



***Higher Education Monitor***

***Access and throughput in South African  
Higher Education: Three case studies***

*Council on Higher Education*

***ACCESS AND THROUGHPUT IN  
SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION:  
THREE CASE STUDIES***

## ACCESS AND THROUGHPUT IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION: THREE CASE STUDIES

The South African Council on Higher Education (CHE) is an independent statutory body responsible for advising the Minister of Higher Education and Training on all higher education policy issues, and for quality assurance in higher education and training.

1 Quintin Brand Street  
Persequor Technopark  
Brummeria  
Pretoria  
South Africa

P O Box 94  
Persequorpark  
0020  
South Africa

Tel: +27 12 349 3936  
Fax: +27 12 349 3928

Website: <http://www.che.ac.za>

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## PREFACE

In the last 15 years the South African higher education system has expanded considerably the size of its enrolments. While in 1994 the total student enrolments in the system were 425 000, in 2007 the total enrolment had grown to 761 000 students. The proportion of African student enrolments has also grown considerably, from 43% in 1998 to 67% in 2007. The distribution of enrolments across gender indicates that women are entering higher education in larger numbers and that this is consistent with the proportion of women in the country's population. The distribution of enrolments across disciplinary fields has about met the targets set in the National Plan for Higher Education (2001) of 40% Humanities and Social Sciences, 30% Science Engineering and Technology and 30% Business and Management. As the CHE's *State of Higher Education Report* (2009) has indicated, the system has made important gains. However, the overall performance of higher education is not totally satisfactory in that not only is South Africa's system far from constituting a mass higher education system in terms of the participation in it of the population between 24 and 30 years old, but also the demographics of student participation indicate that African students are still under-represented in the total enrolments. Overall the higher education system still reflects the legacy of apartheid when it comes to participation by 'race' group and socio-economic status, and when it comes to who among these students finish their degrees on time and with good marks. Moreover, the quality of the degrees offered is still uneven and it is not certain that employers are always satisfied with the range of knowledge, skills and competences shown by higher education graduates.

In 2009 it is clear that the goals of access and equity are complex and cannot be separated from quality. Neither is it possible to measure access and equity only in terms of the inputs and outputs of higher education (enrolments and graduations). To measure our achievements in the area of access, equity and quality it is necessary to include the educational processes involved as well as the environment within which these processes take place. Thus access, equity and quality need to be unpacked in terms of equity of access or equality of opportunity, equity in terms of the learning environment or equity of means, equity of achievement, and equity in the ability to use the results of higher education. Research on higher education indicates that the simultaneous delivery on all four levels of access, equity and quality is the mark of a successful and responsive higher education system.

The obstacles against achieving this and the possible strategies to meet society's expectations of higher education have constituted the focus of much of the Council on Higher Education's work whether in its advice, monitoring or quality assurance areas of responsibility.

In 2007 the CHE published *A Case for Improving Teaching and Learning in South African Higher Education, Higher Education Monitor, No. 6, October 2007*. This publication took as its point of departure the analysis of the throughput rates of the 2000 cohort to make a number of important recommendations on issues that needed to be addressed in order to improve teaching and learning in South Africa, and, therefore, in the efficiency of the system. These recommendations focused on aspects of planning and goal setting at system level, professional development and capacity building in higher education, the identification of strategies that could improve graduate output, and the need to create an environment in which professional development in teaching and learning was valued and sought.

This new publication is also a contribution to understanding and, hopefully, solving the access, equity and quality conundrum. *Access and throughput in South Africa. Three Case Studies*, looks at the same problem from a

different angle. The book explores the relationship between students' success and their experiences of universities as academic and social spaces. This book is the outcome of a research project which tried to answer the following questions: How do we understand students' diverse experiences of the academic encounter - in the lecture rooms, in the residences and the various student centres, and in daily interactions with other students and staff? What are some of the institutional issues and factors influencing academic performance and the current throughput rates? How do we make sense of students' diverse university experiences of, on the one hand, racism, cultural isolation, sexual harassment and violence, and on the other, generally positive academic interactions and scholarly engagement?

The project was undertaken by three research teams which took their institutions University of Pretoria, University of the Witwatersrand and University of the Western Cape as case studies. The qualitative information gathered through interviews with staff and students and the analysis of institutional policies has been combined with the analysis of institutional and system level quantitative data which reflects the different historical trajectories of these three institutions. While each team has had a distinct approach to their research, all three case studies shared the view that students' experiences of higher education need to be understood within a framework that does not separate the cultural from the material contexts of higher education, but that, on the contrary, tries to understand their interactions.

The book is organised into six chapters. Chapter 1 outlines some of the context of higher education in South Africa and of the three institutions that participated in this study. Chapter 2 analyses the theoretical complexities involved in student access and success in the context of the restructuring and transformation under way in South African higher education. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 present the case study research on Wits, UP and UWC respectively. Chapter 6 situates the findings of this research in the broader field of research on student success, offers some conclusions across the three case studies, and draws out the implications of the research findings for educational policy and practice.

As sometimes occurs, the production of this book was unduly delayed. However, the pertinence of the issues raised in the research here presented is almost greater today than when it was commissioned. That this publication is so directly germane to the current debates on institutional culture and transformation suggests that bringing about change is a very complex and often vexing task. We hope this new issue of the CHE Higher Education Monitor will be at the centre of institutional debates, will help illuminate some of the problems students face when they enter higher education and will generate ideas as to how to tackle the more subtle and less-easy-to-measure dimensions of students' passage through higher education.

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) would like to thank the Vice-Chancellors of the three higher education institutions on which this study is based for opening up their universities to be researched for this project. Thanks are also due to the critical readers who gave their time and insights to this project. Last but not least, the CHE would like to express its gratitude to the three research teams who undertook this project with seriousness, commitment and rigour.

**Dr Lis Lange**  
**Director Monitor and Evaluation 2003-2007**  
**HEQC Executive Director.**

## LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

**Fatima Adam** is a doctoral student at the University of the Witwatersrand focusing on higher education curriculum reform. Most of her experience is in project management and strategy development for the education development sector. Most of her work has been in the area of science and technology education, predominantly at the schooling level. She has also been involved in higher education initiatives over the past two years. These include a project on assessment for the Council on Higher Education as well as on the racism commission set up by the Education Minister. She has a B.Sc in chemistry, HDE (maths and science), B.Ed and M.Ed.

**Judy Backhouse** is currently a full-time PhD student in the School of Education at the University of the Witwatersrand University. She is based in the division for education leadership and policy studies and is researching doctoral programs in South Africa. Judy has worked extensively in higher education, most recently as senior lecturer and head of the school of Information Technology at Monash South Africa, but also in lecturing positions at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, the University of Pretoria (UP), the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Durban-Westville. She has published in the areas of education, technology education and international education. Judy also has a long history in the information technology industry where she has held management and technical positions. She has a M.Sc. in Mathematics and an MBA.

**Hlengani Baloyi** is a PhD student at the School of Education, University of the Witwatersrand and a doctoral research trainee at the HSRC. His doctoral research is on the differential performance of students in historically black and white schools in South Africa. He obtained a BA degree and a HDE at the University of Limpopo (then University of the North) in 1993 and 1994 respectively. He taught high school Afrikaans 2nd Language for ten years. During that period he achieved a B.Ed degree from the University of the North-West and an M.Ed from the University of the Witwatersrand. In 2006 he obtained an M.A in Housing. He has coordinated research projects, presented conference papers and published in the areas of housing policy, teaching quality and learner performance in mathematics and language tests.

**Teresa Barnes** is an associate professor of History and Gender/Women's Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the USA. Previously, she was an associate professor of History, and senior researcher at the Center for the Study of Higher Education at the University of the Western Cape. She holds a PhD in African Economic History from the University of Zimbabwe. Her major research interests are in histories of institutional culture in higher education and the historical dynamics of gendered regimes of knowledge production.

**Michael Cross** teaches educational policy and planning at the School of Education, University of the Witwatersrand. In his academic career, he has published several books and numerous articles both nationally and internationally, including *Imagery of Identity in South African Education, 1880-1990* (Durham, Carolina Academic Press, 1999), *The Role of Higher Education in Building Democracy - 2nd Tri-Nation Campus Diversity Seminar* (Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman, 1999) and *Dealing with diversity: the politics of curriculum in South Africa* (Cape Town: Juta, 1998). He was for several years editor of *Perspectives in Education*.

**Mary Hames** is the Director of the Gender Equity Unit at the University of the Western Cape. She holds an MPhil in Southern African Political Studies and is currently pursuing her doctorate in Women and Gender Studies at the African Gender Institute, University of Cape Town. She has published on women's human rights and sexual rights in South Africa. She has also made written and oral submissions to parliament arguing the legitimization and recognition of same-sex marriage and the democratization of employment equity in higher education institutions. Major projects at the Gender Equity Unit are Focus Week on Prejudice Reduction and Anti-homophobia, the conceptualization and performance in an acclaimed play focusing on embodiment and titled "Reclaiming the P...Word", a project on the poverty eradication of university students, a mainstreaming programme for students with disabilities and writing and publication project for staff and students. Mary also serves on the boards of numerous community organizations and on various university committees.

**Jonathan Jansen** is Honorary Professor of Education at the University of the Witwatersrand and Visiting Fellow at the National Research Foundation, South Africa. His most recent books are *Knowledge in the Blood: How white students remember and enact the past* (2009, Stanford University Press) and his co-authored *Diversity High: Class, Color, Character and Culture in a South African High School* (2008, University Press of America). In these and related works, he examines how education leaders balance the dual imperatives of reparation and reconciliation in their leadership practice. He is a recent Fulbright Scholar to Stanford University (2007-2008), former Dean of Education at the University of Pretoria (2001-2007), and Honorary Doctor of Education from the University of Edinburgh. He is a former high school biology teacher and achieved his undergraduate education at the University of the Western Cape (BSc), his teaching credentials at the University of South Africa (HED, BEd) and his senior postgraduate education in the USA (MS, Cornell; PhD, Stanford). He serves as Vice President of the South African Academy of Science and from this vantage point currently leads three major studies on behalf of the Academy, including an inquiry on the role of the South African PhD in the global knowledge economy. He recently served on the boards of bodies such as the Centre for the Study of the Internationalization of Curriculum Studies, University of British Columbia; the International Commission on the Child of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (Washington D.C., USA), and as Member of the General Assembly, International Association for the Advancement of Curriculum, among others.

**Vanessa Ludwig** participated in this study whilst Programme Co-ordinator at the Gender Equity Unit, University of the Western Cape. She is currently the director of Triangle Project, a human rights organisation which focuses on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex rights.

**Neetha Ravjee** is a researcher in the Institutional Planning Office at the University of the Western Cape. Previously she held positions as senior researcher at the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of the Western Cape and postdoctoral fellow at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Stellenbosch. She holds a PhD in educational leadership and policy studies from the University of Washington. Her areas of specialisation are philosophy of education and curriculum theory.

**Ramodungoane Tabane** is an Educational Psychologist in private practice and a director at Careworks Training focusing on various behavioural changes through training such as Conversity and HIV/AIDS. He is currently completing his PhD at the University of Pretoria. His academic interest lies in fields such as HIV/AIDS, research, school desegregation and integration, psychology, and narrative and rational behavioural therapies.

**Hlengiwe Perpetua Sehlapelo** is an experienced educationist turned consultant. At the time of the study she was a PhD student at the University of Pretoria, Faculty of Education in the department of Management, Law and Policy. She has a B.Sc. (Home Economics), Higher Diploma in Education and B.Sc. (Honours) from the University of Natal, Masters in Educational Administration and Masters in Curriculum and Instruction from Ohio University, Athens, USA. Most of her experience has been in higher education, lecturing in a multidisciplinary programme in the Department of Human Ecology & Dietetics in the faculty of Community and Health Sciences at the University of the Western Cape. She was intricately engaged in the curricular redesign of the Human Ecology curriculum, a process emanating from action research undertaken in the department. She has accumulated a vast knowledge in research, project planning and management, monitoring and evaluation of projects and programmes in the education and development sector. She is still attached to the University of Pretoria as a part-time lecturer in the distance education programme lecturing Education Law and Policy. She is also a member of the Lynwood Ridge Primary School governing body.

**Yael Shalem** is an Associate Professor at the University of the Witwatersrand School of Education. Her research and teaching areas of interest are curriculum and identity, pedagogy and assessment, and teachers work.

## ACRONYMS

ALC	Academic Literacy for Commerce	NGO	Non Government Organisation
ANC	African National Congress	NRF	National Research Foundation
ANCYL	African National Congress Youth League	NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
B.Ed	Bachelor of Education	OBE	Outcome Based Education
B.Sc	Bachelor of Science	OPV	Opvoedkunde or Education
BA	Bachelor of Arts	PASMA	Pan African Student Movement of Azania
BAdmin	Bachelor of Administration	PUCHE	Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education
BCom	Bachelor of Commerce	RAU	Rand Afrikaans University
BTh	Bachelor of Theology	RDP	Reconstruction and Development Programme
CHC	Central House Committee	RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
CHE	Council on Higher Education	SACOS	South African Council on Sport
CV	Curriculum Vitae	SADC	South African Development Community
DoE	Department of Education	SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
DST	Department of Science and Technology	SASCO	South African Students' Congress
EMS	Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences	SD	Senate Discretion
FTE	Full time equivalent	SRC	Student Representative Council
GDP	Gross Domestic Product	TELP	Taylor's English Language Preparation
GEAR	Growth, Expansion and Redistribution	TSA	Technikon South Africa
HAU	Historically advantaged university	UK	United Kingdom
HDU	Historically disadvantaged university	UNISA	University of South Africa
HDE	Higher Diploma in Education	UP	University of Pretoria
HEMIS	Higher Education Management Information System	UPFY	University of Pretoria Foundation Year
HSRC	Human Sciences Research Council	USA	United States of America
ISA	Independent Students' Association	UWC	University of the Western Cape
ISI	Institute of Scientific Information	WFTES	Weighted full time equivalent student
MA	Master of Arts	WITS	University of the Witwatersrand
M.Ed	Master of Education		
MBA	Masters of Business Administration		
NCHE	National Commission on Higher Education		
NECC	National Education Crisis Committee		



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# CHAPTER 1

## Access, retention and throughput in South Africa

This project examines issues of access, retention and throughput at three very different universities in the South African higher education landscape. These issues play out against the historical and social backdrop of differentiated education and the systematic exclusion, poverty and political disempowerment of the majority of the population. And while higher education institutions in South Africa share this common past, they also display highly disparate characteristics related to their local contexts, the communities they serve, their staff profiles, and their access to resources and culture. Consequently the three institutions face both common and specific challenges. This chapter explores their contexts and their conceptualisation of success as measured in terms of access, retention and throughput.

We begin by sketching some developments in higher education in South Africa in the past two decades. In particular we look at the growth and change in composition of the student body. We also consider the impact that staffing and funding issues have on the ability of higher education institutions to discharge their core functions, particularly teaching and learning. Having set the scene at a national level, we turn to the specifics of the three universities examined in this study. We place them in their historical and social contexts and compare their educational offerings, the composition of their student bodies and their resourcing. We then go on to examine how the questions of access, retention and throughput have been interpreted and responded to at each of the three institutions.

In what follows, we provide some comparative information on the student enrolments, resources and outputs of each institution to help position the three universities in relation to each other. Since the data were not always available in the same format for all three universities, some adjustments have been made in presenting it to take account of these differences. For the purposes of consistency, race is reported as African, coloured, Indian and white and 'black' refers to African, coloured and Indian combined.

### 1. HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

In this section we provide a brief summary of the history of higher education in South Africa to give an idea of the position of higher education at the start of the 21st century. We look at the changes in size and composition of the student body over the past two decades and examine the combination of factors which resulted in these changes. We consider the extent to which the funding of higher education has responded to these changes and the challenges that the government funding framework has posed to the public higher education system as a whole. Finally, we highlight some of the complexities involved in the issues of access, retention and throughput.

#### 1.1 POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

Higher education in South Africa traces its roots to the University of the Cape of Good Hope, established in 1873, which consisted of a number of colleges. From these colleges emerged most of the historically white universities, including the University of the Witwatersrand (WITS) in 1922 and the University of Pretoria (UP) in 1930. Under apartheid in the early 1960s, in keeping with the vision of a separated society, the state created a number of colleges to cater for 'other' race groups, including the University College of the Western Cape,

which was granted university status as the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in 1970. At the time of the election of the first democratic government in 1994 there were 36 higher education institutions comprised of 21 universities and 15 technikons. With the publication of the National Plan on Higher Education in 2001, the government started a process of restructuring of the higher education system through mergers and incorporations. The restructuring has reduced the number of higher education institutions from 36 to 23 and created two new institutional types: comprehensive universities and universities of technology.<sup>1</sup>

In terms of the apartheid vision for education, higher education was segregated into institutions reserved for white South Africans and institutions tasked with providing limited tertiary education to those who were not classified white. Not only was the resourcing of these institutions inequitable, but the range of programmes offered reflected assumptions about the kind of careers for which students of different races were being prepared, and research was not uniformly supported across the higher education sector. While the recent institutional mergers have combined institutions across these boundaries, there are still significant differences in the resourcing, skill levels and outputs of those institutions that were historically white (the historically advantaged universities or HAUs) and those that served other racial groups (the historically disadvantaged universities or HDUs). There were further distinctions among the white universities, between the English-speaking and Afrikaans-speaking institutions which aligned with different political and ideological positions. These distinctions have become blurred in the past decade but continue to influence the culture of institutions and campuses.

Higher education policy post-1994 was largely determined by the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE), which reported its findings in 1996 after an exhaustive consultative process. The NCHE Report proposed a unitary higher education system based on increased participation, greater responsiveness and increased cooperation and partnerships (NCHE, 1996). In addressing the need for equity and skills, it projected greater participation in higher education, which would necessitate changes in curricula and qualifications and more cost-effective management of institutions. The Education White Paper 3, A Programme for Higher Education Transformation, published in 1997, presented a vision of a 'transformed' higher education system guided by the principles of equity and redress, democracy, development, quality, effectiveness and efficiency, academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability, and the question of what 'transformation' should mean for higher education became a preoccupation within the sector (DoE, 1997; Cross, 1998; Mabokela, 2001; Van Wyk, 2003; Ntshoe, 2004; Taylor, 2004). Institutional mergers began in 2002 and have kept many institutions inwardly focused in trying to address the challenges of integrating human resource processes, organisational cultures and operating over geographically dispersed campuses (Bundy, 2006: 15).

The policy agenda for South African higher education that has been developing since 1995 has also been influenced by a number of international trends shaping higher education institutions in developed and developing countries. These have included the growing globalisation of higher education, the commodification of education and the marketisation of higher education provision, changes in technology that have affected teaching and learning as well as the skills sought by graduates, pressures for relevance and accountability in teaching and research, the application to the higher education sector of management approaches developed in the corporate sector, and significant increases in the numbers of students (Eckel,

<sup>1</sup> Comprehensive universities offered vocational and general education programmes. University of Technology is the new designation of the South African technikons.

2001; Ramose, 2003; Van Wyk, 2005; Bundy, 2006; Jamieson & Naidoo, 2007). Bundy suggests that changes in South African higher education after 1994 are a direct reflection of these trends (Bundy, 2006: 9), but his respondents have argued that changes in higher education in South Africa post-1994 were mediated by concerns for social justice rather than being the direct imposition of the neoliberal agendas that drove higher education change in advanced industrial societies during the 1980s (Lange, 2006: 40; Singh, 2006: 66). They argue further that increasingly evident elements of managerialism and performativity are measures necessary for determining progress against goals to make access to higher education more equitable, improve the quality of higher education and produce graduates who are good citizens with skills appropriate for the economy (Lange, 2006: 44).

## 1.2 CHANGES IN THE INSTITUTIONS

The NCHE's proposed increased participation in higher education did not come about as expected. In 1980 there were 159,756 students enrolled in South African universities. By 1990 this number had grown to 304,625 and by 2003 it was close to 490,000. This increase appears substantial, but actually represents a significant slowing in the rate of growth. From 1950 to 1990, the student headcount in South African universities had grown at between 85% and 92% each decade, but between 1990 and 2000, it grew by only 27%, declining between 1995 and 1998, with 1999 marking its lowest point. By contrast, technikons grew rapidly, with enrolments increasing by 119% between 1990 and 2000 (Steyn & De Villiers 2006: 25). Since 2000, there has been a steady increase in enrolments.

The decreases in enrolments during the 1990s have been attributed to a range of factors, including a significant decline in enrolments at the HDUs, the introduction of more stringent measures to exclude students with outstanding fees, and poor school results that reduced the pool of students entering higher education (Steyn & De Villiers, 2006: 25,29). There was also a significant drop in the enrolment of white students, from 220,000 in 1993 to 164,000 in 1999. The reasons for this decline have not been investigated, but are thought to include the movement of white students into private higher education or to institutions outside South Africa and problems in accessing funds for students who did not qualify for funding through the NSFAS (National Student Financial Aid Scheme) (Bundy, 2006: 12).

However, the overall expansion of the higher education system has not made a decisive impact on the participation rate of the South African population between 20 and 24 years old in higher education. In 2003 the gross participation rate was 16.3%<sup>2</sup> against the national target of 20% (Steyn & De Villiers, 2006: 26). Moreover, from the point of view of access, very little has changed over the last 15 years in terms of the participation of African students in higher education.

What has been evident is a significant increase in the proportion of African students enrolling in universities, from 40% in 1993 to 65% in 2002<sup>3</sup>. This has been particularly noticeable at institutions that had been exclusively white. While many of the black students enrolling at HAUs came from the ranks of the middle class, there was also an increase in students from working class and rural backgrounds. This change in the demographic profile of the campuses had wide ranging effects. While students were expected to adapt to campuses largely dominated by a 'European' academic culture, their presence on campus and their specific needs also had an impact in changing campus cultures. Students coming from a wide range of

<sup>2</sup> The gross participation rate calculates all enrolments in higher education as a percentage of 20 to 24 year olds in the population. The calculations are contested; see Steyn & de Villiers, 2006, p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> These figures include both universities and technikons.

different school and life experiences, with different expectations of their role and the role of the lecturer in teaching, and different skills and experiences to draw on in negotiating the academic space, questioned the established culture of learning. More languages were now spoken on campuses where previously English or Afrikaans had dominated. Staff had to adapt to teaching more students for whom the language of instruction was their second or even third language. Students had to adapt to an increasingly multilingual social and learning environment. Questions of race and difference, which had been largely invisible when campuses were socially homogeneous, became visible and had to be faced.

At the same time, academics faced changes in their conditions of service and a breakdown of norms of collegiality which had dominated their working experience in the past, through the introduction of what has been described as managerialist practices. Freedom to teach in their preferred area of research has been eroded as academics are expected to align courses with national frameworks and goals of market relevance. There was an overall increase in the amount of work expected of academics. The need to accredit teaching programmes and the increased demand for data from the Department of Education (DoE) led to increasing administrative workloads for academic staff. Increasing student numbers and efforts to contain costs led to increased teaching workloads. A focus on performativity led to pressures on staff to improve their qualifications and to increase their research output, and staff sought additional work outside the university to supplement salaries that lagged behind inflation (Johnson, 2006: 64-5). Academic staff felt increasingly overworked, less well informed, marginalised in decision making, at odds with the 'managers' and forced into competition with their colleagues (Johnson, 2006: 66-67). These changes have led to a loss of a sense of community and feelings of powerlessness (Johnson, 2006: 61), which in turn affected the relationship between academics and students (Johnson, 2006: 61-7).

### 1.3 RESOURCING HIGHER EDUCATION

Critical for the functioning of the universities are access to financial resources and the availability of suitably qualified staff. Financing of universities has received considerable attention during the last two decades, beginning with the recommendations of the NCHE in 1996, through to the publication of the new funding formula in 2003 and its implementation in 2004. In this section we look at some overall figures and trends for the funding of higher education in South Africa as well as some trends in staffing and how these may have affected the teaching and learning programmes.

Higher education is funded in three ways - by the state, by student fees and by 'third-stream' income, including entrepreneurial activities, donor funding and research activities. State funding to universities increased from R1,160 million in 1988 to R6,071 million in 2004. However, the proportion of the national education budget allocated to universities fell from 12.57% in 1988 to 8.67% in 2004 and the percentage of GDP spent on universities fell from 0.7% to 0.485% in the same time. The percentage of GDP for the whole higher education sector (including technikons) was 0.68% in 2006, which is considerably lower than the 0.85% average for the African continent (Steyn & De Villiers, 2006: 89-91).

Overall, the proportion of income derived from state funding fell and the proportion derived from student fees increased for both HAUs and HDUs from the late 1980s to the early 2000s. However, the proportions differ significantly between these two groups. In the HAUs<sup>4</sup>, tuition fees represented 23% of income in 2003, state appropriations 40% and third stream income 37%. In the HDUs, tuition fees represented 25%

<sup>4</sup> Figures were not available for all HDUs; for details see Steyn and de Villiers, 2006.

of income in 2003, state appropriations just over 50%, third stream income 20% and funding from the NSFAS represented just less than 5% (Steyn & De Villiers, 2006: 92-4).

The NSFAS was set up in 1999 with the aim of increasing access to education and training. It provides students who qualify with loans of which up to 40% can be converted to a bursary, depending on the student's academic results. Students repay loans once they are employed and earning above a threshold amount. In 2003 the NSFAS disbursed R304 million to 27,783 students at HAUs and R219 million to 32,069 students at HDUs. The NSFAS has facilitated access for a significant number of students who would otherwise not attend higher education and has become a significant source of income for HDUs, improving cash flow and reducing student debt. And the NSFAS awards to students at HAUs have been increasing, indicating that more students from lower income groups are enrolling at these institutions, in line with the goal of increasing access.

The (recurrent) expenditure per student<sup>5</sup> at universities was fairly constant from the mid-1980s to mid-1990s, but increased considerably after 1995.<sup>6</sup> This increase was particularly dramatic at HDUs. Although on average the HDUs have in the past spent less per student, the gap between the HDUs and the HAUs has been steadily narrowing in this regard with, on average, HAUs spending R37,697 and HDUs spending R31,775 per student in 2003. Another way to look at expenditure is in terms of (recurrent) expenditure per qualification awarded, and this analysis shows that costs have been relatively constant at HAUs, but increased dramatically at HDUs from the late 1990s. This reflects the decreasing student numbers at these institutions (Steyn & De Villiers, 2006: 100-3).

Two main concerns dominate the discussion about academic staff in higher education: how to replace an ageing academic and research staff (DST, 2002: 21) and how to increase the proportion of black staff in the universities. The DoE has identified the low number of black postgraduates, inadequate funding for postgraduates and the inability of institutions to offer competitive salaries as obstacles to recruiting black academic and professional staff. In addition, the 'alienating' culture of HAUs makes it difficult to retain black staff (DoE, 2001: 38). The shortage of black academic staff means that black students lack role models (DoE, 2001: 34, 39). An analysis of the average remuneration of university staff indicates that inflation-adjusted salaries have increased steadily since the late 1980s. However, the averages mask what happens at an individual level. In particular, the average age of academic staff is increasing, which means that the higher salaries of senior staff cannot be balanced by smaller packages at the lower levels. In addition, the outsourcing of many of the lower-paid support staff such as cleaners and gardeners has significantly raised the average salary level. Further, the ratio between students and academic staff has increased over the past two decades, which may have had some impact on teaching and learning (Steyn & De Villiers, 2006: 164-5).

In responding to the challenges of teaching the larger and more diverse student body, universities need to be able to draw on financial resources and increasingly skilled staff. As Scott et al argued, funds are needed to implement supplementary programmes and develop new approaches to teaching and learning, and educational expertise is needed to improve teaching practices (Scott et al., 2007: 60-2). While funds have been made available for foundation programmes and 'teaching development' (Scott et al., 2007: 43,62), the slow erosion of financial resources and the growing demands on academic staff add to the challenges of increasing access and improving throughput and retention.

<sup>5</sup> Measured per weighted average full-time student.

<sup>6</sup> When figures were adjusted to constant 2000 prices.

Although the situation has improved since 2000, when higher education institutions in South Africa were being faced with decreasing state funding, increasing student debt and pressure to use their financial resources more efficiently (CHE, 2000: 18), the new funds provided by government are earmarked funds and third-stream income is limited by being largely dependent on additional work by already pressured academic staff.

#### **1.4 ISSUES OF ACCESS, RETENTION AND THROUGHPUT**

The problems of access, retention and throughput are by no means clearly defined or easy to solve. The goals and the means to achieve stated targets in relation to all three are contested. From the point of view of the monitoring of institutions' efficiency, it is also difficult to produce simple measures for throughput. We end this discussion of the national issues with a sketch of some of the debates around and difficulties involved in the issues of access and throughput in the South African context.<sup>7</sup>

Students entering university do so from positions of extreme inequality, most obviously in schooling, but also in terms of financial and other resources. A lack of academic 'preparedness', in terms of both social class and the high school curriculum is cited as one of the reasons why students fail to or take longer to master degree requirements (Scott et al., 2007: 42-3). Financial pressures oblige students to work while they study (even as ostensibly 'full-time' students) or take breaks between years to earn, further delaying their progress. But to exclude students who have the potential to succeed because they cannot do so in the expected time frame works against the goals of social inclusion. How long it takes to graduate and who leaves a university without completing a degree are issues which matter to students and their families, to higher education institutions and to the government as the main funder of higher education. But quantitative measures of throughput fail to reflect the intricacies of social conditions and the teaching and learning process.

Graduation rates are calculated by dividing the total number of qualifications awarded at an institution by the total number of students enrolled. This gives a rough measure of the number of years that graduates are staying in the system, but does not take into account fluctuating enrolments or the different durations of degree programmes (Steyn & De Villiers, 2006). Cohort studies that track the number of students in a cohort to graduate after three, four or five years give a better sense of student progress and are beginning to become available (Scott et al., 2007). Measuring student throughput is further complicated because students do not follow linear paths through higher education. Students may complete one year of a course and then move to a different course or to a different institution. While these appear as 'dropouts' in measures of the course or institution in question, they may go on to be successful graduates elsewhere (Scott et al., 2007: 12). There is also an argument that students who complete one or two years of university without graduating still benefit from the skills and insights that they have developed during that time and that they should not be considered 'failures' (Wits, 2003b).

Despite their limitations measures such as graduation rates calculations or cohort studies are useful indicators of the need to investigate more deeply and systematically the process of teaching and learning and how students' readiness, socioeconomic factors, lecturers' pedagogical resources and the institutional environment combine to produce different academic results. In the next section we present data compiled at each of the three case-study universities to measure student success. The approach and terminology used at each institution to calculate student success reveal the different concerns and assumptions that are made at each institution and explain the different responses provided by each institution to the same problem.

<sup>7</sup> We use the expression 'access and throughput' throughout this publication as also including the concept of retention

As will be seen, the developments and debates that have preoccupied the higher education sector in South Africa during the past two decades have played out differently at these three universities. The way these pressures manifest at each and the way each has responded are influenced by their respective histories, positioning, strengths and weaknesses. In the next section we look in more detail at the three institutions' specific conditions and concerns.

## 2. THE THREE UNIVERSITIES

The three institutions examined in this study exhibit marked differences in the composition of their student bodies, organisational cultures, staff profile and resources. The UP is the largest of the three in terms of student enrolments, staffing and income. In 2006, UP enrolled 46,122 students, the somewhat smaller Wits enrolled 24,198 students and the UWC enrolled 14,838. In the same year UP employed 3,470 permanent staff members as compared to 3,086 at Wits and 1,201 at UWC.<sup>8</sup>

Comparing the size and resourcing of the three universities presents some difficulties in terms of access to information and different ways of reporting information. In this section, data have been taken from a variety of documents, including the UP 2006 Performance Indicators, the Wits Annual Report 2005 and UWC Institutional Operating Plan 2004. In these documents it is not always clear how figures are arrived at. For example, the way staff are classified into academic and support, full- and part-time, permanent and contract varies across the institutions. Consequently, it has been necessary to use old data (2003) published in *The impact of changing funding sources on higher education institutions in South Africa* (Steyn & De Villiers, 2006) to make more meaningful comparisons.

### 2.1 INTRODUCING THE THREE UNIVERSITIES

#### 2.1.1 The University of Pretoria

The UP originated as the Pretoria campus of the Transvaal University College in 1908 and was granted university status in 1930. The institution known as Tukkies (from TUK, the letters of the original name) served the Afrikaner elite and promoted Afrikaner nationalist values through the use of the Afrikaans language and through strongly defended traditions in the halls of residence. UP is a well-resourced institution with efficient administrative structures. Its culture has been described as hierarchical, rigid, rule-driven, authoritarian and patriarchal - opposition is discouraged and dissenting voices are silenced (Jansen, 2005: 205).

UP has been quick to embrace change and has taken a pragmatic approach to shifts in the higher education landscape. The introduction of English as a medium of instruction has made it possible to attract students from a wider base and the use of technology has been embraced as a way of coping with the growing student body. Today UP is the biggest residential university in terms of student numbers and one of the most productive research universities in South Africa.

Situated in the leafy eastern suburbs of Pretoria, UP continues to serve the local Afrikaans-speaking population but it also attracts growing numbers of English-speaking students, both black and white. Students at UP are typically drawn from the wealthier sectors of society and UP attracts more than 30% of the top achievers from the school system<sup>9</sup> and enjoys relatively high graduation rates. Concerns at UP are to integrate students into the culture of the institution successfully, to manage racial tensions and to deal with the complexities of running the teaching programmes in two languages.

<sup>8</sup> HEMIS 2006

<sup>9</sup> UP 2006 Performance Indicators, p. 4



### 2.1.2 The University of the Western Cape

The UWC was created in 1960 by the apartheid government to provide training for people designated 'coloured' in order to staff a separate civil service for the coloured community. Despite its focus on the coloured community the management and academic staff at UWC were predominantly white. Protest action by students and black academic staff led to the appointment, in 1975, of the first black rector. In 1982, the UWC mission statement formally rejected the apartheid ideology on which it was established and in 1983 the UWC Act established UWC as an autonomous institution on the same terms as the established white universities.

From the late 1980s UWC aligned with the mass democratic movement and tried to address social and policy issues in new curricula and research. The institution adopted a transformation strategy under the motto of 'the people's university' that involved changes to staff, including the recruitment of African scholars and the diversification of the student body through the adoption of an 'open' admissions policy. During the 1990s, UWC played an important role in policy research and formulation in the emerging democracy and many of its senior academics and alumni took up public office.<sup>10</sup> In the longer term, the transformation strategy was to backfire, as many students who gained entry under the new admissions policy struggled to complete, student debt soared and the university faced financial crises. Difficult working conditions made many scholars leave and the mood on campus became more sober as constraints became increasingly evident.

Situated in the northern suburbs of Cape Town, UWC now serves an increasingly diverse student body, but elements of its history continue to influence the present reality. Students at UWC are mostly drawn from the less wealthy sectors of society, have access to fewer resources and have had poorer schooling than the typical student at Wits or UP. A high dependence on student fees, together with high levels of student debt, creates a variety of challenges for the university. Among the 'previously disadvantaged' universities, UWC stands out for its strong research tradition, and competes effectively with other universities with similar resource levels.

### 2.1.3 The University of the Witwatersrand

The Wits, can be traced back to the South African School of Mines, established in Kimberly in 1896 and transferred to Johannesburg as the Transvaal Technical Institute in 1904. This institute eventually became Wits in 1922, with six faculties (Arts, Science, Medicine, Engineering, Law and Commerce)<sup>11</sup> serving the English-speaking population of Johannesburg. Over the years Wits has built a strong identity as a defender of liberal values and played a leading role in research in South Africa.

When racial separation at universities was enforced in 1959, Wits maintained a stand against apartheid. This had severe consequences for the University - banning, deportation and detention of staff and students, and invasions of the campus by riot police.<sup>12</sup> But in spite of the early 'open university' rhetoric the question of formal access for 'non-white' students began to be tackled only in the late 1980s. This inspired some scholarship on the issues of educational disadvantage and academic support for non-traditional students. It was, however, the change in composition of the student body in the 1990s that intensified the debates and precipitated a range of initiatives and programmes designed to cater for students from a historically disadvantaged background.

Since the late 1980s the university has undergone a number of changes in leadership, and these, together with changes in the higher education environment that sit uncomfortably with the institution's liberal ideals, have resulted in uncertainty about the identity of the university and its role in the new higher education

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.uwc.ac.za/portal/public/about\\_uwc/history.htm](http://www.uwc.ac.za/portal/public/about_uwc/history.htm) accessed 12 May 2006

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.wits.ac.za/depts/wcs/about.shtml#history> accessed 14 May 2007

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.wits.ac.za/PlacesOfInterest/Archives/history.htm> accessed 14 May 2007

landscape. The university positions itself as a research university with a strong social justice agenda. Wits is an inner-city university situated in Braamfontein, Johannesburg, in an area characterised by high-rise apartments and office blocks. While Wits draws many students (both black and white) from the wealthy middle class, it has an important number of students from working-class and rural backgrounds.

While the differences between the three universities are significant, all three exist within the same higher education environment of increasing student numbers, increasing diversity in the student body, decreasing resources, uncertainty about higher education policy, and increasing external control in the form of quality management and reporting demands and pressures for efficiency.

## 2.2 THE STUDENT BODIES

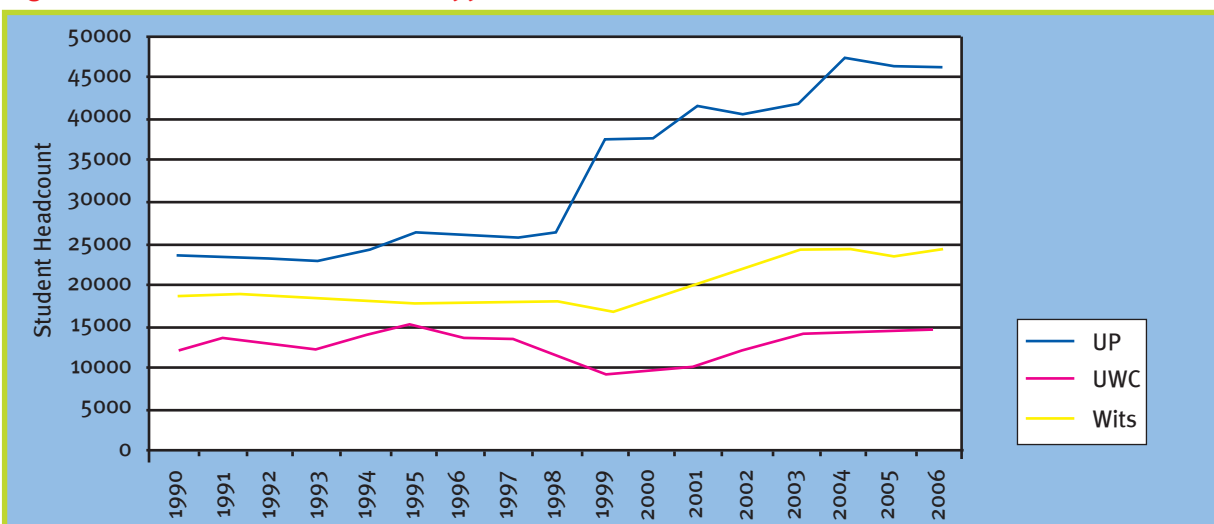
The changes in the demographic profile of students in the higher education sector have presented challenges for the teaching and learning programmes. The nature and extent of these changes has, however, differed across institutions. In this section we examine how the increasing student numbers at the three universities have reflected a trend towards an overall balance in the racial and gender composition of the students, but also how this has differed across the three universities and how imbalances persist in specific faculties.

While it would have been in keeping with our focus on undergraduate students to report here on the profile of these students alone, the demographic information we used was not available for undergraduate students only and so the information that follows includes postgraduate students. And since we are interested in students' on-campus experiences and neither Wits nor UWC have distance students, the figures below for UP exclude distance students.

### 2.2.1 Overall student enrolment

The number of students enrolled at South African universities increased during the 1980s and into the 1990s. From 1997 to 2000 there was an overall decline in student numbers, particularly at the HDUs, and since 2001 there has been a steady increase. These overall trends played out differently at the three universities. The chart below shows the changes in the student headcount at the three universities over the period 1990 to 2006. At UP there was a steady growth in numbers, at Wits student numbers declined steadily from the early 1990s until 2000, and UWC experienced a decline in numbers between 1995 and 2000.

**Figure.1: Student headcount between 1990 and 2006**



Source: HEMIS and Steyn 2006: 184

In 2000 there were 28,093 contact students at UP's various campuses; by 2006, this number had increased to 38,389. This was partly due to the acquisition of two new campuses, but also to growth on the main campus. During the same period, the phasing out of outsourced distance programmes led to a drop in distance students from 28,098 in 2000 to 10,837 in 2006. Of the total 46,122 students enrolled in 2006, 32,276 (70%) were undergraduates.

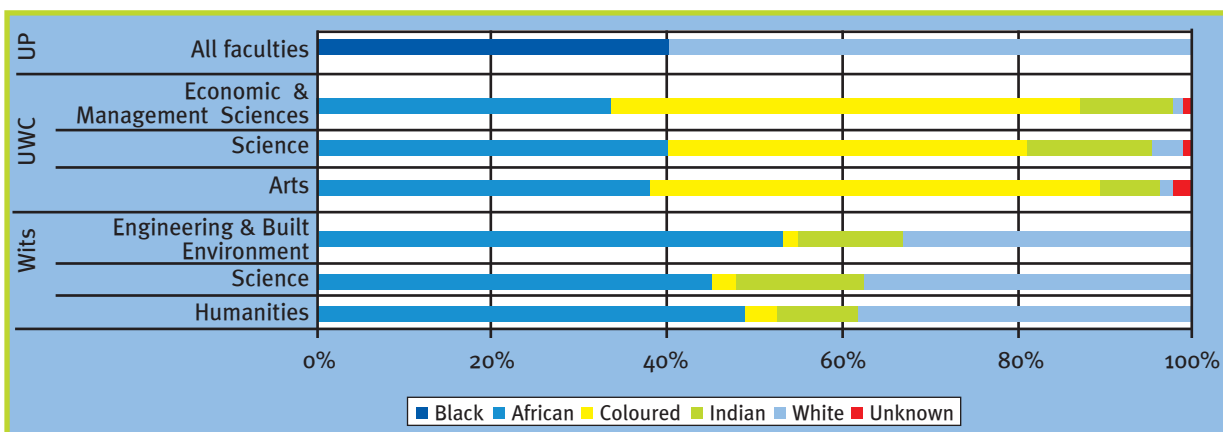
In keeping with the trend for HDUs, UWC student enrolments reached a low point in 1999 with 9,453 students. Since then there has been a steady increase, to 14,838 in 2006. Of these, 12,020 (81%) were undergraduate students. The increase in student numbers also marked a shift in student enrolments across faculties, with fewer students enrolling in Arts and increasing numbers in Economic and Management Sciences, and Community and Health Sciences.

As at 2006, Wits had 24,198 enrolled students, of which 16,214 (67%) were undergraduates. This represents a decrease of 9% from 2004. More than half of the students are registered in the Faculties of Humanities and Commerce, Law and Management, and the rest are distributed equally across Health, Engineering and the Built Environment, and Science.

### 2.2.2 Student profiles by race

The racial composition of the student bodies reflects the history and the geographical location of the three institutions.

**Figure 2: Racial composition of student bodies across the faculties studied<sup>13</sup>**



The UP has more white students than black, and more white students than the other two universities. However, the number of black students at UP increased from 29% (of contact students) in 2000 to 40% in 2006. Almost all distance education students (97%) are black. At the undergraduate level, UP had 28,206 contact students in 2006, of which 38% were black.<sup>14</sup> A breakdown of black students into African, coloured and Indian was not available.

In 2005 of the undergraduate students at UWC, 35% were African, 50% coloured, 10% Indian and 5% white. Since 2000 there has been a significant decrease in African students (from 51% in 2000), while the

<sup>13</sup> The breakdown by faculty was not available for UP.

<sup>14</sup> UP 2006 Performance Indicators, p. 26

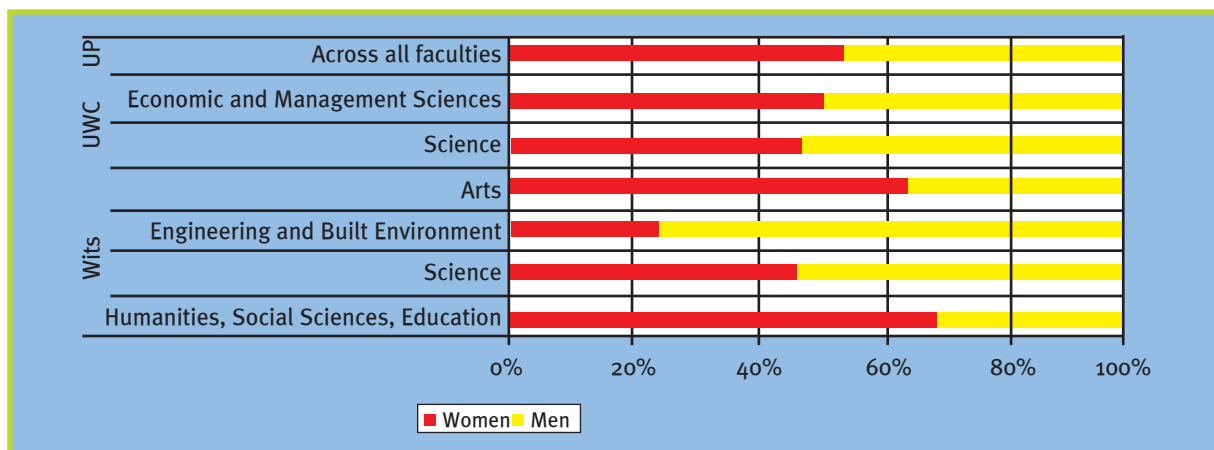
proportions of other races have increased. The SRC (Student Representative Council) has raised this as a cause for concern and has suggested that at least 50% of staff employed by the Schools Liaison Office (responsible for recruitment) should be African. The institution, on the other hand, raises the question whether the decline in the number of African students should be a cause for concern since the student population to a large extent reflects the population demographics of the Western Cape.<sup>15</sup> In any event, the focus at UWC is still on historically disadvantaged students.

At Wits the ratio of white students to black in 2005 was 36:64 and this ratio had remained relatively stable over the previous three years. The faculties have similar racial profiles, with somewhat more African students in the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment and somewhat fewer in the Faculty of Science.

### 2.2.3 Student gender profiles

While the student bodies have similar numbers of men and women in their overall enrolments, there are significant differences in the gender profiles of particular faculties.

**Figure 3: Gender composition of students across the faculties studied<sup>16</sup>**



At UP there are slightly more women students (53%) on campus than men and at the undergraduate level 56% are women.<sup>17</sup> Data on the gender breakdown across the three faculties studied were not available.

At 58% of the student body in 2005, women outnumber men at UWC and this has been increasing since 2000. The chart above, however, indicates that the genders are relatively equally distributed in Science and Economic and Management Sciences, with women being in the majority in Arts.

At Wits there are equal numbers of male and female students on campus but differences are apparent at the faculty level. Male students significantly outnumber female students in Engineering and the Built Environment and marginally in Science. There are, however, more female than male students in Humanities.

### 2.2.4 Student's place of origin

While the number of international students enrolling at South African universities has been increasing steadily, they remain a small part of the student body, particularly at undergraduate level. International

<sup>15</sup> UWC Institutional Operating Plan 2004, p. 31

<sup>16</sup> The breakdown by faculty was not available for UP.

<sup>17</sup> UP 2006 Performance Indicators, p. 26

students at UP have grown from 754 in 2000 to 2,441 in 2006, but this represents 6.4% of the contact students. At undergraduate level 1,339 (4.7%) were international. UP draws 62% of its students from the Gauteng province in which it is based, 94% of its students from South Africa and 98% of its students from Africa.

UWC students come from across South Africa, with all nine provinces represented in the student population, but the majority of its students are drawn from the Western Cape. Approximately 40% of its students are from rural and peri-urban centres (Morta, 2006)<sup>18</sup> UWC has been drawing an increasing number of international students, mainly from the rest of Africa, but increasingly over the last three to four years from the Far East. In 2005, 91% of the total student population at Wits came from South Africa, of which 67% were from Gauteng and 38% from Johannesburg. KwaZulu-Natal and the Northern Province were the two main feeder provinces outside Gauteng, each contributing approximately 6% of the total student population. Seven percent of the student population came from other African countries and the remaining 2% from other continents.

What does not show up in the above profiling of the student body, and is much more difficult to quantify, are class differences. While it has been the practice in South Africa to use race as a proxy for class, this is no longer the case as the universities accept more and more black students from the ranks of the middle class. Class differences and differences in schooling might well play a role in how easily students access the culture of the universities and how well they cope with their studies.

### 2.3 FACULTY STRUCTURES AND DEGREE PROGRAMMES

Comparisons of access and throughput across universities are complicated by the very different requirements of different degree programmes. The range of qualifications offered by an institution will affect the number and type of students they attract. Programmes have different entrance requirements, durations and workloads and require different skills. In conducting this study we were faced with a choice as to which faculties to focus on and the faculties selected had to be comparable across the three institutions. Here we compare the faculty structures and the range of degree courses offered at the three institutions. We explain our selection of faculties and then look in more detail at the degree courses offered by these faculties.

The three universities support significantly different faculty structures - UP has nine faculties, UWC seven and Wits five. The number of faculties does not reflect the range of courses offered at each institution but rather the size of the faculties. For example, both UP and UWC have separate faculties of Law and Education, while at Wits these disciplines have been included in the larger Faculties of Commerce, Law and Management, and Humanities, Social Science and Education, respectively. Notable differences are that UWC does not offer any Engineering courses and Wits offers no courses in Theology. UWC has a department of Religion and Theology in the Arts Faculty. Table 2.3.1 lists the faculties at each university and attempts to show how they correspond across institutions.

<sup>18</sup> UWC Enrolment Planning Tables

**Table 1: Faculties at the three universities**

UP	UWC	Wits
Health Sciences	Community and Health Sciences (CHS) Dentistry	Health Sciences
Natural and Agricultural Sciences Veterinary Science	Natural Sciences	Science
Humanities	Arts	Humanities, Social Science and Education
Education	Education	
Theology		
Economics and Management	Economic and Management Sciences (EMS)	Commerce, Law and Management
Law	Law	
Engineering, the Built Environment and Information Technology		Engineering and the Built Environment (EBE)

For this study, we wanted to select faculties that would be comparable across the three institutions. The faculties that were most obviously common across the institutions were Science (Natural and Agricultural Sciences at UP, Natural Science at UWC, Science at Wits) and the Humanities (Humanities at UP, Arts at UWC, Humanities, Social Science and Education at Wits). In addition, in our study of each institution we included a third faculty where questions of access, retention and throughput were of particular interest to the institutional researchers: Education at UP, Economic and Management Sciences at UWC, and Engineering and the Built Environment at Wits.

At UP the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences comprises four broad schools in the Agriculture and Food, Biological, Mathematical, and Physical sciences. In 2004 it had 4,833 students registered. Humanities is the oldest faculty at UP and includes the schools of Languages, Social Sciences and Arts. It has 16 research centres and institutes and in 2004 it had 5,116 students enrolled. The Faculty of Education comprises two schools, Educational Studies and Teacher Training, and serves close to 15,000 students, of which 10,500 are distance students.<sup>19</sup>

At UP the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences offers six degree programmes at the undergraduate level, some of which are three- and some four-year programmes. Entrance requirements differ across the programmes, but they generally require a language and mathematics (and sometimes a science subject) at higher grade level. Some of the programmes can be taken over an additional year for students with lower school results. The Faculty of Humanities offers nine undergraduate degree programmes with a wide variety of specialisation options. One of the programmes runs over four years, while the others are three-year bachelor's degrees. The Faculty of Education offers a four-year Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) degree with seven specialisations.

<sup>19</sup> 2006 UP in a Nutshell, p. 22

The Arts Faculty at UWC is one of the oldest faculties, created when the university was established. Since then it has undergone changes in structure and in the number and nature of its students. In 2005 it had 2,754 registered students. Currently the Faculty comprises 11 departments offering undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Teaching functions are the responsibility of the Academic Planning Committee, which reports to the Arts Faculty Board. Students interact with course coordinators, who are administrative staff who escalate issues, if necessary, at departmental meetings. The Natural Sciences Faculty, also one of the three original faculties, enrolls over 1,300 new students each year and in 2004, 57% were women. The Science Faculty has ten departments covering a wide range of subjects. Students attend an Orientation programme (on subject choices, available resources and support services) at the beginning of each year, and during the term the Institute for Counselling assists with study skills, essay writing and career preparation. Economic and Management Sciences is made up of six departments<sup>20</sup> with undergraduate programmes and a postgraduate School of Government. Programmes span the public and private sectors and are oriented to areas where there are skills shortages. Consequently the Faculty grew by 64% from 2,448 students in 2000 to 4,027 in 2004.<sup>21</sup> The Faculty includes an Academic Development department that offers a compulsory first-year course in 'academic literacy for commerce' (ALC).

The Faculty of Arts offers a three-year general Bachelor of Arts degree (BA), usually structured to allow for two majors in the third year. Nineteen major subjects are offered, with modules running either for a full semester or for half a semester. Entrance is allowed to students who have a matriculation exemption. The Faculty also offers a Bachelor of Theology (BTh) and a four-year Bachelor of Library Science (BBibL). The Faculty of Natural Sciences offers a general Bachelor of Science (BSc), nine three-year specialist BSc programmes<sup>22</sup> and two four-year BSc programmes.<sup>23</sup> There is a support course for students who have completed Mathematics at standard grade or obtained less than 50% for higher grade mathematics. Engineering and Management Sciences offer a general Bachelor of Commerce (BCom), specialist BCom degrees in accounting, law, investments and public management, and a Bachelor of Administration (BAdmin). The BCom degrees require a D symbol for higher grade mathematics, while the BAdmin has no mathematics prerequisite. The Faculty recently introduced a four-year stream to provide additional support through a range of enrichment courses in the first and second years of study.

The current faculty structure at Wits was established in 2001 by rolling several smaller faculties into larger groupings. The three faculties examined in this study represent 57% of all the undergraduate students at Wits. Of the three, Humanities is the largest, with 4,573 enrolled undergraduates. The student body is dominated by women (66%), and the breakdown by race is typical of the overall racial profile at Wits. The Faculty of Humanities houses seven schools, of which five are of interest to us.<sup>24</sup> The Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment is considerably smaller with 2,880 enrolled undergraduates. Its student body is male-dominated (71%) and at 27% there are fewer white students than the campus average of 36%. While most engineering undergraduates (69%) reside off campus, this Faculty has larger numbers of resident students than the other faculties. The Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment is structured into seven schools. The Faculty of Science is the smallest of the three with 1,976 enrolled undergraduates. There are somewhat more male (53%) than female students, and African students are

<sup>20</sup> Accounting, Management, Economics, Industrial Psychology, Political Studies, and Public Administration

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.uwc.ac.za/ems/About\\_Faculty.asp](http://www.uwc.ac.za/ems/About_Faculty.asp) accessed 13 May 2007

<sup>22</sup> Applied Geology; Physical Sciences; Mathematical and Statistical Sciences; Applied Biotechnology; Computer Science; Environmental Sciences; Chemical Sciences; Biodiversity and Conservation Biology; and Medical Bio-Science

<sup>23</sup> Science Education and Pharmacy

<sup>24</sup> The remaining two are the Graduate School for Humanities and Social Sciences, which is concerned with postgraduate students and WitsPlus, which focuses on part-time short courses.

under-represented at only 44% compared to the campus average of 50%. The Faculty of Science consists of ten schools, grouped into four related areas.

The three faculties studied at Wits offer a mix of three- and four-year bachelor's degrees. Most of the degrees can be taken in an extended mode where students are allowed one extra year to graduate and are supported by additional intensive teaching. The Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment awards nine undergraduate degrees with various professional specialisations and durations of three or four years. Degrees are accredited by local and international industry bodies, which results in mostly fixed curricula with limited electives. Because of the fixed curricula, failure in one unit can prevent progression to the next year. In the Faculty of Science, the teaching focus is on a general, flexible BSc degree that allows students to pursue a range of interests. Many undergraduate courses are offered in 'major' and 'auxiliary' options, with the former having higher entrance requirements. The Faculty of Humanities houses a mix of general and professional degrees, including the general three-year BA degree and six other four-year professional undergraduate degrees.<sup>25</sup> In general, entry requirements for degrees in the Faculties of Engineering and the Built Environment and Science are higher than for the Faculty of Humanities degrees.

As can be seen from this summary, the range of degree structures makes understanding throughput a complex task and, in the discussions that follow, distinctions are drawn between degrees of different duration, and general and professional degrees.

## 2.4 THROUGHPUT

As discussed above, measures of the efficiency of the teaching and learning process from the point of view of access, retention and throughput are problematic and most indicators can be seen only as proxies that might serve as warnings about the existence of problems with this process. The nature, extent and causes of these problems, however, need to be explored from a range of perspectives. We begin by presenting measures of graduation rates using the crude and contested calculation that is used nationally to compare institutions. In Section 3 of this chapter we present data that have been compiled by the three universities to produce more meaningful interpretations of the student graduation rates.

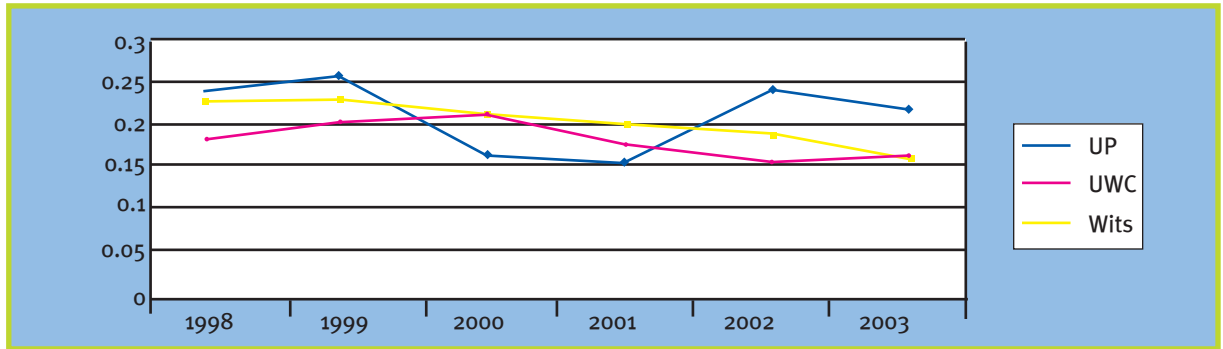
As mentioned in Section 1.4, above, graduation rates are calculated by dividing the total number of qualifications awarded at an institution by the total number of students enrolled. While this measure is acknowledged to be crude, it has the benefit of being easy to calculate across widely differing institutions and it does give some measure of the rate of student progress. How much can be inferred from the graduation rates is, however, not certain because it does not take account of the time lag from enrolment to graduation and the different durations of qualifications.

The calculation can be made using either student headcount (the actual number of enrolled students) or the weighted average full-time student number, which takes account of the modules that students are enrolled in and whether they are contact or distance students. Figures 2.4.1 and 2.4.2 show the graduation rates for the three universities over the period 1998 to 2003 using both student headcount and the weighted full-time equivalent student numbers.

<sup>25</sup> Including degrees in Dramatic Arts; Education; Fine Arts; Music; Social Work; and Speech and Hearing Therapy



**Figure 4: Graduation rates by headcount (qualifications / headcount)**



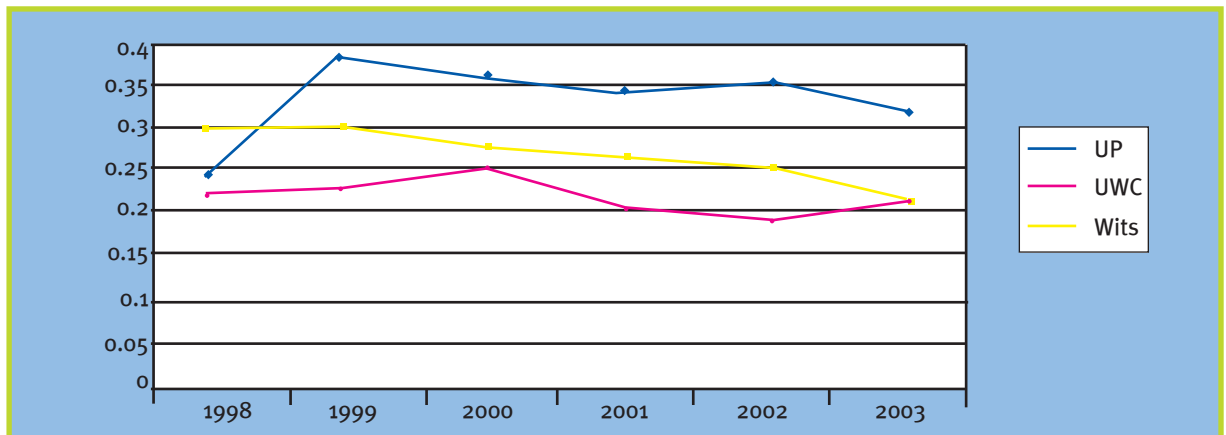
Source: Steyn & De Villiers, 2006

While differences in the duration of qualifications are not taken into account in this measure, provided that the proportions of students enrolled in programmes of different duration remain relatively stable, it will indicate trends in the student flow.

The graduation rate by (WFTES) shown in Figure 5 is perhaps a more sophisticated calculation as it takes into account differences between distance and contact mode students. This is borne out by the way that the graph in Figure 7 appears very similar to the one in Figure 8 for both Wits and UWC, which had no distance students, while UP fares considerably better in the second figure.

Institutions prefer to take a more detailed look at the progression of students, often using cohort studies to make sense of it. The way institutions interpret, measure and respond to issues of access and throughput reveals not only their different focus but also their different resources. In the section that follows we look in more detail at calculations of throughput as reported by the institutions themselves and at how they have tried to address their concerns.

**Figure 5: Graduation rates by WFTES (qualifications / WFTES)**



## 2.5 RESOURCES

While we are not aware of any studies that indicate a causal relationship between resources and student success, the institutions' ways of responding to the challenges of access and throughput and the quality of staff they are able to attract are likely to be constrained or enabled by the resources available to them. The information presented here is intended to give some background information about the relative levels of resourcing at the three institutions.

