Low-Income Students, Human Development and Higher Education in South Africa

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CHAPTER 8

Five students’ life histories
Conversion factors, functionings and inequality

We were influenced by the work of Daniel Bertaux and Paul Thompson (2006) in placing the life-history method at the centre of our Miratho research. They summarise the strengths of the approach by stating that life histories:

[B]ring home the complexity of the sequences of cause and effect in human lives. In choosing particular courses of action, structural constraints such as economic needs interact with value orientations, moral obligations, self-determined goals, and the individual’s own perception of the situation and choices ahead. (Bertaux & Paul Thompson 2006: 17)

Having discussed the Miratho students’ access trajectories (Chapter 5), university participation (Chapter 6), and how they moved on to further study or employment (Chapter 7), in this chapter we focus on selected individual stories to capture the rich day-to-day experience of intersecting conversion factors, agency and inequalities of university education. Moreover, this approach allows us to avoid the monolithic view that all low-income students struggle with the same problems and to the same degree, or that they have the same opportunities to convert resources into similar outcomes. Simultaneously, we can trace commonalities among students. We consider here how conversion factors variously affect individual student’s opportunities for developing multi-dimensional capabilities and key functionings (Chapter 4). In these narratives we also see the Miratho Matrix being operationalised across its four dimensions of capabilities, functionings, material factors and conversion factors, as these worked out and came together in each person’s life.

Of course we recognise the possibility of repetition but we wanted to provide a holistic account of a sample of the students’ lives to show the Matrix at work and the dynamics of changes brought together in a life over time. The three previous empirical chapters do not do this, given that they are intended to range across the whole dataset and break up the stories into access, participation and moving on. Here, we bring these stages back together.

This chapter draws from the life-history synopses and the access, participation and moving-on conversion factors tables that we compiled for each student. Excerpts from the photovoice and ‘Imagined Futures’ workshop discussions are also incorporated.
From the narratives of the 58 students we retained over four years, we selected five students, two men and three women, two from the Eastern Cape, two from Limpopo and one from Gauteng, whose university stories illustrate the variation in intersectionality of conversion factors and functioning achievements. We selected one student from each of the universities: Mashudu (Metro), Sonto (City), Aphiwe (Provincial), Madoda (Rural), and Rimisa (Country). Their stories provide empirical examples of how a university career can be experienced differently.

The chapter comprises six sections. All students were first interviewed in 2017. The first five sections tell the university narrative of each student. Each starts with the student’s background and how they accessed university. Thereafter an account of their university participation is provided, describing first the material conditions shaping their university participation and then their academic and non-academic engagement. This is followed by a discussion about whether and how they moved on from university. At the end of each narrative we summarise which conversion factors intersected to result in the achievement of learning outcomes, that is functionings and underlying capabilities. In the sixth and final section we offer conclusions about what the five life histories tell us, both when read individually and when considered in the context of what we know about the whole group.

Mashudu: Metro

Life before university
Mashudu was born in 1998 and brought up by her parents alongside four siblings in Makwarani village in the Vhembe district of Limpopo. Her mother, a teacher, was unemployed at the time we first interviewed Mashudu, while her father worked as an agricultural advisor. Unlike any of the other Miratho students, both her parents had university degrees and one brother was studying at Mangosuthu University of Technology, while her other brother had not been to university but was working. Her twin sisters were in grade 9.

Mashudu’s family was ‘very supportive’ of her academic development and it was always expected that she would go to university. Unusually, she started thinking about going very early at age eight because her cousin who had gone to Metro told her about university and encouraged her to work hard. Mashudu’s ‘deep village’ was very remote, with no tarred roads and erratic access to public transport. Social problems such as substance abuse and teenage pregnancy were common. It was also common for successful people from her village to move away, so that young people had few role models, and few people from the village went to university.

Mashudu described her high school, Tshivhase Senior Secondary School (quintile 2), as ‘one of the best schools in the province’. Her parents chose the school for its reputation. There were good teachers, a laboratory, a library and all the required books, and Mashudu was part of the choir. There were about 70 learners in her class. The school was far from home and so Mashudu had lived with her grandmother and brother who was also in high school at the time. She worked hard and passed her grade 12
exams with excellent grades\(^{25}\) (five As and two Bs). Metro University representatives had been to Country University for an open day and Mashudu’s school had taken their students there.

**University access**

In 2015 Mashudu obtained a Metro University application form from a former student at her school who was studying there and she applied for a Bachelor of Pharmacy. She was accepted and moved from Limpopo to Gauteng to start her studies in 2016. She found the transition from rural to urban life relatively smooth, as she had often visited her cousin-sister who had studied in Johannesburg years earlier. Mashudu had initially wanted to study chemistry and sought advice from a doctor who had advised her to study pharmacy. She looked up information on pharmacy on the internet using her smartphone and realised that it was what she wanted. Her excellent grades made her eligible for a Metro merit bursary that covered part of the registration fee and 10% of first-year tuition in 2016. Her mother paid for the application fee and the balance of the registration fees. Her parents offered relative financial stability (despite her mother being unemployed). Mashudu was the third student from her village to go to Metro in about thirty years (other young people like her brother had gone to other, less elite universities).

The conversion factors of geography and community are relevant. Coming from a small rural village in Limpopo where few young people went to university could have had a negative effect. However, this was countered by other conversion factors: comparatively good schooling, personal attributes (her hard work), a family where both parents had gone to university and were able to provide encouragement and some financial support. Mashudu identified her parents as her major advantage, because, unlike other young people from her village, they helped her ‘see out of the village’ and aspire for a life impossible to attain without a university degree. Mashudu thus had a relatively smooth access trajectory because conversion factors intersected to result in more enabling than constraining effects. She was therefore able to achieve full access – being admitted to and registered in a university and a programme of her choice. This enabled her achievement of the capability for inclusion and participation under less precarious circumstances than most Miratho students.

