subjects and finding their passion along the way. Here is an illustration which encapsulates it well:

I started as a first year Humanities student in Psychology and Sociology, but I think I must have taken every single course in Humanities to eventually find that specialisation. ... If I compare where I am now to what I studied and envisioned for myself, it came out completely differently. When I started in 2009, like every other student, I didn't know what I wanted to do. Psychology was something low on the list that I didn't really see myself doing, but I took it as an elective on top of the course which I had: I went in with Media Studies and Politics as majors and then decided I absolutely hated Politics and realised it wasn't for me. I found it far too theoretical, I suppose. Then I went into majoring in Sociology and Psychology from the second semester in year one. I got a distinction in Sociology and not one in

51 The participants are all listed in Appendix A. As noted earlier, the main narratives are given pseudonyms; all other participants are referenced by a number.
Psychology. I remember a professor at the Sociology department saying to me why don't I come and do Honours in Sociology, but in all honesty, I had zero interest in pursuing it even though it was one of those subjects where I got so much enjoyment out of reading and learning. It is definitely a critical thinking subject but it didn't fuel me as much as Psychology did, and I think maybe at the back of my mind I would have had no idea if I had done an Honours in Sociology what the next step would have been from there. [47]

As noted above, the narratives of changing direction were more apparent amongst BA students, but we did note a few examples among the BSc students:

I had no idea what I wanted to do when I was in high school, and I went to a student advisor, and she interviewed me and said she thought a BSc in human biosciences would suit me. That's a major in Psychology and Physiology. I didn't like Psychology that much but in Bio, I really liked the look of Genetics. So, I switched my majors. I dropped Psychology and decided I was going to major in Physiology and Genetics. And then in second year I took Microbiology as an elective, and I really enjoyed that. So, then I thought I'm going to drop Physiology and take Microbiology and Genetics as my majors. Physiology was cool but I couldn't see how it was going to help me later on and I didn't have any desire to pursue it further... So, what was meant to be Psychology and Physiology turned into Microbiology and Genetics! [51]

Before we start to get a view that every subject choice is based on an intrinsic interest, here is a reminder that, at least in some cases, courses were taken to complete degree requirements:

I didn't like English and Philosophy and all that stuff. To be honest I wasn't completely crazy about those things, I just did them for the sake of the fact that I had to, had to fill up my credits so I tried different things here and there but I stuck to History and Journalism. [19]

We were interested to see trajectories where the change in direction actually meant a change in programme; in all instances where we noted this it was from a BSc to a BA (or to a bachelor's degree in Social Sciences). Two of the three institutions in this study allow BSc students to take some BA subjects, and this often fostered the possibility for change. In the one institution that had adopted the most ‘liberal arts’ approach to degree structure there is very little restriction on course combination across BA and BSc courses. This flexibility enabled one student, who had started out doing a BSc in order to become a school mathematics teacher, to change her BSc degree to a BA after she fell ‘head over heels with Philosophy’:
So, I started out definitely wanting to take English and Maths. And I’ve always loved computers and I do a bit of web design so I thought I’d take Computer Science, to do a bit of programming …

[The university I attended] is very free in letting you sort of mix and match, so I could major in English even in a BSc so long as my other major was one of the core sciences …

I also took Physics and then I thought I’d just see what all this Philosophy stuff was about …

So, I then had a clash between Philosophy and Maths and I found myself adoring Philosophy and finding Maths rather boring at the start. Because at the start all the Maths we were learning was stuff I’d learnt in school so I started going to Philosophy instead of Maths. … I failed to go to Maths and do the work so that by the time they switched to new Maths that I didn’t know I was so far behind that I didn’t do terribly well …

I did pass Maths at the end of the year but I’d fallen completely head over heels with Philosophy so I switched to a BA and to Philosophy as my new Major. [6]

And here is a student from the same institution who started off planning to do Chemistry and landed up majoring in Psychology and continuing with Honours in that direction:

