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

Marshall, Delia, Case, Jennifer

Published by African Minds

Marshall, Delia and Jennifer Case.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/58076.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/58076

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2089770
CHAPTER 6

DOING POSTGRADUATE STUDIES

Narratives already introduced and relevant to this chapter:

Themba  BSc(Hons) and MSc Chemistry – doing PhD overseas
Martin  BA (Hons) Theatre Management – working as theatre manager
Johnson  BSc(Hons) Geology – MSc completed – working in environmental consulting company
Jo  BSc(Hons) Microbiology – doing MSc
Mulalo  BSc(Hons) Geology – working as an intern in a state department
Thato  BSc(Hons) – doing masters in Environmental & Geographical Sciences

Narratives to be introduced in this chapter:

Paul  BA(Hons) Philosophy – MA History – working as a researcher
Cheryl  BA – year at home – work – Hons in Development Studies – working as research assistant

There is a view\(^88\) that the main purpose of the university is to reproduce itself, and thus the main aim of undergraduate education is preparation for graduate (what we call postgraduate) education. And thus it is useful to start our consideration of what happens after bachelor’s graduation with a look at those students who chose to continue in the university with postgraduate studies. We opened the book with the story of Themba, who has achieved the pinnacle of academic success with a scholarship to do his PhD at a prestigious international university, following his South African masters degree. Already in his story we saw a signal of the importance of the role of the supervisor – in his masters he had a dynamic and energetic academic mentor who went to extra effort to craft opportunities for her students to get exposure in the academic world. For Themba it did not seem that there had been too much deliberation over his choice to continue with postgraduate studies: his top marks in the undergraduate degree and his interest in Chemistry, meant that the postgraduate opportunities that were made available to him looked very attractive.

Following the other featured narratives in the book, we recall that both Johnson and Jo have been doing their masters degrees; Johnson has nearly completed the thesis and has started full-time work. Martin and Mulalo had both completed honours degrees and then headed to the workplace. Importantly though, most of the other young people whose lives have been featured in detail have had some deliberations over postgraduate studies. Hannah is still trying to get her transcript and this is not only for reasons of employment; she is also thinking about postgraduate options and has already tried to apply for an honours programme. So has Sima. Nala hasn’t completed her undergraduate degree but she is already talking about her postgraduate plans, as is Tebogo.

This pattern plays out across the broader set of narratives in this study. Of the 60 young people in this study who had completed their bachelor’s, 18 had also completed honours or were in progress with it, and a further 24 had completed a masters or were busy with it. A further 10 students who hadn’t started postgraduate studies made some mention of it in their interview. Thus we can say that nearly all bachelor’s graduates in this study have in view the idea of studying beyond this point.

It is interesting to put this picture against the broader backdrop of participation in postgraduate studies in South Africa. There has been dramatic growth in this sector, tracking closely the growth in undergraduate participation outlined earlier. However, the patterns in participation at this level, as in the undergraduate space, remain relatively low by global comparisons and racially differentiated. Our study shows that there are many different sets of deliberations that lie behind the choice to do postgraduate studies, including different social settings and personal choices. This chapter teases these out.

Career-related reasons for doing postgraduate studies

We commence this exploration of reasons students give for postgraduate studies by considering those reasons that are related to future career plans. Most of the narratives in this space involved a plan for a very particular career that would involve postgraduate study. As one could imagine many of these were those planning to get into academic careers, but there were also professional careers that required postgraduate study. Two examples of the latter category were one participant who had decided to become a forensic anthropologist where the minimum qualification would be a PhD, and another who had become an academic librarian which required a postgraduate diploma in this area. The librarian described his route into this career:

89 From 1996 to 2012 the number of masters enrolments more than doubled and the number of doctoral enrolments trebled. However, participation is still overall at a low level by international comparisons, and highly racially differentiated. Research on causes for the low participation in postgraduate studies by black South Africans point to deep-seated socio-economic disadvantages, making it difficult to access sufficient funding to support a young person into this stage of further studies. ASSAf (2010). The PhD study: An evidence-based study on how to meet the demands for high-level skills in an emerging economy. Pretoria: Academy of Sciences of South Africa (ASSAf); Cloete, N. (2016). Free higher education: Another self-destructive South African policy? Cape Town: Centre for Higher Education Trust.
When I graduated I didn't know what I was going to do. Then an old friend asked me why I didn't consider librarianship because when I started studying that was one of my interests. So, I applied for the programme, the Postgraduate Diploma, and got in. And that was how I ended up in Libraries. I did the Postgraduate Diploma in one year and I did masters in just over two years. [22]