**University participation**

During her first (2016) and second (2017) years of university, Mashudu experienced considerable emotional distress because she did not have secure funding. She asked for and eventually received assistance from the health sciences faculty to pay 50% of her outstanding first-year tuition fees. This allowed her to qualify for a registration fee waiver in her second year, but she still owed Metro ZAR 267 000 for tuition fees and on-campus accommodation by the end of that year. She worried about this constantly: ‘I would say the worst challenge was to worry about my fees every single day I’m here.’ Her father took out a loan of ZAR 135 000 to cover part of her debt. Money for merit awards (ZAR 88 000) and ‘donations’ (about ZAR 20 000) from ‘knocking on doors’

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\(^{25}\) The grading system used in South African schools is: A or Level 7: 80–100% (outstanding achievement); B or Level 6: 70–79%; (meritorious achievement); C or Level 5: 60–69% (substantial achievement); D or Level 4: 50–59% (moderate achievement); E or Level 3: 40–49% (adequate achievement); F or Level 2: 30–39% (elementary achievement); Fail: Level 1: 0–29% (not achieved).
and getting government ‘gap’ funding made a big difference. In her third year (2018) she applied for and received a bursary from a pharmaceutical company through the Tomorrow Trust which acts as a broker to secure funding for students.

With secure funding, Mashudu directed her energy towards doing well academically. One academic achievement stands out. In 2018, Mashudu was tasked with a research group assignment to develop a business plan for a pharmaceutical company. The business idea stemmed from her past observations of patients in public hospitals in Venda receiving insulin pens. She had wondered how, with long commutes in minibus taxis, patients were maintaining the ‘cold chain’ (keeping the medicine below required temperature for efficacy) both on the journey home and in rural villages where there is commonly no electricity and hence no refrigeration. Her research group decided to develop a special portable cooling package for insulin pens, where solar power could also keep the medication at the right temperature at home. The group came first in class for this idea, presenting it to the CEO of Aspen, a South African pharmaceutical company. After that, the group started thinking about establishing a company (‘Green Freeze’) to specialise in manufacturing prototypes. They also approached the head of department for funding for material supplies and with plans to work with Metro’s department of engineering. Mashudu believed she had gained entrepreneurial skills from this project, which she said Metro encourages in pharmacy students.

The Tomorrow Trust was crucial in providing ongoing support through study skills workshops, and from these Mashudu learned the value of adjusting her study practices, for example, where, how and with whom she studied. She also learned how to be more strategic, that is, how to prepare for tests and exams by not trying to learn everything, but rather ‘learning to identify what is important’. She learned from these workshops that she is a ‘visual’ learner and that using highlighter pens and summaries of her own writing helped her study well. For subjects that she found particularly challenging, she had extra classes with a tutor, which the Tomorrow Trust had also organised.

In addition, Mashudu had the support of lecturers who recognised her potential. She recalls one lecturer sending her an email when he noticed a drop in her grades after a test. She went to see him and he gave her helpful formative feedback, which reassured her that there were lecturers who cared about her success. After four years of study at Metro, at the end of 2019, she completed her bachelor’s degree with what she described as ‘very average grades’ (50–60%), and she had no outstanding fees to cover.

Outside academic activities, she became involved with an organisation supporting Metro students from Venda to feel they belong. She thinks coming from a rural area makes navigating urban university life challenging: ‘Coming from a rural area you don’t know how to take an Uber for example, to find your way around.’ Without people from Venda who understand her because they are more like her than the ‘typical’ Metro student, Mashudu did not think she would have managed in her first year. She did some volunteer work for a clinic for homeless people, taught science and volunteered in a feeding scheme at a secondary school in Johannesburg. She thought it was important to give back to others. She appreciated encountering people from different cultural groups and had learned a new language (isiZulu). She would have liked to have been involved in more of these kinds of extra-curricular activities at university.

The conversion factors that enabled Mashudu’s meaningful engagement in both academic and social aspects of university life were: sufficient funding (from parents,
the Metro merit bursary, the faculty discount, the bursary from the Tomorrow Trust); information and support (Tomorrow Trust and her parents); and her personal attributes (enjoying her subject and working hard). Her case reminds us that the process of navigating through university and engaging deeply with one’s study subject or becoming a full member of university is complex and requires more than an adequate threshold of financial resources. Mashudu’s case also reminds us that ongoing information and academic support opens up students’ opportunities to be more engaged members of their universities. This includes volunteering, joining other student-led campus clubs or initiatives, taking up campus jobs, or being proactive in setting achievable academic goals that may influence opportunities for further study and employment.

Overall, her university participation enabled the achievement of these functioning: being an epistemic contributor, planning her life, navigating university and society, and being included and participating in university. Initially, her functioning to deal with stress and worry was not achieved as she worried about funding, but as her circumstances improved she strengthened this capability and functioning. She also used the capability for ubuntu and the corresponding functioning, doing volunteer work that centred on improving the well-being of others. Her narrative functioning was advanced through being able to tell her story in the Miratho interviews.

Moving on from university

In 2020 Mashudu started a compulsory internship at a private hospital in Johannesburg. She felt that she was being ‘thrown into the deep end’ but learned to be independent and ‘deal with real life patients’. She enjoyed her work experience in the pharmaceutical retail sector, completed her internship at the end of 2020 and passed the required exams. In 2021 she began her community service year. After this, the South African Pharmacy Council will accredit her as a qualified pharmacist.

In hindsight, she thought of Metro as ‘one of the best universities in the country’. It had adequate facilities and ‘connections’ and alumni were regularly invited to talk to students about careers and work. They had workshops where students were exposed to the pharmacy industry ‘as a whole and not just as a pharmacist working in a pharmacy’. Thus, being a Metro graduate was advantageous and Mashudu was convinced that ‘having the Metro name on your CV opens a lot of doors’.