Well, when I was in matric52 I had this dream of being like a Chemistry person, like working in a lab and making explosions and things like that. I actually took psychology as a filler in my first year, and I just really fell in love with it. I decided to take it through and continue studying it, and I did a lot of volunteer work in residences and in the community. Yes, I just decided maybe psychology is the route for me to take, so I only actually really decided in my second year, I think, to become a psychologist. [15]

What this study challenges is the assumption that most students enter university with fully formed ideas of their interests and strengths. Even someone like this student, who is an academically successful school leaver from a well-off family, has had quite a few fits and starts as she felt her way around the curriculum. Fortunately for this student, her university allowed her to shift from Chemistry to Psychology. Had she started with a BSc at most other South African institutions she might not have been able so seamlessly to shift her interests progressively towards the Arts. One interviewee felt that needing to make choices like this was one of the things she really liked about university, compared to school:

52 Matriculation is the final school-leaving examination in South Africa and the term ‘matric’ is often also used to refer to the final school year, Grade 12.
And what I’ve learned with university is that you are able to choose. At high school, obviously our courses and subjects and things were prescribed, and everything was a set thing of what you’re going to do and where you’re going to be and these are the marks you’re going to get. [29]

Yet another student describes his shift from a BSc to a BA through following his interest in Geography. He had initially been advised to register for a BSc, but he didn’t enjoy the Maths prerequisite, and so later shifted to a BA:

I studied Politics, Geography and then I did some Maths and Stats – although the Maths was a problem. I enjoyed the Stats but I didn’t see the point in Maths. Because I was registered as a Science major in the first year, I had to do it … And then someone told me actually you can sign up for Social Sciences and you can do more interesting stuff. So, I shifted in second year and that’s when I picked up French. [27]

Another key initiative in the institution that allowed a high degree of student choice is a system of ‘introductory lectures’ during orientation week in which students can ‘try out’ the subjects they are planning to do. Many interviewees spoke spontaneously about changing their choices during this week, for example:

I chose the institution and then I initially registered for Bachelor of Music and then, during the introductory week when I was going to the lectures and seeing what they were going to cover, I realised that I didn’t really want to do that; it is very different to what I had anticipated, it was very performance-orientated. I wasn’t interested so much in music as I was in learning about music and being on the development side of it. So, I had to suddenly change my degree in a week, so I had some subject changes and then I switched to a BA. [20]

As noted above, one institution in this study had a relatively rigid set of programme rules which allowed for little student choice in the BA and BSc programmes. Johnson, whose narrative will be introduced in the next chapter, was registered for the Geology programme at this institution and described the rigidity in subject choice as follows:

[There was] not much choice. Yes, there were choices here and there but it is pretty much whether you are going to do physics in second year or you just want to continue and do a different type of physics, but everything else was set.

We have explored here the experiences of students who came to study a particular disciplinary direction, but then changed their minds after they had done a course in that area. Sometimes
it was because they found they couldn't manage with it academically, sometimes they said it
didn't interest them or it was not challenging enough. Either way, the trajectories that we have
considered here allowed for the possibility of changing disciplinary direction, and usually
without the cost of an extra year. We noted that these experiences were found more with BA
than with BSc students. We also noted quite substantial differences between institutions in
terms of curriculum flexibility. Only one institution in the study allowed for a fairly seamless
move between the BA and the BSc programmes, although this was not so easy for students
who were on a bursary or in the extended curriculum programme. At another institution in
the study, this move was not readily available to a BSc student but was not impossible; while
in the third institution, rigid programme structures made this impossible.53

A closer look at the BSc

We move therefore to consider more closely the trajectories of students who encountered
difficulties in subjects, but did not have the option of substantially changing direction as
Martin and others described in the previous section did. Mostly these experiences were noted
with BSc students. The reader has already been introduced to Tebogo who hit difficulties in
the second year of his BSc in Actuarial Science, and Nala who spent two difficult years in the
BSc extended curriculum programme. To add to this, we introduce here the story of Martha,
who also struggled to progress in the BSc programme.

Martha is from elsewhere in Africa and had obtained a prestigious scholarship to study
Electrical Engineering at a South African university. She struggled in her first year and said:

> Engineering was too much for me at some point. Maybe it was an issue of confidence,
> I don't know, I just remember that it was hard for me.

