CHAPTER 3

DELIBERATIONS AND DECISIONS ON STUDY PLANS

Narratives already introduced:

Themba BSc Chemistry – doing PhD overseas
Tebogo BSc Actuarial Science – switch to BCom – still not completed, unemployed
Nala BSc extended programme – switch to BA – still not completed, working in start-up company
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

Narratives to be introduced in this chapter:

Johnson BSc(Hons) Geology – MSc completed – working in environmental consulting company
Jo BSc(Hons) Microbiology – doing MSc

The previous chapter looked at students’ progression through the university curriculum. We began with this aspect because it is at the heart of the book’s focus, and because experiences of academic study were central in the conversations we had with the 73 study participants. These conversations revealed that, perhaps contrary to the assumptions underpinning the curriculum structure, many students do not have a good idea at the start of university of what their particular strengths and interests are, and many times this needs to be discovered through trial and error. In some curriculum structures this could be accomplished without losing time or incurring too many extra costs, but in other curriculum structures having made the ‘wrong’ choice costs heavily, sometimes leading to academic exclusion.

Choices made initially about what to study and where to study were found to have significant long-term ramifications. And so, in this chapter, we move backwards in the chronology to look more closely at the choices made, and at the deliberations which our participants engaged in before going to university. We look at their decisions around going to university and what to study, and note here the significant role often played by parents and the
broader community. We have already noted that although the interview only asked the individual student about their own choices, almost all students mentioned their parents in the course of responding to the interview prompts, most especially on the topic of where and what they decided to study.

The interesting starting point is to note that for nearly all young people we interviewed, the decision was not about whether to go to university or not to go to university. They were all performing academically at school at a level which made university admission possible. For nearly all of them, a combination of individual and family aspirations meant that they would make this happen. The only decisions would be around which university and which programme of study.

The exceptions to this general pattern were very few and should be noted. There is Hannah, already introduced in the previous chapter, who had wanted to leave school and start working to support her mother and siblings. It was her school principal who felt she should rather go to university and took active steps to get her a place even with a late admission. The only other person who seriously thought of working after school was Nala, who also thought this might be the best way to support her mother.

What this emerging analysis therefore suggests is that being able to go to university depends on having a family structure that can entertain this long-term project. Even if not financially well off, the family is able to release the young person from the immediate need of focusing all efforts on earning money to cover the family’s needs. We have noted how Themba’s grandmothers exerted an influence on the family’s aspirations for him and how Martin’s family wanted him to do a professional degree but then also supported him when they saw that he would succeed whatever route he took through higher education. We also noted in some narratives, parents who had made deliberate school choices – maybe shifting their children from one school to another, with a view towards supporting university study:

> And then, for my grade 11 and 12 year my parents decided that I should move to [another school] because they felt that it would prepare me better to get into a good university. … so that was also a huge thing for me, after having been at [my old school] forever and it’s a very small school with a different environment. [17]

The majority of young people in this study had some kind of structure that could foster and support their aspirations for higher education and this chapter outlines the range of different forms that this could take, importantly also noting and analysing those instances where family support could not extend to what was needed, for example in our consideration of the absence of any mention of parents in Tebogo’s narrative.

An important aspect of this analysis is that it troubles the generic application of the concept of ‘first generation’ university students in the South African context. Sixteen participants said that at least one parent had attended university, and ten participants explicitly said that neither
parent had been to university.\textsuperscript{60} For the remainder, what we can note is that a substantial proportion of participants had parents who were unlikely to have attended university, given what the participants said about family finances or the nature of their parents’ employment.

In our study we therefore deduce that it was a very small proportion of students who had at least one parent who had completed bachelor’s studies. But there were a great many instances of parents who, despite not having been to university, were excellent resources in providing broad support and encouragement to their children to do so.

The prevalence of students who are formally first generation in South African universities needs to be understood over a period of recent massification\textsuperscript{61} of higher education in South Africa. Some of these ‘first generation’ students were from relatively financially stable families who worked in trades or owned businesses. These parents saw that higher education was increasingly important:

\textit{When I was still in high school my father said I am going to give you the same choice that my father gave me. It is that you either go to university and study whatever you want and I will pay your way as far as I can for as long as you want to study because you need tertiary education. None of my parents have degrees, my mother has a diploma in secretarial work, but my dad had British O-levels and that's it. But they know the importance of getting tertiary education especially in this day and age. So he said, you could do that [go to university] and I will pay your way. I am not forcing you to go though. If you don't want to go that's fine, but next year, you are then on your own payroll. You want to stay at home, fine, pay rent and contribute towards food, electricity, water, Internet and all that … So, I said, ‘OK fine, I will go to university.’} \textsuperscript{[46]}

But many of the students were from families that had really struggled, and wanted their children to have a better life than they had:

\textit{My dad, he keeps on telling us that because he was the first-born he couldn't continue further with his studies because at that time there was pressure for him to get a job and help out with his other siblings … he keeps telling us that we don't have that pressure and as much as things are tough at home, we don't have that pressure of providing for other siblings … My parents told me in grade 11 that I am applying to [three top universities] and there was no option. I tried to ask them about [going to a university of technology] and they refused.} \textsuperscript{[31]}

\textsuperscript{60} Interviewees were not directly questioned on specific issues such as parental education levels in the conversational format used in the interviews in this study. See Appendix A for more detail on the research design.