However, Metro did not provide much support for job hunting. She had found out about Indeed, an online job search website, from fellow graduates and submitted her CV, was shortlisted, interviewed and offered the internship – all of which she says Metro had not assisted her with (e.g. providing information on how to go about applying for jobs, or writing a CV).

Mashudu wants her younger twin sisters to have a better university experience than she did, and to make sure that their expectations are realistic by telling them about ‘the bad things and how really challenging it was’. She thought that most of what she had heard about university before she got there was too focused on the positive aspects.

Her transition from university into well-paid permanent employment looks promising because conversion factors intersected to result in her achievement of the functioning for future work/study. These are: obtaining a Bachelor of Pharmacy degree, university reputation, information and support (from peers), personal characteristics, and labour market opportunities, as well as having no debt.
Sonto: City

**Life before university**

Sonto was born in 1997 and grew up in White City Jabavu, in the sprawling township of Soweto. She lived with her mother and two younger brothers. Sonto described her township as ‘a very rough community [with] a lot of crime’. She came from a polygamous family (her estranged father had several wives and 25 children) in which women were expected to ‘look for a job or go find a husband’. However, Sonto’s mother, who worked for African Children’s Feeding Scheme, was highly supportive of Sonto’s university aspirations, although her step-father who worked in construction was not.

Sonto went to the Pace Commercial Secondary School (quintile 3) which she described as ‘like any other in the townships’. She walked a total of four hours to and from school every day. It was a large school with about 50 pupils per class. Pupils had to ‘push’ themselves at the school if they wanted to succeed. The school provided adequate textbooks and had good teachers, but did not offer any extra-curricular activities, and the computer laboratory was only for students studying computers. She had to push herself in high school because teachers seemed unconcerned about the personal problems of learners which can negatively affect academic performance. She worked hard: in grade 12 she studied at school until 17:00 and sometimes walked home alone in the dark, which was ‘scary’. She passed her grade 12 exams in 2015 with good grades (two As, two Bs, two Cs, one E). Despite not having any information about university, Sonto had always wanted to go since she learned about it on television.

**University access**

Sonto’s first visit to a university campus was in 2015 to City when she submitted an application form, which she had obtained from ‘some guy’ she met in grade 12. In selecting the university, Sonto decided to ‘play it safe’ by choosing City rather than Metro which she had heard was ‘academically strict’. This can be seen as the development of an adaptive preference: she chose City in order to mitigate the risk of academic failure, and not necessarily because she thought it was better. Sonto was ‘very passionate about people and the community’ and had dreamed of studying law, which she thought would enable her to do work that uplifts her community. However, her high school specialised in commerce, so Sonto did not qualify for a law degree because she did not have the right combination of subjects. She instead applied for a BA in politics that she began in 2016. Thusanani Foundation paid her registration fee and initially funded her tuition fees (± ZAR 35 000 per annum in 2016), so she had mistakenly not applied for NSFAS, although she was eligible to do so.

Overall, Sonto’s access pathway was relatively uncomplicated, although most conversion factors intersected in a way that would typically result in constraining effects. She came from a ‘rough’ township, had not secured funding, her parents’ had low-paid jobs, and her school did not provide much learner support. Like many of the Miratho students, Sonto was the first in family to go to university and therefore had no second-hand higher education experiences to draw on to assist her on how to apply for university. Despite this, her access trajectory was smooth because of other conversion factors that worked in her favour. First, her personal attitude, drive and aspiration for higher education were important. She believed that ‘you have to push yourself individually so that you can be where you want to be in life’. Second, the financial assistance
from the Thusanani Foundation that paid for her registration fees was crucial. Third, her mother’s encouragement had a positive impact.

Therefore, we can see that Sonto successfully converted the relatively few resources available to her by achieving access and enrolling for a programme that she was interested in (although it was not her first choice), and at a university that she had chosen (although this can be seen as an adaptive preference), albeit under non-ideal and precarious circumstances.

University participation
Upon her arrival at City in 2016, Sonto was conscious that coming from a township made her different from someone from the suburbs who is used to having nice clothes and takes for granted the fact that they will eat every day. The idea of others guessing where she came from made her ‘shrink’. She was also not confident in English (unlike ‘suburban’ students) because she had been taught in isiZulu at school.

Throughout her time at university, Sonto lived at home and commuted daily to campus, which was challenging because travel was expensive. She used minibus taxis (on occasion walking four hours to and from university when she could not afford taxi fare, or skipping classes). There were often big gaps in the timetable (classes could be from 7 am to 7 pm); at the worst of times, she had to get up at 4 am and/or walk home at night, which was dangerous. Although she knew that it would have helped to be a campus resident, she could not afford the cost without a bursary.

Especially in her first year (2016) it was difficult for Sonto to understand the white lecturers’ accents and she was often ‘in the dark’. However, attending tutorials helped her to get a fuller picture of what was being taught in class. It was a relief for her to learn from the Miratho photovoice workshops that this experience was the same for other students. She struggled with typing ten-page assignments because she had to do all the research on her own, did not have a computer and spent much time travelling to and from campus. She complained that, because lecturers did not comment on her work, she never knew what to do to improve her grades. For most of her time at university, she studied by herself, and occasionally consulted her lecturers, although they were often not in the office when they said they would be and she had no other engagement with them out of class. However, she brought with her into university the self-reliant approach to studying she had had to develop in school.

Sonto enjoyed her studies. In her first year (2016) Sociology was her favourite module because it explained how society or communities shape individuals, and it made her more questioning. Her second year (2017) was more challenging than the first because lecturers expected students to read more widely. By her third year (2018) she found difficult the amount she had to learn without access to all the study material. She managed to study by being part of a large (20–27) group of students who helped each other by sharing textbooks, and she passed all her modules.