She changed her degree to Computer Science during that year, but when she started second
year she wasn't allowed to go into the second-year course in this discipline since she was half a
credit short of first-year credits. So she had to do some courses in Applied Mathematics:

> It felt depressing because my sponsor had to pay a whole bulk of fees just for me to
> not do the second year. That was painful. I also went through a bit of depression
> because I didn’t feel like I was doing what I had come here for.

53 This restriction of student choice has been an unintended consequence of the programmatisation of SA higher education, which
was actually intended to allow greater flexibility for students and portability across institutions. Instead, with programmes designed
around compulsory core modules, students who change programmes or transfer between institutions often need to repeat an academic
year. For further detail on the impacts of this policy, see: Ensor, P. (2002). Curriculum. In Cloete, N., Maassen, P., Fehnel, R., Moja,
T., Gibbon, T. and Perold, H. (eds), Transformation in higher education: Global pressures and local realities in South Africa. Cape Town:
Juta, pp. 179–194.
In her third year at university Martha was able to do the second-year Computer Science course, but now she had difficulty in building friendships with this new cohort of students, which was necessary in order to access academic support from peers:

*Because the people who were in second year Computer Science had been together in first year, it was hard for me to form study groups because I didn’t know my classmates. … I also started struggling. It was hard, I remember at one point I wanted to install an operating system on my laptop because I needed it to study, but it was just so hard to even find somebody to help with that. I am also a lady you know, there weren’t that many ladies who do that kind of thing, you know IT people from African families. We don’t grow up with computers so you don’t know how to do stuff on your computer, like installing an operating system. Yeah, so it just became hard for me to feel on top of my game.*

During that year Martha managed to change her major to Mathematics since she had passed all her courses in this area. She was relieved that her sponsor, an IT company, allowed her to do this. But her academic struggles did not go away:

*Yeah, but it was still hard. It was actually hard because I didn’t feel like a Maths genius in the Maths class and it was just hard. Maybe it was a psychological thing, all I remember is that it was just hard.*

At the same time she married her boyfriend and then fell pregnant with their first child. She says:

*Well, I thought you know, it was kind of a silly thing, but people say that when you get a baby you become a bit more focused in life because you have a baby to take care of, you work harder. So I thought, well, I am married now so I should have a baby and my husband didn’t mind me having a baby at that time. Also because my academic life was falling into the drain. So I felt that now that that is happening, I’ve got to do something right and I thought maybe I should become a mother. So that’s what happened that year.*

At the end of the year Martha took a break from her studies and spent two years as a full-time mother. She feels that getting married and having a baby gave her a sense of purpose in life. Then she managed to obtain a scholarship to study fully online through an overseas institution, again in Computer Science. The following year she also registered for Computer Science through the South African distance university and is doing both programmes of study in parallel. She is studying because she feels these programmes will give her the skills she needs to get a job, especially given the challenges of finding work as a foreigner in South Africa.
Martha has a rather sobering comment on how being at university influenced her life: apart from meeting her husband and getting credits for first year she doesn't think she obtained much:

*Now that I think about it, I think for some people it is better for them to first take a gap year so that they can build up some level of maturity, maybe through work in the gap year or something. I feel it might have been better for me at that point, because I would have been more mature and know what is more important to me. Like I'd have known not to go and waste money on Mr Price clothes. Now that I have a family I know the value of money, but at that point I didn't know that. Stuff was just given to me and it was easy to take things for granted. To see your friends drinking and partying … there was shallowness to life.*

Martha's experience is an important check on drawing any quick conclusion about how university influences a young life. She was far away from home, she struggled to make friends in her class, and when she experienced academic difficulties she didn't have people she could turn to. She changed course of study twice but this didn't alleviate the difficulties. The structure of the BSc curriculum had consequences that she didn't anticipate. She spent three years at university and feels she did not gain much academically. She is still persisting at studying in the area though, still hoping to get skills that she can use in the workplace.

