AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION DYNAMICS SERIES VOLUME 3

GOING TO UNIVERSITY

THE INFLUENCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION ON THE LIVES OF YOUNG SOUTH AFRICANS

JENNIFER M. CASE, DELIA MARSHALL, SIOUX MCKENNA & DISAAPELE MOGASHANA

African Minds Higher Education Dynamics Series Vol. 3

Going to University

The Influence of Higher Education on the Lives of Young South Africans

Jennifer M. Case, Delia Marshall, Sioux McKenna
and Disaapele Mogashana

AFRICAN
MINDS

A NOTE ABOUT THE PEER REVIEW PROCESS

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FOREWORD

Sue Clegg, Emeritus Professor of Higher Education, Leeds Metropolitan University

A foreword can offer those who choose to read it some insights into the broader context within which a book sits, what contribution it makes, and a view about why what its authors are saying is important. This book contributes to broader debates about the significance and importance of higher education in a number of distinctive ways.

First it is based on the narratives of students who started degrees at a number of South African universities. This may not sound remarkable but I will argue it is because we have limited knowledge of what it means to this generation of young adults to have been to university, regardless of whether or not they are deemed to have succeeded. These stories are important and they challenge many of our preconceptions.

Second the book makes a virtue of writing in a way that makes these narratives open to a wider audience. It wears its academic credentials lightly in order to extend the range of readership beyond the narrow band of scholars who study higher education as their profession to include those who have a broader interest in higher education. This is increasingly important in a context where debates about the purposes of a university education have narrowed internationally to a concern with the economic benefits to individuals and society.

Third the authors speak from and contribute to debates about the significance of higher education in the South African context. The complexities and difficulties of the legacy of apartheid and the creation of systematic educational inequality by political design are of immense importance. Questions about how these might be overcome have provoked South African scholars to ask searching questions about the roles and limitations of universities. This has heightened significance in terms of the timing of this book written at a time of student protests and a broader politicisation of the debate.

Finally, these arguments have international significance because the South African case has sharpened the debate about equity and higher education. Some of the best writing about higher education in recent decades has come from South Africa. The book is underpinned by an argument that we need not just look at embedded structural constraints but that we should also consider how people understand their situation and their own abilities to act; hence the importance of narratives. It offers readers an opportunity to think about broader questions of agency and constraint, and issues of race, class and gender. It is an invitation to consider these

matters because they have wider societal and political significance. What makes their contribution impressive is that the analysis is underpinned by considerable theoretical sophistication. That it is accessible and readable, and made available through open access, makes their arguments more, not less, important.

The words of those interviewed are the core of this book. The study is based on 73 interviews six years after they first enrolled as students and we are skilfully introduced to 20 individuals whose stores are revealed in some detail as the book progresses. This gives the book a unique feel. It proves a subtle device for teasing out the pressures these young adults face, the resources both material and cultural they draw on, and the way they weave their narratives in accounting for their trajectories to date. From the very beginning, which starts with two stories, we are challenged to revise our expectations of failure and success. Superficially one student is a success, the other not; one has his degree and is going on to anticipated success at the very highest level of qualification, the other is back at home not having finished his degree and trying to find work in order to get the funds to complete. In the negative language of many discussions of students' trajectories those like that of the second student are represented as student failure or, in even more pejorative terms, as wastage. However, because the authors are concerned with understanding and explanation, a more complex picture emerges.

Time at university is not without value for those students who have not yet completed, or may not complete. What they take from it is varied and complex but it expands the ways they see the world and the ways they can imagine their roles within it. In many instances it changes how they see themselves and people from different racial and class backgrounds. The struggles of some of these students are palpable and the form of presenting the narratives allows the authors to explore multiple strands. Some of these are material and relate to financial support but some are more subtle. Students also describe how they navigate the university itself; starting with knowing what course to opt for, and how much flexibility a course offers, and what happens if they come to the realisation that they are struggling academically or that they just don't like the subjects they have chosen.

The language of choice sounds rational and instrumental but these are also deeply emotional journeys. The stories also alert the reader to the impact of relationships and in particular for women the consequences of having a child whose care still falls to them and can interrupt or change the ways they navigate through a degree. Parents and other carers also feature in terms of material resources and their lack, but also as a source of emotional support, encouragement and of know-how. Again, the authors challenge us to re-examine what we think we know, for example, in terms of race and class; some parents are poor but not without other resources and provide support to these young adults as they are making their way through university and beyond. So, what is important about the use of narrative is that it allows for an examination of the broader structural constraints and cultural and structural conditions which allow some of the participants to flourish but which impede the development of others.

What we see here are authors in complete command of their material, offering us a very sophisticated understanding of the meaning of going to university which far transcends simple

ideas of success/ failure and makes us question and look behind some of the numbers about who succeeds, who fails, and what jobs these young people get and aspire to. The experiences of university that emerge from the descriptions of the individuals in the book is about more than individual social mobility and the authors quite consciously ask us to reflect on that.

The use of the narratives gives the book an engaging and readable quality. This is not to be scoffed at. Many academic books are tedious and dull, and indeed incomprehensibility is often seen as a mark of profundity. But as I have argued above there is nothing unsophisticated about the analysis in this book. By cumulatively introducing more narratives the authors challenge us to recognise the complexity of their subject matter. They invite a much wider readership to recognise that what goes on in universities has broader relevance and is of societal importance. They lead us to ask some of the bigger questions about the purposes of a university education, what are the limits and scope of individual agency, and how we can think about the relationship between individual and economic development and human flourishing. These are issues which are debated by those of us who work in the field of higher education studies but are too often reduced to an over simplistic either/or in broader political debates. This is why decisions about style and readership are not neutral.

There is a democratic impulse in the writing of this book and an encouragement, made easier by the accessible web-based form of publication, to engage a wider audience. There is also a recognition that we as readers are, like the participants they describe, moved by emotion as part of our rational deliberations. I was deeply engaged in reading this book; engagement is important because it allows us to commit to things that matter to us. I think universities matter. As a first generation, working-class beneficiary, higher education transformed my life and it was not just as a route to a better job. If that was true for me it raises the question of whether it can be and should be true for this generation of students and young adults. The authors do not put this so baldly but I think they create a space where these questions can be asked.

This brings me to the importance of the South African setting where these questions have an especial urgency. While the South African university system is characterised by the authors as an incipiently 'mass' one, participation is relatively low by international, although not African, standards. It is also a system which still bears the scars of the past with historically white universities being more privileged than historically black universities with long-term consequences into the future for its students. Most disturbingly, although not surprisingly, while black participation has increased, black success still lags behind that of their white counterparts. Although there is financial support for the very poorest students, many more face financial hardship. Increasing numbers of studies are also showing that being at university is tougher in many more subtle ways for black students, not least because those students who enter but whom the university thinks unlikely to succeed without additional support follow a different curriculum to that of their better qualified peers. This often means an additional year and given the state of South African schooling this extra year becomes a space for the least privileged black students. The #FeesMustFall protests were surely also fuelled by these

experiences and frustration that a system which, despite sometimes strenuous efforts at redress, still disproportionately fails black students.

It is impossible when reading this book not to engage with broader questions about the state of South African higher education. Of course, the authors are not claiming that they have solutions and this is not what the book is about. However, the nuanced picture they paint gives us more resources for thinking about the questions. For example, they show in some detail that the different institutions and disciplines allow for greater or lesser flexibility to change the course of study. Some students take some considerable time to work out what their real interests and strengths are and some of these detours come at a considerable financial penalty. The stories indicate that there is often a lack of good advice or they are dependent on luck, finding a caring tutor or family member. There are also rigidities in the fee regime – one participant has passed all her courses but is tragically unable to graduate because she owes the university money. Solving some of these problems might seem like tinkering but as the authors argue there is clearly more that can be done and there are some difficult curriculum and funding challenges.

There are also big questions about the purposes of the university both in terms of the contribution to future careers and societal development but also in terms of human flourishing. By focusing so clearly on the individual stories, the authors are able to offer insights into how change might come about at all these levels. They highlight the effects of class as well as race and show how they interact, and because these are stories of agency they show the resilience and resourcefulness of these young adults, not victimhood. This is central to thinking about the university and to student lives beyond it.

These questions of structure and agency are important for international readers because the authors are making claims about the importance of theorising for our understanding of higher education systems. There will undoubtedly be many more academic papers that come from this project that will press home the authors' contributions and those who study higher education will readily recognise the critical theoretical roots of the analysis and the use of narrative as a powerful explanatory device. There are also relatively more straightforward matters: recasting and reemphasising our thinking about success and failure, recognising the complexity of choice for students, exploring how financial constraints impact on study, and so on. There are some areas that emerge of greater significance in the South African context than others; for example, the importance of the rural context particularly for post-university job searches where it is much more difficult than in the denser networks of the city. Rural communities tend to be poorer and this again points to the significance of race and class.

There are two ways of reading this, one of which is to think (as a resident of a tiny offshore island) that this doesn't really matter in 'our' context. The other is as a cue to take more seriously issues of location and geography and noticing for example that post-university experiences do indeed depend in part on location (in England the contrast is between the job-poor North East and the frenzied chaotically expensive job-rich South East). We might also reflect that Australian readers, for example, have scholarship of their own that points to the

importance of the rural context and also about how place is significantly associated with both race and class. In other words when we say 'international' it is good to remember that the term itself is not neutral. Mindful of the debates about what has become referred to as the global 'North' and 'South', the word 'international' should not be a euphemism for the view from the North. This is a book from the South and importantly so. International flows of significance should no longer be thought of as originating solely in the North. This deeply engaging book adds to our ability to question what higher education is for, what it can mean for those who participate in it, and to approach these questions with an extended vocabulary that moves beyond the idea that all universities can or should be about is individual and economic advancement. My view is that this is an idea whose time is ending and that many readers will be glad to have more evidence that points to the paucity of this vision.

CHAPTER 1

CONTEXTUALISING HIGHER EDUCATION

Themba[1] excelled at school and was awarded a scholarship to fund his studies for a BSc in Chemistry at a prestigious South African university. His family had wanted him to attend a university closer to home, but the scholarship specified the university. Themba found the first half of first year 'terrible'; he focused on his studies and didn't socialise very much and felt really lonely and homesick. He was still coming to terms with the whole idea of being at university; he had wanted to become a priest but his family had vetoed that option. During the July vacation, Themba had a conversation with a mentor and decided he needed to try to do things differently. From here on he started to spend more time with friends and and he found that he was beginning to really enjoy being at university. Second and third year were challenging – 'Physics was just another beast completely' – but he managed to succeed academically and upon graduation was accepted for honours. Themba's academic interests really took off in his masters year when he had a dynamic supervisor who arranged sponsorship for him to present his work at overseas conferences. From here he successfully competed for a highly sought after scholarship to do his PhD at a top international university. Themba is presently conducting this research in a cutting-edge scientific area.

Tebogo, who also did very well at school, was accepted into the highly competitive BSc in Actuarial Science at another high-status university. Tebogo felt his first year went well and he passed all his courses. However he didn't get the marks he needed for the second year Financial Mathematics course in this programme. He could continue with other second-year courses but it was a 'tough time' for Tebogo. At the end of that year he decided to take a break from studying and spent a year back home, doing some tutoring of Maths to school children. The following year he returned to university, changing his programme to a BComm in Economics and Finance. However, he didn't pass a key course in Economics needed for the following year, and so at that point he changed again to a more general BComm and continued to complete two majors. However, there were still other courses to complete and so he had to return for

1 All student names in this study are pseudonyms. The research participants had the option to choose their own pseudonym and most did so. The first introduction of a new narrative in the book is signaled by the use of bold font.

what was now a fifth year of study. This turned out to be 'another terrible year' and at the end, having passed only two of five courses for which he was registered, he was excluded[2] from the university. Now he is back at home, trying to get a job, in order to have the funds to be able to return again to complete his degree. But he is finding it hard to find work in his home town. Tebogo knows he should try to get to Johannesburg to increase his chances of finding work but he doesn't have money to do so.

Themba and Tebogo offer narratives that are the familiar stock of South African conversations about higher education. Both of them grew up in a township[3] and managed to get access to a competitive programme in a high-status university. We celebrate the student who succeeds at the highest level against the odds and we despair about the student who doesn't. Tebogo, in deliberating over his experiences of failure, seems to confirm some of these commonsense views:

> *[In high school] we didn't really have to study really hard to get pretty good marks. That is kind of a trap because it led us to believe that we could keep doing this for the rest of our lives. University clearly proved that this wasn't the case.*

Tebogo's comment supports the view that all that is needed for success in higher education is hard work. Students who don't apply themselves to their studies will fail. End of story.

Except this isn't the whole story at all. There is a broad literature that shows how complex are the multiple influences on academic outcomes.[4] Those of us who teach like to think that good teaching makes a difference. We also believe that institutional cultures can be better or worse in supporting academic endeavour. We know that peer relationships matter and indeed, Themba's narrative credits the importance of not only focusing on academic work. But all of these perspectives see the university as some kind of island in society, that can make good all the disadvantages that society places on so many young people.

The well-established field of the sociology of education has provided evidence over decades and across contexts of how societal structures influence educational outcomes.[5] The relationship between a student's socio-economic background and their educational attainment is well

2 Most South African universities require students to pass a certain number of course credits in a year in order to be readmitted the following year. If this is not achieved, the student faces what is termed 'academic exclusion'.

3 'Township' is a South African term referring to the underdeveloped peri-urban settlements created during apartheid for black African people who were denied residence in the other parts of the city.

4 There has been considerable research over a long period and in different contexts on student success in higher education, aiming to understand the various influences on academic outcomes. Much of this work has been quantitative using academic results and survey responses, but there have also been qualitative studies of student learning that aim to understand multiple influences. Some representative studies are: Yorke, M. and B. Longden (2004). *Retention and student success in higher education*. New York: McGraw-Hill International; Leibowitz, B. et al. (2009). *Focus on first-year success*. Stellenbosch: SUN Press; Kuh, G. D. et al. (2010). *Student success in college: Creating conditions that matter*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

5 The sociology of education is a subfield both in sociology and in education. Much of this work has taken place at the school level but increasingly there is higher education research that bases itself on a sociological perspective. For a useful overview of the field and its approaches see: Moore, R. (2004). *Education and society: Issues and explanations in the sociology of education*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

known and cannot simply be explained by individual characteristics.[6] Families with higher socio-economic status are able to offer their children a home environment that better prepares them for formal education. It is therefore not surprising that children from better off homes typically do better at school and higher education. It is not only about being able to pay fees, but possibly more significantly about the deep practices in the home that predispose certain young people to success in school and university – what has been termed 'cultural capital'.[7]

Therefore, a sociological perspective shows that powerful groups in society are powerful not only because of their economic position in society, but also because of their access to what has been termed 'powerful knowledge'.[8] This recognition has led to a focus on figuring out how to support those who are often termed 'first generation' university students, those whose parents did not go to university,[9] to gain access to this powerful knowledge.

There are other lines of argument that suggest that the solution is the reworking of what counts as valued knowledge, in order to allow for easier access by a broader range of people. There is an argument that the forms of knowledge and associated literacy practices that are valued in the academy are those of privileged groups in society, and that the university mainly serves to prop up this privilege. This is an important and ongoing strand of contestation in the university, with renewed emphasis across the global South and especially in contemporary discussions on 'decoloniality'.[10] It is also important to recognise that the stock of knowledge available to humankind is not static; as new knowledge arises and gains in importance, other

6 The relationship between socio-economic status and educational outcomes has been a core focus of the sociology of education. This relates to performance at school, access to higher education, performance in higher education, and also access to graduate jobs. These empirical relations are well established across many contexts (most notably in the UK) and can be moderated, but not eliminated, by the provision of good public schooling. For illustrative UK exemplars of this work see: Reay, D. and C. Vincent (2016). *Theorizing social class and education.* London: Routledge; Bathmaker, A–M. et al. (2016). *Higher education, social class and social mobility: The degree generation.* London: Palgrave McMillan.

7 Cultural capital is a concept that comes from the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. This concept extends the notion of capital beyond a purely economic meaning, and explains how people can get ahead in the world not only based on economic power. Crucially, capital only has meaning in the context of a field, which is a distinctive social space with particular rules of the game. The notion of cultural capital has been taken up by sociologists of education to explain the relation between socio-economic status and educational outcomes noted above. For illustrative exemplars of this work see: Clegg, S. (2011). Cultural capital and agency: Connecting critique and curriculum in higher education, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 32: 93–108; Naidoo, R. (2004). Fields and institutional strategy: Bourdieu on the relationship between higher education, inequality and society, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 25: 457–471.

8 The argument that the cultural capital of the middle-class home, also valued in the university, is not completely arbitrary, is captured in the notion of 'powerful knowledge', introduced in the following work: Wheelahan, L. (2012). *Why knowledge matters in curriculum: A social realist argument.* Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

9 An important development in understanding student experiences in higher education has been the formulation of the concept of 'first generation' students, whose parents did not access higher education. The notion of 'first-in-family' recognises students might have other family members like aunts or uncles who have been in higher education who can provide the necessary support based on their experiences, even if parents can't do so. Exemplar research in this area includes: Luckett, K. and T. Luckett (2009). The development of agency in first generation learners in higher education: A social realist analysis, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 14: 469–481; O'Shea, S. (2016). Avoiding the manufacture of 'sameness': First-in-family students, cultural capital and the higher education environment, *Higher Education*, 72: 59–78; Pym, J. and R. Kapp (2011). Harnessing agency: Towards a learning model for undergraduate students, *Studies in Higher Education*, 38: 272–284.

10 In South Africa during the 2015/2016 student protests one of the calls was for an overhaul of the curriculum, under the banner of 'decolonising the curriculum', building on, in particular, Latin American scholars of 'decoloniality'. A useful overview of some of these debates can be found in: Mbembe, A. (2015). *Decolonizing knowledge and the question of the archive*. University of the Witwatersrand.

knowledge will move to the background, especially in times of rapid change.[11] And it needs to be acknowledged that oftentimes social structures of exclusion, such as racism and colonialism, play a role in the legitimation of some forms of knowledge over others. All the same, there is still no getting away from the reality that knowledge has power in the contemporary world. The power of knowledge provides access to sophisticated technology and economic deliberations; it is key to human development and to critical conversations that society has about itself.[12] It is central to the sustainability of democratic systems.

And thus the journey of these students through higher education is of crucial importance in the world, not only for their individual possibilities of access to better lives through social mobility, but also for the broadening of access to knowledge in society and for the collective contribution that higher education can make to the betterment of society. These twin issues are at the core of this book: the influences on student success in higher education, and the broader contribution of higher education to the individual and to society.

It matters that Themba has succeeded. And it is of utmost concern that Tebogo apparently hasn't at this point.

The study

This book reports on a study in which in-depth interviews were conducted with 73 young people who first entered university studies in South Africa some six years beforehand.[13] All were studying towards a three-year bachelor's degree, in either Arts or Sciences at one of three research-intensive[14] universities in the study.[15] Themba and Tebogo are just two of them. The interviewees come from a range of socio-economic backgrounds; many of them are what can be termed first generation students in that their parents did not participate in bachelor's level university study. For many of them, access to university brings huge expectations to live different lives to that of their parents: expectations of social mobility. Some of them, like Themba, succeed in getting their degrees; some of them don't succeed at first but then get there; some, like Tebogo, are still grappling. Some of them move with ease into the jobs they

11 Achille Mbembe refers to the 'planetary library' as an evolving, expanding stock of human knowledge, referred to in a recent keynote address at ICED/HELTASA I (https://youtu.be/qLEEEyn4Hi0)

12 Wheelahan, L. (2012). *Why knowledge matters in curriculum: A social realist argument.* Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

13 The full research design of the study is laid out in Appendix A.

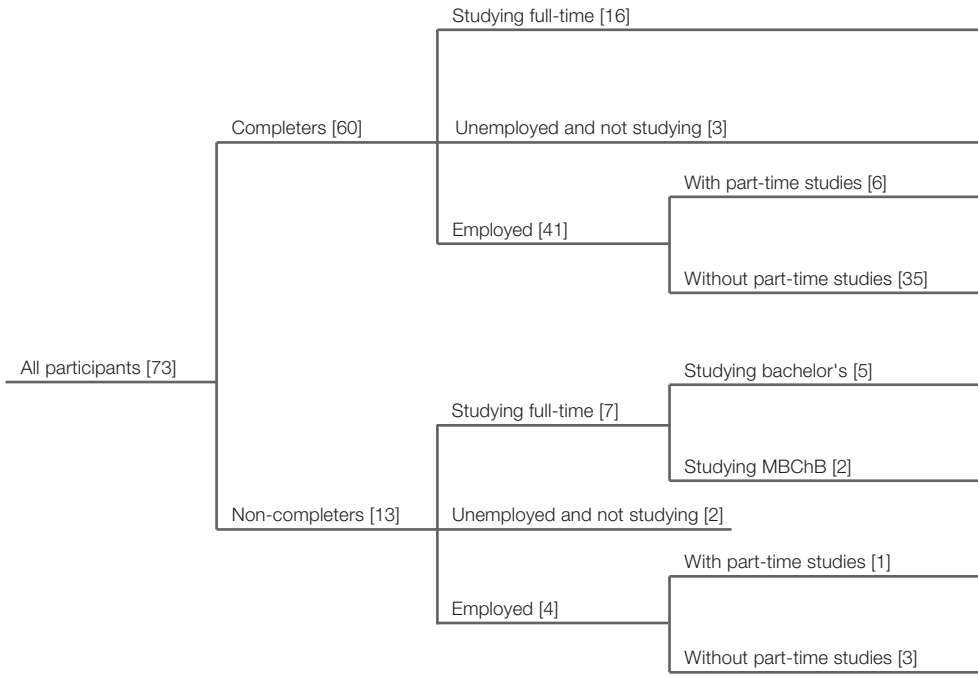
14 There are currently 26 public universities in South Africa, of which seven are characterised in a recent analysis as research-led. The terms research-led and research-intensive tend to be used interchangeably in this literature, and all refer to universities which have a strong focus on strengthening knowledge production. In this study we use the term 'research-intensive'. These universities tend to enjoy higher status in terms of desirability for prospective students, select higher-performing students from the school system, and are a focus for recruitment of graduates by top firms. Bunting, I. (2016). Academic core: Performance and change indicators. Cape Town: Centre for Higher Education Transformation; Van Broekhuizen, H. et al. (2016). Higher education access and outcomes for the 2008 South African national matric cohort. Stellenbosch: Centre for Development and Enterprise, Stellenbosch University.

15 The three institutions involved in this study are described in Appendix A. In the main part of the book we do not use institutional names but rather describe characteristics of the institutions where relevant in the analysis, in order to aid an interpretation of the findings that rests on the empirical evidence given, rather than on reader preconceptions.

had anticipated; many of them struggle to find the kind of work that fits their ideas of what they should be doing.

In Figure 1 the trajectories of the 73 participants in the study are shown schematically. The first distinction is between those who at the time of the interview had completed a bachelor's degree and those who hadn't. In each of these groups further distinctions are made on their current full-time occupation, whether working or studying or employed. For those who are working, we disaggregate finally whether they are studying part-time or not.

Figure 1 Trajectories of study participants



In the chapters that follow we draw on the 73 narratives to analyse the broader influences on these experiences of success and failure. In this chapter we have presented the stories of Themba and Tebogo, and we will shortly introduce Nala. In each subsequent chapter we will introduce a few more young people to the growing pool of core narratives around which the book is structured.[16] These narratives provide a springboard for the closer examination of findings emerging from this study across the full set of interviews, illustrated with further data, and

16 A narrative methodology underpins this study, in which the logic of each individual story is firstly examined before any attempt to find similarities and differences across narratives. In the book we use this orientation to present the main findings in the first instance through a close-up examination of selected illustrative narratives.

contextualised within the contemporary literature on higher education in South Africa and elsewhere.

Before we neatly categorise our young people into narratives of success and failure, we need to stand back somewhat from our own preconceived ideas about young people's trajectories in the world. Certainly, Tebogo had hoped to complete his degree by this point, and is currently mustering his capacities to be able to do so. But even in this difficult space, sitting at home in the township without easy access to networks in the world, he had this to say when asked how he might have been influenced by the experience of having been at university:

> *I think university has changed my life for the better, no two ways about it. Just having been there … it shapes your thinking. You really grow up a lot and I mean not like – just like – generally grow up, but university teaches you how to critically assess pretty much everything, and it makes you curious, it makes you sceptical … I am better off having gone to university than not having gone, and that is my honest opinion. Yeah, no, it was definitely a big plus. It was a huge plus going to university.*
>
> *I think just out of the many academic difficulties I've had, in the past I have regretted having gone to [the university I attended], given how challenging it was, but I think another thing that I wasn't completely aware of in going to university was really the different standards that exist across the universities in South Africa, that they are not all of the same difficulty level. If you perhaps go to [another university] it might be challenging but it won't be anything close to [the university I attended]. So yeah, at times … well firstly when you see some of your friends who weren't up there in terms of academic strength in high school but they completed their degrees in no time, but that's because they went to other universities … do you know what I mean? ... So sometimes I think maybe I should have gone somewhere else. But look, university is a big jump.*

He has no regrets about going to university; he is proud to have been at an institution where he feels the academic standards were almost impossibly high. Even though he hasn't yet completed a degree, he feels that he is a changed person, and he is optimistic about his capacities to sort out the problems that are currently facing him.

Let's not be too quick to cast simplistic judgements, and let's also not be too sanguine about the experience of failure. The messy reality is somewhere in between. And possibly the most important finding to emerge from this study is quite how messy are the trajectories that many young people go through as they attempt to find their way in the current world. Even in a society with a relatively sophisticated (if very sluggish) economy, with legislation supporting the education and employment of the previously disadvantaged majority, there are no easy routes for most young people in contemporary South Africa. There are both opportunities and constraints, and young people are navigating these in interesting ways.

The book explores the exercise of agency in detail. How is it that some young people in this study found the capacity to act in difficult situations whereas others didn't? We look closely at how individual agency seems to mediate both opportunities and constraints. Our exploration rests on the sociological perspective introduced above, which requires a full consideration of the workings of social context in supporting or restricting young people's paths into adulthood. One enormously crucial dimension centres on the roles that parents and other authority figures play in young people's lives. Here the broader narratives offered by Themba and Tebogo are instructive. Themba's grandmothers had an important influence on his educational opportunities:

> *My grandmother, even though she didn't study too far, she was a great supporter of education. Both of my grandmothers actually encouraged me to speak English before I could speak Zulu because they saw that as a way of being able to get ahead quickly. So, because of that I was able to get admitted to an English medium pre-school quite early. So from pre-school I've just been in [former white educational institutions].*

His younger siblings, his father's children born into a separate subsequent family, sadly do not get this support. Themba says:

> *So, my sisters' family are not well off. My oldest sister is currently not in an education system even though she should be in varsity. She is 19. So, unfortunately, because of the fact that their families could not afford the opportunities for them to study or to go out and study more they haven't been as academically successful.*

The interview did not explicitly ask participants to talk about their parents, but nearly all of the 73 interviewed chose to do so at some point, often about their deliberations to go to university. However, Tebogo's narrative is striking in this regard as he did not choose to mention his parents or his family at any point in the interview. The analysis of these relatively open-ended interviews is focused on what young people themselves chose to put forward in telling their stories, rather than asking them to answer a long list of standard questions. From Tebogo's choice not to mention his parents or family at all we infer that they did not play a significant role in his deliberations around higher education.

Our study also moves beyond the family context to consider many other dimensions of the external environment and how these interact with young people's 'making their way in the world'.[17]

To emphasise the point that we need to avoid simple polarities (which we may have inadvertently suggested by the contrasting narratives of Themba and Tebogo), at this point we

17 Archer, M. S. (2007). *Making our way through the world: Human reflexivity and social mobility.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

bring in one more narrative to unsettle any premature foreclosure around our understanding of higher education in society.

Nala had been accepted to do medicine at a university which would have meant her leaving home, and her mother did not think this was a good idea. So she went to the same university as Tebogo, where she had been accepted to do a general BSc through the extended curriculum programme.[18] She was not too sure why she was doing this programme and, although she appreciated the support, she struggled a lot with the courses and was excluded from Science at the end of her second year; she therefore changed to a Humanities degree, but this also didn't go well. At the same time she had become involved in extra-curricular leadership initiatives at the university, even being involved in the establishment of a new course around social entrepreneurship. After two more years of study she was academically excluded. But she had experience and networks from her extra-curricular involvements that she could draw on in finding a route into employment.