According to Sonto, a combination of an education system that does not teach students like her to be confident and to participate, together with huge ‘social’ challenges, makes a township student different from the ‘typical’ university student. However, coming to City did not make her feel disadvantaged, nor did she feel discriminated against, but coming from a township, and residing off campus presented additional challenges to her participation. Unlike most students in the Miratho group, Sonto said that she did not have to study hard to pass all of her modules.
For leisure, she read novels or watched films. She did not participate in campus activities but was ‘fully’ involved in the #FeesMustFall protests. She said it had been important for her to participate in the protests because without access to funding that does not have to be repaid, black people are trapped in a cycle of poverty. Sonto was a photovoice participant. She titled her story ‘The rise of a new sun’ with photographs that show her moving from the dream of acceptance at university and new opportunities, through hard times and loneliness, to flourishing despite the challenges: ‘I am still breathing, still dreaming and working towards being in a better place.’

Sonto described her university journey as an ‘amazing experience’. It gave her confidence and ‘made everything seem possible’. It also made her see the world differently. For example, what she learned from her Sociology modules made her understand how life is structured for people, it taught her about Black Consciousness, and made her a feminist.

Sonto’s personal attributes, that is, her determination to succeed and her academic talent, helped her convert limited resources (she did not secure any funding during her time at university) into meaningful academic participation. While her mother had always encouraged her, her stepfather called City a ‘fake’ university. Sonto was undeterred by his discouragement. She had focused instead on not disappointing her mother’s expectation that she would get a degree, get a good job, and lift her family out of poverty.

Sonto figured out how to navigate the university system and successfully completed her degree in 2018 with good enough grades to qualify for postgraduate study (i.e. at least 65% average). Through her involvement in the photovoice project she had the opportunity to tell her university story and to be heard, and her degree knowledge led to her seeing the world and her position within it in a different light. This means that she achieved the functionings of telling her story and of being an epistemic contributor. However, she did not fully achieve the capability and corresponding functionings for inclusion and participation, because she could not always participate fully in processes of learning due to material constraints. Nor was she able to achieve freedom from stress and worry, or the freedom to plan her life.

**Moving on from university**

In 2019 Sonto sought help from her department regarding funding and support for further study and had been assisted to apply for an honours degree. She was accepted for honours in sociology at City University but, due to her outstanding fees of over ZAR 80 000, she was not allowed to register or access her academic record and degree certificate. Sonto launched a GoFundMe account on Facebook to try to raise funds, but lost hope that it would get anywhere.

While Sonto was aware that City has a good reputation among employers, she believes one’s university makes no difference. Instead she was fatalistic: ‘If it’s your time, it’s your time.’ Sonto has been actively job hunting since she graduated. Despite growing weary of being an unemployed graduate, she is determined that she will ‘get through it’. She sometimes feels that planning has little value because much of what she planned for has not materialised: ‘I do have things that I want to do. But I feel like I should just let life show me the way.’ She searches for jobs online and has often reached out to the Miratho research team for advice. People have offered Sonto bits of work like transcribing voice recordings, and she acknowledges the importance of having access
to such networks. Unfortunately, none has led to full-time employment opportunities in her field of study.

At the time of the last interview in 2020, Sonto was volunteering at a non-profit organisation (NPO) that does work around mental health. This was inspired by her diagnosis with bipolar disorder in 2019. The NPO was just getting off the ground and they were looking for sponsorship for a venue so people could meet and talk in a safe space. Sonto thinks it is important that people become educated about mental health. Based on correspondence we had with her in 2021, we know that Sonto was still living at home with her mother and her three-year-old daughter. Sonto wants a better life for her family and she had hoped that getting a university degree would help her achieve this because it would enable her to find a decent job. She said: ‘I feel like, there’s a lot that I have to do, that I need to do for my family. But I’m failing.’

Without her degree certificate, Sonto cannot convert her completion of the degree into the achievement of the functioning of future work/study. We do, however, see her exercising the ubuntu functioning of connection to and concern for the well-being of others, which has sustained her.

**Aphiwe: Provincial**

**Life before university**

Aphiwe was born in 1997 and raised with three younger siblings by her mother in Sterkspruit, a rural town in the Joe Gqabi district of the Eastern Cape. Aphiwe described her village as ‘undeveloped because many of the youth are not educated’ and there was substance abuse. Only a few young people from her village have been to university. Aphiwe’s parents were separated and her father did not contribute financially. Because her mother was unemployed, Aphiwe’s family relied on a government social grant. Despite being concerned about finances, Aphiwe’s mother encouraged her to study hard during high school so that she could go to university – her mother did all the household chores so that Aphiwe could concentrate on her schoolwork.

Aphiwe went to a quintile 1 school, St Teresa Combined School. Despite the school being under-resourced with no computer laboratory and insufficient textbooks (five learners would sometimes share a book), the teachers were ‘patient’ and helpful, especially to grade 12 students. Her grades dropped due to personal reasons in grade 11, and in grade 12 she was, she said, ‘lazy’. Despite this she passed her grade 12 exams with some good grades (three Bs, one C, two Ds, one E). A few other pupils from her school also achieved bachelor passes.

**University access**

In 2015, a teacher encouraged Aphiwe to apply to university and gave her the Provincial application form. The Thusanani Foundation visited her school and spoke about university. When Aphiwe got her grade 12 results she called the Foundation and explained that she was unable to fund her studies, and they had assisted her. Aphiwe’s grades were too low, however, to meet the minimum required admission points for the programmes she had wanted to study (medicine, biochemistry or forensic science). She settled for a BE (majoring in English and Geography) and started her first year at Provincial University in 2016.
The access conversion factors influencing this outcome intersected complicatedly. Despite financial challenges, Aphiwe’s mother encouraged her to work hard and go to university, but could not provide academic advice. Although the rural geography and ‘undeveloped’ community she came from, which ‘lacked education’, were challenging conversion factors, Aphiwe’s ‘strict’ mother countered these by ensuring that she studied rather than playing in the streets. However, despite her mother’s efforts, Aphiwe joined ‘social networks’ and did not study hard. Despite completing grade 12 with a bachelor pass, she did not qualify for the degrees she had wanted to pursue, so she ‘just applied to university for the sake of applying’.