Martha's narrative highlights the difficulties of being in a curriculum structure that doesn't necessarily suit your strengths and where changing courses is not easy. Martha does not talk in detail about Computer Science as a subject she is really interested in; it is an opportunity she gets through a scholarship and then an area she continues to feel might open up workplace opportunities. She says of the choice to start with engineering:

*Obviously [the scholarship company] wanted me to do engineering because it is a better degree I guess, because when you are an engineer you can get a job in a lot of things more than just a computer scientist.*

It has to be said here that even those students who succeeded in the BSc found it very academically challenging. It is useful to return to the experiences of Themba, whose story opened this book:

*In my first year, I didn't know how the academic setting would go, so I had initially thought that I'd go there and do all the subjects that I wanted to do. Because I was just naïve and overachieving! So, when I got to the Dean I said 'OK I want to do Maths, Stats, Physics, Computer Science, Biology, Cell Bio, and all of that'. And he said, 'Hang on, you are supposed to do four subjects but are allowed to do maximum...'
of five per semester.’ So, I did five subjects in the first semester and I did pretty well in them but I saw through this that the workload was quite intense, so in the second semester I dropped down to the requisite four.

The one that I dropped was Computer Science because I realised that it wasn’t for me. I got to second year and did Maths, Physics and Chemistry and because I was stupid and crazy I also did Mathematical Statistics as the fourth subject even though I was supposed to be doing just three. Again, the workload was too much, I don’t know why I did that. Ah, I [should] have just done it for first year.

I am so glad that I didn’t drop it, hey, because originally, I wanted to major in Chemistry and Maths, but then second year Maths became another animal and I just saw fire all the time and I was like ‘OK let me go back to Physics instead’. The Physics department is very small; there were eight of us in my third-year class so there was a very good and strong support system for us and it was easy to go to the lecturer and say, ‘Hey I didn’t understand this, please help.’ Even fellow classmates we could chat about whatever we were struggling with, like studying for the exam we could go and study at the Wimpy together and just sit and discuss questions so it was a very close community.

Beyond obvious academic talent, Themba has a real breadth of interest and a serious dose of chutzpah that stands him in good stead. So when in second year he starts to find Mathematics really difficult he is able to change to Physics. The key thing, though, is that he did not fail any subjects, and most importantly he made it through first year where there is a suite of subjects that can’t easily be avoided. If you can make it through first year in BSc you most probably have more ‘wriggle room’ to change subjects, as Themba did. However, for students hitting hurdles in BSc first-year subjects, the only option is to repeat subjects, and often this means the repeat of a year.

Another student who was ultimately very successful academically, noted the challenges of first year:

For me there is always this perception when you are in 4th year, there is this idea that first year was really easy, which is maybe in retrospect true, but I found first year really difficult. The change in environment for me, I had never been to [this city]. I had done Computer Science and I had a fair idea of what it was, but there was still a lot to actually learn because the way that I’d done Computer Science was not nearly as practical as it turned out to be when I got to [the university]. And I had to do Maths, Physics, Applied Mathematics, so it was a difficult routine; those were not easy days. I still think first year was really difficult. I didn’t fail or anything, but it was difficult. I had good marks and all that, but I am just highlighting the fact that it was still difficult. [51]
Mathematics was most frequently mentioned as a very difficult course in first year:

> *Because I’m Afrikaans it was also quite hard to get into Maths and everything in English, so I actually failed Maths in first year.* [49]

> *I don’t know how I made it through Maths in high school and then did half-year Maths, half-year Stats … Maths is not my thing. I hated [it]. That half course was quite stressful. Just, I never felt confident in my Maths. And Stats was even worse.* [5]

One major issue that emerged was the disjuncture between school and university. Those who experienced matric as requiring very little effort were often surprised by the demands of first-year study:

> *It was quite different, everything was different and the level was much higher and not as easy as matric was. The Maths was not as easy because then you get to do calculus and difficult sections that you’d never done in high school, so it was quite hard.* [44]

This participant also found Geology a better option than Biology:

> *Initially I wanted to do Chemistry and Biochemistry, but then the Biology part of it was not really fun for me and I actually didn’t make it through my first year Biology so I had to repeat a year. So, when I was repeating my Biology I took Geology as a back-up course and then I realised that I was more good with the Geology part than I was with Biology so I decided to pursue Geology rather than Biology even though I wanted to do Biology but I decided not to force it. So, I made it through.* [44]

Another participant found challenges in Geology:

> *What you do in first year with Geology is that you do Earth Sciences, not Geology itself. So, in the first semester we did Earth Sciences, which is a combination of Geography and Geology and a bit of science. So, I didn’t do Geography in high school and did computers instead. So, when I got [to university] there was a lot of Geography in the Geology part, which then gave me some trouble so I didn’t do well in the Earth Sciences course and it is the foundation to Geology. So, I had to repeat that.* [40]

What the latter quote reminds us is that when BSc students talk about experiencing academic difficulty, this often meant failing a course and needing to repeat it. The BA students in this
study were less likely to actually fail subjects – the choice to change direction was more often about not continuing in a direction which they hadn’t enjoyed, or in which they hadn’t achieved well. Martin’s radical rethink came when he started to feel at risk of failing, but he didn’t actually fail the subject he had worried about. We do have instances, of course, of failure amongst the BA students in this study but none that led to academic exclusion.

In the BSc, the possibility of actually failing a course is much stronger. And this can mean repeating a year and also carries a risk of academic exclusion. Some students are sanguine about the experience, as is this student doing BSc in Information Systems:

*I took the scenic route, yes. It was very scenic. Yes, I didn’t really focus too much on studies. Subjects like Maths I didn’t enjoy so I didn’t work at it.* [39]

For most other students, the experience of having to repeat a year was very difficult. Failure in key first-year courses such as Mathematics and Biology meant that a student could be barred from any other second-year courses until they had successfully repeated these ‘killer courses’. The curriculum structure of the BSc and the specifications of prerequisite and corequisite courses are, of course, related at least in part to the hierarchical knowledge structures in the sciences. It is not an arbitrary imposition. But what we have seen here is how the curriculum structure affords very different student experiences. The BA structure makes more likely the possibility of exploring different areas till you find your strengths. The BSc structure makes more likely the need to repeat courses, sometimes to repeat a year, and then potentially to get academically excluded from the programme.

The key difference between the BSc and BA as evident through this study is that with the former course of study you have to be much more sure from the beginning that the choice you have made really does match your interests and your strengths. Even when this is clear – most notably in two interviewees who knew from high school that they wanted to become software developers – there are still a range of other subjects – Physics is often mentioned! – that you need to complete successfully as part of the degree requirements. A related complication is that performing well in these subjects in a South African school does not guarantee that you will manage easily at university, a difficulty pointed out in the previous chapter by Tebogo, and well documented across the academic development literature on ‘underpreparedness’ and the transition to higher education.54 It is not that the subjects in the BA are not academically challenging, but the more flexible degree requirements means that there is a lot more scope for trial and error (without necessarily adding an extra year of study or facing exclusion).

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The financial and other consequences of extended periods in the undergraduate programme

The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS)\(^5\) provides financial support to students from the poorest families. Given the poor quality of schooling experienced by most families in this bracket and the lack of social resources supporting education, it is not surprising that many NSFAS students struggle academically at university. NSFAS loans only need to be repaid when a graduate is earning at a particular level, but because NSFAS doesn’t always cover the full costs of studying, these students often join the many ‘missing middle’ students who find themselves in debt to the institution. Universities have used the withholding of transcripts or degree certificates to try to recover bad debt, but the individual consequences of this policy are stark.

There were a number of participants in the study for whom one extra year in the undergraduate degree became necessary due to academic difficulties, and while this always had financial consequences, for most of these students the difficulty was managed in the long run. However, it was clear from Tebogo’s story in Chapter 1, that five years of studying without completing a degree (plus an interim ‘gap year’) had huge consequences for this NSFAS-funded student. He now needs to find the funds for his additional courses to complete his degree, and he has to think about the huge debt he has on his study loan.