**Table 2: Comparison of resources across the three universities, 2003 (all values in rands)**

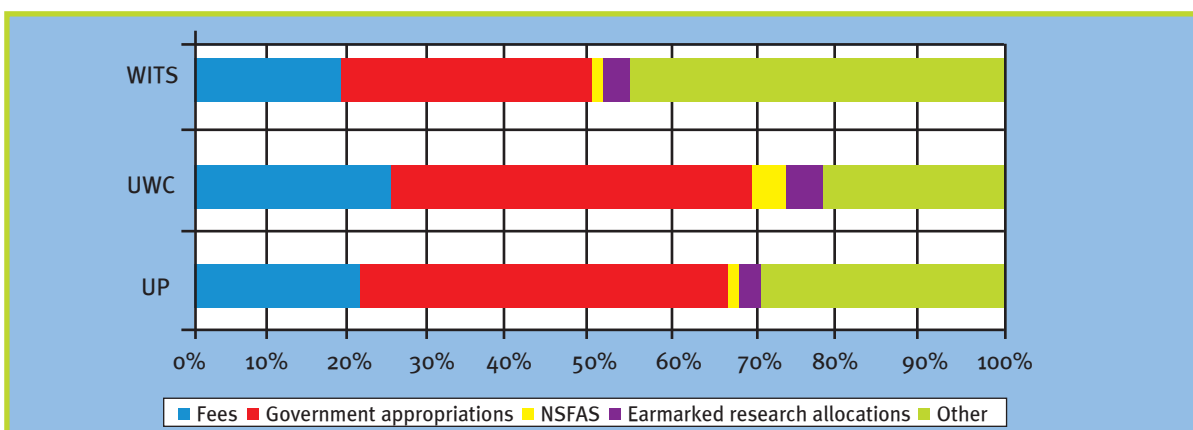
	UP	UWC	Wits
Income	1,710,636,000	426,210,000	1,507,132,000
Recurrent expenditure	1,455,298,000	423,851,000	1,545,026,000
FTE I/R staff <sup>26</sup>	1,839	552	2,065
FTE other staff	2,044	911	1,849
Remuneration per FTE I/R staff	247,318	209,346	191,100
Student headcount	41,951	14,043	24,250
WFTEs <sup>27</sup>	29,518	10,889	18,418
Total expenditure per WFTEs	49,301	38,925	83,887
WFTEs per FTE I/R staff	16.1	19.7	8.9

Source: Steyn & De Villiers, 2006

From the income and expenditure figures above, it can be seen that UP made a comfortable profit in 2003, while on the other hand Wits and UWC were only close to breaking even. Academic staff at UP earn more than at the other two universities and at UP and UWC there are higher proportions of administrative staff than at Wits. Students at Wits enjoy considerably lower ratios of students to academic staff.

In terms of the formula by which resources are allocated, it must be pointed out that the calculations of the full-time equivalent (FTE) staff figures and the WFTEs are contested and that different calculations of these amounts could change the picture. The calculations used, however, are those applied nationally.

**Figure 6: Proportion of different income sources across the three universities (2003)**



Source: Steyn & De Villiers, 2006

<sup>26</sup> Academic staff include Instruction and Research staff, here abbreviated to I/R staff.

<sup>27</sup> Weighted full-time equivalent students. Full-time equivalent student numbers are based on the standardised credit values of the modules in which each student enrolls. These values are then weighted to reflect the (contested) lower cost of distance students.

The sources of UP's income are typical of the average HAU in South Africa. While Wits has proportionately more income in the category 'other', which represents philanthropic and entrepreneurial funding, and is the least dependent of the three universities on government appropriations. UWC depends to a greater degree on income from fees, the NSFAS<sup>28</sup> and earmarked research allocations. UWC has proportionately less income from philanthropic and entrepreneurial funding. This profile is typical of an HDU. That the NSFAS is a significant source of income for HDUs can be seen in this comparison. For the UWC it represents 4.1% of income as opposed to 1.6% and 1.2% at Wits and UP respectively. The proportion of income from the NSFAS also gives some indication of the proportion of students drawn from lower-income sectors of the population at the three institutions.

**Table 3: Degrees/diplomas/certificates awarded by level at the three universities in 2003**

	UP	UWC	Wits
Doctoral	146	27	73
Masters	1,214	233	567
Other	7,834	1,982	3,495
Total	9,194	2,242	4,135
Awards per FTE I/R staff	4.999	4.062	2.002

Source: Steyn & De Villiers, 2006

Despite their lower expenditure per student, both UP and UWC manage to graduate around four students per FTE academic staff member per year.

## 2.6 STAFF PROFILES

The race and gender profile of a university's staff gives a good idea of what students experience there. It suggests how often they will interact with people similar to themselves and in what contexts, and how likely it is there will be role models with whom they can identify. Although there has been a steady growth of black academic staff, the higher education sector in South Africa continues to be predominantly white. All universities in South Africa work towards equity in the racial, gender and disability composition of their staff. Institutions set annual equity targets and report annually on their progress towards those targets. The goal is to bring the profile of staff in line with the profile of the population over time.

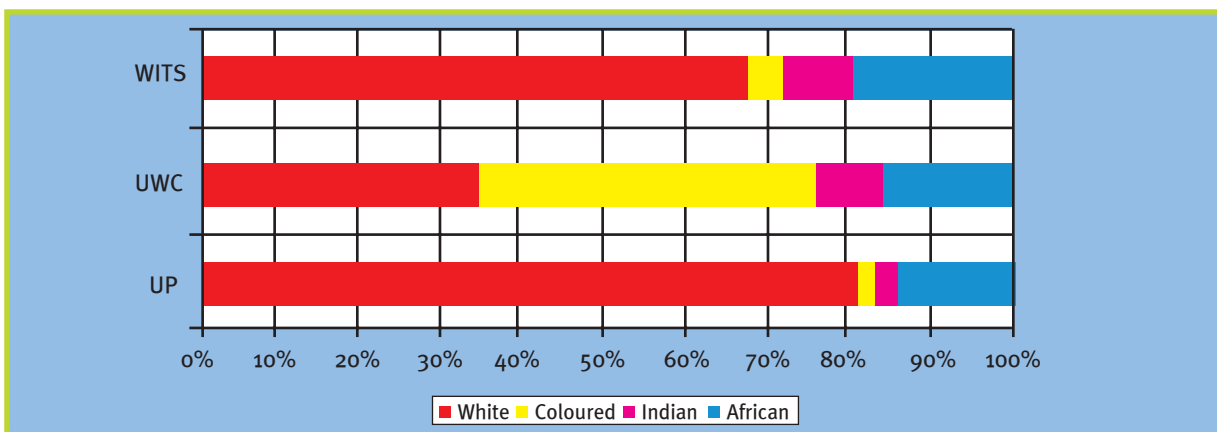
Staff at universities are categorised as either academic (teaching and research) or support (management, administrative and other support positions). In addition, staff may be full-time or part-time and employed on a permanent or contract basis. These classifications are defined differently by different institutions and for different reporting requirements. For consistency, the data used in this section are drawn from the 2004 HEMIS (Higher Education Management Information System) database. This, however, may not report the situation accurately, since the figures are for permanent staff members only, and all the universities, but particularly UWC, also employ staff on a contract basis.

Due to falling student numbers, UWC was forced to engage in a process of staff reduction in the late 1990s. Both the 2004 Institutional Operating Plan and the 2005 Employment Equity Progress Report show that

<sup>28</sup> See Section 1.3 above for details of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme.

the numbers of full-time academic staff (both permanent and temporary) fell from 2,242 in 1997 to 1,354 in 1999 following strict controls over new appointments. Between 2002 and 2005 there were further reductions in total staff numbers from 2,435 in 2002 to 1,815 by the end of 2005. This included significant reductions in permanent administrative and support staff from 702 in 2002 to 599 in 2004. These reductions saw an increase in fixed-term contract appointments (as opposed to permanent appointments). In 2004 contract staff totalled 1,146, of which 359 were academic and 787 administrative and support appointments. Contract staff therefore make up a very large proportion of the staff at UWC (56.7% of support staff and 43% of academic). This course is likely to continue, with more reliance on fixed-term contract and part-time staff, and teaching assistants.

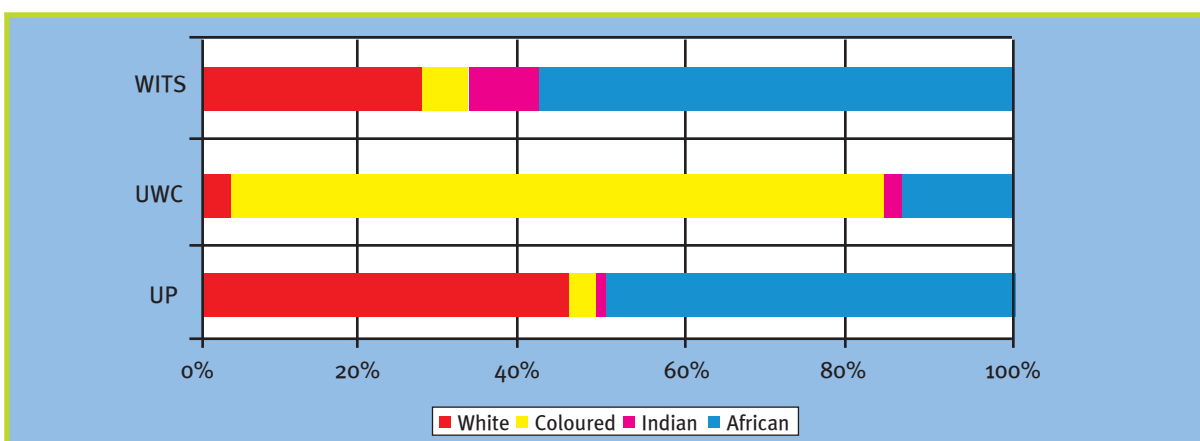
**Figure 7: Proportion of instruction/research staff by race (2006)**



Source: HEMIS 2006, headcount of permanent, professional staff

The dominance of white staff in the academic ranks is clear from the above figure. Only at UWC do whites make up less than 40% of the academic staff and at Wits and UP more than 65% of academic staff are white. Among non-academic staff the picture begins to look more balanced.

**Figure 8: Proportion of non-academic staff by race (2006)**

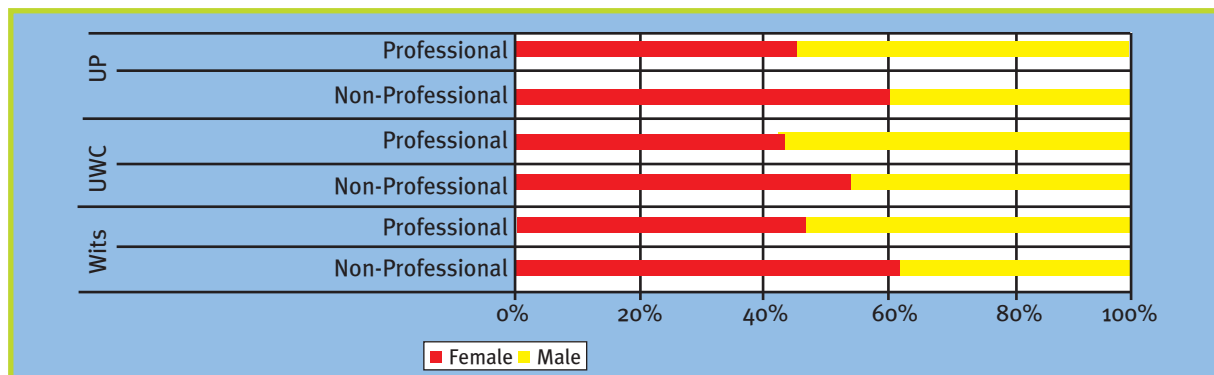


Source: HEMIS, 2006, headcount of permanent, professional staff

It must be noted that there are few people designated 'coloured' living in the Gauteng region (where Wits and UP are situated) and this is reflected in their significantly lower employment at these universities.

While all three universities employ close to equal numbers of men and women, men continue to dominate the ranks of the professional and academic staff while there are more women in the non-professional positions.

**Figure 9: Proportion of permanent staff by type and gender 2006**



Source: HEMIS 2006, *headcount of permanent, professional staff*

The academic staff at UP are almost all white. While UP's employment equity plan for June 2006 to June 2009 has as its target 23.6% black academic staff, there were only 14.1% by the end of 2007. The genders are fairly equally represented, with 45.7% women academic staff at the end of 2007. There are more black people among the support staff, 41.3% at the end of 2007. The target for black support staff is 50.6%. The support staff are predominantly women (60.5% in 2007) and the target is to decrease this.

At UWC, students interact with white staff in the classroom and with coloured staff in the administrative and support areas. In 2004, white staff made up 40% of the total permanent academic staff and occupied 61% of the positions at the rank of Associate Professor and above. Women made up 46% of the permanent academic staff. In the administrative and support staff sector 'coloureds' occupied 85% of the permanent positions, with women comprising approximately 60%.<sup>29</sup> Along with other higher education institutions, UWC has 'not made significant strides to change the profile of under-represented groups'.<sup>30</sup> Human resources management and employment equity planning are key areas for attention in the Strategic Plan adopted in 2000 and a number of interventions to ensure greater diversity in the workforce were proposed in the first Employment Equity Plan (2001-2005).

At Wits, it is clear that the academic staff are predominantly white, but there has been some progress in changing this. A five-year progress report indicates that in 2000 only 15% of the permanent academic staff were black, and in 2005 this has risen to 25%. Over the same period, the number of women employed as permanent academic staff rose from 35% to 45%. However, a closer look at the staff profile by faculty shows that there is greater inequality in individual faculties. According to the Employment Equity Progress Report, the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment has met its targets for black<sup>31</sup> and comes close to meeting its target for African staff<sup>32</sup>, but falls short of meeting its target for female staff. In fact the percentage of female staff dropped from 2004 to 2005.<sup>33</sup> In the Faculty of Humanities, the gender

<sup>29</sup> UWC Institutional Operating Plan 2004

<sup>30</sup> UWC Institutional Operating Plan 2004, p. 32

<sup>31</sup> Including coloured and Indian

<sup>32</sup> Excluding coloured and Indian

<sup>33</sup> This Faculty has a continuous staff complement of 114 full-time and 19 part-time academic staff, over 100 support services staff and a substantial number of sessional and honorary staff drawn from industry. The Faculty has the highest number of endowed professorships or chairs in the University.

balance is in line with targets, but the Faculty continues to be dominated by white staff. The Faculty of Science fares the least well. While they are close to achieving the targets for gender equity, they are eight to nine percentage points off the targets for racial equity, with whites being in the majority.

**Table 4: Staff profile by faculty for Wits<sup>34</sup>**

% of staff	EBE		Humanities		Science	
	Actual 05	Target 06	Actual 05	Target 06	Actual 05	Target 06
Female	20.5	23.0	60.0	60.3	35.2	35.7
Male	79.5	77.0	40.0	39.7	64.8	64.3
White	74.6	74.6	72.9	67.8	81.2	70.6
Black	25.4	25.4	27.1	32.2	18.8	29.4
African	19.7	20.5	17.4	22.8	9.9	17.9

Clearly the staff profiles of the universities reflect neither the demographics of the country at large nor those of the student bodies. The preponderance of white academic staff is particularly noticeable at the formerly white universities of Pretoria and the Witwatersrand and at UP support staff are also predominantly white. Despite ongoing plans to change this, all three institutions continue to fall behind their targets and students continue to learn in a higher education environment dominated by white staff. The inability of the higher education sector to attract, develop and retain black staff is likely to remain a concern in the future and to continue to affect the experience of students in the academic space.

### 3. HOW THE INSTITUTIONS ADDRESS ACCESS AND THROUGHPUT

Having set the scene at a national level and described the three universities that participated in the study, here we examine in more detail how the three institutions have responded to the issues of access, retention and throughput. We examine their positions as evidenced in mission and policy statements and in how they have chosen to interpret, investigate and address the issues. We begin by looking at the question of access and comparing the admissions policies and practices that have been put in place and the impact of these. We then go on to examine the question of throughput for each of the three universities. As will be seen, each university uses its own terminology and ways of calculating throughput and these differences reveal the different concerns that are uppermost, the different assumptions that are made and the different approaches that are taken in addressing the issue of throughput at the three institutions. We also examine the research the three universities have conducted into the question of throughput and the explanations that have emerged and predominate at each institution.

#### 3.1 INCREASING ACCESS

The Higher Education Act (no. 101 of 1997) requires the Council of each university to establish and publish an admissions policy. This policy must provide 'appropriate measures for the redress of past inequalities and may not unfairly discriminate in any way'.<sup>35</sup> The universities have responded in different ways to this requirement.

UP attracts many of the best students exiting the school system (more than 30% of those who leave the school system with more than six distinctions).<sup>36</sup> In addition, rapid growth has meant that many

<sup>34</sup> Wits Employment Equity Progress Report 2006

<sup>35</sup> Higher Education Act (no. 101 of 1997)

<sup>36</sup> UP 2006 Performance Indicators, p. 27

programmes are operating at capacity and students are selected from a large number of applicants. So while the university acknowledges the need for diversity in the student body and to provide access to applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds, this is not easy to achieve. Entrance is based on academic merit, with 'M-scores' calculated from the school-leaving examination results. The admission policies to the Mamelodi campus are set at a somewhat lower level than at the main campus, provided that students entering with lower scores complete extended programmes. A number of foundation programmes are in operation to assist students who enter with weaker school backgrounds.<sup>37</sup>

In the late 1990s UWC decided to make wider use of SD rules to admit students under the age of 23 who showed academic potential and in 2000 it adopted a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) policy (Hendricks & Ralphs, 2003). These steps were motivated partly by the institution's commitment to extend access in order to help 'the historically marginalised participate fully in the life of the nation'<sup>38</sup> and partly by concerns about declining enrolment and retention rates. Up to 20% of students could be admitted without meeting the usual academic requirements.<sup>39</sup>

Subsequently, UWC experienced a rapid increase in student numbers (between 2000 and 2005), at a time when it faced reduced state subsidies and high student debt. The university had placed a moratorium on the hiring of staff and had frozen vacant posts. While external funding was secured to provide academic support for students and to set up a tracking system to monitor their progress, gaps remained. SD students have to complete a foundation year programme before being admitted into the mainstream programme. If they do not pass all their courses in the first year, they are not allowed to register again, so inadequate development and support mechanisms have serious consequences for these students.

Wits has committed itself to admissions practices that are fair and transparent; to at least maintain 'the current demographic profile of its students (68% of whom are black and 50% of whom are women) through the adoption and maintenance of an admissions policy that seeks to identify and admit students with potential to succeed at the University to appropriate qualifications' and to seek increasingly to reflect the economically active demographic profile of Gauteng.<sup>40</sup> It has also accepted the responsibility for creating an enabling environment that provides the best possible opportunity for success for all students admitted. Improvements have been made in the provision of university services and in the Division of Student Affairs, which provides services such as student accommodation, sports, student wellness, counselling and career development, student governance, and support for students living with disabilities.

The Admissions Policy at Wits aims (i) to address equality and access (e.g. the under-representation of black and women students in certain disciplines) - not only by engaging with entrance requirements and setting explicit targets and monitored processes but also by systematically supporting students who are admitted to help them succeed; (ii) to establish the use of RPL for mature learners; and (iii) to appropriately maintain academic standards; and (iv) to 'Africanise' the institution. On Africanisation, it quotes Makobela, who views this as a way of changing 'the student, academic, and administrator bodies', 'the syllabus so that teaching and learning are not dominated by ... northern hemisphere cultures', 'the curriculum and the whole way in which teaching and learning are done', and the 'criteria that determine research excellence' (Mabokela, 1998).

<sup>37</sup> UP 2006 Performance Indicators, pp. 19-20

<sup>38</sup> UWC Mission Statement, 2000

<sup>39</sup> UWC Institutional Operating Plan, 2004, p. 115

<sup>40</sup> FJC/Admissions Policy, 25 October 2003, S2003/1713a

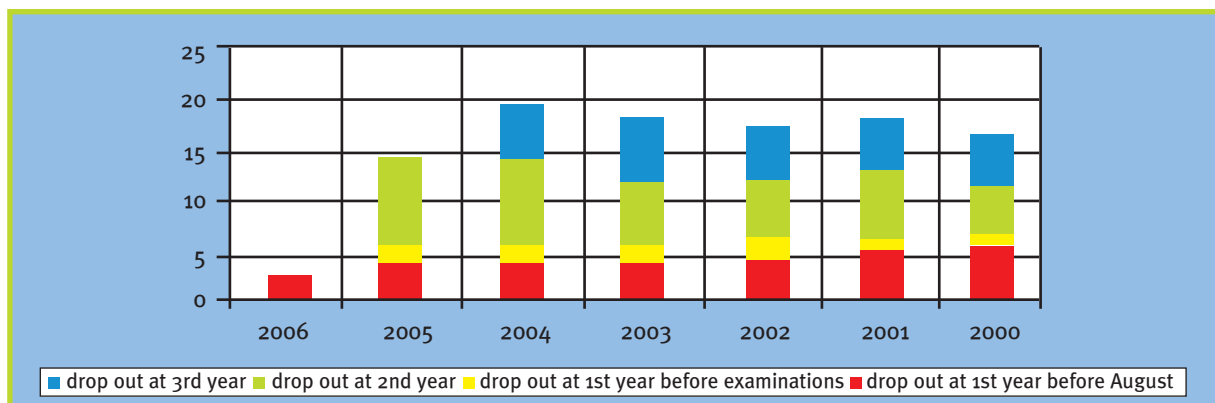
At this stage the policies of the three universities are showing different results. At Pretoria, while progress towards increased access is slow, dropout rates are decreasing and graduation rates are increasing. At UWC a number of students are being admitted through non-traditional paths, but with poor graduation rates. At Wits the new admission policy appears not to have been significantly implemented and some foundation programmes have been closed down.

### 3.2 THROUGHPUT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The UP focuses on student dropout rates and includes in the term 'dropout' all students who do not complete their qualifications. (Other institutions use the term 'dropout' to mean students who choose not to return rather than those who are excluded on academic or financial grounds and not given the choice to re-enrol.) The focus on dropout (or retention) rates is justified by reference to the new funding framework which rewards institutions when students graduate rather than as they progress. This means that a key concern is to keep students in the programmes and get them to graduate.

UP tracks dropout rates by cohort and distinguishes between programmes of different duration so as to assess the process more accurately. Dropout rates have been examined in cohort studies for the cohorts beginning in 1996 (for four-year programmes) and 1997 (for three-year programmes). As is the case at most universities in South Africa, UP has experienced high dropout rates. For example, of the cohort that started in 2000, 6.8% had left by the end of the year. This had increased to 11.8% by the second year and 17.3% by the third.

**Figure 10: UP academic dropout rates for contact students<sup>41</sup>**



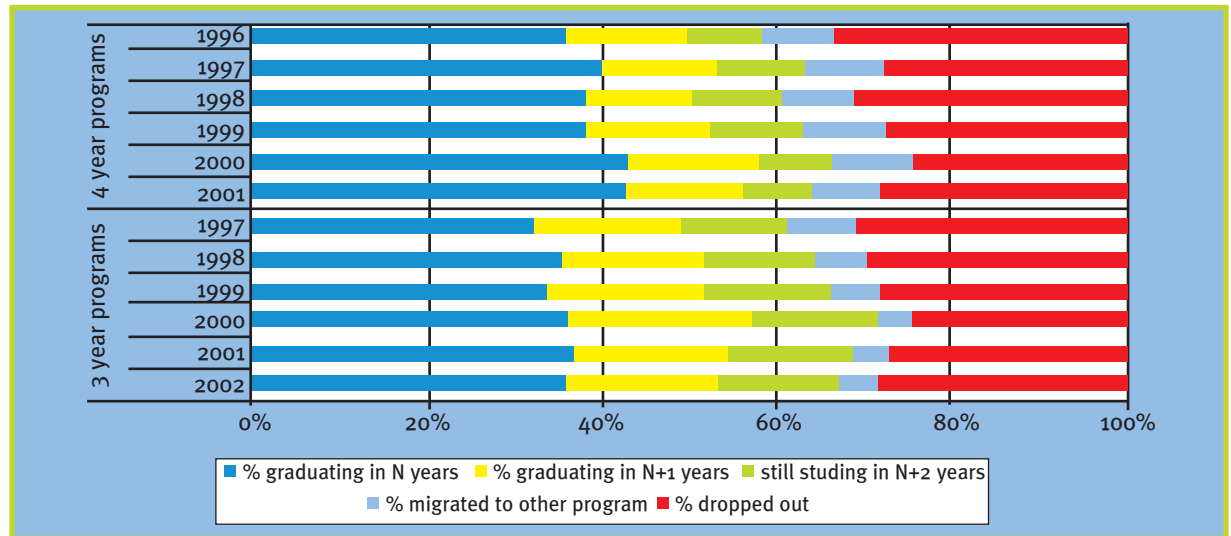
Up to 20% of undergraduate students in the contact programmes at UP drop out. The institution has taken a number of steps to address this high dropout rate, including flexible learning, tutors, enrichment courses, extended programmes, summer/winter schools and foundation courses. There are signs that these are having an impact - for example the percentage dropout at the end of the first year fell from 6.8% in 2000 to 5.8% in 2005 and there have been improvements in the second and third years. However, these rates are expected to worsen in future with the addition of students on the Mamelodi campus where there is a significant dropout problem.

<sup>41</sup> UP 2006 Performance Indicators, p.31



The percentage of students graduating within the minimum time allowed as well as within the following year are shown in the chart below.

**Figure 11: UP graduation rates for undergraduate contact programmes**



Source: UP 2006 performance indicators, p. 32

Less than 40% of students complete within the minimum time allowed for the three- and four-year undergraduate programmes, although this has been improving and about 50% of students graduate after an additional year. Looking at the numbers of students remaining in the programmes, it can be seen that it is theoretically possible for the final graduation rates to exceed 60%.

The breakdown of student graduation rates by the faculties studied was not available for UP.

### 3.3 THROUGHPUT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE

At UWC, 'throughput' has been the subject of an extensive body of qualitative research, including studies of undergraduate students across faculties, departments and years of study (Cornell & Witz, 1994; Leibowitz & Witz, 1995; Lalu & Cornell, 1996; Radcliffe, 1997; Lever, 1999; Crossman & Devisch, 1999; Barnes, 2004; Ludwig, 2004) and studies of academic development and planning (Tucker, 1988; Switzer, 1996; Leibowitz, 1996; Chaka, 1997; Flockman, 1997; Baijnath, 1997; Anderson, 2002). These studies point to a variety of factors that affect students' success rates, from administrative inefficiencies and academic factors to economic, health, social and personal factors. Many studies support 'integrated approaches' (Ludwig, in Barnes, 2004) that consider issues of redistribution (such as patterns of access, poverty alleviation, upgrading infrastructure, and a range of financial aid options) and issues of recognition (such as patterns of success, increased academic support, creating a culture of respect and critical scholarly engagement, and alternative pedagogies).

**Table 5: UWC number of graduates by qualification type**

Year	Students entering first year undergrad	Diplomas & certificates awarded	Bachelor's degrees awarded	Total undergraduate awards
2000	1,980	174	1,167	1,341
2001	2,279	187	1,009	1,196
2002	2,963	326	955	1,281
2003	3,019	513	1,003	1,516
2004	2,769	272	1,176	1,448
2005	2,694	393	1,482	1,875

Sources: Morta, 2006; UWC Enrolment Planning Tables

Table 5 shows the number of graduates from the undergraduate programmes at UWC. It also shows the number of first-time entering undergraduates for each year from 2000 to 2005. Data were not available of the number of students who changed to other degrees or faculties or institutions, the number of student exclusions (academic and financial), students who dropped out, and students who dropped out and later returned to complete their degrees.

Success rates are also of great concern to the university. The years 2001 to 2004 saw an increase in the number of students dropping out of the university, with an average attrition rate in undergraduate programmes of 18.5%, the highest rate being 22.7% in 2003/2004.<sup>42</sup> The university has as yet to undertake a comprehensive study into the reasons for this, although preliminary findings gleaned from various quarters<sup>43</sup> indicate that a combination of factors contribute to both retention and success rates. These include economic, social and academic factors (Barnes, 2004).

The two faculties singled out for attention by the Institutional Operating Plan were the Humanities and Economic and Management Sciences. The lack of success is largely attributed to the quality of intake and it noted that the Faculty of Arts was more seriously affected than others. A total of 1,439 students were academically excluded for the year 2006, of which 246 were from the Arts Faculty. Of the 136 who applied for readmission, 79 were readmitted (Barnes, 2004). The Arts Faculty houses a greater proportion of students admitted via the SD or RPL routes.

<sup>42</sup> UWC Institutional Operating Plan, 2004, p. 117

<sup>43</sup> Student Financial Management, the SRC, Promotions Committees, etc.

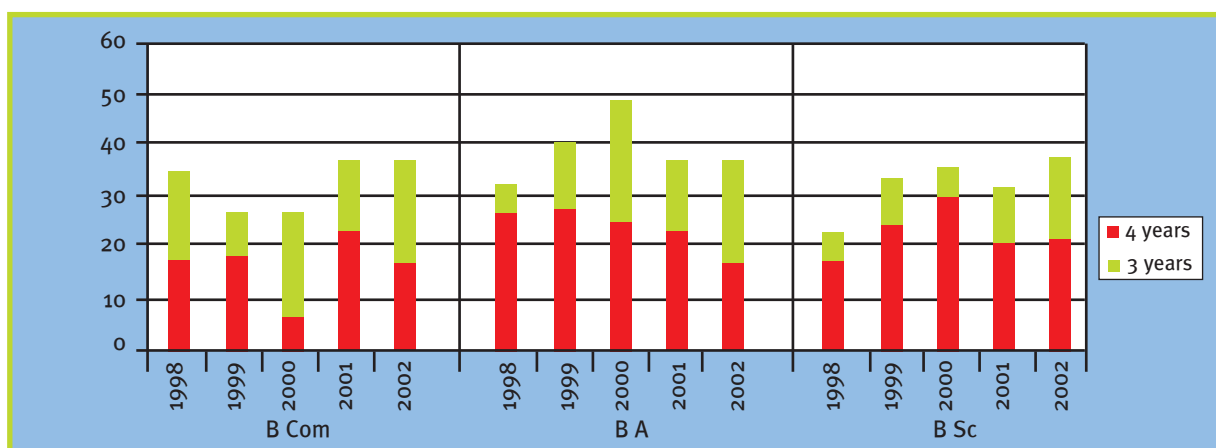
**Table 6: UWC completion rates 2005 by faculty and degree types**

		Enrolled	Completed	Promoted	Withdraw	Completion rate %	DoE target rate %
EMS	Faculty overall	3,774	526	2,024	365	13.9	
	General bachelor	2,609	295	1,609	260	11.3	25
	Professional bachelor	426	30	282	61	7.0	20
	UG diploma/certificate	36	10	1	0	27.8	60
Arts	Faculty overall	2,752	529	1,182	169	19.2	
	General bachelor	1,904	346	879	118	18.2	25
	Professional bachelor	417	17	245	49	4.1	20
	UG diploma/certificate	5	4	0	0	80.0	60
Science	Faculty overall	1,997	403	772	64	20.2	
	General bachelor	1,103	162	549	58	14.7	25
	Professional bachelor	410	81	217	6	19.8	20

Sources: Morta, 2006; UWC Enrolment Planning Tables

Table 6 shows the institutional completion rate, calculated by comparing students completing to the enrolled headcount and broken down for the Faculties of Science, Arts and Economic and Management Sciences. It can be seen from this table that all three faculties still have some way to go to reach the targets set by the DoE, although there are some areas of success. The professional bachelor's programmes in the Science Faculty meet the target and the undergraduate diploma programmes in the Arts Faculty exceed the target.

**Figure 12: UWC students graduating in 3 and 4 years by faculty (percentage)**



Sources: Morta, 2006; UWC Enrolment Planning Tables

Looking at the time to completion, it can be seen that few students complete in the minimum period of three years and many will require more than four years to graduate.

A number of measures have been introduced to improve the success rates both in the faculty and the university as a whole, for example the introduction of a tracking system to identify students who are 'at risk'.

An online Marks Administration System (MAS) was introduced this year with the specific aim of timeously identifying those students who are at risk of failing. This information will be used to monitor students' progress and to provide academic support interventions if required.

### 3.4 THROUGHPUT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

At Wits, the Working Group on Retention and Throughput<sup>44</sup> investigated student throughput figures for students enrolling from 1992 to 1998.<sup>45</sup> They found that, on average, less than 50% of students graduate and less than 45% graduate in the minimum time. Many degrees exclude more than 20% of students for academic or financial reasons. In addition, there are distinct demographic trends:

In almost every faculty, in almost every qualification the race comparisons are statistically significant - white students are doing statistically better than black students for all the variables - average years to graduate, percentage who graduate (to date and in N, N+1 and N+2 years) and percentage who are excluded. For the gender comparisons women are doing better than men for most qualifications for most of the variables. (*Report of the Working Group on Retention and Throughput, Wits 2003a:13*)

Of the 16,206 undergraduates registered at Wits in 2005, 18% qualified, 52% proceeded to the next year of study, 21% returned to the same year of study and 7% were excluded for not meeting minimum requirements.<sup>46</sup> Of particular concern is that white students are significantly more likely to graduate and to graduate in a shorter time than black students and women fare better than men.

As we have seen, undergraduate degrees are of varying duration, so Wits has chosen to use 'N' as the minimum duration of the degree. In addition, students are enrolled for either a 'normal' programme taking the degree over the specified number of years, or an 'extended' programme where they complete an additional year of study. Thus students on the extended programme complete a three-year degree in four years and a four-year degree in five years.

In trying to set benchmarks, the Working Group found they were hampered by the unwillingness of other institutions to share detailed throughput figures. They also commented on the lack of clarity around national benchmarks and the need to engage in debate about the setting of these benchmarks. Internally, Wits has agreed to the targets shown in Table 7.

<sup>44</sup> Wits 2003

<sup>45</sup> Wits uses the following definitions in measuring throughput and retention:

Success rate: The number of courses passed as a percentage of courses registered in a given year. (The DoE uses the same definition.)

Completion rate: The average years to graduation. (This differs by degree type.)

Transfer: Students who will graduate from a degree other than the one for which they originally registered.

Dropout: Students who leave the university in good financial and academic standing.

Exclusion: Students not permitted to reregister - either because they have not met minimum academic requirements or because they owe the University money.

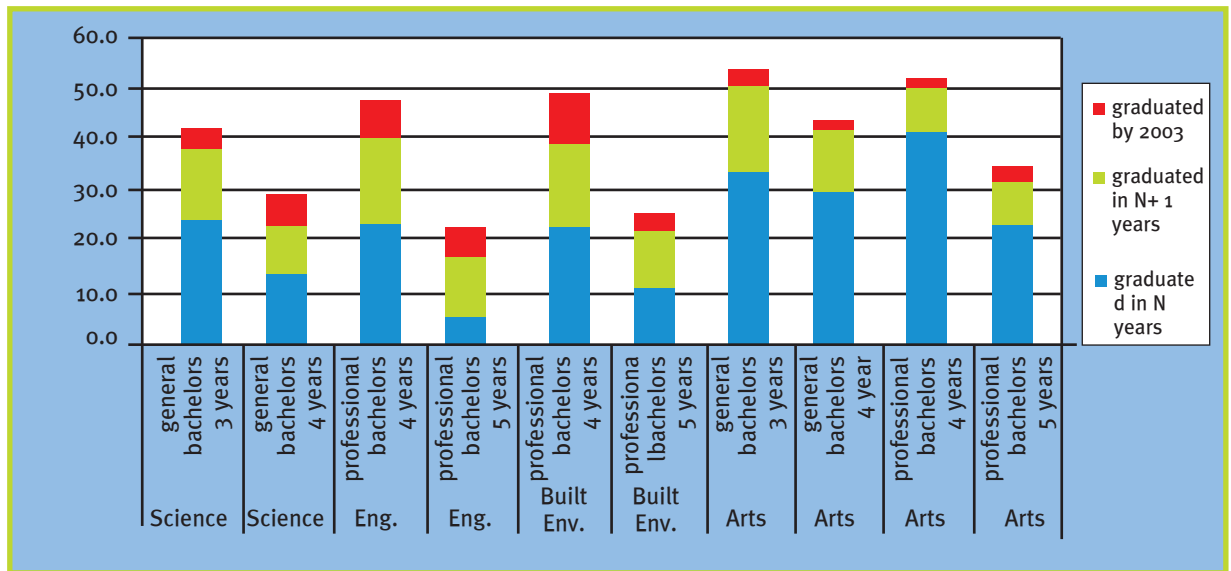
<sup>46</sup> Wits Annual Report 2005, p. 32

**Table 7: Wits throughput targets**

For students studying the normal curriculum	30% should graduate after N years
	50% should graduate after N+1 years
	70% should graduate after N+2 years
For students studying the extended curriculum	40% should graduate after N+1 years
	60% should graduate after N+2 years
	70% should graduate after N+3 years

Figures 13 to 15 summarise the graduation rates and trends across the three faculties studied. These figures are based on a cohort study of students registering for the first time in the years 1992 to 1998. The cohorts were tracked for two years after the expected minimum duration (N+2). The graduation rates are given for key types of undergraduate degree and are split according to whether students complete the normal course or the extended programme.

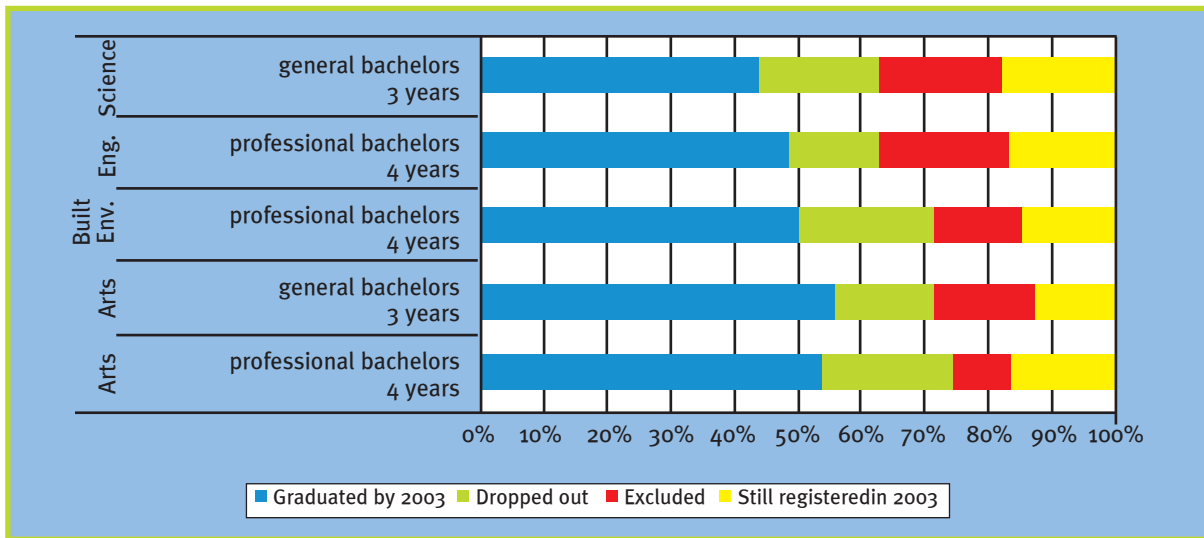
**Figure 13: Wits cohort study percentage of students graduating in recommended times**



Across all the degree programmes, the number of students graduating lies between 45% and 55%. Of course there will have been students in the cohort study who were still registered at the end of the study, so this figure does not show the final graduation rate. From this figure it is clear that one additional year makes a significant difference to the graduation rates and that the extended programmes have significantly lower graduation rates. It would appear that the extended curriculum programmes are not succeeding despite the extra attention that such students receive.

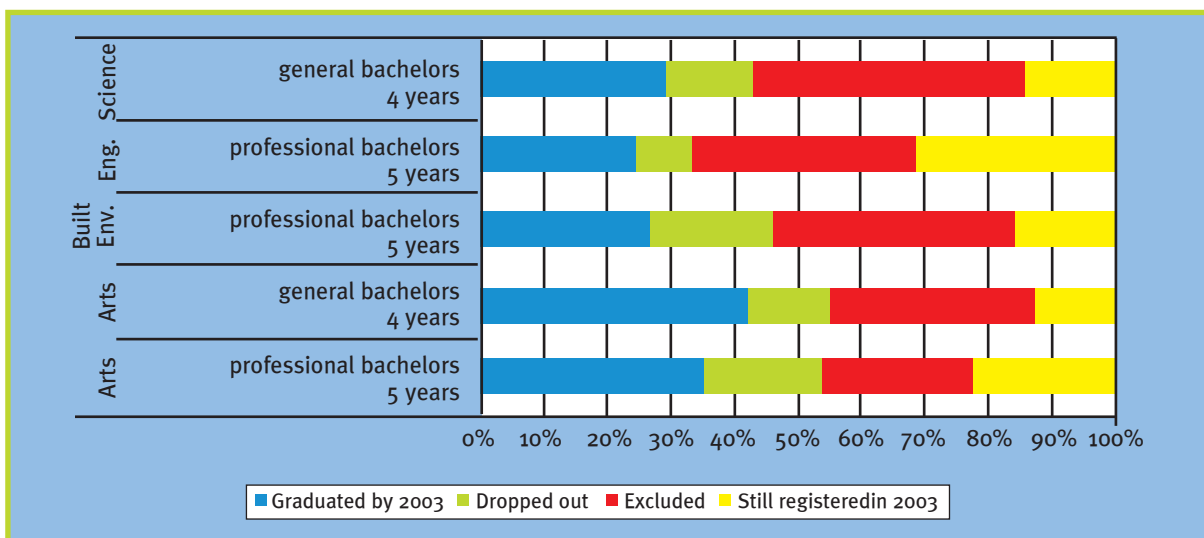
Figures 14 and 15 give some idea of the number of students dropping out, excluded and still in the programme.

**Figure 14: Wits cohort study graduation rates for standard degree programmes**



For those students on the extended degree programmes there are significantly lower graduation rates and higher exclusion rates. Students will have been excluded for academic or financial reasons and it is not clear here which predominates

**Figure 15: Wits cohort study graduation rates for extended degree programmes**



As part of the cohort study, trends were analysed for statistical significance by race and gender. In the Faculty of Humanities, men take longer to graduate than women in the general programme and black students take longer to graduate than white in both the general and professional programmes. The number of students dropping out and being excluded both showed a significant increase over the period (1992 to 1998). In the professional programme, significantly more women graduate than men and more men and black students are excluded. In the extended professional programme the time to graduate showed a significant decrease for women.

In the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment, for engineering degrees, black students take longer to graduate than white students and more men and more white students graduate. There was a

significant decrease in the number of women graduating over the period studied. There is no difference in graduation rates or time by race or gender in the Built Environment degrees. More black than white students drop out and more men and black students are excluded. Exclusions in the extended programme declined over the period studied. In the Science Faculty, men take longer to graduate than women in the three-year programme and black students taking longer to graduate than white in both the three-year and the extended programme. The overall graduation rate was decreasing. More black students drop out and more men and black students are excluded from the Science degrees.

In general, at Wits, black students continue to take longer than white students to complete. However, in the case of the four-year professional bachelor's degrees in the Built Environment, the average number of years to graduate showed no significant difference by race. While the difference in performance between racial groups is usually attributed to black students having, on average, poorer schooling, this is not always the case. Unfortunately the statistics available do not profile students by the type of school they attended, so that this cannot be confirmed.

The Working Group on Retention and Throughput requested comment from all faculties on their throughput rates<sup>47</sup> and found that the responses depended largely on their specific diagnosis of the nature of the problem. Humanities cited the use of the general BA as a 'foundation year' by students seeking access to other courses, the 'underpreparedness' of students and poor curriculum counselling or lack of enforcement of recommendations. Engineering and the Built Environment suggested that poor schooling made it difficult for students to 'keep up with the mathematics and science requirements', while heavy workloads and financial problems led to students dropping out. The Science Faculty pointed to poor preparation in school mathematics and students having opted for the BSc after having been refused entry to Health Sciences or Engineering and the Built Environment. However, there is general acknowledgement that throughput has become a major challenge facing Wits. All the faculties are involved in identifying and investigating 'bottleneck' courses that contribute to throughput problems.

From these<sup>48</sup> and other<sup>49</sup> investigations, a number of factors have been identified that contribute to the low graduation rates. These are factors relating to the students, factors relating to the staff and other systemic factors.

**Student-related factors:** These include the notion of 'underpreparedness' or students not being academically 'strong enough'; issues of students' prior learning and language skills; students' approach to learning, and their attitude and expectations; a diminished learning culture or students taking less responsibility for their learning; and issues of the students' life and other pressures such as personal, social, financial or family matters.

**Staff-related factors:** These include outdated or simply different approaches to pedagogy; the attitudes of academic staff; the skills of academic staff in teaching and assessment practices (also referred to as staff 'underpreparedness');<sup>50</sup> pressures on the time and energy of academic staff, and staff being demotivated by changes in the university.

<sup>47</sup> See comments from p. 18 onwards of S2003/1797.

<sup>48</sup> Wits Annual Report 2005

<sup>49</sup> Report to Senate of the working group on retention and throughput, S2003/1797; Senate teaching and learning *imbizo*, Wits, 2004

<sup>50</sup> The notion of staff underpreparedness was introduced by Inglis, 2005.

**Systemic factors:** These include the inherent difficulty of some course content; increasing student numbers; resource constraints; too little support for students making the transition from school; a lack of coordination and systematic assessment of various 'solutions' that have been attempted, and a lack of recognition for teaching and academic development work that discourages academic staff from putting energy into their teaching duties.

The report of the Working Group on Retention and Throughput argues that:

Managing underpreparedness takes time and resources. Some would argue that this is the function of the school system ... but ... the tertiary sector simply has no other immediate choice than to take on the work with enthusiasm and commitment if equity and redress are priorities. Universities can and should assist underprepared students but cannot be expected to independently redress many years of inadequate education at school. (Wits 2003a: 42)

It goes on to point out that the new funding formula that penalises universities where students take longer to complete leaves the sector 'in a double bind'. It includes a comprehensive list of existing strategies that Wits uses to address the throughput problem, including central systemic interventions, staff development and student development strategies. It suggests that retention strategies in universities can be grouped into five categories:<sup>51</sup>

- **Sorting:** Best fit recruiting; entry assessment and placement; academic advising; early warning alerts
- **Supporting:** Child care; financial aid; wellness; security; personal counselling; housing; work study
- **Connecting:** Student activities; peer programmes for learning and mentoring; orientation; faculty/student events; faculty advisors
- **Transforming students:** Learning skills; tutoring; remedial education; skill-based curricula; formative assessments; incentives for completion
- **Transforming the institution:** building community/institutional culture; policy changes; curriculum changes; faculty development; incentives for schools to improve graduation rates and sanctions if they fail.

An important response from Wits has been to put in place a comprehensive set of policies and structures to address the needs of marginalised<sup>52</sup> communities on campus. These include Wits 2010, the new admissions policy, the employment equity plan, the language policy, the policy on sexual and racial discrimination, the policy on disability and HIV/AIDS,<sup>53</sup> and a wide range of structures and programmes which includes the throughput committee and the transformation task team. The strategic principles outlined in Wits 2010 that are significant for this project include: (i) a commitment to developing high-level and scarce skills, with a particular emphasis on increasing the number of black and women graduates in under-represented areas; (ii) giving priority to the quality of the teaching and learning experience with a view to improving success and retention rates; and (iii) a commitment to facilitating the intellectual achievement of both students and staff. Underpinning the Wits strategy is a commitment to a 'representative staff and student demography', to being 'innovative in curriculum development and pedagogy' and to 'increase the rate and proportion of graduations relative to registrations, decrease the performance gaps between groups ... and ensure that our administration and management are effective and efficient'.

<sup>51</sup> Wits S2003/1797, p. 41

<sup>52</sup> Report of the institutional culture survey, Wits 2002. Institutional surveys in 1986 and 1998

<sup>53</sup> Report of the institutional culture survey, Wits 2002



The responses discussed here, including conducting research and putting in place policies, demonstrate the idealism and commitment to a social justice agenda that is typical of Wits. Whether these actions have translated into a more inclusive environment and a better learning experience is partly the subject of this study.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This chapter has outlined some of the context of higher education in South Africa and the three institutions that participated in this study. We began by examining policy changes in South Africa in the past decade that sought to create a single, unified higher education sector that provided appropriate good quality education and increased access, particularly to those segments of the population that had not had access before. Changes in the policy landscape led to changes in the profile of the students, with increasing diversity across the sector and an increase in students ill-prepared by their schooling and their life experience to cope with the demands of higher education. There was also some growth in student enrolments and this was uneven across institutions. There have been significant increases in the workloads of those in the higher education sector and shifts away from collegiality that have made higher education a less attractive sector in which to work. The financial situation of universities has come under pressure with decreasing state funding and high levels of student debt.

We then went on to examine how these challenges have played out more specifically at UP, UWC and Wits. We sketched the history of each institution and discussed the faculty structure and range of programmes offered. Each institution faces different shifts in its student profiles. Pretoria has had to deal with significant increases in numbers, a shift to using English in the teaching programme and a move from an all-white campus to one with an increasing number of black students. UWC has faced increases in the number of weaker students admitted via alternative routes, increasing diversity on the campus, falling student numbers and significant poverty with attendant disruptions in learning. At Wits the increasing diversity has included increasing numbers of students from outside the middle class and students with poor schooling. Falling student numbers, followed by substantial increases after 2001, have also been a concern. We examined throughput at the three institutions using the graduation rate per student to show an overall decline. Using this fairly crude measure, it can be seen that Pretoria performs better, with higher throughput rates than Wits and UWC. To position the three universities, we compared their financial resources and considered the profile of their staff.

Finally, we examined in more detail the responses of the three institutions to the questions of access, throughput and retention. We examined changes in the admissions policies at UWC and Wits. We also looked at how each institution defines and measures throughput in the faculties that were being studied and how each has responded to the challenge of improving throughput rates in the past. From this discussion, it is clear that the questions of increasing access and measuring throughput and retention are not simple to define or to address. A complex interplay of factors and decisions combine to create unique circumstances at each university. The chapters that follow describe how the study was carried out at each institution and the detailed findings at each.

## CHAPTER TWO:

# EXPLAINING STUDENT ACCESS AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION: A THEORETICAL REVIEW

This chapter analyses the theoretical complexities involved in student access and success in the context of the restructuring and transformation under way in higher education. It is a foray into significant historical moments in the South African debates on the question of access to higher education and student performance. The purpose is to backtrack these moments, review key perspectives that dominated the debates and the underlying assumptions and discourses in order to reconceptualise our current theoretical and methodological approaches intelligently. To do this, the chapter goes beyond the theoretical perspectives adopted in the individual case studies presented in this book.

This chapter begins with a short periodisation of the literature and debates on student access and academic performance since the 1970s in order to contextualise the general conceptual direction and the theoretical issues explored in the rest of the chapter. It reviews important arguments about the institutional and pedagogic factors that affect successful achievement in higher education. It then examines the ways in which students' collective resources or social life at the university mediate their academic experiences. With reference to institutional mediation, the chapter unpacks the main intellectual discourses that underpin institutional pedagogic and social practices, the modes of academic practice they tend to privilege and their significance for academic achievement. The chapter shows how the discourses of access are informed by the broader elements of South Africa's political economy and its manifestations in higher education. It points to the need for an analytical framework that accounts for both the movement of students through the system and their social and academic experience of it.

### 1. THE ACCESS AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE DEBATE IN SOUTH AFRICA: A BRIEF PERIODISATION

The question of successful participation in formal institutions of learning is not new in research in South Africa. It has undergone various metamorphoses in its problematic, the concerns it has raised and how it has been approached as the context of higher education changed. One can identify three main generations in the research on access. The first includes studies of contestation or resistance to the apartheid barriers to formal access to higher education in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The second responds to the re-composition of the student body in terms of race, gender and other forms of identity throughout the late 1980s and the early 1990s, increasing the numbers of so-called 'non-traditional' students or students from historically disadvantaged groups. The third is bound up with the massive expansion of the student population throughout the late 1990s into the present millennium.

#### 1.1 FIRST GENERATION, 1970s TO MID-1980s: THE DOWNFALL OF APARTHEID AS A PRECONDITION FOR ACCESS

Most studies in this period assumed the form of liberal or radical critique of the higher education system and the apartheid barriers to access as articulated in the demands of student, staff and civic organisations (e.g. The Open Universities in South Africa, 1957; Kallaway, 1984; Nkomo, 1984; Molobi, 1987; Solomons, 1989; Nkomo, 1990; Webster, 1987). Liberal educationists, amongst whom might be counted the reformist wing of the Botha government, which adopted much of the 1960s liberal discourse in its De Lange Report,

indicated that lack of educational reform was having a damaging effect on economic growth; to resolve South Africa's problems would require paying greater attention to the issue of access to education as part of 'manpower planning' (De Lange, 1981). Radical and neo-Marxist critique was articulated locally in the journals *Perspectives in Education* and *Africa Perspective*, followed by *Transformation and Social Dynamics* from the early 1980s. Its theoretical foundations found expression in the 1984 Kallaway collection, *Apartheid and Education*, which brought the political economy perspective to the domain of education analysis.

The radical discourse asserted that higher education could not be fully achieved through liberal reform. It necessitated fundamental social and economic changes in the South African society (for a comprehensive review see Cross, 1986; Cross 1991; Cross & Bemath, 1991; NECC, 1986; NECC 1986a and Cross 1993). The bulk of the literature on higher education focused on youth and student movements, particularly youth culture, politics and resistance to apartheid education (Kane-Berman, 1979; Brooks & Brickhill, 1980; Kane-Berman, 1978; Molteno, 1979; Molteno, 1983; Bundy, 1986; Bundy, 1987; Gwala, 1988). Nonetheless, the question of access remained largely a matter of admission to the university or formal access. Debates among students raised a range of issues from the ethnic organisation of universities, the oppressive physical environment and student non-participation in university governance structures to curriculum transformation and the meanings, definition and functions of a university education. Overall, one can distinguish various broad strands in the literature on access in this period: scholarly published literature, policy related studies and student debates about the meanings of access within the student movement. With the relative exception of studies focused on student debates about access (Khoapa, 1973; Ndebele & Moodley, 1975), the general emphasis remained on physical access to the university space (or formal admission).

## **1.2 SECOND GENERATION, LATE 1980s TO THE END OF THE 1990s: DEALING WITH 'EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE'**

Student enrolment during this period was characterised not by a massive expansion of the student body but by its re-composition. The new dispensation in 1994 demanded a serious overhaul, restructuring and transformation of higher education in order to redress the injustices of the past. The first obvious way transformation was to be demonstrated was in formal access to higher education for historically disadvantaged students. Indeed, one could say that this goal was achieved with some success. While the student population only increased from 482,000 in 1993 to 510,000 in 2002, the number of black (African) students increased from 191,000 to 404,000 in the same period, expanding the pool of the so-called 'non-traditional' or 'underprepared' students (see Chapter One for more details). This led to greater heterogeneity in the student population, with students displaying a greater diversity of skills, knowledge and resources (Peat et al., 2000). In response, a new generation of studies emerged that placed the idea of 'educational disadvantage' on the agenda (Badat et al., 1994; Craig, 1989), and Morrow (1993) coined the idea of epistemological access, which he believed was underestimated in the sea of research on formal access.

In his article *Entitlement and Achievement in Education*, Morrow elaborates on this idea. He argues that 'mere formal (physical) access to institutions which distribute knowledge is different from, and not sufficient condition for, epistemological access', which is about learning the standards of practice or 'learning how to become a participant in academic practice' (1994: 40), a process that, though mediated by the instructor, depends largely on the person to whom educational achievement can be ascribed, i.e. the student. Once students have accepted their part of the process, the challenge is to ensure that the campus environment assists them in achieving epistemological access. In contrast to Morrow who attributes to students the major

responsibility for accessing academic practice, Jansen (2001: 3-4) sees institutions as central in facilitating epistemological access. He argues that the politics of knowledge is critical in this process: 'how it is organised, its value basis, its politics, and its power' (see also Ensor, 1998). This period also saw a proliferation of studies on academic development and support devising various strategies to meet the needs of the so-called 'non-traditional students' (Stanton, 1987; Moll & Slonimsky, 1989; Hartman, 1989; Hunter, 1989; Mammen & Imenda, 1994; Mitchell et al., 1994; Imenda, 1995; Van Rooyen, 2001; Crous, 2004).

Lastly, crosscutting these developments were efforts to revisit earlier performance discourses and academic support strategies. For example, King (1993: 200) dismissed academic development programmes in universities as legitimating entitlement and claimed that such programmes demonstrate the thinking that 'it is the lecturer, the curriculum and the university that need to change, not the student'. Elaborating on the difficulties involved in epistemological access for this category of students, Slonimsky (1994) argued that as a consequence of specific learning histories, which are very different from the epistemological culture of learning and teaching in schools, some learners experience educational alienation. In an attempt to explain the specialisation of an epistemological culture at university level, Craig (1996) examined the idea of 'academic form', the ways it specialises knowledge and the implications of various permutations of form and content relations for academic learning and argued that students who have met the formal requirements for access to university study, but are products of authoritarian schooling, may have a far steeper learning curve than their fellow students. More recently, following Bernstein's ideas of knowledge structures (1990, 2000), Muller (2006) examined the importance of sequence and progression in curriculum design, and the implications this has for performance and research productivity. To examine the curriculum responsiveness of underprepared students, Slonimsky and Shalem (2004) continued to examine 'educational disadvantage' by foregrounding three strands of academic practice (distantiation, articulation and research), for which students need a careful and structured socialisation.

### 1.3 THIRD GENERATION, INTO THE 2000s: THE ADVENT OF 'RETENTION AND THROUGHPUT' DEBATES

Since the late 1990s there has been a considerable increase in student enrolment. The proportion of black students rose to 40% of the total student body in 1999, to 61% in 2004 and to 72 % in 2005 (Pandor, 2005). Yet, in sharp contrast to increase in enrolment, there has been decrease in throughput. In 2005 the dropout rate stood at 50% of the total number of students enrolled nationally. According to an HSRC study (2008), of the 120,000 first-year students in higher education institutions in 2000, 36,000 (30%) dropped out in their first year of study, and a further 24,000 in their second year. Of these 120,000, only 26,500 (22%) graduated. In racial terms, white students seem to do better, with a throughput rate of 84% compared with 70% for African students (DoE, 2004). A stronger focus on issues of accountability and (cost effectiveness) in government policy cause a new shift in the debate from 'educational disadvantage' to the question of throughput and retention'. Depending on the underlying approach, several trends can be identified here.

The first trend includes studies attempting to measure student success or failure on the basis of input and output indicators (throughput rates, graduation rates, dropout rates, cohort analysis, etc.) and assess the 'efficiency of the system' using key variables with some bearing on academic performance, such as funding, programme profile and outputs (see Dobson & Sharma, 1995; Dobson, 1999). The National Plan (2001: Section 2.1.3) set the scene by viewing issues of student performance in South African higher education institutions as systemic inefficiencies, which it describes in terms of low graduation rates, i.e. a mismatch between the total number of graduates and the total number of enrolments in any one year; high failure and dropout rates, with clear

differences across fields and levels of study and across institutions; and a systemic 'wastage' of financial and human resources. Following from this, the National Plan (Section 2.3.1) establishes the following short-term (low) national benchmarks for graduation rates: between 20% and 25% for undergraduate degrees, 60% for honours degrees, 33% for master's degrees and 20% for doctorates. It suggests increasing throughput by improving the 'efficiency of the system' by linking institutional funding and programme profiles to graduate outputs, and by supporting academic development programmes, various curriculum changes (e.g. extended curricula in certain subjects and foundation courses) and loan-based financial aid interventions.

The most recent national survey with relevance to the question of throughput is the national cohort study (DoE, 2006) that tracked the academic progression of students who entered South African public higher education institutions in 2000. The national picture for the percentage of the 2000 cohort who graduated by 2004 ranged from 9% to 68%: of the 37,798 first-time entering 2000 cohort at the University of South Africa (UNISA) and Technikon South Africa (TSA) combined (distance education), 9% graduated by 2004; and of the 1,718 first-time entering 2000 cohort for Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education (PUCHE), 68% graduated by 2004. The corresponding percentages for the other public higher education institutions lie between these two extremes. At UWC, 36% of the 1,979 first-time entering cohort of 2000 had graduated by 2004 and 48% had dropped out. At Wits, 47% of the first-time entering cohort of 2000 had graduated by 2004 and 33% had dropped out, and at the UP 60% of this cohort had graduated by 2004 and 26% had dropped out. The dropout figures include students who changed to other institutions and students who 'stopped out' for various financial or personal reasons with the intention of returning to complete their degrees at some future date. These figures clearly indicate a problem with student success throughout the higher education system, and in that sense they are useful tools to roughly monitor academic performance. They are less helpful in explaining why this problem exists across South African universities.

The second trend in the literature involves studies attempting to locate the concept of epistemological access within the general normative paradigm of social justice underpinned by the values and principles of democracy, access, equality, equity and human rights (Cloete et al., 2002; Cross et al., 1999a; Moll, 2004) drawing on identity or culturalist perspectives. It is in this context that Morrow (1994; see also Gamede, 2005) recaptured the idea of epistemological access inspired by the human rights ideology and warned about the danger of promoting an entitlement culture if it makes students negligent about their learning responsibilities.

From 2001 it is possible to discern a renewed attention to the material and cultural contexts of higher education transformation. This is evident in journal articles, PhD dissertations, National Research Foundation (NRF) funded projects, research groups and institutionally supported research focusing on student and staff experiences of campus 'cultures', 'climates' and learning experiences. This attention is linked to the return to the question of how the nature of the higher education space shapes the quality of access, which was displaced from the debate between the mid-1990s and 2001 by the preoccupation with Outcomes Based Education (OBE) in schools, and programmes, modules and 'mode 2 knowledge' in higher education (see Cross et al., 1999b; Cross et al., 1999a; Nolutshungu, 1999; Cloete et al., 2002; Nkoli, 2003; Paola et al., 2003; Rollnick & Tresman, 2004; Lemmer & Van Wyk, 2004; Gamede, 2005; Kotta, 2006; Coughlan, 2006; Van den Berg, 2006; De Beer, 2006).

The advantage of some of these studies is that their interest in systemic improvement led them to develop a multilayered conceptual approach. On the basis of comparative studies of enrolment, their conceptual

framework includes both the micro and the macro level of analysis. For example, for Cloete et al. (2002), the set of factors that shapes the enrolment systems in higher education must be divided into three groups: (i) government policy, (ii) the culture and capacity of institutions, and (iii) the market and other societal influences.

In contrast to the 1970s and 1980s, currently there are fewer studies focusing on 'student culture' and 'youth culture'. Several factors have contributed to this decline: (i) the surprisingly few student protests in recent years over enrolment capping, fee hikes, financial exclusions, the dominance of loan-based financial aid, and the definition of what counts as adequate and effective academic support, (ii) a general decline since the late 1990s in the frequency of open campus debates, in the links with surrounding communities and schools, and in open forums about course content, general campus conditions, student throughput and graduates' work prospects (and eventual work destinations), (iii) the changing role of student organisations from resistance and protest to participation in institutional governance structures, and (iv) the changing nature of student cultures from student political activism to religious engagement, entertainment and beauty pageants (see Cele, 2005; Koen, Cele & Libhaber, 2006, Cele, Koen and Mabizela, 2002; King, 2001; Koen and Roux, 1995, Sakarai, 1997, Badat, 1999, Maseko, 1994, Reddy 2004, Jansen, 2004, Cross et al, 2004). Before the early 1990s, student culture generally included strong links with civil society organisations and trade unions, student-led community-based projects, political education classes, solidarity boycotts, and frequent debates about the nature and direction of broad social and educational change.