\textsuperscript{61} As noted earlier, massification or mass higher education is a term introduced by Trow (1973), and refers to the stage where the participation in higher education moves beyond 15% of the youth cohort.
It was clear from the interview data, that even where there are no financial resources, what seems to matter is a family that has strong aspirations for their children to go to university, and is able to back this up with good advice and information around opportunities and choices. Older siblings or extended family who have attended university also emerged as a strong resource. As the chapter unfolds it will become clear how the financial resources actually seem to matter less than the access to knowledge, information and advice. To open up this topic further we consider the narrative of Johnson, which shows how a family with few options and few financial resources was able to mobilise other resources in the family network towards their child’s future.

As a young child, Johnson came to South Africa with his family as refugees from a war-torn country to the north. Growing up he had wanted to be a lawyer but his parents didn’t approve as they felt that this would clash with their religious beliefs. He did well at school and had started to think of science as an option. In his final year at school there were xenophobic attacks against foreigners and this affected him and his family; he ended up getting final matric results far lower than he had anticipated.

Johnson had applied for engineering at a prestigious university and had been provisionally accepted but this was declined based on his final results. He then had to scramble around at the last minute, having not applied to other institutions. He had an uncle doing his PhD in Science who assisted him to put in a late application at another institution. The uncle and his father convinced him to do Geology, thinking this might lead to career options in their home country which is rich in minerals. Johnson said:

*I’ve never been a lover of rocks and I am still not. I was like ‘OK, just bring it on’.*

He was admitted to the extended programme in Science and he decided to work really hard ‘to prove a point’ – that his matric results were not the real indication of his potential. At the end of that year he applied to a university of technology to do engineering and, when he was accepted, he turned that down, to further prove this point. His lecturers quickly spotted his talent and even in his first year he took on tutoring work. Not being a South African he was not able to access financial support and so he worked part-time throughout his studies to pay for them. He had already been working as a car guard when he was at school so this was not new. Now he took on waiting work: after a full day at university he would sleep for one hour then go to an evening shift. He said:

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So my shifts would end at 11 … [I would] clean up till midnight, take a walk, which was 45 minutes. If I am tired I'd take longer, maybe an hour and 15 minutes, get home and study for three hours till 3 am every day and then sleep from 3 until 6 and if I am too tired I'd wake up at 6:30 and then the process would start again.

He passed all his courses well. Mostly they were prescribed within his programme but he did get to choose which Physics course he would do and he chose Environmental Physics.

Neither of Johnson’s parents have post-school education but it is something that they and their community value and all of Johnson’s siblings have gone to university like he has done. Being a refugee has been an extraordinarily difficult life – he says

the toughest status to be in in a country which I never wish for anyone to ever go back there because you are treated less than a human being basically.

This very hard experience seems to have fostered enormous resilience and agency in this young man.64 His success in higher education certainly depended on his own capacity and persistence, but in the background, was a family with strong aspirations and clear advice. A particular challenge that Johnson faced was being first born and thus having to strike out this new course on his own. Many other students from families like this had older siblings who had already studied and thus were important role models in the family.

Where to study – staying at home or going away from home

Most young people in this study had a narrative about deliberating over different institutions that they could attend; there were very few who only considered one institution. Many of these deliberations were about the geographical location of the institution and the key issue on whether it was possible or desirable to study away from home. It will be recalled that for Themba his family wanted him to stay close by as they felt protective about him. Ultimately though he got a scholarship which required him to go to an institution which was away from home. Tebogo came from a town which had no university nearby and ended up going to a university very far away from home. Nala had been accepted for studies in medicine at a university some distance from her home and her mother wasn’t keen on this, so she turned down that place and settled for doing a BSc at the university in her home town, staying at home with her mother. Martin had done part of his schooling overseas, but then felt he needed to come back to South Africa for university and opted like Nala and Johnson to go to a university in his home town (and therefore to be able to live at home while studying).

64 There is a substantial literature which recognises the significance of resilience for students succeeding in higher education. For example: Greene, R. R. et al. (2003). Resilience theory: Theoretical and professional conceptualizations, *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 8: 75–91.
Of course, the decision to study from your home town or to go away is one with significant financial consequences. For many students it is simply not possible to find funding for food and accommodation outside of the home. If there is a university in your home town, then for many students this is the only option worthy of serious consideration. Two of the universities in this study were in a large city and thus many of the students stayed at home and attended one of these institutions. This student explains the logic of his choice and also recognises the advantages of staying close to family support:

Many of my friends from high school ended up going to [a university some distance from my home], so that may have been another option for me. I did apply and get in at [that institution] but I chose [the institution I attended] partly because of travelling time and partly because the fees were so much cheaper. … Staying at home, I think my life is a lot easier than the lives of many other students who are facing a lot of different challenges. [53]

For students whose parents were university employees, whether academic or support staff, the option of the fee rebate often meant that this institution was a clear choice. Some of them didn’t even discuss this much as it was just assumed:

So, I went to [this institution] because my mom [works] there. So, I didn’t really think of going anywhere else. [41]

Of course, having a parent who was a university employee entailed support beyond merely the financial:

I don’t think I would have got this far if my mother hadn’t been working at the university. She is also only support staff but she was still privy to the environment, and through that both our parents pushed us to go to university. [22]

On the other hand, for quite a number of students there was a strong push to get away from home if at all possible:

Because I was brought up, given everything on a silver platter, spoilt rotten, you know. Like just, you know, I know my parents were trying to do good but at the same time I was like, I need to get out of this situation. I want to be – I don’t want to be able to come home and have my mom do my washing for me. If I don’t have money then I don’t eat, you know. That’s what I wanted to experience, so that I could grow as well as a person. [9]

65 Most South African universities offer a total or partial rebate on fees for the children of their employees.
I was basically looking at universities that were far from home, so [these three institutions] were my options. Because I am from Limpopo, so I felt that I had done all my schooling there and I needed to get as far away from home as possible. So those were my options. I didn't get into [the one institution] but then I got into [the other two] and I had to make the decision between the two so I [made my choice] after the whole Afrikaans thing that people who discouraged me talked about. [44]

Like this student, many students in this study could recount a range of institutions that they had considered across the country. Although this was certainly possible if the family was well-off, these deliberations were not limited to students from this kind of background. Many of the narratives of those who landed up at the small-town institution in this study included such deliberations, often focusing on the choice of being either in a city or in a small town:

I was looking at a few different places ... At the time, I really disliked the idea of a city, which is strange to me now because now I want to be in one. [6]

Okay, so I thought I wanted to go to Pretoria, that's the idea I had in mind, that I wanted to go to a big city because I am from the Eastern Cape and I didn't want to be in the Eastern Cape anymore. I never really applied to Pretoria even though I had told myself that's were I was going. I had two application forms and I applied to [two universities]. [The first institution] responded and said they had accepted me for Computer Science and that I needed to go write some test and I was like 'I didn't choose any of that'. So [the second institution] replied and you know everything was just quick. I am not sure about the big [universities], but [this university] just replied and everything was just prompt; you would call and someone actually answers the phone on the other side. Sometimes you call these places and the phone just rings and rings. [38]

The latter quote illustrates the extent to which these kinds of deliberations are not purely rational. This student said he wanted to go to Pretoria but he never actually applied to go there. He had wanted to go to a university in a city but he ended up going to a small town because they were quick in responding to his queries. The issue of the institution seeming responsive and personable should not be discounted as part of the larger considerations that impact on the students' choice.

For some students, their parents would weigh in with their perspectives on what constituted quality institutions:

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66 One of this student’s potential universities was an Afrikaans-medium institution. Most universities in South Africa are English-medium, though a few are Afrikaans-medium. These latter are rapidly shifting to dual-medium institutions. There are no universities in South Africa where the medium of instruction is in any of the other official languages of the country.
I was not going to stay at home after matric because [the universities in my home city] are not really your desirable places to be, at least for me, and in terms of other institutions, [this university] seemed like the ideal option, so said my parents. [18]

As noted above, the narratives about choosing the small-town institution in this study tended to be more elaborate since for nearly all of these students it would involve moving away from home, and for many of them moving from a city to a small town. Students at this institution tended to have a range of reasons in support of their choice; here is a particularly well-articulated perspective:

Firstly, because they allowed me to mould my own BSc. Secondly, because it's the only university in South Africa that allows you to do a Bachelor of Science with Law. Thirdly, because I got my first year free. Fourth, because my dad lives in [the same province] and fifth, to get away from Cape Town and sixth because none of my friends were going to [this institution] and I needed a change. [37]

Here is a further exemplar of the narrative in support of this institution:

It was smaller, which I did like. I had a lot of family friends there as well, like different connections. So, I knew people that were there and I had, as you can say, a support system already in place, if I ever needed it. [13]

This quote shows also the influence of family connections, of parents or siblings who had attended that institution. Here is a particularly elaborated version of this perspective, in response to the question on why she chose the university she attended:

And I am still not really sure why; I think part of it was that my dad went there and he was very happy. My mom's very close friend is a lecturer there, and actually then, around the same time, one of my mom's other close friends became a lecturer there. So, I knew people in the staff and also my dad told me stories of [this university], really beautiful and great philosophical discussions. All of his friends came from there. [35]

67 It would be likely that getting the 'first year free' would be as a result of achieving high marks in his school-leaving exams. Many universities offer fee rebates on this basis.
Funding your studies

As already noted, the discussion on where to study had financial implications, and sometimes the financial implications constrained the choices, especially for those students who stayed at home or attended the university where their parents could get a fee rebate.

Johnson managed to fund his own studies through part-time work and this was only possible because that institution charged relatively lower fees. That one of the institutions in this study charged relatively lower fees played into the choices for a few of the other students, who also stayed at home. As a foreigner, Johnson could not access NSFAS. Another foreign student was from a wealthier family, but his choice to study had significant financial impacts on his parents:

> They had to sell things and property, cars to get the money. So obviously that added extra pressure on me because I couldn’t afford to fail, failure was not an option. So, I went through all the years and I took it very seriously and passed it because I had to; there was no option to fail and do it again. I had to do it once and that’s it.