Hannah is living with not dissimilar consequences. She grew up in a township and in her final school year she had planned to go and work, as she was acutely aware of the financial distress in her family with only one sibling in a large family bringing in any income. However, her school principal advised her that, as the top student in the school, she should consider going to university, and the principal assisted her in getting a place at late notice. She enrolled for a BA with Law and initially she really struggled with the English medium instruction; her schooling had mostly been delivered in isiXhosa. But she passed sufficient courses to be readmitted.

In second year she decided to branch out a bit and have a social life; she started ‘partying’ and buying clothes to keep up with her more affluent friends. Her marks declined. In third year she felt really depressed, still carrying courses from the earlier years. She knew she was facing exclusion so in September of that year she decided to go home.

With the support of a psychologist’s letter she was readmitted early in the next year, this time to a Social Science degree, but failed most of her third-year courses, which she had to repeat in the following year. Again she failed some of the courses, so she landed up a sixth year in the programme. This, she realised, was her last chance and so she decided to ditch her social life, focused on her books and managed to pass the outstanding subjects. She was so pleased to

\(^5\) This scheme provides student funding on the basis of family income (up to a maximum of R160 000 p.a. in 2016, www.nsfas.org.za). Given that the costs of attending university are in the region of R100 000 per annum, it is clear that this threshold is far too low and excludes the ‘missing middle’, children of families earning below R600 000 p.a. These are the children of most social workers, policemen, teachers and some public servants.
be finished and moved to a large city to be with her sister and look for a job. Then she got a huge shock in the post:

*Just before the end of the year my mother posted me a letter from the university stating that ‘OK you have completed your degree but then your results are withheld due to outstanding fees’. I owe them around R78 000 so now I am paying them R500 per month ….*

*I didn’t think that was coming at all. … My mom told me that the letter arrived and I was so excited and thinking that ‘Finally, thank you God’. When she posted it to me I looked at it and I thought where are my results? I emailed them immediately and they didn’t reply.*

She had no idea that this would be the consequence; although she had been on NSFAS, this hadn’t covered all her costs especially in the final additional year where she accumulated most of this debt, which is going to take a long time to pay back at this rate. She thought that if she agreed to pay, the university would release her results. She went to employment agencies but found out that, without the documentation, it meant nothing that she had completed her degree.

She has managed to find work as a trainee in the police service for which she earns R3000 before deductions. She pays her sister for rent, sends some money to her mother, and then R100 per month to NSFAS56 and R500 to the university. She has tried to get a response from the university on what else she must do in order to get her transcript (she would like to be able to apply for a graduate-level job in the police service) but she hasn’t had any reply.

Hannah’s narrative illustrates starkly the financial bind that a student from a poor family can find themselves in, if they do not progress academically in regular time. A weak transcript or no transcript makes it less likely to get high-paying work, and thus distress over financial debt can compound the difficulties.

**Extended curriculum programmes**

Given the kinds of experiences outlined above with regard to failure, repeating courses and potential exclusion, South African universities from the 1980s have developed what have been termed extended degree or foundation programmes.57 With small classes and expert teaching these are expensive to run, and are now supported by central state funding. The typical model

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56 NSFAS repayments are due once the student has employment and earns over R30 000 p.a. (www.nsfas.org.za).

involves additional teaching and support in first year, spreading the undergraduate curriculum over an extra year. There is a substantial literature evaluating the effectiveness of foundation programmes and students’ experiences in them, and the evidence is somewhat mixed.  

Nala, whose narrative was introduced in the previous chapter, had been given a place in an extended degree BSc programme. This is how she described the support in the extended curriculum programme:

> It was really funny, but our hands were held. We had lots of tutors, we had small groups which is very different when you transition to the mainstream first year. And we had yoga classes, like breathing classes, and people telling us if you need anything, this is my number, call me and we can talk. And if your marks were really low, you would have the head of the extended programme sitting down and talking to you, finding out what is going on.