Some students had identified a career direction that didn't necessarily require postgraduate studies, but where they felt this would be to their advantage:

I also think I want to go into Environmental consulting, not 100% sure whether I want to do impact assessments or whether I want to do more of sustainability and corporate or business situations, or rather consult in those situations. So, I am not quite sure, but I don't have enough experience in those fields but I think a masters will definitely give me a little bit of an upper hand in that sense of having an extra year of study; it will put me in higher positions easier than with my honours degree. [45]

Other participants had less explicitly articulated career plans, but still felt that further studies could help in defining focus. For example, Tebogo, whom we encountered in the first chapter and was yet to finish his bachelor's degree, felt that postgraduate studies were going to be essential:

You see the problem with undergraduate studies, especially in the Commerce faculty, is that they are terribly broad so you leave there knowing a bit of this and a bit of that, but never actually being able to do one thing and do that one thing well. Yeah, which is what postgrad studies really do. They start to point you to one direction and get you to be better equipped to do that one thing. So that is probably in one way that my life might be different. In that then I will be able to plan my career and chose postgraduate studies that I think will take me into the direction that I want to go.

With regard to career options then, more students were considering postgraduate study from a positive position of enhancing options than from feeling stuck with no prospects from the bachelor's qualification. A striking exception came from those who had majored in Geology. As noted for example in Johnson's narrative, Geology is seen by many young people in South Africa as offering good employment opportunities in the mining industry. The honours degree is considered a requirement for this work; one student indicated that the mining industry specified this as a requirement. The irony though is that in this study were participants who had completed postgraduate studies in Geology and still struggled to get work. Mulalo's narrative was outlined in Chapter 4 where it was briefly mentioned that after her honours in
Geology she spent a year at home looking for work. The year at home was really hard and she said:

*The year when I was at home they said, 'Well, it's the same.' They said, 'What is the point of going to school if you go and you come back and just sit?' So I wanted to get the job so badly so that I could show them that going to school, well, someone who went to school and someone who didn't are two different people.*

Eventually she obtained an internship in a government department; not the most intellectually demanding work but at least nominally requiring a graduate-level qualification. Another Geology honours graduate in this study also spent a full year looking for work and then decided to take up a masters programme:

*After university, I tried looking for work but then there was not really much because the mining industry is not really doing well right now. So, I tried looking for work and I couldn't find anything. So, I sat for a year, 2014, doing nothing. Then in 2015, as I was looking for work or for anything that opens up, I ran into an advert about this masters that I am doing now so I just took it. So, it wasn't something that I was like, 'Oh wow, I love this.' *[44]*

While we noted some accounts as above where postgraduate studies were a fall-back when work was not available, there was also an interesting pushback from at least one student who felt that doing postgraduate studies because there was no alternative was a position to be avoided:

*No, I did finish the Honours but the following year I didn't want to come and study, I didn't want to do masters because I didn't feel like the year before was the best year and I didn't want masters to be my only option. I didn't want to do masters because it was the only option I had. So, then I decided to look for a job. *[52]*

Thus, we have shown here subtle distinctions in the reasons given for postgraduate work that involved career prospects. Some were quite finely tuned, aimed at particular careers; others had a general view that postgraduate studies would enhance their career prospects in helping them to focus and specialise; and then there was some, but not much, evidence of students who did postgraduate studies because they could not find work.

**Intrinsic reasons for doing postgraduate study**

What was striking in this study was the extent of intrinsic reasons given for postgraduate study. Most of the graduates in this study identified themselves as people who love learning and
knowledge, and spoke readily about a desire to study further just because this matched their sense of self. Some of them seemed to us to be en route to an academic career but at this early stage they did not necessarily express it in these terms; they rather spoke of intrinsic academic interests that they were exploring. Paul is a good example of this.

Paul had a relatively similar experience to Themba, also in the small-town university, but in Arts rather than Science. After an honours degree in Philosophy at this institution, he moved to another university to continue with masters studies in History. While doing his thesis, although he was a top student, he was advised that there would be no job for him in the department due to pressures for transformation\(^90\) and so he realised he needed to look elsewhere. He has found a position as a researcher in the same university but in a very different disciplinary area.

When asked whether he had considered continuing with a PhD, he indicated that this was his long-term intention but that right now he felt exhausted after the masters and needed to take a break; he was new to History when he had begun his masters, not having studied this subject after school, and he found it a very steep learning curve.