Nala now works full-time in a start-up company focused on social entrepreneurship, a job she loves. She thinks she maybe shouldn't have gone to university when she did or studied what she did but she believes the networks she made there were invaluable:

> *I would never have met the people that I met. [At school] I was around people who didn't have much drive. I think twelve of the students at my high school went to university, and people were just like, 'Why are you applying, what are you doing, why are you trying, why do you need to go to varsity?' So being exposed to a bunch of other people with a lot of drive inspired me a lot.*

Nala's narrative offers an important further challenge to our conventional thinking around higher education and its role in facilitating access to future employment. In South Africa, there is great concern for those who don't finish their degrees. We have national initiatives aimed at trying to reduce this 'wastage'. But was it a 'waste' for Nala to have attended university? She might not have walked away with a degree certificate but she left hugely skilled and focused in what she wanted to do.

Nala came from a difficult family background with limited financial resources and parents who battled to support the family. This certainly influenced her ability to focus on her studies. She was initially working part-time and then when she got a bursary she sent most of it to her mother, something that many young South Africans find themselves doing. But university was also the place where Nala for the first time managed to access professional help to aid her in dealing with depression. It was the place she developed her sense of purpose and fostered her networking skills to begin a career that gives her much satisfaction. Furthermore, she is now studying for a commerce degree through the national distance university.

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18 Extended curriculum or foundation programmes are designed for students who do not meet the admission requirements for the regular (also termed 'mainstream') route, or who are otherwise identified as requiring additional support.

Theorising structure and agency

This study, as already indicated, locates itself within a sociological perspective on education. A key conceptual issue in sociology is the relationship between what are termed 'structure' and 'agency'. When we describe social context as 'structure', the focus is on the roles and institutions that constitute society. Individual action falls under the characterisation of 'agency' which emphasises that human action is always with intentionality. Neither of these dimensions operates independently, they are always 'jointly in play'.[19] And furthermore, the lines of causality are complex and not unidirectional. At any given moment, there are multiple structures that can constrain or enable any individual's enactment of agency. So we can never state that a particular social structure 'causes' a particular person to act in a particular way or to have any particular experience of an event.

Many different scholars have grappled with how to conceptualise structure and agency and the relationship between them. For the purposes of this study, we found the British sociologist Margaret Archer's theorisation of human agency to be particularly useful.[20] A key construct is that of the internal conversation, where individuals weigh up their concerns, their options, and then deliberate on possible courses of action. The extent to which we are able to utilise the space of the internal conversation, and the particular form the internal conversation takes, is structured by our social contexts. It is not a one-way causal link: social structures do not predetermine what agency is possible, though they can certainly enable or constrain it. Conversely, agents cannot deterministically influence structures, but the exercise of individual agency can indeed alter the shape of structural arrangements.[21] Internal conversations are not purely rational deliberations; emotional responses play a key role in decision-making.

In exploring how different people conduct their internal conversations, Archer identified distinctly different 'modes of reflexivity':[22]

- Communicative reflexivity is a mode in which the internal conversation gets externalised and deliberations are checked with close others.
- Autonomous reflexivity involves a much more internal space, where decisions are not typically checked with others, and focus is on building individual competence.

19 Archer, M. S. (2008). For structure: Its reality, properties and powers: A reply to Anthony King, *The Sociological Review*, 48: 464–472, p. 465.

20 Margaret Archer has written up her work over a series of five books. For the purposes of this study, the key ideas are drawn from the final three books: Archer, M. S. (2003). *Structure, agency and the internal conversation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Archer, M. S. (2000). *Being human: The problem of agency.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Archer, M. S. (2007). *Making our way through the world: Human reflexivity and social mobility.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

21 Archer calls this 'morphogenesis', introduced in her earliest book: Archer, M. S. (1995). *Realist social theory: The morphogenetic approach.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

22 A fourth mode, fractured reflexivity, has also been identified, but is less relevant for this study.

- Metareflexivity involves internal conversations referencing social ideals, stems from a dissatisfaction with the social circumstances of others, and often involves decisions that do not necessarily enhance the individual's own status.

Coming from a different theoretical tradition, the economist and philosopher of human development, Amartya Sen, uses the term 'conversion factors' to describe the array of intersecting personal, social and environmental structures that make it possible or not for an individual to exercise their human agency.[23] Agency is conceptualised by Sen in terms of 'capabilities' which relate to individual people's ability to choose to live their lives in accordance with what they value. Sen provides particular value to this study in allowing a conceptualisation of the normative that rests in the first instance on people's own interests in the world, rather than on some externally defined ideal. We saw in discussion above how it was important not to simply characterise Tebogo's experience as outright failure, but also to account for the ways in which he felt his agency in the world had been broadened.

The context of South African higher education

We began our data collection for this study in late 2015, coinciding with the onset of an unprecedented national emergence of student protests under the banner of #feesmustfall. This has signalled the most significant contestation over higher education in just over two decades of the democratic era, and at the time of writing this book the situation is still far from resolved. While the flashpoint has been the annual above-inflation fee increases (related to a declining state subsidy to universities and overall above-inflation increases on the costs of higher education), the dissatisfaction expressed in the protests has resonated with a wider questioning about the contemporary South African system of higher education.

A significant report by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) was published in 2013,[24] offering a substantial mirror against which the higher education system could view itself. The image that this report reflected of poor throughput and low retention was disturbing, although hardly unexpected, given that the CHE reports annually on these statistics. In the most recent report[25] it was shown that with regard to three-year bachelor's degrees, the focus for this study, only 30% of students registered for these degrees in contact mode graduated in the specified three years, with overall 56% graduating within a five-year period. If the cohort is racially

23 The Nobel prize-winning economist, Amartya Sen, lays out his philosophy in the book: Sen, A. K. (1999). *Development as freedom.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. Further elaboration on implications of this philosophy for higher education are in the work of philosopher Martha Nussbaum: Nussbaum, M. C. (2011). *Creating capabilities: The human development approach.* Cambridge, MA: Belknap. See also: Walker, M. and E. Unterhalter (2007). *Amartya Sen's capability approach and social justice in education.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

24 Council on Higher Education (2013). A proposal for undergraduate curriculum reform in South Africa: The case for a flexible curriculum structure. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education.

25 Council on Higher Education (2016). VitalStats: Public Higher Education, 2014. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education.

disaggregated, 31% of white students graduate in three years, compared to 19% of black African[26] students entering these degrees.

South Africa has doubled the number of students in higher education since 1994, and now has about 1 million students in the system. This constitutes 20% of the 18- to 23-year-old-age cohort.[27] Black Africans now constitute 70% of university students, a notable increase since the onset of democracy, but still somewhat less than the population proportion of 80%. An important aspect here is that South African university students are drawn from a very small proportion of schools in the system; overwhelmingly those drawing learners from the top socio-economic bands. Scholars evaluating South African schools note the continuation of a two-tiered system, with the poor only having access to poorly resourced schools from which very few obtain the school results needed for access to higher education (and for those who do, it is mainly to lower status universities), while wealthier families access well-resourced public or private schools, and have good chances of access to higher status universities.[28]

South Africa's post-apartheid higher education system came into being with a White Paper[29] which set out the difficult task of trying to transform a racially segregated system into one appropriate for the new democracy in a new global era at the end of the twentieth century. A subsequent process of institutional mergers sought to further recraft this landscape.[30] Maybe no one should be surprised that the transition has not been quick or seamless. Most historically white universities (HWUs[31]) now have a majority black student body but historically black universities (HBUs) remain almost exclusively populated by black students.[32] A crucial report in 2008 commissioned by the then Department of Education looked into the issue of

26 The post-apartheid South African government uses the apartheid era race-based classifications (black African, coloured, white, Indian/Asian) in order to track social transformation. We acknowledge that these terms are problematic.

27 The participation of the black African majority youth cohort has just reached 15%, taking even this relatively underrepresented group beyond the category of 'elite' participation (as is the situation for most of the rest of the continent) into an early 'massified' system. These terms were proposed in an early work by Martin Trow and continue to be useful markers of different stages of expansion of national higher education systems. Council on Higher Education (2016). VitalStats: Public Higher Education, 2014. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education; Trow, M. (1973). *Problems in the transition from elite to mass higher education.* Berkeley: Carnegie Commission on Higher Education.

28 Spaull, N. (2013). South Africa's education crisis: The quality of education in South Africa 1994–2011. Johannesburg: Centre for Development and Enterprise; Van Broekhuizen, H. et al. (2016). Higher education access and outcomes for the 2008 South African national matric cohort. Stellenbosch: Centre for Development and Enterprise, Stellenbosch University; Wilson-Strydom, M. (2015). *University access and success: Capabilities, diversity and social justice.* Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

29 Department of Education (1997). White paper on higher education. Pretoria: Department of Education, Government of the Republic of South Africa.

30 For an overview of this process, see: Badat, S. (2009). Theorising institutional change: Post-1994 South African higher education, *Studies in Higher Education*, 34: 455–467; Jansen, J. (2004). Changes and continuities in South Africa's higher education system, 1994–2004. In Chisholm, L. (ed.), *Changing class: Education and social change in post-apartheid South Africa.* Cape Town: HSRC Press, pp. 293–314.

31 We will use this terminology and acronyms through this book, noting here the alternative terminology of Historically Advantaged Institution (HAI) and Historically Disadvantaged Institution (HDI).

32 Cooper, D. (2015). Social justice and South African university student enrolment data by 'race', 1998–2012: From 'Skewed revolution' to 'Stalled revolution', *Higher Education Quarterly*, 69: 237–262.

discrimination on university campuses and found substantial evidence of racism and sexism in a range of manifestations.[33]

This contestation over what has been achieved, or not achieved, two decades into democratic South Africa in its public higher education system sets the stage for the present study. We consider young people who entered higher education in 2009, a generation who were born only a few years before the democratic transition and went through schooling in a changed yet also unchanged system. We set out to investigate the influence on their lives of having been in higher education, regardless of whether they graduated or not. We wanted to know about the deliberations and choices in their lives, what they experienced as opportunities but also what they experienced as constraints.

We know from survey studies that South African graduates have relatively low rates of unemployment but that these are racially skewed. On average we know that these graduates have some of the highest rates of return in the world on their personal investment in higher education.[34] These large-scale surveys are important but they cannot tell us much about the individual experiences and choices that collectively constitute the macro picture; they cannot tell us much about the different experiences that average out. This study aimed through a different methodology to bring new insights to bear on important questions that rightly trouble South African society.

Much of the international literature in the sociology of education rests on the concept of social class, where social difference is related fundamentally to occupational status and relations in the labour market. Cultural capital, mentioned earlier, is intimately linked to class origins. This theorisation allows for detailed explanations of how education not only provides routes of social mobility, but also reproduces patterns of social difference.

There is a longstanding debate on how to conceptualise class and its role in social structures in South Africa. Scholars have pointed out that class is a concept originally developed in analyses of industrialised Western countries, and cannot be unproblematically imposed on the South African context. The inheritance of the colonial and apartheid histories has left a highly stratified society where a signficant proportion of the population is poor and not in the formal economy.[35] This group can therefore not be characterised as working class, but rather, the term 'underclass' has been proposed, signalling its very marginalised status.[36] The small working

33 This report is commonly referred to as the 'Soudien Report': Department of Education (2008). Report of the Ministerial Committee on transformation and social cohesion and the elimination of discrimination in public Higher Education Institutions. Pretoria: Department of Education.

34 The concept of rate of return on education refers to the multiplier effect that additional years of education have on the individual's earnings. This is a World Bank study which demonstrates that presently South African graduates have on average the highest rates of return in the world for their years in university: Montenegro, C. E. and H. A. Patrinos (2014). *Comparable estimates of returns to schooling around the world.* New York: World Bank.

35 Statistics show that 55.5% of South Africans are not able to sustain their needs within their income levels. Within this group, 25.2% of South Africans live in conditions of extreme poverty where they are unable to meet their daily dietary requirements or fulfil their basic sanitation or housing needs. Statistics South Africa (2017). Poverty trends in South Africa. Pretoria: Statistics South Africa.

36 Seekings, J. and N. Nattrass (2008). *Class, race, and inequality in South Africa.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

class in formal jobs are in some analyses characterised as part of the middle class due to the possibilities they experience for social advancement.

Roger Southall, in a recent book,[37] focuses attention on the emerging black middle class in South Africa. He points out that the severe restrictions of apartheid meant that the growth of this group was significantly stunted, although the growth of industry in the post-war period did create a black working class. The post-apartheid project, argues Southall, was centred on creating the conditions for expansion of the black middle class, although not usually described in these terms. This is of course a longstanding challenge for the African National Congress (ANC) with its origins in an intellectual African elite, but recognising the need to speak to the dispossession of black South Africans more generally. In the post-apartheid era these contradictions were managed through a policy discourse which suggested that, although the new black middle class would obtain material benefits, they would also remain a patriotic bourgeosie, committed to overall societal upliftment. Present times involve a significant contestation over every aspect of this compromise position.

Southall points out that, due to colonial and apartheid policies, the white middle class tends to have inter-generational transmission of economic capital, which the black middle class does not have. However, Southall also shows that the survival of elite aspirations, even with the financial deprivation and dispossession of apartheid, has meant that cultural capital is a significant resource in many families. For these reasons higher education is intimately connected to social mobility in post-apartheid South Africa. Going to university has come to be seen as crucial for gaining access or maintaining status in the black middle class.

In this study therefore, we were not able to make the same kinds of firm identifications of class as might be seen in some of the UK literature referenced earlier. We have tended to rather use relative terms such as more or less well off, and draw on actual details on parental background where these were known. All the same, we were interested to note in what ways participation in higher education for South African young people promoted social mobility or class consolidation, and this brings us to the broader debates on the purposes of higher education.

Debates on the purposes of higher education

As noted above, this study looks at individual trajectories – not only to understand the influences on student success – but also to consider how higher education has promoted social mobility and economic advancement. Over the last few decades these economic arguments about the purposes of higher education have had saliency. There are two key positions in this regard, one based on human capital theory and an alternative view based on the credentialing

37 Southall, R. (2016). *The new black middle class in South Africa.* Suffolk, UK: Boydell & Brewer.

functions of education.[38] Human capital theory argues that there will be a linear causal link between expansion of educational participation and economic development. Within this understanding, education is viewed as an investment which will offer economic returns both for society and for the individual.

But the evidence from countries that have achieved high levels of participation in higher education does not support this theory. Expansion of education is often not accompanied by an expansion of jobs that require high levels of training; in fact what is observed more typically is that graduates are employed at levels below those for which they are qualified.[39]

An alternative position on the role of higher education with regard to the economy focuses on its credentialing role. In a labour market where lots of graduates are jostling for limited jobs, higher education credentials serve to assist employers to select graduates by signalling levels of academic performance and specifics of skills attained, and this notion often includes judgements of institutional status as signals of quality. This idea is in line with the observation noted above that educational qualifications are not necessarily absolute requirements for a job, but rather tools in which the stakes get raised for access to jobs.

However, regardless of whether higher education is understood to be an economic driver or a means of credentialling skills, we argue that to put economic advancement as the main purpose of higher education is an inadequate conception of its significance in society in current times. While the university might be considered an enduring institution, its purposes need to be reworked and recontextualised in different locations and periods in history. This is especially important in contexts such as that of South Africa of high inequality and limited but growing participation in higher education. It can be anticipated that during periods of expansion there will be renewed debates on the purposes of higher education;[40] and this has indeed been the case.

There is a lively contemporary literature that seeks to reconceptualise the meaning of the public good purposes of higher education in present times.[41] Marginson[42] suggests that in addition to the two economic conceptions of the purposes of higher education outlined above, to be adequate to contemporary social and political challenges, a 'public good' set of purposes needs to be conceptualised that is centred on a global networked open system of collaboration

38 More details can be found in: Allais, S. (2014). A critical perspective on large class teaching: The political economy of massification and the sociology of knowledge, *Higher Education*, 67: 721–734; Marginson, S. (2011). Higher education and public good, *Higher Education Quarterly*, 65: 411–433.

39 See, for example: Brown, P. et al. (2010). *The global auction: The broken promises of education, jobs, and incomes.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

40 Trow, M. (1973). *Problems in the transition from elite to mass higher education.* Berkeley: Carnegie Commission on Higher Education.

41 See, for example: Leibowitz, B. (2012). *Higher education for the public good: Views from the South*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham; McMahon, W. W. (2009). *Higher learning, greater good: The private and social benefits of higher education.* Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press; Singh, M. (2014). Higher education and the public good: Precarious potential? *Acta Academica*, 46: 98–118; Walker, M. (2012). Universities, professional capabilities and contributions to the public good in South Africa, *Compare,* 42: 819–838; Williams, J. (2016). A critical exploration of changing definitions of public good in relation to higher education, *Studies in Higher Education*, 41: 619–630.

42 Marginson, S. (2011). Higher education and public good, *Higher Education Quarterly*, 65: 411–433.

and exchange. He outlines a conceptualisation of 'public good' that is associated with 'democratic forms, openness, transparency, popular sovereignty and grass-roots agency'.

Other scholars have drawn on positions associated with the philosophy of education to offer a recontextualised notion of public good purposes for present times. Nixon[43] draws on an enlightenment perspective which views human existence as constituted through the three inter-related but distinct spheres of the social, the civic and the cosmopolitan. In the social, we have the core of human flourishing, being recognised by others for your distinct achievements. The civic is the space where we need to work out how we can live together in this difference; this will always involve an ongoing pushing outwards of civic boundaries. The cosmopolitan is the arena that in recent times has become dominated by an economic concept of globalisation, but here Nixon, like Marginson, urges us to consider the democratic alternative of a global conversation around social justice, which gains increasing urgency as environmental constraints are felt globally.

Walker and Fongwa draw on the work of Sen, mentioned above, to propose an enlarged perspective on the purposes of higher education to include developing democratic citizenship values, focusing specifically on the challenges experienced in a developing country context.[44] Walker, in earlier work, has also suggested that in such a context, university graduated professionals need to have an explicit focus in their work on alleviating inequality and working towards social justice.[45]

The introduction to this chapter will have given the reader a sense of the style of writing in this book. We have deliberately chosen an approach that we hope will be accessible to a broader audience than a traditional academic one, given that the issues that the book grapples with, as laid out in this opening chapter, are currently very much under debate across society. To summarise, these issues can be formulated as follows:

1. How can we understand student success and failure in higher education?
    a. How does individual agency mediate both opportunities and constraints?
    b. What are the influences of social background?
2. How might the university better facilitate student success?
    a. What is the role of higher education in society?
    b. In what ways does higher education facilitate employment and social mobility for graduates?

What are the broader purposes of higher education in terms of the public good?

The opening narratives of this book, those of Themba and Tebogo, rightly prompted us to begin our investigation of the first major question. These led in this chapter to opening up

43 Nixon, J. (2011). *Higher education and the public good.* London: Continuum.

44 Walker, M. and S. Fongwa (2017). *Universities, employability and human development.* New York: Springer.

45 Walker, M. and M. McLean (2013). *Professional education, capabilities and the public good: The role of universities in promoting human development.* London: Routledge.

some of the debates around success and failure, and the role of individual agency and of broader social structures including family backgrounds. Chapter 2 picks this up to look more closely at student trajectories through the undergraduate curriculum, examining in detail how the hurdles of passing or failing a course build up into larger hurdles around progression. A key issue that starts to emerge at this point is around the way in which young people make the choice to study, and particularly on what and where to study. In Chapter 3 we therefore move backwards in the chronology to look at the deliberations which our participants engaged in before going to university. In this chapter we specifically look at the crucial role that families and communities play in an individual's choice of what and where to study, and how to arrange the finance and logistics around this. In Chapter 4 we return to the university experience, looking beyond matters of academic progress. Here we look at the student experience more broadly, at the possibilities for being and belonging but also at difficulties experienced in the transition from home to university.

With Chapter 5 we move to the second major question and begin our exploration of these young people's lives after they leave the university where they began their bachelor's degrees. In this chapter we consider those who did not complete that degree, most of whom are continuing their studies but at another institution. In this chapter we particularly note the external impacts that can be experienced by young women, in the families they come from, and also the families they come to be responsible for when they have their own children. Chapter 6 looks at the deliberations and experiences of those who continue with postgraduate studies, and Chapter 7 looks at the experience of entering the workplace. These chapters provide significant detail to what is already known about young South African's motivations to do postgraduate studies, and their opportunities and constraints in gaining employment. Chapter 8 draws together some of the key findings that emerge from this study of young people navigating their way through higher education and beyond, and considers implications for higher education.

And so, we now move to Chapter 2 where we look more closely at students' trajectories through the undergraduate curriculum and their academic experiences of being a university student.

CHAPTER 2

NAVIGATING THE UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM

Narratives already introduced:

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

Narratives to be introduced in this chapter:

Martin	*BA (Hons) Theatre Management – working as theatre manager*
Martha	*BSc Elec Eng – switched to BSc Computer Science – motherhood – studying BSc Computer Science part-time*
Hannah	*B Soc Sci completed but no academic transcript – SAPS trainee*

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

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

sufficient courses at the required levels for graduation within three years; those registered in the extended curriculum programme have a curriculum that takes four years.[46]

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

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

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

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

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

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46 Department of Higher Education and Training (2012). Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF). Pretoria: Department of Higher Education and Training.

47 Council on Higher Education (2013). A proposal for undergraduate curriculum reform in South Africa: The case for a flexible curriculum structure. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education.

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

It is worth noting that of the overall cohort who entered this particular programme at this institution in 2009, only 51% had graduated five years after commencement. Of significant concern is that when these figures are racially disaggregated, we see that only 36% of black African South African students graduated, compared to 72% of their white South African peers in this university's BSc programme. It might seem a plausible explanation that many of these difficulties can be ascribed to students not having made appropriate choices around a programme of study. And indeed, many of them fit this description, for example, Nala, who was accepted for Medicine, but decided to do BSc and then changed to a BA but didn't complete that. A further set of explanations might rest in the well-documented poor preparation that many South African school leavers have in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects.[48] For the moment though, these explanations should be considered provisional, while we move to consider students' experiences of moving through the curriculum more broadly, starting with the narrative of Martin, who enrolled for a BA at this same institution.

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

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

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

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

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

48 See, for example: Graven, M. H. (2014). Poverty, inequality and mathematics performance: The case of South Africa's post-apartheid context, *ZDM Mathematics Education*, 46: 1039–1049; Juan, A. and M. Visser (2017). Home and school environmental determinants of science achievement of South African students, *South African Journal of Education*, 37: 1–10.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Martin's experience of changing his disciplinary focus over the course of the degree was seen in many of the narratives in this study. In fact, the experience of knowing what you want to do, coming to university and seamlessly doing it, was very rare across the 73 young people we spoke to. In this section, we first explore in a little more detail this trajectory of changing direction during the degree.

We found that flexibility in the degree structure of BA and BSc degrees was important in enabling students to find their strengths and passions, and to allow them to change direction during the degree. However, the curriculum structure of the degrees varied substantially across the three institutions. On the one extreme was an institution with a flexible, 'liberal arts'-type approach, enabling students to take a combination of BA and BSc subjects alongside many others. Another institution was rather less flexible than this, but did allow some cross-over of BA and BSc subjects. At the other extreme was the third institution, which implemented a thorough programmatisation of its degree structure in the late 1990s,[49] with almost no possibility for BA subjects in a BSc degree, or vice versa. Furthermore, core modules were specified within each degree programme at this third institution, which left very little flexibility to choose between elective modules.

We noted that students in BA programmes experienced more latitude in being able to change direction of study than in BSc programmes, even in the institution which generally allowed significant flexibility in degree structure. This is unsurprising as the sciences have hierarchical knowledge structures,[50] which often lead to senior courses having junior courses as prerequisites. The cumulative nature of the knowledge means that to acquire more advanced levels of knowledge the student already has to have a good grasp of previous levels. In Arts and Humanities, many disciplines involve horizontal knowledge structures where senior courses do not necessarily require the knowledge in junior courses. Senior courses may draw on concepts introduced at more junior levels but they do not necessarily depend much on pre-existing knowledge. Thus, the BA rules of combination allow more for wrong choices and changes in direction. The BA rules also generally allow for straightforward strategic moves if one is failing in a particular area of study. If you find that you can't succeed in a particular disciplinary direction then you can always shift direction and this doesn't necessarily mean an extra year of study, as was seen above in Martin's experience. There is a very wide range of subjects and they make very different academic demands on students.

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

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

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

50 This characterisation of different knowledge structures in the university comes from the work of British sociologist of education Basil Bernstein and has been taken up by others in higher education studies. Bernstein, B. (2000). *Pedagogy, symbolic control, and identity: Theory, research, critique*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield; Maton, K. (2013). *Knowledge & knowers: Towards a realist sociology of education.* London: Routledge; Muller, J. (2009). Forms of knowledge and curriculum coherence, *Journal of Education and Work*, 22: 205–226.

> *know other things that I thought I would love I ended up hating, you know, like Philosophy. I honestly thought that I would love it and I didn't. It was interesting for like the first three months and then I was so over it. [9]*[51]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

51 The participants are all listed in Appendix A. As noted earlier, the main narratives are given pseudonyms; all other participants are referenced by a number.

> *Psychology. I remember a professor at the Sociology department saying to me why don't I come and do Honours in Sociology, but in all honesty, I had zero interest in pursuing it even though it was one of those subjects where I got so much enjoyment out of reading and learning. It is definitely a critical thinking subject but it didn't fuel me as much as Psychology did, and I think maybe at the back of my mind I would have had no idea if I had done an Honours in Sociology what the next step would have been from there. [47]*

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

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

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

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

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

> *So, I started out definitely wanting to take English and Maths. And I've always loved computers and I do a bit of web design so I thought I'd take Computer Science, to do a bit of programming …*
>
> *[The university I attended] is very free in letting you sort of mix and match, so I could major in English even in a BSc so long as my other major was one of the core sciences …*
>
> *I also took Physics and then I thought I'd just see what all this Philosophy stuff was about …*
>
> *So, I then had a clash between Philosophy and Maths and I found myself adoring Philosophy and finding Maths rather boring at the start. Because at the start all the Maths we were learning was stuff I'd learnt in school so I started going to Philosophy instead of Maths. … I failed to go to Maths and do the work so that by the time they switched to new Maths that I didn't know I was so far behind that I didn't do terribly well …*
>
> *I did pass Maths at the end of the year but I'd fallen completely head over heels with Philosophy so I switched to a BA and to Philosophy as my new Major. [6]*

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

> *Well, when I was in matric*[52] *I had this dream of being like a Chemistry person, like working in a lab and making explosions and things like that. I actually took psychology as a filler in my first year, and I just really fell in love with it. I decided to take it through and continue studying it, and I did a lot of volunteer work in residences and in the community. Yes, I just decided maybe psychology is the route for me to take, so I only actually really decided in my second year, I think, to become a psychologist. [15]*

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

52 Matriculation is the final school-leaving examination in South Africa and the term 'matric' is often also used to refer to the final school year, Grade 12.

> *And what I've learned with university is that you are able to choose. At high school, obviously our courses and subjects and things were prescribed, and everything was a set thing of what you're going to do and where you're going to be and these are the marks you're going to get. [29]*

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

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

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

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

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

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

We have explored here the experiences of students who came to study a particular disciplinary direction, but then changed their minds after they had done a course in that area. Sometimes

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

A closer look at the BSc

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

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

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

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

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

53 This restriction of student choice has been an unintended consequence of the programmatisation of SA higher education, which was actually intended to allow greater flexibility for students and portability across institutions. Instead, with programmes designed around compulsory core modules, students who change programmes or transfer between institutions often need to repeat an academic year. For further detail on the impacts of this policy, see: Ensor, P. (2002). Curriculum. In Cloete, N., Maassen, P., Fehnel, R., Moja, T., Gibbon, T. and Perold, H. (eds), *Transformation in higher education: Global pressures and local realities in South Africa*. Cape Town: Juta, pp. 179–194.

In her third year at university Martha was able to do the second-year Computer Science course, but now she had difficulty in building friendships with this new cohort of students, which was necessary in order to access academic support from peers:

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

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

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

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

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

At the end of the year Martha took a break from her studies and spent two years as a full-time mother. She feels that getting married and having a baby gave her a sense of purpose in life. Then she managed to obtain a scholarship to study fully online through an overseas institution, again in Computer Science. The following year she also registered for Computer Science through the South African distance university and is doing both programmes of study in parallel. She is studying because she feels these programmes will give her the skills she needs to get a job, especially given the challenges of finding work as a foreigner in South Africa.