However, despite the support, she wasn’t sure why she was doing Science, her home life was difficult and she was suffering from depression. When she looks back she thinks she should have been studying Business (which she is now doing part-time) but she didn’t realise that at the time.

In this study were a number of other students who had been admitted through the extended curriculum programmes. Many mentioned that initially they had been disappointed to hear that their admission required them to do the extended degree. One student said that the university told her that she was the first person they ever accepted from her school and they didn’t know how learners from that school would cope and thus recommended her to be in the extended curriculum programme:

> But they said if I don’t want to be there I could go and do first year full. So, I was like okay, let me just see how it goes and I don’t regret that decision. [38]

Despite initial misgivings, most of the students in this study felt that being in the extended curriculum programme had been academically valuable. The programme involves a fairly wide suite of courses that you have to take. One student (who had initially been disappointed at the admission to the extended degree) felt that this exposure was really helpful:

> I wanted to do astrophysics when I came here, I was intent on landing on the moon, but then you get here and you realise that astrophysics is actually just physics. But my

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heart was inclined to social issues hence [my ultimate move to] the environmental and geographical sciences. So, I am glad for the two years because it gave me time to understand what things actually are. I can't speak for everyone else but I don't think I was properly prepared [at high school] … so I'm glad for the two years. I got exposed to more courses in the faculty which helped me choose my majors better, I think. [49]

Another student felt that the broad exposure wasn't helpful to her since she knew she wanted to focus on mathematics:

I think the programme is really great for students that are going into the scientific fields because the subjects are Biology … and then there is Chemistry and Physics and Computer Sciences. … For me personally it was a completely useless thing to me considering that only one of the four subjects that I had to do was something that I would actually continue doing. So, I did Maths, Computer Science, Physics and Chemistry. Maths was the only subject that would apply to my personal interest; so it was a little bit difficult for me to have to do Physics again first of all! [2]

Another student said that in the extended curriculum programme 'they sort of mother you'. She did note that being on this programme involved extra work:

I felt we did a lot more work because [the mainstream students] will have to attend one session and we will have to attend two sessions because we're getting that extra help. So, you have less time to yourself and more time [is spent] on the books. And yet you can finish in four years and they can finish in three years. [48]

This chapter began with reference to the macro data on student throughput in undergraduate degrees in South Africa. Only a quarter of students finish the bachelor's degree in the regulation three years, and by five years only a further quarter have graduated. In this chapter we took a close-up look at students' trajectories through the degree, to see what happens – specifically what goes wrong. Every student starts a degree with an expectation that they will graduate three years later but this is mostly not the case.

One key issue highlighted here has been the impact of degree structure – specifically the rules around what subjects can be taken and in what combination – on students' ability to progress through the degree. In the BA degree it is evident that there is more flexibility around subject combinations, while in the BSc there are more required subjects especially in the first year. Students also generally struggle more with the transition from school to university in terms of the level of what is required in order to pass a course in the Sciences.

From students' narratives it was seen that most students have a very limited sense of their strengths and interests when they start university, and that some of the trial and error in subject
choice might be an important part of finding their individual passions. The BA degree structure offers more scope in this regard, and it was noted that students appreciated the one institution in this study where there was reasonable flexibility to move between BA and BSc courses and programmes.

In South Africa, concern about students’ success in undergraduate degrees is not a new matter, and ever since the 1980s there have been curricular and pedagogical reforms to attempt to improve this situation. Most notable in impact have been the extended curriculum programmes which are now established in most universities and are funded by the state. Young people in this study who had come through the extended curriculum programme were mostly positive about the support they had received in making the adjustment to university studies through these programmes. The proposal by the Council on Higher Education\(^\text{59}\) to increase the length of the basic undergraduate degree by one year in effect builds on this work and proposes that this structure should be the default to university entry. However, this proposal, although termed ‘flexible’, does not necessarily propose the kind of flexibility that this study shows is valued by students – the possibility of trying out subjects and finding your intellectual strengths.

The issue of choice of which degree programme to register for is central, and in the following chapter we therefore turn to look closely at how students made these choices, and the role of other people in the family and in the community that had an influence on these deliberations.