University access was therefore achieved within constrained circumstances shaped by five intersecting conversion factors: 1) significant others – Aphiwe’s mother who pushed her to study; 2) information and support – the teacher who provided information on the application procedures for Provincial; 3) funding – the Thusanani Foundation paid for registration fees; 4) community – typically young people do not go to university; and, 5) personal characteristics – although she was lazy, she still achieved a bachelor pass.

**University participation**

In 2016 and 2017 the Thusanani Foundation paid for Aphiwe’s tuition and accommodation, but not any other expenses. She did not apply for or secure funding for the first two years at university. Unlike most Miratho students who approached their studies with hard work and commitment, Aphiwe entered university without real commitment. At the Imagined Futures workshop (18 May 2019), she admitted: ‘Let me just confess something. Ever since I was a first-year, I was never serious about books. I neglected everything academic.’ In addition, she did not know how to use computers when she got to university and struggled with typing and writing essays in her first year: ‘I would miss assignment submissions because I was slow with typing.’ Her lack of exposure to scientific equipment was also an obstacle to becoming a confident member of the university: ‘The first challenge was that of me not being able to adapt to the technical world of the university.’ She was ‘not passionate’ and ‘motivated to study’, was ‘not enjoying any of this’ and sometimes she ‘would skip classes, not study for tests’.

Aphiwe soon realised that university differs from school and that success is shaped by how fast you can adapt, and that this is easier for students who are familiar with computers, have used microscopes at school, and so on. However, this realisation did not translate into significant change in how she studied in her second year (2017). Aphiwe tried to work out which questions would appear in tests and studied these with peers. From the modules she took for her BEd degree, she learned the most from Sign Language, but had applied rote learning techniques because it was ‘a lot of work, I hate it, I fight it’. Instead, she enjoyed subjects like Zoology, even if Zoology is a ‘huge book’.

It took time for Aphiwe to acknowledge that she must work much harder to improve her chances of completing the degree, and that both her attitude and study approach needed adjusting. By her third year (2018) she understood that ‘it’s the effort you put on your work that counts’ and said this again in her fourth year (2019); by then she was retaking Zoology after failing it for the second time. She had slowly come to understand that in Zoology there is theory which requires students to ‘go beyond the content’, and that it was important to work out how the content is relevant to the wider world, for
example, to realise that Zoology is relevant for understanding the effect of parasites on
the body, or why vaccination is important. She came to understand why doing well in
modules like Zoology required her to read widely, and not just rely on the lectures.

We might assume that not having funding in her first two years might have affected
Aphiwe’s focus on academic work, yet there was little change even when she had
secured NSFAS in her third year (2018). This covered tuition fees, a textbook allowance
(used to buy a laptop), and food and accommodation, so she did not have to worry
about finances. Although she thought books and other study material were vital too,
she worked around this by sharing these resources with fellow students. This is why she
found it important ‘to make friends with people you are studying with’. She had not
needed money for transport because she lived about five kilometres from the university
and walked to and from campus. Because of this, she was sometimes able to send small
amounts of money from her textbook allowance to her mother.

While at Provincial, she had failed two out of six modules in her first year (2016)
and failed Zoology and both her majors in her second year (2017). In her third year, she
replaced English with EBUS (Economics and Business Studies) as one of her majors,
and had to study the first year and second year work for EBUS simultaneously (in 2018).
Aphiwe’s academic performance started to improve only late in her fourth year (2019),
when she finally passed all her modules, including Zoology. Seeing others around her
completing their degrees made Aphiwe realise that she needed to push herself to finish
her degree, even though she had not chosen it. In her fifth year (2020) she was busy with
Teaching Practice modules.

Aphiwe took part in the photovoice project, calling her story ‘When life throws
you lemons…’ with photographs illustrating her acceptance at university, followed by
‘rejection’ (no place in a campus residence, no NSFAS funding), financial struggles, and
stress. She then worked out how to apply to NSFAS online, while the help and support
from Miratho and the Thusanani Foundation made a tremendous difference in her
story: ‘They brought light into my life.’

In her spare time she watched films, and slept a lot at weekends. She had taken part
in beauty pageants in the first years of university, but gave this up. She had not been
in favour of student protests because they had prevented her from attending classes.
Although she had friends who she could turn to for advice she did not want others to
see her ‘crying and depressed’ because ‘I don’t like people to see me as weak’. Overall,
she did not enjoy her degree and did not look forward to being a teacher. Despite her
negative university experience, she was grateful for the chance because she felt being
at university had taught her to value other people (the capability and functioning for
ubuntu), to be more focused, and to work hard.

We can therefore summarise from Aphiwe’s story that three conversion factors
intersected to limit her meaningful participation in university at the academic level.
These were her personal attitude (including learning disposition and lack of hard
work in the first years of university), schooling effects (on approaches to university
learning and on use of technology for learning), and NSFAS funding. Although the
funding enabled her fuller inclusion and participation in that she could afford more
study materials, she could not fully convert the other resources into the functioning of
being an epistemic contributor. However, over time, this capability was being developed
incrementally. Her narrative functioning was well developed, and her emotional balance
capability and achieved functioning strengthened over time. She also got better, with
help, at navigating university systems. She did little planning for the future, beyond planning to not stay in teaching.

**Moving on from university**

When we last spoke to Aphiwe in 2020, she had not yet obtained her degree as she still needed to complete practical teaching modules. If she passed all modules she would obtain her degree by the end of 2021, after six years of study. In 2021 Aphiwe was left still with one teaching portfolio to submit before completing her degree. The main conversion factor that constrained her moving on was that she had not yet completed her degree. She had therefore not yet achieved the functioning of future work/study.