The third trend includes an unprecedented proliferation of introspective institutional research on academic performance officially undertaken by the institutions, driven by Senate, Academic Planning Units or higher education centres established to operate as think-tanks for institutional policy development. These include institutional climate and culture surveys and studies on various aspects of institutional transformation (Cross and Johnson, 2003, Wits, 2006; UCT 2003, Mabokang, M & Drieke H.R.H, 2006; Potgieter, C, 2002; Lewins, K., 2006; Louw J. and Finchilescu, G., 2003), and throughput and retention studies (Steyn & van Zyl, 2001; Koen 2001; Cranfield, 2002; UCT 1999; Van Zyl, Steyn & Orr 2003; and Alence, 2007). Running through these studies are a wide range of issues which include concerns about residual discourses of whiteness, typified by Eurocentrism, liberalism, as well as and the legacy of prejudice and discrimination - racism, sexism and lack of transparency - reflected in the recruitment, appointments, salaries, benefits and retirement of staff (Van Zyl et al., 2003). These studies also focused on issues such as poor service from support staff, the relevance of the curriculum and methods of teaching and assessing, academics' assumptions and attitudes, and alienating student experiences.

Centred on throughput and retention is the (Wits) Report of the Working Group on Retention and Throughput: Executive Summary (Wits, 2003b), which indicates that 'for most undergraduate degrees there are statistically significant differences between success achieved by different genders and different race groups' with 'black students doing worse than white students and women faring better than men'. The Report goes on to stress that the University is facing real pressure to demonstrate meaningful engagement in issues of equity, redress and transformation at the level of higher education specifically within the undergraduate student population. It suggests that, to align the university with national priorities, 'Wits needs to balance access with success, and explore institutional responses to improve both' (Wits 2003b:5). Specific strategies are called for to cater for the needs of students perceived 'at risk of failure' and incapable of achieving their potential for success because they are either academically 'underprepared' or 'historically disadvantaged' (for reasons of educational, social or linguistic background). The Report also points to the need to 'gather reliable

data' and develop a university culture 'where retention issues can be discussed honestly without the fear of blame' to promote positive teaching and learning practices (Wits 2003b: 60-61).

UWC's recent Institutional Operating Plan (2004: 36) expresses concern about the 'low throughput, prolonged time-to-degree and high attrition rates' of undergraduate and postgraduate students. Throughput has also been the subject of an extensive body of qualitative research at UWC: from the success rates of postgraduate students (Koen, 2001; Cranfield, 2002), part-time and adult students (University Mission on Lifelong Learning, 1997, 1998; Division of Lifelong Learning, 1999, 2004; Thaver et al., 2002), Senate Discretion students (Koen, 2003), students with disabilities (Blaatjies, 2003; Howell & Lazarus, 2003), and undergraduate students across faculties, departments and years of study (Cornell & Witz, 1994; Leibowitz & Witz, 1995; Lalu & Cornell, 1996; Radcliffe, 1997; Lever, 1999; Crossman & Devisch, 1999; Barnes, 2004; Ludwig, 2004), to academic development and academic planning (Tucker, 1988; Switzer, 1994; Leibowitz, 1996; Chaka, 1997; Flockman, 1997; Baijnath, 1997; Anderson, 2002). The factors that affect students' success rates range from administrative inefficiencies and academic factors to economic, health, social and personal factors. Many studies support 'integrated approaches' (see Ludwig, in Barnes, 2004) that consider redistribution (e.g. patterns of access, poverty alleviation, upgrading infrastructure, a range of financial aid options) and recognition (e.g. patterns of success, increased academic support, creating a culture of respect and critical scholarly engagement, alternative 'inside-out' pedagogies). In addition, another set of studies has looked at the academic culture at UWC as a subset of institutional culture (see Mabokela 2003, 2004; Hames et al., 2005; Mama 2003; Barnes, 2004; Thaver, 2006; Portnoi, 2005). These predominantly qualitative studies are good examples of institutional research designed to strengthen reflective practices at institutions and enhance student politics by involving student organisations in the design and analysis of institutional studies.

## 2. THEORIES AND METHOD: COMPETING APPROACHES

Overall, the analytical history of academic performance in South Africa has been one of contention between two competing theoretical and methodological traditions. The first tradition consists of quantitative studies concerned with measuring academic performance using suitable input and output indicators to monitor and compare trends in students' success rates across institutions as well as within institutions over time. They include national and institutional surveys on student enrolment and progression, student and staff surveys on campus climate, campus diversity, institutional culture and university internationalisation, and so on (e.g. Cloete and Bunting, 2000; DoE, 2006, Cross & Harper, 1999; Cross et al., 2004; Schoole, 2006).

The second tradition emphasises explanation rather than measurement. Within this tradition, it is possible to identify two schools of thought. There are those who seek to explain academic performance in terms of some attribute of the individual student, such as motivation, cognitive ability, personality, aptitude, time management, reading or writing skills (e.g. Stanton, 1987; Moll & Slonimsky, 1989; Hartman, 1989; Hunter, 1989; Mammen & Imenda, 1994; Mitchell et al., 1994; Imenda, 1995; Van Rooyen, 2001; Crous, 2004), and there are others who do so by focusing on the individual student as a member of a certain group defined in terms of class, race, or gender and which is often assumed to be stable and culturally defined. The students' educational and socioeconomic backgrounds are seen as important factors in understanding and explaining their patterns of performance (e.g. Koen & Roux, 1995; King, 2001; Cele & Koen, 2001; Cele et al., 2002; Broekman & Pendlebury, 2002; Cross et al., 2003; Jansen, 2004; Cele, 2005). There are also those who tie their explanations to the institutional factors that influence student performance and throughput, focusing on students' experiences in particular institutional contexts and arguing that opening access to

higher education to students from historically excluded groups often requires more fundamental changes beyond the simple increase in numbers (e.g. Makgoba, 1997; Seepe, 2000).

A further distinction is made on the basis of the extent to which studies of academic performance consider issues of power and account for individual and group identities - either as ascribed biologically or as socially constructed in networks of power (Seepe, 2000; Odora-Hoppers, 2001; Gibbon & Kabaki, 2002). Among these, liberal multicultural approaches tend to view access in terms of the inclusion, integration or assimilation of students from historically excluded groups into existing institutional structures and cultures. These approaches generally adopt an uncritical stance towards 'diversity' and 'culture' and therefore do not question the ways in which curricula and everyday institutional practices are shaped by dominant cultural constructs such as colonial racial categories and hetero-patriarchal norms.

In contrast, critical cultural approaches seek to transform various aspects of institutions to which access is sought, tend to destabilise group identities, and do not separate out the material from the cultural contexts of access to higher education. They account for the cultural politics of universities, i.e. how dominant ideas, ways of thinking, meanings, policies, structures, norms and rules, pedagogies, curricula, and everyday practices in teaching and research can function to exclude. They emphasise the need for deconstructing not only the inherited apartheid classifications, but also other homogenising categories such as 'the disadvantaged student' (see Ravjee, 2001). They view educational institutions as sites of contestation and struggle. Conceptually they are therefore more useful in addressing issues of retention and success as well as institutionalised forms of domination and exclusion such as racism. In other words, one can broadly think of cultural approaches as falling along a continuum from mainstream multicultural approaches, which view access in terms of the inclusion and assimilation of historically excluded groups into existing institutions and generally adopt an uncritical stance towards 'diversity' and 'culture', to critical multicultural approaches that seek to transform various aspects of institutions and destabilise group identities themselves.

### 3. THE QUEST FOR A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

As this review sets out to show, addressing throughput in terms of systemic inefficiencies is limited both in clarifying why there is a problem with student academic performance in South African universities and in engaging with some of the central ideas that currently dominate debates about throughput. Unlike many previous studies on access and retention in South African higher education, which tend to emphasise measurable dimensions of the problem (enrolments, failure and dropout rates, etc.), the three case studies have taken, broadly, a critical cultural approach. As Kuh and Whitt (1998: iii) have indicated, 'Cultural perspectives encourage coherent interpretations of what seem, in isolation, to be atomistic events'. Cultural perspectives are interdisciplinary; they draw on such disciplines as psychology, sociology, anthropology, and on organisational theory, which remind us that there are many ways to view cultural phenomena (Kuh, 1993: 13-14; see also Manning & Eaton, 1993). When considered in isolation, student enrolments, dropout rates, failure rates, throughput rates, resource allocation and institutional renewal strategies sometimes seem trivial or meaningless. Critical culturalist perspectives seek to understand students' experiences in terms of the crosscutting issues of class, race, gender, language, physical disability and so on, within a framework that does not separate out the cultural from the material contexts of higher education.

Methodologically, culturalist approaches group the meanings and interpretations made by individuals into 'student culture', 'the culture of the academic profession', 'the institutional culture', 'the culture of the national system of higher education' and 'the culture of individual disciplines' (Kuh & Whitt, 1998: 12-13).



According to Manning (1993), meanings and interpretations can be found in cultural artefacts, including memorials and buildings (physical artefacts); stories, myths and campus language (verbal artefacts); and shared rules and norms, social conventions and organisational principles (beliefs). The main point in conducting a study of meanings is therefore to construct coherent interpretations of what 'seem, in isolation, to be atomistic events' (Kuh & Whitt, 1998: iii). This could prevent a narrow technical and administrative approach to matters such as student enrolments, and dropout, failure and throughput rates.

But what is university culture? What is institutional culture?

### 3.1 CONCEPTIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

Culture is historical and specific; it is both a product and a process and it reflects the way social groups are organised in society. As Cross (1992, 1993, 2002) has shown, although culture can be conceived of as a uniting force binding social groups together, it is also a divisive factor reflecting the complexity of social formations generally constituted by various subgroups and subcultures in a struggle with the dominant culture. The struggle over culture is very often expressed in the justifications of certain forms of behaviour in terms of 'this is the way things are in my culture', and in the anger and even resistance expressed by groups who experience domination. Thus an institution exerts an influence on the behaviour of social agents (e.g. students, and staff) while these same agents simultaneously influence and define the institution's culture (Kuh, 1993: 3). This means that culture is not an unchangeable text but a complex, contradictory and uneven process (Cross, 1993: 377). Ignoring this fundamental aspect leads to the reification of culture.

The question of whether universities can be seen to have 'a culture,' or even whether the notion of institutional culture is a useful analytical construct, is contested in the higher education literature. Kuh and Whitt define culture in higher education as 'the collective, mutually shaping patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs and assumptions that guide the behaviour of individuals and groups in an institution of higher education and provide a frame of reference within which to interpret the meaning of events and actions on and off campus' (1988: 12-13). 'Institutional culture' is thus something that is shared (e.g. ways of thinking, or acting, or norms). Methodologically, it can serve multiple analytical purposes: (i) to explain why individual members of the university community do what they do the way they do it, (ii) to clarify what drives and motivates them and (iii) to highlight how they approach problem solving and crisis situations at the institution.

Higgins (CHE 2006: 14-25) suggests that the term 'institutional culture' is used in three ways in South Africa, each representing a different perspective on higher education transformation. It is used to capture the differences in administrative and management styles between the historically white English-medium universities (described in terms of academic freedom, institutional autonomy, distance from the state, liberalism, less authoritarianism, etc.) and the Afrikaans-medium universities (described in terms of centralised authority, anti-democratic approach, close relation with the state, authoritarianism, etc.).<sup>54</sup> Culture is also used as a 'site of conflict' between two visions of higher education, represented on the one side by academics and on the other by the administrative forces of new managerialism in higher education (evident in the cost effectiveness discourse and the imposition of programmes). Further, it is used to identify problems with the 'overwhelming whiteness of academic cultures' that is often experienced as

<sup>54</sup> Interestingly, neither is able to explain the existence of pockets of interdisciplinary intellectual resistance at Stellenbosch from the 1960s or the active compliance with the apartheid state policies at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and Wits (see Reddy, 2004; Kallaway, 2002).

alienating. In this regard, efforts have been made to reconceptualise institutional culture in the context of Africanisation and African renaissance discourses (see for example Makgoba, 1997; Seepe, 2000). Generally, we could add that, like other institutions, South African universities also use cultural means to communicate their differing values and what they believe is important to them. Institutional symbols, rituals, heroes, special mottos, ceremonies and visual images on campus serve to communicate institutional beliefs (Manning, 2000).

Many studies tend to split the treatment of 'institutional culture' into 'organisational culture' or 'institutional climate' and to use these terms interchangeably - interestingly, both terms are rooted in the organisational theory literature widely used in US industry since the 1980s (see Portnoi, 2005: 133). Some reject the notion of organisational culture as being irrelevant to understanding educational institutions (Silver 2003, Reddy 2004), while others treat 'institutional culture' as a 'keyword, an item of contested vocabulary in a conflictual and disputed social process. ... [and not] as an assured or given concept, one with a definite set of identifiable contents' (Higgins, 2005). Alternatively, it appears wise not to settle on a fixed meaning, but to use the term to capture the effects of everyday practices (see Higgins, 2005; Thaver, 2006; Barnes, 2007). This is the approach taken in the case studies.

### 3.2 INSTITUTIONAL AND PEDAGOGIC FACTORS THAT AFFECT STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE

Five types of explanations emerge from the review of the literature. First, the transition between school and university is not an easy one for any learner (Thomas et al., 1991) and is often associated with stress, anxiety and tension which, in many cases, lead to students failing or withdrawing from university regardless of race, gender, background or class (Darlaston-Jones et al., 2003). Many complex combinations of idiosyncratic variables that affect university performance and success are mentioned in the literature relating to underpreparedness. Some of these are (i) student age, maturity and life experience (West et al., 1986; Clark & Ramsey, 1990; Long et al., 1995; Shah & Burke, 1996), (ii) institutional cultural differences between the school and the university (McClelland & Krueger, 1989; Abbott-Chapman et al., 1992; Dobson & Sharma, 1995; Long et al., 1995; Bourke et al., 1996), (iii) gender differences (Scott et al., 1996); (iv) socioeconomic status (Western et al., 1998), (v) previous school performance (McInnis et al., 2000), (vi) long-term goals (Elsworth & Day, 1983; West et al., 1986; Abbott-Chapman et al., 1992), (vii) mode of entry into the university institution (McClelland & Krueger, 1993), and (viii) institutional forms of mediation or more specifically institutional responsiveness and the notion of pedagogic distance.

Students entering a system of higher education for the first time, particularly those whose previous school performance was poor, need help and support with the transition and enculturation process (McInnis et al., 2000). Tinto proposes a combined approach to transition programmes into university life that recognises the role of high schools, family, and peers as well as the university (Tinto, 1987, 1993, 1995a,b, 2000; Tinto & Goodsell-Love, 1993; Tinto & Russo, 1993; Tinto et al., 1993). Tinto suggests that there is an integral institutional need within universities to integrate orientation programmes that introduce students to university life in an atmosphere of fun and support as opposed to one that provokes stress and anxiety.

Before we move on to the second type of explanation, it should be noted that the term 'underprepared' is evolving. Current research at Wits on the phenomenon of underpreparedness suggests that its meaning has spread to include student ability at different levels of university study. The term is also currently being used to refer to staff, who, due to increasing pressure to perform across different work related contexts and teach

an increasingly diverse student population, find themselves underprepared for the tasks they are expected to perform in dealing with the so-called 'non-traditional' or underprepared students (Inglis, 2005).

Second, institutional factors such as the size of an institution, the size of specific classes, student-teacher ratios and the nature of a particular course may also have a significant influence on students' performance (Tinto, 1993). The impact of the campus environment has been examined by Schuetz (2005) from an ecological perspective, looking at how relationships, activities and the environment affect student success. Graham-Smith and Lafayette (2004), studying the experiences of disabled students, found that a caring staff was the single most important factor in making a student's experiences on campus positive. The University of Sydney experimented with a one-day workshop to help students form strong social and study-related networks and found that those who attended the workshops enjoyed stronger peer relationships and self-motivation (Peat et al., 2000).

Third, the needs of specific student groups and the difficulties they might encounter as a result of their academic, social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, their individual personality characteristics and their financial difficulties have also received attention (West, 1985; West et al., 1986; Abbott-Chapman et al., 1992; McJamerson, 1992; Terenzini et al., 1994; Lewis, 1994; Long, 1994; Shields, 1995; Scott et al., 1996; Western et al., 1998; Dobson, 1999; Strage, 2000; McInnis et al., 2000). Some of the studies in this area also look at student age, maturity and life experience (West et al., 1986; Clark & Ramsey, 1990; Long et al., 1995; Shah & Burke 1996). Studies of students' expectations (Ochse, 2003, 2005) and evaluation of their own ability found that black students consistently overestimated their success, white males were accurate in their estimations and white females underestimated their abilities.

Fourth, following Bernstein's ideas of knowledge structures (1999, 2000), Muller (2006) examines the importance of sequence and progression in curriculum design, and the implications this has for performance and for research productivity.

Within this set of preoccupations, a recent case study of pedagogic responsiveness (Griesel, 2004) has provided useful explanations of the importance of feedback, pedagogic engagement with learners' thinking and systematic socialisation of underprepared students into academic practice. In this case study, Moll (2004: 4) also shows how, through curriculum responsiveness, the idea of equity and access is tied up with the assumptions and values that underpin the university curriculum. He distinguishes four main types of curriculum responsiveness: (i) economic responsiveness - the extent to which the curriculum meets the changing needs of employers by producing graduates who are innovative, skilful, competitive and able to increase the economic competitiveness of their employers, or more generally by facilitating 'greater responsiveness between higher education and industry', (ii) cultural responsiveness - how the curriculum accommodates the diversity of students' sociocultural realities by developing a wider variety of instructional strategies and learning pathways, (iii) responsiveness to the learner - teaching and assessing students in ways that are accessible to them, and (iv) responsiveness to the knowledge discipline - a systematic inquiry according to the principles and procedures dictated by the underlying knowledge discipline and an immersion in complex theoretical developments. From the teaching side, this requires socialisation into academic inquiry of specialised knowledge. It includes making available what is valued about the underlying discipline, how it is assessed, and which evaluative criteria are of significance, but also adjusting the teaching to the rhythms, tensions and emotions of learning.

Fifth, and of increasing significance in the South African context, is the theory of 'pedagogic distance'. This theory brings together two dimensions of lecturer-student interaction useful for understanding the nature of pedagogic and social mediation. The first is the notion of 'transactional distance', i.e. the cognitive space between peers. It shows that physical and pedagogic distance has an effect on the teaching-learning connection in the classroom (Moore, 1997). The theory is based on understandings and interpretations between the teacher and students. It is the inability to reduce this distance that has had negative effects on the historically disadvantaged students. This problem can be minimised through strategies that embrace the notion of 'social presence' (Richardson & Swan, 2003), defined as 'the degree to which a person is perceived as a "real person" in mediated communication' (Gunawardena, 1995: 151), which enhances student perceptions and feelings of connectedness to the lecturer, (Hostetter & Busch, 2006). The second dimension is 'teacher immediacy' defined as 'the act of reducing the physical and/or psychological distance between lectures and students through touch, direct body orientation, eye contact, gestures and positive head nods and related body language (Witt et al., 2004). We would assume that this dimension is more appropriate to the school context. The theory suggests that narrowing the pedagogic distance between lecturers and students would enhance pedagogic mediation in several domains of interaction: emotional, political, linguistic and physical.

### 3.3 STUDENT'S AGENCY: SOCIAL RESOURCES AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

A university campus is a peculiar location in social life where individuals experience ideological upheavals in place, location, identity and desire. For academics, this experience is articulated through debates on academic freedom, individual autonomy, collegial governance and truth seeking. The debates on these matters produce assumptions about what is worth knowing and how knowledge is created, about tasks to be performed and standards of performance and about patterns of professional interaction. Students negotiate their needs and aspirations: they interpret policies, rules and guidelines and they respond to institutional administrative and academic provision. They do so in view of the specific ways in which individual academics and administrators interact with them. Nevertheless, their power to negotiate their needs (or their agency) is overdetermined by their social background, the availability of social resources and organisations on campus, and external pressures. It is through becoming a *member* of the campus community, or in other words through *collective membership*, that the university campus affects students' individual lives. What does the concept of membership mean?

This concept is not often explored in the literature on institutional culture. Used in relation to access, the term 'membership' refers to the mastery of a particular institutional language. As Coulon puts it:

To become a member is to gain affiliation to a group, an institution, which requires progressive *mastery of the common institutional language* [our emphasis]. This affiliation depends on each one's particularity, the individual way each one encounters the world, on being in the world in social institutions of everyday life. Once affiliated, members do not need to interrogate themselves about what they do. They know what is implicit in their behaviour and they accept their routinised social practices. A member is not therefore a person who just breathes and thinks. It is a person blessed with a range of procedures, methods, activities, know-how, which make them capable of inventing means of adaptation to give meaning to the surrounding world. (1987: 44-5; authors' own approximate translation from French)

The mastery of the institutional language presupposes a sort of 'cognitive consensus' about the normative paradigm of the institution (norms, rules, values and beliefs) or the dominant set of values, rules and norms

that must be internalised or learnt, with reference to which agreement is reached about the meaning of social situations and campus social practice (Coulon, 1993: 28). Three main factors influence how students may or may not be empowered in this process.

The first and most important empowering or disempowering factor for students' agency is their background. According to Searle (1995, in Broekman & Pendlebury, 2002) 'background' refers to different ways of being in the world. It includes 'skills, abilities, pre-intentional assumptions, attitudes, practices, capacities, stances, perceptions and actions' (Broekman & Pendlebury 2002: 291) that we carry from one milieu to another. Of the functions Searle assigns to background, we would like to highlight two. First, background facilitates certain kinds of readiness and, second, it disposes one to certain sorts of behaviour. (Searle, 1995: 136). Thus, background enables and constraints what we intend, how we interpret our actions and the world around us, and how we are interpreted or socially constructed by and within our interactions with other people. Background may be an asset or resource that is individually produced or owned, but it may also be a product of social interaction. It can also be a liability. Importantly then, students from different social backgrounds (race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, etc.) experience, and negotiate membership of, campus life differently.

According to Schneider & Stevenson (1999: 142-7) strong family ties are an important source of agency. Such benefits may include non-material resources such as social obligations, rules of the game, symbolic exchanges, trust, norms and information channels (see Bourdieu & Coleman, in Dika & Singh, 2002; 1998; Dyk & Wilson, 1999). Furthermore, when parents advise their children about their career and study plans and help them choose a particular course of study strategically or arrange for them to participate in a work placement or internship (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999: 141, 147, 169), they empower them. When this happens, it is more likely that there will be a good match between the student's desired educational and occupational aspirations and her or his ability to devise suitable strategies to achieve them, i.e. an aligned ambition. In addition, students whose academic background in school prepares them better for the academic environment of a university internalise the messages of the culture of the university with more ease. They benefit from 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures' (Bourdieu, 1977: 72), that act as conductors of action in new environments, i.e. habitus. To quote Bourdieu:

When *habitus* encounters a social world of which it is a product, it finds itself 'as fish in water', it does not feel the weight of the water and takes the world about itself for granted. (1989: 43)

*Habitus* ensures the active presence of past experiences in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, and tends to guarantee the correctness of practices and their constancy over time. In our view, habitus minimises social displacement. The institutional environment matches students' habits, their unthinkingness in actions, their dispositions and predispositions (Grenfell & James, 1998: 14). Gansemer-Topf (2005: 1) refers to this alignment as the phenomenon of 'institutional fit', i.e. 'the match between an individual student's interests, abilities, and expectations and the larger institutional culture'. In her view, institutional fit is directly related to student satisfaction, performance and, ultimately, retention and graduation. In contrast, when graduates from rural and township schools come to campus, one would expect that their habitus encounters a social world which does not match their learning experience; they encounter an environment which has little meaning and value to them. They may feel socially displaced.

The second empowering or disempowering factor for students' agency is campus social life or collective resources. Tierney (1993) refers to 'communities of difference' - the range of campus organisations, forums and social groups through which students find spaces for mutual engagement, joint enterprise, construction and expression of group identity, affirmation of difference, and the development of awareness and learning. Communities of difference represent constellations of competing - and in some cases conflicting - student interests, values and social traditions, drawn from the students' cultural backgrounds. They include students' political, social, academic and religious organisations.

As networks of civic engagement, student organisations serve several useful purposes. They foster sturdy norms of mutual trust and generalised reciprocity within the group or organisation. They facilitate coordination and communication, and amplify information about the trustworthiness of individual members. Networks of civic engagement embody past success at collaboration, which can serve as a cultural template for future collaboration. As such, student organisations promote the sharing of social capital as a vital ingredient in meeting the challenges of campus life. They lower transaction costs and speed up information transfer and innovation. They form a parameter for 'understanding the "other" in the midst of and across multiple socially constructed realities' (Rowe 2003). According to Woolcock and Narayan (2002: 230), this is created through (i) 'bonding' - building connections to people who are 'like you' (e.g. Independent Students' Association, Muslim Students' Association, Ballroom Dancing Club), (ii) 'bridging' - building connections to people 'not like you', or (iii) 'linking' - building connections to people in positions of power, who provide access to resources (e.g. tying students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds to students from historically advantaged backgrounds).

The study on Campus Climate undertaken at Wits (Cross et al., 2003) points to highly diverse collective resources, formed as a result of different interests and sociocultural activities, leisure and recreation activities and sports. The study points to three important patterns in student behaviour: (i) a shift from traditional student politics (the dominance of student affiliation to political organisations) to a preference for social, cultural, academic and religious organisations, (ii) an increased interest in academic organisations, particularly among medical and engineering students, and (iii) claims by students from minority denominations that they are being discriminated against on religious grounds.

External pressures constitute the third empowering or disempowering factor for students' agency. The changing forms of popular culture, as expressed in new recreation patterns (e.g. the *gumba* - a party with loud music, or a 'bash'), music (e.g. *kwaito* - a South African music style), social functions (e.g. pageants and modelling), and other activities (e.g. gym and magazines) mediate campus experiences in complex ways. An encounter with the pressures of global culture through student mobility and the mass media, as expressed in consumerism, fast food, body politics (shaping up through aerobics or gym), television, music, dress and so on, also forms part of the social medium in which students negotiate 'a home' on campus (Cross et al., 2003).

In summary, the literature suggests that factors leading to success or failure in academic study include (i) student underpreparedness, (ii) curriculum relevance or responsiveness, (iii) integrated institutional environments, and (iv) collective resources. It also shows the usefulness of a qualitative approach that can construct arguments on the basis of a close account of social or academic processes and practices that affect academic achievement. What is missing from the studies reviewed above is a clear conceptual framework

that can integrate macro and micro levels of analysis and show how these mediate students' experiences and in turn their academic achievement. With the view of broadening our approach to student access and performance, the following two sections explore perspectives for studying the interface between students' background and their aspirations, and between their social and academic experience, as they are situated in the material conditions of the university, at macro and micro levels. It must be noted that these two sections are particularly important to this literature review because they were instrumental in providing the conceptual framework for the Wits case study. As already indicated, the conceptual framework used in the other two case studies is different.

#### **4. DOMAINS OF INSTITUTIONAL AND SOCIAL MEDIATION OF STUDENT EXPERIENCE**

One of the main goals of culturalist perspectives is to understand the meanings individuals, particularly students, give to events in their particular academic setting, taking into account crosscutting factors such as class, race, gender, language, physical disability and the internal and external environment that affect their university experience. Bernstein's work on the construction of the pedagogic field provides useful conceptual distinctions. Exploring the intellectual context that regulates the production and distribution of meanings and thus the dominant social order in education, Bernstein draws a distinction (1999, 2000) between the 'official recontextualising field' and the 'pedagogic recontextualising field'. In our own interpretation of Bernstein's theory, the official recontextualising field encompasses aspects such as institutional vision or mission, policies, rules and guidelines that regulate academic and social life on campus. Organisationally, it is shaped and driven externally by specialised state agencies such as the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the National Research Foundation (NRF) and internally by the university administration. It is through the directives and expectations of these structures that university, and in particular student, life is regulated, steered or controlled. Modes of regulation are not technical; they are constructed discursively and they provide sets of meanings with which the university administration and the academics in particular, located in the pedagogic recontextualising field, translate national and institutional directives, regulations and expectations into practices and modes of interactions that define what is legitimate and what is not within the university. Analytically, the official recontextualising field is an important area for understanding students' experience of access and success. For the sake of simplicity we refer to this area as the official domain.

The pedagogic recontextualising field produces specialised modes of communication and interaction between knowledge communities, lecturers and students, lecturers and managers/administrators, according to seniority and experience. Organisationally, it is shaped and driven by specialised academic disciplines, publishing houses, research foundations, academic and professional journals, faculties and departments. In pedagogic terms, it refers to curriculum, teaching and assessment - what Bernstein refers to as the three main message systems of the pedagogic process. Its main function is academic production and reproduction. We refer to this as the pedagogic domain.

This distinction is useful in that it provides a framework for mapping out the key institutional domains of practice where the interplay of mediating factors in student experience takes place, namely the official domain, the pedagogic domain and, in addition, the social domain. The interaction between the official and the pedagogic domains produces what Searle (1995, in Broekman & Pendlebury, 2002) calls institutional facts and constitutive rules. By institutional facts we mean those aspects of institutional life against which

we conduct our daily lives on campus, and whose use we collectively agree on - even if we do not think about them (e.g. rites of initiation, graduation ceremonies, graduation robes, etc.). As Broekman and Pendlebury (2002: 289) put it, 'institutional facts assume collective agreement on function, status and meaning'. By constitutive rules we mean the normative framework, not always explicit, that creates the very possibility of a particular form of practice (what students at university should do and how they should do it, e.g. using the library, attending seminars or lectures, producing assignments, using leisure time). Searle sees 'rules' primarily through a normative framework. Whether and how students interpret or attach meaning to these facts and rules depends on their background of capacities, know-how and dispositions - in other words, a sort of pre-intentional knowledge about how the institution works, and a set of abilities for coping in and with the institution. Nonetheless, we are reminded by Bernstein's notion of recontextualisation (1990: 184) that the practices in each of the domains are socially produced and thus are guided by specific interests and power relations.

## 5. DISCOURSES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE, GLOBALISATION AND AFRICANISATION

In this section we examine current discourses in the student access and success debates in higher education in South Africa, the main battles being fought in this regard, and the victories and the losses. We do so with reference to the national vision of higher education in South Africa and the assumptions that underpin issues of student access and performance, and the ongoing process of transformation and restructuring at institutions of higher education. Three key highly contested discourses can be identified in current debates, all of them with different nuances: the discourse of social justice, the discourse of globalisation, and the discourse of Africanisation.

### 5.1 DISCOURSES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

The discourse of social justice foregrounds the need to create an equitable society based on democratic values and rooted in the understanding of South African and African historical and contextual peculiarities. It emphasises high participation and inclusion, particularly of those previously excluded. It assumes different nuances depending on whether it is driven by radical or liberal democratic ideologies. While the South African vision for higher education is clearly rooted in the discourses of social justice as proclaimed in the African National Congress's (ANC) Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), its translation into higher education policy and its implementation have been constrained by the increasing dominance of neoliberal ideology articulated by the Growth, Expansion and Redistribution (GEAR) macroeconomic policy framework. The NCHE report released in September 1996, the White Paper on Higher Education (1997), and the Higher Education Act (1997) set out the national vision. Three main imperatives underpin this vision: (i) increased participation, (ii) greater responsiveness, and (iii) increased cooperation and partnerships (NCHE, 1996: 6-7; DoE, 1997: 8-10; Cross & Harper, 1999).

Of importance to the question of student access and success are the first two, which echo the ideals of the mass democratic movement and mirror the seven pillars of the national Constitution, namely: democracy, responsibility, equality, freedom, respect, reconciliation and diversity. This progressive perspective was to be implemented and managed alongside GEAR under tough efficiency-driven regulatory measures and tight fiscal policies. Its defining features are:

- **High or increased participation.** A key feature of this approach is a policy of growth; that is, an expansion of student enrolments, feeder constituencies and programme offerings. The principles of



equity and redress as well as the realities of demography and development require an expansion of participation. Greater numbers of students must be given access to higher education, and recruited from a broader distribution of social groups and classes for the visible signs of apartheid to be erased. This necessitates radical changes in the ways institutions and the system are structured, funded, planned and governed to eradicate the inequities, ineffectiveness and inefficiencies of the past. Greater numbers mean greater expenditure. In a situation of financial constraints, suitable measures should be devised to make wider participation affordable and financially sustainable. Greater numbers also affect standards. To combat the potentially adverse effects of rising enrolment on educational and academic standards, effective quality assurance is advocated and institutions must be held accountable through the monitoring of performance indicators (NCHE, 1996: 6).

- **Greater responsiveness.** A heightened responsiveness to societal interests and needs is required. In essence, increased responsiveness reflects the greater impact of the market and civil society on higher education and the consequent need for appropriate forms of regulation. More specifically, this means:
  - **At the social level,** higher education should engage with the problems and challenges of its social context. In South Africa, this context is that of a developing and modernising African country in a period of transition from racial discrimination and oppression towards a democratic polity with constitutional provisions for justice and equal opportunity. Aspects of this context must be reflected in the content, focus and delivery modes of higher education programmes and in the institutional missions and policies. Governance structures should provide for stakeholder consultation and participation in decision-making processes so that needs are identified and met.
  - **At an epistemological level,** responsiveness entails a shift from closed knowledge systems (controlled and driven by canonical norms of traditional disciplines and by collegially recognised authority) to more open knowledge systems (in dynamic interaction with external social interests, 'consumer' or 'client' demand, and other processes of knowledge generation) (NCHE, 1996: 4; Moll, 2004: 12). Such interaction would lead to the incorporation of the perspectives and values of previously silenced groups into the educational and cognitive culture of institutions.
  - **In curriculum and cultural terms** responsiveness means that institutions must be seen to be both *acting to change student practices*, through research and teaching, and *acting to change themselves* and their priorities in response to the social imperatives that press upon them, such as catering for the needs of increasingly diverse students (Moll, 2004: 12, our emphasis). This is a view of curriculum that 'capitalises on learners' cultural backgrounds rather than attempting to override or negate them' (Moja, 2004: 25).
- **Increased cooperation and partnerships.** Academic insularity and institutional self-reliance should make way for recognition of the functional interdependence between multiple actors and interests with a stake in higher education through cooperation and partnerships. In terms of student access and performance, this view builds on the assumption that the following would certainly maximise participation: the optimal use of human and infrastructural resources; linkages and partnerships between higher education institutions and commercial enterprises, parastatals, research bodies and non governmental organisations (NGOs), nationally and regionally; cooperation among a broader range of constituencies; and the establishment of participatory, responsible and accountable structures and procedures, with appropriate steering and coordinating role of the state (NCHE, 1996: 76-80).
- **Competence-driven pedagogic practices.** A progressive pedagogic view is favoured that emphasises the promotion of flexible learning and thinking, local knowledge, diversity of criteria, the privileging of

process issues over product, multiple entry and exit points, alternative pathways to access, learner-centred pedagogies, sustained and systematic learner support and academic development, and strategies of empowerment of generic competences. We borrow from Bernstein the concept of the 'competence model of pedagogy' (2000: 46) to refer to this view. Internationally, it is supported by studies that show that isolation, including self-isolation (McInnes & James, 1995, quoted in Peat et al., 2000; Jones, 2004), lack of interest in studies, and difficulties in making the transition from school to university (Peat et al., 2000) are major obstacles to successful performance (see also Graham-Smith & Lafayette, 2004; Schuetz, 2005). It is claimed that integration of the local and the informal (e.g. indigenous knowledge and experience) into the academic curriculum, or even more radical curriculum approaches (e.g. Africanisation of the discipline - see for example, Bodibe, 1992, in Moll, 2004), would help students, within the right institutional culture, to develop their competences.

## 5.2 DISCOURSES OF GLOBALISATION

The discourse of globalisation positions higher education institutions as key agents in the development of graduates with the expertise and high-level skills for a high growth path of economic development and global competitiveness. The key challenge for higher education is to build 'talent highways', which focus academic socialisation on learning codified generalisable knowledge, which in Muller's view (2000: 35) requires a principled decision to shift the national goal from 'high participation to high performance'. In South African higher education, efficiency and managerialism feed off the imperative of globalisation (Johnson and Cross, 2004; Van Wyk, 2005; Favish, 2005; Johnson, 2006) and have gained policy legitimisation in GEAR and several higher education implementation documents (CHE, 2000, National Working Group, 2001; DoE, 2001, 2002). As Jackson and Carter (1998, quoted in Carpenter, 2002: 41) put it, 'The production of management knowledge is not informed by a sense of how work needs to be done and what resources are available to do it, nor by a sense of efficiency as a means to an end, but by the assumption that efficiency is an end in itself.' Arguably, the restructuring and rationalisation strategies in higher education reflect GEAR's perspective on efficiency, cost saving and fiscal discipline, which have led to the emphasis on managerialism, the emerging concept of universities as 'businesses', the resurgence of an 'audit culture' with its 'rituals of verification' and technologies of control, and the use of the norms of the free market and business as the organising principles of campus social and academic life, including the conduct expected of individuals (Strathern, 2000: 61). The following are the main themes in the globalisation debate:

- **Managerialism.** Johnson (2006: 5) defines 'managerialism' as 'the tendency to appropriate private or corporate sector processes, practices and organisational forms and implement them in public sector type organisations such as universities'. The term has come to mean the dominance of managers in power and authority over academics and a top-down style of management that privileges economic rationalism above all other concerns, including academic leadership. Protagonists of managerialism believe that the voice of command that has brought so much success to the capitalist production in industry is the answer. It is seen as desirable ('it would certainly give us a competitive edge'), inevitable ('we do not have much choice under the present economic circumstances') and necessary ('the only way we can get out of this financial mess'). Central to managerialism is the emphasis on what postmodernists called performativity; efficiency; the separation of academic from administrative functions; executivism in university management that imposes a panopticon of control, surveillance and compliance; the overestimation of outputs vis-à-vis process; and tight fiscal controls matched with income generation leading to increasing commodification or marketisation of knowledge and university services. It has produced a whole new set of words and phrases with new meanings consistent with a liberal-globalisation view of higher education: 'outsourcing',

'core business', 'scenarios', 'business units', 'cost centres', 'value for money', 'best practice', 'performance appraisal', 'quality assurance', 'quality control', 'accreditation', 'accountability', 'strategic plans', 'benchmarking', 'peer-review', 'external verification', 'stakeholder', and so on - a sort of 'execospeak'.

- **Low participation.** In contrast to the view of 'high participation', the liberal-globalisation discourse projects a new identity of 'high performance'. This is an economic model that strives for increasing output with minimum investment and costs by drawing on students from high income or upper class social elites through selection criteria based on meritocratic ideology. It means fewer opportunities for students from under-represented groups, particularly low socioeconomic groups, to participate successfully in higher education.
- **Performance-driven pedagogic strategies and practices.** The main elements that are fused in this view are: knowledge capacity, throughput, minimum support, specialised careers, partnerships and connectivity, cost effectiveness, efficiency and tight management of quality. 'Performance-based accountability' (Fuhrman, 1999, 2003) or new managerialism are the tag names associated with this view, which puts the competitive demands for high performance (both in research output and throughput) at the top of the university's priorities. This view foregrounds 'performance' or 'management' and 'assessment' according to the specialised standards of the discipline and in lieu of market demands. Again drawing on Bernstein (2000: 46), we refer to this view as the 'performance model of pedagogy'.

Critics of globalisation in education argue that the emphasis on performativity, which is encouraged by GEAR in South Africa, has overtaken the commitment to equity and accessibility (the discourse of social justice) and will have a negative impact on transformation (Soludo, 2001; Van Wyk, 2005). Strathern (2000: 63) alludes to the emergence of new categories of 'managerial professionals', which have resulted in a loss of collegiality, and new power hierarchies (e.g. executive deans, known as 'super-deans', and heads of schools appointed more on managerial than academic grounds). Johnson & Cross (2004) argue that in recent years and under the pressures of globalisation, managerialism has been embraced as an alternative to collegiality, which has come to be seen as an archetype too outdated and old-fashioned to deal with the pressures of the knowledge economy and global competitiveness.

### 5.3 DISCOURSES OF AFRICANISATION

This discourse is highly contested. While Africanisation dominated South African black politics from the days of Africanism in the 1950s and early 1960s and the Black Consciousness movement from the late 1960s onwards, only in the post-1994 period did it become a legitimate theme in higher education debates (Cross, 1999: 223-58). Currently one can distinguish three major sets of relevant literature: (i) works emphasising curriculum responsiveness; (ii) works emphasising an epistemological redirection; and (iii) works advocating an identity re-creation of the South African university (e.g. 1995, 1999; Jeevanantham, 1999) Mseleku (2004: 2).

- **Africanisation as curriculum responsiveness.** This set of literature has undergone several metamorphoses, from earlier concerns with the integration of 'African studies' dimensions in the university curriculum to current concerns with more fundamental issues such as the Africanisation of the curriculum knowledge basis. For example, for Moll Africanisation as responsiveness to the African context entails approaching labour market supply, cultural diversity, disciplinary knowledge, and academic learning from the perspective that university curricula must be engaged with the problems and issues of Africa' (Moll, 2004:

15). Bodibe (1992, in Moll, 2004) calls for the Africanisation of the discipline through integration of the local and the informal (community, indigenous knowledge) into the academic curriculum.

- **Africanisation as epistemological challenge.** This is a reaction to the realisation that the Africanisation of African universities has left the debate on models and the content of curricula and structures intact (Crossman & Devisch, 2002). This literature locates the main reasons at philosophical and ideological level. Fundamental changes should start at the knowledge production level by shifting from 'the monochrome logic of Western epistemology' and 'bring indigenous knowledge systems into the formal realm'. This should have an impact on the transformation of knowledge-generating bodies such as science councils and higher education institutions (Odora-Hoppers, 2002: vii; and see for example Odora-Hoppers, 2002; Ntuli, 2002; Crossman & Pickett, 2002; Crossman & Devish, 2002; Majeke, 2002). Yet, as Molls clearly shows (2004: 14), there is no single voice amongst African scholars saying what a new epistemology would be like. Some argue for the indigenisation of the Western idea of rationality in African spiritual wisdoms. Others argue for socially relevant research and teaching that focuses on the most pressing issues in Africa, such as rural poverty and underdevelopment, illiteracy and cultural domination.
- **Africanisation as identity re-creation.** Seepe and Makgoba, who call for the radical overhauling of the culture of the university, including its administrative, academic and pedagogic practices, lead this debate. For Seepe (1999: 1; see also Seepe, 2004), 'the African identity of the institution should be located in the treatment of African issues not as a by-product but by moving African issues in the academic, social, political and economical milieu from the periphery to the centre'. This is reiterated by Jeevanantham (1999: 54-76), who highlights the need for moving subjugated discourse from the periphery to the centre. Makgoba (1996: 177) offers the following account:

Africanisation is the *process or vehicle* for defining, interpreting, promoting and transmitting African thought, philosophy, identity and culture. It encompasses an African mind-set or mind-set shift from the European to an African paradigm. Through Africanisation we affirm and identify ourselves in the world community. Africanisation involves incorporating, adapting, integrating other cultures into and through African *visions* and *interpretations* to provide the dynamism, evolution and adaptation that is so essential for survival and success of peoples of African origin in the global village. It is a logic and a way of life for Africans. By *inclusivity*, Africanisation is non-racial. It is enriched through the African Diaspora. Africanisation has evolved over time from the narrow nationalistic intolerant to a global tolerant form. Africanisation continues to challenge the thinking, the identity, the philosophy, the culture and simply being African in the modern world.

Therefore, as Mseleku (2004: 2) has pointed out, if an institution in its mission statement claims to be a truly African university, 'this should be reflected in its institutional culture, its curriculum and its library holdings' and practices.

## 5.4 POINTS OF CONTENTION

In a recent literature review, Van Wyk shows how these discourses have gained expression within institutions and identifies four 'constitutive meanings': '(i) emphasis on equity and redress (gender and racial equality); (ii) concerns with critical inquiry (e.g. knowledge production, rethinking, abandoning old ways of doing,

fundamental change, transmutation, controversy); (iii) attention to communicative praxis (e.g. effective communication, participation); and (iv) concerns citizenship (cultural change)' (2005: 6). While many higher education institutions have adopted new 'core values', these are often not translated into practice (Favish, 2005). She indicates that institutional plans are couched in terms of performance indicators and that this reinforces a 'thin' understanding of transformation. The fact that concerns with measurement have overtaken concerns with equity and accessibility can, in Favish's view, have a negative impact on the realisation of transformation. She does concede that measurement of performance constitutes an important element in monitoring that past inequities are being addressed, provided there is room for creativity. Yet, a focus on indicators runs the risk of leading institutions towards meeting the targets rather than addressing the complex issues of excellence in teaching and research that cannot be easily measured by indicators.

Other strand of the debate focuses on the relationship between the discourses of globalisation and Africanisation. While authors like Soludo (2001) argue that South African intellectuals must resist the encroachment of globalisation, others (Moja & Cloete, 2001; Moja, 2004) argue that it is wrong to view these as competing discourses. Moja, for example, stresses that 'higher education reforms in South Africa have to integrate both Africanisation and globalisation issues' and to conceptualise institutional responsiveness to educational disadvantage according to both discursive imperatives - equity and excellence. She labels this mix 'glocalisation', in which 'participation' is driven by the two imperatives of equity and performance equally, and thus will be manifested in a differentiated way through the higher education sector. In contrast to Moja, and Cloete (2001), who contrasts globalisation to Africanisation, some see social justice as more appropriate. Like Europeanisation in Europe, Africanisation is increasingly seen as embracing globalisation connotations.

Under considerable attack is the ideology of performativity. Critics are divided on this matter. Some reiterate the NCHE call for increased participation in higher education and argue that, together with the knowledge challenge, the challenge of human resources necessitates substantially increased participation rates (Moja & Cloete, 2001). Other critics have manifested some scepticism towards this approach. For example, Muller (2000: 35) suggests that a principled decision is required for shifting the national goal from 'high participation to high performance'. Moja and Cloete argue that the 'knowledge challenge' might create differentiation within the higher education sector, in terms of both the knowledge profile of academics and the criteria for successful participation.

## 5.5 SOME IMPLICATIONS

The balance a university strikes between the choices grounded in these discourses determines how it negotiates decisions on issues such as entry requirements, organises its courses into programmes, maintains quality, promotes academic excellence, regulates the entrepreneurial competitive culture of higher education, provides support programmes, and regulates the portability of credits and student choices of courses. It affects the university's choices of specialised versus equivalent learning pathways, discipline-based versus interdisciplinary programmes and modules, and pure versus strategic research, depending on its academic history, clientele, financial position and relations to society and the market. It has implications for decisions on such matters as what kind of research is valued, how much of the time spent on the various aspects of academic work should be counted as valid (workload models), what kind of support students should be getting, by which means formal access should be regulated, and so on. It also influences the relations between academics (i.e. collegiality) and between academics and the university administration.

## 6. CONCLUSION

We have shown in this review that there has been a relatively direct correlation between the 'biography of access' (a term we borrow from Gamede, 2005) and the evolution of academic scholarship on the matter, more specifically mainstream studies and educational literature on student access and academic performance. We have seen recently a renewed effort to explore new paradigms, new concepts and frameworks for dealing with issues of academic performance. This is partly because orthodox quantitative analyses have failed to come to grips with the complexity of the throughput and retention phenomenon under present circumstances.

This general overview has shown that student access and academic performance have become one of the most controversial fields in studies of higher education in South Africa. Today almost all issues of academic performance seem to have fallen into deep polemic, at theory, methodology and policy levels, and both nationally and institutionally. As has been demonstrated in this chapter, theoretical and policy debate on academic performance can progress more productively and creatively only by means of concrete empirical analytical work that can account for the complex contextual conditions of South Africa. In this regard, educational research has lagged behind the other domains of social sciences in the last two decades. Nonetheless, the general direction taken during recent years, with the massive proliferation of institutional research, postgraduate research, national projects and targeted funding to promote research on academic performance, has been highly encouraging. Overall, the issues we are grappling with in the field of access and performance are ideologically problematic, conceptually complex and deeply embedded in the struggle for social justice and global competitiveness. They will probably dominate educational debates for some years to come.

## CHAPTER THREE: 'Wits gives you the edge': How students negotiate the pressures of undergraduate study

Michael Cross, Yael Shalem, Judy Backhouse, Fatima Adam and Hlengani Baloyi

### 1. INTRODUCTION

A 2003 review of retention and throughput at Wits found that, while rates vary across the faculties, on average fewer than 50% of students graduate and fewer than 45% graduate in the minimum time. Many degrees exclude more than 20% of students for academic or financial reasons, i.e. do not allow them to continue with their studies. In addition there are distinct demographic trends, with 'black students doing worse than white students and women faring better than men' (Wits, 2003b, 2004). Reportedly, 33% of undergraduate students are dropping out of Wits without a qualification within five years of enrolling. In the words of a student interviewed for this study: 'So why keep on coming here in thousands, then, next thing, only two of us are getting out? No, this is not worth it.'<sup>55</sup>

These figures are particularly worrying in view of the social context and history of South African universities. Wits, together with the University of Cape Town, the University of Natal and Rhodes University, committed itself to the liberal ideals of the 'Open Universities' as outlined in their manifesto in 1954 (Wits, 1957). Fundamental to these was the rejection of apartheid state interference in university affairs. While this commitment represented a significant expression of the crisis of apartheid institutions, the claim of being an 'open' and non-racial university required a radical transformation of key institutional practices. This 'common purpose' (as described by Munro, quoted in Johnson, 2006: 88) required a significant change in staff and student composition in terms of class, race, gender and ethnicity.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, with the provision of financial aid and the introduction of more flexible admissions and selection criteria, the student composition at Wits began to change considerably. The number of students grew from 17,884 in 1994 to 23,232 in 2005, which was a sharp increase given that student numbers had remained relatively static during most of the 1990s.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, the end of apartheid led to an influx of international students, particularly from the Southern African Development Community (SADC). From 1997 to 2005, the number of international students increased from 701 to 2,072. More importantly, the number of students from working class backgrounds began to increase, which has meant that many more students have enrolled who do not possess the necessary social and cultural capital to meet the challenges of the typically elitist academic and institutional culture at Wits. The university in turn has had to face the challenge of adapting its learning and teaching practices to students who do not come from middle-class backgrounds and, more broadly, transforming the social relations between lecturers and students and among students.

This study is about the complex interplay between the formal, social and pedagogical practices at Wits and the social and academic life of its diverse student population, many of whom fall into the category of 'non-traditional' or 'underprepared' students, i.e. black students from diverse social and educational backgrounds (Wits, 2003b).

<sup>55</sup> E17, Electronic engineering, AF, nR (See Section 1.2 of this chapter for explanation of coding of interviews.)

<sup>56</sup> The student population now more closely reflects the demographics of the country. In 2005, Wits had a total of 23,232 students, of whom 14,960 were black (10,884 African, 3,455 Indian and 621 coloured) and only 8,269 were white.

It is not clear how closely or in what manner the question of throughput and retention relates to these changes in student demographics.<sup>57</sup> We mention the changes in order to sketch the background against which this study takes place - we do not intend to imply that we see the increase in 'underprepared' students as a cause of lower throughput rates. Increases in overall student numbers, changes in students' expectations and attitudes, decreasing funding and changes in funding approaches, changes in management practices and the related impact on the culture of the university and changes in the university's staffing profile may all play a role.

The question of retention and throughput has now become a major concern across all faculties and schools. To address this challenge, various Faculty and Senate committees have undertaken several studies.<sup>58</sup> This study uses a broadly critical cultural approach to explain access and retention.

### 1.1 AIMS OF THE STUDY

This study investigates a range of campus experiences, perceptions of and attitudes to campus processes and practices, and the social context in which students learn and staff, faculty and administrators work. It seeks to clarify the enabling and constraining conditions for achieving the university's goals for access, throughput and retention. It addresses the following main questions:

- How do students negotiate their access and success within the Wits institutional environment?
- What individual or collective resources (cultural and material) do they resort to in the process?
- How does the institution mediate this process?

To do this it explores three aspects of the Wits cultural web: (i) the institutional memory (histories, legacies, traditions, values and ethos) that the dominant culture tends to privilege and the discourses and assumptions and related institutional policies that form the basis of the university's academic and student practices; (ii) how these influence academic performance and the current throughput rates; and (iii) students' diverse experiences at the university of, on the one hand, racism, cultural isolation, sexual harassment and violence and, on the other, generally positive academic interactions and scholarly engagement.

The study seeks<sup>59</sup> to recapture Morrow's (1993) distinction between formal and epistemological access. It focuses on the institutional culture of the university in order to identify those practices, norms and values that constrain and those that enable successful participation for the increasingly diverse student body. Given the radical change in the profile of students admitted at Wits, the question of formal access has been significantly addressed. It is epistemological access that needs more attention.

Low graduation rates, high dropout rates and general academic underperformance are central problems facing South African universities. The CHE points out that currently 'there is little understanding of why large numbers of students are dropping out of higher education institutions' and raises a concern that 'current quantitative approaches to understanding throughput in terms of systemic inefficiencies rarely

<sup>57</sup> According to CHE (2006), the graduation rate for universities has been relatively stable over the years 1986 to 2003 - showing a slump only in the early 2000s, which is accounted for by increasing student numbers and the formula being used: 'It is clear from studying all the graduation rates ... that most universities rates are stable, although there is no sign of definite improvement.' The report goes on to say that 'since no progress has been made with the improvement of the graduation rates over the last 18 years under the SAPSE subsidy formula with a very large emphasis on rewarding student success, the prospects of improving the graduation rates in future in HE look rather bleak. The improvement of graduation rates in an environment of increasing S/L ratios (consequentially with larger class sizes) will probably be impossible if academic standards are not to be jeopardised' (CHE, 2006: 130).

<sup>58</sup> Senate S2003/2183; Senate S2003/2196; Council C2003/412

<sup>59</sup> Students who are admitted to the university have formal access but they may not have access to the knowledge and information that the institution holds. Morrow terms this epistemological access.



address questions about the multiple ways in which the academic experience affects student performance and retention' (CHE, 2005). Indeed, the only investigation on throughput and retention driven by Wits Senate (Wits, 2003b) falls within this (quantitative) paradigm and adds little to our understanding of the obstacles impeding academic success for a considerable number of students.

The chapter has three main sections. Section 2 deals with how students experience and respond to institutional efforts to promote a healthy and dynamic student life on campus. It engages with what students know about the official domain of the university and how they perceive it, and its efforts to create an enabling environment for students. Following Manning's classification of culture in higher education (Manning, 1993), Section 3 focuses on the values and assumptions that underlie what students say about learning at a university, their expectations of themselves and their lecturers, and the rules and academic conventions they attribute to the social space of learning and teaching at Wits. Section 4 deals with four focal areas of student social experience and how these relate to student social and academic development. Section 5 concludes by reviewing the findings of the earlier sections and examining what these might mean for Wits. We outline three possible responses to the findings of this study and elaborate on the implications of each.

## 1.2 METHODOLOGY AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study focused on third-year students in the faculties of Humanities, Science, and Engineering and the Built Environment. These faculties were selected because they have the lowest throughput rates at Wits. Institutional rules and policies were examined, in particular those implemented in the past five years. Issues of curriculum and pedagogy dominated a significant part of student experience and were addressed to the extent that students raised them as critical to their experience.

A literature review examined theoretical and empirical studies on culture; university culture and epistemological access; national and international studies on student throughput and retention higher education transformation; and institutional culture.<sup>60</sup> The documents collected and analysed included throughput statistics for the three faculties; mission statements; strategy, policy and procedure documents at institution, faculty and school level; and initiatives taken at institution, faculty and school level to improve or understand throughput issues.

The study set out to interview 5% of the third-year students<sup>61</sup> enrolled in the three faculties. The target sample was differentiated by race, gender and whether students were resident on or off campus. Of a target of 124 students, 107 interviews of third-year undergraduate students were completed - 86% of the target. In general the sample reflected the target in terms of race, gender and place of residence, with the notable exception of white students, who were under-represented across all three faculties. A team of eight master's students from the same faculties as the undergraduate students conducted the student interviews. The interviewers attended a one-day training workshop where they were introduced to the study and practised open-ended interviewing techniques.

The staff interviews were conducted by PhD students. Eight staff members were interviewed from Humanities, seven from Science, and eight from Engineering and the Built Environment. Three members of the administrative staff were also interviewed. The quotations from the interviews were edited for clarity by omitting hesitation (*um, er*) and repetition (*to, to, to*) without compromising meaning.

<sup>60</sup> See Chapter Two.

<sup>61</sup> 'Third-year students' was interpreted to mean students completing courses at the third-year level.

In this report, we follow current university categorisation required for equity and access reporting purposes. Accordingly, race is described as white or black, with black being further divided into coloured, Indian and African. Quotations from student interviews are coded for faculty (H for Humanities, S for Science, E for Engineering and the Built Environment); interview number; course; race (A, C, I or W respectively for African, coloured, Indian or white); gender (F or M); and residence status (R or nR for students who are resident or non-resident on the campus). So, for example, 'E24, electrical engineering, AF, R' is student number 24 from the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment who is an African woman studying electrical engineering and staying in a university residence. Staff interviews are coded for faculty and interview number. So, for example, 'Staff H02' is staff member 2 in Humanities.

Conceptually, we examine the ways in which the intersections and interactions (sometimes productive, sometimes not) among various sets of cultures or subcultures influence the quality of students' social and academic experiences, and ultimately their academic success. These sets of cultures can be located within three main conceptual domains. In demarcating these conceptual domains, we follow Bernstein's analysis of intellectual fields and pedagogical identities (Bernstein, 1990, 2000). The first intellectual field Bernstein identifies is the official field which we refer to as the official domain. This encompasses aspects that have some bearing on the shaping or reproduction of the dominant institutional culture, including its institutional vision or mission, policies and rules and guidelines that regulate academic and social life on campus. The second is the pedagogic field, which we refer to as the pedagogic domain. This includes discourses, strategies, inputs and processes connected to the university's curriculum and teaching and learning activities - the academic culture and practices. The relations between these intellectual domains, which are both compatible and conflicting, give rise to specific student experiences and identities. The third conceptual domain we look at is students' agency and positionality within the framework of the social domain. In our view, it is the dialectic between these three intellectual domains that shapes student experience and enables or constrains epistemological access.

## 2. THE OFFICIAL DOMAIN

In this section we ask two main questions: Are students aware of the different aspects of the normative framework (the policies, rules, norms and standards) that regulates student academic and social life at Wits? How do they interpret it, and how do they respond to it? To explore these questions we concentrate on what students say about how they encounter, experience or confront Wits institutional life, particularly the meanings they attach to perceived *institutional facts* and constitutive rules. Also of importance to our analysis are real or perceived aspects of institutional identity. These can be physical - such as official institutional publications, websites, memorials, buildings and their names, signs and symbols; verbal - for example privileged stories in vehicles of communication such as Wits News, Wits *Student* or *Vuvuzela*, myths, official messages, speeches and campus language; or behavioural - rituals such as graduation ceremonies, rites of initiation, cultural performances and traditions. Institutional identity is also expressed through established rules and norms, social conventions and organisational principles, and through the values and assumptions expressed by institutional managers or leaders in the name of the institution and used as guiding or warning signs (Manning, 1993). These are critical for understanding how students negotiate an enabling moral code and shape their behaviour and lifestyle.

### 2.1 IMAGINING WITS: WHAT DO STAFF AND STUDENTS THINK OF WITS?

Wits positions itself as a high-quality research institution with recognised international standing. This is reflected in Wits policy documents and media advertising and in staff and student views of Wits.

Student views were articulated through a variety of descriptors based on information from parents, friends, media, alumni, staff members and fellow students. Here are some examples: 'Wits offers a high standard of education'; 'Wits is world-recognised and the standard of education is very high'; 'I will be getting a good quality of education'; 'An internationally recognised university'; 'I will be highly marketable'; 'It has a very good reputation, more than other universities in South Africa'; 'Wits is a university with a lot of heritage and that is what is appealing to me'; 'The qualifications of Wits are top-notch'; 'One of the leading universities in South Africa'; 'A centre of intellectual thought'; and 'I always thought it was a cool university ... you know when kids say it's cool, it's something they want to get into ... probably because it's in Joburg and Joburg is the thing'. Students comment that Wits offers more than just a qualification: it offers both formal curriculum and opportunities to develop leadership skills. Some alluded to the slogan 'Wits gives you the edge'.<sup>62</sup>

Many students considered themselves 'lucky' or 'honoured' to be at Wits and also felt they were 'top students' in the country.<sup>63</sup> Besides family, friends and peers, several factors seem to have brought Wits to their attention:

*You look at the news, even when I was still in high school, any news analysis done, it was always a professor from Wits University. So there is a question of distance and although there is RAU<sup>64</sup> next door, but for me things like that when you see them on TV they influence your perception a lot.<sup>65</sup>*

*I guess it means getting the best form of education since this campus is one of the best in South Africa if not the best. It is quite an achievement you know, especially toward the black people. There is so much respect for Wits than most other universities. If you happen to come to Wits there is this prestige about it.<sup>66</sup>*

Staff expressed similar views. When asked what attracted them to work at Wits, their responses included:

*I found Wits to be one of the major universities in South Africa.<sup>67</sup>*

*Geosciences in South Africa, and I would say in Africa, is centred around what happens in this university. We are the flagship, we are ranked in the top 100 universities in the world. In the geosciences we're the only one in Africa that way.<sup>68</sup>*

*The university had a very good reputation ... I like the way that it is a varied and challenging university. It's got very high academic standards but at the same time it doesn't suffer from the same complacency that you often get with very high calibre universities.<sup>69</sup>*

The significance of staff and student images of Wits goes beyond expressed feelings of pride and honour. They are also constructs of expectations and how these should be met. More specifically, these constructs

<sup>62</sup> Students H08, H27

<sup>63</sup> Students E03, E04, E26, E27, E29

<sup>64</sup> Rand Afrikaans University, now the University of Johannesburg

<sup>65</sup> H11, Media studies & international relations, AF, nR

<sup>66</sup> H15, Political science, AM, nR

<sup>67</sup> Staff E02

<sup>68</sup> Staff S04

<sup>69</sup> Staff E01

are about recognising and interpreting the specific institutional rules, adjusting to established living and academic standards, and coping with the challenges of campus life. Embedded in them are students' predispositions and their degree of preparedness for integration into campus life.

## 2.2. INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION AT WITS

Our analysis of official documents, including the Wits mission statement (Wits, 2007), (Wits, 2005b), Wits Transformation Strategy (Wits, 2005c), and other strategy documents and our review of previous studies (Wits, 2002a, 2003a,b) reveal considerable institutional commitment to changing the culture of the institution to be more inclusive. The Wits mission statement strongly advocates social inclusiveness, anti-racism, anti-sexism, supporting tolerance and diversity, ensuring the active participation of students and staff in all aspects of the institution, and creating an enabling environment by providing well-resourced, well-maintained and friendly campuses. This means that at policy level Wits has committed itself to providing the necessary collective resources (institutional forms of support and mediation) to students who need help to supplement individual resources or to compensate for the lack of these. By 'resources' we mean the necessary pedagogical, service and social structures as well as mediation strategies that enable a productive and generative learning environment that is inclusive and supportive, particularly for historically disadvantaged students.

The University has acknowledged that it has not represented a home for many communities who felt marginalised (Webster, 1987; Van Zyl et. al., 2003) and has taken steps to ensure that all students and staff have a sense of belonging and operate in an environment where they can excel. The cultural project is focused on celebrating diversity by promoting 'one campus, many cultures'<sup>70</sup> The institution has developed a wide range of policies and strategies to support transformation, including Wits 2010 (Wits, 2005b), the new admissions policy, the employment equity plan, the language policy (Wits, 2003c), the policy on sexual and racial discrimination, and the policy on disability and HIV/AIDS (Wits, 2002b) and also a wide range of structures and programmes, which includes the throughput committee and the transformation task team.