South African students had more opportunities for accessing bursaries and loans and, except for those from wealthy families, it was usually a combination of funding sources that made their studies possible. One institution in this study seemed to offer a particularly wide range of funding opportunities to undergraduates:

> My mom is a part-time teacher and she wasn’t earning that much. So, I got student funding which was amazing. I didn’t realise at that time, so it is through NSFAS, they were amazing. I got like so many bursaries because that’s a student loan, interest free, but I am supposed to pay the loan. I got so many bursaries that in the end I netted R30 000. I made a profit from my student loan, which I then used to pay – well technically it wasn’t my money, but it was money in my bank account – so I used to pay for my [honours]. So, if you do well they just throw bursaries at you and for my final year of study, because it was my last year, they have a thing that if you pass they back pay you for the whole year so you don’t have to pay back your certain fees. So, if you pass, third year is free, so they paid me R30 000 to study in my third year, which was amazing. By the time I was in third year my mom wasn’t actually giving me money so I was really lucky as a student. [35]

Another institution in the study also had scholarship options and students were able to cover fees by combining various sources:

> Okay, my mom paid for some of the fees. I had an uncle who paid some of the fees. I was working part time so I paid some of the fees. And I applied for financial aid
so I got some covered by financial aid, and I got the Humanities scholarship or something and that covered some of the fees for the one or two years or something like that. So, there were a lot of different sources for being able to pay the fees. I was glad because I knew if I took out a loan, it would be a whole other story. [26]

Thus for many students in this study there were options to figure out how to fund their studies, when considered at the outset of studies. It must be noted though that this tended to depend on a family having some degree of financial flexibility. Even if the family was not paying the full costs, often they were making some financial contribution. For students from families who couldn’t do this, the consequences were severe. For example, one student’s mother was a teacher and a single parent; this student was in residence at a university away from home. Initially she was on NSFAS but it seems that this was reconsidered in the light of her mother’s income and thus she needed to pay R16 000 in the middle of her first year.

It was very rough because I remember there was a point where my mom told me that I needed to change and go to another university because she could not afford, she just couldn’t. I have three other siblings at home that had to go to school and she is a single parent. So, she said I had to start looking for another place. And I said ‘No, I am not going to change’, and I just kept applying for bursaries, And, when I went home, I never applied anywhere, and I told myself that I was going back to [this university] even though I didn’t know how. [38]

When she didn’t get a reply from the bursary applications, she started following up proactively and eventually was awarded a bursary and was thus able to continue her studies.

Another student who found herself just above the NSFAS threshold (the group now referred to as the ‘missing middle’) also referred to the difficulty of parents being able to pay university fees off teacher salaries:

Honestly, I can’t remember, but I think they assumed that my parents could afford it even though they couldn’t really. At the time both of my parents had jobs, both are teachers. My mom is a preschool teacher and my dad is a high school teacher and I mean anyone who knows teachers’ salaries know that they don’t earn much. [2]

Having a parent who was a school teacher is a significant resource: ten of the study participants explicitly mentioned that they had a parent who was a teacher and often this was in the context of confirming the educational aspirations that were held for them. All of these ten completed

68 Though the family income threshold for NSFAS funding is adjusted each year, it remains far below the level at which a family could afford the costs of fees, meals, accommodation, transport etc for a single child, never mind for more than one child. The ‘missing middle’ group whose income is, in the words of one #FeesMustFall protester, ‘too rich for NSFAS, too poor for fees’, often do not have the property or other collateral necessary to access a bank loan.
their degrees and some of them, like Themba, were already excelling at very high levels in the university system. Thus it must be of particular concern that, with the current levels of university fees at many institutions, school teachers cannot afford for their children to go to university. It needs to be noted here that in a previous era teaching bursaries were readily available, and also that fees were not so disproportionate to teaching salaries. 69

As noted, one institution in this study had substantially lower fees, and the students at this institution seemed more likely to self-fund their studies. One student whose parents were retired, and not wealthy, having put substantial funds towards another sibling who needed special medical care, said:

_ So, because I was very independent at a young age I felt like I didn’t want them to pay a cent for my studies so I made my own plans. So, they haven’t paid for my studies so I’ve paid for my studies in my own way. [34]_

First she had some bursary money through her father’s firm (this was noted in a few other students from similar working-class backgrounds in the city). When she found that this was insufficient to cover her expenses, she took a bank loan but paid heavily for that:

_ At the bank, they call it a student loan but it is more of a personal loan, they refer to it as a student loan, but it is a personal loan so the interest is hefty. Just this year in January I paid up that account … over a period of 5 years I borrowed R32 000 and over the period I paid over R130 000 back. [34]_

Funding tended to become an especially troubling issue for many more students when they were not progressing academically, as already noted in the previous chapter. Extra unbudgeted years had to be funded by their family, bursaries dried up, and debt started to accumulate. The NSFAS rules are that you do not get paid for subjects you are repeating:

_ At first it was NSFAS [who funded me] but then after not making it in first year it was an issue and my family had to make a plan to pay for my next year. So, first year it was NSFAS, but second year my family had to make a plan, but then NSFAS took me up again in the following year. [44]_

By ‘my family’ this student is referring to her brothers who were working and had to make a plan to support her, since both her parents were already deceased. Another student who lost her bursaries after poor performance in first year couldn’t find other funding and left university at this point, never to return to her studies:

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69 Teacher bursaries which had been available to all race groups during late apartheid and the early democratic era were withdrawn in 1998 because of an ‘oversupply’ and then reintroduced as Funza Lushaka bursaries in 2007. For more details see: Adler, J. and Y. Reed (2002). Challenges of teacher development: An investigation of take-up in South Africa. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
You see, I got a bursary and financial aid for the first year, and then it didn't get extended so I was left with no choice. I didn't have fantastic marks. [1]

As has been so potently demonstrated through the #FMF protests, finding the money to pay student fees is a huge concern for many students. The NSFAS system only supports students from very poor families, and with the limited level of support and likelihood of much weaker school backgrounds, these students often find themselves in a vicious spiral of poor progress, extended years of study and mounting debt. The ‘missing middle’, who constitute most of the students in this study, mostly managed to cobble together finances from a range of sources which for some included part-time work. A key factor was a family structure that could help navigate these challenges, and with some financial flexibility when unexpected costs arose.