**Madoda: Rural**

**Life before university**

Madoda was born in 1993 and grew up with his family (father, stepmother, an older brother and sister, and a nephew) in Lusikisiki, a rural village in the OR Tambo district in the Eastern Cape. His mother had died in 2009. His father was a bricklayer and worked as a mediator, settling disputes in the community. His stepmother was unemployed, his brother was a firefighter, and his sister was a road cleaner. His nephew was in grade 8.

Madoda went to Hillbrow Senior Secondary School (quintile 3) and completed grade 12 in 2013. Because the school was far from his home, Madoda rented a room 25 minutes away from school. Although there were nights he slept ‘without eating’, he worked hard and enjoyed high school. Textbooks were free and there was a science laboratory, although it was not used and did not have computers. There were about 80 pupils in Madoda’s class. Although most of his teachers liked and encouraged him to work hard, they were sometimes too tired to explain work to learners or did not understand learners’ questions. Through a bursary from a mining company in grade 12, Madoda attended extra lessons during weekends and holidays at a nearby college. The company sponsored pupils intending to study mechanical and chemical engineering. Despite repeating grade 12 in the hope of getting better grades, he did not and he passed with a C average.

**University access**

In 2014 Madoda applied to a university of technology, but did not meet the admission requirements. He then applied to Rural University and was accepted in 2015, making him the first in his family to go to university. His family’s financial situation was precarious because his father did not always have work and so Madoda struggled to get money to register. Although his parents wanted him to give up the idea of university, he applied for and secured a bursary from the NSF, with assistance from the Thusanani Foundation.

While some conversion factors (money, schooling) had a constraining effect, others (personal characteristics, significant others in the form of the Thusanani Foundation, and encouraging teachers) had an enabling effect. Therefore, Madoda was able to convert these resources into achieving the broad functioning of access, albeit under non-ideal circumstances. He had wanted to enrol for a degree in civil engineering but, because of his low points, registered for a diploma in civil engineering at a satellite campus of Rural University, with the intention to continue to a BTech and then a degree.
University participation

While his family had no information about university and were initially discouraging, they eventually supported and motivated him. A pastor, who had encouraged him not to get distracted, advised Madoda ‘just to focus on studies, and other things must melt away’. He was undeterred by having fewer material resources than other students, and he developed a strong academic disposition. Madoda sometimes sent money home to his family from his NSF bursary. He lived in a university residence, unlike most Miratho students, and was part of a study group of nine students. He had found university very difficult at first, feeling that students like him from rural areas would always lag behind ‘those guys from urban areas’ in academic performance. Nonetheless, he worked hard and other students turned to him for help.

Madoda felt that most of his lecturers, especially his head of department, cared about students’ success and were supportive and willing to help. They encouraged both class participation and going for consultations, and Madoda did both. His study programme was full of modules from which he learned about procedures, practising calculations and ‘study by heart’, although he liked to learn by explaining things to other students. He felt that students learned from each other, as much as, or more than, from their lecturers. The students also organised group studies and mostly communicated in isiXhosa. They read books and watched relevant YouTube videos using the department’s computer laboratory. He felt included in teaching and learning processes and had opportunities to give and receive epistemic material.

Applying theoretical knowledge to his Construction Materials module occurred during his work placement in his fourth and final year of study (2018). Ideally, students went to different companies for exposure to diverse construction sites but, due to a shortage of companies, students continued at the same company. Each of Madoda’s work experience internships lasted six months and both took place at Green Acres, a shopping mall in Gqeberha. The internships centred on constructing a new access road. Madoda learned how to supervise other people. ‘Working as a civil engineer instructing people’, was the most important learning from a module on management: leadership skills and how to control, motivate, communicate with and treat people. Although he found it challenging, he followed the instructions he received and encouraged workers to apply what he asked of them. None of his lecturers made any site visits (as they ought to have done), but relied on updates from students’ reports faxed every three months.

Because he was focused on studying, Madoda did not participate in sport as much as he had hoped. He enjoyed helping young people from his community with maths when he had time during the holidays. He was known in the community as someone who studied at university. He felt he had changed and developed new aspirations: ‘Now at least I have dreams. To have my own things as a grown man. And I want to be independent, yes. So not to depend to my father.’ His dream was to be a structural engineer in ‘a huge company’ and possibly work abroad, ‘even Dubai’. Madoda completed his civil engineering studies at the end of 2018, passing his diploma with good grades (eight distinctions out of 26 modules).

Through his university participation, Madoda developed the capabilities and corresponding functionings of inclusion and participation, epistemic contribution, practical reason, navigation and ubuntu. His hard work and relationships with his pastor, friends at university and one inspiring lecturer had a positive impact. He appeared to
have emotional balance in his life. Other enabling conversion factors are that he had funding throughout his studies, and that he had access to technology (internet, but no laptop) which also enabled his inclusion and participation in processes of learning.

Moving on from university
Between 2019 and 2020 Madoda was unemployed and looking for work. He had left his CV at several construction projects near his home and surrounding areas, as well as on internet platforms such as LinkedIn. He had been doing part-time jobs such as invigilating exams at a further education college and working as a teaching assistant or assisting clerks in the dean’s office at Rural University. He attributed his unemployment to ‘a lot of politics’ where ‘big guys’ who employ most people in the construction industry control everything. Because he lacked connections, Madoda felt that he would not get employed and would get ‘left behind’. He therefore applied for a Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery at three universities. He believed that medicine offered better employment prospects than engineering because the government, not private companies, were the largest employer in the field. He ‘researched’ which qualification would enable him to ‘work and get money for the rest of my life’. He thought having two different qualifications would give him ‘many keys to open the door’ to employment. However, in 2021 he secured a one-year contract on a road construction project near his home and was busy with that.

Many conversion factors were instrumental for him to achieve the functioning (albeit not secure) of future work/study. His personal characteristics of hard work and diligence, obtaining the degree, and access to technology to apply for jobs were crucial, while the subject field of engineering and labour market opportunities in his home province enabled him to secure contract employment.