Of course, one could argue that an inclusive learning environment is not a condition for successful academic participation or that the main priority of a university is to make sure that it produces research of international standards and provides education for students who can cope with its standards and, therefore, the fact that the university formally enables access for diverse students demonstrates its commitment to transformation. This is a crude claim that does not match students' perceptions of their experiences at Wits. The challenge facing Wits, which cannot be adequately addressed within the boundaries of this investigation, is to explore what a productive and generative environment should be like, what kinds of structures, strategies and practices constitute productive interventions, which of these are provided across faculties, and what happens to students who need this support but do not get it or, in other words, how they experience its institutional culture. This would certainly minimise the current perception among many students that there is a disjuncture between institutional policy commitments and institutional practice.

Students tend to privilege policy issues that have a direct bearing on student life, their situation or location on campus, their immediate needs and experience (such as the code of conduct, sexual harassment policy, student exclusion and financial aid policy, and social and recreational concerns). They are less aware of policies that appear more removed from their immediate and situated context, such as are expressed in the

<sup>70</sup> In fact Wits has more than one campus.

mission statement, the language policy and the internationalisation strategy. And they are largely silent about issues of national concern, within or beyond higher education.

A variety of initiatives in the areas of teaching and learning, curriculum innovation and pedagogy across Wits have sought to improve success and retention rates,<sup>71</sup> including training and support for staff through the Centre for Learning and Teaching Development (CLTD); a more inclusive language policy (Wits, 2003c); the introduction of an extended or bridging curriculum; the establishment of a Writing Centre; monitoring of courses in which the pass rate differs significantly from the norm; the Pre-Bursary Scheme in the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment; foundation courses in the Faculty of Humanities; physical, social and emotional services provided by the division of Student Affairs, and a study of the gap between matriculation and the first year of study, to upgrade teachers' content knowledge and investigate the advantages and disadvantages of more inclusive admission policies (Alfred et al., 2000; Mumba et al., 2002; Enslin et al., 2006).

### 2.3 STUDENT EXPERIENCES OF TRANSFORMATION

While students show appreciation for the positive experiences emanating from the diversification of the student body and the consequent enhancement of the campus environment, perceptions about *institutional racism* are still entrenched in some academic and administrative structures. The student interview material indicates that institutional commitment to transformation is not widely understood, and that not all students experience it the same way. Although many students acknowledge that Wits has made significant progress in instituting policies, values and principles designed to promote human rights, social responsibility and justice, equity and equal opportunity, academic freedom and freedom of expression, and the well-being of students on campus, for some it remains in many ways a 'white', 'elitist', 'alienating' and 'racist' institution. These perceptions are aggravated by a lack of awareness of the policies and strategies already in place to deal with race, diversity and representivity issues. Perceptions of institutional racism were expressed with reference to the following aspects of institutional life: (i) racial imbalance in both academic and administrative staffing, (ii) student failure, (iii) experiences with some academic and administrative staff, and (iv) the university financial aid strategy.

Some students perceive the current race imbalances in both academic and administrative staff as a manifestation of racial discrimination:

*What I have noticed is that 'nothing can be done'. It seems like they don't give black people a chance. They give black people minor jobs like secretaries and that. They don't want them to get involved in higher standards, higher levels.<sup>72</sup>*

Our impression is that the University authorities have not effectively explained the Wits strategies for implementing staffing policies, particularly the employment equity targets, to the wider student community. Students cannot articulate these policies beyond regarding them as management tools for reporting purposes. This seems, for example, to be behind the way some students interpret the decision by the University authorities to close down the School of Social Work:

<sup>71</sup> WITS 2010 and FJC/Admissions Policy, 25 October 2003, S2003/1713a

<sup>72</sup> S05, Zoology, AF, nR

*I was quite disappointed because there are some faculties that I shall not name, that display or love racism ... There are some elements of racism that you encounter, but as subtle as they are, [they] are there. And with the whole thing of social work closing down ... Apparently there are rumours saying its closing down, and I'm not too happy about that, because it is a department that is dominantly black.<sup>73</sup>*

There is also the perception that white faculty deliberately fails black students.<sup>74</sup> For example, the current failure rate in Engineering was attributed by one student to white faculty members who, in his view, may want to 'frustrate the system' because they cannot get jobs elsewhere:

*I think that I'll talk about the negative side of it because, as you know ... in my school, only 25% of the students who are initially registered in first year ... will graduate, so not everyone, and in that 25% black people are the minority. You find ... one, two or three, when the 75% could be mostly ... black people. So I think that, because the government is trying to push the affirmative action ... you get people who are trying to frustrate the system from the university level. And because ... we do know that ... a white guy will not get a job easily in my field ... and most of the people who are lecturing us here on campus are the white, the same people who are not getting jobs outside, so ... I just really suspect that they could be trying to frustrate that system from a university level.<sup>75</sup>*

Perceived double standards in the way administrative staff address student issues have also been reported as a matter of concern:

*In general the whole university is fine although the racism is unnerving sometimes. It is really annoying especially when it comes to administration. In order to get things done, you have got to bring in white people ... When white people go and approach the administration, things happen very quickly but if you're black, you have to run around and get this person's authority and this person will shift you to that person, etcetera, because they just don't trust black people.*

*We had a performance with the marimba band and we had to get Wits T shirts because we were representing Wits. Obviously we had to get the money from the Department so that we can go and get the T shirts and have them printed. ... My tutor Ms A said I should go and fetch the money, so I went to Ms B, the admin. person who deals with accounts. Then Ms B tells me she has not been told that I have to get the money. So I had to go to Mr A to authorise it first. So I go to Mr A and Mr A has not been told that someone is coming to fetch the money ... I didn't like it because another white guy from our class went to fetch it and easily got it.<sup>76</sup>*

## 2.4 FINANCIAL PROBLEMS

Financial problems have a significant impact on student experience and many of the students interviewed were receiving financial aid. The Engineering Faculty students in particular receive company sponsorship, which they regard as sufficient to address their needs.<sup>77</sup> However, there seem to be students who are forced

<sup>73</sup> H07, Psychology & African literature, AF, R

<sup>74</sup> H07, Psychology and African literature, AF, R

<sup>75</sup> E03, Electrical engineering, AF, R

<sup>76</sup> H20, Music, FW, nR

<sup>77</sup> E26, Quantity surveying, AM, nR

to share their financial aid with family members<sup>78</sup> and thus struggle to meet basic student needs such as photocopying textbooks and regular meals.<sup>79</sup> A sociology student highlighted her difficulties by indicating that her mother is a domestic worker and her father unemployed. She stressed that she finds it difficult to talk to her friends about her problems because:

*You know for instance at home you don't have enough food. How do you tell somebody who is wealthy that at home, we don't have food and everything? How could they understand?*<sup>80</sup>

In addition, the increase in tuition fees and the cost of textbooks and food are not matched by adequate financial aid, a development that tends to disadvantage the poor.<sup>81</sup> Related to this is the university policy on financial exclusions, which is regarded as unfair:

*A lot of students have also been excluded. And on the issue of race, because a lot of black people rely on financial aid, that is pretty obvious for everybody. It makes you wonder again, because Wits is reputed for being a Jewish institution, I'm not certain about that, but pretty much is owned by whites. Okay, they say they are allowing us to come in, but what is happening with these ridiculous shoots [in fees] and they don't do anything to compensate for that?*<sup>82</sup>

Staff, however, felt that some improvements had been made in funding students. For example, one said:

*We have voluntary field trips and students are meant to cater for themselves and I think the first time we went, students actually ended up stealing some of the food I had taken. So that after that I have always said, okay, if you can't afford to take food, just come and tell me quietly and I've taken food along. And I used to have bigger parties asking for that, and ... I think we had one who came on the one trip without food this year and they kind of had a problem about not being able to draw the money. It seemed like it was more bad planning perhaps than not having the resources.*

*Because I think the way we were applying the money was to give more people less money. So we were paying fees and giving them some money to support themselves. Whereas the policy is now rather to pay everything for fewer. So in some ways it means that we do have much less of the economic disparities between students but it might mean that fewer students have access. And possibly the current strategy is better because those students who did have access with insufficient money were perhaps then not performing well and might have left with some level of debt.*<sup>83</sup>

Also contested is the university fees policy, though not necessarily on racial grounds. Students are required to make an upfront payment of R5,000 before registration to secure admission to the University. The balance of the tuition fees must be paid on or before the last working day of March and interest is charged on the balance owing. International students (i.e. those who are not South African citizens or who do not have permanent residence status in South Africa) are required to pay their fees in full before registration.

<sup>78</sup> Staff EO2

<sup>79</sup> H08, Sociology and psychology, AF, R

<sup>80</sup> H08, Sociology and psychology, AF, R

<sup>81</sup> H07, Psychology, AF, R

<sup>82</sup> H07, Psychology, AF, R

<sup>83</sup> Staff S04

## 2.5 OTHER CHANGES AFFECTING STAFF

At the same time, increasing student numbers, increased managerialism and decreasing funding have resulted in academic staff feeling overworked, carrying heavier administrative loads and having to deal with problems with facilities. As one staff member commented:

*I found that we've been getting larger and larger classes. It's a struggle to get venues ... For exams, to get a venue for over a hundred students, and then splitting into other venues ... At one point we had five hundred students for a tut [tutorial]. We had to split them into three groups, but were forced to split them into two because the venues were in close proximity to each other and we could find the bodies to man them. I feel bad because you can't run an effective tut with a very large group, especially for group work. Sometimes I am able to do the things I want to do and the other times I can't.<sup>84</sup>*

While most lecturers praise the administrative staff in their departments, they criticise the support they receive from faculty and central administration. And they uniformly decry the increased paperwork. One staff member said, 'Aagh! Without doubt - we're just churning paper'.<sup>85</sup> And according to another, 'The academic is spending more time doing administrative work, so our teaching suffers,<sup>86</sup> our research suffers'. The overarching impression created by academics is that they are working to capacity.

## 3. THE PEDAGOGIC DOMAIN

In this section we look at how students experiences the spaces of teaching and learning at the university. We first examine interviews, to understand how students and staff interpret and negotiate the social space of learning, and then the various pedagogic approaches evident at Wits, relating these to the students' experience. We also discuss the students' goals and identities and how these relate to their approaches to learning.

### 3.1 THE SOCIAL SPACE OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

Here we examine the dynamics and processes through which students negotiate the social space of learning, exploring the interplay of factors that help to shape it and the dynamics and processes that affect student performance. We do this with reference to the following aspects articulated in both student and staff constructs: (3.1.1) the school and the university as binary social and learning spaces, (3.1.2) staff and student expectations about their responsibilities and roles in teaching and learning, (3.1.3) the relationship between the student and the lecturer as an educative authority, (3.1.4) the relationship between academic and personal life in the learning process, and (3.1.5) how race and language delineate the social space of teaching and learning.

#### 3.1.1 School and university as binary teaching and learning spaces

At Wits, students encounter a learning environment very different from the one they have come from, the school. The university learning environment appears to be open, unlike the school environment, which is regimented by rules and regulations: 'In school ... you're constantly being watched, you're being monitored, kind of so you don't break the rules.'<sup>87</sup> In contrast to this, the academic environment is attractive because of its freedom: 'I did come around once when I was in school and I saw people having, like, freedom, you

<sup>84</sup> Staff S02

<sup>85</sup> Staff H08

<sup>86</sup> Staff E02

<sup>87</sup> E06, Urban planning, IM, nR



know, the freedom which you do have in university and it was kind of attractive, I thought, from a young age.<sup>88</sup>

In the learning space of the university no one 'nags' you to do things or to do them on time:

*But when I got to Wits, I realised I wasn't prepared, high school didn't prepare me, it was a shock, the workload, and independent, you have to do things on your own, at your own pace, because in high school, your teacher is always nagging at you, do this exercise, do this, you know exactly that if you don't stretch, the teachers carry the stress for you, you just have to be there, you know. And getting to Wits was quite an eye opener, and now I appreciate that as an individual I practise urgency.<sup>89</sup>*

And no one tells you how to study:

*I thought they do everything for you, like making the academic stuff easier but it was not. I did not for instance know anything about the computer, until I got here. I didn't know how to search for books in the library ... Even in studying, they don't really tell you how to study.<sup>90</sup>*

It is important to note why we characterise the context of the university as appearing to be open. This is because, underpinning the apparent openness, a particular relation of authority marks the social space of learning and teaching at the university - the lecturer authorises knowledge. This is evident in the way students describe what they do when they seek advice or help and the procedures they follow. What comes out clearly is a sense of hierarchy and seniority - lecturers at the top, then senior students (tutors), then peers at the bottom layer. Here are the choices:

*Well I have lots of friends on campus, some doing things similar to mine, so I can consult with them any time, if they can they will help ... otherwise tutors are always there with their consultation times, which sometimes are not at the best times so you have to try and fit in, and I also consult with lecturers.<sup>91</sup>*

However, if one is looking for an answer that is guaranteed, one goes to lecturers:

*You don't want to be confused by someone else. If you're getting ... the information from someone who's going to be testing you, I'm sure ... you more guaranteed to be doing the right thing, unlike hearing something from someone else. So I do prefer ... consultation with the lecturers.<sup>92</sup>*

A sense of degree of difficulty gives the student a sequence of possible options: (i) 'If I have difficulties, I try to sort them out on my own, if I find I have no way of understanding I discuss with my friends, if that doesn't help then I go and consult my lecturers',<sup>93</sup> (ii) 'Mostly if you just need a little help you do go to your friends; for something major you go to your lecturers',<sup>94</sup> or (iii) 'It depends on the question; if I think it's a

<sup>88</sup> E06, Urban planning, IM, nR

<sup>89</sup> H07, Psychology & African literature, AF, R

<sup>90</sup> H08, Sociology & psychology, AF, R

<sup>91</sup> H13, International relations, IF, R

<sup>92</sup> E03, Electrical engineering, AF, R

<sup>93</sup> H07, Psychology & African literature, AF, R

<sup>94</sup> E29, Urban planning, IF, nR

stupid question I just ask my colleagues, but if I think it's important, like relevant to my essay, I go straight to the lecturer'.<sup>95</sup>

At times, the view of authority is mediated through perspectives that emanate from outside the academic culture - from a perceived African culture. In this regard, some students claimed that they find it difficult to consult their lecturers because, in their view, it is difficult in an African culture to interact closely with people who are old, or older than oneself. The challenge for them is to develop the necessary confidence to be able to communicate with older people and lecturers:

*You know I come from a culture where we tend to respect older people and have to listen to them. But, right, I can enter into any conversation with an adult and speak confidently. So it is that confidence that is one of the things that I have actually got from Wits. It is the assertiveness and learning to substantiate my own ideas.*<sup>96</sup>

Briefly, in contrast to school culture, in an academic culture students are expected to engage knowledge by marshalling evidence rather than by deferring to teacher authority. Here we draw on the famous distinction made by Peters (1966) between demanding consent in lieu of being 'in authority' and dealing with knowledge from a position of 'an authority'. The former uses formal authority to demand consent whereas the latter requires analysis and explanation as a mode of justification of an idea. The rules of the former are far more explicit as they are located in the formal authority of the person (a school teacher, a university lecturer). The rules of the latter are implicit and debated. They are drawn from the field epistemology and refer to the form in which ideas are produced academically. Whilst they appear to allow freedom and dissent, the criteria for justification are formal; they are not up for grabs. Therefore, what appears to be free and open, by contrast to the learning and teaching spaces at school, is in fact structured around the authority of the lecturer and those who are close to the lecturer in the hierarchy (senior students, tutors, and so on), with tight constitutive rules on how to behave and what to do to demonstrate competence. The challenge facing Wits students is how to reconstitute and position themselves productively in relation to the educative authority. This depends largely on how they understand or interpret the nature of this authority and their own responsibility towards it.

### 3.1.2 'We are not here to spoon-feed you'

So far we have dealt with the educative authority ('an authority'), its hierarchical structure ('in authority') represented by the lecturer, and how students relate to this authority. On the other side are the students who are subject to this authority. How do they see their role in this relationship? How do they portray their share in the moral contract? Many of the students convey a clear sense that it is up to the individual student (irrespective of her/his particular problems and difficulties) to capitalise on what the institution offers. They say, for example, "They encourage a sense of expressing your own opinion and thinking for yourself so that you can draw your own conclusions"<sup>97</sup> or "They allow you to be an individual, there are no rules in the group, if you don't see one person for a month, it is fine"<sup>98</sup> or,

*Basically this is where you get to establish yourself as an individual. Wits gives you room to be an individual. You realise what you want, they propose all sorts of things, and you have to*

<sup>95</sup> EH27, History of art & media studies, AM, R

<sup>96</sup> E01, Urban & regional planning, AM, nR

<sup>97</sup> H13, Psychology & international relations, IM, nR

<sup>98</sup> H22, Political science & international relations, MA, nR

*grab whatever you can. And it is not restrictive, you're allowed to venture into anything and experience with anything, and so definitely it does give you the edge.<sup>99</sup>*

This is not to say that students do not have expectations of the institution; they do. But they talk more clearly (and more repeatedly) about the need for understanding their role vis-à-vis learning and performing than they do about the responsibilities of their lecturers. Lecturers are described as 'interesting', 'boring', 'resourceful', 'passionate' or 'racist'. Students on the other hand are tasked with the responsibility to work hard and get the results.<sup>100</sup> The following student makes sure that when he does not understand, he makes a point of finding out:

*I always make sure that what I don't understand I will try to find information and ...work hard on that. I committed myself to understand things although ... they gave me problems, but no, I think that ... sometimes ... you don't always need to go to ... tutors and lecturers asking for a hand ... say I don't understand it, this term, what does it mean? You have to go through the thing until you get it.<sup>101</sup>*

The Wits environment is considered conducive to learning but only when one works hard: 'It is positive if you work hard, I mean if you don't work hard you can't consult because what is it you will be going to consult on?'<sup>102</sup> What really matters is 'putting in effort and coming out with something which is worthwhile and positive'. Together with 'responsibility' and 'hard work' in such an environment, students need initiative. They need to get out there to the specialist, the lecturer, and confirm that they have understood: 'Ja, I do, very much so, actually I'm one of those people that you'll find following the lecturer after lectures, to go and confirm, yes.'<sup>103</sup> There is here a clear reduction of the notion of institutional responsibility and an expansion of self as the centre of power, action, change and development. 'I practice urgency', 'If I have difficulties; I try to sort them out on my own', 'I commit myself', 'You have to go through the thing until you get it' - these are the kinds of claims made by students, which disclose their conception of themselves as the primary locus of responsibility.

The idea that students have to be resourceful, independent and work hard is reinforced by lecturers:

*My very first lecture is one of establishing the contract between my student and myself. What is my duty and what is their duty? We look at what we are supposed to get out of the time that we spend together. So that's the one thing that I would establish. The second question is always, always the same. Are there any disadvantaged students in this class? And it is interesting to see who puts up their hands. And I always look right through and never find any disadvantaged students - simply because we are all at Wits University. Do you understand? So I already set the course straight about, I don't believe in hard luck stories, I believe in effort.<sup>104</sup>*

*What needs to change is the student attitude. There needs to be an attitudinal change. That attitudinal change can only come about when a student body recognise that nobody owes them anything. For every*

<sup>99</sup> H07, Psychology & African literature, AF, R

<sup>100</sup> H11, Media studies & international relations, AF, nR.

<sup>101</sup> E04, Quantity surveying, AM, R

<sup>102</sup> H08, Sociology & psychology, AF, R

<sup>103</sup> E03, Electrical engineering, AF, R

<sup>104</sup> Staff H08

*student who gets into Wits, there's another five million who did not make it. So those students who get in need to recognise that they have a one shot, one golden opportunity and they need to make that. People fail because they claim that they were ill and the illness again comes a part of because of the lifestyle, they didn't study, they have problems at home.<sup>105</sup>*

*As much as the education system says that they are giving them critical education, I think they come to university thinking that everything has to be dictated to them, given to them in notes. My personal teaching style is not tell, I like to ask ... And I get the feedback, 'Could you not just tell it to us?' It's because it's too much of effort to engage in and maybe the workload is very demanding in this field, in this course, so they can't keep up with the reading at the same time and then have a discussion.<sup>106</sup>*

And staff feel that 'students don't take personal responsibility for learning' and 'expect information to be brought to their attention, or to them, as opposed to investigating and searching for information'.<sup>107</sup>

A different facet of responsibility is how students negotiate their power in view of the reverence accorded to the educative authority, which makes the public space of transmission one in which the self can feel vulnerable and shy. Students negotiate their power by deciding where to sit, and when and if at all to participate actively in the public sphere of the lecture room. A striking feature here is the minimal, or in some cases absence of, mediation in this process. For some students, active participation is associated with embarrassment or even sheer fear:

*I find them interesting although I know I don't participate as much as I should. In tutorials, I do, but I get a bit intimidated in lectures. I tend to sit at the back and there are always three or four [other] people [there].<sup>108</sup>*

*I participate in tutorials, in lectures I don't, because there are so many people and I feel as if my little question is taking up all the lecturer's time.<sup>109</sup>*

Do you mean like ask questions? *Never, never, never! I wait for the end.*

Why? *I'm too embarrassed. If I had a comment to add, maybe, but hardly ever, once in a blue moon.<sup>110</sup>*

*No ... as you know how ... [in] this degree, the Bachelor of Science in regional planning ... there is a lot of presentation that ... needs to be done ... like, presentations, they are really hectic. Like, my first presentation, ... I really suffered ... because it was my first time to speak in front of people, and in front of my lecturer, whom I really respect ... so it was really challenging ... I wasn't angry, but I was afraid ... lack of confidence.<sup>111</sup>*

<sup>105</sup> Staff E02

<sup>106</sup> Staff H01

<sup>107</sup> Staff E04

<sup>108</sup> H10, Modern languages, WF, nR

<sup>109</sup> H28, International relations & sociology, WF, nR

<sup>110</sup> H09, Psychology & English Literature, WF, nR

<sup>111</sup> E01, Regional planning, AM, nR

Others will take their time but then take the risk:

*Well, participation is something you gain after, afterwards you keep quiet, you shut all the information down. Who else is going to advise you if you can't raise your concern about what you don't understand? I think that participation is needed in class.<sup>112</sup>*

The general sense that emerges here is of students who acknowledge that they need to try to solve their problems, take responsibility for knowing the work that is required, seek the initiative to make a mark, address the lecturer when needed and, when they feel vulnerable, keep a low profile. Having a clear sense of authority over knowledge and the individual self as the locus of responsibility are two important markers of the social space of learning at Wits University. As we will show, the constitutive rules for effective student engagement in these processes tend to be assumed; they are not always made explicit. As a Drama student put it: 'There is this thing they say that 'this is varsity, we are not here to spoon-feed you', that they are lecturers and not teachers'.<sup>113</sup> How do students get to understand how this Wits learning environment works?

### 3.1.3 Learning the rules for the social space of learning and teaching

The rules for the social space of learning and teaching signpost what is possible and what is not, and when and how things operate. We know from the contrasting comments about the school environment that these rules are not transmitted or monitored in the same way at university as they are at school. Student interviewees do not mention being monitored or watched, but they do speak of rules of behaviour that are inscribed in the Wits academic culture and to which they need to adjust. The process of adaptation is not a conscious one: 'It's not like you know that you're changing; it's just that you adapt'.<sup>114</sup> This suggests that the constitutive rules are inscribed in some form of academic expectations, which might not always be explicit, but which clearly require an adaptation: 'It was a completely different environment and ... I had to start from scratch in terms of adjusting'.<sup>115</sup>

What practices are foregrounded by the students that reflect rules or criteria as to how to behave academically at Wits? Very commonly mentioned is when and where one can approach the lecturer. Typical comments are 'They're ... more available to consultation in their offices, rather than after lectures when ... everybody's kind of in a rush, etcetera, so ... they make themselves available more frequently'<sup>116</sup> or 'because they provide consultation time, so it is very convenient, if the times they specify are not convenient for you, you can always make an appointment via a phone call'.<sup>117</sup> Also discussed is how to make contact with the lecturer, for example 'Lecturers usually ... give us ... their office telephone numbers and their office number, where we can reach them, and they always say that, if we need to consult with them, [we] must either just look on their timetable or leave a note under their door, and then we can come make an appointment for consultation with them'<sup>118</sup> or 'Sometimes, e mail, sometimes I go to their offices, sometimes I call - it depends'.<sup>119</sup>

<sup>112</sup> E4, Quantity surveying, AM, R

<sup>113</sup> H14, Drama, AF, nR

<sup>114</sup> E28, Architecture, WF, nR

<sup>115</sup> E03, Electrical engineering, AF, R

<sup>116</sup> E06, Urban planning, IM, nR

<sup>117</sup> H07, Psychology & African literature, AF, R

<sup>118</sup> H46, Education, AF, R

<sup>119</sup> H08, Sociology & psychology, AF, R

Students need to know what is appropriate. For example, the kind of query determines where you raise it: 'Well it depends, when it is a comment I can raise it in class, when it is a problem to do with understanding then I can go to them after class.'<sup>120</sup> They have to come to terms with the pace of the work: 'When the lecturer decides to pile all our work all at one time towards the end of the second block; that really pisses me off.'<sup>121</sup> They need to learn to deal with the pressure of fixed submission dates:

*I think reaching a deadline can be quite difficult. Lecturers can be quite stingy with extensions. I mean, I've never been granted an extension in my life. It's my pain. It's not funny. I literally finished each one on the day or the time in which it's ... [due].*<sup>122</sup>

Students need to learn when to expect marks to be published: 'We want marks and marks are not out yet.'<sup>123</sup> The tight timetabling of the exams can be a problem:

*Now there was one time when I got my exam timetable and there was one exam in the afternoon and also another the following morning. I was so exhausted. That is really one of the worst things that I got really annoyed about. I know they have a lot of trouble trying to set up timetables and avoiding clashes but that was pretty annoying. I think that impacted on my marks a lot, I can't remember what I got but I remember I was really exhausted.*<sup>124</sup>

When the rules and expectations are not clearly communicated, students feel overwhelmed or frightened ('thrown into the deep end'). When this happens, some withdraw, while others, such as the student quoted in the following, rely on their own 'personal discipline':

*Well, last semester we had a new lecturer. They introduced TV production this year and it is still a very new course. He gave us a new course outline and here we're thinking, in the third week we will do this and so on. What happened eventually was that he started doing his own personal work using school equipment; he sort of started a cute little production company of his own. So the time we were supposed to be having our lectures he ended up going off to do his business and we showed up for the lecturer and he is not there. At the end of the day we knew that if we were going to go for TV production there was not going to be a class, so we asked him what we are going to do for our marks and his response was: 'Do whatever you want.' People went haywire, they got cameras, shot whatever, edited, like I ended up editing something for two months. I learned a lot but one thing he taught me was that if I didn't have my personal discipline I wouldn't have learned anything ... If a lecturer gives us a course outline, he is supposed to follow it. (Our emphasis)*

*Also TV production this semester was not so bad but we were sort of thrown into the deep end. We were divided into three groups and the lecturer gave one lecture on the practical aspects of studio work. We shot in one day, exchanging positions all through - we didn't really know what we were supposed to do. Then we were given about three or four lectures then we were told, 'Go and work on your stuff'. So we went in, worked on our ideas and as time drew closer to our exam, it became more and more difficult, we felt thrown into the deep end. CTV were given like four lecturers and had a whole reading*

<sup>120</sup> H13, International relations, IF, nR

<sup>121</sup> E30, Urban planning, AF, R

<sup>122</sup> H28, International relations & sociology, WF, nR

<sup>123</sup> E29, Urban planning, IF, nR

<sup>124</sup> H09, Psychology & English literature, WF, nR

*pack on what to do in studio. So it was really difficult but one thing it did for me personally was that it forced me to think on my feet and work.*<sup>125</sup> (Our emphasis)

Staff, however, tend to feel that the criteria are communicated:

*At the beginning of each course a student has a very clear idea of the course aims, the outcomes, the assessment criteria, and the course content, the reading list, everything is in a little pack, and that then gives the student a very clear idea of what they're committed to in the course and it gives them a sort of route map through the course, which then allows them to monitor their own performance, which I think is a far more positive way of doing it than a big stick teacher running after them kind of technique, which will maybe help them through your course but doesn't necessarily help them in terms of their personal growth.*<sup>126</sup>

And some feel that, even when they are, they are not adhered to: 'We've also had a big problem with lack of attendance, and we've also had a big problem with plagiarism in that class.'<sup>127</sup> Staff also express their own frustrations when norms of behaviour that they expect are not adhered to: 'I have to ask people two, three times to keep quiet and to single people out and I've had to send some out of class and I hate doing that.'<sup>128</sup>

The social sphere of learning and teaching consists of layers of criteria and assumptions. What students describe above are the outside layers of the practice of learning - time frames, course outlines, etc. These are important, but they do not disclose the evaluation criteria of the knowledge base itself, or the kind of text that the student is expected to produce. Students have to come to grips with less explicit principles that underlie the specialisation or the discipline:<sup>129</sup>

*And you know it is what you learn from each subject and not necessarily in the actual curriculum. It is the principles that are taught through the subject and how you incorporate that into the career that you want to have.*

Making the underlying criteria explicit is important in a culture of performance, where the idea of standards to be achieved is paramount. In the following quotation, a very dedicated student in the Faculty of Humanities discloses her frustration. She knows that there are criteria. She knows that these are drawn from the specialisation of the academic field, in this case psychology, but they are not made clear and can be misinterpreted. What this student wants is a set of criteria that will make success or failure equally visible, and thus help her to regulate epistemological access:

*Okay, my first year was tough in both subjects - you know in psychology the language they use is different from the normal English ... psychological terms, some of them that you had never known that they exist, words such as psychic, mind, body and soul. And when the lecturer teaches, she assumes that everybody knows. And it takes time to adjust to university because in high school everything is done for you but not here. You have to attend classes, tutorials, take notes, submit essays; you don't*

<sup>125</sup> H12, Drama, AF, nR

<sup>126</sup> Staff E01

<sup>127</sup> Staff E06

<sup>128</sup> Staff S02

<sup>129</sup> H11, Media studies & international relations, AF, nR

*have to create your own stories. Sometimes it happens - you know in BA most of our assessments are in terms of essays - and sometimes you misinterpret the question. And when you consult you get to realise your mistake.*

*Okay, lecturers ... expect [you] to do hard work and they give you low marks. That is the only thing that irritates me. You know if I get an A I want to know why, and if I get a C or fail, I want to know why so that I can improve. I don't want to repeat the same mistake and if I get an A I want to know why so that I can do the same in other courses. So if you can't explain to me why I got a D, I get very frustrated.*

Do you normally go to them to ask why? *I do always, it doesn't matter what mark I got.*

Do they give you explanations? *Ja they do and they are very patient*<sup>130</sup>

This student's comment that lecturers do explain is reinforced by a lecturer:

*But I think that the major thing is in the qualitative feedback, one on one, engaging with students, and then particularly written feedback, so when they submit written or formal work to me that I sit down and I give them a written piece of feedback on their work. I've found that over the years it's been the most valuable thing*<sup>131</sup>

Where and when to consult with lecturers, the pacing of the work, the timetabling of exams, when to expect marks to be published and finding out sources that are up for short loan seem to be some of the ways the social environment of learning and teaching is marked, with institutional rules on how to behave. Rules of communication are important for expectations and central to creating a social order in which there is consistency and predictability. Rules provide structure and habituation. So clear expectations laid down in a course outline that is followed consistently by the lecturer and a good explanation of how to prepare for an exam are basics for many students. Learning can be difficult when expectations are not communicated, when the rules and principles are not clearly spelt out, and when students face problems and do not know what support options are available.

### 3.1.4 Personal problems are your own concern

Alongside a strong sense of the responsibility falling on the shoulders of the student is the idea that personal problems belong to the realm of the private:

*I have a personal experience, when my mother passed and with those assignments that I had to submit. You know they always say, 'I understand, you guys have problems' and when you ask for an extension, they give you a week. For somebody who has got a very close relationship with the mother, that sounds unfair.*<sup>132</sup>

*I guess it's the helpfulness of everybody that is positive. It's my take to studying that I am very positive,*

<sup>130</sup> H08, Sociology & psychology, AF, R

<sup>131</sup> Staff E01

<sup>132</sup> H11, Media studies & international relations, AF, nR



*I want to study, I want to get a degree. Negatively, it's not that much, but you have private issues that sometimes impact, but not all the time.*<sup>133</sup>

*The environment is positive, obviously, but it comes with a lot of strains. We come from different backgrounds and this obviously comes with some strain, like financial problems. Some people come here without food, they are hungry, they can't even concentrate, but the fact that it's positive makes it okay. I'm fortunate to be in such a place.*<sup>134</sup>

Despite the existence of official support structures in the university community, students feel that depression, family problems and financial problems have to be faced alone. And a lack of information and students' own inhibitions compound the problem:

*I see evidence of students struggling with ... for instance, not really knowing about the support mechanisms that are in the university, counselling units and various other things that have been set up that work incredibly well but just not very many students know that they're there and know how to access them. And I think also that students tend to feel quite inhibited about asking for help, asking for advice.*<sup>135</sup>

The sense of institutional anonymity can be overwhelming: "The Wits community is massive and I see myself as a very small, small portion of Wits. I consider myself a number at Wits."<sup>136</sup>

### 3.1.5 Race and the English language in the learning space

We present below a long excerpt from an interview with a student who felt she did not belong to the same tradition of knowledge as the lecturer (and some of the students in the course) and that she was being prevented from entering it. Instead of being brought into the tradition by intersubjective means or dialogue, this student experienced alienation. She felt prevented from asking questions or saying she did not understand or testing her own ideas in public. In her attempt to make sense of a lecturer breaking the moral contract (implied by what educative authority is) and her experience of alienation, she makes use of an explanation from her everyday experience as a victim of the apartheid legacy, an experience largely mediated by racism. Unfortunately, this is a reality that many lecturers, who are predominantly white, are unable to understand given their social space and identity. In this case the student felt that she was not heard because she was not competent and because she is black:

*And the questions they ask because you're not so familiar ... especially in Drama, they will say all these names of people who have written theories about drama and films and you find that you don't know them. But other people, who have had the privilege, know them. It just scares you. Sometimes the lecturer acts as if we know these things and you find that you don't know these things and it becomes difficult to write essays. And I don't know even how to use the Internet.*

*... In class when we were asked a particular question, I could not answer because ... I could not show that I don't know. Even though I could be having an idea, I could not say it because I would think*

<sup>133</sup> E29, Planning, IF, nR

<sup>134</sup> H33, Sociology & psychology, AF, R

<sup>135</sup> Staff E01

<sup>136</sup> E30, Urban planning, AF, R

*that it is wrong. So I would just let the other people talk, including the black people who grew up around Gauteng, because they had the privilege of going to multiracial schools. I remember I did design and drawing and when we were in class they were talking about all those terms like 'abstract' and 'realist' and everyone seemed to know and I don't. Then they would give us this assignment and it is the white people getting grade A and this affected me and I would not even try hard to prove myself because I knew I would fail. So I only stuck to what I knew and if I got 50% then I was happy and would not struggle to get 80 or something like that.*

*And what happened afterwards? Well I quit Design and Fine Arts because it was just too difficult for me. I couldn't stand the pressure. Like when we were in class drawing and the lecturer would walk around to comment on what people were drawing, I could see he would go to some people and make detailed comments but when he came to me he said very little and I felt that perhaps my level of competition was lower than others. I couldn't stand the pressure.*

*Well, we have consultations. If I struggle with something I go to the lecturers. But as I said some lecturers have this attitude that you must know these things. I remember I went to one lecturer for consultations; there was something that I didn't understand on the essay on what he wanted us to do. I don't remember exactly what he said but it was like he didn't want to listen to what I was saying. I explained what I didn't understand and he was, like, there is nothing I can do to help you and what you have to do is go to the Internet and research, because I gave you the essay topic so you just see what you can do. To me I expected him to explain a little bit more on what he expected but he just told me to go to the Internet and research.*

*You thought he was not very kind? Ja, I thought he was not kind and then there is this thing they say that 'This is Varsity, we are not here to spoon-feed you', that they are lecturers and not teachers. I don't understand that, I mean a lecturer, teacher, what is the difference? You're all helping so you have to help us. Sometime you ask a question and they look at you like that is a stupid question: 'How can you ask such a stupid question?' They tell you this is not high school, this is varsity, and you should do 90% of the work and we do 10% of the work. They give you stuff and they do not explain how to do it. Like this year, we got a new lecturer for Performance and he is very helpful. He doesn't mind even to just go to his office to sit and talk. He understands that with performance we have different levels of development; we can't all develop at the same level so he treats us differently, whereas with other lecturers they expect that we should be at the same level. And if you're not they don't take you into consideration, they just concentrate on people who can catch up very fast, who're good at this or good at that. And acting is about process and other lecturers were not working on the process but on results. He concentrates on the process, on individual process. You can also relate to him not in a very personal manner but in a comfortable way.<sup>137</sup>*

A Zoology student suggested that black students are undermined from an academic perspective and deliberately prevented from succeeding:

*It has this culture that a person could not understand. It has pressure, a lot of pressure. What it does, it underestimates people from other backgrounds. Some of us are failing not because we [are] not doing*

<sup>137</sup> H14, Drama, AF, nR

*well, maybe it's because we're black. Whenever, white people will write whatever they want, they look at scripts, they look at names, and if your name isn't - already it is a deduction.*

*Well mostly lecturers are racist ... For instance, we went to this other chick two weeks ago, during the September holiday. We did different projects. Before we went there I didn't know if they chose the groups to be white, I think it was planned. If there was a white person in our group, they would be our group leader. There is no one concerned whether we like it or not. Whenever we go to lecturers they tell us to go to students and they will tell us what to do.<sup>138</sup>*

And an Engineering student suggests that white students are offered academic support that is not offered to black students:

*Well, what I know, in truth, if you can keep on like interviewing the students from electrical engineering, they will tell you very well, as I have said, they don't want to see themselves any more at Wits. They are tired of the school. At the same time they won't even influence any other one to come to Wits. And at the same time, they just want to get out, in all proportion, to get out, to get out of this school. Yes ... for the black people, this school is not that great. We can see that the advantages are for the white students.*

*Is it [that] altogether they don't have many advantages, black students? Like white students? Yes, I would say so.*

*Is it about disadvantage? Like ... if you are struggling, with a certain course, you can go to the ... school and explain in such a way that they can find you ... a private lecturer or ... a person who will help you with that course. ... At the end of the day we never knew about that. And, secondly, we never even saw any ... black person getting something like that. And you can even see from the result path that black people are really struggling in this school. So [animated] why keep on coming here in thousands, then, next thing, only two of us are getting out? No! [Emphatic] Uh, uh. This is not worth it. As in, at the end of the day you think, is Wits a business institution, like a business institute, or is it like to help South Africa as a whole? You don't really get an answer what is it exactly that Wits ...<sup>139</sup>*

Without clear criteria transmitted formally and pedagogically, other discourses (such as racism) could contaminate students' perceptions of their performance:

*It depends which faculty you are in, even the school you are in. For example, there's a difference between Media Studies and the History of Art. Media studies they are fine. The lecturers are open, you can come in, though sometimes they say this time is consultation time, after this send an e mail. The School of Art, there are students who say there's still that racial segregation or whatever you call it and to me it's like maybe it's like that a little bit because I was getting 40s and 50s and I used to work hard. The white students were not working hard but they were getting 80s and you compare your work and you see that I'm even better than them. You see that this white student fails to do referencing...<sup>140</sup>*

<sup>138</sup> S05, Zoology, AF, R

<sup>139</sup> E17, Electronic engineering, AF, nR

<sup>140</sup> H27, History of art & media studies, AM, R

Meanwhile the staff have a contrasting view - that it is getting harder to distinguish between the work of white and black students:

*The other difference is that the quality of the black students has improved. It's not easy to tell the difference between white and black students now, unless you're actually seeing the person. It was always the whites were at the top, blacks were at the bottom - no longer true.<sup>141</sup>*

Generally the students interviewed did not see English as the medium of instruction as a matter to contest - it is widely accepted as an institutional fact ('It is better to use English').<sup>142</sup> Most students who attended private or 'Model C' schools<sup>143</sup> have no difficulties with English:

*No difficulties at all, I guess English has been my medium of instruction throughout primary school and high school so I have no difficulties because even at home I forget myself and start speaking English. I was taught from an early age that it is quite a necessity to communicate in English.<sup>144</sup>*

However, the English language is a major constraining factor for students who come from black and rural schools, where the mother tongue is predominant: 'So I think language, it's really giving ... students ... who are coming from rural schools a problem.'<sup>145</sup> For some it represents a barrier to conceptual access:

*To be honest, I just listen. That is what I have learnt to do after coming from the Matric, being surprised because of the environment, and ... you see some kids having a nice time during lectures. And on the other hand here you are struggling to conceptualise what is being delivered in the lecture and catch each and every English word. That itself is a challenge to you.<sup>146</sup>*

Some feel demotivated, given the difficulties they experience in expressing themselves:

*Basically I was studying at Dinoto High School and the language that was mostly used at that school was Sesotho and Zulu. So I applied to Wits and was admitted. The experience of being accepted to the university was wonderful. When I got to Wits, the language used is English and coming from the background where I come from, speaking English was quite difficult. So what I did was to put myself under the pressure of having to read books and trying to communicate with people as much as possible. Another problem that I had was to interact with people and to create social bonds, because I was not feeling confident with my language. So what was happening was, I was spending most of my time alone and could not share most of my academic experiences with other people. That year was not good for me because that year language was a serious issue for me. Coming to my academic performance as well, language really hampered my performance. Like I would go to classes and would understand my work but when it came to writing and expressing myself, it was quite a difficult thing. ... I'm a hard worker, but I was demotivated because I would work hard, and because of the language problem my results would come out as average, although I never had that thought of dropping out of school.<sup>147</sup>*

<sup>141</sup> Staff S06

<sup>142</sup> Students H07, E03, H46, E30

<sup>143</sup> Model C schools are suburban schools that were in the past reserved for white children.

<sup>144</sup> H15, Political science, AM, nR

<sup>145</sup> H26, Sociology, AM, R

<sup>146</sup> S03, Life sciences, AM, nR

<sup>147</sup> H19, Media studies, AF, nR

And students may not get much sympathy from staff members regarding their language difficulties. A humanities lecturer says: 'Look, I got to France without speaking a word of French and I wrote a PhD in French, I don't see why you can't make an effort to write English properly.'<sup>148</sup>

The position of English as a lingua franca that provides important cultural capital creates a contradiction that Lodge has labelled 'the access paradox' (1997). If you provide students with access to the dominant language, you help to perpetuate and increase its dominance. If, instead, you deny students access, 'you perpetuate their marginalisation in a society that continues to recognise this language as a mark of distinction' and 'deny them access to the extensive resources available in that language; resources which have developed as a consequence of the language's dominance' (Janks, 2004).

The student experiences reported here may be isolated but they assume significance for two reasons. First, they are in direct conflict with the policy of the University that emphasises commitment to fostering a culture of dialogue and respect among students. Second, they point to the limitations of dominant pedagogic practices at Wits. Performance-driven strategies work best in a highly selective education environment, which Wits as an institution is trying to transform. Students who do not share the academic code and who have knowledge gaps (owing to historical disadvantage) experience the failure to recognise their particular circumstances and offer support as inequitable, and interpret this failure as racist.

### 3.2 PERFORMANCE-DRIVEN PEDAGOGIC PRACTICES

Overall, the evidence from the interviews points to the dominance within the Wits learning environment of what we would call *performance-driven pedagogic practices*.<sup>149</sup> The defining aspects of these include a particular conception of specialisation of knowledge, and modes of transmission and evaluation based on a particular relationship between students and lecturers. On the one side of this relationship are the students, who focus on individual academic achievement or success (high performance) in a competitive environment with limited peer collaboration or faculty support. They focus more on meeting the requirements defined by the lecturer and less on being recognised as different and particular individuals with specific experiences, needs, problems or aspirations. Their major resources for success are the accumulated social and cultural capital they carry with them, their ability to work independently and their individual autonomy. On the other side is the lecturer, who has the power to define what constitutes academic knowledge, what constitutes a good academic text, what knowledge is relevant and how it should be assessed, and when a student has attained the required performance level.<sup>150</sup>

Performance-driven approaches to learning at Wits have their roots in the liberal-meritocratic discourse that dominated academic practice at Wits throughout the 1970s and 80s, and are now supported by the globalisation discourse of competition and use value for the economy. They are essentially economic: they do not allow students extra time, too much individual attention or different evaluation criteria because of personal circumstances or need. Students have to be self-reliant, resourceful, motivated and 'get on with it'. Minimal support is made available and students are expected to take the initiative to find any extra support they need. Academic selection replaces academic support, and relations between students and lecturers are sporadic and formal. In Schneider's words, students are expected to have 'aligned ambitions' (Schneider &

<sup>148</sup> Staff H08

<sup>149</sup> We borrow some of the characteristics of these practices from Bernstein (2000), as described earlier.

<sup>150</sup> This is similar to what Sfard (1998) refers to as the 'acquisition metaphor'.

Stevenson, 1999) - to set goals and devise strategies to achieve them on their own. The 'fittest' students will survive in a kind of educational or intellectual *laissez passer*. For such an approach to work, the institution needs to be highly selective and exclusionary - the performance-driven approach does not cater for the complex learning needs of the 'non-traditional' students.

### 3.3 ALTERNATIVE PEDAGOGIC APPROACHES

While performance-driven approaches form part of the dominant discourse at Wits, the evidence from the interviews suggests there are meaningful pockets of innovative pedagogy grounded in principles of social justice and perceived as more effective for addressing the needs of 'non-traditional' students. Besides examples given by academic staff, these are implicit in the ways students describe their lecturers ('intelligent', 'interesting', 'challenging', 'informative', 'firm', 'dedicated', 'eye-opening', 'absolutely brilliant', 'motivating' and 'stands out') and the assumptions students make about their lecturers' practices. The quotations below illustrate how students describe lecturers as 'authorities' (Peters, 1966), as teachers whose knowledge base enables them to work with ideas and develop them for the student.

*He is another very ambitious and really dedicated lecturer. He is very firm, he does not try to be our friend, he knows what he is here for and is very clear on his mind. He knows what he wants from students and communicates with us all the time. I think he is so dedicated to the students; he answers all e mails and is so intelligent.<sup>151</sup>*

*She can take an ordinary thing and make you think in a completely different way, for instance she can take 'flower' and start looking at it in terms of symbols and signifiers in a very eye-opening way.<sup>152</sup>*

In these statements, the students express their belief in the authority of some of their lecturers - they trust what these lecturers transmit. This is what Peters (1966) sees as the challenge for educative authority - it needs to continually prove and justify itself. The process of justification is rational: the lecturer, who claims an authority over knowledge, communicates his or her knowledge in an intelligible way. Authority is educative when it appeals to reason, its pronouncements can be challenged and its incumbent understands that his or her authority is provisional (Peters, 1966: 240). Educative authority will not seek consent to a view through fear, command, indoctrination, hypnosis or appeal to a particular person. This means that the student's trust is gained because the lecturer follows a process that is trustworthy. The defining features of this process include:

#### Recognition of individual potential

*He tells me that even if my mother is a domestic worker, it doesn't mean that I will be a failure in life.<sup>153</sup>*

#### Teaching with passion

*[A] is fantastic because you really feel her passion about what she's teaching, and she really cares about her students as well. She teaches first years and she had, like, 50 first years and she would know each and what is going on in each one's life. And [B] as well, her personality and how much she shares with us, but also the passion for what she teaches.<sup>154</sup>*

<sup>151</sup> H11, Media studies & international relations, AF, nR

<sup>152</sup> H12, Drama, AF, nR

<sup>153</sup> H08, Sociology & psychology, AF, R

<sup>154</sup> H10, Modern languages, WF, nR

### **Motivating students**

*That lecturer was ... not just a lecturer; he was someone in my life. He played a good role in my life. Well, he motivated me, you know, he gave me directions. I told him my problems, he gave me directions. He gave me directions as to ... how to become a good person, a good achiever and potential student at the same time.<sup>155</sup>*

### **Validating different points of view**

*She teaches us what is important, she's very open-minded but if you have a different view, she encourages you to hold your point of view even if it's different to hers ... which is nice.<sup>156</sup>*

### **Encouraging interaction**

*And it's pretty much hands-on, it's interactive, it's small groups, you know, so you're able to share your point of view, you're actually able to listen more carefully. Ja, it's the smaller group does it better for me though. I think in the bigger classes such as geography and sociology and the maths etcetera. ... bigger classes, it's almost tougher to cope.<sup>157</sup>*

### **Building a 'nice relationship'**

*I mean like in Italian there are only five of us and we build up a nice relationship with our lecturer, but that again can be a problem because if there is a personality clash then it is a big issue<sup>158</sup>*

Students also articulate the benefits of a supportive rather than competitive relationship with their peers:

*If you help another student... it's possible ... dangerous ... It's confusing what I'm saying. Take it this way: you're alone, you practise, you try to understand things and you get some solutions from somewhere - maybe from your lecturer or classmates. And many things, you try to analyse those solutions and try to find out what, why did the answer like this and why did this become like this, you know. And you are at your own, you are not with someone else, you're just doing things yourself and someone from, maybe your friend will come and ask you something else. So in that way, by talking to that person, giving him information, helping him, you are also benefiting.<sup>159</sup>*

*You find that sometimes you are in a group, your group members don't pitch so it's something that is negative about that. Some people are just not willing to help you at times.<sup>160</sup>*

These comments were offered when students were asked to think of happy experiences at Wits or about lecturers who had made an exceptional impression on them. In other words, the ideas about community and care come when students think about the ideal. Ideal lecturers break the formal boundaries between the lecturer and the student - they are those who take the trouble to know their problems (their private and vulnerable self) and to support them when they need it. These lecturers are mentioned for the time they devote to guiding and motivating students ('guides us through planning, tells us about all the complexity ... around planning').<sup>161</sup>

<sup>155</sup> E04, Quantity surveying, AM, R

<sup>156</sup> E28, Urban planning, WF, nR

<sup>157</sup> E06, Urban planning, IM, nR

<sup>158</sup> H10, Modern languages, WF, nR

<sup>159</sup> E04, Quantity surveying AM, R

<sup>160</sup> E05, Urban planning, AM, R

<sup>161</sup> E05, Urban planning, AM, R

Students emphasise the benefits of community (having small classes), equality ('treating us equally'), counselling ('take his advice' and 'how to become a good person, a good achiever'), interaction ('by talking to that person, giving him information, helping him, you are also benefiting'), attunement ('You are actually able to listen more carefully') and intimacy ('She would know each, and what is going on in each one's life').

### 3.4 COMPETENCE-DRIVEN PEDAGOGIC APPROACHES

We refer to these emerging practices as competence-driven practices. Generally, these foreground the person over the 'student' and emphasise the potential of the self as a whole rather than just its performing aspects. The benchmarks here are 'inclusion' and 'integration'. Success is predicated not only on personal effort and hard work but also on help from the other who cares, as the following remarks suggest: 'She does not treat us differently; she treats us equally as one community';<sup>162</sup> 'If he sees you're falling apart he's trying to build you at the same time';<sup>163</sup> 'the fact that I have kept on going, a lot of lecturers have been very helpful and encouraging';<sup>164</sup> and 'They actually make you want to be part of the whole planning thing'.<sup>165</sup>

Formal roles and boundaries are backgrounded and the student is given the opportunity for self-affirmation and self-definition and to make a mark. Economically, it is a more expensive model, which requires small classes for its interactive aspect, academic support, and mentoring and academic enrichment initiatives. Psychologically, it stands for an approach to learning that foregrounds empowerment and emancipation over and above the acquisition of skill for an instrumental purpose (for example, a career) (Bernstein, 2000: 50-56). Learning and teaching are construed as a space of possibilities and choice, where the primary goal is self-development. In curriculum terms, this approach allows for loose boundaries between academic knowledge and everyday life.

Interviews with academic staff reflect a strong competence-based approach - a willingness to support and understand students as holistic human beings:

*I think the biggest challenge that I feel is actually a language one ... actually a very positive thing because it means that personally as an educator I'm much more careful about how I deliver my material. I speak more clearly, I choose my language more carefully, I tend to use a lot more support mechanisms, whether it's through visual aids or by putting information on the computer local area network - that sort of stuff. But I'm very much more conscientious in my teaching, let's say, it's not a kind of old boy's club where I take a lot of things for granted. I'm very much clearer, I tend to elicit a lot of feedback from students, actually ask their opinions on whether the material is coming through clearly enough and I tend to get a much clearer feedback cycle from my students through that.<sup>166</sup>*

*First of all, I'm trying my best during the course to help them, each and every one student. I'm asking them to come to my office for consultations. We are trying to help each and every one student. If one student don't have the knowledge we are expecting from them, to help them to move with everybody else, to move forward.<sup>167</sup>*

<sup>162</sup> E05, Urban planning, AM, R

<sup>163</sup> E04, Quantity surveying, AM, R

<sup>164</sup> H09, Psychology & English literature, WF, nR

<sup>165</sup> E30, Urban planning, AF, R

<sup>166</sup> Staff E01

<sup>167</sup> Staff E04



*We do have Ms X in what we call the biological sciences, and she's administrative back-up for the first-year courses that are taught between the two biological schools. And she's very supportive of the students. So those that go to her get a lot of sympathy and help and assistance, and I'm sure she makes a big difference to them feeling at home.<sup>168</sup>*

Each of these two sets of practices - performance-driven and competence-driven - assumes more specific modes and their construction in specific historical circumstances 'may give rise to what could be called a pedagogic palette where mixes can take place' (Bernstein, 2000: 56).

The data we have here are not quantitative - they do not tell us how many lecturers are perceived to offer advice and guidance and to empower students, and how many lecturers are perceived to position themselves primarily as knowledge specialists. This could be an interesting study but it is not the point of this analysis. We are also not suggesting that more of these practices will improve throughput and retention - debate about this is beyond the scope of this study. The tentative conjecture that can be made is that, in the absence of guidance, academic support, advice and personal care, and in view of language difficulties, students who are able to 'crack the code', understand the modality of knowledge and work hard, will thrive. Other students manage unevenly, or drop out, depending on the availability of personal empowerment.

### 3.5 VARIED LEARNING GOALS AND IDENTITIES

Contributing to the complex picture is how individual students approach their studies. When students speak about their study choices, three different kinds of goals and experiences or social identities emerge. First, there are those who have an instrumental goal and see a degree as useful to secure a job - we call this a market-related identity. These students say things like: 'I just chose a degree that would guarantee a good salary'<sup>169</sup> or, for example, that the degree has given them an 'opportunity to come up with ideas that ... will help in ... future ... things like the 2010 tournaments'.<sup>170</sup> The market related identity feeds off the globalisation discourse where the usefulness of knowledge is defined with reference to the economic advantage that a degree can purchase.

Second, there are those who are more inwardly oriented and focus on building themselves through the expressive aspects of the field: 'I like our department because we get to think and create our own ideas, make them come to life and watch what we really want ... the whole issue of being able to express myself as a student - I think that is really wonderful.' This particular student went on to say:

*I can express myself and, if my ideas are good, I get high marks ... So I get to pass because of what I'm able to do - not what, for instance, because of what some philosopher wrote twenty thousand years ago ... That's what I mean by saying it is more informal; you don't feel like you're forced to do stuff. It's almost like you do your degree or tutorial because you love it and not because you have to do it.<sup>171</sup>*

Being recognised as the centre of production of new knowledge rather than as responding to external needs or criteria is primary in this identification. We call this the knowledge for the sake of knowledge identity,

<sup>168</sup> Staff S04

<sup>169</sup> E03, Electrical engineering, AF, R

<sup>170</sup> E04, Quantity surveying, AM, R

<sup>171</sup> H12, Drama, AF, nR

grounded in the classic liberal view of education. This includes those who see the value of what they study in understanding themselves or others better - for example a student of media and international politics who 'loves' what she is doing because she loves 'meeting people from other countries' and 'learning about new cultures and how things are done in other countries'.<sup>172</sup>

Third, there are those who attach to their degree altruistic concerns and seek to improve or change society in some way through their study.<sup>173</sup> We call this the social justice or socially responsive identity. Examples include an international relations student who better understands 'the conflict and the turmoil that is going on in the world, particularly in the Middle East';<sup>174</sup> a student of industrial psychology who seeks to understand the work situation ('working with Unions and looking at what drives people ... to excel in their work or what behaviour leads to strikes and all those things, I find those very interesting')<sup>175</sup> and a student in quantity surveying who 'chose it because I saw that there was a need in the construction industry for people who can ... help for the infrastructures and the development'.<sup>176</sup>

These different identities need to be matched to the kind of courses students are taking. Where student aspirations complement their studies, this can be beneficial, but where there is a mismatch it can affect their success:

*I think that they are very positive because what I find is that the students recognise that if they do well, because of the need for manpower in the economy, students have a positive attitude to choose value added courses, and all my students in mechanical industrial engineering have always gotten jobs, and they recognise that they need to do well. And what I've noticed, especially among the African students, [is] an increasing interest to do postgraduate work. Because getting postgraduate work, I mean qualification, they are assured... middle management work.*<sup>177</sup>

*It's mixed, it's varied. We've got some dedicated, very hard-working students that take things very seriously. We've got other students where we feel that maybe their values, their attitudes aren't quite the same as what we're trying to get across. For example, students who are very concerned with making money at the end of the degree, who've chosen a professional degree because they think it's a way of getting a smart car and good job, and that's not necessarily the kind of stuff we're teaching. We're focusing a lot on development issues and concerns as a country, and things like that. But I would say there are a number of students who have a strong and furious work ethic around academia, which is very positive.*<sup>178</sup>

#### 4. THE SOCIAL DOMAIN

This section explores four focal areas of the social domain of student life: (4.1) the social environment at Wits and how it affects their identities; (4.2) patterns of social interaction and how these affect student social and academic experiences; (4.3) the expressions of student agency in these processes, such as students' choices and stances concerning the world surrounding them, their openness to being challenged, and

<sup>172</sup> H11, Media studies & international relations, AF, nR

<sup>173</sup> The discussion of identity is broadly based on Bernstein's classification of identity (2000: 53-63).

<sup>174</sup> H13, International relations, IF, nR

<sup>175</sup> H07, Psychology & African literature, AF, R

<sup>176</sup> E26, Quantity surveying, AM, nR

<sup>177</sup> Staff E02

<sup>178</sup> Staff E06

whether they have enough self-confidence to challenge or defend their views and ideas; and (4.4) the social interactions between staff and students.

#### 4.1 THE WITS SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Depending on their background, students may encounter an environment whose features contrast with their past experiences. They may have to negotiate a profound process of acculturation if they are to be assimilated into the institutional culture, which can be individually taxing. Success or failure in this process is informed by their imagined or actual understanding of what the Wits culture is. An examination of student constructs offers the following picture:

##### **Wits is socially diverse and flexible**

*It is very social, very academic, it combines all those situations.*<sup>179</sup>

##### **Wits has a culture of learning**

*Having the privilege of experiencing both universities [RAU and Wits], I would say Wits has a culture of learning, a culture of wanting to better yourself.*<sup>180</sup>

##### **Wits has different values and conventions**

*I come from a very conservative background, so I used even to dress differently from everybody else. I used to have these long braids and all my dresses were long. I hardly ever used to wear trousers, I didn't even wear jeans. So when you get here you kind of feel like an outsider, and then as time passes you learn to adjust and fit into the way of doing things. I had a huge culture shock when I came here. We don't wear short skirts where I came from, but here it is, like, anything goes. So at the end of the day I had to adjust to the mindset of being at varsity, like for the fact that my personal morals are not necessarily another person's morals.*<sup>181</sup>

##### **Wits has different rules for interacting**

*In school, according to their rules, you only associate with guys, girls with girls, so you come here it's an open environment. It's more comfortable basically because if you're in an enclosed environment, you're constantly being watched, you're being monitored, kind of so you don't break the rules, you know what I'm saying?*<sup>182</sup>

And the 'Wits student' has particular characteristics:

##### **Self-confidence and assertiveness**

*So what does it mean to be a Wits student? Elitist! No, honestly! The confidence! The confidence! You need go out and expose yourself to almost anything. I think what is important about the degree that I'm doing is that it is not rigid. If I wanted to go into the corporate world, I could, you know what I mean, I could literally go into any direction that I want. And it is about shaping the direction of that confidence, because a lot of people may be qualified, but they get into interview and mess it up because of lack of confidence or communication skills. I believe that most people get their jobs because of the way they sell themselves.*<sup>183</sup> (Our emphases)

<sup>179</sup> H13, Psychology & international relations, IM, nR

<sup>180</sup> H22, Political science & international relations, AM, nR

<sup>181</sup> H12, Drama, AW, nR

<sup>182</sup> E06, Urban planning, IM, nR

<sup>183</sup> H11, Media studies & international relations, AF, nR

*And my other brother who is a medical doctor would always tell me that when they went for practicals, students from Wits had so much confidence and they acted like they knew everything - while them, they struggled for confidence although perhaps they knew some of the things. So he believed that because they came under the name of Wits, it gave them confidence. So that made me to think I should come to Wits and carry that name because it will give me the confidence. Fortunately I was accepted at Wits.<sup>184</sup> (Our emphasis)*

### **Respected**

*To me now I feel like a member of the community and in terms of the corporate world, they do respect Wits. As they say 'Wits gives you the edge' and now 'Take the lead with Wits'.<sup>185</sup>*

### **Autonomy and independence**

*Yes, and also the thing with Wits is that they let you use your own mind. There can be times when lecturers can be very biased, but generally they encourage a sense of expressing your own opinion and thinking for yourself so that you can draw your own conclusions.<sup>186</sup>*

Social diversity, openness, freedom and flexibility characterise the Wits social environment and Wits students are self-confident, assertive and respected. It is through participation in campus activities and forums that students experience, develop and internalise the values, attitudes and skills promoted in such an environment and develop a sense of belonging to the Wits community (become a 'Witsie').<sup>187</sup> Acquiring this identity entails individual epistemological and cultural contestation, a process which may require a radical change in language, values, attitude and behaviour, depending on one's biography. Evidence from the interviews points to multilayered responses from students in this process. Three main categories can be identified.

The first category comprises those who are open to the rules, codes, norms and standards, including rituals that characterise Wits institutional life, have adapted to them, have the resources to negotiate their social and learning spaces, and have developed a sense of identity with the campus community - that is, have become 'Witsies'. They can say with certainty: 'Ja, I feel like I belong here. I'm part of Wits'<sup>188</sup> or 'I feel that I belong to Wits because I adapted well and I understand the situation now.'<sup>189</sup> Adaptation becomes easy when, through previous socialisation, students discover their habitus on campus - the institutional environment matches their habits, their unthinkingness in actions, their dispositions and predispositions (Grenfell & James, 1998: 14). Students encounter the university 'as a meaningful world, a world endowed with sense and with value, in which it is worth investing one's practice' (Wacquant, 1989). But other students encounter at Wits an environment that has little meaning and value to them.

The second category comprises those who have found the Wits environment alienating, a threat to their identities - and, as such, contestable; and who have opted to negotiate membership in their own terms,

<sup>184</sup> H19, Media studies, AF, nR

<sup>185</sup> H27, History of art, AM, R

<sup>186</sup> H13, Psychology & international relations, IM, nR

<sup>187</sup> A Wits student with a Wits identity. We borrow the term 'Witsie' from the 2004 interviews to refer to the 'insiders', those who feel fully inserted into the Wits community, and have developed its academic and intellectual qualities (being independent and autonomous individuals), internalised its values and accepted its norms and standards, i.e. assumed its identity.