Choice of what to study

With Johnson’s narrative we already have a sense of the resources that might be drawn on in making a choice of which programme to follow. Johnson had already realised that he was good at the science subjects at school and had wanted to do engineering. When this didn’t work out, he had to go to a university that didn’t offer engineering, and so he needed to choose a direction in the BSc degree. His uncle and his father suggested that Geology would be a good choice given the potential future opportunities in the mining industry in their home country. Fortunately, this turned out to be a line of study that he excelled in.

There are a number of other students in this study who chose Geology with a view to its career prospects. One student explains explicitly how exposure to mining was part of community life for him:

I come from a rural area in the Eastern Cape and most of … the older men in my village used to go and work in the mines in the Joburg and Rustenburg area … every time they came back they would talk about how life is in the mines and how they used to work with gold and platinum and different kinds of minerals and ore. So, when I grew up I was interested in going to see what a mine looked like and maybe work there, but I knew that I do not want to dig gold and do that. Yes, you didn't want to do what they did, which was quite physical. … So, when I grew up and in high school I started checking different careers that have to do with the natural sciences. I also had a friend who was studying at Wits and when I was completing my grade 12 she was doing her first year in Geology and she told me how it was and that’s when I got even more interested in Geology when it came to natural sciences and that’s how I applied to it. [40]
Often it was the parents who had views about appropriate lines of study based on notions of future job opportunities. This was problematic when it didn't link to the young person’s interests:

\[\text{My parents made me apply for university in Grade 11, which was silly because what do you know in grade 11? So I applied to do BSc in Stats and BA as second option, but then after school ... I went away for the year and I was like, 'I don't want to do Maths, I want to do a BA.'} [30]\]

This distinction between having parents with strong views about subject choice or those who are quite laissez faire about what their children study seems related to the family’s financial situation, on whether it can afford for a young person to follow a line of study that might not necessarily lead to a well-paying job. The key issue to be noted either way is that these are students who had discussions with their parents about their choice of study. Given that the study focused on students who started with a BA or a BSc, it is not surprising that mostly these were parents who were open to a formative, rather than a professional, degree. Where they were prescriptive, it tended to be about having some subjects, if not a whole programme, that would lead directly to employment, the idea of having something to ‘fall back on’:

\[\text{I wanted to act, I knew I wanted to do Drama, the whole time, but my dad was concerned if I did only Drama, so he was keen for me to do something else as well, so I applied for Law at Wits and I was accepted for that.} [7]\]

\[\text{Actually, my dad was pretty much like, 'You can study Fine Arts and I'll pay for your degree, but then you also need to have something to fall back on.'} [12]\]

It was noted earlier that Johnson’s uncle was able to advise him about studies in science. There are other narratives that also illustrate the potential role of the extended family; this young person had an uncle who nurtured and supported her desire to do journalism:

\[\text{My uncle is an ecologist so we always went to game reserves with him ... so my love for taking photos and writing and looking at stuff was always nurtured from that ... and then, what, in grade ten ... we had that Life Orientation project where it's, like, 'What do you want to do with your life?'; I'm, like, 'My word, I don't know what I want to do with my life, I don't know', and then we did those aptitude tests and all that jazz and then it came up that I should do journalism. And I was, like, okay actually this would be nice as I love taking photos, I love writing so why not put two and two together ... my mom was a bit apprehensive about me being a journalist because our family also is just lawyers and that whole typical doctor thing.} [19]\]
On the one hand it is a wonderful resource to have parents who have the finance and the attitude to let you explore and ‘find yourself’. On the other hand, though, one still needs to make subject choices and, as shown in the previous chapter, many students struggled with this. One young person expressed it as follows:

*They always said I could study whatever I wanted for however long I wanted. I almost wanted them to say I must do a law degree or something. I wanted some direction or instruction, but they left it very much up to me to decide. I have friends who were instructed on what to do and it’s awful, but I almost wanted them to steer me in some direction. My mom has always said she wanted to study something in the Humanities so maybe she was living a little vicariously through me. My dad studied Engineering and is in this job he really doesn’t like, so he said you can study whatever you want but I wouldn’t recommend Engineering. Which was fine because I was never inclined to go towards that.* [47]

Thus in some cases it might have been that parents didn’t want to overly direct their children. However, it should be noted that in many cases, the lack of directive advice from parents seemed to be because the parents did not know much about university subjects:

*Both my parents and myself were ignorant to the various options and disciplines that they offer.* [34]

The role that parents and family played in advising students as to programme of study varied considerably. For many parents, the university and its offerings were foreign territory and they were unwilling or unable to offer guidance. For others, the guidance was towards offerings that seemed to have future employment possibilities. For yet others, usually with stronger financial resources, there was an encouragement to their children to simply follow their interests and passions.

