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

Marshall, Delia, Case, Jennifer

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This book follows many of the expected norms of academic texts but it also subverts a few of them. In the process of investigating the influence of higher education on the lives of young South Africans, through a reflection on their own experiences, we realised that some of the common approaches to academic writing would constrain our purposes, and so we jettisoned these. As just one example of such jettisoning, we insert the methodology here as an appendix, and not as the more traditional Chapters 2 or 3 of the text itself. We felt that moving away from the crux of the study’s purpose in order to outline our methodology so early in the book would detract from the core intent. Furthermore, we are hoping that many of our readers will not be within our own field of the Sociology of Education, and we wanted to ensure that we didn’t put them off the text with the detailed exploration of the study design. Seeing as you have now found your way to this appendix, allow us to tell the story of the research process and reflect on a few of the decisions that we took in the writing of this book.

This book reports on a project investigating the influence of higher education on the lives of young people, based on interviews conducted with participants who had studied either Science or Humanities at one of three South African universities. The project team comprised one academic from each of these universities, together with a recent PhD graduate who worked as a research assistant. The study enjoyed financial support from the National Research Foundation (NRF) of South Africa under the Competitive Programme for Rated Researchers. The project ran from 2014 to 2017 and data collection ran from July 2015 to April 2016.

As a research team we all have backgrounds in research on student learning in higher education, with a range of studies on students’ experiences as they moved through university, with work across science, engineering, humanities and social sciences. Building on this work we conceptualised the project to explore how these learning experiences are formative of the individual and how this reaches into life after graduation. We were also particularly interested to investigate the little-known domain of what students do who leave a programme before graduating – what they make of the learning to this point and how they proceed from there.

Research on students’ learning experiences typically engages students while at university. The ease of data capture with this somewhat captive audience might be one of the reasons why
there has been less research attention on what happens to young people after they leave university. Building on work that Jenni had conducted with engineering students, the four of us conceptualised this study to focus on students who had entered science and humanities programmes, working across three institutions.

Theoretically this work is informed by the social realist theory of Margaret Archer, as applied to student learning research. The sociological conceptualisation of the study allows for a perspective that considers the constraints and enablements of social structures on the life course of the individual, while also accounting for individual intention and agency. It is particularly applicable to work that seeks to capture the fine-grained patterns of contemporary life in a dynamic social context.

The understanding that underpins this book, that experiences and events in the world emerge from the interplay of structural and agential mechanisms, thus required that we set aside simple notions of cause and effect. Instead, we tried to unpack the causal tendencies of a number of structural and agential mechanisms so that we could consider how these may have various effects in the world. This required that we relinquish any search for a quick-fix for our low retention and throughput rates. Instead we considered the rich array of mechanisms at play in every one of these 73 students’ lives and tried to pull out some key findings which suggest ways forward and which may assist us in making higher education a more inclusive space of powerful knowledge.

The research questions guiding this study can be summarised as follows:

• How can we understand student success and failure in higher education?
• What is the role of higher education in society?

By implication this work extends into a broader consideration of the contributions that these young people make in a dynamic society, allowing for an engagement with current debates around the public-good purposes of higher education.

**Institutions involved in the study**

The 73 study participants enrolled for a Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Sciences in 2009 at one of three universities: University of Cape Town (UCT) and University of Western Cape (UWC) in Cape Town, a large coastal city in the Western Cape province of South Africa, and Rhodes University (RU), situated in Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa.

The University of Cape Town is the oldest of the three institutions and it has its origins in a school for boys founded in 1829. It was formally established as an independent public university in 1918. During the apartheid period it was designated a whites only university. At the same time the state created a college for coloured students which in 1970 became the University of the Western Cape. These origins live on in the designations Historically White University (HWU) and Historically Black University (HBU) although both now enjoy high status due to their research activities. UCT now enrolls over 26 000 students and UWC over 20 000. Rhodes University has a similar history to UCT and was established in 1904 and is designated a Historically White University. It however is a much smaller institution with just over 8000 students. None of the three institutions in this study were subject to the post-apartheid mergers, although Rhodes University did lose its East London campus to the University of Fort Hare.

Data collection

The chief data source for this study was a set of 73 individual interviews conducted with young people who were purposively selected and invited from the broader group with these characteristics:

- Entered university for the first time in 2009
- Entered UCT, UWC or RU
- Enrolled in BA or BSc

Ethical clearance was obtained from each institution and thereafter contact details for the students as held on the university records was elicited. For one of the institutions we were not permitted to contact students directly and thus a general email was sent out from the university inviting participation in this study. Not surprisingly the response rate on this invitation was very low.

The initial email invitations went to the entire 2009 BA and BSc cohort, using the contact details on the university database, and once invitations had been accepted we started to target our further invites to try to ensure that we had reasonably representative groups in terms of race and gender. We aimed for an even spread across the two degree programmes.