<sup>188</sup> H26, Sociology, AM, R

<sup>189</sup> H21, Media studies & political science, AM, nR

through struggles of various kinds. They associate themselves with campus life but resist any form of assimilation and fundamental change in identity and personality or are not willing to undergo this metamorphosis, and stress the value of difference and diversity. Asked whether he had to change anything about himself to adjust to Wits life, a Town Planning student answered:

*Yes, you know, of course I did, but ... not much of myself. There are so many things that happen at varsity, so to adjust is what I did, but I didn't change my personality to suit the institution.<sup>190</sup>*

The third category comprises those who lack the resources to negotiate their identities either in their own terms or in terms already established on campus. They may develop feelings of cultural displacement, alienation, withdrawal or isolation or marginalisation: 'I do not belong here.'

*Not really! I don't. I think to be a member of the Wits community means you are always at all events - it's more like you participate in everything that Wits has to offer.<sup>191</sup>*

*I don't identify myself with Wits students or Wits anything. I'm just here to get my degree. I don't even feel like I belong here. It is difficult when you come from a very poor family ... How can you identify with those people who have, because you are totally different from them?<sup>192</sup>*

*Wits community is ... well, I can't say much about it because ... no, I've been hiding for several years, and I think that ... has pulled me away from knowing things.<sup>193</sup>*

We should not underestimate the radical possibilities of the discourse of marginality on campus. Particularly given the legacy of apartheid, and, to borrow a phrase from Hooks, there is a need 'to create spaces where one is able to redeem and reclaim the past, legacies of pain, suffering, and triumph in ways that transform present reality' (1990: 147). The margins very often offer the conditions that make such action possible. This is, in our view, the rationale behind the establishment of gender-specific or race-specific student associations - a declining phenomenon on campus.

Pertinent questions to ask are: What happens to students in the third category? Are their chances of success compromised or diminished? There is certainly a perception among students that participation in the Wits community enhances the chances of epistemological access, though it is not a sine qua non for success. There are instances where students resort to resources outside campus, but these are anomalies.

## 4.2 SOCIAL INTERACTION ON CAMPUS

The changing student composition seems to have produced visible social benefits as much as it poses serious challenges to both the students and the institution. It seems to have had an impact on their identities and patterns of interaction. Students expressed their experiences and responses in terms of race, gender, ethnicity and language and student diversity.

<sup>190</sup> E27, Urban planning, AM, R

<sup>191</sup> E28, Architecture, WF, nR

<sup>192</sup> H08, Psychology, AF, R

<sup>193</sup> E04, Quantity surveying, AM, R

#### 4.2.1 Race and ethnicity in campus social interactions

The boundaries between the different race and ethnic groups are certainly thinning and becoming more and more porous. As result, many students interviewed do not see manifestations of racism in their interaction with peers but rather in relation to the University administration and some staff. Race and ethnic grouping is justified through affinity arguments. Racial integration in high schools has also been reflected in changing attitudes to race issues. The intellectual and social engagement on campus is increasingly turning the Wits student community into an open society. One student compared RAU to Wits as follows:

*Wits students are more engaging, they are more open, they allow you to be you, you have that space. And there is not that outright racial segregation, because at RAU you have a place where white people chill and a place where black people chill, similarly for Indians and coloureds. Here it is just the Matrix<sup>194</sup> although obviously you're going to chill with people you relate with and in most cases it is people that you have a familiar background and sometimes that background is race.<sup>195</sup> (Our emphasis)*

*Well, I don't know the problem. I have got a whole load of white friends, well, not as many as my black friends, and they are just general people that I get along with, guys we go to class with. Like in my politics class, there are times when we talk about racial issues, there are points where I agree with my white friends and disagree with my black guys because I feel that sometimes they are talking from the heart and are not thinking about issues. Personally, I have got no issues. I think one thing that helped is the high school I went to which was racially mixed and I got along with white guys pretty well. I had no problem identifying myself with others.<sup>196</sup>*

But some students are keenly aware of difference:

*I grew up in the location. It is strictly black people and we all speak Shang'ani and I come here, even though I have been exposed to other languages like English, Sotho, Zulu and other African vernacular languages, but here you're put in a large environment where you have to relate to speakers of many languages. I have never been in a class with white people and I experienced it when I came here for the first year. And I'm quite an introvert, so I felt like there was pressure on me to prove myself because of stereotypes. Even in the company of friends I had this peer pressure. Because my parents are not here they could tell me - let us do this, let us go to this club or that, so I had these kinds of social pressures.<sup>197</sup>*

And a staff member (who is not South African) commented on how the divisions in South African society affect students working together:

*I mean students don't see themselves as South African. Students see themselves as Zulu, Sotho ... Like yesterday I had five of them here, and she's Sotho, she's Xhosa, she is whatever. So I'm saying,*

<sup>194</sup> The Matrix is the student centre at Wits. It houses food and banking outlets, a bookshop and offices for student organisations.

<sup>195</sup> H22, Political science & international relations, AM, nR

<sup>196</sup> H15, Political science, AM, nR

<sup>197</sup> H14, Fine Arts, AF, nR

*but you're South African! So ... that causes problems, especially when we put them in groups to work. They divide themselves by their tribal thing.*<sup>198</sup>

#### 4.2.2 English as medium in social interaction

At the social level, the dominance of the English language has multiple effects. It lowers one's self-esteem and confidence in social interaction:

*You know, the place I'm coming from is semi-urban. English, I mean, I only spoke English at school, not a good one. You know I told you I'm from a public school. Sometimes I tried to express myself in English and it gave me a problem. Sometimes it lowered my self-esteem. So I think language, it's really giving ... students ... who are coming from rural schools a problem.*<sup>199</sup>

It also affects their mother tongue because they have to speak English all the time:

*Um, the English language. Sometimes you know you ... one day you wake and you feel like I don't have to talk English today and you, you lose everything. You just lose everything, you try to talk to people ... You lose 'cause you didn't feel at first that you'll talk English. So, ja, it does somehow, but as time goes on, we need to understand that things like those are ... need not, be forgotten.*<sup>200</sup>

The most cited example is the 'Model C school' phenomenon on campus, expressed in language, group identities, materialistic values and lifestyles. This is how it is portrayed:

*There is something they call a Wits lingua, they try to make everything, I don't know whether to say 'romantic'! You know when a Wits student is speaking; you will know that this one is from Wits.*<sup>201</sup>

#### 4.2.3 The question of xenophobia

Xenophobia is another issue that has had significant repercussions. According to one international student, xenophobia is something that makes South Africa a 'very intimidating' society. In South Africa, there are (largely unfounded) fears that foreigners are to blame for all social problems. Xenophobia can be related to a fundamental fear of difference that can result in cultural shock (see Kleg, 1993), a situation of being uncomfortable among individuals of other cultures. Like racism, xenophobia can result in harmful activity. The dislike or fear of foreigners can lead to violent behaviour and cause bodily or psychological harm and damage. We asked international students whether they felt like outsiders. The answers were revealing:

*Yes, sometimes. South Africans are xenophobic. They are. They'll let you know it's their home and they are not very accommodating. Some, not all. They'll basically cut you down to pieces and they'll make you feel like you have to defend where you come from.*<sup>202</sup>

<sup>198</sup> Staff E02

<sup>199</sup> H26, Sociology, AM, R

<sup>200</sup> E04, Quantity surveying, AM, R

<sup>201</sup> H16, Drama, AF, R

<sup>202</sup> E30, Urban planning, AF, R

Xenophobia is most often perceived as non-acceptance of diversity, a rejection of and hostile attitude towards otherness and others, in this case the foreign students who cannot express themselves in the local languages:

*Yes, like with the languages. People just look at you and they just assume you're Zulu or Sotho or Xhosa and so forth. So people come up to me and speak to me in their language. And I think it is so disrespectful, so when I ask them back in English they think you're such a snob. And then like every once in a while they do and I speak to them in Shona which is my language, they start thinking that I'm shouting at them or I'm scolding them and that is the only time that they turn to English, to tell me I'm rude. So when they speak their language it is fine but when I do I'm rude.<sup>203</sup>*

Xenophobia seems to be directed at foreign students from other African countries who are generally black students:

*[Laughs] No! No! No! ... As you know the South African community ... tends to ... separate from other African people. Like it tends to think that all Africans ... are not into standards that they expect ... an African who is not South African tends to be looked down upon, you know. I've got my experience ... I think people here, they are not very much friendly to ... African people.<sup>204</sup>*

Finally, some students have concerns about an individualistic campus ethos that these students bring to campus: 'people go about their own business and do their own things.'<sup>205</sup>

#### 4.2.4 The value of institutional and student diversity

The diversification of the student body has had a considerable impact on student social life. First, it has made it possible for students to be more flexible about who they choose to interact with: 'Socially also even culturally Wits is really diverse, you will find your way either way.'<sup>206</sup> A Media Studies student eloquently expands this:

*Wits community in general is very diverse, not only culturally but also economically as well. There are people who are rich, in the middle class, and those who are poor. Culturally it is a very flexible society, even if you are a very individual person, you will always find people to relate with and other groups of people you don't relate with. So to an extent the culture and the Wits community is very diverse and flexible. On the issue of dressing and presenting oneself, there is a way in which it is a basis for exclusion because if you dress in a particular way, you're more likely to be accepted and if you dress in another particular way you are seen not to be in fashion. So to some extent at Wits you have to dress yourself in a particular way to be accepted.<sup>207</sup>*

<sup>203</sup> H12, Drama, AF, nR

<sup>204</sup> E01, Urban planning, AM, R

<sup>205</sup> H07, Psychology & African literature, AF, R

<sup>206</sup> H13, Psychology and international relations, IM, nR

<sup>207</sup> H19, Media studies, AF, nR



And another student explains:

*A friend of mine goes to RAU and I have been there quite a lot. It is not nice to be in RAU because there you go there and when you go home you don't really know people, you don't interact with people. But when you're at Wits, you go to places and meet the same people so you do interact with people, so you have at Wits these different groups but these groups are not always separated.<sup>208</sup>*

Second, it has increased social interaction across race, gender and ethnic boundaries:

*I think it makes a positive impression because with people of diverse backgrounds you tend to learn a lot from them. So like, it helped me to grow, socially and intellectually, so this, I think, helps a lot.<sup>209</sup>*

*I mean, like, as a black student ... during my first year of study I used to be more around people of my colour at that time. But nowadays because of such dramatic change in demography, I had to also adjust myself to talk to other people of other, from other colours.*

*Maybe you could say I have become a bit more social. Being forced to interact with everybody. Not trying to fight with everybody can make you have to sort of calm down, learn how to socialise at a broader level. Even though I am not somebody that goes out trying to meet everyone under the sun. I just think, in terms of accommodating other people.<sup>210</sup>*

The challenge facing Wits is about how to find and foster a sense of community among diverse individuals, and how to integrate a highly disintegrated society. On a university campus, where students from different backgrounds (in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, country of origin, religion and sexual orientation) are brought together with an assumed common purpose, the challenge is to recognise difference and consider its consequences in accomplishing that common purpose. While progress has been made, the fact that students coming from poor backgrounds, black schools and rural environments claim to be getting a raw deal in several aspects of student life points to major challenges for both the students and the institution. For students, coming to grips with diversity may require recognising 'the educative value of understanding different constructions of social reality and the possibilities of establishing new, shared meanings and practices' (Broekman & Pendlebury, 2002: 291). For the University, we certainly agree with these authors that, 'impossible though it seems to make the rules explicit, it may be worth the attempt because the very exercise of trying to specify institutional facts and their constitutive rules ...' may help the institution to 'decentre', and so come to reflect on and refine its own institutional rules and procedures (Broekman & Pendlebury, 2002). Institutional reinvention is a fact in the same sense that students reinvent themselves, whether through negotiation or contestation.

### 4.3 STUDENT AGENCY AND STUDENT ORGANISATIONS

Wits students constitute themselves in communities of difference (associations, forums, committees, working groups, clubs and other networks) for mutual engagement, joint enterprise, construction and expression of group identity, affirmation of difference, and the development of awareness and learning. These include student governance structures (for example, the SRC), student political organisations

<sup>208</sup> H18, English & media studies, WF, nR

<sup>209</sup> E01, Urban & regional planning, AM, nR

<sup>210</sup> S04, Science, AM, nR

(the South African Students' Congress (SASCO), the ANC Youth League (ANCYL) or the Independent Students' Association (ISA)), and social, academic and religious organisations, which foster norms of mutual trust, solidarity, support and reciprocity among students. Students use these groups to negotiate meaning in social issues of interest to them or to compensate for an absent family or for institutional support on campus. Such communities represent constellations of competing - and in some cases conflicting - student expectations, interests, values, norms and social traditions, drawn from the students' cultural backgrounds. They offer spaces for 'bonding', 'bridging' and 'linking' students with similar biographies in potentially empowering social networks, but they can also be disempowering (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000: 230).

The present study has confirmed some of the aspects and patterns of student affiliation identified in the 2003 Campus Climate survey (Cross et al., 2003). First, a very limited number of students interviewed were affiliated to a political organisation - students tend to be linked to social, cultural and religious organisations. Second, traditional student political concerns, with the emphasis on wider national issues, have become a matter of intense contestation. SASCO and ANCYL have been outplayed by a new set of middle-class concerns represented by the ISA, which won the SRC elections in 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2005. SASCO regained student governance in 2006 but seems to have redirected its concerns towards student-related issues and has become low profile on national issues. Third, students involved in the study seem to be silent about any involvement in academic organisations, although these have gained significance among postgraduate students, particularly among medical, science and engineering students. We speculate that this trend is specific to postgraduate students.

While we cannot claim that student organisations have been in any essential way an emancipatory force, the social energy that they are able to mobilise must not be underestimated. We have identified the following possible parameters of empowerment (Bellah et al., 1991; Tierney, 1993; Wenger, 1999).

**Leadership development:** Current student organisations operate as - or in some cases have the potential to become - 'communities of practice', to use Wenger's term, with an important incubating and nurturing role. This is particularly true of those groups focusing on intellectual, political, cultural and academic engagement. As a locus of engagement in action, interpersonal relations, shared knowledge, and negotiation of enterprises, 'such communities hold the key to real transformation - the kind that has real effects on people's lives' (Wenger, 1999: 85). Students say that 'they're grooming my leadership skills, I must say, grooming me to be a good leader'<sup>211</sup> and 'it gives me skills, organising skills; it gives me leadership skills; it gives me a lot of skills that I will use in future - it keeps me out of other stuff that's happening on campus'. This student added, 'I think it's useful and I'd advise other students to join it, especially first years'.<sup>212</sup>

**Social and cultural awareness:** Student organisations form a basis for understanding the 'other' (Rowe, 2003) in the midst of and across multiple socially constructed realities. Students say such things as 'It's important to understand what's going on around you [on Palestinian issues] especially if you're a student'<sup>213</sup> or:

<sup>211</sup> E03, Electrical engineering, AF, R

<sup>212</sup> H31, Psychology, AF, R

<sup>213</sup> H28, Media studies & English, WF, nR

*Yes for instance now there's this African renaissance. I think it's important that people know who they are and where they come from. I think even these different cultural societies must establish an umbrella so that they'll be able to understand each other.<sup>214</sup>*

**Replacement for family or institutional support:** Some students see student organisations as providing common spaces and resource networks within a community contesting racial, religious, ethnic and cultural issues and on encountering a strange or unfriendly institutional environment. They provide spaces where once-isolated individuals may now live in communities or in adopted 'families'. The impersonal and uncaring environment on campus and the intimate and relatively closed communities of these organisations force students to 'come to terms with the meaning of citizenship, social responsibility, conflict and how to resolve it, and intellectual freedom' (Tierney, 1993: 43), often constrained by the codes and norms of academia. Students observe 'It makes me feel better - a bit like home. It makes you feel comfortable. It's a home away from home'<sup>215</sup> and 'It is like being in church, I feel like I belong - it is the only place I feel like I belong around here in Joburg'.<sup>216</sup> Or even more dramatically:

*I had like five guys grabbing my butt. It was the first time I went out wearing jeans and I was dancing with my boyfriend. Then these guys come one by one and grab and move and grab and move. It felt so violated, so I said that is not my social scene, every time in a while I go to the PIG,<sup>217</sup> but only when I'm invited by a friend. Otherwise my social arena is mostly church. The best friends I have now I got them from the church, and of course my neighbour at home or my room mate.<sup>218</sup>*

**Reaching out to communities:** And organisations serve as a bridge between students and communities: 'There were a lot of things that I learnt. I learnt a lot from going out to communities, reaching out to communities and talking to young people, telling them about the importance of education, encouraging them and telling them how to apply for bursaries, if they want to make it into universities, helping out in old-age homes.'<sup>219</sup>

A matter of concern is that these fragmented communities seem to make little effort to promote politics of articulation, beyond individual or group boundaries. Students tend to accept dispersion and fragmentation as part of the construction of a new social order that reveals fully where they are and what they can become, and which does not demand that they forget (Hooks, 1990: 148) or consciously unlearn certain forms of behaviour: Wits is a very diverse and flexible community - it is just a matter of finding your own space. As Durkheim observed, the social order could deteriorate into a fragmented anomic culture if people do not spontaneously find some moral 'glue' to hold it together when they realise their fundamental interdependence (1984: 85).

There seems to be a degree of institutional uncertainty about what strategies should be put in place to facilitate constructive engagement between student organisations and the University - a task that cannot be

<sup>214</sup> H27, History of art, AM, R

<sup>215</sup> E30, Urban Planning, AF, R

<sup>216</sup> H08, Psychology, AF, R

<sup>217</sup> A student pub

<sup>218</sup> H12, Dramatic arts, AF, nR

<sup>219</sup> H26, Sociology, AM, R

done effectively by the SRC alone or the University Forum alone. If student engagement in institutional life is understood as being mediated by the communities in which meanings are negotiated, then student organisations - as critical nodes in the creation and recreation of institutional culture - should be taken very seriously. Such organisations are part of the social fabric of learning and enrichment. Promoting academic associations could, for example, play an important role in promoting academic citizenship. Unfortunately we have not been able to probe this matter in this study.

#### 4.4 STUDENT SOCIAL INTERACTIONS WITH STAFF

While students made little mention of social interactions with staff, it is clear that in some departments there is a degree of socialising - either in 'field components'<sup>220</sup> of the academic programme or in department clubs, or just in the corridors.

*Our school has a club called the Compressor Club. It's in a basement, and it's a fully fledged club where we sell drinks and we play games and students and lecturers congregate and actually share jokes and share fun, what have you. They meet as colleagues down there, and at that time sometimes because of the openness sometimes students actually tell you problems that they're having and you understand student's problems.<sup>221</sup>*

*here is sometimes a braai once a year, which is nice and mixed and relaxed. So there's a constant interaction whether in the corridors, whether in the classrooms, whether in the offices, everywhere.<sup>222</sup>*

*For instance, when I see my students sitting outside in the sun, whatever, I'll sit down and have informal [chat] with them and that will lead on to something where I say, why don't we have a proper discussion about this and sit down and talk about it.<sup>223</sup>*

*We also helped the students to relaunch the old biological club, Bio.Soc, Biological Society. We actually gave them space, and it was space that wasn't really very useful, and they've built a bar facility and then it has a door going out onto one of the terraces ... and they organised a lunchtime function every Friday, most Fridays, and then sometimes into the afternoon and many staff will go and join into that as well. So there's lots of informal interaction with students.<sup>224</sup>*

Staff indicate that these interactions help them to understand students better.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The university is undoubtedly an institution par excellence where people intelligently become individuals as they realise their interdependence, and thus it is 'an indispensable source from which character is formed' (Bellah et al., 1991: 6). Such a process should certainly provide leverage for tackling the taken-for-granted elements of institutional life, and for negotiating and building a dynamic institutional 'culture that is more dependent on process than stasis and an understanding of education oriented toward social change rather than social reproduction' (Rowe, 2003: 3). Through mediation, students can be helped to respond as good

<sup>220</sup> Staff S04

<sup>221</sup> Staff E02

<sup>222</sup> Staff E03

<sup>223</sup> Staff E01

<sup>224</sup> Staff S04

citizens conversant with the institutional patterns of culture. Yet the patterns judged to be harmful or less desirable can be altered or eliminated by empowered individuals willing to act collectively to reshape reality.

### 5.1 INSTITUTIONAL IMAGE AND STUDENT EXPECTATIONS

The study confirms the widespread historical reputation that Wits enjoys as 'a world-class university' or 'a centre of excellence' with high academic standards. Assuming that this perception is a reflection of 'good results', and these are an outcome of 'good practice', there seems to be consensus that something is right at Wits, which makes it a reputable university. While laudable, this particular image has a mixed effect on the students themselves. On the one hand, it makes them feel honoured and proud for having been admitted to an institution of such high standing. On the other, it raises their expectations of what they should do to succeed in such an institution to an intolerable level.

When the challenges that go with their efforts to succeed are not met with the necessary institutional support and enabling mediation, students feel alienated and marginalised. They experience Wits as a harsh, cold and unforgiving environment, where many (both white and black) do not fit the mould (of excellence and independence) and struggle to survive. From these experiences, a perception has also developed that something is fundamentally wrong at Wits. The image of excellence attached to Wits constitutes an important historical legacy that needs to be cherished and nourished through adaptive and more context-sensitive and innovative strategies that take the increasing numbers of this type of student seriously.

### 5.2 THE MAGNITUDE OF THE PROBLEM AND CURRENT INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES

The low graduation rates, and the exclusion of a large proportion of prospective students for academic or financial reasons, were mentioned in the opening paragraph of this chapter. A number of different strategies have been implemented to improve throughput, targeted at both staff and students. Teaching and learning committees coordinate a variety of initiatives at the level of faculties and schools. However, lack of synchronisation and synergy both vertically (policy and strategies from the official domain, and academic and social practice) and horizontally (across programmes, packages, schools and faculties) tend to render them ineffective.

### 5.3 PATHWAYS TO INDIVIDUAL ADJUSTMENT: STUDENT EXPERIENCE AND RESPONSES

Notwithstanding these interventions, the overall picture emerging from the study is worrisome. It shows that, although there are many positive experiences emanating from the university's decision to diversify its student body, it is equally clear that its institutional commitment to transformation is neither explicitly recognised and understood by students nor experienced the same way across the student body. To highlight the experiences of the students we interviewed, we divided them heuristically into three categories:

**Category A** - students whose social and learning orientation matches what is expected of them at Wits and who have the resources to adjust to the Wits environment and engage meaningfully with their studies.

**Category B** - students who do not share the social and learning orientation required at Wits, but who take it upon themselves to work hard and find the resources they need. These students can benefit from personal care and support given by individual lecturers.

**Category C** - students who do not share the required social and learning orientation and do not have the resources to negotiate their needs in their own terms. Students of this kind need sustainable and continuous care and guidance to socialise them into sound academic practice.

#### 5.4 MODES OF ACADEMIC PRACTICE: PEDAGOGICAL AND CURRICULUM STRATEGIES

Dominant at Wits are performance-driven strategies, which emphasise high student performance and low participation. These practices recall a time when Wits catered for a predominantly white and carefully selected student population, and emphasised merit and equal opportunity, competition among students, and the survival of the fittest: students had to adapt or perish. In this model are limited concerns with social justice or access beyond a meritocracy framework. Institutionally, it is an inexpensive model demanding very little from the lecturers but very taxing and demanding on the student's side.

Pockets of competence-driven strategies have emerged, promoted by individual staff members and informed by concerns with institutional social responsiveness around equity, higher student participation and epistemological access. This is a response to the challenges posed by the increasing numbers of the so-called 'non-traditional' or 'underprepared' students. In these strategies, a learning contract goes hand in hand with a moral contract. In some cases, current academic practices in some schools can be described as hybrid, embracing mixed approaches.

This legacy leaves the institution with three options: (i) to stick to its performance-oriented approaches and align its selection and admission policies accordingly, (ii) to emphasise competence and help staff adapt their teaching practices to this new approach, and (iii) to adopt a hybrid model that retains the performance focus but offers greater support to students in need. The latter two options move towards addressing the concerns of equity and epistemological access.

**Option 1: Emphasise high performance.** This would require an admissions policy that carefully selects candidates who can make it, predominantly on their own - a policy based on the assumption that the fittest will survive and continue to very selective and high-standard postgraduate studies. This option would align with the University's strategic orientation towards research because it would lessen the burden of undergraduate teaching and allow more time for research. It would also be relatively inexpensive, making it a pragmatic choice. It would not, however, address the transformation goals expressed by Wits, particularly in the short term, and there is a risk that the best students coming from inadequate schooling would be missed in the selection process. It would favour Category A students, and those in Category B who are more likely to survive. In this case, the selection should filter out students likely to fall into Category C.

**Option 2: Emphasise competence.** Economically, this is the most expensive option. It requires considerable investment in staff time and resources - small classes for its interactive aspects, academic support, pastoral care, mentoring and academic enrichment initiatives - as is being planned for postgraduate students. At present, staff who promote a competence model of pedagogy often do so at the expense of their personal time and research and sacrifice their careers in the process. If the institution were to commit to this option, it would be critical to address staff development issues more comprehensively and to put in place appropriate recognition mechanisms for their efforts. The clear message from staff interviews is that staff are worked to the limit and to expect them to provide more support for students with the same level

of resources is not practical. Generally it would require considerable trade-offs between research and teaching, which would be likely to compromise the research orientation of the university. Further, the institution's best students might feel neglected, as most efforts would concentrate on Category B and C students.

**Option 3: Adopt a hybrid model.** This model should retain the best aspects of high performance and contextualise them within a framework of social justice. If throughput and retention are to be improved with the current student diversity, the best elements of performance must be retained and enhanced through more open social relations that foreground the person over the student, and through pastoral care and personal and collective forms of recognition. This does not mean compromising standards but rather making them explicit, actively and collaboratively, to students by providing enabling socialisation and learning opportunities especially for those who are unable to crack the code. This approach could work with all three categories of students - enhancing Category A students' capacity to navigate through the system while catering for the needs of those students who do not share the academic code and who experience knowledge gaps, by specifying criteria, norms and standards through suitable support strategies (see Slonimsky & Shalem, 2004) on the importance of socialising students into key academic practices: distantiation, appropriation, research and articulation). This model would require the good efforts of academic staff operating within a competence model to be expanded systematically.

In this view, the choice is not between high participation and high performance but rather about confident participation for high performance. Economically, the third choice is relatively expensive. It requires, at a minimum, investment in staff time and resources - small classes for its interactive aspects, academic support, mentoring and academic enrichment initiatives - as is being planned for postgraduate students.

## 5.5 THE OVERALL VIEW

The picture that emerges at Wits of the changing institutional culture and its possible effects on throughput and retention is varied, multidimensional and not without paradoxes. On the positive side, both the staff and students, in their different and diverging understandings and interpretations, have embraced the idea that academic achievement at Wits requires a great deal of individual discipline and hard work and an appropriate work ethic. On the negative side, the University has not yet clearly found an identity that matches the profile of its student population. On the whole, we are impressed with the policy instruments that have already been put in place, as well as with what we saw in both students and staff as unrealised potential. In substantive terms, we have an impression of considerable efforts and well-targeted accomplishments in some departments, and underexploited potential and delivery practices in every faculty examined in this study, but no comprehensive strategy to meet the diverse needs of the undergraduate students the University attracts.

Against this background, it is our view that comprehensive institutional academic support and mediation should complement the emphasis placed on individual effort rooted in performance strategies in an almost unproblematic way. Better communication and more visible application of policy as well as clearly articulated academic expectations at the university, faculty and course levels would benefit all students, while specific support should be provided to new students, particularly second-language students, those who have

graduated from disadvantaged schools, and those who come from communities with limited resources and social capital. These students are increasingly becoming mainstream in the Wits student body. This challenge cannot be effectively addressed through the current scattered, fragmented and uncoordinated initiatives championed by dedicated faculty members.

The challenge begs for an integrated, broader programmatic and institution-wide support strategy, which requires the allocation of resources, leadership and institutional pragmatism tied to its vision as articulated in Wits 2010. In this regard, we cannot overemphasise the need for synergy between support strategies, communication strategies, and initiatives to mediate student experience and the mission of the institution and its strategic planning instruments. As demonstrated, the policy context for such a paradigm shift already exists. What is missing is the synchronising of strategies at the levels of student interaction on campus, pedagogical support and operational and service delivery issues, to mobilise and support the immense energy and commitment that students and staff have declared in our study.



## CHAPTER FOUR: 'I must study double now': How students encounter and negotiate academic lives at the University of Pretoria

Jonathan Jansen, Ramodungoane Tabane and Hlengiwe Sehlapelo

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The UP has comparatively high progression and pass rates over the three to five years of undergraduate study. The relatively high entrance requirements, enabled by the fact that many of the top-achieving students in the country choose to enrol here, mean that UP has a lower dropout rate and a higher on-time graduation rate than most of the other South African universities. Yet, as access for non-traditional students broadens under new governmental and policy demands, it is increasingly evident that progression rates are related to factors such as race, gender, field of study, social class, language and the school the student attended.

While broad relationships can be traced between these identity-related factors and academic performance, it is unclear how institutional factors - such as academic cultures - might influence the progression and pass rates of new, incoming and, especially, non-traditional students. With this in mind, the broad research questions were framed as follows:

1. How do students encounter and experience the academic life at a large urban institution such as UP?
2. How do students engage with and respond to the academic challenges in their lives?
3. How do students explain the effects of academic challenges on their progress and performance as undergraduates?

The specific interview questions were tuned into the established challenges that face students at a former white, Afrikaans, conservative university that has only recently - compared with the HBUs (historically black universities) and the English liberal universities - opened up to non-traditional (black, international and English mother tongue) students. The institutional context generated specific interview questions, within the broader research questions, such as the following:

- To what extent do you feel 'at home' or welcomed within the UP institutional environment?
- How do you cope with, or respond to, the Afrikaans instruction in your classes?
- In what ways, if any, have you been able to integrate (socially, racially, culturally) into the broader student culture and activities on campus?

### 2. RESEARCH STRATEGY

The data from three faculties (Humanities, Natural and Agricultural Sciences, and Education) were compiled from six data points, as follows.

1. **The faculty profile** brought together data on the academic and administrative staff, the curriculum orientation, the overall instructional programme, the formal arrangements for students to access staff, the size of the faculty (student numbers), the student distribution by race and gender, and the faculty's broad philosophy in terms of what it sees as its distinctive mission and identity. These data came from a combination of interviewing the faculty leadership and combing through relevant faculty documents.

**2. The faculty history** of student progression and pass rates (PPR) was statistically compiled for the period 2000-2005. The statistical profile of these rates is centrally available for the institution as a whole, but was accumulated by faculty and disaggregated for specific programmes with traditionally high failure and dropout rates (e.g. Accounting in Economic and Management Sciences). The idea was to have a composite statistically based narrative for each faculty's PPR.

**3. The faculty students** were interviewed in a focus group format using a semi-structured interview protocol that covered the issues on which the three research questions focus (experience, engagement and effects) that framed the investigation. The one-hour student interviews, transcribed for record keeping and analysis, formed the most direct and qualitative evidence for the students' encounter with the University.

**4. The faculty administration** were also interviewed in a focus group format to determine the formal arrangements for access and service and the administrative staff's collective experiences of student problems, needs, challenges and concerns. These data add another layer of evidence to explain the student-administration interface and the extent to which it facilitates or frustrates academic progress.

**5. The faculty academics** were asked to respond to a single electronic question to determine how they understood the student experience and what they would see as obstacles to student progression. These data provide the lecturer perspective on the student encounter with the teaching and learning context of a particular faculty, and reveal how lecturers identify and resolve academic problems.

**6. The student biographies** present the stories of four black students in their third year of study in one faculty (Education), in which they recount how they gained access to UP and experienced academic life. What makes these extended student narratives so powerful is that they offer uninterrupted insights into and detailed insider accounts of the journeys that severely disadvantaged black students have to undertake to eventually experience success in a large, urban and formerly white university.

While firm causal links are not drawn in this kind of study, the dependent variable in focus is academic performance. The study set out to inquire how student problems and experiences influence both traditional and non-traditional students' PPR. Through sustained interviews with third-year students, this study developed 'thick descriptions' of how these students encounter, experience, engage with and explain the factors that affect their progress and performance in the undergraduate years. Such qualitative depth is lacking in the impressive statistical summaries of progression or throughput rates, or in striking anecdotes of dramatic conflict or confrontation in student lives.

The study made some initial assumptions about student, academic and institutional culture, while also recognising that these phenomena are fluid and subject to change, especially on a campus that describes itself as simultaneously the largest black campus and the largest Afrikaans-language campus in South Africa. The research design and methods were therefore sensitive to issues of culture as legacy but also culture as change.

The third-year students had negotiated almost three years of academic and social life on campus and were able to provide a reasonably long-term view of how campus culture and experiences affected their academic performance. Both black and white students were included in the interviews, which were video-recorded and, separately, audio-recorded to ensure reliable records of the focus group sessions, and these records were then transcribed for analysis. The data analysis was conducted manually and the analytic themes emerging from this process are represented in ten major findings in Section Five.

It is crucial to place these findings within the historical, social and academic context of a large, urban and formerly white Afrikaans institution, taking into consideration its most recent transformations since the 1990s. Such context explains both the trajectory and pace of change and the inhibitors and stress factors that give UP its particular complexion.

### 3. A THEORY OF PEDAGOGIC DISTANCE

The data in this study directed us towards a theory of pedagogic distance that explains the gap between teaching expectations and learning achievements as a function of separateness or disconnectedness. This distance is not necessarily geographical or physical, though this is an added dimension in the specific context of distance education. In conventional higher education classrooms, pedagogic distance has at least five dimensions: emotional, political, pedagogical, linguistic and physical, each of which requires elaboration.

The constructs proposed by this theory are insightful but inadequate for capturing the kinds of distance (and distancing) observed in the course of this study. The first construct is 'transactional distance', first proposed by Michael G Moore (1991) to suggest that both physical and pedagogical distance have an effect on the teaching-learning connection in the classroom. Transactional distance is a variable composed of 'the structure of a course and the dialog between the teacher and students' and is, moreover, 'made up of understandings and interpretations between the teacher and students' (Jensen, 1998). This distance can be reduced by the nature and structure of the interaction in the classroom. But the mass of studies invoking this construct pay much less attention to the pedagogical dimensions of the relationship and fail to elaborate what these might mean in contact institutions of higher learning (Shin, 2003).

The second construct is 'social presence' (Richardson & Swan, 2003), defined as 'the degree to which a person is perceived as a 'real person' in mediated communication' (Gunawardena, 1995: 151). Much emphasis is therefore placed on student perceptions and feelings of connectedness to the teaching person, and this has become the basis for some fine-grained empirical studies (Hostetter & Busch, 2006). Again, the typical context of application is online and distance learning and the construct relies quite heavily on students' personal and group perceptions.

The third and related construct is 'teacher immediacy', which seeks to explain student performance in relation to verbal and nonverbal cues from the teacher that connect to and engender learning (Witt et al., 2004). Immediacy is defined as 'the act of reducing the physical and/or psychological distance between people' (Love, 2004: 3) through behaviours that include touch, direct body orientation, eye contact, gestures and positive head nods. We suspect that these cues, while important, might apply less in the context of university teaching and more to teaching younger children; in any event, there was less support for immediacy expressed in the interviews with students in this study.

Our theory of pedagogic distance implies learner-centred education, and interactive teaching in its broadest sense. Good university teachers bridge the gap between teaching and learning in a way that invokes the richly suggestive response: 'I see what you mean.' It involves two persons, an act of meaning, and an act of seeing or insight into a problem.

The **emotional dimension** requires engaged teaching in which the teacher is able to convey a sense of the subject matter beyond its narrow cognitive or content significance to inspire a sense of connection to what is taught. It is the physics lecturer who presents the discovery of the atom as a story rather than a dry lecture - the courageous inquirers, the frustration of setbacks, the thrill of discovery, the race between competitors - who engages students emotionally, as if they were there. Such teaching reduces the distance between teacher, subject matter and learner, and ensures a motivational context for learning.

The **political dimension** recognises the unequal power relations in the classroom, and creates the basis for approach, for questioning, for challenging, for expressing uncertainty. Students everywhere are acutely aware that authority and power are centred in the person at the front of the classroom, but even more so in universities with strong authoritative cultures, like the one in this study. Furthermore, in racially divided communities, and in former white universities, black students are conscious of their disadvantage in the cultural context for communication; they are also likely to be aware that they are less well prepared, in many cases, than their white counterparts in terms of schooling. In other words, a classroom is a powerful political context in which access to knowledge, authority and culture is highly differentiated in terms of not only student-lecturer relations but also student-student relations. A university teacher who is conscious of this inequality in its various dimensions, and whose pedagogical strategies constantly seek to close these gaps, has shortened a significant distance in the classroom.

The **pedagogical dimension** refers to university methods of teaching and learning compared with school methods. For first-year students, these data showed repeatedly that a significant pedagogical distance exists and is seldom overcome in the university classroom. The smaller classrooms, the managed attendance, the demand requirements (e.g. homework) and the personal supervision are aspects of school pedagogies that might be resented by high school students but provide a comfortable safety net to which they become accustomed. The large lecture venues with hundreds of students, the lack of personal knowledge between lecturers and students and the lack of supervision more direct supervision leave many students vulnerable to failure. Our data show repeatedly that students find this distance formidable, and indeed many drop out or fail because the institution and the lecturers do not see it as their role to directly address the pedagogical distance other than through additional tuition. To be sure, some students adjust quickly and the more talented eventually catch up with the required performance standards after initial faltering.

The **linguistic dimension** acknowledges that there is a considerable distance, which stresses the hierarchy that exists between students and teachers (and also administrators) when it comes to languages. The dominant institutional language (e.g. English or Afrikaans) is largely foreign to some students. This distance created by incomprehension between teacher and student is a major contributor to failure rates in higher education. Students who come to university from language-insulated communities could be hearing the language of instruction for the first time. Even when the tuition language is taught at school, the poor quality of education could still mean that little competence is carried through to university. But it is not only the language of tuition but also the language of the discipline that can increase the distance between teachers and learners; in the hands of an unskilled teacher, or a professor who does not recognise the

distance caused by specialist language, for example, this could be an insurmountable gap in the classroom for many students.

The **physical distance** between students and teachers matters, and this is where teacher immediacy studies come in. The large first-year classes place most students at a large distance from and therefore often out of pedagogical reach (because of noise, and the lecturer's voice capacity) of the lecturer at the front of the room. Another cause of distance is inaccessibility, such as the difficulty of finding a lecturer in limited office hours. This is made worse where a university, because of lack of funding or foresight, does not provide enough supporting classes or tutorials or teaching assistants. The difficulty of trying to solve an administrative or intellectual problem can be demotivating for students and affect their learning; this is especially the case in the first year of study where the impersonal character of higher learning makes this physical distance appear normal in a post-school environment.

Our theory therefore posits that the major reason for undergraduate underperformance in South African universities is their difficulty in traversing pedagogic distance in any or all of the five dimensions (emotional, political, pedagogical, linguistic and physical), and where institutions are unable to recognise and redress these distances, through improved teaching and learning support, the risk of failure and dropout remains high.

#### 4. INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Initially an English-medium institution, the UP traces its roots to 1908, when it functioned as a branch of the Transvaal University College (hence the Afrikaans nickname 'Tukkies'), and to 1930, when it gained full autonomy and its current name. Two years later, in 1932, it secured a mandate to serve (white) Afrikaans speakers. During the decades that followed Afrikaans was its medium of instruction and, in accordance with the apartheid policies of the day, it became one of the leading servants of Afrikaner nationalism in South Africa.

The 1990s brought all the struggles of transition into the heart of UP, which responded, as it did to state authority under apartheid, with the required zeal in opening access to black students and appointing black academics. This change was of course not uncontested, nor did the responsiveness to the new political environment go unopposed. For example, the senior managers and professors are overwhelmingly white and male, and the student body consistently votes into power the right-wing Freedom Front, which is allied to the minority white political organisation of the same name. Further, black students are still a minority at UP and more white than black academics have been appointed since the 1990s. Nevertheless, the university's claims to 'transformation' centre on its two-language instructional policy (English and Afrikaans), the fact that it has the largest number of black students of any contact conventional national university (from 29% of contact students in 2000 to almost 40% of the student body in 2006, and 97% of its distance education students), and that 53% of its contact students are women (see Table 8).

**Table 8: Student profile**

Study level	Number of students			% black (contact students)*	% female (contact students)	from Gauteng (contact students)	Number of graduates
	Contact Mode	Distance Mode	Total				
<b>Undergraduate</b>							
2000	20211	27665	47876	26.1	55.4	66.0	7065
2001	21297	26737	48034	27.9	55.8	65.1	7784
2002	22470	26945	49145	28.7	55.6	60.0	6790
2003	23837	14022	37859	31.0	55.8	60.7	5904
2004	28526	11973	40498	40.1	56.2	59.3	7166
2005	28252	10423	38675	39.2	56.1	59.5	7914
2006	28206	6884	35090	38.1	55.7	60.5	-
<b>Postgraduate</b>							
2000	7882	433	8315	35.3	43.5		
2001	8915	519	9434	38.8	44.7		
2002	9693	2007	11700	40.0	44.4	67.1	3089
2003	10359	4107	14466	41.8	44.4	66.9	3361
2004	10437	4237	14674	43.7	44.3	67.8	3509
2005	10247	3155	13402	43.5	44.9	68.3	3700
2006	10183	3953	14136	45.1	46.1	67.8	-
<b>Total</b>							
2000	28093	28098	56191	28.7	52.0		
2001	30212	27256	57468	31.1	52.5		
2002	32163	28952	61115	32.1	52.3	62.1	9879
2003	34196	18129	52325	34.3	52.4	62.5	9265
2004	38963	16210	55173	41.0	53.0	61.4	10675
2005	38499	13578	52077	40.4	53.0	61.8	11614
2006	38389	10837	49226	39.9	53.1	62.4	-

\*Note that 'black' includes African, coloured and Indian students.

Like most of the leading South African universities, UP presents an image of itself as a university representing academic excellence while at the same time accommodating academic potential from disadvantaged student communities. In terms of academic excellence, UP continually reminds its public that more than 30% of the country's top Matric achievers (those who obtained more than six distinctions) enrolled at this institution, and that the number of enrolling students with three or more distinctions grew from 896 in 2000 to 1,757 in 2006 (see Table 9 and 10).

**Table 9: First-time entering contact student profile by race and aggregate M score (matriculation score)**

Year	Number of students					Number of students		Average M-Score	% top achievers from RSA**
	African	Coloured	Indian	White	Total	Human Science	Natural Science		
2000	860	58	244	3820	4982	2861	2121		52.8%
2001	1079	84	263	4019	5445	3215	2229		47.1%
2002	1163	75	270	4223	5713	3312	2419	18.9	32.4%
2003	1543	59	285	4175	6062	3383	2679	19.1	38.6%
2004*	2236	93	301	4560	7190	4136	3054	18.8	31.6%
2005*	1968	107	290	4444	6809	3910	2899	19.5	30.5%
2006*	2163	130	260	4479	7032	3923	3109	20.0	32.7%

\* Includes Mamelodi Campus  
 \*\* Percentage of matriculants enrolled at UP who achieved more than six distinctions

**Table 10: Number of first-time entering contact students with three or more distinctions (A) in Matric**

Number of As per student	Number of first-time entering students at UP							Total number of matrics 2005
	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	
3	342	442	446	525	572	542	604	2998
4	218	254	293	347	437	412	399	1924
5	138	159	194	247	283	296	296	1308
6	116	159	161	222	295	265	286	1200
7	59	67	87	121	148	134	122	454
8	20	23	27	48	47	50	40	70
9	3	6	7	7	15	14	10	10

In addition, UP reminds itself and its constituencies that it is the largest producer of accredited research outputs of all South African universities, that it is a world leader in Institute of Scientific Information (ISI) terms in at least four disciplines, that it enjoys favourable ratings in some of the global international rankings (it is in the top 500 of the Shanghai World Rankings), and that it has one of the most elaborate and flexible e learning infrastructures of any university. Perhaps unsurprisingly, UP's academic reputation weighs heavily with students who consider applying to the institution, as Table 11 shows.

**Table 11: The most important factors influencing student applications**

Determining factors	Total 2004 %	Ranking 2004	Ranking 2002	Ranking 2000
<b>Institutional factors</b>				
Academic reputation of UP	91	1	3	1
International recognition of the degree or diploma	90	3	2	2
The general image of the university	85	5	10	*
Location of the university	82	6	11	14
Level of innovation in teaching and research	77	10	6	*
Employment rates	77	11	9	12
<b>Personal factors</b>				
The university presents the exact course that I am interested in	91	2	1	3
Excellent facilities and equipment available at the university	86	4	4	6

Like all South African institutions, UP makes a place for black students with poor school preparation by offering a combination of foundation year and extended programmes. There are various forms of foundation year programmes. One is the UPFY (University of Pretoria Foundation Year programme, modelled on a similarly named successful programme at the former University of the North, now Limpopo University). This enrolls students who, while meeting the matriculation standard, fall short of the specific requirements for the science-based faculties. This programme has a 60% to 65% success rate. The so-called Extended Programme enables students to add a year onto their formal studies and so increase their chances of success in a programme such as Engineering. Mentoring and tutoring budgets are significant across faculties, and at the recently incorporated Mamelodi Campus (formerly a campus of Vista University), lower admission requirements apply than at the other UP campuses.

The most important indicators of UP's future are the continual increase in the number of black students and the decisive changes in UP students' language preferences. In 2006, 60% of undergraduate and 72% of postgraduate students preferred English as the language of instruction and communication (see Table 12).

**Table 12: Language preference (contact students)**

Study level	Race	2004			2005			2006		
		Afr	Eng	Total	Afr	Eng	Total	Afr	Eng	Total
Under-graduate	White	11896	5207	17103	11363	5809	17172	11187	6278	17465
	Coloured	71	302	373	69	324	393	63	379	442
	Indian	4	1156	1160	3	1182	1185	8	1128	1136
	African	14	9876	9890	18	9484	9502	27	9136	9163
	Total	11985	16541	28526	11453	16799	28252	11285	16921	28206
Post-graduate	White	3662	2212	5874	3187	2602	5789	2820	2775	5595
	Coloured	30	186	216	21	232	253	24	218	242
	Indian	12	511	523	2	521	523	1	547	548
	African	31	3793	3824	2	3680	3682	3	3795	3798
	Total	3735	6702	10437	3212	7035	10247	2848	7335	10183
<b>Grand total</b>		<b>15720</b>	<b>23243</b>	<b>38963</b>	<b>14665</b>	<b>23834</b>	<b>38499</b>	<b>14133</b>	<b>24256</b>	<b>38389</b>



These important cultural and demographic shifts at UP must be taken into account in interpreting the findings that follow.

## 5. DISCUSSION OF MAIN FINDINGS

The analysis of interview data, statistical performance data, documentary data and the student biography data generated ten major themes or findings, discussed in the following sections:

1. The primacy of language in the ways students negotiate access and experience success (and failure) at the University.
2. The significant variation in graduation and completion rates across and within faculties - even within a generally positive institutional performance with respect to continuation and graduation.
3. The power of residence culture in influencing the academic success and social integration of students at the University - when compared, for example, with the experiences of day students ('dailies') in the same faculties and programmes.
4. The abiding significance of the school-to-university gap in explaining student success at the University.
5. Academics' continuing and widespread negative expectations directed at undergraduate students.
6. The negative effects of pedagogic distance (the educational distance created between lecturer and student) on student attitudes and responses to academic challenges.
7. The increasing importance of access to information as a critical variable in students' ability to navigate their way through a complex academic organisation.
8. The veiled significance of race and racialised understandings in the ways students express their sense of engagement with and achievement at a former white institution.
9. The demoralising effects of a large, multi-campus and constantly changing institution (access to curriculum, textbooks, parking, facilities, etc.) on students' sense of academic security and success.
10. The uncertain and unpredictable role of learning resources in students' confidence and academic success.

### 5.1 THE PRIMACY OF LANGUAGE IN THE WAYS STUDENTS NEGOTIATE ACCESS AND EXPERIENCE SUCCESS (AND FAILURE) AT THE UNIVERSITY

The most common expression of problems, anxiety and frustration among third-year students across the three faculties had to do with UP's language policy and practice. On paper, the University has a dual language policy that recognises English and Afrikaans as the languages of instruction, but in practice the students found a range of behaviours from language exclusive classes to mixed language practices within the same classroom.

It is clear from the data that, for all students, the university's language practice has a direct impact on the quality of the academic experience and the chance of success. For white students the language policy is

dishonest: the brochures and orientation suggest that students will receive instruction in 'their own language' (for Afrikaans students especially) and not in both languages in the same classroom. Many Afrikaans students saw the pandering to English as a selling-out of Afrikaans, a one-way obligation of Afrikaans-speaking students with little reciprocity from the English-speaking group. A minority of Afrikaans speakers felt that the drift towards English was inevitable, and even necessary in a globalised world, since mastery of English would improve their chances of work in other countries after graduation.

For black students the language practice in classrooms bedevilled their chances of academic success. The three main forms of communication (lectures, notes and discussions) mixed the two languages in ways that doubled the workload for students already struggling with academic English; since every lecturer had his or her own way of combining English and Afrikaans in mixed-language classes, this made it difficult to adapt to the stresses of learning. For example, some will lecture in English and produce class notes in Afrikaans (the trade-off), while others will ask questions in English and these will be answered in Afrikaans and summarised in English. There are many other kinds of combination. All students, but especially black students, found this frustrating.

But academic English was as much of a problem. Both black and white students complained that they were accustomed to a common, everyday English from their school experiences and then had to try and follow an elevated English which they simply could not grasp well enough, especially during the first and even the second year of study

What was striking from the interviews with administrators was the observation that two groups of people (black and white) are approaching each other in an unfamiliar or non-home language, i.e. English. And both struggle. Administrators found it difficult to explain when the concepts in their heads were in Afrikaans. Students observed that Afrikaans academics struggle with English, and this simply made the situation worse when it came to communicating complex ideas.

What became clear from the interviews, though, was that the capacity and inclination of students to 'ride' the language challenge varied considerably. As one academic put it,

*I think one of the main challenges has to do with the medium of instruction. I had the privilege of teaching dual-medium undergraduate classes. Some students complained that this switching from one language to the other was rather disruptive to their ability to concentrate [but] many students saw this as an opportunity to 'get bilingual' in my subject, and thrived, but for some it was a real challenge.*

Even so, at the heart of the problems of access to knowledge and success at UP, for black and white students alike, lies the problem of language.

## **5.2 THE SIGNIFICANT VARIATION IN GRADUATION RATES ACROSS AND WITHIN FACULTIES - EVEN WITHIN A GENERALLY POSITIVE INSTITUTIONAL PERFORMANCE WITH RESPECT TO CONTINUATION AND GRADUATION**

The UP is a large university, with 47,859 students (41,148 contact and 6,711 distance) in 2006, spread over five campuses from Sandton (one of two business schools) to Pretoria (major faculties such as Humanities and Science) to Onderstepoort (Veterinary Sciences). The actual and projected enrolments by field of study for both contact and distance education students are shown in Table 13.

**Table 13: Student enrolments: Head count by major field of study, 2004-2010**

Field of study	2004		2006		2008		2010		% growth per annum
	Contact	Distance	Contact	Distance	Contact	Distance	Contact	Distance	
Science, Engineering, Technology	17089	47	17970	40	18911	40	19915	40	2.6%
Business/Management	7074	28	7315	0	7564	0	7822	0	1.6%
Education	4432	7448	4732	6671	5052	7355	5394	8109	2.2%
Other Humanities	10829	24	11131	0	11426	0	11711	0	1.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>39424</b>	<b>7547</b>	<b>41148</b>	<b>6711</b>	<b>42953</b>	<b>7395</b>	<b>44842</b>	<b>8149</b>	<b>2.0%</b>

The dropout rates are comparatively low, but nevertheless high in social costs to the students and financial costs to the institution. For the 2000 student cohort, for example, 5.9% had left by August of that year, with the figure increasing to 6.8% just before the year-end examination for the same year. The cumulative figure had reached 11.8% by the second year and 17.3% by the third year (see Table 14).

**Table 14: Academic dropout rates for contact students**

Year	First-year cohort	First year				Second year		Third year	
		Dropout before 1 Aug		Additional dropout before examination		Dropout with registration		Dropout with registration	
2006	6823	189	2.8%						
2005	6246	292	4.7%	72	1.2%	500	8.0%		
2004	6700	315	4.7%	67	1.0%	540	8.1%	392	5.9%
2003	5591	237	4.2%	57	1.0%	383	6.9%	365	6.5%
2002	5377	247	4.6%	69	1.3%	311	5.8%	351	6.5%
2001	4958	278	5.6%	43	0.9%	325	6.6%	287	5.8%
2000	4368	258	5.9%	41	0.9%	216	4.9%	240	5.5%
					6.8%		11.8%		17.3%

The success rates of UP students are clearly differentiated by race and gender. On-time graduation rates for three-year programmes show that white and Indian women students have the highest success rates (62.2% and 65.7%), with coloured females at 53.3% and African women at 38.3%. Men score lower than their female counterparts in all race categories, with 55.8% white males, 54% Indian, 38.9% coloured and 30.2% African graduating on time in three-year programmes.

As Table 15 shows, the percentage of students who graduate in the minimum times is also a concern, at 35.1% for three-year programmes in 2002 and 43.1% for four-year programmes in 2001.

**Table 15: Graduation rates: Undergraduate contact programmes**

Programme duration	Starting year	Number of first-year students	% graduating in minimum period	% additional graduates in minimum period +1 year	% still studying in minimum period + 2 years	% who migrate to other programmes	% dropout after min period +2 years
3 years	2002	3350	35.1	18.2	13.6	4.7	28.3
	2001	3026	36.7	17.9	13.8	4.7	26.8
	2002	2843	35.9	21.1	14.7	4	24.3
	1999	2578	33.9	18.4	14.8	5.8	27.2
	1998	2331	34.9	17.2	13	5.2	29.7
	1997	2331	32.2	16.7	12.3	8.5	30.3
4 years	2001	1623	43.1	12.6	8.4	7.9	28
	2000	1260	43.1	15	8.4	8.7	24.8
	1999	1319	37.8	14.6	11.3	9.1	27.2
	1998	1298	38.3	12.1	10	8.8	30.9
	1997	1210	39.8	14	9.8	9.2	27.1
	1996	1154	36.3	13.6	9.1	8.3	32.7

Academic exclusions are another dimension of the problem, with 2,328 undergraduate students excluded at the end of 2005 and 909 of this group re-admitted for registration in 2006 (39%) after following the various routes, including appeal, for readmission (see Table 16). The academic exclusions vary by faculty. In the faculties considered in this study, the undergraduate exclusions were 504 Humanities students (21.6%), 482 Natural and Agricultural Sciences students (20.7%) and 128 Education students (5.5%).

**Table 16: Record of exclusions, 2005**

Faculty	Number of students academically excluded (End 2005)			Number and % of re-registrations in 2006		
	UG	PG	Total	UG	PG	Total
Humanities % excluded	504	51	555	165 32.74%	11 21.57%	176 31.71%
Natural & Agricultural Sciences % excluded	482	7	489	238 49.38%	2 28.57%	240 49.08%
Law % excluded	234	38	272	115 49.15%	6 15.79%	121 44.49%
Theology % excluded	6		6	5 83.33%		5 83.33%
Economic & Management Sciences % excluded	343	172	515	115 33.53%	98 56.98%	213 41.36%
Veterinary Science % excluded	7		7	3 42.86%		3 42.86%
Education % excluded	128	70	198	26 20.31%	25 35.71%	51 25.76%
Health Science % excluded	30		30	13 43.33%		13 43.33%
Engineering % excluded	594	262	856	229 38.55%	144 54.96%	373 43.57%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2328</b>	<b>600</b>	<b>2928</b>	<b>909</b>	<b>286</b>	<b>1195</b>

It is important to recognise that at UP, as elsewhere, graduation and completion rates are strongly linked to of high school graduates' matriculation scores (M scores). In three-year programmes, for example, 65% of students with M scores in the 25 to 30 range (i.e. students with several higher grade A passes at Matric), graduate on time, while only 30% of on-time graduations are found among students with M scores of 16 to 18. The on-time graduation rate is down to 14% for students with an M score range of 10 to 12.

And finally, the graduation and completion rates vary considerably by faculty. For example, in Education 71.4% of students graduate on time, in Engineering 60% and in the Natural Sciences 51%. These variable rates are in turn a function of the different M score level entry requirements in each of the nine faculties.

### **5.3 THE POWER OF RESIDENCE CULTURE IN INFLUENCING THE ACADEMIC SUCCESS AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY - WHEN COMPARED, FOR EXAMPLE, WITH THE EXPERIENCES OF DAY STUDENTS ('DAILIES') IN THE SAME FACULTIES AND PROGRAMMES**

It is difficult to overstate the importance of residence culture in the historically Afrikaans universities. In non-Afrikaans universities there were rapid shifts in the racial demographics, but in the Afrikaans ones the *koshuis* (residence) traditions are deeply entrenched and valued. For students from inside the traditional culture, the *koshuis* is a place of pride and association where parents and grandparents once resided and where stories of a glorious past have been carried down through generations of UP students.

Black students entering these residences at first feel alienated by these strong, Afrikaans-oriented cultural practices and traditions. Their rationale for entering residences is pragmatic and instrumental, i.e. to find a place to stay while completing studies at a reasonable price and as close as possible to the university. For black students the residence has accommodation value only, whereas for white students, especially those from Afrikaans families, it has an enculturation value, which is to build on and extend the traditional values, practices and traditions of the *koshuis*. Black students' experiences in this cultural hotbed of Afrikaner traditions were much worse until initiation ceremonies were made illegal and eventually became obsolete in most of the residences.

This conflict of expectations about what a residence is and what residential life is for continues to create some degree of tension between white and black students, but UP has mandated several changes that have taken the rough edge off this experience for undergraduates. First, every residence was required to have black students among its leadership. Second, efforts were made to recruit black academics and administrators from the UP full-time staff to fill vacant slots as heads of residences, with considerable success. Third, as indicated, some of the more provocative traditions and ceremonies were discouraged, if not outlawed, with more open and inclusive practices now forming the rallying points for building new residence traditions. It appears that the one area where UP has made significant strides towards transformation has been in changes to its residence cultures.

The students claim, consistently, that the residence experience for both black and white occupants is a critical element of their socialisation into university life. Residences build unity, a commonness of purpose. First-year students look up to their seniors, and find the support and encouragement that accrue from loyalty to the residence. Rural students find residences a crucial bridge to the complexities and uncertainties of a large research university.

Residences are also places of intense social activities organised around committees of various kinds dealing with rag, inter-residence socials, community outreach, team building, leadership training, sports, music and

culture, entertainment, spiritual life, and so on. This rich network of people and activities is, on the one hand, an important way of breaking into university life, but many students also complained about the challenges of balancing the demands of academic work and social life; this was especially the case for students who had to work part-time to raise or supplement their resources to cover university costs.

This does not mean that the residences are no longer racially divided, or that the most visible traditions do not favour one cultural community, or that in some places leadership still expresses itself in terms of quasi-military styles of command and control over new students; this is clearly evident from research and observation. But it does mean that these traditions and divisions are no longer dominant or unchallenged, and that the growing black leadership among staff and students in the residences is slowly beginning to achieve greater inclusivity without losing some of the more harmless legacies of the *koshuis* tradition.

#### 5.4 THE ABIDING SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SCHOOL-TO-UNIVERSITY GAP IN EXPLAINING STUDENT SUCCESS AT THE UNIVERSITY

Students in all faculties notice a huge gap between the academic demands of high school and the academic expectations of the university. It is significant that the claims about this gap are made with equal stridency by students from top schools with top Matric results and by those from rural and poor schools with poor school-leaving results.

The first aspect of the gap is simply the **intensity** of the work expected at university compared to school. Students from the elite schools claim that they did in fact work very hard at school, and had developed the discipline, they thought, to cope with the demands of intellectual work at university. However, the sheer volume of work and the concentration required were vastly more demanding than anything they had experienced at school.

The second aspect of the gap is the difference between the way the **progression** from one set of concepts or procedures to another happens in school and the way it happens at university. At school students felt that they were being guided steadily and systematically through difficult work; at university, there was no such consideration, with the professors moving at a rapid pace without establishing whether earlier concepts or ideas had been grasped fully, or at all, by the large classes. To be sure, some students recall being 'spoon-fed' at school and how as a result they developed attitudes towards knowledge and learning that disadvantage them in the fast-paced environment of universities.

The third aspect of the gap is the **independence** that academic teachers assume each student already possesses - the assumption that they will be able to cope with the complexity and pace of academic work on their own. Students recall being 'watched' at school, and being forced to work under the close supervision of teachers with little freedom to deviate from work at school or at home. The university situation requires a massive adaptation, and if they do not adjust quickly enough they soon find themselves far behind in their academic work, under huge stress and facing the possibility of failure.

The lament that follows, by one of the most experienced undergraduate teachers, was echoed, with varying degrees of emphasis, by other academics:

*Since 2002, I have personally been responsible for teaching plus/minus 2,450 second and third years on our campus as for two years I had the entire year group, so believe what I tell ...*

*In class, the actual problem is being able to extract key issues and respond critically. Undergraduates (third-year students) are still very dependent on the lecturer, believing everything without question. They are unable to take down notes despite a structured presentation; they find a 50-minute contact session long. (I have double periods, making 100 minutes an eternity for some.) Academic literacy skills, in particular reading and writing, are poor. They are unable to (orally or in writing) express themselves academically; they do not read beyond anything but simple class notes and photocopied excerpts of non-academic texts; only the brave and English-proficient respond when challenged (English proficiency per se is below standard). They are unable to search for, let alone synthesise, information; they have a vague grasp of what is well-structured text; referencing techniques are an enigma; argumentation is a non-existent skill.*

*They do not understand that studying implies effort, discipline and commitment, they lack study skills (looking for main ideas and key words, summarising the essence, looking for arguments/contradictions etc.). They expect to rote learn and regurgitate; critical and creative thinking skills are rare; they shrink back from anything that requires more than a passive class attendance; they are accustomed to being spoon-fed; some have very limited IT skills despite having passed the CIL courses.*

*They decorate their tasks with calligraphy, glitter and pictures of angels and kittens etc., oblivious to what is appropriate academic style - a kind of naivety encouraged by some colleagues who reward such 'beautiful' submissions. When they cannot see a practical link to how the academic content relates to what they think they will 'need' in a classroom one day, it is declared irrelevant. Theory of anything is thus questionable.*

*They struggle to organise their work (e.g. portfolios) and have difficulty seeing 'the bigger picture', hesitate to take initiative, hardly ever consult me about academic content but badger me about piffly administrative matters (despite an entire detailed handout and study guide) or drain me with endless personal problems.*

*... Speakers of English as an additional language experience much difficulty in both expressive and receptive communicative skills. Effective time management is a serious problem for most. Many students are working (au pair/sports coach) as well as trying to study full-time; others find balancing social life and studying impossible.*

While it might constitute valid criticism to point out the way academics tend to focus on undergraduates' lack of various academic skills and to locate the problem exclusively with the student, the issue is usually more complex than this. Without forgetting that this type of attitude defines the pedagogy and politics of how institutions relate to their students, it must not be overlooked that the complaint quoted above is an acute commentary on the degree of underpreparedness of high school graduates for tertiary education.