**Finding your interests and passions at school**

The curriculum structure in South African universities presumes that the young person leaving school already has an idea of their interests and strengths. For such young people, having this experience was a tremendous resource in getting going at university. What was disturbing were the many who had not had the kind of teaching and mentoring experience at school to be able to learn this about themselves, or indeed the kind of academic challenge which could help them differentiate their real strengths apart from being generally academically successful at school.
One participant illustrates how it is to be in a family where it is expected that young people will find what interests them; each child ultimately gets described around their interests. Both her parents were scientists and she is doing science but she says:

“My brother came out all sort of film and media, he’s super artsy. At school, it was the [science] subjects that interested me the most. History and English, I could take or leave, but Maths and Physics and Biology I loved.” [50]

Here is another student who started to find his interests at school:

“On deciding on Geology, I just used to love Geography; I enjoyed it a lot in high school and I said this is what I want to do. I used to enjoy Geography and Life Sciences but for some reason Geology was just more interesting. And even in Geography I liked more the climatology and the geomorphology side of things so that’s how I ended up with Geology.” [38]

One student doing Classics noted that it was harder to make a subject choice when you come from a school that didn’t give you sufficient exposure academically:

“It’s different when you come from a disadvantaged background, and I suppose it is also my fault for choosing those courses or those majors, Classics and English. People coming from very good schools have a lot more knowledge of ancient history, for example, for Classics, or philosophy and classical literature. For someone not knowing those things, it’s difficult to adapt to the environment. It’s amazing that I managed to finish in three years. … I love English language. Out of all my teachers at high school I think I only had two who properly engaged with the content, my Maths teacher and my English teacher. So, I was either going into Maths or into English, and I love English language, and Classics is sort of an extension of English because it speaks to the roots of the language and our culture.” [22]

These narratives about enjoying particular subjects at school were, however, distressingly rare in this study.

Some students – again very few – spoke about general advice in the school towards university study. This quote shows how the general drive for university in this school was also linked to an expectation that a young person would find their own particular interests:

“I think I was driven by my school. They had this idea that by matric everyone should have some idea of where they would like to go. … I also had this passion for writing in English at school so I thought Journalism would be a good idea.” [47]
Another student, who started with a BSc but then changed institutions to a University of Technology (UoT),\textsuperscript{70} felt that the emphasis on traditional universities was potentially problematic, in that students were not always able to fully explore their interests:

\begin{quote}
So, I came from a Model C\textsuperscript{71} school and I think when you come out of a school like that the expectation is that you are going to go into a traditional university. There is no space for the thinking that you are going to a UoT. When I finished school with the new curriculum, it said that I had a degree pass,\textsuperscript{72} but what it doesn't take into account is your actual practical skill and what kind of student you are, whether you are a theoretical or a practical student. It does not take account of where you fit it. I have done very well at [the UoT I attended] and got Dean's scholarships and stuff like that. I finished top of my class for my diploma. [3]
\end{quote}

Another issue noted across the narratives, but not always explicitly commented on, was the status accorded to STEM careers:

\begin{quote}
I came from a school where it was only, like okay, I'm doing Maths, Chem, and Physics – that's the streamline I go to. [52]
\end{quote}

This student completed her BSc and now works in career advising; in particular she feels there is insufficient exposure to Humanities-type subjects:

\begin{quote}
That's also my reason for the Careers Service because a lot of the time the learners aren't exposed to all the options that are available and don't really know how to go about researching. [52]
\end{quote}

It is clear across this study that students do not typically get the kind of experiences that set them up for good decisions regarding subject choice at university, even those from relatively functional South African schools. These include not only formal career guidance but also learners' understandings of what different subjects are available and their interests and abilities in these.

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{70} Under apartheid, the higher education sector was divided into two types: universities and technikons. After apartheid, a series of mergers saw the restructuring of the sector resulting in the current 26 public higher education institutions made of three types: traditional universities which primarily offer formative and professional degrees and postgraduate qualifications, universities of technology which primarily offer vocationally oriented qualifications, and comprehensive universities which offer a combination.
\end{flushleft}

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\textsuperscript{71} 'Model C' is a term commonly used to refer to public schools designated under apartheid for whites only, even though the term is no longer in official use.
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\textsuperscript{72} The school-leaving certificate, commonly known as 'matric', indicates whether the individual has achieved a 'Bachelor's Degree Pass', a 'Diploma Pass', or a 'Higher Certificate pass', relating to whether they have achieved the minimum requirements for entrance into each of these further qualifications.
\end{flushleft}
3. DELIBERATIONS AND DECISIONS ON STUDY PLANS

**Academic advising at the university**

Just one year into studies most students have a much clearer idea of what they are interested in and good at, but this point is often too late for this realisation as academic exclusion might have now become inevitable or the financial costs of changing focus might be prohibitive. One participant questioned whether there might be another way of going through this necessary learning:

> End of first year I was more informed and knew what I wanted to do … Isn’t there a better way than taking a full year? … because when you go straight into first year, you find the workload overwhelming and most of the time you don’t understand what is going on, so people fail and dropout. [48]

Another participant was ignorant at first about what a BA entailed, but describes finding her interests:

> I didn’t even know what a BA was; who knows what a BA is before you arrive there? … I did English and History at first year because I thought I might want to be a teacher … I kind of knew that I wouldn’t do a job that has a description; I can’t do numbers so that’s BComm out, I can’t do science so that’s out. So, I applied for journalism and politics; they bought me in the first lecture until the end. I think I am interested in people; I am interested in social change. [11]