Paul had very clear ideas on why he had chosen postgraduate studies in History. In his Philosophy studies he had focused on ethics and had an interest in human suffering. Historical studies seemed an important way to get close to these issues in the South African context, and also to be a good career move in the long run:

> I guess History was a way for me to understand how South Africa came to be in this place that it is in. I guess I felt some kind of an ethical and intellectual obligation to try and understand this and I knew that I had the intellectual capabilities to pull it off. I wanted that depth that a masters would give me. I thought that it would be convincing, you know if you look at these sorts of technocrats, government and ministers and so forth in South Africa. A great deal of them had backgrounds as economic historians. I felt it would like open up doors later on that, you know … maybe like in the mid-forties I would like to move into government or something like that.

On his choice to do a BA, Paul said:

> Yes, well I liked reading a lot and I figured, well, that this is a way I could do nothing but to learn how to read better and write better and so forth and expose myself to new ideas. And it all seemed very exciting. … As most humanities students, I was quite impatient with the question of, like, ‘What are you going to do with this degree?’ And ‘What does it mean later?’ and so forth …

\(^90\) Transformation usually refers to the shifting of the demographics of a workplace to be more representative of South Africa’s population, as required by the Employment Equity Act of 1998.
The question of the relevance of the knowledge to the workplace, as signalled here by Paul, is a dilemma that most students in the BA had to find a way to resolve at some point. Here Paul takes the stance that this question can simply be deferred. We will see further deliberations on this matter in the following chapter.

These quotes illustrate the extraordinary combination that Paul exhibits of highly strategic career thinking coupled with a genuine intrinsic social and intellectual drive. These come together in a carefully expressed awareness of his privilege – he knows both that he has access to these ways of thinking, which derive at least in part from his family and school background (both parents are university educated and one parent has written a book), and that he had the luxury of doing a degree that didn’t have an immediately obvious career direction because he had a family safety net. He chose a BA because he liked reading and thought it would be great to do a degree where he could learn to read better and write better, and be exposed to new ideas.

It was during the degree that he got a sense that he was really good at academic work. He is calmly confident of his talents in this regard, and went through two demanding job interview processes knowing that, while there was a large field of applicants, he had a strong set of skills. He would like to do a PhD but definitely not in South Africa. As with his choice of masters institution, he recognises that where you study matters, in terms of the profile that you come to have.

So many narratives around further study involved expressions of real passion and delight in studying:

I did honours because … I loved being at university, I love the vibe, I love that I had no responsibilities. I loved that I could just sit and read the whole day about stuff that was interesting. [28]

Honours changed my life (more laughter), I just chose amazing courses and I was with a core group of about 10 people and we just learned so much and we worked so hard. I’ve never worked that hard in my life, but it was this team and we just challenged each other and we learned so much and got into the depth of what we were learning. [11]

As noted earlier, while the majority of bachelor’s graduates had already completed honours, many of the others also expressed future plans involving further study. Sima, whose story was laid out in Chapter 4 and who had left after the bachelor’s degree to go and work, said the following:

When I look at myself I am like, ‘No, but this can’t be it.’ Now I feel like just one degree is not going to get where I want. So, I feel like I have to add more to it, to who I am. Even for my son, he has to be like, ‘This is my mom’ and be proud. I feel like it will make me a better person and I feel like I still have to go deeper within me and challenge myself and to see if it will develop me into being the person that I
feel I should be because I am still not out there. Even at work at a meeting I want to say something but I am still, even though I have that confidence, I am one of those people who don't really like to stand in front of people. But I feel going back will make me a person who will be able to tackle anything basically.

Importantly, as has been seen across the narratives of Themba, Jo and Paul, the postgraduate space allows for different relationships with lecturers and these can be very formative. At the same time, this change from the more distant relationships that are typical in the undergraduate space were found by some to be challenging, at least initially. The really important aspect is that research supervision is a form of mentoring into an academic role. For some participants, this was a career move they hadn't previously thought of:

At the end of my honours I was approached by one of my lecturers in the department and she has been working on this larger project and so she asked me to start as a research assistant. … There was a scholarship offered to me and obviously because of financial need I accepted it … So that's been a highlight in my postgraduate journey, that I stepped out of my box and entered this whole new world that I didn't foresee myself participating in and just being exposed and talking to these people and exchanging knowledge and context, and a networking process as well. So that has been very influential in my decision to continue further into PhD and my decision to want to be a lecturer in the future. [34]

There was only one student in this study who felt that she didn't get much out of the postgraduate experience:

Yeah, so I knew I wanted to do honours so I just applied and did it. I didn't enjoy it and it was like a waste of time I think. … I can say I have this degree but I didn't really benefit anything from it. [30]

Elsewhere in the interview, it becomes clear that this negative experience was partly due to her choice of discipline, but also her choice to shift to a university where many of her friends were going, but which ultimately was not a very positive environment for her. Apart from this one student the postgraduate experience was rated very highly, and significant in terms of personal growth.