Rimisa: Country

Life before university
Rimisa was born in 1997 in a rural village in the Vhembe district of Limpopo. He grew up in a large family with 11 siblings. Rimisa’s mother died when he was a child. He was not close to his father who had spent most of Rimisa’s life working in Johannesburg but was home because of an illness when we first interviewed Rimisa in 2017. The family relied on his father’s monthly disability employment benefit of ZAR 5 000.

Rimisa went to Hanyani Secondary School (quintile 2). In grade 12 he preferred to spend most of his time at school reading to avoid ‘unpleasant’ situations at home. ‘A lot’ of pupils from Rimisa’s school went to university. He worked hard throughout high school and achieved good grades (two As, two Bs, three Cs). Rimisa’s high school teachers played a significant role in his academic life and encouraged him to work hard and go to university. His life orientation teacher invited universities and colleges in Limpopo to visit the school to provide information and bursary application forms to grade 12 learners. In contrast, his family did not think it was worthwhile for him to aspire to university because they knew they would not be able to pay for tuition.

University access
Although Rimisa knew he wanted to go to university from grade 8, he lacked access to
the internet to apply to different universities and for bursaries. He also lacked money for university application fees, and applied to Country University only after his high school teacher gave him the ZAR 100 application fee; it was ‘the cheapest university’. The teacher’s assistance made up for the lack of support from his family for whom it was ‘difficult to understand my situation. They didn’t know anything about application forms’. Because most people in Rimisa’s village were nurses and teachers, he had wanted to be a nurse but he could not register for this or for teaching because both courses were full. He was offered a Bachelor in Indigenous Knowledge Systems instead, which he accepted, despite not knowing anything about it. Thus, in 2016, Rimisa became the first in his family to go to university.

For Rimisa, university access was achieved under constrained circumstances because he neither freely chose Country nor to study Indigenous Knowledge Systems. His hard-working disposition and determination to pursue his aspirations led him to apply for university despite being ‘rejected’ by Country three times. The Thusanani Foundation and a relative paid his registration fees in his first year (2016). We therefore see how two conversion factors (personal characteristics, significant others) intersected to enable his access, despite the intersection of two other conversion factors (a lack of support from immediate family, no secure funding) which nearly disabled it.

**University participation**

Rimisa’s high school teachers paid for his application fee and gave him money for food and clothes during his first two years (2016–2017). In 2018 he secured NSFAS funding and became less dependent on them for financial support, but he maintained these relationships.

Although he was ‘clueless’ about his study programme at first, he grew to love it and he worked hard. He particularly enjoyed learning about indigenous health care. His African Health Care lecturer took a research-based approach to teaching: students were given a research topic in class with guidelines about using the library, anthropology department and internet for information. They sometimes interviewed traditional healers, and Rimisa did this in his home language. Findings were discussed in class. Rimisa thought this the right approach for the course and felt he was part of producing new knowledge. Students were also expected to work in groups and present in class. He attended all lectures and kept the handouts he got from class.

When preparing for tests or exams, he would write notes, and first read through them ‘as if I am reading a newspaper’ to familiarise himself with the content. Thereafter, he would read in depth. Following this he would draft his own test questions, and then he would write down the answers before going through the questions again, answering them orally. He did not like to work in groups, although he saw the benefits of doing so. He consciously ‘associated’ with lecturers who regarded him as ‘one of their best students’. He also had five friends whom he described as hard working, encouraging, and able to distinguish between the ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ people to associate with at university.

Rimisa worked very hard to achieve as many distinctions as possible by the time he completed his studies. This was part of his strategy to win university merit awards to help him pay off tuition fee debt from his first two years at university. He was also motivated by the annual Thusanani Foundation award ceremonies, where students’ achievements were celebrated and rewarded (he received a tablet in 2018 for being one of the top achievers).
Rimisa’s study programme included a research module that culminated in a thesis which had to be submitted as a requirement to complete the four-year (integrated honours) degree. His research explored the role of indigenous knowledge for sustainable livelihoods. He conducted a qualitative study at a local village in his fourth and final year (2019) and obtained a B (over 70%) for the thesis. Rimisa completed his degree in 2020. He is the only student of the 66 we interviewed who passed his degree cum laude. He had developed the ambitious academic aspiration to have a PhD at 27.

Out of class, Rimisa volunteered as a class representative. His job consisted mostly of liaising between students and lecturers about the availability of lecture halls. Because there was a shortage of venues for teaching, class representatives had to arrive early and look for available rooms, book them and let students and lecturers know. He also volunteered at the Community Engagement and Research Centre at Country, for which he earned a small stipend. He was a photovoice participant, calling his story: ‘The difference between “here” and “there” is courage.’ Photographs captured his initial confusion, his challenges regarding accommodation and navigating university, the help he received from others, the resolution of his financial problems, and his other-regarding future plans to help others avoid the struggle he had experienced.

From Rimisa’s story, we see how four conversion factors intersected and stand out as the main determinants for being able to convert his resources into capability-enhancing participation at university, in both the academic and social spheres. These are funding, relationships with significant others, personal characteristics – including aspirations and hard work and interest in the degree subject, and good-quality teaching and learning arrangements. Rimisa achieved the functionings of epistemic contribution (through research), navigation (aiming for distinctions to pay off fees, developing relationship with lecturers because he realised this would help him succeed, volunteering as a class representative to build other skills and be more visible at university), and inclusion and participation. He also achieved narrative functioning (through his involvement in photovoice) and practical reason functioning (which we see in how he articulates a vision for his future and a good life). The functioning of ubuntu, showing care and connection to others who also cared for Rimisa’s well-being, inspired his wanting to give back to his community and support the well-being of those who come from similar circumstances as his.