Martha has a rather sobering comment on how being at university influenced her life: apart from meeting her husband and getting credits for first year she doesn't think she obtained much:

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

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

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

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

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

> *In my first year, I didn't know how the academic setting would go, so I had initially thought that I'd go there and do all the subjects that I wanted to do. Because I was just naïve and overachieving! So, when I got to the Dean I said 'OK I want to do Maths, Stats, Physics, Computer Science, Biology, Cell Bio, and all of that'. And he said, 'Hang on, you are supposed to do four subjects but are allowed to do maximum*

of five per semester.' So, I did five subjects in the first semester and I did pretty well in them but I saw though this that the workload was quite intense, so in the second semester I dropped down to the requisite four.

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

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

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

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

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

Mathematics was most frequently mentioned as a very difficult course in first year:

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

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

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

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

This participant also found Geology a better option than Biology:

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

Another participant found challenges in Geology:

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

What the latter quote reminds us is that when BSc students talk about experiencing academic difficulty, this often meant failing a course and needing to repeat it. The BA students in this

study were less likely to actually fail subjects – the choice to change direction was more often about not continuing in a direction which they hadn't enjoyed, or in which they hadn't achieved well. Martin's radical rethink came when he started to feel *at risk* of failing, but he didn't actually fail the subject he had worried about. We do have instances, of course, of failure amongst the BA students in this study but none that led to academic exclusion.

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

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

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

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

54 In 2010 the Academy of Sciences of South Africa hosted a forum to deliberate on the gap between school and university study in the STEM subjects, entitled the 'ASSAf Mind the Gap Forum'. The proceedings of this forum are summarised in the following article: Case, J. M. et al. (2013). Mind the gap: Science and engineering education at the secondary–tertiary interface, *South African Journal of Science*, 109: 1–5.

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

The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS)[55] provides financial support to students from the poorest families. Given the poor quality of schooling experienced by most families in this bracket and the lack of social resources supporting education, it is not surprising that many NSFAS students struggle academically at university. NSFAS loans only need to be repaid when a graduate is earning at a particular level, but because NSFAS doesn't always cover the full costs of studying, these students often join the many 'missing middle' students who find themselves in debt to the institution. Universities have used the withholding of transcripts or degree certificates to try to recover bad debt, but the individual consequences of this policy are stark.

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

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

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

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

55 This scheme provides student funding on the basis of family income (up to a maximum of R160 000 p.a. in 2016, www.nsfas.org.za). Given that the costs of attending university are in the region of R100 000 per annum, it is clear that this threshold is far too low and excludes the 'missing middle', children of families earning below R600 000 p.a. These are the children of most social workers, policemen, teachers and some public servants.

be finished and moved to a large city to be with her sister and look for a job. Then she got a huge shock in the post:

> *Just before the end of the year my mother posted me a letter from the university stating that 'OK you have completed your degree but then your results are withheld due to outstanding fees'. I owe them around R78 000 so now I am paying them R500 per month … .*
>
> *I didn't think that was coming at all. … My mom told me that the letter arrived and I was so excited and thinking that 'Finally, thank you God'. When she posted it to me I looked at it and I thought where are my results? I emailed them immediately and they didn't reply.*

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

She has managed to find work as a trainee in the police service for which she earns R3000 before deductions. She pays her sister for rent, sends some money to her mother, and then R100 per month to NSFAS[56] and R500 to the university. She has tried to get a response from the university on what else she must do in order to get her transcript (she would like to be able to apply for a graduate-level job in the police service) but she hasn't had any reply.

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

Extended curriculum programmes

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

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

57 For an overview of the development of foundation programmes, see: Kloot, B. et al. (2008). A critical review of the educational philosophies underpinning Science and Engineering foundation programmes, *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 22: 799–816; McKenna, S. (2012). The context of access and foundation provisioning in South Africa. In Dhunpath, R. and Vithal, R. (eds), *Alternative access to higher education: Underprepared students or underprepared institutions?* Cape Town: Pearson, pp. 51–61.

involves additional teaching and support in first year, spreading the undergraduate curriculum over an extra year. There is a substantial literature evaluating the effectiveness of foundation programmes and students' experiences in them, and the evidence is somewhat mixed.[58]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

58 See, for example: Mogashana, D. (2015). The interplay between structure and agency: How Academic Development Programme students 'make their way' through their undergraduate studies in engineering. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cape Town; Rollnick, M. (2010). *Identifying potential for equitable access to tertiary level science: Digging for gold.* Dordrecht: Springer; Smith, L. C. (2012). The effect of selected academic development programmes on the academic performance of academic development students at a South African university: An empirical analysis. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cape Town.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

From students' narratives it was seen that most students have a very limited sense of their strengths and interests when they start university, and that some of the trial and error in subject

choice might be an important part of finding their individual passions. The BA degree structure offers more scope in this regard, and it was noted that students appreciated the one institution in this study where there was reasonable flexibility to move between BA and BSc courses and programmes.

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

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

59 Council on Higher Education (2013). A proposal for undergraduate curriculum reform in South Africa: The case for a flexible curriculum structure. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education.

CHAPTER 3

DELIBERATIONS AND DECISIONS ON STUDY PLANS

Narratives already introduced:	
Themba	*BSc Chemistry – doing PhD overseas*
Tebogo	*BSc Actuarial Science – switch to BCom – still not completed, unemployed*
Nala	*BSc extended programme – switch to BA – still not completed, working in start-up company*
Martin	*BA (Hons) Theatre Management – working as theatre manager*
Martha	*BSc Elec Eng – switched to BSc Computer Science – motherhood – studying BSc Computer Science part-time*
Hannah	*B Soc Sci completed but no academic transcript – SAPS trainee*
Narratives to be introduced in this chapter:	
Johnson	*BSc(Hons) Geology – MSc completed – working in environmental consulting company*
Jo	*BSc(Hons) Microbiology – doing MSc*

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

Choices made initially about what to study and where to study were found to have significant long-term ramifications. And so, in this chapter, we move backwards in the chronology to look more closely at the choices made, and at the deliberations which our participants engaged in before going to university. We look at their decisions around going to university and what to study, and note here the significant role often played by parents and the

broader community. We have already noted that although the interview only asked the individual student about their own choices, almost all students mentioned their parents in the course of responding to the interview prompts, most especially on the topic of where and what they decided to study.

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

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

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

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

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

An important aspect of this analysis is that it troubles the generic application of the concept of 'first generation' university students in the South African context. Sixteen participants said that at least one parent had attended university, and ten participants explicitly said that neither

parent had been to university.[60] For the remainder, what we can note is that a substantial proportion of participants had parents who were unlikely to have attended university, given what the participants said about family finances or the nature of their parents' employment.

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

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

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

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

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

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

61 As noted earlier, massification or mass higher education is a term introduced by Trow (1973), and refers to the stage where the participation in higher education moves beyond 15% of the youth cohort.

It was clear from the interview data, that even where there are no financial resources, what seems to matter is a family that has strong aspirations for their children to go to university, and is able to back this up with good advice and information around opportunities and choices. Older siblings or extended family who have attended university also emerged as a strong resource.[62] As the chapter unfolds it will become clear how the financial resources actually seem to matter less than the access to knowledge, information and advice. To open up this topic further we consider the narrative of Johnson, which shows how a family with few options and few financial resources was able to mobilise other resources in the family network towards their child's future.

As a young child, **Johnson** came to South Africa with his family as refugees from a war-torn country to the north. Growing up he had wanted to be a lawyer but his parents didn't approve as they felt that this would clash with their religious beliefs. He did well at school and had started to think of science as an option. In his final year at school there were xenophobic attacks against foreigners[63] and this affected him and his family; he ended up getting final matric results far lower than he had anticipated.

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

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

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

62 The notion of 'community cultural capital' captures the impact of extended family support beyond the nuclear family. Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth, *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 8: 69–91.

63 For an overview of these events see: Neocosmos, M. (2008). The politics of fear and the fear of politics: Reflections on xenophobic violence in South Africa, *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 43: 586–594.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

64 There is a substantial literature which recognises the significance of resilience for students succeeding in higher education. For example: Greene, R. R. et al. (2003). Resilience theory: Theoretical and professional conceptualizations, *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 8: 75–91.

Of course, the decision to study from your home town or to go away is one with significant financial consequences. For many students it is simply not possible to find funding for food and accommodation outside of the home. If there is a university in your home town, then for many students this is the only option worthy of serious consideration. Two of the universities in this study were in a large city and thus many of the students stayed at home and attended one of these institutions. This student explains the logic of his choice and also recognises the advantages of staying close to family support:

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

For students whose parents were university employees, whether academic or support staff, the option of the fee rebate[65] often meant that this institution was a clear choice. Some of them didn't even discuss this much as it was just assumed:

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

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

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

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

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

65 Most South African universities offer a total or partial rebate on fees for the children of their employees.

> *I was basically looking at universities that were far from home, so [these three institutions] were my options. Because I am from Limpopo, so I felt that I had done all my schooling there and I needed to get as far away from home as possible. So those were my options. I didn't get into [the one institution] but then I got into [the other two] and I had to make the decision between the two so I [made my choice] after the whole Afrikaans thing that people who discouraged me talked about.*[66] *[44]*

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

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

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

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

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

66 One of this student's potential universities was an Afrikaans-medium institution. Most universities in South Africa are English-medium, though a few are Afrikaans-medium. These latter are rapidly shifting to dual-medium institutions. There are no universities in South Africa where the medium of instruction is in any of the other official languages of the country.

> *I was not going to stay at home after matric because [the universities in my home city] are not really your desirable places to be, at least for me, and in terms of other institutions, [this university] seemed like the ideal option, so said my parents. [18]*

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

> *Firstly, because they allowed me to mould my own BSc. Secondly, because it's the only university in South Africa that allows you to do a Bachelor of Science with Law. Thirdly, because I got my first year free.*[67] *Fourth, because my dad lives in [the same province] and fifth, to get away from Cape Town and sixth because none of my friends were going to [this institution] and I needed a change. [37]*

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

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

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

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

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

Funding your studies

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

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

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

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

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

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

> *Okay, my mom paid for some of the fees. I had an uncle who paid some of the fees. I was working part time so I paid some of the fees. And I applied for financial aid*

> *so I got some covered by financial aid, and I got the Humanities scholarship or something and that covered some of the fees for the one or two years or something like that. So, there were a lot of different sources for being able to pay the fees. I was glad because I knew if I took out a loan, it would be a whole other story. [26]*

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

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

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

Another student who found herself just above the NSFAS threshold (the group now referred to as the 'missing middle'[68]) also referred to the difficulty of parents being able to pay university fees off teacher salaries:

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

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

68 Though the family income threshold for NSFAS funding is adjusted each year, it remains far below the level at which a family could afford the costs of fees, meals, accommodation, transport etc for a single child, never mind for more than one child. The 'missing middle' group whose income is, in the words of one #FMF protester, 'too rich for NSFAS, too poor for fees', often do not have the property or other collateral necessary to access a bank loan.

their degrees and some of them, like Themba, were already excelling at very high levels in the university system. Thus it must be of particular concern that, with the current levels of university fees at many institutions, school teachers cannot afford for their children to go to university. It needs to be noted here that in a previous era teaching bursaries were readily available, and also that fees were not so disproportionate to teaching salaries.[69]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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69 Teacher bursaries which had been available to all race groups during late apartheid and the early democratic era were withdrawn in 1998 because of an 'oversupply' and then reintroduced as Funza Lushaka bursaries in 2007. For more details see: Adler, J. and Y. Reed (2002). *Challenges of teacher development: An investigation of take-up in South Africa.* Pretoria: Van Schaik.

> *You see, I got a bursary and financial aid for the first year, and then it didn't get extended so I was left with no choice. I didn't have fantastic marks. [1]*

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

Choice of what to study

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

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

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

Often it was the parents who had views about appropriate lines of study based on notions of future job opportunities. This was problematic when it didn't link to the young person's interests:

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

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

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

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

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

> *My uncle is an ecologist so we always went to game reserves with him … so my love for taking photos and writing and looking at stuff was always nurtured from that … and then, what, in grade ten … we had that Life Orientation project where it's, like, 'What do you want to do with your life?'; I'm, like, 'My word, I don't know what I want to do with my life, I don't know', and then we did those aptitude tests and all that jazz and then it came up that I should do journalism. And I was, like, okay actually this would be nice as I love taking photos, I love writing so why not put two and two together … my mom was a bit apprehensive about me being a journalist because our family also is just lawyers and that whole typical doctor thing. [19]*

On the one hand it is a wonderful resource to have parents who have the finance and the attitude to let you explore and 'find yourself'. On the other hand, though, one still needs to make subject choices and, as shown in the previous chapter, many students struggled with this. One young person expressed it as follows:

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

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

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

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

Finding your interests and passions at school

The curriculum structure in South African universities presumes that the young person leaving school already has an idea of their interests and strengths. For such young people, having this experience was a tremendous resource in getting going at university. What was disturbing were the many who had not had the kind of teaching and mentoring experience at school to be able to learn this about themselves, or indeed the kind of academic challenge which could help them differentiate their real strengths apart from being generally academically successful at school.

One participant illustrates how it is to be in a family where it is expected that young people will find what interests them; each child ultimately gets described around their interests. Both her parents were scientists and she is doing science but she says:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> *I think I was driven by my school. They had this idea that by matric everyone should have some idea of where they would like to go. … I also had this passion for writing in English at school so I thought Journalism would be a good idea. [47]*

Another student, who started with a BSc but then changed institutions to a University of Technology (UoT),[70] felt that the emphasis on traditional universities was potentially problematic, in that students were not always able to fully explore their interests:

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

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

> *I came from a school where it was only, like okay, I'm doing Maths, Chem, and Physics – that's the streamline I go to. [52]*

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

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

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

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

71 'Model C' is a term commonly used to refer to public schools designated under apartheid for whites only, even though the term is no longer in official use.

72 The school-leaving certificate, commonly known as 'matric', indicates whether the individual has achieved a 'Bachelor's Degree Pass', a 'Diploma Pass', or a 'Higher Certificate pass', relating to whether they have achieved the minimum requirements for entrance into each of these further qualifications.

Academic advising at the university

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

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

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

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

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

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

Another student found the consultations during this orientation week helpful:

> *I saw something called Bachelor of Social Science and I thought, 'OK, let me do that.' And then I got to [the university] and I changed my mind completely; it just*

> *happened by chance that I went to consult with someone at Humanities in O-week.*[73] *They have these consultants that you can speak to about your life and career choices and where you want to go etc. So, I went to one of those consultations. I've always been very, even in high school, politics and gender have always been something that I am really passionate about. So, I was like, politics is a natural choice. So … there was absolutely no logical reason why I changed it to a BA, but I felt strongly about changing it. [8]*

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jo explained how she had been able to change her approach to studying:

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

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

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

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

What happens when things don't work out

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

Sometimes a student didn't get accepted for their first choice of study; this would require further deliberation and sometimes just making peace with settling for something that wasn't the first choice. Johnson didn't get into engineering and his family supported him in getting a last-minute place in a science programme at another university. Not surprisingly there were a

number of students in our study who didn't get into the highly competitive medicine programme. One student who managed to change to the MBChB after one year of BSc said:

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

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

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

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

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

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

> *'OK, I know this is not easy but think about your future; if you are doing this, just know that you will never go anywhere in life.'*

Sometimes a parent's disappointment might have been a spur to further efforts. Here is a young person recounting her achievement of being first in the family to do postgraduate studies:

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

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

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

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

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

Another student whose father was a school teacher recounted:

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

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

This whole book is focused on young peoples' deliberations over their options in life, especially in the context of going to university. But in this chapter, we have concentrated especially on the initial deliberations about where and what to study. We note that for nearly

all young people interviewed in this study, there was not much consideration of alternatives to studying after school. Funding obviously loomed large, and across the participants in this study we noted very different situations in which they found themselves. A few had parents who could pay all the costs with some ease, but for most it was a creative combination of bursaries, scholarships and some family funding. We noted that having at least some small financial flexibility in the family was almost a necessity; many of the students in this study on NSFAS struggled academically and ran out of funds before they had completed their studies. Not having a family who could step in with funding unexpected costs put a young person in a tight situation.

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 4

THE BROADER STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Narratives already introduced:	
Themba	*BSc Chemistry – doing PhD overseas*
Tebogo	*BSc Actuarial Science – switch to BCom – still not completed, unemployed*
Nala	*BSc extended programme – switch to BA – still not completed, working in start-up company*
Martin	*BA (Hons) Theatre Management – working as theatre manager*
Martha	*BSc Elec Eng – switched to BSc Computer Science – motherhood – studying BSc Computer Science part-time*
Hannah	*B Soc Sci completed but no academic transcript – SAPS trainee*
Johnson	*BSc(Hons) Geology – MSc completed – working in environmental consulting company*
Jo	*BSc(Hons) Microbiology – doing MSc*
Narratives to be introduced in this chapter:	
Mulalo	*BSc(Hons) Geology – working as an intern in a state department*
Sima	*BA – working in a bank*
Thato	*BSc(Hons) – doing masters in Environmental & Geographical Sciences*

This book opened with Themba's experience. Ultimately, he reached the very highest levels of academic achievement, but starting out at university was hard. The main reason for this was that he said he was focusing too much on his academic work and didn't spend time with friends. In the second semester, after some mentoring, he made more effort on the social front and ultimately formed long-lasting relationships in his time at university. He said that being in residence had really helped in this regard.

Hannah's story, also discussed earlier, focused on the many years it took her to complete her degree. In first year she had not felt at home but had managed to pass some of her courses. By second year she felt that she was socially succeeding and fitting in more. However, the 'partying' aspect of this and the desire to keep up materially with her affluent friends started to take a toll

on her academic performance. Ultimately, in order to graduate she had found that she needed to separate herself from those friends.

By contrast, Nala had had to leave the university without completing her degree, but the friends and connections she had made in the space of extra-curricular activities stood her in very good stead for entry to the workplace.

In this chapter we return to the university experience, here moving beyond the focus on academic progress through the curriculum that was the subject of Chapter 2. Students' broader experience of university life is tremendously formative, not only for supporting them in their academic endeavours but for providing a larger platform for personal growth. We too easily forget the challenges of being a young adult and starting to forge your own way in the world. Entering university means entering a far larger community than that of your school, and this presents challenges and opportunities.

In South Africa, with a very recently racially segregated past and continued inequality, becoming part of a campus community can also present additional challenges for young people. In this chapter we explore these experiences in more detail, starting out with the narrative of Mulalo, who comes from a small village in the far north of the country.

Mulalo attended a school with a strong reputation for Maths and Science, and this had led to her being accepted to a university in another part of the country to do a Science degree. She said:

> *My first year I actually wanted to go back home; I really wanted to go back home.*

When asked why she felt this, she said that being far from home was tough, but also that language was a barrier. Her home language was tshiVenda and students at this university mostly spoke English and isiXhosa. By the second semester she felt that she had adapted, but the struggle to adjust had an impact on her academic performance:

> *I think maybe first year I was stressed and I felt like it was just too much and there was no one who was saying 'Go to class' and all that. I was on my own and adapting and I think that's what affected my academics.*

Mulalo failed some courses, resulting in her having to complete her degree in four years. Her parents were paying fees and she felt bad. Her dad was saying, 'No, come back home' but her mom said:

> *'No, she can't come back, I am going to take care of it.' So, in my second year I passed and third year I passed and in fourth year I passed.*

She had to make friends but felt better equipped now to do this:

> *I had to make some new friendships, but there were a couple of people that were doing other courses and now they decided to do what I was doing in second year so that was not so difficult. We moved together and it wasn't that bad.*

Mulalo majored in Chemistry and Geology and on graduation she decided to continue with Geology for an honours year for which she obtained funding from the National Research Foundation (NRF). After completing honours she felt she needed to leave the institution and go and get a job. This was not so easy. She ended up spending a full year at home, unemployed. At the conclusion of that year she got an internship in a state department that tests and regulates the quality of liquid transportation fuels.

Mulalo's narrative illustrates so very clearly the close interaction between socially adjusting and coping academically, with the added challenge if your cultural background feels far from what is perceived as the dominant culture on campus.

The campus

Some students commented on their general feelings about campus life. For students from more middle-class backgrounds there were perhaps greater expectations around the 'rite of passage' that would be university, especially in terms of leaving home, having more freedom, and being able to socialise away from the scrutiny of one's parents. For example:

> *It was hard work but it was a lot more fun and freedom and what I imagined university is supposed to be like. Like just being one of 200 people who rock when you want to do what you need to do. [4]*

But of course, with freedom comes risk. It is interesting that the students from the small-town university in this study were much more likely to make these kinds of general comments about campus life, specifically in support of their choice of that university. They specifically liked the smallness of the campus and the town and the fact that you would quickly find yourself familiar with quite a few people in the surroundings. They contrasted this with the experience of their friends who had gone to a university in the city:

> *[This university] is quite magical and it just kind of hooked me. … I just started to love the fact that I could walk everywhere, that I knew everyone and that I felt safe and it just has something special. I would go and visit my friends at [a university in the city] and before, I thought you know, 'It's bright lights and it is great in Cape Town and the sea and everything.' [Now] I just thought it was crap that they have to drive everywhere and everything was so expensive. They would go out and not really know the people there. I don't know, I started to realise that what I really had*

> *was all you can have at university and you can't have it any time after that. So, I made the most of it I guess. [7]*

One student, while also describing the experience in this way, did note, though, that with time this town started to feel 'too small':

> *I did find though, as I got older, the town got too small. By honours year the town was too small for me … There's only that many places you can volunteer and that many places you can go to for experience. That started bothering me and I definitely did find that people who were there for masters, and doctorates and things like that – they got very frustrated in the town simply because of the drinking, I think. [15]*

Some students in this study, such as Hannah, spoke about the 'partying' aspect of student life, but maybe fewer than might be anticipated. However, more than one student mentioned what was perceived to be a drinking culture on this particular campus. One said:

> *[At this university] the options were basically go to church or get drunk. [35]*

This is an important reminder of the transitional period to adulthood in which students find themselves, which typically is accompanied by experimental behaviour, vulnerability and heightened emphasis on social interactions.[75] This raises significant challenges for university authorities where the lines can be somewhat blurred on who holds responsibility for risky and potentially socially transgressive behaviour.

Themba, introduced in the first chapter, had spoken about the potential value of being in residence; it was when he decided to fully engage with residence life that he made the friendships that sustained his academic commitment. The residence experience was more common amongst the students in the small-town university; students not in residence at this university expressed feeling at a disadvantage in a way that was not expressed by students not in residence in the other two universities in this study. One student described how not being in residence limited her social interactions with peers:

> *I didn't get [residence] accommodation and it became difficult to get to know people and connect. I am also quite a reserved person so I came from having so many friends to not having friends and it got lonely. And sometimes you wish you were in high school because there were all these people around you, your friends and now you are in this big place and you don't really have a friend. It got to be lonely … The problem with staying in digs is that sometimes, even if you have that study group,*

75 There is a substantial literature in psychology and public health on risky behaviour amongst adolescents and young adults. For example: Jackson, C. A. et al. (2012). An overview of prevention of multiple risk behaviour in adolescence and young adulthood, *Journal of Public Health*, 34: i31-i40.

> *people want to meet late at night and maybe you stay so far from campus. I used to stay so far from campus and I couldn't be one of those students who stayed on campus until late because I was staying very far and it was not safe for me to walk alone at night. So, I was basically studying on my own. It would have been much better if I was in Res. [38]*

> *First of all, when you get there, you don't have family in that area so you are just basically on your own. I didn't stay in Res, so basically when I got there I had to stay in a friend's place, a friend from high school, then I had to stay there and try find my own place in digs. My mother had to pay rent. From there, I had to basically walk from campus to my place and those came as financial challenges; there were transitional challenges from the way you used to study and the theoretical part as well. [40]*

These two students came from financially constrained backgrounds and hadn't managed to get a place in residence – which might be due to late applications as limited residence places are generally allocated on a 'first come, first served' basis, and students from wealthier backgrounds tend to have the resources to make applications earlier. Ironically then these were the young people who might have been most in need of the social cohesion offered by residence but they were unable to access it. The 2015/2016 student protests raised public awareness of these issues – yet many cash-strapped South African universities are not easily in the position to plough additional funds into supplying further residence accommodation, which in many cases already runs at a loss for the university.

Making friends

For young people who are just leaving school and arriving at university, fitting in socially[76] is a huge concern and feeling you are not succeeding in this can cause considerable distress. Mulalo's narrative pointed to her initial difficulties in adjusting to a different language and cultural context.[77] Themba mentioned that getting some mentoring in the middle of his first year had helped him get out of his shell and spend time with new friends. Another student said something similar, emphasising the value of the campus counseling facilities:

> *At first, I hated it. I think the first month, but that's because I lived in Res and I am not really a res kind of person. … I didn't know anyone. … So, I went to the*

76 See, for example: McKenna, S. (2004). The intersection between academic literacies and student identities, *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 8: 269–280.

77 For more discussion on this, see De Kadt, E. and N. Mathonsi (2003). Writing in English with an 'African voice': Ownership, identity and learning, *Journal for Language Teaching*, 37: 92–103.

> *counselling centre just to talk about how I am feeling and how I am settling in because I felt like I was really sad. I felt really lonely and I didn't have a lot of friends. So, it was a really simple thing and I just had to snap out of it and start meeting people and so I did that. And it was the best four years of my life, the best. [8]*

For students who are staying at home while studying, there is the possibility of keeping school and community friendships going. For those going away from home, there are sometimes students on campus who came from the same school. On the other hand, there can be a huge value in making new friends, and many students mentioned this. Some students discussed without prompting the issue of old and new friends, for example:

> *I actually haven't kept any school friends. I've only got about one or two school friends and they all did different things to what I did, and, ja, otherwise, I've made completely new friends. One or two of them are actually from school, but I wasn't friends with them at school and then, end up in the same course, you kind of get thrust together and realize, 'Oh, actually, we have a few things in common' and we get on. [5]*

If your school friends are still close by when you are at university it is less likely that you will branch out into new friendship circles, and thus, while you might be in an environment of close social support, you can miss out on new influences that are part of university life. These are not necessarily matters that can be orchestrated; students mostly found that the logic of the environment they were in dictated how their social life evolved.

It is clear that there can be a significant value in having friends who are studying the same courses and who can form study groups and so on, but interestingly some students also mentioned the value of having friends who are taking different courses:

> *It is not so much the actual degree that counted, I think it was the atmosphere at [this university] because I met so many people from completely different backgrounds I would never associate myself with in a class, whether someone was sharing the same subject as me or whether I was just sitting in the cafeteria and I met someone who studying microbiology, and I'm like, 'How's that going?' So, I think it's just the amount of interest I got from different things. Whereas if you go to a college [vocational college], everyone's kind of on the same path, you are all studying the same or similar thing, you all know you are there for two years and you all want to get finished and leave. [25]*

Some students explicitly mentioned that it was a relief to get to university and find like-minded people which they had never managed at school:

> *Well, in high school I was naughty and came from a previously disadvantaged school and there was never a culture of learning there because it wasn't cool to be smart and to learn. And the moment I got to university I felt at home and felt like these people were like me. It was almost like the thinking at university was not what I grew up with, that we could actually learn and make a difference, that we can make progress in life. These weren't even the issues that could be discussed in high school with people, otherwise they'd think, 'Oh this guy is whatever whatever.' So, the university taught me that it is okay to be that person who I was in high school, but that I didn't want to show others. It also taught me that I'd love to get the highest level of education and contribute to that conversation in whichever field, whether in English or politics, just to put my two cents worth into the whole academic discussion. That's what it taught me about myself. [24]*

The latter student also admitted that this new circle of friends came from wealthier backgrounds than he had and he said that he was comfortable with that – but this still highlights the potential social challenges presented by material inequities in the student body:

> *What I really mean to say is that I don't hang out in the places I used to do, but then again, all the people I met at [university] were all richer than me and I started hanging out with them and now I'm still hanging out with them. So socially these days I am not going back.*

There is no academic requirement that you make friends on campus. For some students their social life was more off campus and it is possible that this might have been less mentioned, given the focus of the interview. Having a romantic partner who was not a university student made it less likely that one's social life would be centred on campus, as noted by this participant:

> *I had a great student experience. I spent a fair few days sitting on the grass as everybody does. I had my fair share of all-nighters as well. Honestly, I didn't socialise a lot with university crowd because at the end of my first year I met my current partner and he is 7 years older. So, when I met him he was older and he wasn't really part of that university party scene. So, I ended up hanging out with some other crowd. So, I didn't have such a social university experience. On-campus, yes, but not off campus. There weren't too many other university friends outside doing nightlife and stuff. [28]*

For students who were working part-time and travelling from home, as was more the case in one of the two city-based institutions in this study, the possibility of a traditional campus life was less, and they made less mention of campus life in their accounts than did students from the other institutions.