**Structural hurdles in accessing the postgraduate space**

Compared to Paul’s careful knowledge of postgraduate options and ability to work out a course that will build his career, Cheryl came from a very differently resourced space. At the time of
the interview she was heading off overseas for a fully funded masters, but getting to this point was not nearly as straightforward as it was for Paul.

Cheryl came from a working-class community in a rural town, where very few people had knowledge about university. It was a family friend who was able to point this academically strong school leaver in the direction of a university in a nearby city. She took on BA studies and always knew she wanted to do Psychology. She completed her degree in the regulation three years and put in an application for honours in Psychology. She didn't get in based on her final-year marks, and spent a year at home mainly caring for an aged family member because she couldn't find work.

She again applied for honours in Psychology for the following year and didn't get in. The next year she moved to the city and managed to find short-term work in jobs that were certainly not graduate level: she did direct marketing, she worked for an alarm company in their administration, and she worked as an au pair. She again applied for the honours and didn't get in. She decided to return to the university the following year and redo some of her undergraduate subjects in a bid to get the marks required for this honours. During that year she met up with an old university friend and they started dating. His mother was a lecturer at the university and was the first person who said to her that she should maybe try one of the other honours degrees on offer at the university. She then applied for honours in Development Studies, completed it successfully the following year, and now has obtained a scholarship through that institution to do her masters abroad.

Cheryl's three years trying to get into honours Psychology is a distressing story. The concern is that she didn't have on hand the kind of information that others had when facing this hurdle. Many young people in the study spoke of the difficulty of getting selected for an honours programme and many of them therefore applied for more than one programme, sometimes at different institutions. This challenge was especially acute for Psychology; two students described their experiences:

*Yes, so the selection process is quite gruelling. From undergrad to honours – you have to have a certain mark percentage to get in. Then from honours to masters – it’s very difficult to get in because they … I remember that I had like three days of interviews, and you have tests. It’s a very gruelling process to get into masters, and there are lots of people who don’t get in. Who try three, four, five, or six years in a row, and they just don’t get in, but I was fortunate enough to be one of the lucky ones. I went straight from undergrad to honours, to masters.* [15]

*I applied for Psychology Honours at all the main ones – [names four institutions]. I was invited for the interview round at [the one institution] but by that stage I had gotten the offer from [another institution] and that was it for me. I wasn’t accepted at [a third institution]. It was very competitive and I know it still is. I didn’t hesitate to take the offer [I got]. I remember how happy I felt the day I got that letter.* [47]
Cheryl presumably didn’t have the contacts through her family or her lecturers to realise that this was how admission to Psychology honours worked. For three years she doggedly submitted her application to this one programme. Finally, the social connection with her boyfriend’s mom opened her eyes to other possibilities and from then she has enjoyed a strong and successful trajectory.

Another student struggling with the hurdle into Geology honours, like Cheryl, also only applied to one programme and then spent a year at home until he could try again:

*I took a gap year but I didn’t plan on taking a gap year. What happened is that we were a lot of third year students and I wanted to do honours in Geology and not in Chemistry, so there was a lot of us that wanted to do honours at [this institution] in Geology. So normally they take about 12 or so. So, if there are 25 of you in your third year class, only about half of you make it to honours. They take from the highest mark downwards, so even if you do qualify you still have to have done better than other people. So, I had not applied to other universities because I obviously thought I was going to get a place at [this institution]. I didn’t want to do Chemistry honours so I decided that I would just see what happens in the following year. My option was to either improve my marks or just wait for the following year to try again, or I could apply to other universities. [40]*

The constriction of the pipeline at the honours level, as illustrated in this study, disproportionately affects those students who have limited family and community contacts to navigate these challenges. Those who had this kind of resource were more likely to apply to a range of different fields and institutions, knowing how the competition would work. Thus, even if they landed up in a route slightly different to their initial plans, they didn’t spend a year at home. Even if recontextualised as a ‘gap year’, this is an unfortunate occurrence for a young person eager to study but with limited family resources to advise them in this regard.