**Moving on from university**

Rimisa applied for and was accepted for a master’s in African Studies at Country University in 2020 and applied for funding from the National Research Foundation. In 2021 he was working as a research assistant at Country University’s community engagement directorate. He had not registered for the master’s in African Studies but still intended to do so (the final grades for his thesis came late and delayed his application submission, although he has been accepted into the programme).

His four years of university had helped him gain confidence and achieve things that he could not be or do before: speak English with confidence, dress nicely, have a bank account, and be financially independent. He widened and thickened his capability set with each year of being at university, and he achieved the functioning of future work/study. He seems well on his way to achieving his aspiration of having a PhD at 27 years. He valued being at university because even if a degree may not result in employment, it helped him learn strategies to survive and to address life’s challenges.
What these five life histories tell us about low-income university students

In this chapter, we presented individual student life histories of university access, participation and moving on, showing how clusters of conversion factors intersect, however differently, so that individual student’s capability sets are either widened or narrowed. In all cases relationships were central and important in capability formation. Across the five student narratives, we can draw lessons about conversion factors, functionings and inequality in and through higher education. They illustrate how ‘the freedom of agency that we have is inescapably qualified and constrained by the social, political, and economic opportunities that are available to us’ (Sen 1999: xi–xii).

Aphiwe shows us that the main obstacles to developing a transformative relationship with knowledge and completing her degree was her personal disposition which intersected with the somewhat disengaged approaches to learning that she had developed in high school. The overall impact was thin participation that did not expand her capabilities much at first. Her university participation was characterised by a lack of interest in disciplinary knowledge in her degree, rote learning, limited classroom engagement, and techniques aimed not at gaining better understanding of her subjects but only at passing tests and exams. There is dissonance between her prior conceptions of what studying is for, or what it means to engage meaningfully in processes of learning. This reflects how difficult it can be for low-income students to take on a new identity as a university student, especially when they carry with them from school to university unhelpful approaches to learning and have not chosen their degree.

Rimisa’s personal characteristics and agency towards his goals intersected with relationships with significant others, resulting in opportunities for deeper, more meaningful participation. Participation was characterised by a keen interest in disciplinary knowledge, eagerness to better understand and come to his own realisations based on this knowledge, and more engagement across different spheres of university life. Rimisa’s remarkable outcomes – achieving a distinction pass in the required time and moving on to further study – shows us what can be achieved when talented and driven young people are given the opportunity to access higher education and are provided with financial and educational support. However, this individual effort on its own does not resolve social and higher education inequalities and money challenges.

Sonto’s self-reliant attitude and agency and impressive navigational resources were brought to bear on the intersecting conversion factors that manifested as obstacles to her participation. Although her determination and talent were enough to widen and thicken her capability set, they could not overcome the financial barrier, which limited the extent to which her university participation enabled functioning for further study or employment. The outcome of her university education would have been better had she had access to the right information and support at the beginning of her studies so that she could apply for financial assistance from NSFAS. We are reminded why it is important for low-income students to have access to timely and accurate information about opportunities to apply for financial assistance before they enter university.

Madoda is an example of a student who converted relatively limited resources through hard work into degree completion with good grades and a thickened capability set. However, we can see that having a university degree does not readily translate into employment opportunities and secure the functioning for work because the labour
market plays a key role, especially if graduates remain in rural areas where work opportunities can be limited.

Mashudu was fortunate to have both funding and the kind of academic support she received from the Tomorrow Trust, in addition to her diligence and hard work. Without these conversion factors working together, she might not have had the opportunity to do as well as she did, or achieve the capabilities of inclusion and participation, epistemic contribution, practical reason, and future work/study as outcomes. Her story therefore reminds us that an adequate threshold of financial resources is not enough to enable students to flourish at university; they need continuous support to enable their academic and well-being achievements.

Thus, in all five life histories presented in this chapter, we see some variation in the intersection of conversion factors, resulting in different levels of achievement of key functionings (Chapter 4). At the same time, we can see how, even with hard work to make their university participation meaningful, students faced limitations in the secure development of all eight capability domains because of the obstacles caused by structural inequalities.

Reading the narratives within the broader context of what we know about the Miratho students from the previous chapters, we can see clearly that opportunities are shaped both by structures, such as socio-economic class, and by how young people are actors and agents, interacting with these structures (Walker 2020c). Within the context of our findings the narratives illustrate the idea that discussing university outcomes needs to go further than measuring student success in terms of degree completion or distinctions obtained. What matters perhaps even more is what students actually manage to do during their time at university and how this enables the achievement of valued functionings, transforms students, and prepares them for further capability expansion throughout life. The capability approach enables us to do this.

Conclusion

International literature on widening participation usually misrepresents working-class or low-income students as deficient, high risk and problematic (Crozier & Reay 2011). Our findings challenge this deficit viewpoint by capturing the aspiration, determination, agency and hard work of students like Mashudu, Sonto, Madoda, Rimisa and even Aphiwe as they negotiate structural constraints as best they can. We acknowledge that we cannot know everything about how the personal attribute of being a hard worker is formed and that the development of this is contingent on various factors including their upbringing, socio-economic status, cultural values, and so on. So, while Aphiwe could have worked harder from the beginning of her time at university, we do not support the idea that hard work and determination are the only factors that determine university success. Rather, conversion factors worked in enabling or constraining ways in each person’s life to facilitate university access, participation and success. However, we have also seen how uneven the achievement of valued capabilities can be, depending on how these conversion factors intersect, and on the students’ personal characteristics. We see both the power of conversion factors and persistent inequalities and the potential of individual agency.
Reading the life histories individually illustrates why and how accessing, participating in, and moving on from university can look different for individual low-income rural and township university students who nonetheless have much in common in terms of having similar socio-economic and family backgrounds and similar experiences of secondary school. Our capability-based analysis directs us to examine how clusters of material, educational, environmental, social and personal conversion factors can manifest as obstacles and opportunities for the achievement of learning outcomes for each and every student in understanding both the reproductive and transformative potential of university.