In one institution in this study, students can attend lectures across a range of subjects to get a feel for them during orientation week, as was mentioned previously. Some students found this very helpful, although one participant noted though that ‘at O-week they just advertise everything to you’. He came to feel that a gap year after school might have helped

> … so that one can discover themselves and make informed decisions in going to varsity because there is ‘doing subjects’ and there is ‘being practical’ … So yeah, I think university is good but it is about being practical about the working world and, yeah, that’s how I feel. I feel that one needs to be well informed because university, sometimes, it is not a place where people can really thrive and grow and find your true potential and self-actualise. [18]

Another student found the consultations during this orientation week helpful:

> I saw something called Bachelor of Social Science and I thought, ‘OK, let me do that.’ And then I got to [the university] and I changed my mind completely; it just
happened by chance that I went to consult with someone at Humanities in O-week.\textsuperscript{73} They have these consultants that you can speak to about your life and career choices and where you want to go etc. So, I went to one of those consultations. I’ve always been very, even in high school, politics and gender have always been something that I am really passionate about. So, I was like, politics is a natural choice. So … there was absolutely no logical reason why I changed it to a BA, but I felt strongly about changing it. [8]

In some other university contexts, most notably in the USA, academic advising is a substantial operation within the university.\textsuperscript{74} In South African universities it is mostly ad hoc, and usually undertaken in the context when a student has failed courses and is facing exclusion. The realities about the limitations and possibilities of academic advising are well illustrated in the narrative of Jo, which we introduce now.

Jo had been a strong academic performer in school but coming to university, she said, ‘This place just knocked me down to my knees.’ She said she only understood the first 20 minutes of every lecture but she worked hard. At the end of the year she got two ‘fat letters’ from the university saying she had been excluded. She phoned the administration to try and find out where she had gone wrong and got an unsympathetic response simply saying there was nothing that could be done to change this situation. At this point she remembered a female academic who had signed her registration form and seemed approachable and so Jo asked to speak to her. This academic made time for her to come in and on perusing her transcript found out that there had been an administrative mistake; she should not have been excluded. This academic’s intervention set off an important academic connection – Jo later did honours’ and masters work under her supervision in Molecular and Cell Biology. The research subject really interested her, but it seems that the personal connection also played an important role.

It was not easy, however, to achieve her goal to get to postgraduate studies in Molecular and Cell Biology: because she had failed key first-year subjects she couldn’t proceed into the necessary second-year subjects for the major in this discipline. By following a detour via Botany (which she didn’t enjoy that much) and an extra year in the programme, Jo managed to achieve her dream. Reflecting on her undergraduate experience she said:

\textit{As an undergrad I struggled a lot academically. My transcript is just horrific. I think in my final year … I gained a bit more confidence. I think a light bulb just went on. I sort of understood the material easier, it wasn’t that difficult.}

\textsuperscript{73} O-week is shorthand for Orientation Week, the week of activities that most universities offer first-year students before lectures commence.

\textsuperscript{74} In most US universities there are structures, staffed by professionals who are not lecturers, that offer academic advising to students. First-year students are typically required to see these advisors at particular intervals. While it must be acknowledged that the US system cannot be readily duplicated in South Africa, the need for such advising in South Africa is potentially greater – as shown in this study, many students who are first generation to university have very limited knowledge about subjects and degree choices.
Jo explained how she had been able to change her approach to studying:

*I felt more confident studying with other people. I used to be a loner when it came to studying. I didn’t want to pull people down, that sort of doesn’t help because if you don’t understand anything, you’re stuck in your own mind. … [In third year] I had a good support system. Two of my friends were very competitive and that helped. We sat together, studied together.*

Jo also had a strong family support structure. Her mother had raised her as a single parent and had also fostered 10 other children while working fulltime in a job with night shifts. During Jo’s second year, her mother was diagnosed with cancer and had to have chemotherapy while also caring for a foster child with cerebral palsy. This was a very difficult time but also cemented the tight family bonds. Jo’s aunt’s husband had always been something of a father figure to her and gives her lifts every day to university. Even as a masters student she phones her uncle every morning for a lift, and picks up her lunch on the way out:

*My mom is amazing. My lunch is packed every day, three lunch bowls, she opens the door … I basically just get up, have a shower, get dressed, and on my way out I can grab my lunchbox, the door will be open …*

Once in university, it can be seen again that access to advice and information to support choices is limited. Orientation events are once off and at a stage when students are not always ready to take in such information. Academic advising is mostly done on a fairly ad hoc basis by academics, and in the case of the smaller university, by the deans of the faculties. Students’ experiences depend a lot on the dispositions of the person they happen to encounter. Thus for most students, navigating the curriculum is an enormous challenge, made off partial information, and often leading to poor choices, with significant emotional, social and financial consequences.

**What happens when things don’t work out**

The chapter so far has considered the important set of deliberations that a young person needs to make around the choice of institution and programme of study. It was shown that parents and extended families often play an important role in these deliberations, and to a lesser degree, advice from schoolteachers.