**Deliberations on the future after a postgraduate degree**

Paul’s narrative gives a sense of the deliberations that a student faces once they have completed one postgraduate degree. Once you are in the system the logical thing seems to be to go from honours to masters to PhD, and indeed it can be attractive if you are familiar with the institution and the department. On the other hand, staying on in the university is also about not being in the workplace, getting that experience, and, most crucially, getting an income. Participants in this study offered fine-tuned accounts of the deliberations they had made in this regard. While many offered intrinsic motivations for further study, as outlined above, financial constraints were real matters that had to be dealt with.
One student doing a masters felt this acutely:

I would like to have the independence of earning my own money again and getting bursaries has been, I am sure for everyone, it is an absolute nightmare. I really just got my bursary now and it is four months into the year already. [41]

Another student had no intention of doing full-time postgraduate studies at all because of this issue:

I didn't do it at [the institution where I did my bachelor's] because the option there was more full time and I wanted to work full time and study part time. I wanted to work – I have no idea why. I wanted to make money, I guess. I could have stayed and studied on, my mom was encouraging me to, but I wanted to make my own money and be in charge of my own money. [21]

It is important to note here that many young people in this study were doing postgraduate studies part-time while working, and often this was motivated by finances. Of course, the option of studying in this mode depends on the discipline; if you are doing laboratory-based research it is not possible to do these studies part-time.

Other students felt that they needed to be out in the ‘real world’ for a bit before returning to further postgraduate studies. They felt they needed a break from ‘being a student’. They wanted to get broader experiences on which to base further academic and career choices. They also recognised that doing doctoral studies requires incredible commitment to the field, and they wanted to be sure they were in the right space for that. Some students were a bit negative about what they felt was the elitism and insularity of the academic space, and felt they needed this tempered with experience outside. One participant who had just completed a masters abroad said in response to the question of whether she would continue with a PhD:

It’s hard for me because – I think part of it is part of me not supporting the, like, the elitism of academia that I do not want to go ahead and just do my PhD. Like, I feel like, I need to have some kind of lived, worked experience to earn the privilege of being able to do a PhD, you know … I could go straight into it but I don’t feel like that’s the right thing to do. I feel like I need to understand the complexity of the issues that I’m dealing with in real life. Like it’s, I’ve literally been, I haven’t had

91 Researchers have described a ‘leaking pipeline’ whereby it is difficult to keep students in the higher education system from undergraduate through to postgraduate studies, particularly those from lower socio-economic groups who are under enormous pressure to find employment and begin to earn a salary. The high earnings potential for graduates in South Africa (reflected in the ‘rates of return’ discussed earlier), ironically make the desire to continue studies harder to fulfil. This leads to a high proportion of postgraduate students having to study part-time with consequences for progression and throughput. Between 60 and 70% of doctoral students in South Africa study part-time. Cloete, N. et al. (2015). Doctoral education in South Africa: Policy, discourse and data. Cape Town: African Minds.
much of a break between my first year and masters and I think that it would just be almost like dishonest or just, it wouldn't be fair or right for me to just go straight into a PhD. [17]

This chapter has taken us into the stage of life beyond the bachelor’s degree, and the complexity of the deliberations that young people undertake has increased dramatically. The vast majority of graduates in this study had either completed postgraduate studies, were currently doing them either part- or full-time, or had plans to undertake them in the future. A range of reasons were formulated for the interest in studying beyond the bachelor’s degree. Some had ambitions towards a career path that required a particular set of postgraduate qualifications, such as working as an academic, a librarian, a forensic anthropologist, and so on. In this regard, Geology emerged as an interesting space. It was a popular BSc choice due to a perception that it offered good job opportunities. The general expectation was that you needed an honours degree in order to work as a geologist, but even with the honours degree completed, students were struggling to find work in the field, and this sometimes led to further postgraduate studies.

We were also interested to note participants’ articulation of quite intrinsic reasons for continuing studying. In short, these young people liked studying, they liked an intellectual challenge, they liked feeling committed to an academic endeavour, and they wanted where possible to keep this as part of their lives after the bachelor’s degree. This is a significant finding. Sometimes it was expressed in quite general terms around a desire for a challenge and for personal growth. Others expressed a deep interest in a particular disciplinary area and wanted to pursue that, even if it wasn’t going to specifically enhance their job prospects.

Although there are typically more funding options available at postgraduate level than at undergraduate level, some students experienced difficulty in obtaining a space in a programme in their chosen field, especially at honours level, for which access is often very limited. Being a full-time postgraduate student involves financial sacrifice compared to full-time employment, and thus many were looking forward to completing their studies. A desire was also expressed to get out into the ‘real world’. We now move to consider experiences of students in accessing and maintaining such ‘real world’ employment.