## **5.5 ACADEMICS' CONTINUING AND WIDESPREAD NEGATIVE EXPECTATIONS DIRECTED AT UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS**

Throughout this study, students complained about persistent negative expectations of their chances of success on the part of university teachers. Lecturers would explain how few students historically passed a course and how difficult past students found the content, and tell them their numbers would be dramatically reduced in the course of the programme.

Students obviously found these persistent negative comments pernicious and insulting, and complained that such attitudes worsened the already difficult transition to university life and in turn generated negative perceptions and low expectations of the students. These feelings were common across the three faculties, and appeared to be limited to particular academics and particular courses of study.

*They say in class that none of, not all of you, gonna make it ... the veterinary tests are so difficult, and if you fail a prerequisite course, then they take it you cannot do other courses and ... then they cost you another year even if you go and explain that 'I am not studying vet'.*

*They tell students in class, they tell you: 'You know, next year, you see, just cut a line in the middle - half of you will be in here and half of you will not be here.' Now when you are being told that, you are comparing yourself with the whole group of people.*

Students also reported, at the same time, wonderful counter-examples of caring and concerned academic teachers who 'went the extra mile' to ensure that all students were accommodated in their classes and that high expectations were communicated to all students. However, these positive examples were completely overshadowed by the prominent examples of negative communication by certain academics.

*We get lecturers that are very caring and very friendly and there are those that will ask if you got a problem with the tests and that 'you got to tell me now [because] if you tell me later I am not going to change it'. We do get those lecturers but the other lecturers, they don't care.*

It was common practice during the apartheid years that such negative attitudes, often racist, were expressed towards black students in South African universities, and especially in the so-called 'bush colleges'. The persistence of such practices, facing black and white students, suggest that there is an institutionalised behaviour which students experience as destructive and punitive in their undergraduate years.

## **5.6 THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF PEDAGOGIC DISTANCE (THE EDUCATIONAL DISTANCE CREATED BETWEEN LECTURER AND STUDENT) ON STUDENT ATTITUDES AND RESPONSES TO ACADEMIC CHALLENGES**

One of the most frustrating experiences reported by students was their failure to grasp the rules of the game, i.e. what academic teachers really expect from them in terms of accessing and representing knowledge - in other words, how to succeed in academic life. What further confuses them is the fact that such expectations vary from one lecturer to the next and even from one academic department to the next. Performing in one way for lecturer X yields positive test results, but doing the same for lecturer Y meets with failure. And it is this lack of predictability or, put differently, the lack of access to the hidden codes of academic success, that frustrates many students. As one of them put it,

*Sometimes it's not about the facts, it is about what each lecturer expects from you ... we have lecturers that expect you to say everything you know about the topic than the question [asks for], and the more you rumbled around it the more marks you get; but there are other lecturers that are just looking for three words, and if you do not have those three words ... in your answer, you are not gonna get the marks ... I think the only way [of] knowing what sorts of answers they like or how they mark is from looking at previous scripts.*



Part of the dilemma, students feel, is the way lecturers do not appreciate that they are new to the discipline, encountering subject matter long familiar to the academic concerned but completely unfamiliar to them:

*And they have been dealing with these concepts for 20 years in their lives perhaps, um, and they just, you know, they just don't have ... suppose you could say empathy [agreement in the background] ... the feeling for you.*

This pedagogic distance is not only a physical space separating the lecturer and the student; it is also a deeply emotional space, one in which the fear of being embarrassed or even humiliated makes it so much more difficult to bridge the gap, so to speak.

*If you go to a lecturer and you are in your first or second year, you are still scared - half of the stuff that they are actually saying to you, you're not taking in because your heart is beating so fast. You're with this person that might just bite your head off [laughter] and you like sitting there and you're trying to understand, but you're also scared.*

It is also in this distancing that students become aware of the fact that the rules of the game at school do not serve them well in university, such as in the modes of thinking in the two institutions:

*Eke dink 'n groot ding is op skool leer hulle jou dink op 'n manier, maar hulle leer jou nie regtig dink nie. As jy op universiteit kom, um, die mense wat vir ons klas gee, die dosente, um, dink op 'n heeltemal ander manier - die wetenskaplike manier waarop hulle mens wil leer dink. [I think the big thing is that at school they teach you to think in a particular manner, but they do not really teach you to think. When you get to university, the people teaching you, the lecturers, they think in a completely different manner - the scientific manner of thinking which they require from you.]*

Students obviously have to negotiate this distance in ways that are comfortable to them and appropriate for the particular lecturer. What is clear from this data is that there are few structured opportunities for students to learn how to learn in a university setting, and that most of this knowledge is gained in the course of studies which carry a much lower risk for well-prepared students than for academically weaker ones.

## **5.7 THE INCREASING IMPORTANCE OF ACCESS TO INFORMATION AS A CRITICAL VARIABLE IN STUDENTS' ABILITY TO NAVIGATE THEIR WAY THROUGH A COMPLEX ACADEMIC ORGANISATION**

Both administrators and students point to the lack of crucial information before they enter university and even once they enter it, about access, registration, curriculum choices and pass requirements. Surprisingly, many of the black students found their way into university by accident or through a series of 'lucky breaks' rather than as a result of systematic and structured information reaching them well in advance of their decisions to embark on university study, anywhere. One student put it this way:

*The worst thing about my situation was that I had no knowledge or information about applying for tertiary loans or bursaries. None of my brothers or sisters knew how, since neither of them had any tertiary qualifications. What really broke my heart is that the teachers did not bother to enlighten us about applying for bursaries or loans; they did not even bother to give us the names and addresses of different tertiary institutions so I guess they did not care about what happened with us after schools.*

Other students obtain bits and pieces of information, often coincidentally, and then find themselves stumbling into university poorly prepared to make good decisions about study choices. For this reason, many black students - especially those in Education - found themselves choosing subjects and degrees which they did not wish to take in the first place and, because of a combination of inappropriate school subjects and a weak Matric pass, being forced into programmes that were not their first choice.

*So when I was on the verge of giving up, one of my best friends told me about the special projects that are being run at the UP to help students who want to pursue careers as educators. So I took my chances and applied to be on the project - luckily I was accepted. When I was told I was accepted it felt like I was given another chance in life. This was an opportunity I could not miss. I cannot lie to you and say that I ever thought of myself as a teacher. Teaching never really crossed my mind before.*

Students, confirm administrators, are not well briefed in their schools about the formal requirements for university studies in general or the specific entry requirements for a particular course of study. Worse, schools force students into registering for subjects on the standard grade (in order to boost Matric pass averages) only to disadvantage the student in terms of the 'four higher grade subjects' that must be passed for access to university. If this is true for some students in former white schools, it is a huge problem for students from the majority black schools in the country.

## **5.8 THE VEILED SIGNIFICANCE OF RACE AND RACIALISED UNDERSTANDINGS IN THE WAYS STUDENTS EXPRESS THEIR SENSE OF ENGAGEMENT WITH AND ACHIEVEMENT AT A FORMER WHITE INSTITUTION**

Unlike the situation in the recent past, race no longer features as a prominent part of the negative experiences of most of the UP students in either their social or academic lives. This does not mean that there is not a very visible public confrontation around race from radical black groups (such as the Pan African Student Movement of Azania (PASMA) on the Mamelodi Campus accusing the main campus of being retained separately as a volkstaat, and saying that UP needs to change its name to Mofokeng University) or radical white groups (such as the Volksfront, which recently sold cookies at favourable prices to black students and more expensive prices to white students as a mock action against affirmative action). Nor does this mean that for ordinary students there is no racialised experience in their academic lives; it is simply no longer a prominent or everyday experience as it was in the past.

One of the key reasons for this shift away from racial attitudes and confrontation has been the transformation of the student residences, where most of the heads of residences are now black staff of the university and in which many of the more racially divisive traditions and practices have been outlawed. In addition, the student leadership of each of the residences is now required to include black membership, as mentioned earlier. Activities are now consciously designed to facilitate greater racial interaction and understanding: 'at the hostel they try to make evenings where all students of different races in a floor compete with another floor. So we get to do things together and learn from each other.' In 2007, UP's first Rag Queen was a black woman. The change in the residences has been one of the more successful cases of transformation in this large institution.

Given these changes, students tend to drift towards racial groupings for practical reasons such as language, as one student indicated:

*When they gave us work to do in groups, I always decided to be with black people only because I had an English language problem. I was thinking that if I am not with black people only, I would be like I am not participating in the group and that group members would say I am the one who is not participating.*

Nevertheless, the link between language and prejudice always lurks beneath the surface, for example in the attitudes of Afrikaans speakers towards English speakers:

Ek dink net vir Afrikaanse studente, ons almal het Engels geleer op skool, en meeste van die Afrikaanse student kan Engels praat, ons kan dit verstaan, dis honderd persent; ons het nie so groot 'n probleem daarmee nie [want] jy het dit geleer van klein af. Maar die probleem is, Engelse mense kan nie Afrikaans praat nie, maar ons moet hulle taal praat ... dit maak dit nou weer onregverdig. *[In the case of Afrikaans students, we all learnt English at school, and most Afrikaans students can speak English; we understand it, one hundred percent. We do not have a big problem with it since we learnt it since we were children. But the problem is, English people cannot speak Afrikaans, but we have to speak their language ... which makes it unfair.]*

The most difficult arena within which racial attitudes have an impact on students is in Student Administration, and again in contexts where language is held up as the barrier to cross-cultural understanding. In the words of a senior administrator in one of the faculties,

*So now you have two groups of people who must gain insight into something in another language. That is why we now try to simplify the letters of correspondence ... It is still a problem for me, especially with black students, for whom neither English or Afrikaans is really one of their languages. To try and explain to them [in English] which is also not really my first language. So it is difficult. Words like 'registration' and 'application' get mixed up, where neither of us understands the difference. So yes, explanations become difficult between people who do not share the same first language.*

Another administrator is more direct,

*The year in which we started to take in non-white students [anderskleurige studente], I found that you saw the same student three to four times. And that student would come back to you, not necessarily for the same information, perhaps for a little more information, and if you helped that student once with something ... he keeps coming back to you with any other problem [agreement in background].*

As UP now approaches a level of 50% of black students in the student body, and growing, the race problem becomes less and less of an issue in the ways students explain their academic encounters and their academic progress. Indeed, more and more of the black students come from integrated schools (for example, Pretoria High School for Girls provides the largest number of black students per school to UP of any school in the

country). For such students, learning and living with white students is a largely normal experience, as it is for white students from these integrated schools. Although the language of instruction still can constitute a problem for learning, language differences are no longer such a dominant cause of social disagreement.

### 5.9 THE DEMORALISING EFFECTS OF A VERY LARGE, MULTI-CAMPUS AND CONSTANTLY CHANGING INSTITUTION (ACCESS TO CURRICULUM, TEXTBOOKS, PARKING, FACILITIES, ETC.) ON STUDENTS' SENSE OF ACADEMIC SECURITY AND SUCCESS

Until the mergers took effect, UP was the largest residential university in South Africa, growing to more than 40,000 contact students and an additional 10,000 distance education students. The demands on buildings, parking, staff, planning and learning materials simply did not keep up with this unexpected growth in student numbers. Students felt the effects of this expansion directly and negatively in their day-to-day encounters with academics and administration. Observations such as the following not uncommon:

*In the first year there are thousands of students and hundreds of subjects so that you get clashes and things do not work very well ... the university is not flexible ... they must come up with better situations where you can't find yourself writing more than two exams in the same day.*

Parking problems loom large in the academic experience:

*Every single day people miss classes because they can't just find parking anywhere ... you end up parking your car on the outside miles away, and then you have to pay some guy who wasn't there when you got there ... so, I don't know, obviously the university has like all the space they got around but it's not enough.*

What further slows the learning process for undergraduate students is the difficulty of accessing textbooks quickly, in part because of an underestimation of class size at the university:

*I am really upset for feeling this way ... you want an organisation like this to be organised, to be exact [and] not to waste your time, I mean, like in the bookshop.*

*Don't they know how many psychology students are there in class? Okay, maybe this is the lecturers that have to tell them but then they only order twenty books and we have to run to get the book or maybe we didn't order that book again and [we have to] get it at Juta's which is a problem for me because I have an account with money in it at the Tuks bookshop. So now I have to get money to buy a book because the bookshop did not want to order it.*

The fact that students have to travel between campuses to take courses is a major problem since the timetabling does not allow them to reach the other campus quickly enough on days when there are back-to-back classes. Students therefore miss classes or come late, a problem aggravated by the search for parking.

It is clear from the interviews that the large and impersonal feel of this multi-campus institution has a negative impact on how students understand and experience access to academic facilities.

## 5.10 THE UNCERTAIN AND UNPREDICTABLE ROLE OF LEARNING RESOURCES IN STUDENTS' CONFIDENCE AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS

The ambivalence of the language policy of UP casts learning resources (textbooks, tutors, lecturers, study guides, assignments etc.) in an uncertain role in the classroom, for all students. Put briefly, the dilemma is expressed by students as follows:

*Your textbooks are in English, and you are still thinking in Afrikaans, then you do not know how to name the sketches or things, because sketches are in English, you have to put [in] Afrikaans words but think and write in English.*

Such translation is not easy for Afrikaans students whose entire school (and indeed home and community) experience was through the medium of the mother tongue. They try to engage with this dilemma, but this is extremely difficult, especially in the first year:

*Some tests are written in Afrikaans and key words put in English ... basically what we should do is we should try and switch to English as soon as possible but sometimes you are thinking in Afrikaans 'cause you are so used to talking Afrikaans.*

The lecturers themselves are diverse in terms of their language resources, and this adds to the confusion in the classroom. Some, say the students, are bilingual but others are only English-competent or Afrikaans-competent, which makes it difficult to 'match' lecturers and language and subject matter. The study guides are promised in either English or Afrikaans, but when students come to class the teaching is not predictable by language.

In sum, a large variety of ways of deploying learning resources emerged:

- Teaching in English, with class notes in Afrikaans
- Teaching in Afrikaans, with class notes in English
- Teaching in both English and Afrikaans at the same time
- Teaching in Afrikaans but answering questions in English
- Teaching in English and doing summaries of the lecture in Afrikaans
- Teaching in Afrikaans but through text references in English only
- Setting examinations in both languages, or with one of the languages appearing in key words only
- Separate language classrooms
- Language integrated classrooms.

For students, this simply meant that the workload doubled, as did the frustration and, for such students, an explanation for failure: 'All my knowledge, all the keywords I know was in Afrikaans and suddenly I must study double now.' For black students in particular, this switching between languages in the different learning resources raised doubts about their academic performance.

*My lecturer provided me with everything in English but explained in Afrikaans [so] in class you sit and don't understand anything. And you write a test and you fail while Afrikaans students get 80 and you ask yourself what is wrong with you.*

But it is not simply the English that is a problem for non-native speakers; it is the kind of English used and the problem of overcoming the English challenge in difficult subjects. In other words, learning a difficult subject and learning in English doubled the challenge of academic access and success for black and white students alike.

## 6. STUDENT BIOGRAPHIES

Four women students in their third year of study were selected (black, successful in their tertiary studies, from rural areas, with financial and academic challenges) to compose their stories in three to five pages of narrative. Only the broad structure was suggested to the students, including how they gained access to UP, how they negotiated access to knowledge, and how they account for their success, so far, in their individual journeys through the institution. The stories are rich in depth and meaning, and offer the kind of nuance, context, coherence and emotion that did not emerge as readily from the highly interactive focus group interviews. The four biographies are presented without interruption or (immediate) interpretation, for they speak on their own terms in the context of this report.<sup>225</sup>

### 6.1 THE STORY OF MMATLOU SOPHIA MALAPILE

One day in 1987 my mother gave birth to me. I was born in Potgietersrus (Bokwidi Village) in Limpopo (rural area). I'm the only child to my mother, who is single. Respect, honesty and to believe in God is what they taught me when I was a little girl and now I still have respect. I started my primary school in the village. Attending your school in a rural area is bad, we realise it now, because they didn't give us the opportunity to learn other languages fluently. Everything was in English except Sepedi as first language and Afrikaans as second language, but we did also English as second language. They explained everything in our mother tongue.

After finishing my Primary school in the village my family instead of my relatives because we are close like family (I have 3 uncle and aunt) they decided that I have to start my grade 8 in Private school (multiracial school). Money was the big problem because they didn't have it at that time for me to go to the private school. Finally, I attended my High school in the village, which was not my family's intention. The reason why they wanted me to go to the Private school it was because of my performance in Primary school. My family is very supportive, caring, loving and responsible for us.

During my high school they also explained to us in our mother tongue. I enjoyed my high school and it was challenging because I didn't allow myself to be one of the bottom in the class according to the academic record. We had this girls (2) in my class who were the best, but I told my self that I want to be like them, in order to be like them I have to be a hard work and do the best I can do. And I made it because sometimes I get higher marks than them in my grade 8. In grade 9 I got academic merit certificate for the best learner. I did keep my good work, in grade 10 they didn't give us the certificate. In grade 11 I got merit certificate for Physics.

It was not that easy for me in matric because there was this subject which is Biology we were not up to date. I decided to go to winter school in another school because I saw that I'm not going to do well in it. And my family also supported me. During our trials I was one of those people who passed in matric. Final exam in matric I did well because I passed it with Endorsement. I used to tell my self that if I was in Private school I would have done well as compared to the school I was in because they know English better than us and they have good education.

<sup>225</sup> The stories are presented here as written without any corrections.

After passing my matric I said thank you God for everything because He makes everything possible, when you pray. At that time I thought of being a paramedic or a traffic copper. I didn't know where I going because my family didn't have money to afford in the University. I applied to the University of Limpopo but they replied late I didn't have chance to reply back.

During January the second (2005) my brother (aunt's child) gave me this other pamphlet from UP that allow you to write a test if you passed it you are able to study in UP with whatever you want to do. I came to Pretoria with my brother and his wife so that I can write the test, I did write it but I didn't make it.

It was so sad because I had to stay for few days so that I can go back home. I was staying with my aunt (Nellmapius) the time when my brother called me and said I have to come to them (Mamelodi Sun Valley) tomorrow early in the morning. When I arrived there my sister (my brother's wife) told me that she has this paper which says that they want people who want to study education. My sister is a teacher at Mamelodi so she found out about the paper in the school so she decided to tell me. 'I know you don't want to do teaching' this is what my sister told me the minute she told me about to study teaching. I did accept their offer.

I came here with my brother, I didn't want to sit at home and do nothing about my future so I had to come. At the first place I decided to study teaching because I had no choice and no money. I did hate teaching with all my heart. When times goes on I stated to love it.

During my first year it was very terrible and I hate that year. I remember the first time we were at Mrs Schilling's office with my brother I was so scared because I didn't know how to speak English fluently and it was very difficult for me to understand them talking. It was my brother who was doing the talking with Mrs Schilling. When leaving the office going I was very stressed, depressed and confused because I hate to look like an idiot. When I was at home they tried to console me.

The time came for me to come to the residence, it was horrible, terrible and all that kind of things because they had to leave me alone and I was not used to stay with the absence of my family. And I was thinking at that time that what kind of people am I going to find there? This made me to be more confused. We went to Groenkloof Spar before coming to the hostel to buy something for me to eat. When coming back from the spar they had to drop me on the Campus gate, I nearly cried in front of them but I tried not to cry. I hurried to my room get on the bed and cried for the whole night until I fell asleep. That day I cried like somebody has died and I didn't even eat something.

Orientation week taught me some of the things. We started our classes, yoo it was terrible because I didn't understand when they teach us. I did have problems with the language they use here which is English. The language problem made me to have difficulties in and out of class because I didn't understand what people were saying. Pocket money is not a problem to me because my family used to send me some money. In my first year my academic record during the first semester was very bad because I failed many subject.

Things which influence my academic record to be poor was the environment were you have to stay with people you don't know, waking up early, having lots of assignment to type (I didn't know how to type at that time) and writing tests. On top of that you don't understand English, (eish). Yoo! Computer and OPV [Opvoedkunde or Education] was the subject I hated during my semester, I didn't even pass computer but I managed to pass OPV during the exam.

Having confidence in what you are doing is one of the things which helped me to cope in UP. My family supporting me that also counted. Praying to God every day so that He can give you strength to study, this is very important because everything to God is possible. You know I told myself that God gave me the opportunity so I have to use it and do the best I can do. Hard work is what pays because if you work hard you will find yourself happy everyday because your work will be so good.

An advice which I can give to the people like me is that don't ever give up because the minute you give up is the time you loose. You have to be patient when learning the language because it will help you to know the language. When praying to God day and night so that He can give you strength to study will be the best. You have to work hard every day because hard work pays. If you don't understand some of the things you have to do don't have pride, just go to people who understand the work so that they can help you. When you have problems just go and talk to some one you feel free to talk to so that he can help you. Don't just live with the pain in your heart. Seek help to people. When you are a first year don't allow peer pressure to overcome you because it will lead you to many problems.

## 6.2 THE STORY OF BONGI BEAUTY MASILELA

We as human beings we are not the same; we have different personalities and gifts; someone's gift can be education and someone else's gift can be acting, and so on.

Before I can tell my story I like to first say who I am. I'm a girl who is now 21st year old, a girl who is interested in education because everyone knows that education is a key to success. I'm a friendly person who likes to be with people and communicate about life of all over the world because if you do not communicate to other people at least one hour a day so your life will not be good for you and you will feel as you are alone in this world, I'm a first born at home.

I have one little sister who is in primary school and one little brother who is in secondary school, according to my side to be a first born it means that I have to show the good future to my family especially to my little sister and brother so that they can know how to make a good life for themselves.

The most important thing I have to encourage them that they must not leave school because it is the only thing that will make their life and future to be bright at the end, I was born in rural area and I'm still staying in rural area at the place which is called Kwaggafontein. I'm dependent because I'm under my parents; I still get support from my parents.

If I was in school I knew just a little bit about UP but I did not know about the information for different courses. I had a little bit of information on January 2005 when I finished my matric. I got information from the teacher who was working at another school; she said to me there is a teacher from that school who was attending her studies in UP, and that teacher said the University people want the students who finished matric with endorsement exemption and the minimum of 10 M score to come and study in their University because there is a loan-bursary they offering for teaching course. I decided to go to that teacher and get more information and the teacher said if I want to go to the University I can come with her. The following day I came to the UP with my senior certificate, at University they accepted me because I met the requirements they wanted and they gave me an application form to fill in my details. After that they told me when I am supposed to come and study, now I'm still in UP I'm a third year student in Bachelor of Education.



I remember when I was at school I was telling myself that I'm going to do the course of BScience or something else but not teaching because the teachers do not get enough payment, I decided to do teaching after I got a loan from UP because my parents were not having money to pay for other course that I want, it was tough for me in my first year to do the course that I don't want, but now it's not like in my first year I'm starting to enjoy teaching because if you are not a teacher you can't know exactly how the people differ and you can't know the different cultures of people, you can know their cultures but not as someone who is a teacher because everyday the teacher has the children from different traditions, and also now I'm enjoying teaching because this course helped me a lot, if I remember I was a kind of person who was shy and I was not able to talk to someone that I don't know but now I'm not shy and I like to talk to everyone it's either I know that person or I don't know her.

I was so happy when I was a first year student because this year made me to know many people from different places, but the only thing is that I had a problem of language, my English language was not good and I didn't able to communicate with everyone because some of the students did not know my home language, I was interested to communicate with them but because of English language problem I couldn't. In first semester I also had a problem in my studies, I did not able to concentrate good on the strategy that UP uses because of they are lecturing in English first language and I did English second language at school.

In my first year in this University it was so difficult for me because I took so long time to use to know the way they lecturing, because I thought that it will be the same as in school, when I remember I did not able to participate in some of the things and those things were for University and others were for residents. When they were giving us the work to do in groups I was always decide to be with black people only because I had English language problem, I was thinking that if I'm not with black people only I would be like I'm not participating in the group.

I was also thinking that the group members will say I'm the one who does not want to participate, when the lecturer was asking the question in class I was not raising up my hand because I was thinking that when I'm giving an answer the students would laugh at me or others would make some jokes about what I have said. In residence I was not participating in most of the things they were doing because I did not hear them in some of the things they were saying, but my reason for not participating was the problem of language.

In order to cope to this I decided to try speaking English language with any student, I can say I still have language problem but not as I was in my first year now it's better because I can speak English language with anyone I want to speak to, I think for me to try this language and to come to the University it helped me a lot because if I was not here I wouldn't know this language better, and the only thing that made me not knowing English is that in rural schools when they are teaching they are using more our languages than the English language.

I like to say to everyone that wants to come to UP to do teaching he or she must keep it like that because this course is very important more than the other courses, no one can survive without it because this days almost everything needs education and every person needs education in order to do other courses or to be something, and I like to say to everyone that don't like to do teaching come and do teaching because this course is very good.

Let us be serious about education because it is a key to success, and everyone gets good future from education, without education there is no future and without the teacher there is no education, let us please take teaching seriously and teach our children so that their life will be bright because of they will know who they are.

### 6.3 THE STORY OF MOSOMA SARONA MALETSATSI

My name is Maletsatsi. I am the fifth child in a family of nine. I was born in 1980 at Dennilton in Mpumalanga. I started my primary school when I was seven years old at Sereme Primary school, I later moved to Tlou-Kwena primary and then completed my matric at OR Tambo comprehensive school.

Passing my matric was the best highlight of my life. In my matric year I had to read most of the subjects on my own since I did not have any teachers, my school was understaffed. I had to rely on other learners from neighbouring schools for notes and other learning resources. But I did not let that get to me, I knew that it was my future that was at stake so I made sure that I read as much as I could. When the matric results came out, I felt happy about the way I performed. Something happened that turned my joy into sorrow, unfortunately we were told that there was something wrong with our matric results and that our scripts needed to be re-marked. When the second results came out I was happy to find out that I had passed still.

As if going through the trauma of having to wait for my matric results was not enough, my parents told me that they could not afford to pay for my tertiary education. At that moment I felt like my whole world had just crumbled down and all my dreams were shattered. I felt all alone, nothing made sense for, the thought of me having to stay at home and wait for something to happen made me sick. I knew that I had loads of potential in me, and my time was been wasted. The worst thing about my situation was that I had no knowledge or information about applying for tertiary loans or bursaries. None of my brothers or sisters knew how, since neither of them had any tertiary qualifications. What really broke my heart is that the teachers did not bother to enlighten us about applying for bursaries or loans; they did not even bother to give us the names and addresses of different tertiary institutions so I guess they did not care about what happened with us after school.

I realised that sometimes things do not go according to our plans, but we cannot just sit around and wait for them to happen. I knew I had to do something to change my situation, so I decided to start job hunting. For months and months I sent my CV's to different companies with no luck. Few years passed and I had nothing to do still, and then one day I decided to pack my bags and move to Pretoria where I stayed with my uncle. I never gave hope I still tried my luck in job hunting again here in Pretoria, and eight months later I found a job at a certain retail store. What I had in mind when I found this job was that I would work and save some money as much as I could to pay for my university fees one day. At work I started asking my colleagues for information about registering at a university.

I was lucky to discover that one of my colleagues was registered part time at the UP. So I decided that one day soon I would go with her to find out about the tuition fees and everything. I was very disappointed to discover that the fees were very high and there was no way I would afford to pay them with the salary that I was getting.

So when I was on the verge of giving up one of my best friends told me about the special projects that are being run at the UP to help the students who want to pursue careers as Educators. So I took my chances and applied to be on the project, luckily I was accepted. When I was told that I was accepted it felt like I was given another chance in life.

This was an opportunity I could not miss. I cannot lie to you and say that I ever thought of myself as a teacher. Teaching never really crossed my mind before, but what I can tell you is that I always knew that I needed a career where I was going to work with children. I always loved child psychology. So when I was told about this opportunity in teaching I really did not mind, because I felt that at the end of the day a child psychologist and a teacher do the same thing, they both help the child.

The first challenge that I encountered as a first year student teacher was that most people tormented me about choosing a career as a teacher, they told me that I was wasting my money to pay for the fees, and that when I work I would not be able to afford a good life because my salary would be so little. **I failed to understand why people were so negative about teaching. I remember one day in Hatfield waiting for a bus to Groenkloof a group of students came and waited along, one of them started saying that she wishes she was an education student, and the others asked her why? She said because education students have more time to socialise because their modules are too easy.** As an education student I felt like I was seen as someone without brains and that really broke my heart. This explains why educators are not given the recognition they deserve.

I overcame this challenge by accepting who I am and what I love doing. I told myself that I am studying teaching for myself, to make a difference in young people's lives and I told myself that do not need anyone to approve of that. **Whenever people asked me why I was studying teaching, my answer was so that their children can have a proper education and this country will be a better place.**

As a first year student I was also faced with the language problem. Coming from the rural areas of Mpumalanga and having studied at a school where the medium of instruction was Sotho, I found it very hard to exchange a few words in English. In most of the time I failed to express myself. At a big institution like this sometimes you feel intimidated by other student whom you think are more skilled in the use of the English language than you are. In the first months of the first semester this really affected me and my studies. I could not contribute anything in class because I was scared of being judged. But then I realised that I could not sit in the box forever, therefore I decided to do something about my situation. What I did was I started reading a lot of magazines and newspapers, I know it may sound funny but it really worked for me. Everyday I took a magazine and started reading out loud to myself and that helped me with the pronunciation of most word.

But I figured that it was not enough for me to just read the magazines I needed to converse with other people, so I was lucky to befriend a certain lady whose first language was English. I opened up to her about my language problem; she was very keen to help me in any way. We made certain that we would at least spend 45 minutes together each day chatting. Slowly but surely, I started gaining confidence. I was happy to be able to contribute in class most of my class discussions.

One other challenge that I came across as a first year student was my financial status. I was broke most of the time and for the first few months that affected me badly. Sometimes I would find myself daydreaming in class about what I do not have. But my mom and I had a very long talk about that and she made me realise how privileged I was to be studying at an institution like the UP. She placed things into perspective for me and I realised that most of the things I sought after were not necessities they were just needs e.g. designer clothes. After that long talk with my mother I never allowed any financial problems to get to me, instead I used those problems as a motivation to pass all my modules and finish my degree in time.

The last thing that I want to say to first year students is that know why you are here, love every moment of it, and do not get enticed by the things that will shift your focus from your studies. Be proud of where you come from, you may not know much as yet, but you are here to achieve greater things. Remember that this is not like high school where a teacher will be after you asking why you did not do your assignment or homework, here all the responsibility is on you. The choice is yours whether you want to make it or not.

#### 6.4 THE STORY OF LERATO MDLULI

I am HK. My family lives in Hammanskraal and I am the sixth child from seven children. My mother used to be the bread winner of the family. Unfortunately she passed away in 1992 when I was doing my grade 9. Life started to be difficult more especially for me and my younger brother. We started to have financial problems. In 1993 I went to high school, fortunately I did my grade 10 and 11 in the same year and I managed to pass. In 1994 I was in matric, the principal of the school decided to buy my books and pay school fund for me. I wanted to be a doctor but that did not happen because I fell pregnant. There was no one who can look after my child. I had to raise her on my own until she starts going to school.

One day I visited the school where my child was attending, my former teacher asked me what I was doing. I told her that I am doing nothing. She told me that I must go to the UP and asked for Dean Jansen. He will help me. I remember I did not have money for transport. I went to other members of my church and asked for transportation money. It was in 2004, that means I have been home without doing anything for ten years. I came to Groenkloof Campus and talked to the Dean's secretary. She told me that I did not make an appointment. I told her that I did not know, I will not have enough money to come back since I am not working. She gave me the opportunity to see the Dean. I was allowed to go to the Dean's Office. He greeted me, the first question was: 'Lady what can I do for you'. I told him that I needed to study. And he asked me again what do I want to study? I told him all my sufferings. He was open to me he also told me about his history when he was still a student.

I chose education because of my background. I used to help other learners when they did not understand the teacher. I also looked at my age. I started my degree at the age of 29. I want to help my community to get better education. In rural areas many schools lack facilities. To be an educator will help other learners to realise that education is an important key to life.

Many people more especially in South Africa regard education as a minor profession. People must be shown that education is one of the best professions in the world. People cannot do anything without educators. I also have a love for children and willing to help other people. Raising the standard of my people's education is something that was always in my mind. In my area there is a need for educators in Science and Mathematics. In my school one teacher had to teach more than five classes alone because there used to be a lack of teachers. Being a teacher is not a boring thing anymore as others used to say.

My first year at the University was very challenging but difficult. I used to wake up at 4 am rushing to the bus stop. I came back home at 7 pm. If I have an Opvoedkunde test in the evening I would arrived home around 9 pm. Language was also a challenge, imagine being out of school for ten years and decided to go back to school is not easy. The mind has already expired and you have to put back everything like a grade R teacher. It was difficult to answer the lecturers in class even when you know the correct answer because you are not sure whether you are speaking correct or not. The financial problem was the most difficult one that I could not solve on my own. My bus ticket was almost R80 per week at that time. I decided to go to the Dean and explain to

him my problems. He told me that he will try to help me by all means. I was offered a residence in March then I moved in May. Learning started to be enjoyable. Things did not work out smooth in the beginning and I was on my way to drop out but there was this thing in my heart (whenever challenges are facing me I have to fight and face them back). I had enough time to study. I started passing my modules though it was not easy in the beginning. Everything seems to be difficult. If you are willing to be a real soldier you fight until all your enemies are defeated. My language improved a lot because now I can talk to anyone I meet.

In my first year I have experienced many things. My mind was totally blank, and if I did not understand the lecturers in class I would visit them in the office. The lecturers are good. They would help me as an individual and show me all the methods I have to follow. I was always after lecturers because there were many things that were difficult to me. They helped me without grumbling. I learnt that the educators at the University are really trained to help learners. They also treated learners with respect. They are filling all the roles of educators. I was also sharing some of my problems with them. The educators have time for all the students in spite of colour they help us the same. I also like the way we are treated. We are treated the same and equally. I have found one thing challenging in my life, you most know why you are at the university. The choice will be yours again. A person must understand herself/himself. University is not a playground but it is something that determines your future. To overcome many things, try to study as hard as you can.

If you do not understand anything go straight to your lectures they will help you. The lecturers are there to help. To understand what you are being taught is a remedy. To overcome challenges start by asking yourself where did things go wrong? What is it that you do not understand and find ways to solve the problems. As students we are also helping one another. Going to your fellow students for help is not a shame, because we do not understand things the same. That does not mean that someone is stupid whenever she/he asks help from others. One day you will be helping others too.

My advice to other students is that they must follow their hearts. They must take education as a real living profession not just for the sake of not being at home without doing anything. The love of what you are studying will make you more powerful in all directions that you will be facing. You cannot go for something that you do not love. Love comes first. Challenges will always be there. Life without challenges is useless. In life you do not have to give up. Face the challenges and tell yourself that you shall overcome. Studying at the university does not mean you have to be rich or have good qualities in life, every one can study at university. It does not matter whether you are from rural areas or poor families, the fact is education is for all. People must bear in mind that whatever happens no one can take it away from you.

## 7. TOWARDS A SYNTHESIS

What do these stories of students, academics and administrators reveal about the academic experiences of undergraduate students in a large, urban university which was until recently an all-white institution in the service of Afrikaner nationalism?

The first observation to be made is that the students' struggles for access start long before they enter university. The role of serendipity, those small accidents of information that may or may not lead to the gate of an institution, points to an as yet unstructured, unsystematic pathway for especially rural, first-generation students seeking training beyond high school. For black students, the lack of career guidance and counselling is clearly still a devastating barrier to making sense of their futures. But it is not only the lack of information, it is the lack of preparation that became so obvious through the interview and biographic data.

It is, again, the quality of school preparation that determines the chances of success at university. And those students who nevertheless make it into higher education find their problems start when they are confronted with the English language, computer-based technologies, and difficult content subjects.

The second observation is that the terrain on which students must engage academic content and negotiate academic lives is complex. They come from different class and cultural backgrounds, they learn in a non-native language, they face negative attitudes from some university teachers, they take on difficult subjects for which they feel inadequately prepared, they find the learning support erratic, they discover that 'the rules of the game' for academic success are very different from those of high school, and they face enormous administrative challenges as they try to navigate their way through a changing university. Yet there are positive elements in this complex environment, such as the support systems in fast-transforming university residences, the individuals who teach supportively, and the efforts to build socially integrated living spaces.

The third observation is that while all students struggle to come to terms with the academic rules of the university game, the problems multiply for black rural students in particular because of the combination of academic underpreparedness, language challenges and financial difficulties. These are especially pressing during the first year of study, but for those students who survive this initial experience the chances of subsequent success are high.

The fourth observation is that institutional context and cultures make students' academic experience and engagement unique. Where the language issue is more or less settled, and universities have English as their medium of instruction (as at Wits and UWC), there is no further complexity to students' academic induction. Where this issue is at the centre of unresolved political and institutional conflicts, then students find themselves locked into the kinds of challenges outlined in this report. Clearly the Afrikaans-English struggle in a historically Afrikaans university is not going to go away soon, and the tensions and ambivalences will spill over into a messy arrangement with respect to curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and the deployment of learning resources.

The fifth observation is how, as students begin to engage with and encounter each other across racial lines, race is silenced as one of the everyday campus discourses. Throughout these interviews, students did not raise this issue - even when directly asked - as powerfully as matters of language, resources and organisation. The problem is that students are still deeply divided socially, and there is little evidence of any 'normal' and sustained relationships beyond what is organised in the residences or through group assignments in the classroom - and even then students tend to seek association by race. The transformation of the residences at UP offers a powerful example of what is possible when change is strongly directed from the centre of a bureaucratised system. It is unclear from this research, however, to what extent racial integration affects students' academic success.

The sixth observation is that there is a double 'gap' or distance between school experience and university demands, and between student and lecturer in the university classroom. These contexts offer the most direct opportunities for positive intervention. On the one hand, much more intensive interaction is required between the schools and institutions of higher learning - especially between UP and those schools that fall outside the traditional (or white) suppliers of high school graduates. On the other hand, much more could be done to alter the behaviour of university teachers to enable them to teach more efficaciously and more justly, especially in contexts of diverse students and dual-language policy commitments.

## CHAPTER FIVE: THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF EQUITABLE ACCESS AND SUCCESS: A CASE STUDY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE

Neetha Ravjee, Mary Hames, Vanessa Ludwig and Teresa Barnes

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Initially created in 1959 as an ethnic institution designed to reproduce the apartheid project, the UWC is widely recognised for resisting this official trajectory. During the last 30 years it has established itself as a university in its own right. As UWC repositions itself in the post-apartheid period, its academic identity reflects traces of the multiple identities evident in its historical narrative: from 'bush college' in the 1960s, to 'the struggle university' and 'the university of the working class' in the 1970s, to 'the home of the intellectual left' in the 1980s, and 'a place of quality, a place to grow: from hope to action through knowledge' in the current period. Each phase has been marked both by breaks from and continuities with previous phases and by the broader socioeconomic and political realities of the times.

The idea of equitable access has been central to UWC's mission since the late 1970s. However, two recent sets of statistics point to academic underperformance as a major issue affecting South African universities. The first, a national cohort study (DoE, 2006) tracking the academic progression of students who first entered South African public higher education institutions in 2000, identifies low student success rates as a problem facing all institutions. The national picture for the proportion of the 2000 cohort that graduated by 2004 ranged from 9% (total distance education: UNISA and Technikon SA) to 68% (Potchefstroom University, now the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University).<sup>226</sup> For UWC, the study found that, of a cohort of 1979 first-time entering students in 2000, 36% had graduated and 48% had dropped out by 2004. A second set of institutional statistics, based on an analysis of throughput rates at UWC, identifies 'low throughput, prolonged time-to-degree and high attrition rates' (UWC, 2004a: 36) as a serious issue in both undergraduate and postgraduate education.<sup>227</sup>

This chapter seeks to explain students' academic performance at UWC by exploring the complex relationships between their everyday experiences on the one hand, and everyday institutional practices, rules, processes, ideas and meanings on the other. The main research questions are:

1. What are students' major positive and negative experiences and interactions in different institutional spaces (such as the library, the student centre, the sports centre, residences, laboratories) and in various activities (travelling to campus, attending lectures, and so on)?
2. Are the numerous university subcultures (academic cultures, student cultures, administrative cultures, residence cultures, etc.) experienced differently by different groups of students? What are the main points of intersection and interaction among these subcultures and in what ways do they influence student success?

<sup>226</sup> For a full table of comparisons see McFarlane (2006).

<sup>227</sup> At the same time recent trends showing that 'the FTE enrolled growth rate outpaced the FTE degree credit rates significantly' by 2004 (UWC, 2004a: 36, 77) lead us to question the appropriateness of the current formula for calculating throughput under actual conditions. Detailed statistics for UWC are provided in Chapter One.

3. In what ways do the various forms of student and staff engagement in institutional strategies, administrative processes and academic practices influence the quality of students' academic experiences?<sup>228</sup>

The overall research objective is therefore to answer the question: can any conclusions be drawn about the relationship between these broadly cultural experiences and student success?

The chapter is organised as follows. Section 2 deals with students' everyday interactions and Section 3 their experiences with administrative and financial structures. Section 4 looks at staff experiences in relation to student academic performance and their perceptions of the factors influencing academic success. Section 5 examines students' classroom experiences, and Section 6 concludes. In each section we relate the findings on campus relationships, administrative processes and classroom experiences to issues of institutional culture. Each section explores the dynamics of cultural constructs in various institutional spaces and identifies productive or destructive interactions and combinations among various institutional subcultures - student, administrative and academic. We explore the ways these combinations influence the quality of students' academic experiences and, ultimately, their academic performance.

## 1.1 METHODOLOGY

The research was based primarily on qualitative data drawn from interviews conducted in 2006 with third-year students and staff in three faculties (Arts, Science, and Economic and Management Sciences) and on relevant institutional documentation. The choice of these faculties was based on two sets of institutional statistics. First, statistics on student performance indicate that all three faculties have low throughput rates compared with other faculties at UWC (Morta, 2006). Second, the Institutional Operating Plan (UWC, 2004a: 77) expresses a concern about student pass rates in specific modules in the Arts and Economic and Management Sciences faculties, and the Science Faculty's service modules for the Dentistry and Community and Health Sciences Faculties.<sup>229</sup> By 2005 the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences (EMS) was the largest and fastest growing faculty, with 3,588 students. The Arts and Science faculties were the third and fourth largest, with enrolments of 2,235 and 1,742 respectively. The Faculty of Community and Health Sciences replaced the Arts Faculty as the second largest faculty in 2005.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 31 staff members: 12 in the Arts Faculty, 11 in Science and 8 in EMS. The staff members included academic staff (lecturers of third-year modules, heads of departments, deans) and administrative and support staff (e.g. faculty office staff). The proportion of female to male academic staff interviewed was about 60 : 40, and for administrative staff it was closer to 90 : 10. The majority of academic staff respondents were white; this largely reflects the racial composition of the faculties at UWC (UWC, 2004a: 104). The interview questions for staff explored their reasons for choosing to work at UWC, their interactions with students and other staff members, the types of academic support available to students, their perceptions of the challenges facing staff and students, and their explanations for the current throughput rates.

The questions for students asked about their reasons for choosing to study at UWC, their interactions with other students and with staff, their experiences in various institutional spaces, and their methods of coping

<sup>228</sup> These different forms of engagement may be viewed as crucial components of institutional cultures. See Chapter One.

<sup>229</sup> Based on an analysis of module pass rates across the university, the Institutional Operating Plan (2004a: 77) lists the following modules of concern in the three faculties. For EMS: Accounting for Management, Political Studies, Auditing, Taxation, Financial Accounting, Management Accounting, Management, and Industrial Psychology; for Science: Mathematics, Applied Mathematics, Quantitative Skills, Chemistry, Computer Science, and Statistics; and for Arts: Humanities, Geography, and Ethics.



with the demands of academic life. The reason for choosing third-year students to interview was that, as they have made it to their third year, it can be assumed they have successfully negotiated these institutional spaces. Their knowledge of university life was therefore most closely related to the focus of our research. Individual and focus group interviews were conducted with 71 third-year students: 16 in the Arts Faculty, 29 in Science and 26 in EMS. These included interviews with four students in leadership positions in the Student Faculty Councils and in Residence House Committees.

This study begins with the premise that students are not a homogeneous group and that their diverse subjective interpretations of their experiences will also depend on how they perceive not only themselves but also each other. The sample of students interviewed was therefore not completely random but as widely representative of the current UWC student profile as was possible. All the students who were interviewed were asked to complete a short questionnaire to supply basic demographic information. The following profile emerges from the responses of the 64 students who completed the questionnaires.

All the students who were interviewed from the Science and EMS faculties, and 80% of those from the Arts Faculty, were full-time students. The average age was 23, with the oldest being 36 and the youngest 19. In the Arts Faculty 60% of the students were female, in Science 50% were female, and in EMS over 65% were female. One student indicated 'other' for gender. About 60% lived in UWC residences. The other 40% lived with their parents, boarded privately or shared a house with other students. To meet their transport needs, five students reported having access to a vehicle, and the rest relied on public transport or lifts with friends and family. Most students (58%) said they relied on bursaries and/or loans to fund their studies, and over 44% said they worked on a part-time basis. Students' additional responses to questions about financial aid, student employment, nationality, race and language are summarised in the relevant sections of this chapter.

In engaging with the interview transcripts a concerted effort was made to ensure that the views of the staff and students were fairly represented. It must be mentioned that, since the researcher is as much part of the research process as are the 'subjects', data collection and interpretation are highly dependent on the status of the interviewer. Since the researchers were members of staff or students, with a particular profile in terms of race, gender and position within both the university hierarchy and the institutional subcultures, this had an influence on the responses. Being insiders had both advantages and drawbacks for the researchers. In some cases it was clear that the interviewees assumed the interviewer could be trusted with certain information and views, while in others it was clear they were cautious about confidentiality. Students in particular were cautious in their responses to certain questions. This difficulty was circumvented to some extent by enlisting the assistance of students to conduct the interviews. Eight senior undergraduate and postgraduate students conducted most of the interviews. Institutional knowledge, the politics of social location, and being perceived as an insider, therefore played a large facilitating part in both the collection and interpretation of the data.

In this chapter, quotations from the interviews are coded as four letters followed by two numbers. The first letter refers to the faculty (A for Arts, S for Science and E for EMS) and the next three indicate whether the respondent is a student (STU) or a staff member (STA) and this is followed by the interviewee number in the faculty. So, for example, ASTA 05 refers to a staff member in the Arts Faculty and SSTU 25 to a student in the Science Faculty.

### Interpretive framework

In trying to understand student experiences at UWC we begin by acknowledging that students are a heterogeneous group. They arrive at the institution with differing home cultures, high school cultures, teaching and learning cultures and intersecting identities of race, class, gender, ideology, ethnicity, language, sexuality, nationality and specific historical experiences. UWC reflects the range of differences evident in broader society, in terms of both individual identities and the meanings individual students attach to access and success in higher education. It is therefore important that we investigate students' experiences and student cultures within a critical cultural framework - one that does not separate the cultural from the material contexts of higher education,<sup>230</sup> and that questions the taken-for-granted stability of dominant cultural constructs such as race and gender.<sup>231</sup> We draw on various interdisciplinary critical cultural literatures which have extended the range of issues traditionally covered by critical pedagogy to include a conception of education as a form of cultural politics, a view of educators and lecturers as cultural workers and an understanding of the university as a site of struggle, marked by numerous contestations (over ideology, race or gender for example) in curriculum, research and everyday institutional practices and relationships.<sup>232</sup>

We adopt a critical cultural framework to understand students' experiences at the intersections of various sets of overlapping cultures that make up institutional culture(s).<sup>233</sup> It is useful to see institutions as differentiated into many intersecting subcultures, within and across disciplines and departments, and among student political groupings, by race, class, gender, ideology, nationality, language, sexual orientation, disability, age, level of study, and so on.<sup>234</sup> At the same time, the numerous factors affecting institutional culture(s) may include historical power relations, leadership, dominant networks, academic politics, resources, the extent to which everyday rules are obeyed, and so on. The commonalities across institutions - for example the ideological and historical networks, the inherited colonial and hetero-patriarchal cultures - suggest that the boundaries between institutions are not very clearly defined. We therefore approach 'institutional culture' by examining the relation of its internal components to each other and to outside factors affecting the components. We also examine institutional culture in relation to two further indicators: participation and decision making.

Viewing students' experiences through a critical cultural lens recognises that the nature of the overlaps between various subcultures across institutions can function to make the boundaries between and within institutions more fluid.<sup>235</sup> We therefore adopt an 'inside out' methodology to examine universities from the inside, by examining social relations, everyday practices, rules and processes, cultures, and so on, and from the outside, by considering events and issues in the broader socioeconomic and political contexts that influence what happens in universities (Martusewicz & Reynolds, 1994: 6). For example, students' broader societal contexts are shaped on the one hand by the promise of radical and plural democracy, and on the other by the persistence of economic inequalities and complex societal conditions, including pervading conditions of unemployment, underemployment, poverty, homelessness, illiteracy,

<sup>230</sup> Solutions for redressing historical inequities therefore require strategies that address both redistribution and the recognition of difference. See Fraser (1995), who further distinguishes between affirmative and transformative approaches to redistribution and to recognition.

<sup>231</sup> This creates a practical dilemma for South African universities. How do we balance the statistical need to 'measure' educational redress by holding on to the official apartheid labels (e.g. to measure changes in historical patterns of access), and the pedagogical need to question and destabilise the apartheid categories in everyday curriculum practices and relationships? See Ravjee (2001).

<sup>232</sup> The related interdisciplinary educational literatures discussed in Chapter Two cut across critical cultural, feminist, poststructuralist and postcolonial studies. See especially Freire (1985) and Smith (1999).

<sup>233</sup> Chapter Two provides the working definition of 'institutional culture' used in this study.

<sup>234</sup> It is also possible that the disaggregated 'academic cultures', 'student cultures', 'research cultures', 'campus cultures', 'residence cultures', 'administration cultures' and so on might be more helpful analytically than trying to understand an assumedly unified culture of an institutional whole. However, that approach might result in endless permutations and combinations.

<sup>235</sup> Critical cultural approaches would view individual social actors (students, staff, administrators) as constituting 'multiply organised subjectivities' that are simultaneously racialised, classed, gendered, sexual, national ... and contradictory.

crime (including misogynistic crime), drug addiction, alcoholism, the HIV/AIDS pandemic and other health-related problems, all of which surface to varying degrees and in numerous ways within the institution. Besides these conditions, the increasing cultural trend towards an atomistic individualism and self-enrichment over community concerns and the welfare of the collective has an impact on the university at various levels and works against the realisation of a healthy civic culture.<sup>236</sup>

Surfacing in various ways within the institution, these many forces affect the institutional culture and the academic project both positively and negatively. This study has sought to investigate and understand how they influence students' academic performance.

## 2. EVERYDAY INTERACTIONS AMONG STUDENTS

UWC has a diverse student population from across South Africa, with all nine provinces represented. Approximately 40% come from rural and peri-urban areas. There has also been a steady increase in the number of international students choosing to study at UWC. For South African students, a comparison of the 2000 and 2005 enrolment statistics shows the following trends in the proportion of students by official apartheid classifications: African (decrease from 51% to 33%), coloured (increase from 40% to 50%), Indian (increase from 6% to 10%), white (increase from 2% to 5%), and unknown (increase from 0% to 1%).<sup>237</sup> The proportion of women students increased from 55% in 2000 to 58% in 2005; this increasing trend is evident in all faculties. Overall student enrolments increased from around 9,670 in 2000 to just over 14,590 by 2005 (Morta, 2006).

The student sample reflected the diversity of the UWC student population. The majority (81%) of interviewees were South African citizens. We asked South African students to self-identify their apartheid race classification, and received the following interesting responses in order of frequency, not always matching the official apartheid classifications: black (33%), African (27%), coloured (13%), black/African (6%), Indian (2%). A few students (12%) chose not to identify themselves by race, and the other 7% used the following terms: African (not black), African (brown), African (not coloured), Xhosa, and coloured Muslim. International students, who made up about 18% of the student sample, indicated the following nationalities: Tanzanian, Congolese, Zimbabwean, Chinese, Namibian, Motswana, Nigerian, Rwandan and Swazi. The students' main home language was Xhosa (30%), followed by Zulu (13%), English (13%) and Afrikaans (9%). About 6% were from bilingual home language backgrounds (English and Afrikaans, Sotho and Xhosa, and Tswana and English). The other 29% indicated the following home languages: Venda, Tswana, Sotho, Tsonga, Swati, Shona, Selopa, Yoruba, Kinyarwanda, French, Owambo, Chinese and Swahili.

This section focuses on students' social experiences and their interactions in various campus spaces and student structures. In presenting student perceptions of their everyday interactions we have tried to simultaneously privilege the experiencing subject without divorcing individual stories and perceptions from the larger societal contexts of privilege, domination and resistance, of which they are a part.

### 2.1 COMPLEX SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS 'AT HOME'

Students interact with other students in particular settings, i.e. at lectures, in social spaces, when travelling to and from campus, in the university residences, in student clubs and societies. Most enter the university from

<sup>236</sup> For a discussion of these issues in other national contexts see Bellah, (1985), Sagan (1991) and Mouffe (1992).

<sup>237</sup> The 2004 and 2005 Reports from the Chairperson of the Council recommended that these proportions be revisited. See UWC (2004b: 5) and UWC (2005: 17-18).

smaller, more homogeneous learning environments that they have grown accustomed to over a period of several years. They reported that aspects of that prior homogeneity include a lack of engagement with people outside their ethnic and/or race groups. While most said that UWC was the first place where they had ever interacted with people outside these groups, all those interviewed felt that being at UWC had enriched their lives by opening them up to engagement with people from a variety of backgrounds. Some have formed close bonds with people they met at university; generally with those who study in the same field, or who live near them or travel with them.

*There are cliques that 'hang' over weekends. You see some of them already starting on a Friday afternoon at 'Condom Square', playing music, drinking and braaiing. But when you get here you already have your own group of friends, and over weekends you've got your own stuff ... But if someone's doing the same course as you, you sometimes meet over weekends to study together. But I've always been a loner. In my first year I didn't really worry, but now in my third year I have friends. We sit together, we chat, and whatever.<sup>238</sup>*

For other students, their social interactions decrease as they get closer to completing their studies.

*My first and second year I had a car pool going so I had a lot of time when I finished classes waiting on other people to finish, [so] in my first year I spent a lot of time fairly socialising - maybe playing a bit of soccer, maybe a bit of frisbee. But in the second year it kind of fell away because a lot of people buckled down, and I think the reason is that a lot of people I knew in first year, I think that at least 50% of the people I knew in first year dropped out by the time second year came around. I think that's a growing trend at the university that at least half of the students did not make it to second year because it's just not their thing or they didn't have the right attitude to study. Nowadays I spend my time more wisely, going to all my classes, making use of library facilities - yeah, mostly academic. I do use my time more wisely.<sup>239</sup>*

While day students reported a variety of interactions with other students outside the normal university activities - revolving around common interests such as sport, going to nightclubs, or being involved in some community or volunteer work - we found a greater diversity in the kinds of interactions among students who live in residences.<sup>240</sup> Many loved the integrated residences but not the idea of men and women sharing bathroom space; others complained of loud music, issues of safety and hygiene in the residences, and a lack of recreational and shopping facilities for students living on campus.<sup>241</sup> Students who spend most of their time on UWC premises found recreational activities to be limited to sports, church and The Barn (the campus pub). Many students expressed the opinion that there were too few social activities for students who lived in UWC residences. A few were particularly scathing about The Barn, which is open 24 hours a day and which they saw as the only place students could go to relax. Many of the women students living in campus residences said it would be the first thing they would change at UWC, although some men also expressed the sentiment that it was not a safe space, especially for women.

<sup>238</sup> ASTU 04

<sup>239</sup> ASTU 03

<sup>240</sup> About 60% of the students interviewed lived in UWC residences, mostly at Chris Hani, Ruth First, Hector Peterson, Eduardo Dos Santos, Liberty, Cecil Esau, Cassinga and Gorvalla.

<sup>241</sup> The interviews were conducted during the cleaners' strike at UWC. Interestingly, students' comments did not reflect empathy with the plight of the cleaners. Only one student acknowledged the strike, and that only as it affected students: 'The cleaners' strike affected me because residence is dirty and the stand-in cleaners are not doing their job properly.'

*I attend a lot of bashes and spend a lot of time in The Barn.<sup>242</sup>*

*I used to be a member. I used to go there often so I know everything about The Barn. At the end of the day you end up failing. Sometimes people wake up in someone else's bed without knowing how they ended up there. There are a lot of bad things that happen ...<sup>243</sup>*

*There are certain places like The Barn for example - I'm not fond of that place. Not that there's anything wrong with the place, but I don't feel like it can be safe for students, more especially female students. But I see the university has tried by all means to put up some lights and surveillance cameras.<sup>244</sup>*

*My worst experience ... I've seen a girl beaten up by her boyfriend and nobody did anything about it. People were just watching. I did not like that. And then I heard that somebody died in a bash in the student centre. I got scared ...<sup>245</sup>*

Most students who live on campus reported associating mainly with other students living in the residences. This may be due to the lack of mobility resulting from the poor public transport system and the campus transport facilities, which many found inadequate.

Students spoke of insider-outsider experiences in different ways, and many used the metaphor of the 'home' to express a sense of belonging, or of not belonging, to UWC. Following Thaver (2006), we find it useful to view 'home' as a 'contested terrain [simultaneously a site of] racism, sexism, and other damaging practices [and of] shelter, comfort, nurture and protection'. Students' comments reflect both meanings of 'UWC as home'.

### 2.1.1 Home as supportive

Many students experienced much of the campus space as one of comfort and protection, where positive and supportive social relations are central to coping with university life. The following comments capture the positive meaning of 'UWC as home'.

*I feel at home because of the people that I know, so I would say yes, but sometimes I don't feel at home when things are not going well on my side. That's when I'm not happy but most of the times I'm happy. My friends support me ... no not staff. I talk to my friends when I'm in trouble or have something bothering me. Just being able to control your emotions and your feelings about things that's how I deal with it. ... don't go to the faculty for help. I tried once and they didn't help so no<sup>246</sup>*

*I have lots of friends on campus. I think UWC is a good place to be. When I came to varsity I got the opportunity to speak to other tribes and races ... Xhosas, Sothos, Indians, whites. You can also learn about other people's cultures.<sup>247</sup>*

<sup>242</sup> ESTU 14

<sup>243</sup> ASTU 11

<sup>244</sup> ASTU 08

<sup>245</sup> SSTU 04

<sup>246</sup> SSTU 09

<sup>247</sup> ESTU 09

*Home is home because of what is happening around ... if it makes me feel okay, makes me feel safe and welcomed and all that then I feel at home. ... it fluctuates depending on what is happening at that particular time. I am coping ... but it is demanding still. I am from Congo. Academically I work hard and my friends help. You stress with your classmates - that's what makes you cope, not the lecturers - you find it hard to interact with the teacher - you try and tell them you don't understand but it's worse. It's better to go to your classmates who understand you.* <sup>248</sup>

The phrase 'I'm happy here' was mentioned often. Many loved the UWC student life in general, especially making new friends and enjoying the sporting activities (squash, soccer and pool were popular). A few students mentioned that their social life in their first and second years was so 'hectic' that their academic work suffered. Going to The Barn and the 'bashes' (student social functions organised by the SRC) emerged as popular social activities, though some students perceived both as being notorious for excessive drinking and subsequent violence.

### 2.1.2 Home as inhibiting

Not all interactions were seen to be friendly and supportive. The meaning of 'home' as negative or destructive appeared in students' comments as two themes: a perceived discomfort with embracing difference and diversity, and a concern with issues of safety. With regard to the first theme, a study conducted in the mid-1990s (Koen & Roux, 1995) found that UWC students from different race or ethnic groups interacted mostly in formal institutional settings. Ten years later, another study on students' experiences (Barnes, 2007) found that while many students 'feel at home at UWC, and enjoy the friendly and diverse atmosphere on campus', others perceived certain campus spaces to be dominated by certain ethnic groups or student organisations. Comments from students interviewed for this study suggest that tendencies towards ethnic social interactions persist.

*You still see coloureds sitting on the other side and blacks on the other side, Xhosas there, one Shangaan there, Tsuanas there - so we really need to mix. I don't know how we gonna do it, but we really need to have one big team.*<sup>249</sup>

*Socially it was fine because I came from a multiracial school, so mixing with other races was fine for me. I had friends - I could mingle with everyone.*<sup>250</sup>

*I experienced, what should I say tribalism or kinda thing like more especially Xhosa ... it wasn't easy. ... The worst experience is the one I told you when I was staying with a Xhosa guy, that was something, tribalism basically and more especially if you are Tswana - at times yob it can be hell.*<sup>251</sup>

These comments may be interpreted in relation to changing societal discourses on identity and difference, perhaps echoing a re-emergence of ethnic paradigms across national contexts. They raise questions about the role of universities in providing an education that enables students to transgress apartheid-era divisions.

<sup>248</sup> SSTU 16

<sup>249</sup> SSTU 07

<sup>250</sup> SSTU 15

<sup>251</sup> SSTU 08

Some students found the university an alienating space. They referred to racism, xenophobia, homophobia and sexism.

*There's a certain way of thinking, there's a certain way of behaviour that people are expressing and people are encouraging that behaviour ... Behaviour of racism, behaviour of xenophobia. Classifying people according to their skin colour and status ... if you don't carry a certain school bag, if you don't eat certain stuff.*<sup>252</sup>

Some students felt that there were certain spaces that were dominated by one or other group, whether based on race, ethnicity or gender. International students, particularly students from other African countries, felt particularly discriminated against. They have difficulty finding representation in student structures and having their voices heard. But they often suffered in silence.

*I mean you feel it on a big scale most of the time. Most of the people I hang around with, they are victims and they have fear to express or defend themselves. ... people who call you makwerekwere ... and stuff like that ... but I've been a foreigner in three countries now and ... so it made me prepared to being treated as a stranger, as a foreigner, as the other person ... So my heart has grown to accept ... so it doesn't hurt this self.*<sup>253</sup>

*In terms of social life this is not good for us foreigners, who are staying here on this campus ... South Africans have their own parties ... they tend to segregate us. ... you see normally South Africans see foreigners ... they [are] like racist, they not friendly with you ... so I definitely don't like that.*<sup>254</sup>

*Okay, sometimes I feel like a foreigner - I feel like there is some sort of discrimination you see especially from the South African students, maybe against foreigners. I'm comfortable when I'm with foreigners or foreign students from other countries - Nigeria, Botswana, maybe SA ... no I don't choose whether it is a South African or it's another foreigner, if the guy is good to me so I don't have a problem. If someone is open then we click.*<sup>255</sup>

Others said that although they mix freely with everyone, they seldom form close bonds with people outside their own gender, ethnic or sexual identity. A number of students expressed strong anti-homosexual views.

*I associate with girls because I get along with them. When I'm with guys I feel like I don't belong ... I've got friends from Congo, but they are more my brothers in the church, not really my friends. But no friends that are not straight since I'm a Christian and Christianity is against this.*<sup>256</sup>

*... females, but sometimes I hang out with coloureds, but no lesbians and gays, no, not at all, and I will never because of my beliefs. I believe as a Christian that what they are doing is wrong.*<sup>257</sup>

<sup>252</sup> ASTU 01

<sup>253</sup> ASTU 02

<sup>254</sup> SSTU 21

<sup>255</sup> SSTU 24

<sup>256</sup> ASTU 09

<sup>257</sup> ASTU 10

Other students, however, felt that sexual orientation would not stop them from associating with anyone as their faith did not permit discrimination. Some students said they counted gays and lesbians amongst their friends, but it was difficult to tell who was and who wasn't gay or lesbian.