We obtained the following overall breakdown of interviewees from the various institutions:

137 2014 statistics
In terms of race and gender, we considered a comparison between the demographics of our interviewees and that of the broader cohorts for the two institutions with the larger samples (the racial breakdown excludes international participants who comprised 9 out of the 73 participants):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>BSc</th>
<th>BA</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UCT</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UWC</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RU</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A study of this nature does not aim at any kind of statistically representative findings. We acknowledge that the myriad mechanisms from which any specific event and experience emerges makes sweeping generalisations an impossible goal to achieve through representivity of sampling. We wanted to elicit a broad spectrum of experiences across the lives of a range of young people and in this we succeeded. But it is all the same important to know what kind of biases might be emerging from the composition of the interviewee group. Thus we note in general that we have higher female composition in most groups as compared to the cohort, and this might be expected in a study of this nature which invited a social conversation. In terms of race, in nearly all groups the overall make-up of the group (white vs black South African) is surprisingly close to the cohort composition, except for the UCT BA in which whites were relatively under sampled.

In the study we were particularly interested to trace where possible the experience of students who had not completed their degrees. Again, we did not seek or require statistical representivity but we were interested to see how widespread these experiences were in the cohort. In comparing degree completion in our interviewee sample to the overall cohort we see the following:
Institution | % graduated | Cohort
---|---|---
UCT – BSc | 60% | 51%
UCT – BA | 93% | 93%
Rhodes – BSc | 100% | 64%
Rhodes – BA | 95% | 64%

Note: The cohort throughput data refer to five years after commencement of study; the interviewee data run to six years after commencement.

Thus it can be seen that the UCT interviewees were somewhat representative of the overall group in terms of graduation rates, while for the RU students we had the pattern of having proportionally fewer students who had not completed their studies respond to our invitation. This is unsurprising. There is possibly little incentive to respond to a request for an interview about a period of your life that did not work out as you had intended.

Interviews were conducted either face to face if this was convenient geographically, or via Skype. All interviews were audio-transcribed. The interview protocol was semi-structured with the follow questions providing the general prompts for conversation:

1. Tell me about what you are doing now (your job, your commitments). What is a typical day like?
2. How did you get here? Work backwards from the present through the options you have had and choices you have made.
3. How do you think having been at university influenced the choices you have made in your life?
4. How do you think your life might have been different if you hadn’t been to university?

The interviews took between 30 and 90 minutes. Our preference had been for face to face interviews, but as the project progressed we noted we were able to get data that was just as rich through the Skype interviews.

**Data analysis**

The analysis was informed methodologically by Polkinghorne’s concept of ‘narrative analysis’ – working from an epistemological position which sees narratives as their own mode of knowledge, and thus requiring a distinct analytical approach. Rather than the classic

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approach to qualitative data which looks for common themes across interviews, Polkinghorne argues that in the first instance each narrative needs to be treated on its own terms, to explore the inherent logic in the trajectory that it represents. From this point it becomes possible at a next stage to look across narratives, but this again needs to be done maintaining the integrity of the analysis of each individual narrative. This analytical foundation can be seen in the decision to structure the book around key illustrative narratives.

The analysis of individual narratives in this study is also informed by Margaret Archer’s social realist theory – drawing on a stratified conceptualisation of human identity and building this into a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between agency and structure.\(^{139}\) With regard to the latter we are intensely interested to note how both structure (institutional arrangements, roles and relationships) and culture (ideas and beliefs that structure the social world) condition the space in which young people enter and move through higher education and then into their lives. While we recognise the causal powers of social structures in this conditioning, this does not mean that they are ever fully determining of the space for individual action. Thus we are particularly interested to see how individuals experience the world around them, weigh up the imports of their experiences, and formulate courses of action. These are informed by views of the world out there, of opportunities and constraints, and here we recognise that no-one ever has a ‘complete’ or ‘true’ view of what these are – our knowledge is always fallible.

A key aspect of this study derives from the semi-structured format of the interview protocol. This meant that the narratives we obtained represented the issues that the young person chose to put forward in explaining their choices and experiences. We were interested in our analysis to see what issues were mentioned and also to note, where possible, issues that were less prevalent in the data. However, an interview is also very much a social experience and thus the narrative cannot be considered to be the one definitive view on that person’s life.

These statements of course need to be treated with caution; the researcher who takes these at face value is likely to fall into an ‘epistemic fallacy’\(^{140}\) since people’s interpretations of their own lives as they are living them are inevitably limited. In a society that is saturated with particular discourses around the value of education and higher education, we can expect young people who have been through higher education to be using this discourse, especially if they have a sense it is what the interviewer wants to hear.

In the final instance NVIVO was used to code each interview against themes that had arisen in the analysis of individual narratives. These macro categories then formed a basis for more detailed explorations within particular themes.


\(^{140}\) The ‘epistemic fallacy’ refers to the analytical error whereby people’s accounts of their lives are taken to be the way things are. In telling their experiences, students may well misinterpret the roles of certain structures or cultures and may over- or understate the role of personal agency, for example. Archer, M. S. (2007). Making our way through the world: Human reflexivity and social mobility. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Data representation and discussion

This book follows many of Polkinghorne’s concepts in its representation of the data. We wanted both to show the narrative structure of the data as a collection of 73 rich stories and simultaneously to engage at a sophisticated level with the interplay of structure, culture and agency across the stories. This led us to select twenty narratives which represented core issues and to use these across the chapters to illustrate the central issue of that chapter, along with brief quotes from the other participants.