Thus different institutions offered different kinds of campus experiences, and this was also strongly affected by whether you were in residence or stayed at home (or were in private accommodation, known as 'digs'). Young people attached much significance to the social connections they had at university. Here we also saw some evidence of the potential impact of cultural and/or socio-economic differences, an issue which will be explored further at a later point in the chapter.

Connections to lecturers

In the previous chapter we noted the impact that a personal relationship with a lecturer could make on a student's life, recounting the experience that Jo had with the lecturer who first intervened as an academic advisor and then later became her supervisor. Jo described this relationship:

> *And the funny thing is she's not warm, and I'm not warm. We have this weird thing but I think we're just comfortable with each other.*

Not many students could recount this degree of closeness with a lecturer but there were a few others, for example:

> *He was a very nice lecturer. … he was kind of our age and he got our jokes and so I started to go to him for help and he was very patient and I am very grateful. … And so, our conversation extended from him helping me with my problem to talking about the cool Maths tricks and interesting theorems. And actually, very quickly it evolved to talking about our lives and childhood … [35]*

The students from the small-town university had a better chance of getting to know their lecturers since they were more likely to bump into them during everyday life in the town:

> *I mean, like, we would go to tea with the deputy Dean, like, on the weekends. And that's not weird, … [in this town] you go for a run and you will pass your lecturers on your run and you will bump into them at [a bar], like you see them everywhere and they know you extremely well. Especially if you give them an opportunity to get to know you. So, I think that knowing my lecturers and having that kind of relationship where they would help me at the drop of a hat at any time of the day with any question that I had. It was incredibly helpful and knowing your lecturers just makes you want to do better for them. [37]*

Another student said:

> *Because you see people so often you actually see them living what they're teaching so I think that's also a big thing. [19]*

In the context of this interview, 'living what they're teaching' referred to lecturers with involvement in community activism, but more broadly many of the students from this institution referred to seeing their lecturers in everyday life in this small town.

Even at a larger university, some students explicitly mentioned good connections with their lecturers:

> *[The university] was a very friendly and open and diverse student environment. There was so much to do and so much to offer. I really enjoyed that. The lecturers in the Science department, at least, they were quite big names, good researchers, … so I think it taught me a lot. …*

> *I was very happy academically at [this university]; I liked the facilities and I liked the staff, especially the [staff in my department], they were really amazing people. [30]*

Compared to school, one student commented:

> *I would also say the sort of relationship [of] going from teacher and student to lecturer and student is a lot more informal. That sort of showed me that the people in teaching positions are there to help you and it's given me a bit more confidence. And in the workplace, I have more confidence about going and getting help. [50]*

It is important to note, though, that not all students found that lecturers were so easy to approach. One student in the small-town university said:

> *In high school, it was a lot easier to approach a teacher than a lecturer. In high school, it is a different setting: when the teacher comes they can just walk next to you and you can ask them because it is not like you are in an auditorium setting. They can approach you and talk to you as a person and ask you a question and you can relate. After the class, you can walk out with the teacher and continue talking to them. You can approach and engage with her. But when it comes to university, first of all you have been here for the first year so you don't know how these people are outside the classroom. And there are so many first-year students that you don't know in class, so you are shy to raise your hand and ask a question. You are also shy to*

> *approach the person afterwards, because mostly they may be a lot older than the teachers you had at school. [40]*

The interviewer then asked this student if race might have played a role in this matter, noting that he was black African at a historically white university. The student answered:

> *In terms of race, I actually didn't have a problem with that. From my department, from first year to honours there were different lecturers, like black lecturers from African countries, English, South Africans to international people. So, I didn't really get that sense of saying, 'OK, this person is black or this one is white.' It was a matter of how the lecturer presented themselves and the way they introduced themselves – that's when you get to know that this person is approachable or not. But then the racial thing was not an issue.*

Students spoke more about connections with peers than with lecturers, and here we noticed an interesting contradiction: being at university was about finding like-minded people, but it was also about being exposed to a diversity of viewpoints. We deal with each of these now in turn.

Being around like-minded people

A number of young people commented that at school they had felt a bit out of place with their academic interests, and that it was a huge relief to come to university where everyone was focused in this way. This, of course, also has its down sides:

> *In university, you are meeting other people who are top learners while when you were in school you were exposed to few people. When you get to university it is big. You get people who are clever and very smart. And coming from high school, I was one of the smartest in my class, but then when I got to university I was one of the lower people getting the 50s and 60s. [44]*

The flipside is that this competition could be stimulating. Nala, introduced in chapter 1, noted how inspiring it was to meet like-minded people at university 'with a lot of drive' – unlike her high school peers. These contacts had led to her current job in social entrepeneurship. Martin also comments on the positive effects of like-minded peers:

> *Well, there is value in being put in a peer group and seeing other people excel and you want to compete in that excellence; I've always been that person in high school, always wanted to be a top academic. [Martin]*

More significantly in terms of our interest in social mobility, many young people found themselves in a group of peers that they liked to associate with, people who could have the conversations they found stimulating. None of these students would like to say that what was happening here was their joining of an educated elite, but sociologically of course this is how it could be described.[78]

Dealing with difference

As much as students expressed pleasure in being in a community of what felt like like-minded people, discussed above, there was also significant mention of the value they derived from being exposed to a broad university community from diverse home and cultural backgrounds:

> *It was like we were family and yet we all came from different backgrounds. That experience has taught me how to handle different kinds of people from different backgrounds and this helps me now in Cape Town because it is also very diverse and there are so many encounters with different people. I realise that had I studied in Zimbabwe I wouldn't have had so much exposure to the different kinds of people. [8]*

A South African student gave a similar account of the broader cultural exposure on campus:

> *Well, being an Eastern Cape-born guy, and most of the people you interact with you are Xhosa-speaking or a bit of Zulu, and a bit of Sotho, but when I was in university I had to mingle with English speaking people whether they were from South Africa or not. I had to mingle with people from other African countries and other South Africans speaking different languages, so it made me learn more about people's languages and behaviour and backgrounds and what influences them and their likes and dislikes. … [40]*

To explore this theme in more detail, we turn first to the narrative of Sima, who felt that being at university had given her the confidence to transcend any stereotypes that might be imposed on her.

Sima, one of a small group of black pupils at an Afrikaans high school, had thought it might be cool to go to the same university that Nelson Mandela had attended[79] but her mother

78 For a full overview of participation in higher education, and its relation to social mobility in South Africa, see Southall, R. (2016). *The new black middle class in South Africa.* Suffolk, UK: Boydell & Brewer. An important caveat to this finding is the reminder that the students in this study were attending high-status research-intensive universities. A recent PhD study found that amongst students attending an HBU there was a stigma attached to having an academic persona or being seen to engage in 'academic practices': O'Shea, C. (2017). Understanding the reading practices of Fort Hare students. Unpublished PhD, Rhodes University.

79 Nelson Mandela attended the University of Fort Hare, which is among those universities that served black African students during apartheid (HBUs). These universities continue to be largely attended by poorer black students, and perceived by many in society

quickly put her straight on this and she applied to, and was accepted at, the higher status small-town university. They offered her a place in the extended curriculum programme; initially she thought this was one extra course and was dismayed to hear it was an extra year. However now she feels it was good as it helped her to make friends:

> *I was off campus and I am not a socialite so I am actually grateful for foundation because I was able to make friends because let's say, I don't think I make friends easily. I think now that I was in a classroom, then the environment became conducive for me to make friends so I am grateful for the foundation. And I am still friends with those people, we were all in the foundation, but I met other people as well.*

She wanted to do Organisational Psychology because she had read some of her mother's assignments in that area and thought they were interesting. Because her mother was paying she was focused on subjects that she felt would give her a better chance of a higher paying job. Describing the experience of being at university she said:

> *It is a completely new world. Ai! It is overwhelming, but I said to myself I wasn't born into those prestigious families, I was born from my normal family so I will not make myself feel small because of that. I continued with life and I said to myself that I am here for one reason and that is to get my qualification and hopefully build a better future for myself and whoever comes after me. So yeah, it was the first time meeting those types of people. It was a little bit intimidating but you never showed it. You said: 'Let me just go to the library, we are all the same; we all want to pass' [both laugh]. My parents won't have money for me to be at university for seven years, so let me do my thing and get what I came here for.*

And she certainly did manage to get what she 'came here for': she entered through the extended curriculum programme and completed her degree in organizational psychology and industrial sociology in the required four years. Sima here expresses a student experience noted in quite a few of the interviews of going from a relatively homogeneous community into a broad university community where students might come from wealthier backgrounds that make you think poorly of yourself in a materialist culture.[80]

(including parents and employers) of a lower status. Bozalek, V. and C. Boughey (2012). (Mis) framing higher education in South Africa, *Social Policy & Administration*, 46: 688–703; Cooper, D. (2015). Social justice and South African university student enrolment data by 'race', 1998–2012: From 'Skewed revolution' to 'Stalled revolution', *Higher Education Quarterly*, 69: 237–262.

80 The issue of diversity of financial resources has been mentioned a few times already in this book. The materialist nature of South African society means there is pressure on students to 'keep up' with their classmates with regard to clothing and cell phones. This has enormous consequences for social integration and sense of well-being for many students. See, for example, Tabensky, P. and S. Matthews (2015). *Being at home: Race, institutional culture and transformation at South African higher education institutions.* Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press.

Sima expresses so well the challenges and personal growth in rejecting such stereotypes. In reflecting broadly on what she gained from higher education she gave an elaborated explanation on how she felt she had changed as a person:

> *My way of thinking developed. I am a person who actually expresses themselves, or maybe my intelligence comes out when I write. But it changed my view of the world and of people, especially when you do social sciences or the arts, you get to have a deeper understanding of why people are the way they are. Doing psychology helps you understand why people think the way they do. And even though I did it for a year, I think the person that I am, I am an understanding person, so if I come across any type of person I try not to take things personally. I understand that maybe you had this type of upbringing and so forth. So basically, going to university helped me in that regard.*

Another student offered a similar account of personal growth, here stating it explicitly in terms of stereotypes about race and possible senses of inferiority:

> *I suppose I'm not in awe of people anymore. You know, when you are at the bottom you always look up to these smart people and – excuse my racism – you go: 'Oh, the white people' and you aspire to be like the white people because they are just there in the distance, shining so brightly and doing so well in the world. But I suppose that's because I come from a coloured community so I don't know a mixed setting. So, coming to university and being exposed to different people, I'm now kind of: 'You know, I can do everything you do and a lot more.' [22]*

This student pointed out that he was extroverted and had made friends across potential racial barriers. He goes on to point out the mostly racialised patterns of campus both inside and outside of class:

> *In the cafeteria area, the main food court, there was always a group of Indian guys playing dominoes. … You still find that lots of people of the same colour are grouping together and there's no integration. And you find that with the classes as well, especially in Humanities. You find that Philosophy is mostly white – and its big classes. In English, as you advance, you also find that certain courses are white dominant, like Shakespeare & Company and Classics, for example.*

For one student, the experience of mixing with people of all races seemed to be understood as a light-hearted adventure:

> *Oh yeah. I mean I've dated every race you can think of; I had a ball in that regard. I dated the whole rainbow nation and it was so much fun. [2]*

Like Sima, some students also experienced dealing with difference as a challenge to meet black African students from different language groups:

> *Well, coming from living in Durban my whole life, it was sort of a change; I got exposed to this whole culture clash, Zulus and Xhosas and even meeting foreign students for the first time. So yeah, we don't really get exposed to that in a school in Durban so it was a different experience … Well, being an outsider of the Eastern Cape was sort of a cultural challenge from the Xhosa students because I would not be adhering to their definition of manhood because they go up to the mountains and things like that.*[81] *So, it was a bit of a problem at the beginning because we were also freshmen and yet we had to negotiate that as well. But as we got older we developed respect for each other, so having been there for a long time helped, but at the beginning it was a real problem. [18]*

The majority of participants thus felt positively about the experiences of cultural diversity at the university, and felt they had, through these experiences, been able to develop in their confidence and openness, and ability to reject racial stereotypes. It is therefore of significance that we explore now in detail the only student, Thato, who directly articulated her difficulties in navigating racism and prejudice in the university environment.

Thato grew up in a southern African country and reflects on her early views of whiteness as follows:

> *And then we watched soapies – The Bold and the Beautiful, Days of Lives – and you don't even realise it, but you start internalising whiteness as the be all and end all. I wanted to be white because they were on TV and they had nice big houses and [my white friend's] parents lived all over the world and would come and visit. So that was how I understood white to be – associated with wealth and all good things in life. And we struggled financially for some time, so that shaped how I viewed white people as well as people with money.*

When she came to university she was:

> *I'm, 'Oh my goodness, I want to meet white friends because hey, they are rich.' And for a long time, I thought they were smarter and better because they have money, right? And then Honours year happened and you start having conversations with*

81 This is a reference to the initiation ceremony that Xhosa boys are expected to participate in during their transition to adulthood.

> *friends and start being exposed to the department, you don't just go to classes anymore, you start interacting with the people that make the department run, and then your blackness becomes … You become more self-aware and conscious. So [university] shaped my life in that it woke me up from my slumber of thinking that white people are better.*

Like the students mentioned above, Thato's experiences of university had her come to reject racial stereotypes. She indicated that she had initially been scared of white male lecturers but was no longer so, and rejected her earlier valorisation of whiteness. However, this stance evoked anger as she became aware of the structural operation of racism in society:

> *I have become more conscious of my blackness since being here. … So, I decided to shelve some personal, like some internal discussions for a while until I'm done with my dissertation because I always get passionate about things and then I either get angry … that you will be judged according to your skin colour or the fact that you wear your hair a certain way. Those are some of the things that started to become obvious to me at [university]. In class, for instance, on the one side you have white people and on the other side …*

She said that, while she had initially put effort into try to reach out to the 'other side' of class, she then came to think:

> *Why am I doing this? This is a waste of time, no, I'm not going to do this.*

Thato's experiences are an important caution to any naïve conclusions that might be drawn about the possibilities that the university holds for promoting social cohesion. As has been seen in this section, students have a reasonable expectation that they will be able to fit in socially with their classmates. This is not always easy, and when power structures based on race seem to be unchallenged, this can lead to anger. This particular student ended up feeling she needed to shelve these feelings for a later time as she was worried this would get in the way of her academic progress.

One participant who had recently completed masters study in the US articulated a critique of the institution and its privilege:

> *People graduate not necessarily enamoured by the university institution. You can graduate frustrated. You see the problems with the institution, with the privilege of the institution. So I don't know if it recreates a lot of critical thinking and a lot of like backlash against that institution, you know. [17]*

Given the focus on experiences of racism on campus highlighted during the 2015/2016 protests, and investigated a decade earlier in the Soudien Report,[82] it was surprising in this study that looking back on their university experiences, nearly all interviewees were upbeat about their experiences in this regard, even if they recounted initial challenges as indicated above. Indeed, the general view expressed was that university allowed these students to navigate relationships across racial groups and they were encouraged to reflect critically on issues of racism and intersectionality with gender, sexuality, socio-economic background and so on. It is important to note that our study included a considerable range of student experiences in terms of cultural backgrounds and academic success. It is likely that the main reason for this more positive outlook on university was that they were now some years past the experience, and as will be discussed in more detail, they had mostly entered the workplace or further study with success.

Experiences around safety and trauma

Some quotes in this chapter have already alluded to issues around safety – some of the students at the small-town university felt it was relatively safe and loved being able to walk around, while those who were living a bit further from campus in the same town felt it was distinctly unsafe. Students are vulnerable. They often walk around with high-value items on them and they are easily at least distracted if not inebriated. They could be seen as easy victims in a country with desperate poverty and terrible crime rates. There were a couple of students in this study who had experienced crime while at university and it had often had a significant impact on their lives. One student spoke at length about a housebreaking which had not only been traumatic in itself but had also left her housemate disturbed and behaving very oddly. This had a significant impact on her and she ended up leaving university not having finished her degree.

Another student for whom an experience of crime impacted on her ability to complete her degree describes it as follows:

> *So, I got into a taxi there one day and I was hijacked and … I don't really want to get into too much detail about the hijacking and all that but obviously it wasn't a great experience. I got my case sorted and that, but I just couldn't focus well. I think for about two weeks I was a bit off and it happened during the examination period. I couldn't write some of the papers and stuff, I was really despondent. But then I think about a month or so, I said, 'Let me just try and push through.' But by that time, it was a bit difficult for me to push through, considering that my exams had been so horrible. [2]*

82 Department of Education (2008). Report of the Ministerial Committee on transformation and social cohesion and the elimination of discrimination in public Higher Education Institutions. Pretoria: Department of Education.

Students' educational experiences are, of course, never just determined by events within the formal curriculum. Traumatic experiences of various kinds, including crime as indicated here, acted as a constraint on some students' academic journeys. In terms of these experiences of crime, it is sobering to think of the impact of the 2015/2016 protests across most campuses, which for many students were a time of uncertainty and unsafety, whether from the violent acts of some of the protesters, or the violent acts of security personnel and police.

The student who was hijacked in a taxi went on to be extremely poorly served by the institution in this regard. She went to a student advisor in her department, to discuss what to do given her poor June exams. He asked her about her plans for the following year. She said she wanted to do Actuarial Science and he laughed at her as this seemed an unrealistic goal given her marks. She then went to another subject advisor, who responded to her story of the effects of the hijacking by recounting a story of another student who had struggled, which made her feel that he thought she was exaggerating the impact of her experience. He then said to her, 'You know, you are a very pretty girl, perhaps you should study education instead?' She left the institution without completing her degree.

As well as providing examples of sexism and lack of empathy, this story again emphasises the issue raised in the previous chapter, that of the relatively poor culture in South African universities for academic advising. Students often seemed to be left to their own resources to navigate academic challenges arising from difficulties in their lives.

The extra-curricular space

While progressing through the formal academic programme occupies a central focus in most students' minds, being at university also offers opportunities for other educational experiences beyond the formal curriculum. Nala's striking narrative given in the Introduction showed an unusual case of where the richness of her extra-curricular experience in the areas of leadership and social entrepreneurship became the basis for her employment, completely overshadowing her unimpressive academic transcript. Of these extra-curricular activities, she said:

> *I really enjoyed seeing people improve and better their lives. It made me feel like I was doing something, even if it was something small. I used to give music classes to kids in previously disadvantaged schools because that's where I came from and I just wanted to be able to give back. So, I think that's where the leadership role stepped in and also because I wanted to break away from my family. I knew that I needed to do something on my own. I couldn't depend on anyone and I didn't want anyone to depend on me because I'm still really young.*
>
> *… Being around those people, having leaders like that in your life, pushing you, giving you information just like for free, taking you away for a week and trying to nourish that inner leader you have – I think that was a beautiful experience for me.*

> *Without that, I don't think I would have had the positivity and the drive to actually do something on my own.*

Martin was also very much involved in extra-curricular commitments in the field of community theatre, but scaled these back when they started to impact on his academic progress. While his present employment relates directly to his formal degree qualification, his narrative makes it clear that his involvement in community-based work since school has also had a strong influence on his personal capacities.

This said, the mention of the extra-curricular space was actually less prevalent than might have been expected in the study – only about a fifth of students mentioned extra-curricular involvements. These included subject-related societies (Pharmacy and Law societies were mentioned), residence committees, orientation leaders, social and environmental movements, and community service. All of these students felt that this involvement was hugely beneficial to them. A very small group of students had active sport involvement, not necessarily on campus. Overall, those mentions of extra-curricular activities that did emerge in the data came from students who had spent at least part of their time in residence. Those students who commuted to campus or who had part-time work did not mention such activities.

Part-time work

Johnson's striking narrative of waitering every night while he studied a BSc will be recalled from Chapter 3. He would get home around midnight and then do a few hours of studying. As a refugee he was exposed to many people having to make ends meet in these kinds of ways and he had been a car guard while at school so he didn't feel that he was in such an unusual situation.

It was, though, a relatively small group of students in this study who worked part-time while studying. There are a range of reasons for this. Some students were staying at home and self-funding their studies, and had family connections into part-time work – notable was that most coloured students in this study who were studying from their Cape Town home were also working part-time. One such student describes her daily life as follows:

> *Ok, because I didn't have a car at that time and I was taking public transport … so it would take me 15 minutes to walk from my house to the bus stop, and that would be early in the morning so that if I had an 8:30 class, I made it to class. … . If I don't have classes in the mean time I'd make photocopies, study, do whatever work I could within those hours and so usually I'd be on campus from about 8am up until maybe 2pm. In between the time, I'd go to class and finish whatever assignments, homework or whatever it is that I needed to do in that time. And then, I'd take a*

> *taxi that took an hour to get to town, that would be between 2 to 3pm from campus to town where I worked. And then I would work … It is a call centre so it is fairly quiet at night, so I asked my employer that at night when there weren't any calls coming through I got permission to sit with my books and study. I'd get home at about 9.30 to 10pm because the travelling took some time. I'd have supper and then sit with my work, then go to bed at 12. So, it was very hectic during that time, but I was ambitious and young so I didn't look at it and say: 'Oh, I have a hectic life', I was enjoying it because I felt like I was living purposefully, I used every minute of every day constructively. [34]*

Many students from even more financially constrained backgrounds had gone to universities elsewhere in the country and didn't have the networks to get part-time work or indeed a sense that they would be able to fit part-time work in alongside studies. This might have also been related to family and community expectations around part-time work. Also, while some students felt that waitering was almost a rite of passage for a young person, other students did not feel this was appropriate work:

> *No, I didn't seek employment; I am not the person to work in waitressing and all that. [18]*

While a student, Hannah had managed to get work as a research assistant and this had not only helped her financially but had also built up her academic confidence. A few other students in this study had also found the multiple benefits of part-time work connected to the university – one student who worked in the library ultimately studied further in this area and is now a university librarian. Some students did personal tutoring of school children particularly in the subjects of Maths and Science, a job which some of them had done since school.

This chapter has taken a broader look at the student experience at university. Unsurprisingly it has been demonstrated that social connections mean a lot to young people at this age, and for most, going to university involves a significant focus on making new friends. This can be challenging for many reasons, not least of which is entering into a different cultural space to that of the home community. Socio-economic differences can produce real difficulty for less well-off students who feel pressure to keep up with their friends' spending patterns in what is a materialistic youth culture. Difficulties are also exacerbated by racial divisions in the student body. Yet most people in this study navigated these challenges well, even if struggling initially.

Integrating socially and connecting with campus life seemed to be linked to coping academically, although for some students this had to be managed at points so as to make sure to spend sufficient time on study. Some students managed close connections with their lecturers although this was not that common. Some students fitted part-time work in alongside studies and this often provided additional opportunities for personal growth.

Students also found themselves potentially vulnerable to risky situations, and experiences of crime and trauma impacted seriously on the well-being and associated academic performance of these students.

The thing that every student dreads is having to leave the university before they have finished their degree, possibly due to academic exclusion. Universities don't often know much about what happens to students who 'drop out' and it is only recently that at a national level these trajectories can be traced.[83] The following chapter thus focuses specifically on the experiences of the participants in this study who had to find a route forward in life after they had to leave their initial choice of institution.

83 Department of Higher Education and Training (2016). 2000 to 2008 First time entry undergraduate cohort studies for public higher education institutions. Pretoria: Department of Higher Education and Training.

CHAPTER 5

NON-COMPLETION OF THE FIRST DEGREE CHOICE

Narratives already introduced and relevant to this chapter:

Tebogo	*BSc Actuarial Science – switch to BCom – still not completed, unemployed*
Nala	*BSc extended programme – switch to BA – still not completed, working in start-up company*
Martha	*BSc Elec Eng – switched to BSc Computer Science – motherhood – studying BSc Computer Science part-time*

Narratives to be introduced in this chapter:

Yan	*BSc – took year off – studying LLB through distance university*
Tshidi	*BSc extended programme – BSc Civ Eng at another university – work – BSc Computer Science – work – part-time study and motherhood*
Lerato	*BSc – time out and work – BSc Civ Eng at another university – work – BSc Civ Eng at another university*
Bongi	*BA Music – work – ND Chemical Engineering – motherhood with part-time study through the distance university*

The young people in this study had in common that they had started their bachelor's studies in a particular year, at one of three institutions. The book has outlined so far their academic experiences, the deliberations that led to a course of study, and located these within a broader social experience. At this point we shift to consider what happened after they left this institution. A small group of the participants left the institution without completing the degree, and these form the focus for this chapter.

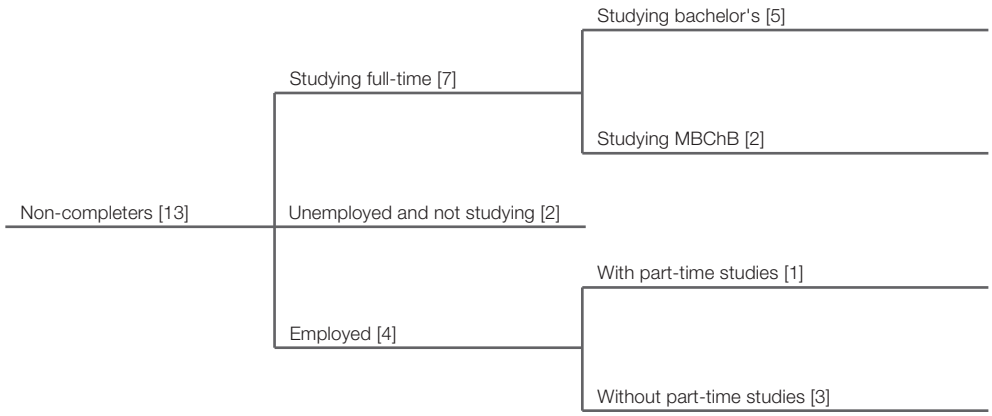
In many national discussions, these students are referred to as 'wasted'; there is an assumption that after leaving the institution they are lost to higher education and land up unemployed. As discussed previously, the most recent data that examines the throughput of bachelor's cohorts shows that just under half of the entrants drop out of the degree for which they registered. What the present study shows is that many students who have dropped out of

their initial course of study do find some way to resume their studies at another institution, often also changing course of study.

Of the 73 young people in this study, 13 of them fall into this category of 'non-completers':

- Two of them are studying full-time in the MBChB
- Five of them are still in full-time study (but at another institution)
- Four are employed (one of whom is studying part-time)
- Two are unemployed and not studying

Figure 2 Trajectories of non-completers



There is only one student in this group of 13 who is clear that she has no intention of studying (she left after a dismal first year) and she is adamant that her line of work – radio announcing and DJ-ing – does not need a formal qualification at all. All the remainder expressed intentions to finish their bachelor's degree, whether they are currently registered or not.

Some of these students have already been encountered in the featured narratives in the book so far. At the outset of the book we met Tebogo, who spent five years studying, is now only a few courses away from graduation and hopes to complete these. He is presently unemployed and needs to find work in order to pick up his studies again. Nala had three unsuccessful years at university and now works in a start-up company and has done some part-time studying towards a commerce degree, although presently she is not studying. Martha was excluded after three years studying BSc and is now at home with a baby and is studying part-time.

In this chapter we therefore shift to a slightly different use of the narratives in that we focus in detail on four further narratives that illustrate the key issues in the experiences of non-completers, with a brief mention of two others.

Finding your passions – even if not at first attempt

In Chapter 3 we looked at how students generally make their choices of study direction on the basis of very partial knowledge, not only about the options out there, but also about their own strengths and weaknesses. This has enormous implications for students' progression through their studies, and can be true even for students from relatively well-resourced schools, such as Yan.

Yan started a BSc degree. She had wanted to study Law but she only got into her second choice which was the BSc aiming towards a major in Astronomy. She enjoyed Astronomy and Applied Maths, but didn't like Maths and Physics. She said, it was 'a balance of things I liked and things I didn't'. Because she failed some subjects she needed to do some electives in Humanities to make sure she had enough credits to avoid exclusion. She did English literature

> *and half of the people in my English class were from the Law faculty … So I asked how it was down there and I made friends with them so I'd go to their lectures and miss mine (she laughs). And then I realised that Law was actually what I wanted to do.*

She had wanted to do Law but decided to make peace with the second option of Science, thinking that Astronomy would be interesting. It was through her elective experiences that Yan obtained a clear sense of which subjects really did interest her, and these were not in the Science Faculty but in Law (her first choice all along).