*One of them we discovered was homosexual, but he is hiding. So the politics of coming out of the closet were there. You know it came as a shock, but then knowing that we accepted him the way he is and that we don't think of his sexual orientation.<sup>258</sup>*

*I play soccer and I hate it when people confuse me to be a lesbian or tomboy. I'm not a lady but a female. I think I've a balanced life of friends, soccer, school and church. For me UWC is a home away from home. I'm happy at UWC and I think it accommodates everyone.<sup>259</sup>*

We compare these comments to a recent study (Abrahams, 2005) which found that lesbian and bisexual women remained silent about their sexual orientation until they had completed their studies and left the university. Some reported that while they were at UWC they were subjected to a variety of oppressions such as homophobia, mental distress, low self-esteem, communication difficulties, and fear of punitive action such as harassment and corrective rape.<sup>260</sup>

The second theme that emerged in students' negative perceptions, the concern with issues of safety, dangerously intersects with their perceived discomfort with diverse identities. This issue is not restricted to the university campus. A quick glance through some 2005 and 2006 articles in *The Cape Time* and *The Argus*, the Cape Town morning and evening newspapers, reveals an increasing number of reports on violence linked to homophobic and xenophobic incidents in Cape Town schools and in communities in general. This is an example of how the local politics of the dominant hetero-patriarchal and xenophobic cultures in wider society cut across social institutions, including universities, and ultimately have a negative impact on the quality of students' campus experiences. Yet there is a notion among students that the university should be a protected environment, untouched by what happens outside its precincts. Students' negative experiences point to the need for broad campus-wide engagement in dealing with issues of difference and with transforming the campus to make it safer.

Issues of safety emerged particularly strongly among women students. Some felt more comfortable and safe on campus than outside, as they were not familiar with Cape Town and saw crime as a big issue. This view was especially strong among international students.

*On campus I feel at home because I'm used to this environment ... but I'm afraid to be outside campus. I don't know anyone here and I'm new here so I'd rather sit at home.<sup>261</sup>*

*I don't go off campus ... I'm still worried of this thing of crime, so I'm afraid to go to other parts of South Africa at the moment. I like staying on campus - closer to everything - can stay late anywhere don't have to worry about how to go home.<sup>262</sup>*

<sup>258</sup> ASTU 08

<sup>259</sup> ESTU 17

<sup>260</sup> See Hames (2007: 63)

<sup>261</sup> SSTU 24 (International student)

<sup>262</sup> SSTU 19 (International student)



Some students mentioned the attitudes of some security personnel at the university entrance gates who questioned legitimate students but allowed members of the general public in without an access card, and the problems of visiting students at other residences because of the access control rules. When it was pointed out that the rules were for their own safety, most agreed that violence on campus had declined, but said that theft, especially of cell phones and electronic equipment, was rampant.

*How can this be your home when they steal from you? Family doesn't steal from family. And when you report it, it's like you were stupid to leave your stuff in your room. The attitude of some of the staff towards the students here - it's not like at home. They don't behave like they are your parents.<sup>263</sup>*

Many students, women in particular, said they appreciated the university's efforts to provide better computer facilities which operate 24 hours a day at the residences as they often feared going to the main campus after dark. They also appreciated the extended library hours, but felt that more needed to be done about security as most spaces on campus were still too dark at night and so they often did not use the library after hours.

Do these comments express isolated sentiments or reflect a pattern? We mention these examples not to be dramatic but to point out the seriousness of the issue, which also emerged in previous research (see Barnes, 2004; Division for Lifelong Learning, 2004; Hames, 2007). For many day students, transport to their various places of residence after rush hour is a severe problem. The trains were not perceived to be safe and walking in certain areas after dark was seen as presenting a big problem. Some students said that whatever was not done by 4 pm was 'just left until the next day'. For senior students this would most certainly have a negative impact on their academic work.

Students' comments should be viewed in relation to the transport options available to students. UWC is located in the industrial area of Bellville and is mostly accessible by train, bus and taxi if own transport is not available. Although the Bellville commercial centre can be reached on foot, usually a 30 minute walk, it is dangerous to do so at night. The public transport services cease at 7 pm, and the university shuttle service to residences in the townships is not always regular.

## **2.2 POWER AND POLITICS OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM: ACCESS TO RECREATIONAL AND SOCIAL RESOURCES**

In this section, we take the commonsensical view that access to recreational resources in moderation is a positive factor in students' well-being and thus contributes to an academically supportive context. How do students achieve this access?

Interactions mediated through student structures highlight the power dynamics of access to recreational and social resources. At UWC, the Student Representative Council and the Central House Committee (CHC) regulate access to the use of UWC's facilities. To access these, individual students must apply through a student organisation affiliated to the SRC. The SRC also determines budgetary allocations to clubs and societies.

These arrangements place an enormous amount of power in the hands of office-bearing members of these two structures, a situation which some students thought led to student facilities being dominated by certain groups on the basis of ethnicity, gender or ideology. There was some contention among residence students

<sup>263</sup> ASTU 06

about sporting codes and political representation based on race, ethnicity and gender. Some felt that only certain sports were adequately supported, and that coloured males generally dominated these. Others perceived student structures such as the SRC and the CHC to be dominated by Xhosa males. They felt that these imbalances reflected serious discrimination embedded in UWC's student structures. Yet others felt that these structures are led by individuals who have no interest in completing their studies, and that initially they would approach a staff member if they had any problems; they only approached the SRC when they were forced to because of, for example, a perceived 'threat of financial exclusion'. Common to these different perceptions was an emphasis on how one is received within certain settings. As one student remarked:

*When you approach someone you can see on their face whether they will accept you. They might not say anything, but it's there. You can see it. You can feel it. And if you don't feel welcome, you won't go back.<sup>264</sup>*

The majority of students who live in the campus residences are from the Eastern Cape. It stands to reason that such students would be strongly represented in the residence student structures.<sup>265</sup> However, the fact that men dominate these structures although the majority of those living in residences are women raises serious concerns about the gendered nature of student politics. The constitutions of both the SRC and CHC provide for at least 30% female representation and they generally meet their quotas. However, recent reports (e.g. GEU, 2006) suggest that these women are rarely visible other than at the Women's Day programme in August each year. Furthermore, issues such as safety and gender-based violence are seldom raised in public campus debates.

Two further issues arising from these institutional arrangements emerged in the interview data: the difficulties student clubs and societies not recognised by the SRC experience in organising activities on campus, since the SRC has the sole right to decide who is recognised, and the related concerns about which issues are taken up by the student structures and which causes are championed.

In its 2005/2006 Financial Statement, the SRC stated that the university management had not increased its budget for the past few years:

*This situation compels the SRC to plan its programmes according to a permanently limited budget at the expense of quality service. This will mean that the plan of the SRC will not be congruent to the broader needs of the student population. Additionally the SRC finds it difficult to increase the budget of its structures and give donations. (SRC, 2005/2006)*

In 2005/2006 the SRC had a total income of R1,368,247, of which R992,000 was an allocation from the institution (UWC SRC, 2005). Its four largest expenses were R350,022 on festivals and functions, R212,004 on conferences, orientation and seminars, R192,037 on travelling and accommodation, and R59,606 on telephones and faxes. It showed a surplus of R265,497 in the 2005/2006 financial year. Yet some students in the Arts Faculty stated that when they approached the SRC for financial assistance for one of their projects, they were turned down on the basis of limited SRC funds. In none of the SRC reports is mention made of student debates, seminars and student development and support, yet

<sup>264</sup> ASTU 01

<sup>265</sup> We were unable to obtain information on the representation of international students in the CHC, and the SRC and its affiliated clubs and societies

students are unable to access facilities and resources to engage in these activities without SRC approval. One student felt that UWC was sometimes too restrictive, while not enough control was being exercised in other areas.

*When I'm outside of campus, it feels like I'm crazy on campus. You have to ask permission ... for everything, and then still being asked why, what type of a gathering? That freedom is not there. The freedom of expression is not there. The censorship is too much in everything that you wanna do. You are like more in a prison on campus.<sup>266</sup>*

However, while no student disagreed with the necessity for independent student-led structures, the SRC elections have had to be extended or postponed on many occasions because of the low student turnout. A minimum of 25% of registered students must vote to endorse the elections. Low turnouts may be variously interpreted as student apathy, or a lack of interest in the candidates, or the perceived irrelevance of the structures for effectively representing students' interests. Whatever the reason, the low turnouts may be symptomatic of a general lethargy evident in the low levels of participation in student political life in general.

Interestingly, few students reported participating in the activities of UWC student clubs and societies.<sup>267</sup> Obviously there are exceptions. A few students mentioned regularly participating in the activities of student associations. The Black Management Forum and Swazi Student Organisation were mentioned. The sports clubs and the regular social functions organised by the International Students' Organisation and by religious structures were seen to play a supportive role in breaking the isolation often experienced by students living in university residences. Students in the EMS Faculty - one who worked as a full-time administrator on campus and two who were tutors - participated as mentors in the Brawam Siswam mentoring programme for high school students.<sup>268</sup> Similarly, several student-led initiatives focus on integrating the social and academic environments. For example, some residences have mentoring programmes for first-year students and study groups for senior students. In the first-year programmes senior students in all three faculties - Arts, Science and EMS - mentor or tutor first-year students in a range of subjects. These student-led academic support initiatives, together with social and religious groups, are seen as essential components of student support strategies and a way to develop social and academic support networks in the residences. Our data did not allow us to compare the degree of success of these initiatives across the residences, or the extent to which they influence residence cultures.

Several students and staff commented on the complementary roles of student leadership structures at various institutional levels: the faculty, residences and clubs and societies. This is how a third-year student, a student leader and a staff member describe the spotty levels of student participation in campus affairs.

*One of the main challenges is student participation. Students could be really encouraged to participate more on issues around the campus, not only for personal, having fun but doing something else. I don't know how to put it but they really can focus on that.<sup>269</sup>*

<sup>266</sup> ASTU 01

<sup>267</sup> There is a large discrepancy between the number of student clubs and societies at UWC and the degree of student participation.

<sup>268</sup> This is a joint initiative of UWC, selected local schools and the Provincial Administration of the Western Cape. It develops mentoring relationships between academically successful university students and Grade 9 students.

<sup>269</sup> SSTU 14

*... students cannot just come up with groups - they need to be coordinated by someone. So maybe someone from the SRC could come up with those ideas for support groups, to find who will be able to assist students regardless of the faculty when they are just to get them to a picture where they can sit and see that they can actually do something with their lives instead of just sitting around.<sup>270</sup>*

*[On shared governance] ... We have students on the faculty committees. They've already come to the student affairs committee meetings - that affects them directly. I have not seen effective representation on any of the committees. I don't think undergraduate students are effective on Academic Planning Committees - on Student Affairs Committees, yes, but not on academic planning. Postgraduates can be involved in undergraduate planning. Selective involvement, yes - where it's effective - hundred percent yes.<sup>271</sup>*

To summarise, students' social interactions tend to be generally positive. We found remarkable examples of activities in the student residences - such as mentoring and tutoring programmes, and study groups - that cut across the social and academic spheres of campus life, but few indications of an overall student culture marked by widespread participation in student clubs and societies or open campus discussions on issues affecting students. Students' negative experiences involved safety issues on and off campus, and cultural, political or identity related differences, which often influenced the dynamics of student structures.

What does this tell us about how students' social experiences relate to their academic success? It is possible that some may have had extremely positive experiences and still performed poorly, while others may have had negative and damaging social experiences but been academically successful. However, the data in this section point to the specific combination of factors which may have a strong influence on students' ability to meet the demands of rigorous academic work. Their multiple anxieties about transport, their safety after 4 pm and walking on campus after dark, suggest the need for integrated strategies that simultaneously change different but related aspects of the overall campus environment to ensure the success of the academic project. For example, if the library and computer laboratories are open until late but transport and security issues are not addressed, students are unlikely to use these essential academic resources after certain hours, which would definitely affect the amount of time they are able to devote to their academic work.

These findings suggest the need for multi-pronged institution-wide interventions that on the one hand actively foster the valuing of difference among members of the general campus community and, on the other, investigate how the overall academic environment supports the demands of academic work. This would mean considering the multiple effects of a range of factors that affect the overall quality of campus life for both day and residence students. The examples in this section also provide us with the beginnings of an argument about the roadblocks to academic success - about how specific combinations of social, cultural and academic factors influence students' academic lives. We develop this argument below by considering students' experiences with administrative and financial issues.

<sup>270</sup> SSTU 13

<sup>271</sup> SSTA 01

### 3. STUDENT INTERACTIONS WITH INSTITUTIONAL ADMINISTRATIVE AND FINANCIAL STRUCTURES

Students at UWC have to deal with issues that many of them did not face previously, from sorting out financial affairs to finding their way around an unfamiliar environment academically and socially. Most high schools in the urban areas have no more than 1,500 learners and a rather small complement of staff. In rural areas these would be even fewer. The university has over 14,000 students and nearly 3,000 staff. Whereas previously the school secretary and principal were generally the only people students had to deal with for administrative matters, now they have many more, in various departments. This puts them under pressure long before they enter a lecture theatre, where yet again feelings of displacement may await them, as we show later. Youths of 18 to 20 are expected to cope in this environment and to show high levels of maturity and confidence. Coupled with these pressures are issues of power and authority which are often inscribed by race and gender. It is no wonder then that some students reported that during their first year they generally avoided interacting with staff as much as possible, and many of them in their third year still avoid contact with staff, except for a few whom they consider to be supportive, or with whom they can identify (see Section 5).

In this section we will see that students' academic experiences were influenced by a combination of factors: the contradictions of everyday interactions, issues arising from institutional processes and rules for registration, academic advising, and the various kinds of student balancing or coping strategies to deal with arrangements for financial aid and student employment. The main purpose of this section is to investigate how particular institutional arrangements (for registration, financial aid and student employment options) and student and staff interactions influence students' campus experiences.

#### 3.1 CHOICE OF INSTITUTION

Many students chose UWC because of its academic and political reputation. Specific institutional factors - particular areas of study, affordability (e.g. lower fees, and rebates), flexible admissions criteria (e.g. age exemption, and RPL), the flexible study options (e.g. part-time study) and the location of UWC - were instrumental in attracting students.

*I'm here because I want to be here, not because I'm black or poor. If I wanted to be somewhere else, I wouldn't be here.*<sup>272</sup>

*It is close to home. It was transport and the grades ... got a bursary to study here.*<sup>273</sup>

*I did not do well in matric. My class teacher told me that I should do all my subjects on standard grade so I was not well informed. After finishing high school I went to work because we were seven children and I had to help with the financial responsibilities. After 23 I applied for an age exemption and started to study part-time. I now have an administrative job on campus and am allowed to do my studies full-time.*<sup>274</sup>

Those for whom UWC was their first choice chose the institution because they thought it offered the best quality options in the academic programmes they were interested in. Many were also motivated by UWC's history in the struggle against apartheid and its being what some called a 'black empowerment institution'.

<sup>272</sup> ASTU 11

<sup>273</sup> SSTU 14

<sup>274</sup> ESTA 08

They expressed great pride in being students at an institution that was seen as being at the forefront of the liberation struggle. This category of student was generally well-informed about what the institution offered and had done research on it prior to applying.<sup>275</sup> Of the students who did not have UWC as their first choice, many reported that they knew very little about the institution prior to their arrival. Others had applied to other universities in the region, but were either refused or were too late to get into their preferred course. UWC was generally the only institution in the Western Cape to accept late applicants.

### 3.2 EXPERIENCES OF REGISTRATION AND ACADEMIC ADVISING

Registration periods at the beginning of terms often proved to be very difficult for students and staff in all three faculties. Associated difficulties, such as timetable clashes, which are often discovered only during the second or third week of lectures, are common. This is especially true for students who are permitted to register late. Some of these had to be content with whichever courses were available to them. During registration, students seldom see knowledgeable academics. In all three faculties, registration is generally left to administrative staff and student assistants who are sometimes not up to date with course content and requirements. Students therefore often do not know exactly what they will be studying and only get course outlines once they attend lectures.

Course selection was another common problem. We found students taking a hit-or-miss approach to course selection, as the following comments show.

*I think that very, very few students do [choose a module] because that's what they want to do, and because most of them don't know what we teach. And this is my big issue with UWC ... that there is a terrible lack of advisory services and students choose subjects because they fit the timetable or because they think that in some way it can further their career prospects, or because a friend is doing it. There's seems to be very little understanding of how to plan their studies, and what they really want or need.*<sup>276</sup>

*It's a faculty problem. I cannot graduate without that module. I am with two departments - I am with EMS and Science. I did a module from Science. It's the same module, but different codes, same lecturers, and same books. ... It's between EMS and Science - they need to know that 132 is the same as 121. If one student does this then they should be accredited for this. It's the same module, just different codes.*<sup>277</sup>

Of the sample, four students each in Arts and Science had changed their programme of study. Some said they had changed their programmes of study in their second year either because they had lost interest in the field of study or were not passing their modules. This was especially the case in the EMS Faculty, where 60% of students interviewed said they had changed their programme of study at some stage. One staff member suggested that a lack of academic guidance was the reason for a large number of students in the EMS Faculty switching programmes either within the faculty or in some cases even across faculties.

<sup>275</sup> Those who came from outside the Western Cape generally used the internet and approached either teachers or ex-UWC students for information about UWC. Those living in the Western Cape had either attended the Career Exhibition Days or been advised by family members and teachers. Family recommendations also influenced this category's decision, with many stating that friends or family members had previously studied at UWC.

<sup>276</sup> ASTA 12

<sup>277</sup> SSTU 14

*Some students came to the university without any acceptance letter but they have heard from others about UWC's reputation. When [Student X] arrived to register she still did not receive any correspondence from the university and while she stood in the line to get registered her father called to say she was accepted but not for the BCom degree. She also did not have anywhere to stay. She eventually enrolled for a BA degree but felt so miserable that she literally cried her way into the EMS Faculty and is now studying BCom with Political Studies as a major.<sup>278</sup>*

Inadequate academic advising before or during registration periods is a clear example of a lack of integration between academic and administrative processes. However, our data do not allow us to draw any conclusions about whether the success rates of students who changed their programme of study in their first or second year of study were any different from those who did not.

### 3.3 INTERACTIONS WITH ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF

Students report that they interact more often with front-line administrative and support staff in faculties and in central administration. They interact with administrative and support staff in managerial positions less frequently, only when they face serious problems or have been called in to see a particular person. Some students spoke of positive interactions with the university's administrative staff, and found them to be generally helpful, despite the long queues.

**Nee hulle is okay. Jy moet net patient wees vir die lyne en so ...** <sup>279</sup>

We have a very supportive residence coordinator - you don't really feel like an outsider.<sup>280</sup>

*Ja, admin is quite helpful. The only time I interact with admin is when I have a problem. This year there have been many problems since the beginning. And they did help me. But friendly ... I wouldn't say friendly<sup>281</sup>*

*There is one woman [in the library] endi mtbanda [I love] the most. She is very nice in terms of [helping] you find the information you need, what you must look for and helps you with any particular thing.<sup>282</sup>*

*Central admin - have no problem with that. My faculty admin, it's very seldom that we go there. You must have a lot of patience in our faculty cause you have to wait long to see someone. They are helpful but it takes [a long time] ...* <sup>283</sup>

A recent survey of UWC undergraduate students (Barnes, 2004) found that while 73% of respondents were 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with their overall UWC experience and 76% were very satisfied or satisfied with the quality of instruction, only 48% were satisfied with the quality of administrative services. Among our respondents, some students from all race and ethnic groups expressed dissatisfaction with the university's administrative staff. Some of them felt that the lack of respect they experienced was motivated by racism. The theme of racial discrimination in students' perceptions of their interactions with administrative staff was repeated often.

<sup>278</sup> ESTA 06

<sup>279</sup> SSTU 03

<sup>280</sup> SSTU 07

<sup>281</sup> SSTU 09

<sup>282</sup> ASTU 12

<sup>283</sup> SSTU 01

*Wherever you go in UWC you feel like this is a coloured institution and you are just intruding. Wherever you go you get that attitude. Especially at the beginning of the year you feel that pressure. One time I was at ... faculty offices and I was asking this lady for my results, and she said: 'No! Go to Admin!' and I told her my marks were not appearing on my results and I wanted to check if the mistake was corrected. She said 'No, go to Admin!' and then four coloured girls after me went inside and they got their results just like that - no problem. They always give you problems if you are black.<sup>284</sup>*

### 3.4 FINANCIAL ISSUES

In the Barnes (2004) survey of undergraduate students at UWC, 81% of respondents stated that neither parent had attended university, 73% that none of their siblings had attended university, and 28% of students were employed, some for as much as 20 hours a week. In the present study the profile of student respondents in the Arts Faculty showed that their family incomes ranged from less than R2,000 per month to between R4,000 and R6,000, with many students describing themselves as coming from working class backgrounds.<sup>285</sup> These statistics indicate that many UWC students come from working class families for whom fees of around R10,000 per year represent a significant burden.

Many students' choice to study at UWC was thus influenced by the tuition fees, which remain between 30% and 40% lower than those of the other universities in the Western Cape (UWC, 2004a: 37). For a few students, fees are even lower: UWC offers rebates on tuition fees to students who have matriculation aggregates of A and B and a selected number of C aggregates who study in the humanities.<sup>286</sup> The number of new students enrolling with A, B and C aggregates has increased steadily since 2002 (Morta, 2006). UWC also offers fee rebates to staff members and their children. These groups are in the minority, however.

Previous studies suggest that UWC still loses a large number of students owing to their inadequate financial resources. Two institutional studies found the range and level of financial support provided by the institution insufficient (Koen, 2003; Barnes, 2004).<sup>287</sup> Of the students interviewed, 58% (37 students) rely on bursaries and/or loans to fund their studies, with parents' or own contributions making up any shortfall. Several students had outside bursaries (e.g. Price Waterhouse Coopers, Telkom, the City Council and government sponsorships) and two had National Research Foundation (NRF) bursaries. Two students benefited from UWC's matriculation aggregate rebate system and four from UWC's staff rebate. At least 25% said they were relying solely on their parents or their own funds to pay their fees.

The university also administers the bursary and loan programme of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). Of the 37 of our student respondents who reported that their studies are fully or partially funded by bursaries and/or loans, most receive NSFAS funding. NSFAS loans range from R2,000 to R32,000. Students who pass all the modules they have registered for in any one year can convert 40% of the loan to a non-repayable bursary. The rest of the loan is repayable when they have found employment after graduation.

<sup>284</sup> ASTU 10

<sup>285</sup> This information was not available for students in the EMS and Science Faculties.

<sup>286</sup> These are merit awards for 'distinguished students' entering higher education for the first time, and consist of graduated rebates on tuition fees to students entering with A, B or C aggregates. Matriculants with an A-aggregate receive a 100% rebate, those with a B-aggregate receive a 75% rebate and those with C-aggregates (Arts Faculty only) receive a 50% rebate. Staff rebates apply to full-time permanent staff members who wish to study. The children of full-time permanent staff members also qualify for rebates.

<sup>287</sup> Two additional studies (Van Harte, 2004; Cele, 2005) relate these issues to national systemic issues.



Although it is a crucial piece of assistance, the NSFAS has several problematic aspects. Some students were extremely anxious about the large amounts they would have to pay back. Another problem was the timing of the payments, which only begin four months after the start of the academic year. Many students are unable to pay the upfront payment, due at registration, towards tuition fees and so borrow from other sources to pay these registration fees.<sup>288</sup> Another was the amount of the funding, which many students said was insufficient to cover all their expenses. These students sought part-time employment.

*When they know you have a bursary they can't expect you to pay so much at the beginning of the year.<sup>289</sup>*

*I work on campus part-time when not in classes or hanging out - it reduces my account so my parents won't have to pay more so it helps me.<sup>290</sup>*

Thus, over 44% of the students from all three faculties said they worked on a part-time basis. Most reported working on campus, some for as much as 20 hours a week, as found in the Barnes study cited above. They are employed either through the UWC work-study programme (in which case it is up to ten hours per week) or as department tutors and mentors in first-year residences.<sup>291</sup> Three students said they worked between 20 and 40 hours per week, and one student works full-time on campus. Two said they worked during holidays as a condition of their bursaries, and two said they worked off campus from four to six hours per week. Others said they were not employed, but worked when they could find a casual job. The third-year student respondents seem to spend a lot of their study time working.

These financial issues are intimately linked to academic issues. For example, students owing fees are not allowed to graduate even though they may have met all the requirements for graduation. Similarly, NSFAS rules (the timing and amount of payments) oblige students to seek employment to supplement the loan or bursary. Students are constantly faced with issues such as finding extra money for textbooks, printing and living expenses; sending money home; balancing work and study; and, most importantly for some students, acquiring daily necessities such as food. Despite the loans and bursaries, some students consistently reported that poverty played a role in their academic experience. Staff and tutors pointed to ad hoc support and development programmes in some departments, but were unaware of any institution-wide strategy to address this issue.

*Students often come here hungry; they don't read because they're hungry. The faculty does not have anything in place to deal with student poverty on campus. Why are some students arriving hungry every day? That is a campus-wide issue. I think we should be more vigilant of that, of the poverty.<sup>292</sup>*

*The university is still drawing a large number of students from underprivileged socioeconomic communities. Their household circumstances are very challenging and sometimes heartbreaking family circumstances, shacks burn down, there are extended family connections and students get involved in them, there are cultural issues and dimensions.<sup>293</sup>*

<sup>288</sup> For example, one student secured a loan from Eduloan to make the upfront payment and her mother now pays it back in monthly instalments.

<sup>289</sup> SSTU 08

<sup>290</sup> SSTU 04

<sup>291</sup> The UWC work-study scheme provides opportunities for undergraduate students to work on campus for up to ten hours per week as administrative, laboratory, research, community, peer mentoring or tutorial assistants. A percentage of students' earnings is paid into their fee accounts. The rates range from R13.00 to R33.50 per hour

<sup>292</sup> SSTA 09

<sup>293</sup> ESTA 08

*We are also having richer kids coming through this university. If you look at the cars, those are not poor kids. That means the kids from poorer areas are not coming to this institution. When are we going to provide good proper bursaries to potentially very good students? We need to be more involved in the school system and identify students there.*<sup>294</sup>

The various combinations of these financial factors contribute to a stressful experience for some students, starting at the very beginning of the year at registration when the upfront payment is due, when textbooks must be acquired and accommodation and living expenses must be sorted. Again, as with the issues raised in the previous section, the multiplier effects of financial issues facing students point to the need for multi-pronged institutional interventions. If we agree that paying attention to both access and success requires a framework that does not separate the material contexts from the cultural contexts of higher education, then we should not see access and success as 'mutually exclusive, with one being sacrificed for the other. ... access [need not be] sidelined by a focus on success, shrinking allocations to education, and the discourse of efficiency' (Libhaber, 2005: 25). The specific institutional arrangements for financial support (policies, rules, processes, structures, advice, options, amounts), the relationship with external donors, and the availability of alternatives to loan-based schemes (for example, fees on a sliding scale, or increasing the amounts for work-study) will determine the extent to which financial issues function to include or exclude students from low socioeconomic backgrounds from fully participating in and enjoying the academic experience.

#### **4. STAFF EXPERIENCES AND CONSTRUCTIONS OF ACADEMIC CULTURE**

How do UWC staff members experience and construct the academic cultures that surround the students? This section addresses this question by examining interactions among staff and their perceptions of the primary factors influencing student academic performance.

Many staff members chose to work at UWC because of its intellectual and political standing. Many were attracted to UWC by the benefits of a job in academia, including opportunities to further their own studies, although this motivation played out differently across the various categories of staff. Staff in all three faculties voiced two main reasons for choosing and staying at UWC: a political and social commitment to the institution and the desire to work in academia. Of the former category, many are ex-students, some of whom had left the university and then returned to 'give back'. Many are driven, as one said, by UWC's 'specific historical role to ensure that the South African higher education landscape is changed' and by their personal struggles to obtain higher education under difficult circumstances. Among the permanent academic staff members' reasons for working at UWC are stability, security, financial perks such as regional tertiary rebates for their children, and the fact that UWC has enabled them to pursue their own studies and research interests. Administrative and support staff said that they remained at UWC because they felt 'at home' and were comfortable, and because they believed that they could 'make a difference'.

##### **4.1 INTERACTIONS AMONG STAFF**

We found the dominant types of interactions among respondents to be largely intra-group across the three sectors of the institution (students, academic staff and administrative and support staff). Inter-group interactions seem to take place mostly in formal settings directly related to their functions in the institution. Both students and staff associate with people with whom they feel most comfortable, and these interactions often tend to be along the lines of gender, class, race and position in the university hierarchy. Because of

<sup>294</sup> SSTU 01

the race and gender make-up of the university staff in the two employee categories (academic staff and administrative staff) staff rationalised their patterns of interaction as associating with people who had similar interests.

Interactions among staff also tend to happen within rather strict boundaries, most often within departments, and to replicate the historical relational dynamics of the discipline or the wider society, or both. Academic staff reported engaging mainly with colleagues in their departments, or those closely related to their particular fields. These interactions tended to occur in formal settings such as departmental meetings or seminars. Some observed that some academics come to the university only to lecture or attend meetings, leaving little space for meaningful interactions with students or with other staff. This pattern of attendance may be due to the predominance of part-time contract lecturers in some faculties.<sup>295</sup>

*Sometimes it's like a ghost town here. There's just nobody. Everyone's off doing his or her own thing. I suppose it makes it very difficult for students, particularly this time of the year when they are all panicking about their coursework marks.*<sup>296</sup>

Interdepartmental interaction among academic staff generally occurs in formal committee meetings and seminars at faculty level. Informal networks across departments are often defined by subject area and field of interest, as well as ideology, race and gender. The situation is similar for administrative and support staff. Interactions within this sector are, however, much more fluid, with staff from various departments, faculties and units regularly having contact with one another both formally and informally. There seems to be very little interaction between the two categories of staff outside of formal settings. The institutional space between them is reflected in the history of the two staff unions, one for academic staff (now defunct) and one for administrative staff (affiliated to Nehawu).

The demise of the academic staff union in 2002 seems to have resulted in a fizzling out of open campus debates about academic matters among staff in general. In the previous section we pointed to a similar absence of open campus discussions among students, and their limited participation in student clubs and societies. None of the staff or student respondents mentioned participating in informal open campus forums involving both students and staff. The dominant pattern of engagement to emerge from the staff interviews is one of formal interactions within the key structures representing the institutional role players. While such participation does occur, although in a limited manner, in the formal structures representing the interests of students (e.g. the SRC, the CHC and student faculty councils) and administrative staff (e.g. Nehawu), it is absent in the case of academic staff, who rely on the formal faculty structures and on Senate and Council.

What does this tell us about the institutional culture? These patterns of participation in campus life - and the absence of a strong associational life - suggest that in their collective silence staff play a contradictory role in constructing academic cultures reluctant to deal in open forums with contestations about student learning in general and, as we show in the other sections of this chapter, with the inherited colonial and hetero-patriarchal cultures of South African universities. A parallel argument can be made about student cultures. Alternatives to the prevalent 'role player' model would be a deliberative model - embracing open

<sup>295</sup> Staff in the EMS Faculty related the large percentage of part-time staff to the 'brain drain' out of the EMS Faculty post-1994 into government structures and industry and the higher salaries in these two sectors.

<sup>296</sup> ASTA 12

forums characterised by a richer associational life, and a messy constant to-ing and fro-ing between departments, students, administrators, the SRC, staff associations, unions and so on.

In terms of staff relationships, some staff reported negative social interactions along gendered and racial lines, of being 'brushed off' in various ways:<sup>297</sup>

*I seem to get into struggles with some of the male colleagues because they ... you see Prof. X, he's more comfortable with males - at least I think so - he won't listen to me and he's rude. ... I don't go and cry or whatever at anybody, I just left it there because there's nothing you can do to them. Then the dean was someone who always wanted to do something about these things but women are not prepared to talk about what it is.*<sup>298</sup>

*Yes admin should make us follow the rules but you know don't be rude while you're doing it. I think that is one thing admin must learn - how to talk to people of different races 'cause I've seen it and I've actually heard racist remarks being made and I'm not talking about admin alone - also support staff and also lecturers.*<sup>299</sup>

*Admin staff I do not have much joy with. Mr X just basically brushes me off yet he adores me personally.*<sup>300</sup>

Our data did show a pattern of a gendered institutional culture which privileged male norms and male voices. Staff reported that differences of opinion among staff members based on conflicting philosophies or challenges to male dominance in a field are often recorded in the public transcripts of the faculty as 'personality clashes' but in reality may have their basis in the academic cultures of specific departments or disciplines.<sup>301</sup> Staff in the Science Faculty, for example, related these experiences to the patriarchal culture of science disciplines.

*Many women are involved in science education and not only pure science stuff and some lecturers see this [science education] as absolute crap, Mickey Mouse stuff and not pure science.*<sup>302</sup>

*The faculty has a history of a patriarchal culture ... I think the faculty is trying to appoint an equity person to deal with that, and equity issues across the board - race, gender ... So I think that is a positive move in the right direction because it has to be addressed. The faculty does have an equity committee but they've done nothing because I'm on the committee and have never gone to a meeting.*<sup>303</sup>

Importantly, these contestations are implicated at the level of curriculum in epistemological debates.<sup>304</sup> How does an institution seeking to transform deal with contestations about the politics of knowledge? In

<sup>297</sup> This issue is not unique to UWC. A recent anthology on the experiences of black women in South African universities (Mabokela & Magubane, 2004) highlights 'the racist and sexist practices that still suffuse the institutional culture of South African universities, despite their public pronouncements about their commitments to "diversity" and "transformation" '.

<sup>298</sup> SSTA 02

<sup>299</sup> SSTA 07

<sup>300</sup> SSTA 11

<sup>301</sup> Scott's (1990) notion of 'hidden transcripts' is useful in understanding insider/outsider issues in terms of subcultures.

<sup>302</sup> SSTA 03

<sup>303</sup> SSTA 06

<sup>304</sup> Historically it is possible to trace the development of the natural and social science disciplines in parallel to the construction of modern man (European, male, rational, scientific) as the human subject of history against whom all 'others' (women, colonised people) are seen to be incomplete variations. See Said (1978), Smith (1999) and Pyenson (1989) on the development of the disciplines in European colonies.

attempting to understand the politics of gender in higher education, it is therefore useful to see the university as a site marked by contestation over gender meanings,

*marked with codes for man-as-thinker, man-as-aggressive debater, man-as-athlete, boys-becoming-men, etc. The addition of women to this men's club is thus not only a statistical exercise, but also an extremely meaningful social and symbolic exercise - which is by its very nature, dynamic, challenging, and likely conflictual (Barnes, 2007: 12).*

Our data suggests that dealing with these contestations, also evident in the previous two sections on students' everyday experiences, requires that we do not reduce access to the mere addition of more bodies into existing institutions. It also means necessarily transforming not only colonial curricula (e.g. how difference is represented in curriculum) and research methodologies, but also changing pedagogical relationships and institutional cultures. Staff suggested three ways to deal with the sexist, racist attitudes and structural relationships evident in various aspects of the institutional culture. Some supported the idea of diversity workshops for all staff. Others strongly opposed the 'diversity training' route and suggested activities supporting broader cultural changes.<sup>305</sup> A third suggestion favoured faculty-level appointments to deal specifically with 'equity and transformation issues'.

*And sometimes I think there needs to be some sort of training on what it means to be a non-racist organisation and that whatever you do and the face you show people, they will never forget and they won't send their children here. So there's a lot that has to do with PR and [all] staff. I think maybe they need to close admin down for a day and take them through diversity training, anger management, conflict resolution - really it is a problem. I never know what face I'm going to get when I go to admin.<sup>306</sup>*

*No, diversity training etcetera [is] not a viable solution - [it] requires a cultural change in attitudes and behaviours and ways of relating with respect ... respecting difference. Attending a few workshops on diversity training will not change ways of relating ...<sup>307</sup>*

Some staff attributed negative interactions to the general social attitudes and structural power dynamics of sexism and patriarchy as expressed in daily life. Others related negative interactions to the workload issues facing staff members, especially administrative staff.

## 4.2 STAFF WORKLOADS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A large number of administrative staff in all three faculties stated that they felt overworked and often had to take on jobs that in reality required more than one person. We include these views because taken collectively they paint a picture of these staff members often being too busy and tired - the long queues observed by students may indicate understaffing during crucial periods - and of the institution not being supportive enough of their personal plans to further their own education. They claimed that time off for studies was extremely limited and often not granted, particularly when it came to extended periods of more than a month or if their programme of study was not directly related to their job profile.

<sup>305</sup> See Mohanty's (1994) excellent critique of the popular 'Diversity Workshop' route popularised in the United States.

<sup>306</sup> SSTA 02

<sup>307</sup> ESTA 08

It should be noted that academic staff members were more enthusiastic. The majority felt that UWC was very committed to staff development and actively encouraged them to pursue postgraduate study. For example, special arrangements were often made to ensure that they had sufficient time for their research.

The workload issue also emerged among women academic staff who had to deal with multiple workloads: the normal teaching and research, as well as curriculum development, committee work, and other voluntary work for the department or faculty. And they had to balance these commitments with family, home and community responsibilities. Those who were also studying said they had to use multiple balancing strategies, with each having its own patterns of stress. This makes for a highly burdened university workforce, and may be a clue to understanding various campus interactions. As one staff member observed:

*People get very upset at admin - they don't seem to be able to handle the volume. I think that's part of the problem. For example, [there is] one person for international undergraduate students and international postgraduate students for the whole university. Imagine if everybody had the same problem on a particular day! Or imagine 400 who graduate and all calling.*<sup>308</sup>

Staff and students reported a variety of perceptions of staff 'approachability'. Some staff perceived employment equity as not being a priority at the university, and reported experiencing discrimination on the basis of their race, ethnicity or gender. Others stated that students do not have many lecturers they can relate to or who can act as role models for them. Some students mentioned not being able to speak freely to their lecturers because of identity issues, which are often linked to issues of power and authority.

Here we can simply point to the existing parameters of current debates. Although employment equity is one of the seven strategic interventions that UWC has set itself, its staffing patterns remain inequitably stable.<sup>309</sup> The reasons provided for this stability include the small pool of qualified black, particularly African professionals, the institution's inability to match private sector salaries, and the drain on its human resources through 'poaching' by the private sector, the public sector and other higher education institutions. Furthermore, it is commonly believed that black staff members leave or that black professionals are not attracted to the institution because of low salaries.

### 4.3 INSTITUTIONAL EXPLANATIONS OF STUDENTS' ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

The UWC 2005 Annual Report identifies four areas that require ongoing attention to improve the pass rates: the quality of student intake, the commitment of staff and students, a system of support to meet students' learning needs, and a supportive teaching and learning environment (UWC, 2005: 14). In relation to these areas, this section considers the dominant explanations for students' academic performance that emerged from institutional documents and the interviews with staff.

#### 4.3.1 Academically underprepared students

The Institutional Operating Plan (UWC, 2004a) identifies student underpreparedness - particularly in literacy and numeracy - as the reason why many UWC students fail to graduate. The main argument is that UWC draws a large part of its student population from poorly resourced schools which are staffed with teachers who themselves were often under- or poorly-trained.

<sup>308</sup> SSTA 04

<sup>309</sup> See UWC's Strategic Plan (UWC, 2000a); Institutional Operating Plan (UWC, 2004a) and Employment Equity Plan (UWC, 2006).

*The quality of intake affects UWC's ability to respond to the specific learning needs of its students and to devise efficient ways to further develop and affirm their academic potential and improve their chances of success. ... Many students lack the necessary academic skills: writing, synthesising, interpreting, as well as reading and comprehension abilities. In many cases their difficulties also involve inability to use reference tools or to find ways of coping with workload. (UWC, 2004a: 74, 75)*

The 'underprepared student' argument emerged strongly from our data. It takes a variety of forms, depending on the faculty. In the Science Faculty almost all staff interviewed said there was a problem with students' grounding in mathematics. The Science Foundation Programme was seen as a way to deal with this.<sup>310</sup> Some staff consistently located the problem in the academic underpreparedness of students and not, for example, in how a subject may be taught at the university.

*There's definitely a change in the preparedness for higher education. The skills the students come in with have changed and we are not really on top of that - how that change has happened. ... It's a big problem. Mathematics has a pass rate in the first semester of 23%, whereas teaching is exactly the same as before, 20 years ago, but the pass rates dropped.<sup>311</sup>*

The EMS Faculty offers the compulsory ALC course for first-year students as a way to identify and help students requiring academic support in their first semester. The reasons behind students' underpreparedness emerged as a contentious issue among staff in this faculty:

*... some lecturers think that students are just lazy and stupid and that is why there are low pass rates, low throughput rates and a high dropout rate. ... English as the academic language poses great difficulties to almost all of the students entering the faculty. All students are disadvantaged ... even the first language English speakers are weak in writing and expressing themselves.<sup>312</sup>*

In the Arts Faculty, the argument revolved around students admitted on the basis of the RPL criteria. Some background must be provided here. UWC accepts students who do not qualify for university admission through the normal channels. These are generally students who are admitted on the basis of RPL criteria. In 2000 UWC adopted an RPL policy to admit students under the age of 23 who showed academic potential even though they did not have matriculation exemptions<sup>313</sup> (Hendricks & Ralphs, 2003). This is in line with UWC's policy of extending formal access to higher education to help 'educationally disadvantaged students gain access to higher education', to 'seek racial and gender equality and contribute to helping the historically marginalised participate fully in the life of the nation' and to 'encourage and provide opportunities for lifelong learning' (see UWC's Mission Statement, 2000b). Flexibility in the re-admission criteria was another reason students chose UWC, especially those who 'stopped out' for various reasons. For example, one student in the EMS Faculty returned after six years to complete the single outstanding module required to complete her degree.

<sup>310</sup> See Blignaut et al. (2004)

<sup>311</sup> SSTA 01

<sup>312</sup> ESTA 03

<sup>313</sup> Most students interviewed in the Arts Faculty and all students in the Science Faculty said they had obtained matriculation exemptions. We do not have this information for the EMS Faculty. The time-to-degree range evident in the three faculties is reflected in this small sample, all enrolled for third-year courses. Fifty percent had first enrolled in 2004, 30% in 2003, 12% in 2002, and 8% in 2005. One student had first registered in 1995, then dropped out (or 'stopped out') and had now returned to complete her degree. Not counting this student, the average time these students had spent at the university thus far was 3.42 years.

The Arts Faculty houses the largest number of technically underprepared students, admitted through alternative admissions policies such as the RPL and the university-administered Taylors English Language Preparation (TELP) tests. Those who score over 65% in the TELP tests qualify for entry into the mainstream academic programme, and those obtaining between 60% and 64% qualify for entry into the Foundation Year Programme, where they are required to complete certain non-credit-bearing Foundation Year courses designed to help them cope with the rigours of academic work.

The Arts Faculty has one of the lowest throughput rates in the university. Staff members in the Arts Faculty identified two main reasons for this: the large number of students who have entered via alternative admissions policies or with C, D and E matriculation aggregates, and the inability of current teaching methodologies to get enough students to pass. Not all staff members agreed with these reasons. One observed, on the basis of internal faculty assessments, that no one single category of student can be said to be the reason for the low throughput rate.

*We look at our intake, but we're seeing that our intake doesn't determine academic performance. ... We have sufficient full exemptions As, Bs and Cs. There are very few E students. So our academic quality isn't bad. ... We don't have a situation where As are definitely passing, exemption candidates are definitely passing, and our SDs are definitely failing. There's nothing like that. We have SDs on our Dean's List. So that's not our problem.*<sup>314</sup>

Observing that many students who had entered the university with average symbols had in fact excelled, another staff member suggested that academic ability and potential cannot be measured by high school results alone; many other factors are likely to influence students' performance.

Many academic staff felt that students were unable to express themselves in an academic manner because they lacked literacy skills. Some attributed this to English being a second or third language for most students. If students were not proficient in English, they would find it even more difficult to understand and engage with academic texts written in English. This raises questions about the availability of multilingual study material, as is the practice at Stellenbosch University, for all students and staff.

Others perceived the problem as the way reading was approached by students in general, and which texts students were being exposed to, particularly at high school.

*... we still have this culture where students don't read. Even when you give them a Course Reader, they just don't read. We of course don't encourage Readers - apart from the copyright issue - we tell them to go to the library and find information. When they come to the next class, we expect them to have read, but they will come back to you and say we didn't go. Now that is one of the challenges - getting our students to read. They are very poor readers. It would be interesting to do a study to see how many of our students really can read.*<sup>315</sup>

*I'm not sure if it is that they are not reading enough. Our students, especially the younger generation, are quite adept at using the technology available, and these come in a written format - they have to read. I think that they don't necessarily have the understanding of reading organisation frameworks*

<sup>314</sup> ASTA 03

<sup>315</sup> ASTA 04



*in texts to be able to make sense of them ... A lot of them are not exposed in that way because reading is not taught in a strategic manner with a techniques focus at school. So you learn words, and multiple reinforcement of those words ... Nothing in the way they were taught prepares them for an academic environment. ... The critical reading component is completely left out. ... All you need to do is to learn how to give back, to regurgitate. It certainly doesn't encourage anybody to question text at school, so they are totally unprepared for university.* <sup>316</sup>

*I think that in general our students don't have a love for reading and I think that that shows in the way that they write and the way that they don't prepare for classes. Maybe it's not that they don't want to; it's that they can't. I think it boils down to not reading and not having a book culture and also the instant gratification society we are in where students want to have ... [unclear] in SMS language, in that graphic language. Then maybe what we should be doing then is teach in a way that sort of says, okay, I'm going to teach using the technologies that you like so we need to be more innovative from our side. It can be done ... to prevent students getting bored in lectures.* <sup>317</sup>

It should be noted tangentially that another angle on reading issues that emerged from student interviews was problems with accessing study materials in the university library.

*Academically it's fine - I like my area, medical sciences and biomedical research, even staff and lecturers they've been supportive - the only problem is the library. The other problem is we don't always have the materials we have to use so we have to go to Stellenbosch - why not have the materials here? Also the lab is small for the students.* <sup>318</sup>

*A lot of problems with the library, because there are no books. A lecturer would sometimes tell us to find a certain book, prescribed for the course, but when you go to the library you cannot find it, so you have to ask someone from another university maybe from UCT or Stellenbosch to ask for you [from their libraries]. ... However, electronic searches are fine - very efficient system in place.* <sup>319</sup>

Other reasons for academic underperformance cited include a lack of writing skills, students being unable to relate the material to their own experiences, and students who did not meet entrance-level requirements, which could be interpreted as a language problem. A number of academics felt that one had to understand reading within the context of South African society. There is a significant difference between someone who has had books bought for her since the age of four or five, or had bedtime stories read to her when she was very young, and someone whose only interaction with books was at school. The absence of both school and public libraries in certain areas, and the lack of resources in areas which do have public libraries, affects not only reading and writing abilities but also the ability to interpret academic texts.

On the topic of student writing, staff felt that there needed to be a uniform department standard for allocating marks and that students needed to be told about this at the beginning of the course. They pointed to the need to explain explicitly to students what was expected of them at the university level - including 'learning the rules of the game on campus' - which was different from what may have been expected of them at school.

<sup>316</sup> ASTA 12

<sup>317</sup> SSTA 04

<sup>318</sup> SSTU 23

<sup>319</sup> SSTU 19

*Academics ask the students to write at an acceptable standard, but that standard is not clarified for students. That goes totally against what ... learner-centred education is about because it asks for explicit criteria or stipulations for assessment of academic success. Explicit. ... Now if we are talking about standards but we don't actually specify what those standards are explicitly then we are not going to help our students to understand what we are looking for.*<sup>320</sup>

The issue of academic standards is a sensitive one with students in particular. Many lecturers felt that students' writing skills are a severe problem and that students at third-year level still have problems writing coherently. Some said this is often used as an excuse to fail students, particularly when it comes to language usage.

*If I couldn't write in English, why am I in third year? No, no. This is an excuse. But this language thing is a big issue that needs to be looked at in the higher education institutions. I'm saying this taking into cognisance of what is happening at Stellenbosch.*<sup>321</sup>

*Student literacy is a very big issue. I sometimes comfort myself - because you know our students have other majors, so they're doing English 3 or Xhosa 3. So I comfort myself by saying: well, they haven't learnt to write an essay, but they're doing English 3! But I don't think we're honest enough. I know we gossip around the tea table, but at these committees there's a kind of uncomfortableness about talking about our students' literacy problems. And these Readers - I don't think it's good. By third year they should be able to go out and find relevant material and come up with a decent essay.*<sup>322</sup>

#### 4.3.2 Students' learning habits

There was general consensus among staff across the three faculties that many students have a difficult time adapting to the university environment. The way students approach their studies was seen as a primary reason for their lack of success. Many staff members considered that the majority of students entering UWC did not have good study habits and therefore found it difficult to adapt to an environment where success depends on self-motivation and self-study. Many students do not cope. Some saw this as being related to students' experiences of a different work ethic in high school.

*The switchover is horrible for them. Classes at schools range from six to 50, depending on the subjects you are doing. If you're doing maths and science, or biology, you can have as little as six in a class. You come here and you sit in a class with 300 to 400 people. You're lucky if the lecturer remembers the colour of your eyes. Your teacher knew your mother and father. She knew you by name. The individual contact, the individual attention is gone. No one's going to check if you've done your homework. No one's going to make sure that your assignment is in on time or tell you each day that you must go to the library and get started on your assignment. Maybe that's why they're so insecure also.*<sup>323</sup>

*Students are away from the restrictive school environment, they suddenly feel free and don't have to come to class; they make new friends; there is a lot of peer pressure; they can't handle the*

<sup>320</sup> ASTA 10

<sup>321</sup> ASTU 05

<sup>322</sup> ASTA 09

<sup>323</sup> ASTA 02

*pressure and experiment with drugs and alcohol and spend prolonged periods in the Barn or 'Condom Square'.<sup>324</sup>*

Students' participation in lectures emerged as a strong theme in the staff interviews. One staff member observed that, particularly when classes are large, students only attend when they know that an assignment is due or just before a test or examination in the hope of getting 'a scope' [guidelines to prepare for an examination].

*I've got this third-year class that on paper is 217 students, but the lecture hall was about a quarter full, so you know you're preaching to the converted. ... I said this is the test date, some of you must come here, and the others to another venue. ... On the day of the test, that place was chock-a-block. You saw students you've never seen in your life ... They get whiff of a test and they pitch. ... I've told them: you can't depend on the readings. You have to come to class because I'm going to give you information in the class which is not in the readings. Because I'm not going to stand up in class with a book and say we're on page 73 or something like that. So the first thing is to get them to attend lectures and the next thing is to get them to read.<sup>325</sup>*

Students confirmed that they regularly 'bunked' their classes. One student had conflicting interests, and another pointed to a range of factors, from the new-found freedom in the university context to reading strategies.

*I spend an hour at the café ... or maybe the whole day at the café. So then I miss my lectures. I chill at the café. I think it's cool.<sup>326</sup>*

*The first year was all about fun ... we ended up failing. Freedom of going to class whenever you feel like going to class. Reading a textbook that you're not used to ... it was difficult. It's about responsibility. You learn to be responsible at university. You have to now. No one is going to force you to go to class. It was hard at the beginning. I have to prove myself.<sup>327</sup>*

Lecturers came in for a share of the blame. Students identified a number of additional factors influencing class attendance, including the number of students and venue size, personal issues such as health and finance, transport problems in the evenings or when there was either a strike or violence, the attitude of the lecturer, and course content and lecturing style. The reasons ranged from 'classes are not challenging', to 'lecturers don't give us notes in class' and 'they give us slide shows ... so they waste my time'.

*Some lecturers are good, but some are just plain lazy. They just give you notes on the overhead. And sometimes they don't even pitch. When you have to travel all this way for one lecture and the lecturer is not even there, that makes you mad. With this one course, I just don't attend lectures because you're never sure if the lecturer will be there. And where did we learn about 'scopes' anyway? From them!<sup>328</sup>*

<sup>324</sup> ESTA 01

<sup>325</sup> ASTA 06

<sup>326</sup> SSTU 02

<sup>327</sup> SSTU 15

<sup>328</sup> ASTU 04

## 5. POLITICS OF THE CLASSROOM

The above comments provide a good entry into issues at the heart of access to university life - academic and intellectual engagement. The dominant discourse at the institution in all three faculties is of student underpreparedness: academic underpreparedness, or underpreparedness to survive the university environment. This, however, prompts the question: is it not perhaps the institution that is underprepared for its students? While the university has undertaken a series of supportive measures, including infrastructural changes (e.g. more or larger lecture theatres), an increase in staff numbers and more academic support programmes, the Institutional Operating Plan states:

*[that] not enough is being done in the area of development to assist students to succeed academically: be it curriculum responsiveness, infrastructural deficiencies, class sizes, teaching approaches, learning techniques or attitudinal challenges. (UWC, 2004a: 11)*

While the main explanations for student academic performance tended to emphasise student underpreparedness over institutional factors, students (and some staff) felt that there were other factors that had a greater impact on their ability to succeed. Among these are the way courses are structured, the shortage of classroom time, the absence of tutorials for second- and third-year students, and contestations over official knowledge. Course content, approaches to teaching, assessment, academic support and the modular system emerged as contentious issues.

### 5.1 HOW MUCH TEACHING? HOW MUCH RESEARCH?

Recent changes to the higher education funding formula have inspired a renewed emphasis on students' academic success and on teaching and learning across South African universities. This new focus poses questions about the traditional dichotomy in universities that privileges research over teaching in various ways (reward structures, promotions, etc.). While the university has a new teaching and learning policy and is now also reviewing its admissions policies, it is not clear to what extent the changes will affect the current reward structures and promotions criteria, or contribute to an environment that is physically, intellectually, and emotionally conducive to a teaching and learning culture that engages positively with both the myths and the realities of student academic underpreparedness.

### 5.2 WHAT KIND OF TEACHING? ROTE LEARNING VERSUS CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Some staff members agreed that the high school sector could not be held solely to blame for students' lack of reading skills, and that normal everyday classroom practices in universities should also be interrogated.

*I think there is too much rote learning. There's too much lecturing that is seen as: 'You've got to learn what I put on the overhead, and if you learn that and give it back to me, then you are going to pass'. And there's very little attempt to improve students' understanding of the material. ... Now that's not what a university is supposed to be about.* <sup>329</sup>

The above statement is borne out by some of the students who felt that most lecturers wanted them to regurgitate what was delivered during lectures and that deviation would result in some form of punishment, even failure. Others felt that it was unnecessary for them to read beyond the minimum required readings as this would not necessarily improve their chances of success.

<sup>329</sup> ASTA 03

*With some lecturers, you know you must give them things just so. If they put it like that, you'd better put it like that, or you'll fail. Students who failed in previous years always warn the new ones, but you know, not everyone listens. And then they fail.*<sup>330</sup>

What's the point in reading more? Most of the lecturers here don't want you to argue with them. You just give them what they want and you'll pass. Even if it's 50%, at least you pass.<sup>331</sup>

When students were presented with lecturers' arguments that they do not engage critically with the content, many felt that some lecturers practice double standards. Some claimed that often lecturers told them to be critical, but when they were they were penalised in some form or other, which led them to remain silent and seldom engage critically with material presented in lectures.

### 5.3 CONTESTING OFFICIAL KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge, as critical educational theories have noted, is not value free.<sup>332</sup> It is created within specific contexts for specific purposes that may or may not have to do with the common good or collective progress.

*Knowledge comprises a culturally coded set of ideas and events that are imbricated in power and authority. ... For example, whose knowledge is considered worthy, or which discursive set of events, ideas, interpretations and practices come to be defined as 'knowledge', and how knowledge is circulated, transformed and transmitted, are some of the questions that reflect the thorny cultural politics of knowledge and power. (Gururani, 2002: 315)*

It became clear in the course of the research for this study that such ideological battles are often waged in the classroom, and often in the context of a serious mismatch between student and staff perceptions. A few students felt that there was little space within the institution to contest what is currently viewed as 'legitimate' knowledge. They contend that lecturers do not encourage them to push the boundaries of what they are learning and often dismiss their arguments by saying that they lack proof or that they are unscientific in their approach.

*This is supposed to be a place where we can think and criticise, but ... where the lecturer is uncomfortable with your argument he uses his power to fail you and uses different structures to ... marginalise you because you are viewed as somebody who doesn't want to study. ... So you have to compromise your own ideas ... so that you can actually pass and get a piece of paper. [The challenge] is hanging in there because there are no proper channels to actually try to resolve that matter.*<sup>333</sup>

*According to the expectation the lecturers actually have ... they [are] not taking me there to excel - they do not push me to that. They just want me to know what is written by somebody else and remember somebody else's brain. That is the mentality ... its not stimulating. It requires me to remember, not to explore - that robs me of my intellectual capabilities. The academic staff you will*

<sup>330</sup> ASTU 13

<sup>331</sup> ASTU 14

<sup>332</sup> Apple, (2004) for example, argues against the notion that the academy is neutral and that academic freedom abounds within its precincts. He says this view loses sight of the fact that 'academic boundaries are themselves culturally produced and are often the results of complex "policing" actions on the part of those who have the power to enforce them' (2004: viii). This 'policing' happens in various places and is not restricted to epistemological issues.

<sup>333</sup> ASTU 05

*only have a good relationship with them if you produce what they want, that's one thing that I know but then if you challenge the way they deliver then they will really see you different from other students.*<sup>334</sup>

Our conception of 'contesting official knowledge' includes professional and institutional disagreements between students and staff. Some students complained of the absence of 'proper channels' to address problems with lecturers. They seemed generally unaware of the procedures to follow. The current practice for a student wishing to lay a complaint is to approach the head of department, who then investigates and, if necessary, reports the problem, first to the dean of the faculty, and if it is not resolved at that level then to the Vice-Rector (Academic Affairs). Students, however, feel that this system discriminates against them as 'they [academics] stick together' and it is a matter of a lecturer's word against a student's, with the perception that the lecturer would be the one most likely to be believed. Some students perceived that those who complained became 'targeted' by members of staff and effectively marginalised as 'troublemakers'. Two students stated that they dropped out of courses because of this experience, which meant they had to do an extra year.

Two themes in particular are evident here: the common perception of a seeming intolerance of epistemological difference at a university which prides itself on diversity and its history of challenging dominant discourses, and the absolute power which lecturers are perceived to wield in determining a student's success.

#### 5.4 INTERACTIONS WITH ACADEMIC STAFF

Student interactions with academic staff are generally limited to the lecture theatre, with very few going for consultations. Those who do visit staff during office hours often found them to be generally 'very helpful' and 'supportive'; others felt somewhat intimidated. One student said:

*Some of the lecturers are really good when you approach them but I've never consulted them because they always seem so serious.*<sup>335</sup>

Some perceived lecturers to be friendly and supportive; others felt that interactions with academic staff could be uncomfortable at times, from 'distant and disinterested' to 'rude and insulting'. Their comments reflected perceptions of lack of interest, discrimination, negative attitudes and even hostility in the classroom. Some described classroom experiences as stifling and discouraging, especially when faced with negative attitudes and low expectations on the part of some lecturers. Others reported avoiding interacting with staff as much as possible.

*I'd say I go to my tutors more than my lecturers. Consultation - I don't go to consultation. They are available [but] I think I don't have time to go to them really. Some are friendly, some are so scary you don't even want to pass next to them but they do help ... because other students go to them. ... I think I'm in contact more with people working in the library because I spend my time [there].*<sup>336</sup>

<sup>334</sup> SSTU 05

<sup>335</sup> SSTU 16

<sup>336</sup> SSTU 05

*... maybe you're sitting in threes - the lecturer will tell you two of you guys are guaranteed to fail. The lecturers didn't even bother if you write the tutorials - it's your money.*<sup>337</sup>

*If you don't understand something they will tell you you're in the wrong course. Especially in [this faculty] they tell you that you should go to the other faculties it's not for you. You are not [this faculty] material.*<sup>338</sup>

Some students felt that they were not always treated fairly by lecturers. Allegations of racism were common in these complaints. A few felt that coloured students were favoured, while others felt that what mattered was not what ethnic group you belonged to, but whether you 'sucked up to' the lecturer. Many said that race did matter in the classroom, in terms of both lecturers' attitudes and the course content, especially where they perceived the materials to be racist, or to hold no relevance for them (for example, a high proportion of material from Europe and the USA).

*If you are doing urban studies and your text book is all about the UK, how is that relevant? That's when you just tell yourself: I've got the textbook, why should I go to class? I don't want to discuss the UK. And if you argue with them, they can make you feel small so quickly because you can't perhaps express yourself as well as them.*<sup>339</sup>

*I can say that some of them are friendly but the others are I can say like they're almost racist, but they are trying to hide it you know, 'cause you can see when the person is lecturing he's trying to pretend to be friendly, but when you go to him personally you can see the way he's looking at you, you can't even think afterwards to ask so many questions and some of them, I don't know, you can work hard but for him it's like you stupid, so the marks that he can give to you is just the lowest marks - that's what I've noticed personally.*<sup>340</sup>

*If you say that something is racist, then the lecturer gets upset and then the class gets upset with you because you are making the lecturer mad. Some of my fellow students already said to me: 'Why must you always argue? Just leave it. If you make him mad, he's going to mark very strictly and we could fail.' This is intimidation.*<sup>341</sup>

Academics also reported the pleasures and frustrations of communications with students. We found examples of concerted efforts on the part of lecturers to engage with students throughout the year, academically and socially. For example, in one department in the Science Faculty, all lectures are tutorial based and lecturers have an open-door policy for consultation so office hours are a normal practice. Staff members regularly expand the formal relationship beyond the classroom (for example, they employ students in research projects, acquire theatre tickets for them, arrange social functions). Students who are involved in projects with staff members as mentors or coordinators, both on and off campus, have more positive views of their interactions with staff.<sup>342</sup> Both students and staff viewed their interactions outside formal spaces as

<sup>337</sup> SSTU 14

<sup>338</sup> SSTU 18

<sup>339</sup> ASTU 14

<sup>340</sup> SSTU 04

<sup>341</sup> ASTU 06

<sup>342</sup> Following Tinto's (1987) research there is a huge literature on the everyday practices that facilitate the academic and social integration of students into departments through, for example, student involvement in department research projects, participating in department seminars, co-authoring research papers, and opportunities for social interaction. At UWC, Koen (2001) has used this framework to understand the factors influencing time-to-degree in postgraduate education.

having positive spin-offs. Students reported trusting lecturers more. Staff members who are involved in projects with students found it a rewarding experience and say that their relationships with students have improved as a result.

*I think that is where you actually get to know students. They also see a very different side to you, where you build up confidence in them ... I suggested that we take our more senior students on a breakaway ... where we can interact with them in a different way to the everyday, formal environment.*<sup>343</sup>

## 5.5 THE LANGUAGE DEBATE

Some tutors felt there was an over-emphasis on students' English language proficiency, suggesting that the problem sometimes lay in how lecturers perceived students. Others felt that lecturers often don't take the time to 'decipher' what students are saying. They said that if essays were not written in the language of the texts provided, lecturers often felt that students did not understand the work.