Sometimes a student didn’t get accepted for their first choice of study; this would require further deliberation and sometimes just making peace with settling for something that wasn’t the first choice. Johnson didn’t get into engineering and his family supported him in getting a last-minute place in a science programme at another university. Not surprisingly there were a
number of students in our study who didn’t get into the highly competitive medicine programme. One student who managed to change to the MBChB after one year of BSc said:

*It was really bad because I kind of worked really hard to meet what they look for. They look for a well-rounded individual so I was musical, academically I was strong, I did extra-curriculars like sports, I tried to do as much community service as possible. I worked at old age homes and all that. So I really put in extra effort but I was told, well they kind of keep you on your toes and say up until you are registered for science they tell you that you may still have a chance to get in. But that year I was very unlucky as people pitched for registration so there were no spots. But once I got into science I enjoyed it, I don’t regret doing that year at all.* [4]

In the science class, she realised there were actually a lot of other people in the same situation:

*When you get into science they ask you to raise your hand if you actually applied for medicine and a lot of the class raise their hands. But by the end of the year a lot of them have changed their minds, but still you have to work really hard and get top marks. I got top marks but still had lots of fun.* [4]

She got accepted into medicine at the end of her first year.

One Zimbabwean student had a delay in the release of her A level results meaning that her acceptance in medicine was too late for the start – she shifted her plans to then do a BSc in Pharmacy which she ended up ‘loving’. Another South African student had an error in the reporting of her matric marks which meant she couldn’t get a place in the programme she had hoped for. These were very difficult situations which could have easily derailed a young person and delayed the start of studying for at least a year. However, with parents on hand to help them navigate these challenges, these young people were able to formulate a new set of plans in a short period of time.

The previous chapter showed that after commencing a course of study, students’ study plans often did not progress as initially hoped. Possibly more important than the initial choice were then the deliberations that a young person went through when they hit academic difficulties. When this happened, they were often no longer at home. But even at a distance an important resource were parents who would encourage them to persist through difficulties. The encouragement to persist was often underlined by huge sacrifices being made by the family for the young person to be at university. It meant a lot to young people to be encouraged to persist. It will be recalled that after her first two difficult years, Hannah had left university and gone home; she didn’t plan to return. Her mother said to her:

*‘OK, I know this is not easy but think about your future; if you are doing this, just know that you will never go anywhere in life.’*
Sometimes a parent’s disappointment might have been a spur to further efforts. Here is a young person recounting her achievement of being first in the family to do postgraduate studies:

*And considering that I failed in second year, he was very disappointed, I told him not to worry because I’d prove to him that failure is nothing and that I could continue. He is very proud; both my parents are very proud of me.* [34]

Another student, who ultimately was excluded, had a parent who said one should not leave passively:

*My father told me to don’t leave [the university] like that, leave kicking and screaming, try your best to stay. That happened and later we tried to motivate for me to stay again, he was my last bit of hope. I tried to stay; I wrote my appeal for the following year.* [2]

Here we see the value of a parent who has the student’s back, and can encourage them to push on. The flip side is a parent who can offer a perspective beyond the immediate difficulties. It would seem that this is easier for parents who themselves have advanced educational qualifications, and may be especially possible for those who themselves are teachers or lecturers. One science student, recounting the difficulties of first year said:

*So, I struggled with the workload in first year but my dad’s actually a lecturer in Science at the university as well, … and he said they make the first year purposefully difficult to sort of weed out the weak students, so that was very encouraging.* [50]

Another student whose father was a school teacher recounted:

*But it was never about marks. My dad had the rule of if you have expectations and you don’t achieve your expectations, he kind of has the right to be angry with you because you didn’t do what you wanted to do. But if he sees that you can’t do any better for whatever reason, then he’s fine. I don’t know when he started but he showed us his grades and he failed two classes in his school career, so he is like, ‘Who am I to tell you you need to get straight As?’* [27]

Here one can feel the difficult situation that parents find themselves. You are anxious about your child’s future but you also know that being overly directive might backfire.

This whole book is focused on young peoples’ deliberations over their options in life, especially in the context of going to university. But in this chapter, we have concentrated especially on the initial deliberations about where and what to study. We note that for nearly
all young people interviewed in this study, there was not much consideration of alternatives to studying after school. Funding obviously loomed large, and across the participants in this study we noted very different situations in which they found themselves. A few had parents who could pay all the costs with some ease, but for most it was a creative combination of bursaries, scholarships and some family funding. We noted that having at least some small financial flexibility in the family was almost a necessity; many of the students in this study on NSFAS struggled academically and ran out of funds before they had completed their studies. Not having a family who could step in with funding unexpected costs put a young person in a tight situation.

The research found that a key resource was having a family that was able to put some energy into aspirations for their children to study at university. In the two narratives introduced in this chapter we saw at close hand how this can happen: Johnson’s parents were refugees yet had a very clear sense of how important it would be for him to study, and also emphasised that he should do a course with good career prospects. Jo’s mother and uncle were able to create the family stability that remains an anchor for her in the demands of academic life.

Many students in this study were fortunate to have a university in their home city that they were happy to be studying at, and this was often financially attractive for the family. For others, either from necessity or desire, there was the contemplation of institutions in different geographic locations. Maybe more critical is the choice of programme of study. We saw that for a few students the choice was informed by potential employment options, but, as would be expected for formative degrees like BA and BSc, for many students the choice was based on interests, although these were generally not very well formed by the end of school.

Through this book it is shown that often a student’s Plan A needs to be substituted with Plan B or C. In these instances the presence of adults who can support and advise can be crucial. Very few students obtained the sort of academic advising at university that was needed to support them in these moments. Parents were often supportive but didn’t necessarily have the information to provide relevant advice.

The focus of the book thus far has mainly been on academic progress, although the social context in which this takes place has already become evident. In the following chapter we move to consider the broader learning experience presented by being at university.