Thus here again we see evidence – as outlined in Chapter 3 – of the limited basis of self and other knowledge on which many students make their subject choice. Furthermore, as was shown, in the BSc degree it is a problem if there are key subjects that you don't like. If you are planning to major in Astronomy, for example, then you are going to have to do a lot of Mathematics and Physics in your degree.

In Yan's second year, while she was still enrolled in Science but starting to find her passions through her electives, her aunt died. Her aunt had lived with her family and in a way she considered her to be a mother. This compounded the difficulties she was already having in applying herself to her studies and at the end of the year she didn't pass enough courses to be allowed to continue.

She then decided she needed 'time out' and she 'took a year off' [from studies]. She describes this as a year 'spent at home', although during this year she was certainly not sitting around – she did at least three different periods of short-term work, firstly at an electrical company, then doing marketing with an events company, and finally getting work with a lawyer who was a friend of her uncle's. This year confirmed that she did want to complete a degree, having realised the kind of work options that would be available to her otherwise:

> *Yes. I think I learned the hardships of not having a degree in 2011 because that year, it was so hard because you can't just choose or pick certain ways of doing things because there will be criteria of what needs to be done and this is what you need to have or at least be pursuing a particular thing.*

Her expression here is interesting: 'you can't just pick or choose' – she has bumped up against some real-world constraints, and the 'criteria of what needs to be done' relate to whether you have a degree or at least are pursuing it.

The work experience with the lawyer friend of her uncle's confirmed her plan to continue with law and she therefore registered to do an LLB degree with the national distance university. She could have stayed at home and studied but she felt she would do better to be located in Gauteng, which is where she realised there were good employment prospects in law. And this decision has already proven to be a good one: she is currently working part-time as a researcher in the Dean's office at the national distance university, and next year she has an internship lined up at the Constitutional Court.

Another student who had a similar experience to Yan left the university after one year of BSc studies, then decided to do a one-month course in conservation because she had always enjoyed the outdoors and animals and she had been a girl guide. She then worked in a nature reserve and learnt about a course that was offered at a University of Technology (UoT) which was well regarded in the field. She is currently studying that and well on her way with a future mapped out into postgraduate studies. She feels that the traditional university programme did not offer the level of structure that she needed to support her studies, and which she has found at the UoT:

> *[The university] let you be on your own and do your own thing and if you are ready for that, sure. Whereas when you come to [the UoT] there is a very structured way of doing things; there is less chance of your falling off the wagon for a lack of a better word. This is obviously for someone who studies like I do; if you have structure it is easier for me. [3]*

As much as there is a fairly instrumental discourse driving much of the current debate about higher education, this study shows how important is some degree of intrinsic interest in the field, and in this chapter, we see how sometimes starting afresh with a new qualification is the only way to get to that point.

Gap years and working

The young person who went into nature conservation only managed to find this route by leaving her original university and going home. In this 'gap year' she started to look for things

to do that matched her interest and the one-month course opened up a whole new set of possibilities.

For a young person who went to university, away from home, directly after school, it is quite something to return home with an uncompleted degree. As Yan did, many talked about 'spending a year at home'. When you don't have an established career, home at least offers you a bed and food. As was seen, Yan's year at home was a very productive one where she had three different periods of work from which she learnt a tremendous amount. She explicitly states that the third job was with a family friend but it seems likely that the other two were also obtained through family and community networks, her having attended a middle-class school and thus likely coming from a family with these kinds of resources.

Tebogo, whose story was introduced in the introduction, is in a completely different kind of family context. During his first year at home (after two years at university) he spends quite a bit of time unoccupied before he decides to do volunteer tutoring at his old school. Presently he is back home and needing to find work in order to get the money to complete his outstanding courses but he appears to have no links to what he considers appropriate work opportunities for himself as a near-graduate in his home town and no means to get to the bigger city to be able to scout these out.

While the 'gap year' is often seen to be the preserve of those from a wealthy family context, the 'gap year' was recontextualised in a very interesting way in the data to signal agency in a young person whose plans have not worked out but aims to get value from spending a year away from the university. Crucially, we see the importance of a family network in helping this young person make sure that this year is a productive time in which they can get experiences to help them craft their route forward.

The role of the national distance university

The South African distance university[84] was a key player across many narratives in this book, and a crucial part of the unwritten story of what happens to students who 'drop out' of their first degree attempt.

Yan thinks she actually copes better in the distance-learning environment and said:

> *I think I work better independently than with someone standing in front of me.*

Apart from the non-completers that are the focus of this chapter, there are a few other students in this study who completed their remaining courses for graduation through the distance university. One of them explains clearly the logic of this decision:

84 The University of South Africa (UNISA) is the largest university on the African continent with over 300 000 students. It is a comprehensive university, so it offers both vocational and formative and professional qualifications at undergraduate and postgraduate level, all offered in the distance mode of delivery.

> *The reason I did that is that I did not want to spend a whole other year at [this university] completing one subject and I figured it was unfair on the parents as well. So, I took the onus on myself to get a job and then pay for myself to study through [the national distance university]. [39]*

For other students, distance learning became the only option when they found themselves with family responsibilities that kept them at home. Tshidi is one of these (she has a small baby), but her journey towards this point is a long and complicated one, and as will be seen, six years down the line she is nowhere near as settled on a career and study focus as is Yan.

Tshidi wanted to study Computer Science and was accepted for a BSc, but she was unhappy to be placed in the extended curriculum programme. She felt she had qualified for the mainstream programme but that she was placed in this programme because of the school she went to. She also felt there was too much work in the extended curriculum programme with long class hours. She had peers who had less class time – notably these were in the social sciences. She said she felt like she was doing matric again; she decided 'to just leave it' and so she simply left shortly before the end of the academic year.

Her dad then recommended she do Civil Engineering through the national distance university. She tried this but didn't like it; she felt Civil Engineering was 'too manly'.

She then got some work during the Soccer World Cup, which was held in South Africa in 2010. She applied for Pharmacy at another university but didn't take up her place because someone appointed her to be on the board of a company; she really enjoyed having money and did this work for two years. Then she decided she should study again and got accepted to do Computer Science at another university. She did one semester and left – the course was only offered full-time and she did not want to leave her job. So she decided to work full-time; she decided she needed to be earning money. She said:

> *That was the problem. You see, when you see money first, you think between money and school, I will go for money and [the money] was big. So I decided to work full time.*

Now she has registered for Computer Science through the national distance university. Why Computer Science? She says there were three options for her when she left school: Accounting, Medicine and IT and she didn't like the first two. IT was the only option that she considered.

She has recently married and had a baby and therefore decided to put her part-time studies on hold. At the same time, she says she is trying to start a catering business; her husband is pushing her to work for herself rather than for someone who might not pay well.

When asked why then she is studying through the national distance university, she says she still wants the degree as 'something to fall back on' in case the catering business doesn't work out. She also feels she has new responsibilities now and needs to be a role model for her child:

> *As in when I start my semester I need to tell myself that I need to finish this now. There is someone now who is looking up to me.*

But at the same time, she notes again that a degree is no guarantee of a job:

> *Well, I do have people around with degrees and they are jobless: My cousin, he has a mechanical engineering degree. He is 38 now and he's been looking for a job since he graduated about 10 years ago. The jobs that he gets are just these small little jobs that are part time. My sister, she is a pharmacist, she went to [the same university]. She is also part time working.*

This quote is a stark reminder that graduate employment prospects are not evenly spread across all institutions in the country. The relatively good trajectories into the private sector experienced by the graduates in this study from the higher status research-intensive institutions are less common for students from lower status institutions.[85]

Thus far, the connection between higher education and social mobility has been fairly clear. But Tshidi's narrative is an important troubling of the emerging findings of this study. From her perspective, higher education is no guarantee of 'the good life', and in fact, like Nala, she has managed quite well without a degree so far, using her skills and her networking. Tshidi has many peers who also do well in this way, while some of the graduates she knows are sitting at home. There are important indicators in this narrative about the workings of class which are generally underrecognised in discussions on higher education in South Africa, and which are beginning to be made more explicit as this book progresses.

Tshidi is now a mature student aiming to complete her studies in the distance mode. The national distance university plays a crucial role in supporting many students who cannot manage full-time studies for whatever reason, and, as is shown in this study, is underrecognised for the role it plays in helping those who started degrees at contact institutions but left without completing, to finish their studies.

The role of romantic partners in study trajectories

Tshidi repeatedly picked up study routes and then dropped them. Her father has had ambitions for her to study and has been happy to finance this. She has friends who have succeeded financially without studying and she knows graduates who are jobless. She is now planning to finish her studies in Computer Science but not necessarily because she thinks this will influence

85 See, for example: Rogan, M. and J. Reynolds (2015). *Schooling inequality, higher education and the labour market: Evidence from a graduate tracer study in the Eastern Cape, South Africa.* Pretoria: Labour Market Intelligence Partnership (LMIP) Project, HSRC.

her job opportunities. Her husband is encouraging her to start a catering business. She is still on a journey to develop a fully coherent sense of herself and her ambitions.

This aspect of Tshidi's experience illustrates further the key points about the support that young people need from parents and significant others to support them in making choices in their lives. In her case there did not appear to be a limit on her father's ability to support her financially, but it does not seem she had access to the other kinds of conversations that might have helped her find a coherent route forward. She wants to do science but then is unhappy at the full timetable this demands (comparing it to friends doing social science, which is not really a useful comparison). She tries out Civil Engineering but drops out again – this was her father's idea rather than hers. She then applies for Pharmacy but this change in direction is also not clear. Then she goes back to Computer Science full-time but after only a semester she leaves again in favour of keeping on with a full-time job. Her narrative suggests that there were no significant others pushing back and asking her to motivate these decisions. Her father was certainly encouraging but the absence of any censure on dropout might not have been helpful – it suggests she might not have been required to defend these decisions to anyone, and had not yet articulated her path to herself either.

In what appears to be the absence of parental input, her friends came to be people who offered role models of how to make it in the world. These were successful people who demonstrated how little a university degree matters in the world of business if you have the right attitude and the right connections. Finally, it is her husband who is advising her to start a business rather than to work for anyone else – but she is hanging on to the idea of getting a degree to have something to 'fall back on' in case the catering doesn't work out. She says:

> *If it doesn't work out what am I going to do? I've been applying for admin jobs because those are the only jobs that I can qualify for.*

The potential role of romantic partners in influencing the direction of young women's lives was evident in many of the narratives in this study. We did not ask people specifically to talk about their parents or their romantic partners and thus it seemed signficant when these did enter the interview space. Lerato is a young woman whose academic aspirations were strongly confirmed by a boyfriend who urged her to return to study because he reminded her that she was an academic person at heart.

Lerato wanted to come to a university far away from home to be away from her abusive father. But the effects of this abuse travelled with her and she found herself experiencing major depression during her first year studying BSc. She dropped out at the end of the first year and spent a year at home, getting some professional help towards the end of the year. The following year she went to another university and signed up for a BSc in Civil Engineering. The same thing happened with the impact of depression on her studies; there she was excluded after two years. She then went to stay with her aunt and got a job as a store manager; she did well to get promoted quickly but ultimately she was frustrated.

Lerato tells us that at this point her new boyfriend said the following to her:

> *'There isn't much of a future here. Fine, you could gain experience and maybe apply for managerial posts elsewhere, but this is not where your heart lies. You've always wanted to be an academic. What is going on?'*

She reflected on her response at the time:

> *I said, 'Yeah, I know, my current job is a means to an end.' I still want to be an academic. Even back in high school, I was one of those kids with the red blazer for academics. I hadn't forgotten my dreams. I said I would resume my university studies as soon as I'm well enough to do so.*

She noted that saying the words out loud was a significant turning point for her. She is now back at university, again studying Civil Engineering. She has much self-knowledge now regarding her depression and she knows better how to manage it. She also knows how to cope with her studies.

This case of an abusive parent is the extreme situation of a family that does not support the young person being able to make their way in the world. Ultimately Lerato had to cut herself off from connections to her father in order to manage her depression and be able to study. Her aunt has been a significant refuge away from the home; she offered a place to stay and encouragement to work after university didn't work out. And she was fortunate to have a boyfriend who then encouraged her to return to university and supported her personal growth.

It is important to emphasise that the themes represented here were only reported by women in the study. Given the operation of gender roles in our society and the continuation of patriarchal attitudes, it is female students who have an additional complexity to navigate in their route through higher education as they simultaneously explore the world of intimate relationships.

The importance of parental financial stability

While much evidence has been presented in this book so far of the crucial role some parents are able to play in encouraging young people to study and advising them around a course of study, the financial aspects cannot be ignored. What seems important is not necessarily whether a family has lots of money or not, but rather whether the resources they do have can be deployed consistently towards supporting their children's future. In the core narratives outlined so far this is most strongly illustrated in a positive sense through Johnson's refugee family who had no financial resources to offer (he waitered through university to earn money for his fees) but who put emphasis on education and were deeply involved in guiding him on a course of

study. Being a parent is tough when you need to manage your own challenges which also impact on your children. To explore this further we introduce the narrative of Bongi.

Bongi's mother was a single mother who had supported her daughter to get to a prestigious girls' school where she had excelled in music. It therefore seemed pretty seamless for Bongi to continue studies in music at university and all seemed under control. Things went so well in her music career in her first year at the small-town university that she decided it would make sense to shift to another university where she would have more exposure to gigs and concerts in a large-city environment. She applied to change institutions and at this point things fell apart when it became evident that her mother actually hadn't been managing to pay the fees during the year. She landed up not getting a place at the new institution because she couldn't get a transcript of her results from the existing institution.

She wishes her mother had been more honest with her; she feels she would have taken the intiative to work part-time to be able to pay fees, but she also recognises that her mother was in a difficult personal space that year. When the truth emerged, it was too late to do anything and even though she had passed all her first-year courses well, she was not able to get her transcript because of the unpaid fees.

She went home and got a job as an administrator and started to strategise for a way to get back to studying. She feels that her school background, having flourished so well at this prestigious girls' school, really helped in terms of her confidence of getting work and doing well at it. Mid-year when the company where she worked went bankrupt she moved back to the university town and had no difficulty again getting administrative work through her networking skills. She had to do some serious thinking about her study options. A friend suggested she look at transferring to a university of technology where the fees were much cheaper. She also had a rethink on music; doing music at this institution she felt would only prepare her for school teaching and the institution was not in a city with the kind of cultural opportunities that interested her. So she returned to the ideas that had been her second option on leaving school, the sciences, where she had also excelled at school. She decided to try chemical engineering at a University of Technology. To further help the financial situation, this time she applied for financial aid not disclosing her mother's full income, but only the income she obtained through her late stepfather's pension. She is awkward at mentioning this but felt she didn't have any option.

The first year of studies went well, but in her second year of chemical engineering, she hit a snag: the course of study was not easy and she started to feel depressed and not sure of the choices she had made in life; she also started feeling a need to contact her biological father whom she had never known. She failed a number of courses for the first time in her life. This meant that she lost her financial aid. The following year she tried to soldier on, repeating courses, but it was very difficult – compounded by the knowledge that after finding out who her real father was, he said he did not want contact with her. In the middle of that year, she fell pregnant. The following year she stayed at home with the baby but became determined to finish her degree and registered for the same degree through the national distance university.

Across the 73 young people interviewed in this study, of which 55 were female, six of them at the time of the interview mentioned that they had babies. Two of the six had had a baby after graduating; the other four had had a baby while still studying and for each of these this had had an impact on their ability to continue, as seen above in the experiences of Bongi, Tshidi, and Martha who was introduced in an earlier chapter. This is, of course, not an unknown happening in the world of higher education and young people. Even if obvious it must be stated that an unplanned pregnancy has much more of an impact on the life of a young woman than a young man. None of the men interviewed for the study mentioned anything about babies, yet given the realities of how this comes to be, it is very likely that for at least some of them this – an unplanned pregnancy – had been an issue traversed in a relationship.

For one of these young women [31], the birth of her child, one month before her end of year exams, disrupted what had been up to that point a successful course through the degree, and led to her exclusion. She did however manage to complete the outstanding courses through the national distance university and was awarded the degree. For the three others (Bongi, Tshidi, and Martha), we note that there had already been difficulties in their progression through university studies. We did not interrogate their choices to continue with their pregnancies (this was out of the scope of the study) but, in at least one case, having a baby was presented as a purposeful activity at a time when studies were not going well. The relationship between young women's educational attainment and child-bearing is a complex one.[86]

All the same, this chapter emphasises how the experiences of young people in higher education are distinctly gendered. It is notable that of the ten students who haven't completed their degrees, all except one (Tebogo) are women. In most of these cases, there have been external impacts on their lives that have interfered with their studies. Lerato experienced abuse and this had huge consequences on her life. We have mentioned here the three young women who had babies before completing a degree. We have explored the influence of romantic partners who might or might not support a young woman's educational aspirations. Finally we should reference the matter of exposure to crime, mentioned in the previous chapter. The young woman who experienced the highjacking, had a poor exam session, and then inappropriate and sexist academic advising, left the university thereafter without graduating.

It would be easy to be judgemental about many of the young people who have been profiled in this chapter, focusing on students who dropped out of the institution where they first began their studies. However, the most striking aspect to note is how all of them (except the radio announcer mentioned at the outset of the chapter) have a strong drive to complete their studies. Tshidi should be seen as a key illustration of this – she does not have a strong sense of

86 Demographic studies show some evidence of a relation between participation in higher education and median age of first childbirth (data from Demographic and Health Survey Programme at statcompiler.com). This differential is not as strong though as that comparing women with primary and with secondary education. For more discussion on possible causal effects see: Timæus, I. M. and T. A. Moultrie (2015). Teenage childbearing and educational attainment in South Africa, *Studies in Family Planning*, 46: 143–160.

direction in life but she still has a drive to get her degree, even if she is not yet going about this in a very straightforward way.

It was clear that if you have had one experience of dropout it is not easy to find 'traction' on another route. Yan who found her focus in Law and the young woman in nature conservation have managed to achieve such traction. But we note also the experiences of Tshidi, Lerato and Bongi, who are all determined to do STEM degrees but have not yet developed an intrinsic passion for the discipline. It is notable that the degrees represented here – IT, Civil Engineering and Chemical Engineering – are those that are often considered to offer really good job prospects. It might be this that is driving these young women. Yet sadly, especially if you have completed at a University of Technology, the evidence is not clear that these qualifications necessarily jet you into what students might perceive to be a 'good' job.[87] All the same, these young women are determined in what they are trying to do and, for a range of reasons, finishing a degree matters to them.

In all of these narratives we see absences and presences in the support given by parents and others in similar roles. Primarily this is evidenced through a real interest in the young person's life and the provision of a space in which they can deliberate over their options, but importantly it is also evidenced in holding the young person to defend their choices. An absent or abusive father featured in a number of accounts as a significant negative impact on a young person's life, as would be expected, but what is notable in this study is in showing how far into young adulthood this effect can stretch.

In terms of the institutions that students transition to, it is not surprising that financial and related considerations often mean a move to a cheaper option, either a University of Technology or to the distance university. The latter plays a key role for students who find themselves with very limited finances and/or family obligations.

Overall, a key finding in this study is to fill the gaps in our information about students hitherto characterised as 'wastage'. We may wish in our ideal world that students would always complete the degrees that they start but we see for a wide range of reasons how this doesn't always turn out as planned. A central issue is the space for the exercising of agency in which the young person picks themselves up and scopes out new options towards their plan of getting a degree. Often this in itself is a significant learning curve about the self and the world.

Having considered this group of thirteen study participants who at the time of the interview were mostly still trying to complete a bachelor's degree, we return now to the larger group who completed a bachelor's degree, and at the point of the interview were either studying further or working.

87 There is evidence suggesting that graduates from the universities of technology have poorer employment prospects than those from the traditional universities. See: Kraak, A. (2015). The value of graduate destination survey data in understanding graduate unemployment: A focus on the universities of technology, *South African Journal of Labour Relations*, 39: 93–113.

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.

88 Lenartowicz, M. (2015). The nature of the university, *Higher Education*, 69: 947–961.

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.[89] 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 instrinsic 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 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.[91] 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 commited 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.

CHAPTER 7

ENTRY TO THE WORKPLACE

Narratives already introduced:	
Themba	*BSc Chemistry – doing PhD overseas*
Tebogo	*BSc Actuarial Science – switch to BCom – still not completed, unemployed*
Nala	*BSc extended programme – switch to BA – still not completed, working in start-up company*
Martin	*BA (Hons) Theatre Management – working as theatre manager*
Martha	*BSc Elec Eng – switched to BSc Computer Science – motherhood – studying BSc Computer Science part-time*
Hannah	*B Soc Sci completed but no academic transcript – SAPS trainee*
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*
Sima	*BA – working in a bank*
Yan	*BSc – took year off – studying LLB through distance university*
Tshidi	*BSc extended programme – BSc Civ Eng at another university – work – BSc Computer Science – work – part-time study and motherhood*
Lerato	*BSc – time out and work – BSc Civ Eng at another university – work – doing BSc Civ Eng at another university*
Bongi	*BA Music – work – ND Chemical Engineering – motherhood with part-time study through the distance university*
Paul	*BA(Hons) Philosophy – MA History – working as a researcher*
Cheryl	*BA – year at home – work – Hons in Development Studies – working as research assistant*
Narratives to be introduced in this chapter:	
Lynda	*BSc Computer Science – working as a software developer*
Duma	*BSc – moved to complete at another university – work in municipality – consulting and studying BComm part-time*
Lucy	*BA Journalism – working as a copywriter in advertising*

We have already encountered two graduates who had spent a full year at home unemployed. Cheryl had completed her BA in minimum time and had applied to do honours in Psychology. When this didn't work out, she went to her rural home town and started applying for jobs. Nothing came up and she spent most of the year caring for an aged family member. Mulalo had completed an honours degree in Geology, went home to her rural village in the far north of the country and started applying for jobs. It took a full year before she obtained an internship in a state department. On the other hand, at the outset of this book we encountered Nala, who had easily picked up work at a crowd-funding company even though she hadn't come close to completing her degree.

Two other non-completers who moved with ease into the working world were one participant who had dropped out after one year and who became a very successful radio announcer, and another who after dropping out became a data analyst with an online company but is studying part-time to try and finish her degree.

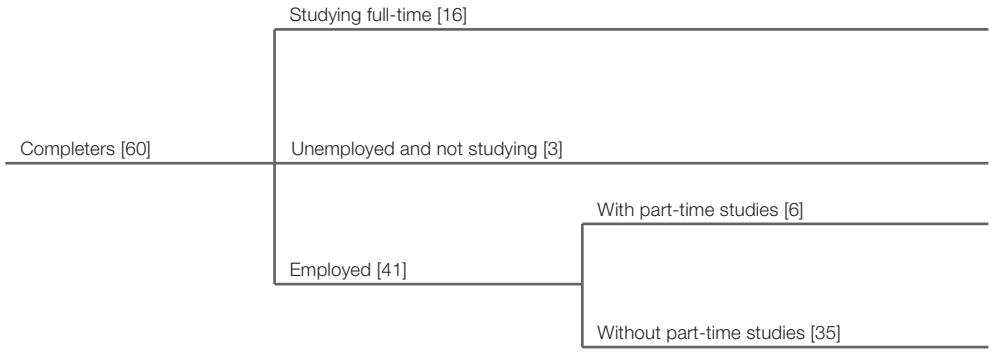
Tebogo as a non-completer had, however, a very different experience to these two when it came to looking for work. When we spoke to him some six years after starting his Acturial Science studies he is at home in a township outside a medium-sized South African town, unemployed and not so far making any progress in getting work.

The striking thing across these narratives is the similarity in the experiences of Cheryl, Mulalo and Tebogo, even though their higher education profiles are quite different – one near to completion of the bachelor's, one completed bachelor's, and an honours degree in science, and one not completed. Heading home from university to a rural hometown or village, and then starting to apply for jobs based on newspaper adverts is a very tough way to find a job, even in the cases where the person is a graduate. Nala and the other two non-completers who remained based in the large city were much more able to pull on prior experiences and networks to get a foothold into the workplace.

Here we have seen an illustration of how higher education is not fully determinant of job opportunities – issues of urban or rural location, and social networks or the absence thereof, are already apparent. To explore this further we turn for the remainder of this chapter to the issue of employment destinations for graduates. Of the 60 graduates in this study, at the time of the interview 16 were in postgraduate or further undergraduate study (discussed in the previous chapter), 41 were in full-time employment and 3 were unemployed and not studying: one participant who is Zimbabwean and struggling to get work after a period with an NGO, and two other participants who were 'in between' commitments but not worried about their capacity to get work (one who had just returned from studying in the US and one who had just finished a very intensive period of high-level work and had decided to take a short break).

The issue of graduate (un)employment is therefore complex to track – in this study it is only the Zimbabwean back in her home country who can be considered a graduate struggling in the long run to get employment. Moreover, a simple survey question to these participants would have obscured much of the detail that has emerged in the picture – knowing who was unemployed at the time of the survey you might catch participants like these three who had all

Figure 3 Trajectories of completers



previously been working or were in between studies, and you wouldn't necessarily know information about those who had spent earlier times looking for work. Nonetheless, we need to start with what is known nationally on the various surveys that have been conducted on graduate destinations.

The issue of graduate unemployment has enjoyed some attention in scholarly and popular South African literature since the early 2000s. At this stage there was an alarm that graduate unemployment from some institutions was at similar levels to overall unemployment in the country, but more recent analyses show that, with approximately 5% unemployment in the working-age pool of graduates compared to 29% for those only with school-leaving qualifications, graduates have substantially better employment prospects.[92]

Within this broad pattern, graduate destination studies[93] have found differences based on issues of race, field of study, and institution. Across the studies it is confirmed that race remains the most significant predictor of employment outcomes for young South African graduates. There is some evidence of 'frictional unemployment', referring to the delay that some graduates experience in obtaining their first job. Regarding job search strategies, the use of social networks is much more prevalent amongst graduates from higher-status institutions. A key finding is that students from historically black universities are more likely to go and work in the public sector than students from historically white universities.

As noted above, nearly all the participants in this study – 68 out of 73 – at the time of the interview were either studying full time or or were in full-time employment. Included in the 45 who were in full-time employment, four of these were the participants mentioned who had

92 Van der Berg, S. and H. van Broekhuizen (2012). Graduate unemployment in South Africa: A much exaggerated problem. Stellenbosch: Centre for Development and Enterprise, Stellenbosch University.

93 Following work in the early 2000s, there have been two key recent graduate destination studies, one focusing on the four institutions in the Western Cape, and the other focusing on two institutions in the Eastern Cape: Cape Higher Education Consortium (2013). Pathways from university to work: A Graduate Destination Survey of the 2010 Cohort of Graduates from the Western Cape Universities. Cape Town: Cape Higher Education Consortium; Rogan, M. and J. Reynolds (2015). *Schooling inequality, higher education and the labour market: Evidence from a graduate tracer study in the Eastern Cape, South Africa.* Pretoria: Labour Market Intelligence Partnership (LMIP) Project, HSRC.

not yet completed a bachelor's degree. The analysis from this point thus focuses on the 41 participants who had at least a bachelor's degree and at the point of the interview were in full-time employment.

Only two of these 41 participants were in jobs that could be considered not to require a graduate qualification (often termed 'graduate jobs'[94]): one was a model and an actress (work she had done even before studying) and one was an estate agent (which although historically not a graduate job is increasingly becoming so). This is therefore an important finding: nearly all participants working were in jobs that could be deemed to require their university qualifications. For some of them, this was a very close match – for example, for those working in psychology or in microbiology, their professional role directly drew on the majors in their undergraduate degree. For others – for example a film and media major now working in marketing, the match was not as direct. To explore this a bit further, we excluded the two participants not doing graduate-level work (the actress and the estate agent), and divided the remaining 39 participants doing graduate-level work into a BSc (15 graduates) and BA (24 graduates) subgroup, and then categorised their domains of work.

Of the 15 BSc graduates in this group, four had majored in Geology and were working in some way related to that discipline, even though as noted in Mulalo's case, they hadn't necessarily managed to get the high-level jobs in mining that they had hoped for. Three participants who had majored in Computer Science were working somewhere in the software industry. Three who had studied in this area were doing work in the environmental domain (one a candidate attorney in environmental law). One was working as a technician in a microbiology laboratory, having done honours in this area. One was a qualified pharmacist. One was a school science teacher. This leaves only two of the 15 BSc graduates who were doing graduate-level work not in areas closely linked to their studies – one broadly in the commerical domain, and one in career advising at the university.