1. Themba – BSc Chemistry – doing PhD overseas
2. Tebogo – BSc Actuarial Science – switch to BCom – still not completed, unemployed
3. Nala – BSc extended programme – switch to BA – still not completed, working in start-up company
4. Martin – BA (Hons) Theatre Management – working as theatre manager
5. Martha – BSc Elec Eng – switched to BSc Computer Science – motherhood – studying BSc Computer Science part-time
6. Hannah – B Soc Sci completed but no academic transcript – SAPS trainee
7. Johnson – BSc(Hons) Geology – MSc completed – working in environmental consulting company
8. Jo – BSc(Hons) Microbiology – doing MSc
9. Mulalo – BSc(Hons) Geology – working as an intern in a state department
10. Thato – BSc(Hons) – doing masters in Environmental & Geographical Sciences
11. Sima – BA – working in a bank
12. Yan – BSc – took year off – studying LLB through distance university
13. Tshidi – BSc extended programme – BSc Civ Eng at another university – work – BSc Computer Science – work – part-time study and motherhood
14. Lerato – BSc – time out and work – BSc Civ Eng at another university – work – doing BSc Civ Eng at another university
15. Bongi – BA Music – work – ND Chemical Engineering – motherhood with part-time study through the distance university
16. Paul – BA(Hons) Philosophy – MA History – working as a researcher
17. Cheryl – BA – year at home – work – Hons in Development Studies – working as research assistant
18. Lynda – BSc Computer Science – working as a software developer
19. Duma – BSc – moved to complete at another university – work in municipality – consulting and studying BComm part-time
20. Lucy – BA Journalism – working as a copywriter in advertising
Appendix B gives the full list of all 73 participants. In our representation of the data, we used pseudonyms for the 20 narratives and we used a numeric coding for the remaining 53 study participants. We quoted the data verbatim except for the editing of any identifying details.

We thus used a combination of individual stories and theorised reflections across the data to develop a complex set of answers to our research questions. In electing to use this particular approach we wanted to achieve two things. Firstly, we wanted to retain some of the narrative form of the data, both because of the richness of the stories our participants shared with us, and because of how engaging we believed these would be for our readers. But secondly, we wanted to allow for a depth analysis that moved beyond the epistemic fallacy whereby the narrative data is understood to be the Truth. This meant that we had to use the theory to explore how structural, cultural and agential mechanisms may have enabled or constrained the participants’ experiences of higher education and to explore the role of higher education in society.

This decision to use an accessible blend of narratives and social realist analysis brought with it further deliberations. We wanted to ensure that our readers were provided with references that substantiated our claims and offered opportunities for further exploration of particular issues. But we didn’t want such references and other more theoretical deliberations to hinder the more conversational approach we were taking in our analytical representations. We therefore opted for the use of extensive footnoting, rather than the more usual in-text reference style.

**Member checking and updates**

As part of our process of ensuring an ethical use of the data, we sent a draft version of this book to all participants. We were looking for any necessary material corrections but we also wanted to get feedback on how we had represented the stories of those who had so generously shared their narratives. In particular we were keen to hear from those who didn’t complete their studies. They are statistically under-represented in this study, so we were especially grateful for the insights we did get from those who were willing to share.

The feedback on this process was most encouraging and enjoyable to receive. We will share just two responses here. Duma, who had left his first institution and completed his BSc elsewhere, who notably had found that work in the municipality was most unstimulating, and at the time of the interview was studying part-time for a further degree and running a business with his friends, writes:

> My ultimate dream of becoming a pilot is finally coming into reality. I have completed the BCom Degree with [the national distance university] and I am proud to be part of your study. I cannot thank you enough for the way you portrayed my
story in your book, I am grateful and more than willing to further participate in future studies you would be taking part in.

And then readers will no doubt be interested in reading ‘Tebogo’s’ response to the member-checking process; you will recall that Tebogo was introduced in the very first chapter. When the data were collected he was unemployed and a bit adrift; just one year on from this point he writes:

Thank you very much for sending me this and thank you for producing this work that asks and answers many questions that the South African society is grappling with. I am very honoured that my story could be used for your study. I am the Tebogo that you introduce in the book’s introduction. At the end of 2016, I finally completed my undergraduate degree. After spending 18 months at home, parents of a friend of mine from university offered to pay my fees for a semester. I successfully appealed against my academic exclusion and registered for my last remaining courses which I passed without a hitch. Soon after that I found work as an intern at a small private equity firm in Johannesburg where I am currently employed. It was a tough journey but I am grateful that I never gave up on my desire to see it through to the end. Thanks again for your work and for offering me the opportunity to participate in it. I will definitely be buying the book once it’s published.

This is a very happy ending on which to end our book, and interestingly it touches on many of the key issues to have emerged from our study: the burden of university fees on many students and their families, the significance of socio-economic backgrounds and also the significance of social networks acquired at university, the rise of internships as an entrance into the workplace, the role of agency in negotiating with structures such as the university’s academic exclusion system, and very importantly, the importance of resilience.