*When they look at you, they see Bantu education, and from there it's an uphill battle. And of course we're not as good at expressing ourselves in English as they are. How can we be? They have years of experience in arguing in English. We haven't. But that doesn't mean we can't speak or write in English. Many of the subjects we did at school were taught in English and the exams were in English.*<sup>344</sup>

*A lot of times you have to re-read an essay a couple of times to get what the student is saying, but if you take the time, then you'll see: hey, these are some brilliant ideas here! But I understand that it's difficult. When you have to mark a hundred assignments, it's not easy and sometimes you just get tired.*<sup>345</sup>

Some staff claimed that UWC students do not have a culture of reading and writing as methods of communication, and academic writing itself has a distinct style which has to be learnt. The Writing Centre helps students, but given the hugeness of the task they are severely under-resourced. There was also a feeling among staff that the institution needed to move beyond the present discourse in academic development and academic support arenas where academic and cognitive ability is judged on proficiency in English grammar. Some academics were highly critical of the construction of UWC students, particularly those who gained entry via alternative access processes, as,

*pathological, as suffering from some or other deficit: concepts such as 'non-traditional students', 'students at risk' - this whole discourse of pathology. ... What is needed is to reconceptualise students that come from different linguistic and educational backgrounds. What we need to understand discursively are the conditions of emergence, formation and existence of their discursive practices as they are, in a positive way.*<sup>346</sup>

Recognising that the politics of the classroom play a large part in student success rates, some staff felt that there was resistance to change, not only to change at UWC, but to change within the broader society, and this played itself out in the way students were treated by some members of the staff.

<sup>343</sup> ASTA 07

<sup>344</sup> Tutor 1

<sup>345</sup> Tutor 2

<sup>346</sup> ASTA 11



*Sometimes I get so frustrated that I just want to leave because I see on the negative side that there is an insularity, a sense of insecurity. I look at the academics that I know - and there are two completely different cultures - and I use that word with caution. On the one hand there are academically very good [lecturers] who are committed to try when it comes to students ... and then you have the second culture ... of people who are ridden by insecurities, really scared of meeting the outside world, and then at the same time wanting to believe that UWC students are no good anyway. And that sort of goes together. ... someone once said: 'Don't be too fancy in your teaching. Our students are semi-literate anyway'.<sup>347</sup>*

## 5.6 THE MODULAR SYSTEM

The university's teaching structure underwent a change from a continuous evaluation system to a modular system as a result of the changes instituted across South African universities in the late 1990s. Some academic staff favoured this system, stating that it gave the institution and staff more flexibility. Others strongly disagreed.

*The current modular system has changed our students into credit hunters. They are not students any more, they have no time to study. They only have time to swot for the next test. If they write four subjects ... in certain weeks makes 21 assessments in 7 weeks of writing. So we're changing that. We're going back to semesters which will give the students time for examination [and study], it will distinctly reduce the amount of assessments, [and] it will give staff more time for research, because it's killing everybody. ... This will be a major change - then they'll not be credit hunters, they'll become students and that, together with more tutorials, should definitely enhance our throughput rate, which is not bad at the moment but at a huge cost to staff.<sup>348</sup>*

*The review of the modular system has shown that it's not only the Science Faculty that has a problem with that - Arts has already gone back to semesters. That is the obvious way to go. It's frustrating because it's a tremendous amount of work that is involved ... but can't be implemented because of a lack of resources.<sup>349</sup>*

Some students also have severe problems with the modular system, arguing that the modules are too short to learn anything.

*...the modules that you learn are too short. I mean seven weeks and then you write a test, and then you are going to write an exam on that at the end of the semester. For me I think that is very short. I think we need to have an understanding. I think that contributes to the failure rate. Within seven weeks you get an introduction to Chapter 1 and 2. What about 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12? I think we deserve more than that.<sup>350</sup>*

The time allocated per class often presents a problem to both students and staff. Students felt that they were not given enough time to get to grips with any particular topic before they had to move on to the next, and they then had to deal with the spacing between assignments and tests and sometimes a lack of coordination between lectures and tutorials.

<sup>347</sup> ASTA 08

<sup>348</sup> SSTA 01

<sup>349</sup> SSTA 01. Note that some departments in the Arts and Science Faculties have gone back to the semester system.

<sup>350</sup> ASTU 01

*They allocate one hour and within one hour, even the introduction itself, to the chapter, to the topic, to today's topic, is not done and for the whole week that's that. Then for the next week ... you'll have an introduction for another one. ... I don't mind even it means having the same subject twice a week, or even three times a week, but provided that you get the concepts ... because now what you find is that a lecturer comes and talks about - like I'm having problems with [Module X] - bodies and apartheid, and before you go through the introduction, ... one hour is gone. You meet next week, this time you're going to treat something very different and yet when you're given an assignment, and the assignment needs you to know everything, ... So you find that you're just beating about the bush, [laughter]. You see you may go the books and get the information, put that in the assignment but you don't have enough time to internalise that information that you've got from that book because you are rushing out to another assignment which is yet as demanding as that one. You don't actually grasp the concept.<sup>351</sup>*

While the contestations over the modular system emerged strongly in the interview data, we found no evidence of campus-wide discussions of this issue. Neither the SRC nor academics as a group have taken it up in open campus discussions. If individual students or academics have formally raised the issue, they may have done so at the level of the department or faculty, but not at public forums on campus. It has not sufficiently entered institution-wide debates to merit a mention in the official university newsletter, On Campus.

## 5.7 MODULES AND ASSESSMENT

Some staff members acknowledged that there may be structural problems with certain modules with high failure rates in which students are often simply blamed for not working hard enough. They suggested that there may be something about the module itself (e.g. the structure of the module, no feedback on assignments) and about how it is taught that needs investigation. This point was made strongly by a student leader enrolled in the Science Faculty and taking a course in the EMS Faculty:

*In one module that I am really struggling with you will find that out of the whole class only 10% will pass. There is not anything that the faculty or the department is doing to check - why? Because you will find that sometimes you will have to find things on your own and you will struggle. Since there are no tutors you cannot go to anyone and ask for the information except for the lecturer and the lecturer will tell you to go back to your books. So they can go back and concentrate [on] the modules that have a really low passing rate, and check whether it is the modules or the students that are being lazy, because you will find that there are students who are really putting in effort but the way that the module is structured is just so difficult.<sup>352</sup>*

Problems with the methods of evaluation were raised by both students and staff. Some students believed that the evaluation system in their departments lacked consistency. Some stated that they seldom received adequate explanations about why they would get 80% for one assignment and do really poorly on the next one. Others questioned whether giving multiple choice tests at third-year level had any pedagogical value. A staff member in the EMS Faculty justified this practice on the grounds of the department being understaffed, and mentioned problems with the outsourcing of teaching. Part-time lecturers often only have time to lecture, not to mark assignments and examination scripts or to engage further with students. This is

<sup>351</sup> ASTU 02

<sup>352</sup> SSTU 13

an example of how an administrative decision - to outsource teaching - can influence pedagogical practices. The problem of understaffing is not necessarily always solved by outsourcing. The quotation below describes another example of how a particular administrative system dictates a pedagogical practice that has a negative effect on students' chances of success in a module. This staff member suggests that the solution may lie in alternative forms of assessment and a reversion to the semester system.

*We initially wanted to do away with exams. They disappear. We could use all sorts of innovative ways in terms of assignments, presentations, projects to facilitate learning. We submitted ... to planning, it got accepted and at the next meeting ... turning back and then exams were introduced. Then the exams were changed from the end of the semester to the end of October. They came back because the administration system couldn't handle it. But we can't have exams at the end of the term, apart from the fact that we are now convinced that pedagogically the current system is not good. We need to go back to the semester courses to give these students a fighting chance. We have full agreement on how we'd like to do it as a faculty ... These external factors to the faculty are forcing us back into the semester system. Mathematics is likened to a language and language acquisition you can't do in a semester; you need a year for that. [We plan to take it forward] through our academic planning committee - we're going back to semester courses.<sup>353</sup>*

## 5.8 ACADEMIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL SUPPORT AND A CULTURE OF LEARNING

UWC has had a rich history of academic support structures. These were dismantled into faculty-specific components plus a Writing Centre in the late 1990s. At the time of this study, students' comments about academic support ranged from 'Can't complain, everything is good - there is adequate support',<sup>354</sup> to the comment below from a student who changed his programme of study, then stopped out, and has now returned to complete the degree:

*Never spoke too much - all the lecturers they never engaged with the students. I don't even have the textbook. You have to buy it from the UK. Lecturers and consultation I never knew about that. I didn't even go to the library. I dropped out the first year. In my first-year class more than half dropped out.<sup>355</sup>*

Many students expressed concern about the lack of academic support after first-year level, stating that this affected their performance in their second year. Most lecturers agreed that the university should address this matter urgently.

*I mean it's very, very dramatic, if I can say that. You move from first year, a situation where you have two lectures and a tut every week to a situation where you have one lecture and no tut a week. The way the environment changes, it really affects you. And this other behaviour of having one lecture and one tut every fortnight is also not helpful enough.<sup>356</sup>*

*I asked [Prof. X] just last week why we don't have any academic support from second year on, and he said that we lack the finances. Now I understand that, but if we don't get academic support for our students, then we can't expect to be taking in students from educationally disadvantaged communities and have them pass in the required time. Academic support is the key. Now we are all*

<sup>353</sup> SSTA 01

<sup>354</sup> SSTU 16

<sup>355</sup> SSTU 15

<sup>356</sup> ASTU 01

*talking throughput, throughput because that is what our subsidy depends on more and more. But if we don't have proper academic support, our throughput will remain low, and then what? If you want to see returns, you have to invest.*<sup>357</sup>

A staff member cited an example of how an inefficient administrative process (tutorial venues not allocated four weeks into the seven-week term, because of timetabling clashes) negatively affected academic practices and the implementation of an institutional strategy (i.e. more tutorials) to support student success.

Students complained that the library was not conducive to either study or reading for recreational purposes. They felt it was overcrowded and noisy and that, although many staff members were very friendly and helpful, others did not make the library a welcoming space. Some said they were not always able to locate the books they required and often had to seek alternatives. In the Arts Faculty, the students who were interviewed said they spent an average of eight hours a week in the library, and mostly to find the material required to complete an assignment. Very few said they read anything beyond what was required and even fewer took out books for recreational reading. EMS students appreciated the extended library hours during examination periods. Many relied on accessing electronic databases. Students in the Science Faculty fall into two groups as regards their use of the library. The first and larger group frequents the library often to study or to do electronic searches. This group sometimes found it difficult to access prescribed materials, as indicated earlier. The second group tended to spend very little time in the library. We were puzzled by one comment in particular: 'I knew there was a library but never knew how to access the library.'

With regard to the science laboratories, the main issues mentioned were the available resources and the laboratory equipment.

*I spend most of my time in the labs. The only problem we have is about the materials we usually use because we went once to Stellenbosch University and I could see how the work was you know, most of the stuff they have there, we don't have them and some of the experiments that we're doing we need to go and store our stuff that side at the University of Stellenbosch. Why not have all that material here so we can be doing our own experiments here? And another problem is the lab is too small for all these students.*<sup>358</sup>

The computer laboratories remained a favourite place.

*Yes it affected my life in a positive way, like I basically can't complain - everything is all good. And another thing, because even other faculties there are resources, facilities like computer labs, which makes it easier for one to do assignments - that kind of thing - so I must say it's progressing.*<sup>359</sup>

*The labs are okay. I've never needed help with computers. They even have computer labs in the residences so we can access our e mail and the web as well as type our assignments till late at night.*<sup>360</sup>

Besides the computer labs, students in all three faculties mentioned a range of academic support initiatives, including mentoring programmes, tutorial systems, Foundation Year programmes, Study Groups, the

<sup>357</sup> ASTA 04

<sup>358</sup> SSTU 23

<sup>359</sup> SSTU 08

<sup>360</sup> ESTU 21

Writing Centre, the Science Faculty 'hot seats' and financial resources. Some academics suggested moving beyond providing isolated academic support services and towards a culture of learning.

*I've very, very serious issues with the lack of programmatic and concerted intervention at the level of academic planning ... at a very, very fundamental pedagogic level. Other universities have three or four contact times per week. At this university ... the academic project has been subject to a law of diminution to the extent that I cannot recognise the pedagogics. ... And what I mean by that is very simply at a quantitative level: we have one lecture a week that is programmed into the academic calendar. One lecture a week at third-year level! That's 14 hours a semester. Now basically how seriously does the institution take its academic project when that is the level at which it's operating? We've reduced the exam to one and a half hours, which presupposes a reduction in academic content, and that reduction in academic content also translates into a reduction in academic processes - the real critical stuff that we need to establish, analytical and so forth - those discursive skills, those discursive norms. So why is the throughput rate low? We have problems at that level.*<sup>361</sup>

Others related the need to develop a culture of learning to the corresponding need to enhance the culture of research on campus, requiring integrated strategies to enhance the overall intellectual environment. For example, the introduction of tutorials at second- and third-year levels should not be in isolation from other changes in the classroom, such as more contact hours with students, alternative forms of assessment, interrogating the modular system, and strategies to increase class attendance. Nor should they be introduced in isolation from other changes in the social and administrative institutional spheres in the areas of safety, transport, relationships and rules and processes for registration and financial aid. Attending to the numerous barriers to academic success may mean identifying and tackling the specific combinations of factors that affect any new intervention. Often these combinations lie in the subcultures of departments, disciplines, residences or student structures but, more importantly, the task of identifying the positive combinations requires open campus discussions initiated by students and staff.

Finally, if we combine the various examples presented in this section into a worst-case scenario, we see the student as a 'client' or 'credit hunter' in a modular regime, who is provided with a 'service' by an outsourced lecturer, who may also be a 'content lecturer' (one who marks only for content and not for language) and who interacts with students only during lectures and assesses their learning through multiple choice questions. If such a scenario should become reality, it would exemplify how a corporatist aspect of the institutional or academic culture has a negative effect on pedagogical practices in a way that impoverishes students' learning experiences. We have to hope that better practices exist in the three faculties we studied. We saw evidence that makes us optimistic, such as the criticism of the modular system, the integration of academic and social activities in the residences, the discussions of alternative assessment methods, and other strategies to critically engage students. However, as discussed earlier, these often do not take the form of open engagement, which tells us something about the modes of participation and decision making in the institutional culture.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This research project allows us to draw some limited conclusions about the relationship between the cultural politics on campus and student academic success. We can advance the idea that student success is loosely

<sup>361</sup> ASTA 11

positively correlated with the ability to build a supportive academic community. Where this occurs, students have an increased chance of negotiating the many obstacles in academic life. Our conclusions are as follows.

First, UWC student experience is characterised by diversity - of origin, campus experience and educational ambitions. Second, it is evident that UWC remains an attractive option for both students and staff for a variety of reasons, suggesting that the institution has been well served by previous students, staff, word-of-mouth, and its public and self image. Third, however, internal campus dynamics do pose a set of hurdles to students at which many fall. Many originate in the outside world, such as family financial status, which still affects a majority of students. Some are, however, internally generated. While important steps have been taken to address deficiencies in internal procedures, too many students continue to express the old frustrations with administrative functions. In addition, there seems to be a continuing intractable distance between many students and their lecturers, which, although unintentional, surely hampers the development of more efficacious teaching and learning strategies. Fourth, we saw a variety of supportive spaces on campus. But these often took the form of self-support rather than institutional support, many being informal groups developed by students themselves in residences and classroom settings. Others have developed around individual sympathetic administrative and teaching staff. These supportive atmospheres are crucial and must be expanded.

## 6.1 STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING ROADBLOCKS TO ACADEMIC COMMUNITY

We propose that equitable access and success be seen as a matter of building academic community around multi-pronged institutional strategies. This is because several intersecting arguments appear consistently in the institutional documentation, in the interview data and in previous research on student performance that explain the low throughput rates in the three faculties we studied. These are the academic underpreparedness argument, the financial factors argument, the school-university transition argument, and the institutional factors and cultures arguments. In this study, staff and student respondents provide numerous examples that show not only the effects of the combinations of student-related and institution-related factors on students' everyday academic experiences, but also the effects of various institutional combinations - for example the interactions between institutional strategies, administrative rules and processes and academic practices - on students' overall experiences.

The findings suggest that academic success may depend less on how students manage single aspects of an institutional culture in general, and more on how they negotiate the multiplier effects of the specific combinations of factors identified in the previous sections. These combinations arise from the intersection of financial and academic issues, staff workload issues, pedagogical practices, administrative rules and processes, institutional relationships and everyday interactions, and the construction of the student as a 'client' and 'credit hunter' who is merely at the receiving end of the various services provided by the university. The question relating to student success is: how can we re-imagine the academic project (with alternative conceptions of student) outside the existing script?

Our research suggests that the key to student success lies in identifying the effects of the various combinations of institutional strategies and administrative processes on academic practices and devising multi-pronged strategies, and not in conceptualising the way forward as individual initiatives for individual students. So, for example, increasing library and computer laboratory hours may require related strategies for transport, lighting, security, and weekend alternatives to The Barn. Similarly, providing more tutorials for second- and third-year students may also require related strategies for teaching and assessment methods,

student class attendance and academic support, as well as for students' non-academic experiences (such as dealing with financial and social issues and safety issues, and respecting difference). In these efforts the role of the institution is not purely mediational, but active and central.

It is also possible to interpret the findings in relation to the familiar 'pipeline' metaphor, and focus on the efficient movement of students through the academic pipeline from school to university. In this interpretation the focus is on how students negotiate the various milestones or roadblocks they encounter in various institutional spaces (academic, social, administrative) as they move through the pipeline. This is useful up to a point, but its explanatory power remains at the level of the individual: academic success is largely dependent on the ability of individual students to successfully negotiate their way through the institutional space. This interpretation equates success simply with graduation. There is nothing wrong with this; it is a sensible approach which allows state expenditure to be matched quantifiably with output. 'Dismantling roadblocks to academic community' would be a set of practices that seek to bring this kind of success closer to the grasp of the many students who have worked so hard to achieve it.

## 6.2 STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING ACADEMIC COMMUNITY

However, an additional argument can be made on the basis of the empirical findings presented in this chapter. We have argued, first, that dominant cultural constructs, as well as various intersections of cultural and material conditions, function as powerful intervening variables across the numerous factors influencing student performance and throughput. This chapter has not only explored how students negotiate their way through the university space, it has also examined how dominant cultural constructs (such as race and gender) play a part in shaping students' everyday experiences, and how these 'markers of difference' influence the attitudes and behaviours of both staff and students, and shape the dominant discourses on student access and success. Instead of emphasising students' individual negotiating strategies, it focuses broadly on the cultural politics of the university: on normal everyday practices and interactions, taken-for-granted assumptions, stereotypes, hegemonic ideas, intersections of cultural and material issues, and so on. It raises the possibility of institutional underpreparedness for dealing with the ways in which issues of democracy and difference influence the quality of academic life.

The interpretive framework of critical recognition (Fraser, 1995) enabled an explanation of student success beyond a simple factor analysis, but in terms of issues that simultaneously cut across a cultural politics of difference (class, race, gender, language, nationality, physical disability, etc.) and a distributive politics of educational resources. A crucial challenge for higher education institutions is to find a way to balance the need for statistics in order to respond the policy request to 'measure' access and success by holding on to the official apartheid labels, and the pedagogical need to question and destabilise these categories in everyday educational practices and relationships as we move beyond the confines of apartheid educational thought and practice. Students' positive and negative social experiences and their interactions with staff point to some of the cultural contradictions in university life. In this study, for example, some students explained the perceived rudeness of some staff in terms of racism, while some staff explained their manner of dealing with students in terms of fatigue due to heavy workloads or dissatisfaction with their conditions of employment, or both. There is much room for misunderstanding in the space between these divergent explanations, and these two examples suggests the need for a larger, holistic dialogue about difference, racism and change in academia, about how larger social forces are manifested on campus, and about how new academic community can be developed.

Second, in relation to two indicators of institutional culture - participation and decision making - the findings suggest that the institutional culture of UWC is a mix of patriarchal and corporatist cultures, with elements of civic culture, as there is currently not much associational life: neither in staff associations nor in student structures, clubs and societies. UWC as a participatory institution has been the formal model since the 1980s, to counter the authoritarian institutional cultures of historically black universities where students had no say in institutional affairs, but staff did through their participation in Senate and Council. The current model of participation is the 'role player' model, where each 'constituency' has a structure representing its interests. It is also the dominant model informing the notion of shared governance (between institutional elites, staff and students) in South African universities.

In contrast, a deliberative model of participation, which supports a more active associational life - indicators of which are the number of associations people join and the crisscrossing between them, and open campus debates - not only teaches us about democratic living but may be the key to shaping institutional strategies for change. Staff and students need to talk to and work with each other, intra- and inter-departmentally (even across faculties) to achieve the kinds of integrated approaches identified in this chapter.

Finally, we return to the concept of throughput. Our research suggests there may be room to reconceptualise the value that exposure to and involvement in higher education impart to students who do not necessarily graduate with undergraduate degrees in three, four or even five years. Our research clearly shows that time spent at UWC is time where students meet people they would never have met in their home communities, read books they would never have read, are helped to gaze across boundaries in ways that they would not have been able to before; in short, they are exposed to new worlds. In a social reality where many of the divisions of apartheid are still all-too-visible, the importance of this kind of learning cannot be underestimated.

Thus we think that there is a need to actively conceptualise all citizens as lifelong learners. Yes, of course students must graduate; that is the goal. But that vital percentage of undergraduate students across the system who do not graduate in five years - could there not be better, more complex and accurate ways to think about their relationship to education and learning than to label them flatly as 'failures' and 'dropouts'? On that note, we end this report with a quotation from a student which for us epitomises the wonderful promise of the UWC experience.

*... and even if, say for example, I go out of here without a degree, I will be having a degree of being able to develop other people, being able to develop a community ... it is actually one thing that UWC really did give to me and it gave that to me because I actually wanted to learn other than learning what I actually came here to do, like just study. I studied more, I actually got more information about life, so I did grow in a way.<sup>362</sup>*

<sup>362</sup> SSTU 11



## CHAPTER SIX: Towards epistemological access

The history and the contextual realities of a university influence students' academic performance. Institutional resources, cultures, internal politics, everyday academic practices and the particular ways in which universities interpret and respond to broader societal challenges combined play a role in influencing students' chances of academic success.

The similarities and differences between the case studies discussed in this book lead us to three conclusions supporting this claim. First, students enter universities from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, with a broad range of reading, writing and language skills and uneven academic preparation. How universities respond to these differences depends on how they coordinate or manage their internal and external pressures and interests across teaching, administrative and social spaces, which in turn function to either engage students or alienate them. Second, despite having to deal with uncertainties in the environment and educate a larger and more diverse student body, many of the academic practices and relationships in all three universities - such as their teaching methods, language practices, curricula, academic and financial support, student accommodation and healthcare options - have hardly changed. Third, internal debate and participation in social-academic communities around successful university programmes determines the success of interventions to improve student performance.

This chapter sets out to summarise what the case study chapters have in common and how they differ. The first section relates the overall study to the broad research on academic performance described in Chapter Two. The next two sections develop the arguments presented in the case study chapters on the basis of the comparative findings, and the final section draws out the implications of the research for educational policy and practice.

### 1. THE CHANGING CONTOURS OF THE ACCESS AND SUCCESS DEBATE

In Chapter Two we identified three approaches to the study of academic performance. The first, which we can identify as the 'numbers game' or statistical approach, measures student success in terms of a set of quantitative indicators of success such as graduation rates, progression rates and throughput rates. Such statistics are useful for monitoring trends and identifying problems within and across institutions. An example is the recent national cohort study (DoE, 2006). These studies are less helpful as explanatory frameworks. We remain, on the basis of these frameworks, unable to explain the relatively low graduation rates in South African universities. Although they can show trends (e.g. relatively low graduation rates in South African universities), they require a more nuanced qualitative analysis of the context in which these trends occur. Additionally, these frameworks do not, and indeed cannot, identify, question or challenge problematic concepts and assumptions in the research on student performance.<sup>363</sup>

A second approach - let us call it the 'methodological individualist' or 'social psychological' approach - explains academic performance on the basis of some individual attribute of the student (e.g. motivation, cognitive ability, reading or writing skills), or the individual student as a member of a certain social group

<sup>363</sup> For example, the focus on measuring quantitative indicators is unable to challenge central ideas in the research on throughput. A clear example is the notion of the 'disadvantaged student', a direct import from mainstream educational research in the United States context, which tends to locate the problem and the solution in the individual student, underscoring the extent to which other factors (e.g. institutional factors) play a role in academic performance.

such as a class, race, or gender. Such studies typically emphasise factors such as academic preparedness, learning styles, or the degree of 'fit' or correspondence between the university culture and the students' home and school culture. A third approach, which we can conveniently label the 'institutional approach', locates explanations for student performance in social and cultural processes within the institution. In this approach, which the three case studies adopted, access to higher education is seen as being specifically about students' increased participation in the social and academic processes of the institution, and about the nature of the higher education space to which access is sought. The argument is that meaningful access requires changes in institutional areas and avoids over-emphasising the mere increase in student numbers. This is by far a more complex cultural process in which meanings and historical social relationships in universities are contested and negotiated.

To explain the similar statistical trends in undergraduate student success rates across a diverse set of institutions, the empirical case studies chose to focus on students' everyday experiences; how they are shaped by institutional factors and how they influence their academic performance. Methodologically, the focus on everyday experiences opened up the investigation to aspects of institutional cultures that are evident in normal, routine academic practices and campus relationships. Following Higgins (2005), we adopted a loose working definition of 'institutional culture' as a 'keyword, an item of contested vocabulary in a conflictual and disputed social process ... [and not] as an assured or given concept, one with a definite set of identifiable contents'. Broadly, the case studies examined everyday academic practices and relationships, institutional rules and languages and taken-for-granted assumptions about hegemonic cultural constructs (e.g. 'race') as fluid and tentative descriptors of an institutional culture. This conceptual approach allowed us to explore the relationship between students' university experiences, including their academic performance, and the culture of an institution without necessarily positing a causal relationship between student success and institutional culture.

The three case studies, each of which uses a specific conceptual framework to examine students' performance, explore the relationship between students' academic and social experiences and the institutional culture of the university. Together they provide complementary lenses through which to view students' experiences in relation to the histories and cultures of the three universities. We recapture these conceptual frameworks to contextualise the discussion in this chapter and to draw out the main theoretical insights from the cases.

The Wits case study (Chapter Three) borrows Bernstein's (2000) distinction between three 'intellectual fields' to trace the process by which institutional rules are produced, reproduced and contested and the way this process enables or constrains access to the academic culture of the university. The first intellectual field is the official field, which we refer to as the official domain. It encompasses aspects that have some bearing on the shaping and reproduction of the dominant institutional culture (e.g. institutional mission, policies, rules and guidelines that regulate academic and social life on campus). The second is the pedagogic field, which we refer to as the pedagogic domain. This is the space of academic production and reproduction, where academics translate the policies and guidelines of the official field into strategies, rules and everyday teaching and curriculum practices. The relations between these intellectual domains, which are both compatible and conflicting, give rise to specific student experiences and identities. A third intellectual field, the social domain, roughly corresponds to student life, social relationships and student cultures. The interactions among these three overlapping domains of institutional life shape campus experiences and

enable or constrain epistemological access. Student success is shown to depend on the extent to which the university manages the tension between its focus on 'performance' and the social demand for 'high participation'. A successful integration between these (which we refer to as the 'hybrid model') institutionalises sustainable and continuous support that recognises that an integral aspect of the labour of lecturing is socialising students into sound academic practices.

The UP case study (Chapter Four) adopts a spatial metaphor - pedagogic distance - to capture the effects of various gaps between the student and the lecturer and between school experiences and university demands. Student performance depends on both the student's ability to navigate the various kinds of pedagogic distance (physical, linguistic, emotional, pedagogical, political), and the institution's capacity to recognise and minimise these distances through student-centred interactive teaching methods and improved support. The physical distance is that which places the student physically 'out of pedagogical reach', as in large first-year lectures or in the inaccessibility of lecturers and tutors during office hours. The linguistic distance is an effect of the inequality between students and lecturers when it comes to the language of instruction and the specialist language of the discipline. The emotional distance lies in the uncertain relevance of the subject matter to the individual students. The pedagogical distance results from specific teaching approaches, learning resources and the broad university environment. The political distance is in the differential power dynamics around the curriculum content, pedagogical relationships and the relationships among students.

Drawing on critical cultural approaches in education, the UWC case study (Chapter Five) explores the relationship between the cultural politics on campus and student academic success.<sup>364</sup> It examines the effects of two types of internal contestations in students' experiences: first, conflicts around institutional strategies, teaching practices and administrative rules and processes and, second, the campus politics around dominant cultural constructs (e.g. gender; race/ethnicity) which structure hierarchical university relationships and inform assumptions of academic superiority and inferiority. These contestations partly define the university subcultures and directly or indirectly influence students' everyday experiences. Some are due to the enduring material and cultural effects of apartheid academic planning on everyday university practices; others the result of current internal university relationships. Student academic success is seen as a matter of building academic community around comprehensive, multi-pronged and integrated institutional strategies that positively influence students' chances of coping with the obstacles in academic life.

Although each university in our study represents a different institutional type, with a different culture, a different history and different material resources, we contend that a tentative explanation for students' similar experiences across this diverse set of institutions can partly be found in similar experience of and response to uncertainty and change. Each is a fast-growing urban university with a strong sense of identity. As apartheid-era institutions, all three face numerous uncertainties as they seek to transform the colonial logic internalised in their historical enrolment patterns, teaching methods, staff profiles, curriculum hierarchies, institutional cultures and resources. All three also face common challenges from the broader context of South Africa as an emerging democracy entering an unequal global economy, and stratified internally by increasing economic inequalities and deep social and ideological divisions inherited from apartheid. The higher education context is characterised by conflicting policy imperatives of historical

<sup>364</sup> Critical cultural approaches have extended the range of issues traditionally covered by critical pedagogy to include a conception of education as a form of cultural politics, a view of educators as cultural workers and an understanding of educational institutions as sites of contestation. The chapter draws on the work of Freire (1985), Fraser (1995) and Giroux & Shannon (1997).

redress, economic growth and democratic citizenship. On the one hand, the demands for economic productivity foreground a neoliberal approach to change, at the centre of which is the emphasis on skills training, quality of academic throughput and individual economic mobility. On the other, the notion of education as a public good foregrounds the challenges of historical redress (including increased access and academic support) and emphasises an education that is relevant to building society as a whole by developing critical intellectuals and engaged citizens (Reddy, 2004). These tensions present each university with common contextual challenges of how to re-position itself in the contemporary higher education environment, and in terms of the movement of students, the institutional environments, resource constraints, and so on. How do universities deal with these challenges and what effect do they have on students' everyday experiences, their academic performance and the way they negotiate their university environment?

The particular ways in which a university manages these challenges create the possibility of particular social and cultural practices that influence (positively or negatively) the pedagogic distance it creates for students. In order to elucidate this, the next section uses the distinction between the official, pedagogic and social domains as an important lens through which to view the institutional factors that cause pedagogic distance.

## 2. CREATING THE POSSIBILITY OF PARTICULAR PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES

The multiple dimensions of pedagogic distance become visible in the ways administrative decisions affect the social spheres of university life and in how the institution deals with the challenges of socialising students for rigorous academic study. However, it becomes visible differently in the three case studies. For example, in the UP case pedagogic distance can be seen in the language practices across the official and pedagogic fields. In the UWC case it is visible in the dilemmas of the modular system, driven by the official field. In the Wits case pedagogic distance can be seen in the conflicting logics of performance and competence driven pedagogical models. In what follows we summarise the main issues which this study identified and will show how the interactions between these overlapping domains create the possibility of particular teaching and social practices that influence, in positive or negative ways, students' academic experiences, and ultimately their academic performance.

### 2.1 THE OFFICIAL DOMAIN

The intersections between national and institutional policies give rise to strategies, administrative rules and practices which compose the official field, and which directly influence students' academic lives. Two problems mentioned in the case studies - inadequate access to financial resources and to information and academic counselling - will illustrate this point.

We found little evidence of institutional safety nets to counter student poverty or the negative effects of hostile policies (e.g. the decrease in state funding, the increase in tuition fees, the dominance of loan-based options), particularly for students from working class families.<sup>365</sup> Students generally find the financial support inadequate and the fee policies and financial exclusions unfair. While none of the case study institutions have explicit policies on financial exclusions, students described the ways in which financial issues around tuition fees, accommodation, student work-study options, the available financial aid strategies and options and the ways they are organised influence their academic work in negative ways. Many students

<sup>365</sup> The variety of options for financial aid in the three universities range from loans, bursaries, work-study options and rebates on fees to scholarships offered by the institution or by various companies for specific fields of study. Loan-based financial aid options are dominant. Most are based on financial need and/or academic achievement. Others are the result of deliberate company initiatives (e.g. in engineering or business fields) or as employment benefits for university staff, including fee rebates allowing their children to study.

who work while studying, some for more than ten to 20 hours a week, often do so to pay their fees, to meet their living expenses and to send money home. Many have difficulty balancing formal work obligations with their academic and social lives - this was especially evident in the UWC and Wits case studies. For many students, the loans and bursaries administered by the universities on behalf of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) are insufficient to cover the costs of tuition, books, accommodation and everyday living expenses. The mismatch between the rules and procedures of NSFAS and those of the universities further complicates students' lives.<sup>366</sup>

Access to information is a critical variable in students' ability to 'navigate their way' through the university, yet many students are not well informed about how to apply or about what their study options are. Inadequate academic and financial counselling often begins at school. Once students enter the university, they deal with academic and administrative offices to sort out their curriculum choices, accommodation, tuition fees, books, transport, and other responsibilities. Across the case studies, students complained that academic staff members are often not available to advise them on subject choices during registration periods. In the absence of appropriate guidance, and hampered by the material difficulties they need to surmount, students sometimes make relatively uninformed and whimsical curriculum subject choices.

Both these problems indicate a sharp separation between the official and pedagogic domains of campus life. This separation reflects the intersections between institutional practices, dominant globalisation discourses of fiscal constraint and SA national policies supporting decreased public spending on core social services. The radical break between the domains contributes to increasing the pedagogic distance and suggests a closer relationship between academic counselling, the distribution of material resources and academic performance that requires a more nuanced examination.

## 2.2 THE PEDAGOGIC DOMAIN

Pedagogic distance is a function of the specific ways in which institutions respond to the internal and external challenges of preparing students for rigorous academic study. The case studies provide numerous examples of how the medium of communication and the form (more or less explicit in which pedagogical strategies, rules and curriculum practices are communicated shape the social relations of learning, and as a result either marginalise or strongly ground students in their chosen field of study. We cite two examples to illustrate this point: students' experiences of language policies and their struggle to understand academic expectations.

In discussing these examples we add to the theory of pedagogic distance that this section develops by considering student success in terms of what institutions see as the 'responsibility of the student' and 'the responsibility of the institution'. The pedagogic modes of the three institutions apportion these responsibilities differently. In the Wits case, the dominant pedagogic mode of the institution privileges the role of the individual student and thereby minimises its own role in the overall pedagogical programme. By emphasising the student as the main actor in the process (as independent, autonomous, needing little support, etc.) it neglects its own role. In contrast, the dominant pedagogical mode at UWC privileges institutional responsibility. There is much more academic support, but this is often uncoordinated and there is a distinct separation between the academic and non-academic spheres of support. So pedagogic distance is still present even in a context where an institution provides support. The UP case is somewhere in

<sup>366</sup> For example, the timing of the upfront payments students are required to make towards their fees often means that many have to borrow money to meet this requirement, immediately disadvantaging those who are unable to do so. The NSFAS loans and bursaries range from R2,000 to R32,000

between. The contradictions of implementing its dual language policy have resulted in widespread changes to practices that created additional problems.

While language issues feature strongly across the cases in this study, the linguistic distance at UP emerges as a function of its unique institutional history. At UP, the language practices in class and in the administrative offices frustrate both students and staff. Its dual language policy works through 'code switching', or a mix of English and Afrikaans, in a variety of ways. Many students find this difficult to deal with, declaring that it increases the volume of their work ('I must study double now'). Learning in a second language is difficult and can be alienating for both students and staff. Increased academic workloads result from grappling with the specialised language of the discipline and the numerous language combinations in lectures and learning materials. Students whose first language is Afrikaans find the policy dishonest and unfair. Lecturers whose first language is not English struggle to express complex ideas in English. Outside the classroom, students' interactions with administrative staff are further complicated by language differences in cases where staff and students communicate in their second or third language. At UWC and Wits, where English is the formal language of instruction, students do not experience the academic workload in the same way. In these cases, some students feel that lecturers who emphasise English language proficiency over disciplinary knowledge implicitly hold a deficit-model view of English second language speakers. Students feel that lecturers often do not try to decipher what they say or mean. While we accept the crucial necessity for academic precision, these perceptions do raise questions about judging intellectual rigour and cognitive ability solely on proficiency in the English language.

Academic staff in all three universities complained that many students (even third-year students) are unable to express themselves in an academic manner - they are unable to search for material, to synthesise information, or to write a well structured essay with a clear line of argument and good referencing techniques. Some relate this to the limitations of teaching approaches in undergraduate education, but many attribute it to the gap between school and university, referring particularly to weak numeracy and literacy skills and the type of high school students have attended. This is consistent with a common view which emerges in South Africa that schools do not prepare students for rigorous academic work. Our data are not wholly consistent with this view. For example, many students at UP with excellent matriculation results (high M scores) coming from well-resourced ex-Model C schools do not necessarily graduate on time, as is shown in Chapter Four.

The explanation for this apparent interruption of the dominant meaning of 'underprepared student' in South African educational research may lie in another significant finding of this study. Most students, irrespective of the type of high school they attended, experience problems in negotiating the general campus environment, the intensity, fast pace and volume of work they are required to cover, and particularly the independence that the new study habits require them to exhibit. Describing the ways in which their school environments are different from their university environment, students note the lack of explicit supervision of behaviour (e.g. class attendance and study times), the tacit rather than explicit communication of pedagogical criteria (e.g. rules of assessment and criteria for what counts as academic practice), and the minimal advice on coping with the demands of academic work. In addition, academic cultures underpinned by middle class norms remain hidden from students who are not from these backgrounds. These differences make university study challenging for many students, irrespective of their high school backgrounds. They feel under pressure to perform but struggle to balance their work, social life and study obligations. They are expected to be responsible, independent and to take the initiative, but many

are frustrated by their failure to grasp the 'rules' and assessment criteria (which often differ by lecturer), and often do not know what is expected of them.

Students for whom physical access to high school has not translated into epistemological access for a variety of reasons will experience a double gap. A student who is academically underprepared and who faces language challenges as well as financial difficulties must deal with a range of additional issues. This dilemma, as Wolpe noted (1995), should be viewed as a structural and systematic issue of poor schooling and deliberate apartheid planning, and therefore may require larger-scale interventions than relying on bridging-type interventions favouring small groups of students.

### 2.3 THE SOCIAL DOMAIN

The social domain can be understood as cutting across the campus informal social spaces and the official and pedagogic domains, which can therefore be conceived as social domains of practice. As such, they are partly characterised by a mingling of old and new relationships and practices. As South African institutions re-position themselves in the post-1994 period, historical institutional narratives interact with new post-apartheid identities and actors within institutions invariably act within that repositioning. Old divisions and relations of domination often persist in the face of new policies and different challenges, leading to both contradictory practices and familiar anxieties, as illustrated in the two examples discussed in this section: the campus cultural politics and student agency.

#### **Institutional cultures ... and cultural politics**

The relationship between academic success and institutional culture is complex. Our data indicate that while institutional cultures influence the overall quality of the academic experience, they may or may not directly influence academic performance. Factors associated with institutional cultures, including the role of dominant cultural constructs, act as intervening variables across the official, pedagogic and social domains.

The case studies illustrate how dominant cultural constructs such as class, race, gender, sexual orientation and language shape campus social relationships. These constructs influence behaviours, attitudes, taken-for-granted assumptions and everyday experiences. They are institutionalised in access and success patterns, staff profiles, curricula, university structures and the dominant discourses on access and success. Lecturers describe students in a dichotomous language that construes the 'non-traditional, underprepared and disadvantaged student' as the academic 'other' of the 'traditional, well-prepared and advantaged student' in terms of these cultural constructs. All three case studies describe university spaces characterised by racist, sexist, xenophobic, and hetero-patriarchal norms and practices which partly define the institutional cultures. The spaces of tension cut across everyday interactions and university structures in a range of campus spaces, from lecture rooms and administrative offices to residences, student structures and social events. Despite most students saying they enjoy the diversity of the campus environments, we found persisting patterns of ethnic interactions in students' informal interactions. This may be related to the re-emergence of ethnic paradigms since the 1990s. When it comes to academic success, at Wits and UP, graduation rates differ by race and gender.<sup>367</sup> Students reported negative perceptions, low expectations, or disrespectful behaviour on the part of staff. In extreme cases students interpret failure patterns, staffing imbalances and the university financial aid strategy as instances of institutional racism. In the UWC case, student and staff explanations for the rude behaviour of staff differed. Students ascribed racist motives

<sup>367</sup> No statistics were available for the UWC case study.

to staff, while staff members attributed their behaviour to their frustrations over their workload or to language issues. The potential for misunderstanding in the ambiguous space between these divergent explanations is high.

The emergence of managerial-driven academic practices does not contribute to institutional cultures in which trust, support and rigorous scholarship thrive together. The permeation of a market logic into academic cultures may indicate shared aspects of institutional cultures in the three universities: the changing language of higher education and new university practices reflect the dominant performance-driven efficiency paradigm. Examples include a view of education as a 'service' or commodity to be traded and a new language to describe students as 'clients', 'credit hunters' and 'human resources'. Official institutional documents reflect a language of institutional change dominated by policy processes, mechanisms, guidelines and strategies that eclipses the sociality of change. New practices include the outsourcing of teaching and other core university functions, and the introduction of corporate management structures, line functions and business units, and so on.

These issues point to the need for a larger national debate about culture, difference and the distribution of material resources in higher education. They also illustrate the limitations of strategies that rely solely on new policy processes to effectively change dominating practices. Clear examples include the contradictions around the implementation of the dual-language policy at UP, the policy on sexual and racial discrimination at Wits, and the sexual harassment policy at UWC. Despite new policies being put in place, in some cases the contradictions of implementation leave old practices firmly entrenched. In other cases the widespread changes to practice create additional problems, as in the complex implementation of the UP language policy, which plays a significant role in access to knowledge. These tensions illustrate negative interactions with the policy processes of the official domain. The examples in the next section show how the academic-social networks being built across the official and pedagogic domains, when conceived as subsets of the social domain, not only reproduce inherited patterns but can also interrupt and unsettle old practices and hierarchies.

### **Student agency**

The campus social space in the three universities is partly defined by student and staff agency outside of formal academic programmes, in academic-social networks and in student clubs and societies. Many of these activities link social and academic spaces.<sup>368</sup> They include study groups, mentoring relationships, disciplinary networks across academic departments and numerous student-staff networks in campus clubs and societies and in residences. Residence culture is important for socialising students into the campus environment; in the UP case it includes black staff members and student leaders playing a central role in transforming residence cultures. Across the three universities, third-year students' reflections on their experiences from their first year of study onwards highlight the things that helped them cope with university life. Examples at the three universities include support networks in residences, in specific departments and in student clubs and societies. These represent spaces for civic engagement among students and may be the catalysts for more integrated solutions to counter the isolation many students experience, especially at the first-year level. However, as social networks they reflect but also challenge old relationships and hierarchies by representing spaces for getting to know the other through new shared academic and social identities.

<sup>368</sup> Tinto (1993) argues on the basis of empirical studies in the US that increasing the opportunities for social and academic integration is a key factor in student success. However, he does not theorise issues of history and culture in relation to the meanings of integration.



The historical context of the social domains of the three universities provides a way to understand how student agency in contemporary university environments is shaped by historical networks and relationships. The history of university sports clubs is an interesting social phenomenon in this regard; it shows how the various networks around sports clubs at the three universities partly define student cultures in relation to different campus and off-campus communities. These relationships function to both sharpen and blur the boundaries between universities. The example of the 'rugby club' at each institution illustrates this point. UP's Tukkies Rugby Club was formed in the early 1900s and is currently one of the largest university rugby clubs internationally. It is also currently part of a national network of Afrikaans-language universities and is a feeder club for the Blue Bulls team and the South African national team. Similarly, the Wits Rugby Club was formed in 1909 and is part of a rugby network inside the university (the interfaculty leagues), with outside teams (the Golden Lions, a South African national team) and across universities in South Africa (the intervarsity leagues, including the University of Cape Town and Rhodes) and outside (Oxford, Cambridge and Imperial College in the UK).<sup>369</sup> In contrast, the UWC Rugby Club was formed in 1965 and joined the South African Council on Sport (SACOS)-affiliated South African Rugby Union (SARU) at the beginning of the SACOS campaign against 'playing normal sport in an abnormal society'.<sup>370</sup> Currently the activities of the rugby club, as with many other UWC sports clubs, remain to a large extent separate from those of the historically white universities in the Western Cape region.

University sports club can be seen as a reflection of institutional cultures and student cultures splintered across multiple dimensions. This point is aptly captured in Mager's (2008) study of the intervarsity rugby tradition between the University of Cape Town and Stellenbosch University, a long-standing friendly sports rivalry between men in the two universities. She describes the intervarsity as a site for the active construction of masculinities around whiteness, patriarchal relationships and institutional and national politics and it is enacted in high school rugby traditions, family traditions, university sports clubs and residence life. This example shows how the social domain contributes to the construction of higher education 'as a masculinist process' (Barnes, 2007: 17). The next example shows the social construction of universities as racialised spaces as a result of deliberate apartheid planning.

Historically, campus social spaces were shaped and formally regulated by the official domain, which spearheaded institutional compliance with apartheid policies. The clearest example lies in the ethnically defined enrolment patterns in compliance with apartheid laws. The Afrikaans-language universities, including UP, did not enrol black students prior to the late 1970s. The English-language universities supported limited formal access to black students within the constraints of apartheid policies.<sup>371</sup> For example, the Wits official policy of 'academic non-segregation' effectively barred black students from participating in social, cultural and sporting activities on campus (Badat, 1999: 49). This policy made black students invisible outside formal academic spaces. As Nkomo (1984: 37) suggests, 'the openness of the English-medium universities is qualified because although they admitted blacks, they practised segregation in all extra-curricular activities except tuition'. In the UWC case, not unlike other historically black universities in South Africa, the university was characterised by a predominantly white academic staff and bureaucratic administrative and governance structures that were intolerant of student agency in the 1960s and 1970s (Gwala, 1988; Badat, 1999). Unsurprisingly, the history of student politics at UWC reflects a

<sup>369</sup> This information was obtained from the official websites of UP and Wits.

<sup>370</sup> This broad anti-apartheid campaign motivated the boycott of campus non-academic activities (including social, sports and cultural activities and university graduation ceremonies) at historically black universities.

<sup>371</sup> Black students were officially allowed to register only in certain fields of study after 1959, with ministerial permission. However, even tuition was sometimes segregated as black students at Wits were prohibited from participating in some academic activities, for example, laboratory work involving white cadavers.

student culture of resistance to official educational processes evident at historically black universities since the late 1960s (Nkomo, 1984). Key in this is that students had no autonomous university structure through which to communicate their grievances about university rules and conditions (e.g. upfront payment of tuition fees, authoritarian campus cultures, dress code) or about the broader socioeconomic and political contexts until the early 1980s (Maseko, 1994).<sup>372</sup> In this case, a civic culture developed largely through a history of student organisations ideologically linked to political organisations in the broad liberation movement.

In recent years, even though the contestations among student political organisations continue to reflect the ideological tensions in national politics, we have witnessed a general decline in the frequency of student-led open campus debates about the nature and direction of broad social and educational change. Post-1994 education policies have influenced the change in the culture of student organisations. From resistance and protest, particularly at historically black universities, the culture of student agency has changed to participation in institutional governance structures. It has also taken the form of social engagement in the broader recreational, social and cultural dimensions of campus life. At the same time, the notion of 'shared governance' in South African universities remains ambiguous. Strategies to address these ambiguities in the changing higher education context are not yet informed by detailed historical studies of student agency.

Finally, university responses to the challenges identified in this section include curriculum interventions favouring foundation programmes and extended curricula, numerous academic support initiatives (e.g. writing centres, computer laboratories, tutoring, mentoring), staff development programmes and creative teaching approaches at each institution, including examples of the individual caring staff member who goes the extra mile. However, these tend to be isolated and uncoordinated. In addition, the three universities fail to address staff and student concerns about financial issues, accommodation options, residence issues, violence on campus, health insurance, transport issues, and so on. Addressing these concerns requires the articulation of strategies across different administrative, academic and social support functions (for example, increasing library hours means improving campus security, lighting and transport facilities), typically ignored in apartheid physical planning, particularly in the case of UWC.

More specifically in terms of addressing pedagogic distance, the study did not find systematic, comprehensive and integrated institutional strategies for improving student success. The organisation of pedagogical provision falls between two extreme positions. Minimalist student-staff relationships and poor teaching practices dominate one end of the pedagogical spectrum. The prevalent mode here is the teaching of large numbers of students with fewer resources in a fast-paced modular regime and in the context of managerialist decision-making styles; key trends in South African universities since the 1990s. Unsurprisingly, many academic staff feel that teaching time is not well organised (for example, there is too little contact time and modules are too short in duration). Also typical is the feeling that they are overworked to breaking point bogged down with administrative tasks and receive little credit for innovative teaching as university reward systems still privilege research output over undergraduate teaching. Negative expectations, Europe-centred curricula, absenteeism among students and staff, and minimal engagement with lecturers during office hours are some of the manifestations of this end of the spectrum.<sup>373</sup> At the other end we

<sup>372</sup> The first fully autonomous Student Representative Council (SRC) was officially recognised by the university administration in 1981.

<sup>373</sup> It is possible that staff absenteeism may be related to the outsourcing of teaching, as an administrative decision, especially in professional and business-related fields of study. Outsourced lecturers are faculty members who have full-time jobs elsewhere and are employed as part-time lecturers on short-term contracts. An immediate effect of this strategy is the limited availability of lecturers for consultation with students and other routine department activities.

found pockets of creative teaching, approaches emphasising critical intellectual engagement, and a range of staff-student social interactions within and outside of formal academic spaces. We found examples of academic communities developing around mentoring programmes in residences, or around the activities of some extended degree programmes. These include creative teaching strategies to engage students with the content and methods of the discipline, the coordination of lectures and tutorials, the routine monitoring of students' progress, and curriculum transformation projects. The innovative teaching approaches around established academic communities in each institution may be a key to informing integrated institutional interventions to enhance academic performance.

In sum, the intersections between the official, pedagogic and social domains create the possibility of particular practices. Negative interactions result in poor teaching practices and increase the pedagogic distance. Examples include the overload caused by the dual language policy, the separation between academic and non-academic support, pedagogical choices being determined by administrative needs, and the outsourcing of teaching. The positive intersections between these three domains are a key to enhancing campus experiences and improving students' success rates. Examples include the emerging academic networks around strong programmes, social-academic support networks such as mentoring groups in residences, and student-led initiatives in a variety of student academic and social societies.

However, we have also shown that many of the above issues present material and cultural challenges. The next section will show that the ways in which universities deal with both types of challenges make a difference in the overall quality of the academic experience.

### **3. PEDAGOGIC DISTANCE AND FRAMEWORKS FOR ACCESS**

Many of the issues influencing student performance encompass material and cultural dimensions, as explained in the previous section. On the one hand, the intersections between the dominant neoliberal policy context, national funding patterns and institutional strategies have a problematic impact on academic cultures in several ways. Unequal institutional resources and the dominance of loan-based financial support strategies, in the context of increasing economic inequalities and decreased public spending on higher education, constrain for many students the possibility of free and open access to higher education. On the other hand, issues arising from an intolerance of 'difference' in wider society are strongly visible in the cultural politics of the three universities. These tensions reflect colonial continuities. They persist in 'the subtext of the organisational life' even as institutions seek to transform. Uninterrupted by new policies, they continue to define universities as hierarchical social spaces that are racialised, classed, heterosexual and gendered. Frameworks for access and success should recognise the effects of these historical continuities in different university spaces and in institutional cultures. This suggests that solutions to these problems require institutional frameworks that address both the material and the cultural dimensions of students' lives. How should universities respond to the neoliberal influences and to apartheid's continuities in institutional cultures and practices? What new script for higher education do these intersections inscribe? Conversely, what role do universities play in spurring change in the outside contexts?

In this regard, the differing liberal and critical approaches to culture and identity imply different frameworks for access to higher education. In this section we consider the implications of critical cultural frameworks for informing alternative modes of engagement in university social and teaching spaces.

### 3.1 LIBERAL AND CRITICAL PARADIGMS

As explained in Chapter Two, mainstream multicultural frameworks theorise access and academic performance in relation to the individual student as a member of a specific group, such as a particular class, race or gender, with the particular group often being defined in stable essentialist terms. Liberal frameworks view access in terms of the assimilation of students from historically excluded groups into existing institutions. They privilege the factors that influence students' integration into the traditional university structures without questioning the politics of knowledge around inherited categories (e.g. race) or the hetero-patriarchal and middle class norms pervading academic cultures. By adopting an uncritical stance towards 'diversity' and 'culture' such approaches place the onus for change on the student, with universities making some surface-level changes to accommodate the diverse newcomers within the existing institutional status quo. The integrationist paradigm does not speak to societies and institutions undergoing transformation, yet this framework largely defines the dominant discourse on student access and success in South African universities.

Critical frameworks, in contrast, present a way to understand subjective experiences by thinking about institutional actors outside of being unitary essences or stable 'nuggets of authenticity' (Appiah, 1992). This move suggests that we think about identity as being constructed in networks of power, and that we view the individual social actor (the student, the staff member) 'as an ensemble of multiply organised subjectivities' (Mouffe, 1992) that are simultaneously racialised, classed, gendered, sexual, national and contradictory. The focus on multiple subject positions is able to capture the different relations of domination and resistance that an individual can be caught up in at any one time (e.g. race and class and gender). Conceptually, critical frameworks are therefore more useful for addressing institutionalised forms of domination and exclusion, such as racism or patriarchy, and for understanding how these forms become embedded in the fabric of institutions - and, as we have shown in this study, across the official, pedagogic and social domains - as part of the institutional cultures. They draw attention to the ways in which institutional factors such as resources, dominant teaching approaches, everyday relationships, curricula and normal university rules and processes can function to either engage students or exclude them and leave historical inequalities unchallenged. In this way, critical cultural theories pay simultaneous attention to issues of unequal material distribution and to the recognition of difference beyond its liberal application. A good example of this approach is Fraser's (1995: 69) critical theory of recognition which 'identifies and defends only those versions of the cultural politics of difference that can be coherently combined with the social politics of equality'.<sup>374</sup> Paying attention to both types of issues, according to Fraser, requires redistributive strategies that restructure the frameworks that generate economic inequalities and deconstructive approaches to destabilise the group identities themselves.

These distinctions are useful for analysing academic experiences and have implications for educational theory, methodology and practice. Critical cultural approaches provide the conceptual tools for analysing these experiences without divorcing issues of class from issues of race, gender and other categories of difference.<sup>375</sup> Practically, this means not separating out the recognition of difference from the distribution of material resources in university contexts. How we conceive of issues of redistribution and notions of 'race' or 'non-traditional student' or 'citizen' will influence how we design programmes of redress (or student

<sup>374</sup> A sole focus on material resources may lead to economic reductionist analyses, while attention to only cultural issues may lead to an apolitical identity politics that asks 'Who am I?' instead of 'What is to be done?' (Patai: 1991).

<sup>375</sup> This suggests drawing on the analytical constructs of neo-Marxist political economy approaches in South African educational research, and balancing their economic reductionism and functionalism with critical cultural approaches. See Cross (1992: 24-33) for an overview of the political economy tradition dominant in the 1970s and 1980s South African educational research.

support, academic development, and so on) and the research questions we formulate around such interventions. A practical dilemma then emerges. The need to measure educational redress statistically in access and success patterns, a task of the official domain, requires that we hold on to the old apartheid racial categories, at least in the short term. However, the case study findings suggest that we problematise these categories in the social and pedagogic domains. While it is not clear how we can simultaneously embrace and deconstruct the apartheid racial categories, universities must engage with this problem.

### 3.2 ENGAGING WITH CONTESTATIONS IN SOCIAL AND TEACHING SPACES

The two examples in this section - on building academic-social community and on the meanings of epistemological access - suggest forms of engagement that recognise the official and pedagogic domains not only as social spaces of academic production and reproduction but also of contestation and resistance.

As networks of civic engagement, social-academic networks and student clubs and societies are the building blocks of inclusive, open and democratic institutional cultures, and are a key to a strong associational campus life. They represent Walzer's (1992) small associations to which we belong where we learn about participation, responsibility and accountability as democratic citizens. They privilege other shared identities (debating society identity, study group identity, soccer club identity, Tai Chi club identity, drama group identity, disciplinary identity, campus identity, residence identity, reading group identity, research group identity, etc.) in tension with, yet slightly outside of, inherited scripts. On the one hand, they reflect broader societal tensions. The relationships among students and between students and staff in the case studies reflect dominant social trends ranging from ethnic interactions to the violence of racism, sexism, homophobia and xenophobia in the university environment. If not mediated and supported by the university, these social-academic networks and student clubs and societies can be divisive and provoke violent incidents, given that this is a highly fragmented society at many levels.

On the other hand, they represent spaces for people to relate to each other outside of the tight class/ethnic/racial/sexual/national scripting of students and staff currently dominant in the universities examined in the three case studies, through different shared identities as members of different networks. Without ignoring the power dynamics within any 'community' in general, we suggest that such social-academic networks do have the potential to break old patterns of communication, disrupt traditional hierarchies and undermine the dominant signifying field that continues to privilege race and ethnicity, for example. In short, they are the seeds to develop academic community around new traditions that cut across historical divisions and that question the inherited identity categories. If well mediated and supported by the institution, these networks can be assets to empower students on campus.<sup>376</sup> They can add a vibrant cultural dimension to the life of a campus, foster intellectual engagement and enrich academic life in general.

Similarly, the political dimensions of pedagogic distance are starkly visible in the classroom context, where both curriculum and pedagogy can be viewed as sites of contestation over access to knowledge. At one level, epistemological access (Morrow, 1993) is about ensuring participation in and across the disciplines, and engaging with the concepts, debates and methods of the field of study. The case studies have shown how the organisational relationships within universities help determine whether undergraduate students achieve this kind of engagement. They point to practices that enable and others that constrain such engagement. But access to knowledge is also about being able to engage in the contestations around disciplinary

<sup>376</sup> See, for example, Cross & Johnson (2008) on the development of institutional mediation strategies for student initiatives.

knowledge, not only in terms of the physical exclusions (i.e. bodies) but also in relation to epistemological exclusions. The exclusion of subaltern knowledges and languages from university curricula occurred as part of the same historical processes that shaped the growth of disciplinary knowledge, determined patterns of inclusion and exclusion and defined academic cultures and pedagogical relationships. A growing body of research across national contexts traces these exclusions to the hierarchical dualisms in European Enlightenment thought.<sup>377</sup> These dualisms have shaped the categories of knowledge and the growth of the disciplines in the modern university around the elevated status of 'European man' - rational, white, heterosexual, scientific - as the universal human subject of history against whom all 'others' (colonised people, women) are seen to be incomplete variations.

While this project did not focus on curriculum transformation, critical frameworks for access suggest that if access is to mean more than merely putting more bodies into existing institutions, then frameworks for access should consider the role of the inherited dualisms in shaping university curricula. Understanding how they work can inform teaching approaches that engage with the contestations around knowledge in the classroom context. In other words, the recognition of curriculum as a form of representation and a site of contestation can inform pedagogical models that engage with (sometimes interrupting, other times destabilising or re-situating) the knowledges and contradictory identities of students and lecturers in the teaching/learning context. Examples include border pedagogies or post-conflict pedagogies that recognise how individual stories and identities - our 'bitter knowledge' and the 'dangerous memories' - are part of larger historical narratives of power and privilege.<sup>378</sup>

In these tasks, and without ignoring student-related factors, we suggest that the responsibility for facilitating epistemological access for all students depends on how universities engage with these challenges. Expanding formal access in ways that guarantee epistemological access - a decisive factor and a necessary condition for enhancing students' academic performance - requires substantive changes within and at the intersections of the official, pedagogic and social domains. The multiple dimensions of pedagogic distance may be viewed as effects of these intersections.

#### 4. CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

It is impossible to improve throughput in undergraduate education without greater selectivity being applied in the decisions about which students to admit to higher education in the first place. This does not mean crude exclusionary policies but it does mean greater precision in choosing those more likely to succeed in higher education, and may include rigorous preparation at pre-university colleges. The notion that universities can simply wait for students from historically excluded groups to 'show up' is not enough; it is important to build long-term relationships with partnership schools to prepare targeted high school learners in advance for the rigours of university education. It is a step towards an open access model that, short of dropping all selection criteria, supports bridging institutions and a broad range of tertiary study options.

The analysis of the three case studies leads us to conclude that once students enter universities the organisational dynamics of universities across teaching, administrative and social spaces make a difference in strategies to enhance academic performance and improve success rates. This study suggests the following elements of practice need to be addressed.

<sup>377</sup> Many of these studies are inspired by Foucault's (1974; 1980) theory of power and Said's (1978) study of Europe's construction of its colonial other. See, for example, Young (1990), Hall (1992) and Smith (1999).

<sup>378</sup> See Jansen (2008), *Knowledge in the blood: How white students remember and enact the past*, especially Chapter 10, on the contours of a post-conflict pedagogy. See also Mkatshwa on dangerous memories, cited in Brock-Utne (2000).

First, universities must ensure that the organisation, planning and delivery of teaching is systematic, accessible, predictable and well-communicated, to at least ensure that these factors do not become an additional hindrance to undergraduate learning.

Second, the provision of comprehensive, predictable and sustained resources to support academic development interventions has a direct impact on the chances of overcoming the huge distance between high school preparation and university success. Resource interventions that empower universities to address institutional resource constraints are required. For individual students, these may take the form of direct or indirect redistribution strategies that open up the possibility of free higher education through alternative arrangements (e.g. tuition waivers, tax rebates on university fees, fees on a sliding scale, extending financial aid to cover the total costs of study, including books, accommodation, healthcare coverage and living expenses).

Third, the twin challenge of academic language and language of instruction (English) remains one of the most significant barriers to success and one which universities must address in a systematic and sustained manner.

Fourth, student support for academic progress will remain fragmented and ineffective unless such support is institutionalised within the full range of services (teaching, curriculum development, assessment design, student administration, student accommodation, campus planning, etc.) provided to all students.

Fifth, it is important that universities take time to teach students about, and make explicit, the often hidden rules and routines of academic and social engagement within university environments.

Finally, the preparation of university teachers for teaching in diverse and changing higher education contexts should no longer be optional; it is crucial to the success of undergraduate students. Knowing how to teach in ways that engage, challenge and transform undergraduate student learning is a complex task for which university teachers must be specifically prepared. Changing the attitudes of university teachers, especially towards students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, is an important task that will have an impact on the orientation and success of undergraduates.

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Persekorpark  
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South Africa*

*Tel: +27 12 349 3936  
Fax: +27 12 349 3928*

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