Of the 24 BA graduates in full-time graduate employment, five were working broadly in the fields of marketing, advertising, PR etc. None of these five graduates had majored in subjects specifically related to this sort of work. Five participants were in the commercial world including human resources and banking, again not related directly to their studies, but jobs that did require a bachelor's degree. Adding in one media person who had not studied in this area, we get nearly half (11) of the BA graduates who were in graduate roles not directly related to their degree subjects, although of course drawing on the broader skills that their studies had fostered.

In terms of the 13 BA graduates doing work more closely related to their studies, two were university researchers and two were librarians. Two were school teachers. Three were working professionally in psychology. Two who were working in the media had trained as journalists.

94 Behle, H. et al. (2015). Reassessing the employment outcomes of higher education. In Case, J. M. and Huisman, J. (eds), *Researching higher education : International perspectives on theory, policy and practice*. Oxford: Routledge. pp. 114–131.

One was training as a candidate attorney. Finally, there was Martin, the theatre administrator, whose honours had been in this area.

To explore this further we consider in a bit more detail the narratives of two young women who went into the workplace directly after the bachelor's degree.

Sima, whom we encountered earlier in Chapter 4, completed her BA degree, and on graduating, went home and started applying for jobs. After four months nothing had come up, and so she became more proactive and started to approach managers at companies:

> *I graduated and I was at home for about four months … and I was, like, 'No I cannot do this, I have to volunteer!' So, I went to companies and introduced myself to the managers and then luckily, because I had done psychology and HR, there was a recruiting company and they took me up as an intern type of thing.*

Sima landed up with an internship doing administrative work for a recruitment company. Then she decided to put her story out on a radio programme which had a slot for graduates who were unemployed. This led to a better job with another recruitment company in a large city and she moved there. But after three months, she didn't enjoy the work and so she resigned and returned home. Her fiancé was working in a bank and so, after four months at home, through him she managed to get an interview for a position in the graduate training programme, starting in sales. She didn't like that and so she soon applied for another position in the same company and she is now enjoying that work and has been in it for two years.

She was interested to note that in the graduate training for the bank there were people with many different degrees, not necessarily with commercial backgrounds. She is happy in this industry, but notes that it is not necessarily that secure; there is always the possibility of retrenchments. She is still hoping to do postgraduate studies at some point. She wants to go deeper personally, she feels she still needs more confidence, and now she has a son she feels she needs to be someone he can be proud of.

An interesting counterpoint to Sima's narrative, offering both striking similarities and some key differences, is that of Lynda, to be introduced now.

Lynda came from a small rural town and was bullied at school for being academically successful. At one stage she even contemplated dropping out. Two IT teachers made a difference, firstly a teacher in Grade 10 who advised her to stay in school, and secondly a matric teacher who was a retired university professor and who helped her with applying for university and bursaries, since her family was not able to pay fees:

> *I knew from fifteen that I wanted to be a programmer because as soon as I wrote my first programme I knew, yes, this is what I want to do. So, I signed up at [the university], not knowing anything, I just came here and said, 'I want to study programming. What boxes do I tick? I want to learn to programme!' So, I ended up doing Computer Science.*

She was a top student at university but could not contemplate staying for honours as she had to start earning money to support her mother. During her final year there was a university initiative which put companies in touch with soon-to-be graduates and she made a connection with a company whose work interested her, gave them her CV, and started working two days after her final exam. She had interviewed at a few other places but decided this was the offer that resonated for her. She really enjoyed this work environment but after a year and a half she felt she had to leave. She explained:

> *The only reason I left them was because I felt I had reached the top of what I was going to learn there. It was still a start-up so there wasn't much room for promotions and moving from junior to mid-level developer and things like that. As a junior developer, I woke up in the morning and I knew exactly what I was going to do all day, I went and I did it and I came home, and that's kind of boring.*

From the first job she moved into a job with a major multinational online company, which was very demanding:

> *They expect you to work 12 hours a day or you're not pulling your weight. It's a highly competitive environment and you're not just doing development, there are a lot of social things involved. … There are five meetings a day and you're still expected to get your eight hours done. It's a toxic environment. I do see how some people thrive in that high-pressure environment – very corporate – but it's not for me.*

After a year with this company she therefore quit, and took off two to three months to recover. Now she is with an online gaming company; she works from her home and has a lot of job flexibility but she still finds herself working too long hours and it has taken a toll on her health. Part of this is because she is still doing some freelancing on the side and doing a few hours in the evening on another project. She is busy interviewing for a job with another major IT-related multinational and if this comes through, she will move overseas with her husband whom she married a short while ago.

Lynda works in an industry where you do not necessarily need a degree – if you can program well, you can get a foot in the door. But she felt the university degree gave her the confidence that she needed. And her trajectory into the workplace has been comparatively smooth in terms of options and networks. When asked what she would have done if she hadn't gone to university, she said:

> *I definitely would have stuck in computers but I probably would have gone and worked at an IT repair shop or something like that. … I've never been a very confident person and maybe it's the field or university in general, but I know that Computer Science at university is known to be a bit of a cocky field and people there*

get a bit full of themselves. And when you're constantly surrounded by these cocky confident people, it rubs off on you and you stop doubting yourself so much.

It is very interesting to place Sima and Lynda's narratives side by side, like this. In the common parlance of South African higher education discussions we might be inclined to focus on the issue that Sima is black and Lynda is white. But both come from families with limited financial resources; Lynda can only attend university because of bursaries. Both had to go and work after bachelor's graduation, Lynda to support her mom. In fact, the striking difference in the narratives relates more to their disciplinary focus and what this means for their work trajectories. Lynda from an early age knows she wants to be a programmer, a specialised skill. She already has a basic level of this skill in place when she gets to university. Following graduation, she goes into a job that specifically uses this skill. This is even relatively unusual across the broader group of BSc graduates, but illustrates the advantage of having a niche area that you have specialised in even at the bachelor's level (this is the upside of the BSc degree structure discussed earlier; it does force you to specialise).

Sima has likewise chosen university subjects that match her interests and which she deems to have potential work applicability. But Organisational Psychology doesn't match you to a job in quite the same way that computer programming does, and so she struggles before she gets her first work exposure in a recruitment company. At the time of the interview she is working in the bank, doing estates management, not related specifically to her majors. In fact, she notes how the graduates she works alongside come from a very wide range of degree and subject areas. Sima's employment situation is slightly more precarious; she knows that a large company like this can do periodic restructuring, although presently that is more at the branch level. Lynda, on the other hand, is finding herself in demand in the global area of online companies and their programming needs.

But you can't choose your passions. And there are also potential risks at having specialised in a particular skill domain; Lynda fortunately loves this work. Sima sees herself still on an educational development trajectory and anticipates significant further personal and career development when she does get to do postgraduate work.

With these two narratives in the backdrop, we look now a bit more closely at the experience of getting into the workplace for the 43 graduates in this study.

The ease or difficulty of getting work

Sima was at home for four months struggling to get work when she decided to start a walk around of companies, introducing herself to managers in the coastal city where she lived. And this bore fruit: she managed to get a job with a recruitment company this way. For Cheryl and Mulalo, whose full year at home we considered at the outset of this chapter, a small rural township or village did not offer these kinds of possibilities.

The important focus here is on the first job after graduation. If you get stuck at home for a year this can be very dispiriting. What we have also seen above, for example in Sima's narrative, is that once they have had a period of work, some of these graduates have a couple of months between jobs and often then go back home.

Having family support at home while searching for employment was seen to be important. For a law graduate in the study [16], being able to bide time at home meant that she was able to choose between two offers of positions as an articled clerk – one in a large law firm in Johannesburg which was not immediately available and required her to wait, and the other, immediately available, in a smaller town. Having the family support of being able to take a year off at home and work in her church meant that this graduate could take up the more desirable law articles position in the big city a while later:

> *I kind of had to sit and pick. Do I want to work for a slightly biggish firm, better salary, in Joburg, better experience and training and so forth? Or do I want to … start in [a smaller town] for 2014 and 2015 and then try and switch to Joburg? So, when it came down to it, Joburg was the better option and so I thought, let me stay at home and just chill a while. And so, it was that I started doing work for my church … [16]*

Social networks or other forms of support in the city were very important for graduates looking for a job. This enabled graduates to survive in the city for an extended period while sending out CVs and following up on job leads, and so made their entry into the workplace easier than for job-seeking graduates in smaller rural towns or villages. This was the experience for Mulalo, a Geology Honours graduate from a rural village who was introduced earlier. She ended up spending an entire year at home unemployed, before securing her current internship in a state department.

The initial difficulty in finding a job was emotionally taxing, and some graduates described feeling despondent after months of unsuccessful searching. For some, there was the need to lower their expectations and apply for jobs that were not necessarily graduate level. For example, this Psychology graduate ended up applying for an internship at an online education company, doing rather menial, reception-type work:

> *Eventually, after four months of trying I thought I needed to lower the expectation about the kind of job I wanted. So, I applied for an internship at [an online education provider]. I actually found them online. … To my surprise I got through from CV, to telephone interview, to face-to-face interview and then to a 'team fit' interview. I couldn't believe it was happening, that anyone would want a Psychology Humanities student. They hired me as an intern. … So, I started as intern, working at reception, answering phones and getting coffee … I think I accepted the fact that*

> *I had to swallow my pride and start from the bottom, and put the Psychology on the back burner. [47]*

As was often the case for these graduates, this relatively low-level job then fortunately led to her current job as project manager in the same company, a career which she now loves:

> *Project management was such a surprise career for me because it was completely unexpected, it happened organically, really, and had no connection to the five years of study I had poured myself into. So that's where I am now, and have been in the same position officially for nine months. … I love what I do, and it is so different to what I imagined I would do. [47]*

In reflecting on her path to employment, this BA (Psychology) graduate refered to the common perception that BA graduates have a harder time finding employment than their counterparts who completed professional degrees:

> *It was really difficult for me at the time. My friends had taken Commerce, Engineering and Medical degrees; I was the only Humanities student among my group of friends, and I was watching them hit the ground running after graduating with jobs they were really passionate about and that they loved. I'm very aware that for them it probably wasn't the case at all, but from the outside it felt as though they just walked into these jobs. … It left a very sour taste about my five years of study. The stigma attached to Humanities students felt so real to me. [47]*

This perception that BA graduates struggle more than BSc graduates to find jobs is not supported in general statistical evidence to date, and was also not apparent in this study. At a national level, labour force and graduate destination surveys indicate that the relationship between field of study (BA or BSc) and unemployment is not as strong as might be assumed.[95] In the present study, of the 43 graduates, 15 described some hurdles in getting a job, but the type of degree was not a significant factor. Rather, what was more significant was whether the job-seekers were rural or city-based and the extent of their access to social networks. Thus, baldly speaking, the ease to which a degree led to job opportunities was significantly mediated by the graduate's urban/rural location and access to social networks.

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95 Overall, graduate destination studies show that social background is the strongest prediction of employment outcomes for graduates. The evidence around field of study needs to be understood against this macro picture. Here there has been mixed evidence around the popular perception that humanities graduates have poorer employment outcomes. See: Cape Higher Education Consortium (2013). Pathways from university to work: A Graduate Destination Survey of the 2010 Cohort of Graduates from the Western Cape Universities. Cape Town: Cape Higher Education Consortium; Rogan, M. and J. Reynolds (2015). *Schooling inequality, higher education and the labour market: Evidence from a graduate tracer study in the Eastern Cape, South Africa.* Pretoria: Labour Market Intelligence Partnership (LMIP) Project, HSRC.

Of the 15 students who described some obstacles in entering the workplace, four were Geology students. For these students (all black South Africans), the expectation that the BSc degree would lead to a good job in industry had been scuppered by the downturn in the mining sector. They struggled to get the sort of jobs and salaries they had aspired to, and instead describe biding their time in lower-level internship positions.

As noted earlier, a greater proportion of the BSc students were doing graduate-level work closely linked to their degree subjects as compared with the BA graduates. Nearly half of the BA graduates (11 out of 24) were doing jobs not directly related to their area of study, but they were not less likely to have found employment.

With regard to the difficulty of getting work, as noted in the previous chapters, for some students a good option was to do postgraduate studies– both to find a form of 'employment' via a bursary, and also to skill themselves up to be more employable at the conclusion of their postgraduate studies.

The graduates in this study had mostly completed their degrees at relatively high-status research-intensive universities. They were well aware and expressed in detail their sense of how the reputation of the institution influenced their job prospects:

> *I think that there's this perception about someone who goes to [this university] – it's a different kind of intellectual. I don't know how to even clarify how [this university] is not just an institution, it's a lifestyle. It's been very helpful. [29]*

> *So since [this university] is the top university in our country, it is looked at in a higher regard than the others. Because I was in the recruitment area, I know that when people hand in their CVs, someone who went to [this university] is going to be looked at more than someone who went to [another university]. So, it definitely does give you more of a competitive edge when you're applying for jobs. [32]*

> *… especially because the media is so small so, you know, when you hear that someone comes from [the same university] you also tend to gravitate towards one another a lot and you get treated very differently as well, so again, it's like that eyebrow raiser, oh … [19]*

It must be emphasised that the institutions in this study occupy a very privileged space in the hierarchy of South African higher education institutions. Young people at lower status institutions do not have the same benefit of the reputation of the university propelling their career prospects.[96]

96 A key study in this regard is that by Rogan and colleagues who compared graduate employment outcomes for university graduates from the University of Fort Hare with those from Rhodes University: Rogan, M. and J. Reynolds (2015). *Schooling inequality, higher education and the labour market: Evidence from a graduate tracer study in the Eastern Cape, South Africa.* Pretoria: Labour Market Intelligence Partnership (LMIP) Project, HSRC.

All of these students came from institutions with strong reputations, but even still, getting the first job required more than this. Looking across the participants in this study it can be seen that the ease or difficulty of getting work depends on social networks more than anything else. It required a way of networking into employment options, which was hard especially for those students without connections into the city. Type of degree had much less of an influence on the ability to get graduate level work than might be commonly assumed. We now explore these findings further by looking more closely at the specific strategies students employed for getting work.

Resources and strategies used for getting into the workplace

The striking thing about the experience of the two graduates who spent a full year at home looking for work, Cheryl and Mulalo, is that their job search strategies, by virtue of the location of their home town, was limited to newspaper and online adverts. By contrast, Nala, who hadn't even finished her degree, used the networks she had built at university to get a job.

Universities can be a tremendous source of future job contacts, and this seems especially so for the large urban university featured in this study. The location in the city meant close proximity to many potential employers, and a range of initiatives took place for students during their final year which exposed them to these possibilities, as was seen above in Lynda's experience. She obtained her first job through a university initiative to link top final-year Computer Science students with companies. Another Computer Science graduate, currently based in Brazil, got his job in a similar manner:

> *In my final, Honours year I did a presentation for the project that I was working on for Computer Science, and because they have recruiters come and listen to us, the company that I am working for was there doing recruiting and that's how I got in touch with them. [51]*

Another graduate, in Environment and Geograpical Science, also recounted how her first job was set up through university-employer networks:

> *During my honours … the managing director [of the consulting company] had a presentation and said that we can apply for internships at the Joburg office. So, I prepared my motivational letter and applied for that. During the holidays in my Honours year I did a three-week internship at [the consulting company]. So, I had the contacts within there, and then while I was there they also offered me a job. [45]*

Sima went home on graduation and then started looking for work in her home town. She was fortunate in that home was a largish coastal city but still she had severed links with the

university networks that were at hand in the university city. Yet somehow she summonsed the confidence to be able to walk into firms and introduce herself. Without this mobilisation of agency she would not have got the position she did.

As noted in the range of jobs that graduates are doing, a not insignificant number of participants in this study got work broadly in the university – none of them yet in full-time employment as lecturers but at least five in administrative, research and library positions, or employed by projects that are connected to the university. For example, this graduate had been working on a part-time basis at the local museum for a few years, when her current, permanent position became available:

> *I started with a temporary position when the previous curator left. I had been working at the museum part-time. They have small student positions and I'd been doing that for a few years just five hours a week. And then when they opened up applications for the permanent position, I was awarded that position. [6]*

For another graduate, his first employment was as an intern in his university's Marketing Department, working on publications and online news [21]; another BA graduate was currently employed as a subject librarian at the university where he had studied [22]. Paul, who was introduced in the previous chapter, is now working as an assistant researcher in a university research and support centre, having come across the advert for his job on the university's website. Although it is not in his field of history specifically, he is enjoying picking up new skills. Another graduate is currently employed in the university's career service, working on a project with high school learners.

The university as an employer for graduates – not only in academic positions – is a perspective that is not always considered in debates around graduate employment.

Experiences of the workplace

Sima's first job was an internship with a recruitment company. For a striking number of graduates in this study (27 out of the 41 graduates who are working) the first job they managed to obtain was an internship. This is a position that is explicitly short term and relatively poorly paid. In fact, some graduates suggested that you need to have access to other family or financial resources to survive on an intern's salary. Lucy, whose narrative will be introduced later on in this chapter, said the following:

> *You can't afford to live off it [intern salary] so you have to have parents or savings that can help you during that time. … [I]t wasn't a well-paid internship, it was R4 000 at the time, but, it did evolve quite quickly so after three months they*

> *doubled my salary then they kept reviewing, so then it became quite a sustainable environment. I think I got very lucky.*

From these experiences it can be seen that the internship often functioned like an extended interview in that a few months into the internship the employee would be offered a better and more permanent position.

Graduates who proved themselves during their internship were often quick to rise through the ranks. This graduate started off as a content writer for an online marketing agency. His BA degree meant that he was 'comfortable with writing' and he made a quick transition to a permanent job in project management with a significant salary increase:

> *I started writing content for them and then they gave me management of the projects … It was a very quick transition. I've been working for that company for 18 months. I started off as an intern on a six months probation and after that they took me on permanent and they doubled my salary. And then another six months later, they gave me this position now and then again raised my salary by 50%, so it has been very quick. [28]*

Some graduates spoke about the tendency of internships to entail low-level and even rather exploitative work:

> *It happened to me with an internship … they essentially wanted me to do a job of what a mid skilled person would be able to do. And it was going to be nine to five so wouldn't have been able to do another job to try pay my rent. And yes, there was no one mentoring me, I wasn't learning anything. [19]*

If it is understood as a rite of passage into graduate employment, then the internship could work. But it does require the graduate to be happy to do fairly menial work with a level of enthusiasm and initiative that makes the company keen to take them on in a more demanding position. It also assumes a level of family support that can enable a graduate to start in a relatively low-paying job.

This increasing reliance on internships as a bridge between studies and work raises equity questions in the South African context where many graduates need to be earning money to support their families. We must also stress that while internationally internships tend to be increasingly popular for students while studying (the 'college internship', sometimes even a mandatory part of an academic programme), the use of internships as noted in the present study is about the status of the first job after graduation.

As was the case with Mulalo, for many Geology graduates, their first job was in the form of an internship. This was experienced as particularly bitter to them, since the downturn in the

mining sector had meant that there were very few of the well-paid jobs they had anticipated on graduating:

> *It is frustrating because when we studied we didn't know that things would be like this. We had a perception that the moment you finish studying you'd have a job and that you just had a variety to chose from, but then when you graduate there are no jobs. Now I am doing an internship and the internship that I am doing is a government internship and I am getting paid three times less than what I would be paid if I was starting properly in the mines. [38]*

It was notable that many graduates in this study found their first jobs in small companies (often in digital media), rather than large corporates. There were numerous accounts of working for start-up companies or starting one (for example, Nala, the social entrepreneur).

Public sector employment

What was notable in graduates' accounts of entering the workplace was that very few took up public sector jobs. This is not unexpected: from the graduate destination studies referenced earlier we know that graduates from research-intensive institutions, such as are the focus of this study, do not appear to favour public sector employment..[97] This section introduces Duma, one of the few graduates who worked in the public sector for a time.

Duma was clearly a very academically talented pupil in school and ended up matriculating at the age of 16. He did an extra year to improve these grades and then applied to do a BSc – for some reason though he was offered a place for BComm at this university. He decided he didn't want to do that degree and so took a 'gap year' which turned into three years working in the UK. Then he reapplied and finally got to start the BSc he had wanted to do all along. He had wanted to do meteorology and they advised him that the closest subject was Geology. His BSc also involved Physics and he started to enjoy that subject more than Geology because he found it challenging. He was part of an undergraduate Physics group who went on a trip overseas. But then in final year he failed a Physics course. He could not deal with how this made him feel:

> *Even in our class they knew I was among the top five performers in class and here I was, I had failed. They asked what was happening because they used to come and asked me for solutions and now I was failing. So that's why I decided that you know*

97 See especially Rogan, M. and J. Reynolds (2015). *Schooling inequality, higher education and the labour market: Evidence from a graduate tracer study in the Eastern Cape, South Africa.* Pretoria: Labour Market Intelligence Partnership (LMIP) Project, HSRC.

> *what, I can't deal with this honestly speaking. Let me just leave and go to another institution and then just try something new.*

He was one course away from graduation but he decided to move. His mother said it was his decision and she hoped it was for good reasons:

> *I told her at the last moment that 'OK Mom, I am going to [this other institution]'. She asked what was wrong and I told her that I needed to move. My mom is one of those people who let's you make you own decisions in life so that you do not, at one point, point fingers at her. She said, 'OK, if you are happy then it is your call, but just make sure that it is a good decision.'*

He moved to a university in a coastal town and managed to get in with a late application. He didn't enjoy it much but he completed his degree.

He was almost finished his degree when through family friends he heard that the municipality was looking for a driver. He went into the offices and they were puzzled as to why he was applying for a job as a driver and they promised to look into graduate opportunities in the muncipality and call him back. They did, and called him on the last day of his exams with the offer of a position as a property evaluator.

> *[The municipal offer] said, 'This job may not necessarily apply to you but you are qualified and at the end of the day you are going to be part of a team of professionals in the team. Most of the people in the team are civil engineers, building engineers and all that.' It was relevant to them, but he told me that I would learn along the way and it wouldn't be rocket science. And it was nice for the first three months but after that I was like but we are doing the same thing all over again. Everyday I knew that we were going to a certain site and do this and that, draw and all that. It was just not me. But because the money was coming in at the end of the month I was like OK, but later said I am not really happy.*

So he decided he needed to start thinking of other options: he felt that this was not what he studied for, even though he had also now realised that Geology was 'not his thing'. He didn't feel there were career growth prospects. So, while still working, he decided he should pick up his studies again. He went to the distance university and enquired with them about doing Physics, his first love. But they advised against this since they couldn't offer the practical side of physics. So he decided to start a BComm in Law and is now in his second year of that degree. He said he loved the BSc but that he is also enjoying the way the BComm Law is broadening his perspectives further. After two years he resigned completely from the municipality job, giving the rather stark view that

> *with government and municipalities, you get to relax a lot and you don't get challenged enough to actually practise what you have done and know what it is.*

Interestingly though, he is now in a small business with a few friends, consulting to the municipalities, doing online capture of documentation. And he is enjoying his part-time studies, especially the challenge and the independence.

What is striking when the variety of graduate workplace destinations is surveyed, is the absence of young graduates teaching in the South African public education system. Of the 60 graduates interviewed, only two are in teaching posts in South Africa, and both are teaching at private schools. One BSc graduate started teaching at a home-schooling tutoring centre and is now a maths and science teacher at the high school she had attended [35]. At the same time, she is completing her PGCE teaching qualification through the national distance university. The other teacher, a BA graduate, is in a locum teaching at a private school while completing her BEd (Hons) in Educational Psychology. Interestingly, she had taught English in Korea for a year before returning to South Africa to study further and teach. This teaching abroad option was also taken up by two other graduates – a BA graduate who is now settled in Japan teaching English [25], and a BSc graduate who taught high school science for a year in Thailand [50]. On returning to South Africa she was offered a teaching post at a public high school (even without a teaching qualification), but had taken up a research technician post instead. And another BSc graduate, currently employed a university careers service, has long-term aspirations to do a PGCE and become a teacher.

Another student who had enjoyed tutoring and was now in a banking job that she didn't find satisfying, said she didn't think enough about teaching as a career option:

> *I wish I had known about teaching before. I didn't even know about PGCE; I didn't know about that, which I could have done. In hindsight maybe rather than honours I probably should have done that. But in [the university I attended] I didn't even do courses that could contribute to this because I didn't even know about it. [30]*

During apartheid, public sector teaching was a major destination for many (mostly white) university graduates (black teachers were largely produced in the college system) due to the availability of teacher bursaries to support those whose families could not pay fees. The ideology of the time rested on a close relationship between schools and universities (and the church).[98] Post-apartheid policy saw a key role for education in social transformation, but has not enacted a system linking universities and schools so closely.

98 See, for example: Jansen, J. D. (2009). *Knowledge in the blood: Confronting race and the apartheid past.* Cape Town: UCT Press.

Deliberations around the experience of work

Many of the graduates talk about deliberations and choices they make around the sort of jobs that they aspire to. Sima was explicit about what work she enjoyed doing and what she didn't enjoy doing, and she had no hesitation on more than one occasion in quitting a job that she didn't enjoy after only a few months. As we saw earlier, Duma felt he was stagnating in his repetitive and unsatisfying municipal property evaluator job and so he gave this up, despite the financial security it provided him, in favour of returning to studying. To explore this further we introduce here a further narrative, that of Lucy.

Lucy studied a BA. Neither of her parents had university degrees but they were well off and able to fund her to study wherever and whatever she wanted to do. She said the following about her choice of institution:

> *My older cousin went to [this university] and she was so cool … and it looked like such an amazing university and I just chose it largely for that idea of being far away from home and staying in a beautiful place.*

She was good at English and Art at school and so she felt a BA was an obvious choice; her parents were happy for her to follow her interests:

> *I have always been independent minded so my parents – neither of them have degrees – so they could afford to send me to university and they were like, 'Whatever'. And my dad was like, 'Do Fine Art, who cares.' And for a long time, I went with the idea of doing architecture … and it just sort of became more of a vague, 'Let me just do a handful of BA subjects' sort of decision.*

In her first year she took English and French literature, Politics and Journalism and said, 'I liked all of them.' She continued with the Journalism major but also had in the back of her mind the idea of one day doing something in international relations. Her Art interests led her to choose the Design strand in the Journalism degree. When she left university, she said:

> *I wasn't really thinking about it at all. I was just graduating with my B Journ and I wanted to move to Cape Town, I think that's the main incentive because I'm from KwaZulu-Natal … I was sleeping on a friend's couch and I was like, 'Well, let me see what jobs I can get.' And personally advertising stood out in Cape Town, probably because it's such a big industry here, and it seemed like something I could do … and I applied for a creative internship.*

Four months into the internship her position was made permanent and she still works at that company focusing on copywriting. The prevalence of internships as routes into the workplace has been noted earlier. On this matter Lucy observed the following:

> *Because I think companies also recognise that as a graduate you actually can't make them any money, you don't have sort of skills that are going to help, and they just have to see enough in you that they're going to sustain you for a bit longer so you can prove your worth which my creative director she once said to me was six months into working there then I became someone that she could let run with something.*

She contrasts her background with the more common route into the advertising industry:

> *It's double the price to go to one of these advertising schools and then they come out of it and they don't know how to engage critically with the world around them. They've learnt something very practical but, not something very thoughtful. So, I am very glad I have approached the industry the way I did because, I gained so much largely on a personal level, I suppose but we'll see where my career goes.*

She enjoys the conceptual side of copywriting and thinks this relates to the broad suite of courses she took at university. She feels she has learnt to function in the 'grey areas' of the world, where much work is driven by the need to sell a product and make a profit. She remembers one prominent lecturer on the far left politically who she thinks would not approve of what her and many of her classmates are doing in the world of commerce, but she notes:

> *At the end of the day that's not real life; you have to work within these spaces, especially when you're young and you're learning.*

She is, however, aiming to get into more socially connected work and has applied for a position with a political organisation. Reflecting on having gone to university she says:

> *I look at my life through the lens that I cultivated at university and from the friends I made in university, … we all have similar priorities and for all of us education is the most important thing in our lives in a lot of ways, it sounds absurdly patriotic but I think that's an honest truth I can't … I don't think that I would have been different if I had gone to [another university] but the mere fact that I went to an institution of higher education … that, I mean is everything.*

Lucy said that she valued being in a collegial workplace. Here she contrasts her nurturing work environment with the more general tendency of advertising agencies to be ruthless and demanding workplaces:

> *I am obviously eternally grateful for the wonderful fostering environment that I've worked in for the last three years, because I had to work with such nice people which I think is uncharacteristic of agencies in Cape Town. They have this reputation for being very ruthless, for working very long hours and all of those things … So, at least I work for an agency that was small and they gave me the impression that they were interested to seeing how I could develop personally and I have been able to change job positions within my company rather than change jobs which has been really nice.*

Lucy had the benefit of a family who could support her ambitions and she was able to choose a degree that matched what were already her intellectual strengths and interests. Her experience seems almost seamless, moving through university subjects with enjoyment and progressively refining her interests, and then managing to convert an internship quickly into a permanent and relatively fulfilling job – although she does niggle a bit about the lack of positive social impact in her work.

From the graduates' interviews, there emerges here a sense of graduates' agency in deciding which jobs to pursue and which to let go. Here, a few key dimensions start to emerge: whether the job is interesting and challenging enough, or whether the work schedule is perhaps too demanding; whether the workplace culture matches their expectations or their personal values and commitments. At this stage in their working lives, challenge and career development are key attributes many are looking for in a job. This graduate reflects on the importance of growing into a career and not merely working for a salary:

> *When I go back into the workforce it would be better if I got something that I would like and enjoy so that I could grow into a position or a career, and not just go back for the sake of money. [21]*

Cheryl, whom we met in the previous chapter, expressed her frustration with the non-graduate-level jobs she was compelled to take while trying to get into Honours in Psychology. Of her administration work at an alarm company, she notes that:

> *Mostly it was just monotonous, everyday it was the same thing, on the computer and capturing the same data.*

As noted earlier, many of the Geology graduates describe difficulties in finding satisfying work in which they are required to use their disciplinary knowledge directly. One Geology graduate describes how her frustration at doing mostly administration work in an internship with a government agency led her to negotiate with her employers for a more suitable Geology-related internship at a Geology consulting company:

> *So, I did my internship [with a government agency] but the internship was definitely not Geology related. … At some point, there was someone from [the agency] that came to check how we were doing with the internship and I was not happy with my internship – I knew it was not Geology but at least I thought I'd be using my Chemistry knowledge or something like that, because I was working under nanotechnology … So, I told them that I felt like I was just there and mostly doing admin work and I was not adding value to my career. I got into an agreement with [the agency] that if I looked for another place, I'd go to that company and they'd continue sponsoring my internship, because places are not taking internships because they don't have the money to pay them. So, I ended up in a Geology consulting company and [the agency] was fine with that and they continued to pay for me. [38]*

This graduate's determination to find a more stimulating internship paid off, and after only a month at the Geology consulting company, she was offered an even better internship at a major mining company.

Another aspect of the workplace that influences graduates' decisions about jobs is the workplace environment and sense of collegiality. We saw earlier with Lynda how a pressured work environment can exact a toll on its employees; in her case, she took two or three months off to recover from a high-pressured job with a major multinational online sales company.

Other graduates talked about the importance of work that was consistent with their ideological beliefs. Paul, whom we met in the previous chapter, discusses this dilemma when he had searched for jobs after completing his masters in History:

> *I applied for a corporate type research job out of desperation but it was … you know, mining industry stuff. So, I would have gone straight from talking about the horrors of mining … straight into consulting for them – not just doing consulting for them, but doing research work for them.*

Lucy also grappled with this issue. Constrasting the social consciousness fostered during her studies with the lack of social awareness or critique in the advertising industry, she says:

> *What I studied was politics and journalism and obviously it's … very critical of the socio-economic sphere, whereas working in advertising … it's not very conscious of that sphere it's working within … . It doesn't put any thought in how it's critiquing it or how it's changing it – or even worse how it's continuing the problems in the social sphere. … So, I find it's quite difficult, especially having studied in [this university's] politics department to switch that off in your mind, to stop being so critical of what you are looking at all the time. I mean, I write copy for an oil company!*

Deliberations about the value of the degree for career prospects

The study included participants from two professions that stemmed from BA and BSc degrees, namely Journalism and Pharmacy respectively. As noted in Lucy's experience, the Journalism graduates did not necessarily go into the traditional careers in this area. In Pharmacy they did go into directly related careers, at least in their first jobs after graduation. We also noted that a number of students, like Johnson, did Geology in the hopes that this would open the route to a good job in the mining industry, but that mostly this did not seem to be the case. Computer Science was also regarded by many as a route with good job prospects, yet those in the field, including Lynda, noted that you really didn't need a degree to succeed in this area. A striking observation of this study was how few students appeared to be entering the professional sector of public school teaching, even though the prospects for employment in this sector are strong.

Students' deliberations in this domain are complex. In many cases, students contradict themselves in trying to rationalise their investment of time in higher education. For example, Tshidi commented that she knew that one did not have to have a degree in order to make money because many of her peers were doing so, yet she also made the following statement:

> *When you check job websites, all the time they ask for a degree. So, I do realise that it is important.*

Many students in this study put forward the standard view, which is supported by evidence, that having a degree significantly increases the number of potential job opportunities. Some of them like Cheryl felt there were no opportunities without a degree, and this is very likely a reflection of her own home community with limited opportunities and high unemployment. She said:

> *With just matric you can't really get a job. With an undergrad, I was able to do that. For example, having a certificate meant something at [the home alarm company] and other people were inspired or intrigued by that.*

The somewhat concerning point here is that the short-term administrative work she had at the alarm company was hardly a graduate-level position. But she felt she would not even have been able to get that without a degree. This may well be an accurate perception, given the employment situation for her non-degreed peers in the rural town she came from.

In this regard, some participants referred to the sense of 'professionalism' that university gave them, but also surprisingly referred to aspects of work readiness that might be expected from schooling, such as interpersonal skills, writing of CVs, etc. One student said:

> *From a personal point of view now I can relate to people of different races, gender, old and young people and how to treat them with respect. It has taught me a lot of*

> *things, from time management to submitting whatever I am given in time and to approach people that can be of assistance in time instead of being late. [40]*

Some students were bothered by this state of affairs, almost as if the degree only served a credentialing function. One student commented at some length:

> *I think sadly there is a kind of [prestige] associated with having a degree of some sort. Maybe people take me more seriously than I should be taken because I have this degree behind my name, and the colleagues who have done a few courses here and there but are so brilliant at what they do, don't get the recognition they deserve. [47]*

She also said:

> *So, I am very grateful to have just that one line to put at the bottom of my CV. If I think about what that one line means, and what went into it, it blows my mind. That five years of study culminates in that opportunity. I think it was a ridiculous idea that it should have meant more because I've always known that a degree doesn't necessarily dictate your job. It's just a different story when you're living it and you have your degree and it's four months and your inbox is empty and there are no bites and nobody wants you.*

Students were also asked in the interview to reflect on what their lives would have been like if they hadn't gone to university. Some like Tshidi noted that you could be successful in the commercial world without a degree, and that having a degree did not guarantee work. It was noted that succeeding in business required not only an entrepreneurial capacity, but also some access to capital. One student explained:

> *Nowadays I don't think there are that many options unless you are an amazing entrepreneur and you find a niche in the market and you utilise it. Without a degree, I think your options are hugely limited. Ok, maybe if you took over your parents' business you could do well, but if you don't have an avenue to do that I don't know how you'd be able to enter the world of working. [4]*

Quite a few participants felt that their job opportunities would be less interesting and/or less well paid if they hadn't gone to university. According to Lerato:

> *Without a qualification, there is only so much you can do. Also in terms of salary, you are not going to be paid what I feel is a living wage. People take you for granted, they treat you like this is the only thing you can do because you couldn't go to school.*

> *I think you are more limited without a qualification, unless maybe you start your own business and you are able to grow through that.*

There were many deliberations over the investment of time in higher education and how this affected your career route. Some felt that going to higher education, even though it keeps you out of the job market for a few years, would ultimately allow you to get more quickly to a certain career position, for example:

> *[Without university,] I would have maybe come out in the same direction but it would have taken me much longer and I think I would have struggled more. [49]*

Some felt that going directly into the workplace would allow you to get ahead, but you could find yourself trapped down the line with limited options (in agreement with the broader point outlined above). Nala had this concern with her current job and explained why she was still hoping to complete a degree through part-time study:

> *Something that bothers me is my position in the company. It is quite a good position but for someone who doesn't have the formal training, it might become a problem in the future. So that is why I want to do that.*

Another participant drew together the threads of this overall conundrum nicely:

> *I think [your options] are limiting [if you don't go to university] because you know you only have this space and the freedom to do a certain amount of things, in a certain way … You can only grow to a certain level or a certain space but then again, you do hear about these people who, for example are doing sales or something with only matric and they are super successful. They're top in the company, or they're earning lots of money, or whatever the case is. So, I think there is space for those who don't want to go to university to really make a success of themselves but it takes a specific type of person to have the will, and the motivation, and the push, and the drive to really be able to do that. [15]*

There were interesting deliberations by BA graduates, given the general negative view about the job prospects following this degree. Some of them agreed with these concerns, for example:

> *BA doesn't give you any content career subjects. I know someone who has PhD in Anthropology and she is struggling to find a job. [22]*

It was also BA graduates who tended to raise the issue of the theoretical focus of university studies compared to what they saw as more practical concerns in the working world. One student said:

> *You can have a PhD in Media and it still makes no difference. You are well educated but can you land a big client? [21]*

On the other hand, another BA graduate was particularly emphatic that this degree opened up many career opportunities:

> *There are too many choices: you can go into journalism, into media, you can go into so many different industries and fields and you can find a job where you learn a new skill on the job as well. It gives you too many options when you do a BA. Sometimes I wish I had studied engineering where I knew that I was going to be an engineer, but you know when you do a BA they ask you 'What are you going to be in?' and you say 'I don't know'. It is true because you actually don't know because there are just too many choices. [28]*

The BA graduates in this study were generally able to articulate ways in which the skills they developed in this degree were applicable in the workplace. They also recognised the importance of being able to sell yourself in this way to a prospective employer. For example, Paul succinctly summarised his skills as follows:

> *I understand well the mechanics of arguments and different methodology … So, I know how to make a strong argument, and I know how to look at data, and I know how to use different types of evidence to make an argument. And I can write and I can understand and I can execute tasks in a sort of like a professional way, you know, like attention to detail and neatness …*

From an interesting angle, a BA graduate who worked in modelling felt that her BA qualification gave her skills that actually were valuable in this field, not usually considered requiring graduate level skills:

> *I think sometimes I go to castings with girls who are definitely more beautiful than me and definitely better in that job in my opinion and I'll get it because I think that they like to have something different and a lot of models haven't studied.*

In this chapter it has been seen that the majority of graduates in this study are in the workplace some six years after first year, and in this chapter we have traced their trajectories into

employment. Some found work quickly, but for many it was a challenge. Location played a huge role; being in an urban area and in a working community offered a tremendous advantage. The university itself also offered a space of networking that supported the job search.

We noted that nearly all bachelor's graduates were in positions that could be described as requiring graduate-level skills. Comparing BA and BSc graduates, there did not seem to be any difference in their ease or difficulty of finding work, but it was noted that BSc graduates tended to be in positions more closely related to the major subjects in their degrees.

In terms of accessing the first job after graduation, we noted the significant prevalence of internships, which almost constituted an extended interview in which the graduate starts with a low-paying contract job and needs to prove themselves. The few students in this study who headed into the public sector did not rate this destination highly, although as noted in other studies this is, for many black African students at HBUs, the main employment opportunity. We noted the complete lack of public sector school teaching across the 73 interviewees in this study; even accounting for bias in response, this is somewhat extraordinary for a sample of BA and BSc graduates and graduates-to-be.

We have now completed our analysis of young people's life trajectories and how higher education has influenced these. In the final chapter we return to the big questions that kicked off this study, around the purposes of higher education in society, and to what extent these are being met in post-apartheid South Africa.

CHAPTER 8

THE PURPOSES OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Expanding participation in higher education forms the major contextual background for this book. A key driver of this expansion around the world has been the growing middle class and its aspirations for its children. South Africa is no different[99] and the first two decades of democracy saw the student body double in size. At 20% participation of the youth cohort, South Africa has moved out of the 'elite' phase into the early stages of 'massified' higher education.[100] This recent expansion means that many students in higher education, termed 'first generation students' do not have parents who studied at this level.

Our study has provided important fine-grained detail on what underpins these macro patterns of participation. We tracked the higher education experiences of 73 young people who had started bachelor's studies at one of three research-intensive South African universities some six years previously. The first set of questions driving this study centre on student success and failure. In exploring their narratives, we were interested in identifying the opportunities and constraints that they encountered on their journey of getting into university, getting through university, and getting out into the workplace or into further studies. We wanted to analyse the ways in which young people enact agency to navigate their journey and we wanted to come to a fuller sense of what enables or constrains them along this route. Importantly, we wanted to more fully understand how universities might respond to these constraints and enablements.

Informed by Margaret Archer's theorisation of human agency, we focused on the deliberations ('the internal conversations') that young people undertake as they formulate and reformulate their courses of action. As per Amartya Sen's philosophy of human agency, we understand that for each person the task is to identify what matters to them and to be able to live a life in accordance with what they value. An important finding to emerge from this study is quite how messy are the trajectories that many young people go through as they attempt to

99 Southall, R. (2016). *The new black middle class in South Africa.* Suffolk, UK: Boydell & Brewer.

100 Trow, M. (1973). *Problems in the transition from elite to mass higher education.* Berkeley: Carnegie Commission on Higher Education.

find their way in the world. We have looked closely at how individual agency mediates both opportunities and constraints.

Common-sense explanations, which dominate within universities and indeed in much of the literature,[101] understand higher education success to be largely a function of attributes inherent in the individual and understand failure to result from the student's lack of such attributes. These explanations rely on the decontextualising of students from their knowledge, norms and values and considering them now in terms of the presence or absence of seemingly neutral attributes.[102] Such explanations similarly conceptualise the university as an a-cultural, a-political, neutral space of skills acquisition. These explanations are central to maintaining the fiction that success in higher education emerges from a meritocracy that fairly rewards the hard work, motivation, language skills, and intelligence of the individual student. While such accounts may identify an institution as being either more or less engaging and conducive to learning, these explanations ultimately rest on the notion that students' experiences of success arise primarily from their inherent abilities and skills.

Every year we see evidence of such explanations for success in newspapers when matriculants[103] who come from dire socio-economic conditions but manage to achieve top marks are lauded for 'pulling themselves up by their bootstraps'. Alongside celebrating the successes of these amazing young people, there is often a not-so-subtle commentary that if these individuals could do it, then anyone with a good work ethic and enough gumption could do the same. But the picture of higher education success provided by the participants in this study insists that we deny such simplistic explanations and acknowledge the complex ways in which structural mechanisms intersect with agential ones in the life of each young person.

Across the study, participants also gave expansive views of how higher education had influenced their lives. The book opened with the narrative of Themba, who had achieved a high level of academic success and was now doing postgraduate studies abroad. When asked about how he had been influenced by being at university, his participation in higher education is seen to have gone far beyond the gaining of disciplinary knowledge in science or the acquisition of skills for employment:

> *It has opened my mind to many things in terms of worldview; I don't limit myself to wanting something that is in my immediate vicinity. It helped me aspire for more and to want to question things more and not just be happy with the status quo. It has helped me form relationships and not only on a cultural level but on more levels*

101 For a critique of such common-sense accounts, see for example: Mettler, S. (2014). *Degrees of inequality: How the politics of higher education sabotaged the American dream.* New York: Basic; Guinier, L. (2016). *The tyranny of the meritocracy: Democratizing higher education in America.* Boston, MA: Beacon; Armstrong, E. A. and L. T. Hamilton (2013). *Paying for the party: How college maintains inequality.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

102 Boughey, C. and S. McKenna (2016). Academic literacy and the decontextualised learner, *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning*, 4: 1–9; Boughey, C. and S. McKenna (2017). Analysing an audit cycle: A critical realist account, *Studies in Higher Education*, 42: 963–975.

103 Matriculants are those who have just completed the school-leaving examinations.

> *than that. It helped me develop a sense of who I am and developed me academically and holistically and helped me have an appreciation of who I am … it has made me appreciate the world more.*

The second major set of questions driving this study thus sought to capture the purposes of higher education in society – in a South Africa of the early 21st century – as seen in the lives of these graduates and aspirant graduates. In this, the concluding chapter, we reflect on these key findings, starting with our interrogation of the influences on student success.

The significance of social class in higher education success

In just over two decades of democracy, higher education has played a key role in the growth and racial diversification of the middle class. At the same time there is much dissatisfaction about access to higher education. South African society still bears in most respects the scars of its legacy of colonialism and apartheid, and on all fronts change has been slow. This sentiment was powerfully expressed by students during the 2015/2016 #FeesMustFall protests.

As it turned out, the interviews for our study were conducted right in the middle of this period. We expected to hear our participants reflecting a similar message to what was being voiced on campuses. But, while many of the participants expressed dissatisfaction with the slow pace of change in society and an awareness of the structural nature of injustice, none of them offered a view that the university should substantially change what it offers to, and demands of, students.

There was a strong sense that their university years had provided them with access to 'powerful knowledge'[104] and that they were, as a result, better able to act in ways aligned to their values and goals. However, alongside this finding that the university played an enormously positive role in these young people's lives was the finding that this was not equally attainable by all – and that it was social class that most impacted on their experiences of accessing higher education, succeeding in higher education, and getting into the workplace.

The participants in our study from impoverished rural settlements or towns, or those from peri-urban townships, experienced far more significant hurdles in getting going as young adults.[105] Their agency and resilience in the face of these hurdles is remarkable and this was often identified in the narratives as the core mechanism by which they were able to achieve as they did. Without the networks that urban, middle-class students were drawing on

104 Wheelahan, L. (2012). *Why knowledge matters in curriculum: A social realist argument.* Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

105 Here we note other current research that is starting to build a more nuanced conception of disadvantage in South African higher education. For example: Czerniewicz, L. and C. Brown (2014). The habitus and technological practices of rural students: A case study, *South African Journal of Education*, 34: 1–14.

before, during and after university, they tended to have longer and less smooth routes through the institution.

Families played an absolutely crucial role in the process of participants making their way through higher education. While the concept of 'first generation student' has proven useful in interrogating the challenges many students experience, our study suggests that a more nuanced understanding is necessary. On the financial side, it is a huge investment for a family to have a young person who is not earning for a number of years after school, and who might also add costs to the household during this period. Even if they were not financially well off, some families were able to release the young person from the immediate responsibility of focusing all efforts on earning money to cover the family's needs. But for those students in our study who had families with absolutely no financial flexibility and who were in frequent financial crisis, it was very hard to be a university student, and this took a toll on their academic progress. Even where these students had support in the form of NSFAS funding, they had no safety net for any crisis that emerged and the limits of the funding meant a great deal of energy went towards managing basic financial requirements. Most other students managed to fund their studies through a combination of resources from bursaries, family, or part-time work.

But family support was not only financial. It emerged from our data that maybe even more important was the extent to which the family was able to foster aspirations and engage with the young person's deliberations and choices. We note here the significance of what Archer[106] terms 'communicative reflexivity' where young people externalised their deliberations in concert with significant others. While we agree with Archer and others that participation in higher education should involve the development of autonomous reflexivity, whereby the individual charts their own course through private deliberations, we found that communicative reflexivity has a very important role to play in the higher education journey, provided there were informed people with whom to talk through their choices.

A key role for family support was when a first choice didn't work out and a second or third choice needed to be made. This could be when a young person didn't get access to their first choice of course or university. A more challenging experience was that of failing academically in the degree they chose, and having to figure out a new course of action. In all such cases, having a family member with a reasonable level of understanding of how the university works and what kinds of intellectual commitment higher education study requires was a boon in assisting the student to make appropriate plans. Much of this kind of understanding came from another family member's experience of going to university, but it was also closely tied to cultural capital[107] whereby social class played a significant role in a family's capacity to provide support.

106 Archer, M .S. (2007). *Making our way through the world: Human reflexivity and social mobility.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

107 Bourdieu, P. and L .J. D. Wacquant (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

As with the initial choice of where to study, participants reported that they continued to turn to parents and other family members around key decisions as they made their way through their studies and out into the world of work, though perhaps now a bit less. During this time, finding one's passions and path in life was a key part of differentiating oneself from one's family and home context, the development of autonomous reflexivity.

This finding raises a number of social justice concerns. How can prospective students from settings where family members or teachers do not have the cultural capital related to university study get support in making decisions regarding institution, choice of study, funding routes, and so on? And how can universities assist in attending to these needs once they have made their way into higher education? The role of the university in advising students is an issue that emerged in various forms throughout our study and is discussed in more detail later.

The social side of university life was enormously important to these young people, as might be expected. Fitting in, making friends, experiencing campus life were often mentioned. Students from less well-off families sometimes struggled, feeling they had to keep up with more affluent friends in a culture that was materialistic.[108] While the university cannot hope to attend to all societal problems, the data would suggest that the university has some role to play in forging social cohesion amongst its own staff and student body.[109] It is important that our institutions of higher learning ensure that there are a number of spaces in the broader formal and informal curriculum for issues such as these to be addressed.

Issues such as social class are of course always intersectional, and race and gender, for example, were seen to play out in all the stages of our participants' lives. While this study did not explicitly aim to explore the impact of gender, it was inescapable in our analysis. This is the stage of life where young people are sexually active and unplanned pregnancies can occur – but it was always the young woman whose studies inevitably got interrupted. We also noted young women's challenges in finding an independent academic course in the context of a man's ideas about what they should be doing. Issues of trauma also affected many of the students' abilities to navigate their path through higher education. Given the operation of gender roles in our society and the continuation of patriarchal attitudes, it was perhaps unsurprising that this study found that it was female students[110] who had an additional complexity in navigating their route through higher education.

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108 A useful South African reflection on being a student in a globalised material culture is: Centwa, S. and P. A. Tabensky (2015). Tales of a Divided City: Not a place for peasants, *Grocott's Mail*, 10 March 2015; see also Posel, D. (2010). Races to consume: Revisiting South Africa's history of race, consumption and the struggle for freedom, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 33: 157–175.

109 Spending time with members of different race and socio-economic groups was noted in the data to be a significant benefit of university attendance; however, contact does not always translate into social cohesion. For more discussion on this, see: Walker, M. (2005). Race is nowhere and race is everywhere: Narratives from black and white South African university students in post-apartheid South Africa, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 26: 41–54; Robus, D. and C. Macleod (2006). 'White excellence and black failure': The reproduction of racialised higher education in everyday talk, *South African Journal of Psychology*, 36: 463–480; Tabensky, P. and S. Matthews (2015). *Being at home: Race, institutional culture and transformation at South African higher education institutions.* Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press.

110 Though it did not emerge in our data, research suggests that this finding of the gendered nature of difficulty in higher education can be extended to any student who does not comply with dominant gender and sexuality norms. See, for example: Msibi, T. (2013). Queering the transformation of higher education in South Africa, *Perspectives in Education*. 31(2): 65–73; Francis, D. and T. Msibi

The role of extra-curricular activities in supporting broader development was also less prevalent than might have been expected; however, students who did participate all felt this was hugely beneficial to them. The students who mentioned involvement in extra-curricular activities had almost all spent part of their time in residence. On the other hand, students who had part-time work or who commuted to campus did not mention participation in these activities. Many students will not have the funds to do expensive activities, and geographical arrangements around student housing and campus also impact on these possibilities.[111] Although universities are unable to contribute much by way of funding for such activities, we note with interest the growing area of student involvement in social entrepreneurship and community engagement. We also note the iniatives that are emerging at some universities to formally recognise student involvement in such activities.

The study thus offers a full understanding of the complex interplay between structure and agency in individual students' navigation through the university experience. This constituted the first major set of questions for the study; the second set of questions move to consider the purposes of higher education in society, beginning with economic considerations.

Social mobility and employment

The widening socio-economic diversity of the student body has meant that the increasing cost of higher education has been especially painful. Indeed, ongoing increases in student fees have been the major issue underpinning the #Feesmustfall protests. State funding to universities has covered a smaller and smaller percentage of costs and now covers less than half the costs incurred by institutions.[112] The shortfall between state funding and university budgets has been filled by increasing student fees. This greatly restricts access to higher education, even with the state bursary system of NSFAS. The issue of access is not only a debate around funding though; it cuts to the heart of the meaning and purposes of higher education. With limited job opportunities for school leavers and a poorly developed vocational system, higher education is seen by many as the only route out of poverty. And for those newly middle class, as around the world,[113] higher education participation is seen as a means of consolidating position.

(2011). Teaching about heterosexism: Challenging homophobia in South Africa, *Journal of LGBT Youth,* 8(2); Msibi, T. (2009). Not crossing the line: Masculinities and homophobic violence in South Africa, *Agenda* 23(80).

111 A recent study shows that while students benefit enormously from participation in extra-curricular activities, there are a range of reasons why some students do not access these. This includes living away from campus, worries about crime, concerns over academic performance, all issues that tend to disproportionately affect disadvantaged students. Walker, M. and S. Fongwa (2017). *Universities, employability and human development.* New York: Springer.

112 Cloete, N. (2016). Free higher education: Another self-destructive South African policy? Cape Town: Centre for Higher Education Trust.

113 Carnoy, M. et al. (2014). The concept of public goods, the state, and higher education finance: A view from the BRICs, *Higher Education*, 68: 359–378.

There are significant material advantages to being a graduate in South Africa[114] and the participants in our study were well aware of this. Given that these graduates will accrue significant financial rewards from their studies over the course of their lives, there is a strong case to be made for them bearing some of the costs. The debate over the private and public good purposes of higher education is conducted with much rhetoric and often not a lot of evidence. Similarly, concerns are periodically raised about graduate unemployment in South Africa, but the statistics continue to show that the employment prospects for university graduates are mostly very good.[115] All the same, patterns of graduate employment are racially skewed, with race remaining the most significant predictor of employment outcomes, even beyond institution and field of study.[116]

Notably, all the graduates in this study who were not in full-time postgraduate studies found work, and mostly they found positions that could be described as demanding graduate-level skills. There was some evidence of graduates who chose to continue postgraduate studies due to difficulty experienced or anticipated in finding work; some felt that postgraduate studies would enhance their employment prospects, but many also offered intrinsic reasons for furthering their studies.

The evidence of 'frictional unemployment', where graduates take a few months to find their first job, was exacerbated significantly by location, with graduates who go back home to locations far from the urban metropolises struggling much more to get into the workplace. Having access to urban networks through family, community, and university, played an important role in getting work. For those who were limited to applying from a distance to positions through the internet, difficulties were more apparent. These findings provide strong confirmation of Sen's theory of conversion factors, where having a degree is not enough; one needs the environmental and social location to help you convert this into capabilities.[117] We also noted the significance of such networks for navigating the route into postgraduate studies.

Contrary to popular perception, we found that BA graduates appeared to have similar work prospects as their BSc peers. Nearly all are in what can be termed graduate-level jobs, and BA and BSc students seemed to have similar levels of difficulty in getting the first job. The only difference noted was that BSc graduates tend to be in work more directly related to their major subjects, perhaps unsurprising given that many BA majors, such as Sociology or Philosophy, are not tied to a particular workplace.

Many graduates found that they had to take an internship position as an entry into employment. These were often poorly paid, and while these did seem to lead to better long-

114 Montenegro, C. E. and H. A. Patrinos (2014). *Comparable estimates of returns to schooling around the world.* New York: World Bank.

115 Van der Berg, S. and H. van Broekhuizen (2012). Graduate unemployment in South Africa: A much exaggerated problem. Stellenbosch: Centre for Development and Enterprise, Stellenbosch University.

116 Cape Higher Education Consortium (2013). Pathways from university to work: A Graduate Destination Survey of the 2010 Cohort of Graduates from the Western Cape Universities. Cape Town: Cape Higher Education Consortium; Rogan, M. and J. Reynolds (2015). *Schooling inequality, higher education and the labour market: Evidence from a graduate tracer study in the Eastern Cape, South Africa.* Pretoria: Labour Market Intelligence Partnership (LMIP) Project, HSRC.

117 Walker, M. and S. Fongwa (2017). *Universities, employability and human development.* New York: Springer.

term positions, at least in the cases of these study participants, we have to raise questions about the fairness of this system, which is becoming ubiquitous around the world.[118] Internships provide industry with a financially cheap mechanism for undertaking a very extended job interview and workplace training, but it comes at a cost to the graduate, many of whom do not have family finances to support them in this period.

It was interesting to note that most participants in this study were working in the private sector, with very few taking public sector jobs. As noted in other studies, for many graduates from HBUs,[119] the public sector is a key employer, but for the participants in this study, working in the public sector was not seen to be a desirable route. Furthermore, those participants who did take jobs in this area expressed great dissatisfaction with the culture in these spaces and made plans to leave as soon as possible. The implications of this situation are concerning: if the most qualified young people in South Africa are actively avoiding the public sector, this does not bode well for the quality of service delivery that this sector can offer the broader citizenry.

None of our participants were in public sector teaching. Given the dire need in the schooling sector, there would seem to be scope for increased use of teaching bursaries as a means of improving the South African school system and more closely linking universities and schools.[120] While it is acknowledged that teaching is a profession and that it requires a high level of pedagogical competency, there would nonetheless seem to be a possibility for more graduates to pay back NSFAS and other bursaries through working as teachers or teacher-assistants after graduation, in much the same way that medical graduates are expected to undertake a year of community service.

Thus far in this conclusion chapter, we have firstly looked back at the role of social class in student success and secondly at the extent to which university education facilitates social mobility and access to meaningful employment. In the first instance, we saw how social class affected higher education access and success in an intersectional manner with issues such as race and gender. If social class is a significant determinant on a student's journey through education, then we need to ask questions about the extent to which the university is simply reinforcing social divides. This in turn means we need to ask how our university structures and cultures might more equitably ensure that every member of the diverse student body has a shot at success. In the second instance, we saw that university attendance provides enormous personal benefits and acts as a very valuable private good. This is however not the full story on the purposes of higher education. The data consistently demonstrated that higher education is far more than a private good enhancing the life chances of the individual graduate and his or

118 In the United Kingdom, there is talk of banning internships of more than four weeks because they have been found to widen the employment opportunities between rich and poor and decrease social mobility. For example: http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/ban-unpaid-internships-completely-says-social-mobility-commission-9796805.html

119 Rogan, M. and J. Reynolds (2015). *Schooling inequality, higher education and the labour market: Evidence from a graduate tracer study in the Eastern Cape, South Africa.* Pretoria: Labour Market Intelligence Partnership (LMIP) Project, HSRC.

120 The Funza Lushaka bursary scheme allows students to pay for their studies and repay through teaching for the same number of years as they received funding (http://www.funzalushaka.doe.gov.za/).

her family; it is also a public good that benefits society as a whole. It is to this that the conclusion chapter now turns.

Higher Education as a public good

The university offers a wide variety of 'goods': from knowledge production to the development of an educated citizenry to active participation in public debate. Many higher education goods take the form of direct benefits for the individual student. Such direct recipient benefits or 'private goods' are often foregrounded in national policies and the media through the conception of the university as primarily acting as a credentialing institution certifying training for various workplaces and professions. Such conceptions are underpinned by human capital theory whereby higher education is seen to increase the productive capacity of individuals to participate in the economy.

But we were particularly interested to note reflections on higher education by our participants that went beyond such conceptions. Public higher education is funded significantly by the public purse and by a citizenry who mostly will not get to university. While almost all our graduates were gainfully employed or studying further, it was notable that in describing their present situation they didn't only talk about the material rewards of employment. They spoke about the need for intrinsic job satisfaction and many were also thinking more broadly about their role in society. BA graduates, as might be expected, tended to be more articulate on these matters; however, this finding was relatively uniform across programmes.

We found Dreze and Sen's public good framework[121] useful in reflecting on the study findings in this regard. Dreze and Sen consider the issue of development by focusing on well-being and freedom rather than on economic growth. In particular, they consider how education can be intrinsically, instrumentally and socially valuable for individuals and society. In this way, the notions of private and public goods become inextricably linked.

The broad intrinsic benefits of having citizens who lead a flourishing life with a love of intellectual endeavours was evident in our data. Many participants in this study expressed how they valued the exposure to the broad fields of knowledge at university – to ideas they had not known, and would be unlikely to get to know if they hadn't studied: 'Ideas that you don't come across in a small town' [10]. They spoke about how this made them want to learn more; they had an even deeper sense of how much was 'out there'. Some students spoke of the intrinsic satisfaction of mastering a difficult area of knowledge:

> *It felt so good to understand and I got so much satisfaction of finally understanding Maths problems, especially when it is really difficult and you know that most of the other students can't do it; it was so good that I wanted to do it again. [35]*

121 Dreze, J. and A. K. Sen (2002). *India: Development and participation.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Another student described being lost in an intellectual challenge as being in a pleasant 'brain fog', something she missed now she is in the workplace:

> *I miss that feeling when you read something and you criticise or analyse it so much you get brain fog. I miss that feeling of being able to be stimulated by something different. [47]*

The comparisons were again acute when participants compared their lives to those of their peers who hadn't attended university; they had enjoyed studying at university and therefore doing graduate-level work that also involved intellectual stimulation:

> *But again, it is not what he wanted to do and I think the big difference between myself and my friends who didn't go to university is that they are not doing what they love whereas I am. I feel like university gives you that opportunity. [46]*

Contrary then to a dominant discourse that sees higher education in fairly instrumental terms, this study shows much evidence that many graduates from higher education have intrinsic and passionate motivations for academic endeavours, and that this is something they take with them after completing their studies.

Besides the intrinsic value of higher education, students also spoke about higher education fostering capacities that led to instrumental personal purposes in the world. These included becoming more independent, developing resilience and, later, moving into the workplace or further study. For many in this study, personal growth was seen to be linked to their moving away from home and they had felt they had needed to become more independent and responsible. For all of them going to university was a transition from a relatively small institution of the school to a much larger one. Some, mostly women, commented on how they felt they had become more confident in this process. Of course, some of this growth would be expected in the post-school period even if not at higher education – these are expected developments in the lives of all young adults.[122] In the analysis, we therefore needed to consider closely what aspects of this personal growth might be especially related to having been at university.

For many students having to persist in the big commitment to finish a degree had changed them as a person and had fostered resilience.[123] This was especially so for those who had

122 There is a substantial literature in developmental psychology and related fields on this topic. For a contemporary overview that incorporates a more cultural approach appropriate to our interests, see: Arnett, J. J. (2014). *Adolescence and emerging adulthood.* New York: Pearson.

123 There is a substantial literature on resilience, a sub-set of which focuses on the experiences of young people in higher education, especially those not from traditional populations participating in university studies. For example, see: Morales, E. (2008). Exceptional female students of color: Academic resilience and gender in higher education, *Innovative Higher Education*, 33: 197–213; Wilson-Strydom, M. (2017 online). Disrupting structural inequalities of higher education opportunity: 'Grit', resilience and capabilities at a South African university, *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 1–15.

experienced academic struggles, such as Tebogo, who was clear that his aim to finish the degree has huge personal significance for him. Yan also spoke about how 'working hard' came to take on a new meaning:

> *I've learned a funny concept while at university that 'eating the frog first' in other words do what you need to do now so that you can do what you want later. Yeah, it was not easy. Varsity has also taught me the value of hard work because in high school you could get away with natural intelligence for a very long time. Now it does not work. If you don't study you fail. It is a life lesson.*

For many sectors of South African society, the possibilities for 'normal' adult development are limited due to lack of economic opportunities and social support.[124] Many of the young people in this study were acutely aware of the differences in their life situation to that of their peers, many of whom had limited options and aspirations and were at home unemployed:

> *You are just thinking of getting better and better and not like just wanting to sit at home and doing nothing. [42]*

But university is more than just a self-improvement camp. Participants were able to articulate the specific knowledge and ways of thinking that they had developed while at university, and how these skills put them in a strong position in trying to enter what is now termed the 'knowledge economy'. Importantly, these are not just instrumentalist technical 'skills' but ways of thinking – which means that the impact goes beyond the individual.

Many students spoke in some detail about the kind of creative and analytical thinking that they had learnt at university: not taking things at face value, being able to interrogate different ways of conceptualising a phenomenon, how to build up or test a logical argument. These kinds of statements were often made by BA graduates and frequently they specifically assigned this to the value of the particular degree as in the following comment:

> *What my Humanities gave me really is the ability to critically analyse everything and not to take everything as it is and that sort of leads you onto problem solving skills and you sort of get good at solving problems and arguing through things and seeing flaws in your own arguments and you become a great problem solver that way. For example, reading a theory, which is what you do throughout your*

124 While important to avoid the popular alarmist views about a 'lost generation' prone to social disorder, research does show that the socio-economic conditions and demographic patterns in post-apartheid South Africa have resulted in a young adult population with a prolonged transition to the patterns of stability that might be hoped for in adult life, and a particular form of fluid behaviour in terms of relationships and social attitudes. For an overview see: Seekings, J. (2014). The social and political implications of demographic change in post-apartheid South Africa, *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 652: 70–86.

> *Humanities degree and learning how to pick at the specifics of it that could possibly be loose and therefore loosening the entire argument. [8]*

At the timing of the study, where most participants were only a few years beyond graduation, much of their focus in applying their intellectual capacities was directed to the workplace. We anticipate as they move more fully into adulthood that these skills will be directed more generally to participate in public debates and community engagements, strengthening the nascent democratic culture in South Africa. Civil society is emerging as an important force for holding the government to account and for forging much-needed change in society. Recent work across the African continent confirms the importance of higher education in strengthening the democratic culture.[125]

A significant challenge in the post 'rainbow-nation' is that of living together in plurality, with respect for other people and other views. This country forged in colonialism and apartheid still has a long way to go in tackling racism and prejudice. Our study offers strong evidence on how the experience of learning alongside a diverse class community fostered progressive views.[126] There were many spontaneous expressions along these lines for a matter that was not a deliberate probe in the interviews, for example:

> *University life has certain things such as promoting gender equality, fighting racism and xenophobia. Those are the kind of things that when you are in high school you don't take caution about and when you get to university you find people promoting those things and helping you understand and you get to understand things from a different perspective. So, you are able to handle yourself in ways that you would not be able to if you hadn't been to university. [40]*

We noted in our analysis of this theme that for many students this development also involved rejecting stereotypes that might have been imposed on them. Some participants noted that in the context of pervasive racism in broader society, it was at university that they had been able to abandon a sense of inferiority that had hobbled them before. These were students who expressed keen awareness of the prevalence of racism in society, but maybe surprisingly did mostly not characterise their university experiences in this way. In terms of people who can act with confidence and compassion in a pluralistic society, our study suggests that these universities are producing graduates with strong capabilities in this regard.

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125 Luescher-Mamashela, T. M. and T. Mugume (2014). Student representation and multiparty politics in African higher education, *Studies in Higher Education*, 39: 500–515.

126 Post-apartheid policy on higher education as expressed in the White Paper of 1997 made explicit the role of higher education in bringing about transformation and cohesion in South African society.

Our study also showed some evidence of the development of a social consciousness and nascent activism that could be linked to a meta-reflexive stance.[127] At this point, most young people were just trying to get traction in the working world, but we were interested to see already a few who were starting to ask critical questions for themselves about their career choices. For example, Lucy said:

> *I can't help but think about things politically even if I am doing like really silly things like selling chewing gum … and I remember starting my job and I was like thinking, 'What the hell am I doing? I'm not saving the world.'*

These young people expressed dissatisfaction with inequality in society and clearly articulated the need for shifts in structural constraints. Graduates with these dispositions, termed by Walker and colleagues 'public good professionals',[128] are going to be crucial in addressing the radical inequities in South African society.

In reflecting on the public-good aspects of the university, then, we can ask, 'What kind of young people have we formed in our university graduates?' They are of course individuals with varied stories and trajectories, each making their own way in the world. But overall, they are thoughtful and independent young people who are establishing themselves in their careers with commitment and responsibility. They are mostly socially progressive and are critically engaged with key public debates. They are keenly aware of the privilege they have had of accessing higher education.

Thus far we have reflected on two broad findings in the study: 1. the relationship of social class to higher education success; and 2. the role of the university in enhancing social mobility and employment, and in contributing to the public good. We now move on to identify two recommendations that emerge from the study, related to structures within the university itself: first we look at curriculum structures and then we discuss the issue of academic advising.

Curriculum structures

There has already been one significant proposal around curriculum restructuring in South African universities which proposed lengthening the three-year bachelor's degree to four years.[129] In resource-limited times this is unlikely to be adopted, but we do think there is still scope to address some of the curriculum issues that our study has highlighted. We need to

127 Archer, M. S. (2007). *Making our way through the world: Human reflexivity and social mobility.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

128 Walker, M. and M. McLean (2013). *Professional education, capabilities and the public good: The role of universities in promoting human development.* London: Routledge.

129 Council on Higher Education (2013). A proposal for undergraduate curriculum reform in South Africa: The case for a flexible curriculum structure. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education.

know that students do not enter higher education with a full sense of their strengths and interests, and we need a curriculum which makes some trial and error possible. The focus needs especially to be on the BSc degree where we saw significant hurdles for progression, especially at the institution with the most fixed programme structures.

In a degree with limited choices and very fixed prerequisites, as in the classic BSc, many students fell by the wayside and couldn't easily get back on track. The consequences of additional years of mounting student debt tended to compound these difficulties. We acknowledge the significance of hierarchical knowledge structures in the sciences which demand cumulative learning[130] and thus require systems of prerequisite junior courses for more senior work. At the same time, we still need to explore whether the curriculum structures are meeting the needs of the typical student that comes up against them.

In all the current debates on the colonial heritage of South African higher education, there has been surprisingly little discussion on the origins of the structuring of the academic year. Short teaching semesters are unquestioned but may not serve the purposes of our students. There needs to be better consideration of how the vacation periods can be put to academic use for those students who need extra time for tasks or the option to catch up missing credits or re-sit assessments. Credit-bearing summer schools and online courses are not much in use despite students spending less than eight months a year in classes. The current structures assume that students will navigate through the curriculum in a relatively unproblematic manner, though the statistics repeatedly show this is unlikely to be the case. As a result of this problematic assumption, there are few opportunities to re-sit assessments to repeat modules or indeed to take on additional credits.

Progressing through the degree was not only a matter of passing or failing. Crucially, the study shows how at university young people were able to explore their interests and start crafting a life course. Again, the flexibility in the degree structure determined how students were able to try out different disciplines and find their passions. And this flexibility varies substantially across the three research-intensive institutions in this study. What is furthermore interesting in considering this variation in programme structure is the implicit assumptions they reveal about the purposes of higher education: a narrowly specified programme leading to a specific employment option implies a more instrumental, 'employability' perspective on higher education, whereas a more flexible programme seems to imply a greater focus on the intrinsic, personal developmental purposes of higher education. Ironically, the more narrowly specified a programme, the more likely that students will hit insurmountable hurdles and drop out, thereby not even contributing to the economic purposes underpinning this structure.

The study also provides a fascinating look into what lies beneath the phenomenon of 'dropout'. The narratives of students who did not complete their first-degree choice showed that for some this was a productive experience of finding their interests and growing personally.

130 Maton, K. (2009). Cumulative and segmented learning: Exploring the role of curriculum structures in knowledge-building, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 30: 43–57.

Taking time out from study, often termed a 'gap year' by our participants, was often valuable and is being conceptualised in a variety of interesting ways that go beyond the elite idea of international travel to include finding work to save up for another year of study. Again, there is scope for universities to consider how this reality can be better accommodated within curriculum structures.

The distance university played a key role in allowing students to continue their studies flexibly and at low cost after doors had been closed at the contact university. It is notable that all bar one of the students who dropped out from their first-degree choice were still studying in some way six years after commencement of the degree.

There seems to be much that can be considered with regard to our curriculum structures and the extent to which they facilitate success. A number of national initiatives[131] could be harnessed to take this forward, building especially on the lessons learned through the extended curriculum/foundation provisioning.[132]

Having reflected briefly on some of the lessons about curriculum structures emerging from this study, we now move on to another finding from our study that we believe is useful for universities to consider.

Academic advising

This study repeatedly showed that for a great many participants, choices around programmes and subjects were often made from a fairly uninformed base. Without family members who had attended university, many of the participants had to guess the content of the subjects and the future career options made possible by university programmes. In one of the institutions, the orientation programme included sample lectures and this was cited as very helpful, though with the proviso that attending just one lecture wasn't necessarily enough to make a fully informed decision. In most cases, too, students can change certain courses within the first few weeks of the year, but this is not encouraged as the student then needs to make up what they have missed. Overall, there was a clear finding that students need the university to better support their deliberations regarding their study choices.

Of course, this is a complex matter given the severe resource limitations in the system. But universities that are able to formalise and make more accessible academic advising are likely to see the results in student throughput. In the context of widening access where many students do not have family members who have been to higher education institutions to advise them, young people are often confused as to requirements, pre-requisites and even the focus of courses. These are all problems that could be attended to by a skilled advisor.

131 The newly introduced University Capacity Development Grant includes a number of funding initiatives in this regard.

132 Council on Higher Education (2013). A proposal for undergraduate curriculum reform in South Africa: The case for a flexible curriculum structure. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education.

In this regard, we welcome the work currently underway[133] in the National Student Financial Aid System (NSFAS) to look at models for more holistic support for students who are funded, very likely to be those students who might not have the necessary family informational support for their decisions.

In some cases, participants spoke of establishing rapport with lecturers and even their deans, and this meant that they had an informed person with whom to discuss their plans and choices. But this was left largely to chance and was somewhat rarer at the larger universities. We also heard of examples where the advice students received from academics was insulting or incorrect.

The issue of institutional culture was evident in fairly subtle ways throughout the data. With regard to academic advisors, it was clear that some students experienced the university as being more responsive than others. In at least one case, the decision of where to study came down to which institution responded promptly and personally to her enquiry.

In response to the needs of students from a far wider socio-economic spectrum than in the past, universities are taking on a number of roles and responsibilities that they never had before, such as providing subsidised transport, holiday accommodation, and so on. This expensive and complicated transition from elite to massified higher education system is a difficult terrain to navigate, especially in the context of severe financial constraints. But interwoven in these new demands is an increased need for careful academic advising at various points in the student's journey and careful monitoring of student progress to decrease the likelihood of academic exclusion.

This need for academic advising is, of course, tied to the curriculum structure. Where the curriculum is fairly fixed and the university rules preclude much movement between programmes, there is little opportunity for navigating a successful pathway, even if the student only becomes aware of her or his skills and passions along the way, as was evident in a great many of the interviews in this study.[134]

Concluding remarks

This study offers a different view on South African higher education than much of the current research which surveys students during their studies. Here we contacted young people six years on from first year, at which point most had completed their bachelor studies. This long viewpoint allowed us to interrogate both the broader influences on student success and failure,

133 http://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/new-funding-scheme-missing-middle-students

134 It is worth considering that a number of study participants only came to fully understand the nature of the subjects they were studying when they were in the university. Furthermore, a number of them only discovered their strengths during the course of 'trying out' various courses. It is beyond the scope of this book to look at the implications of such findings for other institutional types but, given the very structured nature of University of Technology programmes with extremely little flexibility and direct workplace focus, it is worth considering that this finding may be even more pertinent for these institutions.

as well as a view on the impact on higher education participation both on individual lives and on society.

Our analysis allowed us to move to a deeper level in capturing these influences and understanding the logic of the interaction of structure and agency. The nuances of such a deeper logic meant that we have had to reject many common-sense explanations of what leads to young people being able to traverse higher education structures and, ultimately, to achieve the desired qualification and make their way in the world.

In conclusion, then, what kind of young people have we formed in our university graduates? They are independently minded and socially progressive. They are getting traction in their careers and they are acting with thoughtfulness and responsibility. They are thinkers and they mostly engage critically with the world and their place in society. Many are aware of inequalities in society and of their own experiences of privilege.

We are living in dynamic times, especially in a newly democratising society like South Africa. In reflecting on these findings, we feel frustrated to note the enduring impact of social inequities as seen in the impact of social class on student success. At the same time, this study offers a powerful vision of social change – the actions in the present of these actors in navigating the challenges and heading out into society as graduates, are making social impacts through their employment and their broader contribution to the public good. They are resilient young people and future leaders; crucially it is their experiences of grappling with knowledge during university studies that has formed them. There is thus a dynamic tension between the enduring past, the present in formation, and aspects of hope for the future. We are certainly living in an imperfect present, poisoned by the legacy of the past but the seeds of possibility for the future are already germinating.

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APPENDIX A METHODOLOGY

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.[135] 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[136] 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.

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135 Case, J. M. (2013). *Researching student learning in higher education: A social realist approach.* London: Routledge.

136 Bhaskar, R. (2008). *A realist theory of science*. London: Taylor & Francis.

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 enrols over 26 000 students and UWC over 20 000.[137] 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

Institution	BSc	BA	TOTAL
UCT	20	15	35
UWC	3	3	6
RU	13	19	32
			73

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):

Institution	% female		% white	
	Interview	Cohort	Interview	Cohort
UCT – BSc	88%	40%	35%	39%
UCT – BA	69%	73%	30%	59%
RU – BSc	70%	51%	50%	53%
RU – BA	84%	69%	58%	60%

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	
	Interview	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.[138] Rather than the classic

138 Polkinghorne, D. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. In Hatch, J. A. and Wisniewski, R. (eds), *Life history and narrative.* London: Falmer, pp. 5–23.

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.

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139 Archer, M. S. (2007). *Making our way through the world: Human reflexivity and social mobility.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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.

APPENDIX B
LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Name/#	Race	Gender	Nationality	Institution	Degree started	Highest degree completed	Current degree	Current full-time occupation
Bongi	Black African	Female	South African	Rhodes	BA	None	Bachelors	Studying full time
Cheryl	Coloured	Female	South African	UWC	BA	Honours	None	Employed
Duma	Black African	Male	South African	UWC	BSc	Bachelors	Bachelors	Studying full time
Hannah	Black African	Female	South African	Rhodes	BA	None	None	Employed
Joe	Coloured	Female	South African	UCT	BSc	Honours	Masters	Studying full time
Johnson	Black African	Male	Other African	UWC	BSc	Honours	Masters	Employed
Lerato	Black African	Female	South African	UCT	BSc	None	Bachelors	Studying full time
Lucy	White	Female	South African	Rhodes	BA	Bachelors	None	Employed
Lynda	White	Female	South African	UCT	BSc	Bachelors	None	Employed
Martha	Black African	Female	Other African	UCT	BSc	None	Bachelors	Studying full time
Martin	Coloured	Male	South African	UCT	BA	Honours	None	Employed
Mulalo	Black African	Female	South African	Rhodes	BSc	Honours	None	Employed
Nala	Coloured	Female	South African	UCT	BA	None	None	Employed
Paul	White	Male	South African	Rhodes	BA	Masters	None	Employed
Sima	Black African	Female	South African	Rhodes	BA	Bachelors	None	Employed
Tebogo	Black African	Male	South African	UCT	BSc	None	None	Unemployed
Thato	Black African	Female	South African	UCT	BSc	Honours	Masters	Studying full time
Themba	Black African	Male	South African	Rhodes	BSc	Masters	None	Studying full time
Tshidi	Black African	Female	South African	UCT	BSc	None	None	Unemployed
Yan	Black African	Female	South African	UCT	BSc	None	Bachelors	Studying full time

Name/#	Race	Gender	Nationality	Institution	Degree started	Highest degree completed	Current degree	Current full-time occupation
1	White	Female	South African	UCT	BA	None	None	Employed
2	Coloured	Female	South African	UCT	BSc	None	Bachelors	Employed
3	Indian	Female	South African	UCT	BSc	None	Bachelors	Studying
4	White	Female	South African	UCT	BSc	None	None	Studying full time
5	White	Female	South African	UCT	BSc	None	None	Studying full time
6	White	Female	South African	Rhodes	BA	Honours	Masters	Employed
7	White	Female	South African	Rhodes	BA	Bachelors	None	Employed
8	Black African	Female	South African	Rhodes	BA	Masters	None	Employed
9	White	Female	South African	Rhodes	BA	Bachelors	Honours	Employed
10	White	Female	South African	Rhodes	BA	Bachelors	None	Employed
11	White	Female	South African	Rhodes	BA	Honours	None	Employed
12	White	Female	South African	Rhodes	BA	Honours	Masters	Studying full time
13	White	Female	South African	Rhodes	BA	Bachelors	Honours	Employed
14	White	Female	South African	Rhodes	BA	Bachelors	None	Employed
15	White	Female	South African	Rhodes	BA	Masters	None	Employed
16	Black African	Female	South African	Rhodes	BA	LLB	None	Employed
17	Indian	Female	South African	Rhodes	BA	Masters	None	Unemployed
18	Black African	Male	South African	Rhodes	BA	Honours	Masters	Studying full time
19	Coloured	Female	South African	Rhodes	BA	Bachelors	None	Employed
20	White	Male	South African	Rhodes	BA	Bachelors	None	Unemployed
21	Black African	Female	South African	UCT	BA	Bachelors	None	Employed
22	Coloured	Male	South African	UCT	BA	Masters	None	Employed
23	White	Female	South African	UCT	BA	Masters	None	Employed
24	Coloured	Male	South African	UCT	BA	Bachelors	None	Employed
25	Coloured	Female	South African	UCT	BA	Bachelors	None	Employed
26	Coloured	Female	South African	UCT	BA	Honours	None	Employed
27	White	Male	Non African	UCT	BA	Honours	Masters	Studying full time
28	White	Male	South African	UCT	BA	Honours	Masters	Employed
29	Coloured	Female	South African	UCT	BA	Bachelors	None	Employed
30	White	Female	South African	UCT	BA	Honours	None	Employed
31	Black African	Female	Other African	UCT	BA	Bachelors	None	Studying full time
32	Coloured	Female	South African	UCT	BA	Honours	None	Employed

Name/#	Race	Gender	Nationality	Institution	Degree started	Highest degree completed	Current degree	Current full-time occupation
33	Coloured	Male	South African	UWC	BA	Honours	Masters	Studying full time
34	Coloured	Female	South African	UWC	BA	Honours	Masters	Studying full time
35	White	Female	South African	Rhodes	BSc	Bachelors	PGCE	Employed
36	Black African	Female	Other African	Rhodes	BSc	Honours	Masters	Studying full time
37	White	Female	South African	Rhodes	BSc	LLB	None	Employed
38	Black African	Female	South African	Rhodes	BSc	Honours	None	Employed
39	White	Male	South African	Rhodes	BSc	Bachelors	None	Employed
40	Black African	Male	South African	Rhodes	BSc	Honours	None	Employed
41	White	Female	South African	Rhodes	BSc	Honours	Masters	Studying full time
42	Black African	Female	Other African	Rhodes	BSc	Honours	None	Employed
43	Black African	Female	Other African	Rhodes	BSc	Honours	None	Unemployed
44	Black African	Female	South African	Rhodes	BSc	Honours	Masters	Studying full time
45	White	Female	Other African	UCT	BSc	Honours	None	Employed
46	White	Male	South African	UCT	BSc	Masters	PhD	Studying full time
47	White	Female	South African	UCT	BSc	Honours	None	Employed
48	Black African	Female	South African	UCT	BSc	Honours	Masters	Studying full time
49	White	Female	South African	UCT	BSc	Masters	None	Employed
50	White	Female	South African	UCT	BSc	Honours	None	Employed
51	Black African	Male	Other African	UCT	BSc	Honours	None	Employed
52	Coloured	Female	South African	UCT	BSc	Honours	None	Employed
53	Coloured	Male	South African	UWC	BSc	Honours	Masters	Studying full time

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Disaapele Mogashana is a PhD graduate of the University of Cape Town, who worked as a research assistant on this project. She is the director at the True Success Institute where she focuses on coaching students and people who have been 'Unfathered', an experience she shares in her recent biography with that title.

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Around the world, more young people than ever before are attending university. Student numbers in South Africa have doubled since democracy and for many families, higher education is a route to a better future for their children.

But alongside the overwhelming demand for higher education, questions about its purposes have intensified. Deliberations about the curriculum, culture and costing of public higher education abound from student activists, academics, parents, civil society and policy-makers.

We know, from macro research, that South African graduates generally have good employment prospects. But little is known at a detailed level about how young people actually make use of their university experiences to craft their life courses. And even less is known about what happens to those who drop out.

This accessible book brings together the rich life stories of 73 young people, six years after they began their university studies. It traces how going to university influences not only their employment options, but also nurtures the agency needed to chart their own way and to engage critically with the world around them.

The book offers deep insights into the ways in which public higher education is both a private and public good, and it provides significant conclusions pertinent to anyone who works in – and cares about – universities.

AFRICAN MINDS

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