

SPATIALITIES OF WIDENING PARTICIPATION: NARRATIVES OF FIRST YEAR STUDENTS RECEIVING FINANCIAL AID

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ABSTRACT

The National Student Financial Aid Scheme Act of 1999 led to the establishment of a national financial aid scheme which aimed to redress past inequities and to ensure representativity and equal access for those historically excluded from accessing higher education (Republic of South Africa 1999). A significant body of research on legislation and policy on widening participation in South African higher education exists. This article aims to contribute to the body of knowledge on widening participation by drawing on a recent study which aimed to investigate the higher educational experiences of students from low socio-economic backgrounds. The purpose of the study was to gain insight on the spatialities of widening participation as experienced by students receiving financial aid from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). This was achieved by exploring their experiences of access to and participation at one university in KwaZulu-Natal, a province with a large rural population. To this end, the study sought to investigate the educational geographies of participation and success through narrative inquiry. The study identified both academic and non-academic factors that influence students' access to the curriculum and participation in higher education.

Keywords: equity, higher education, access, widening participation, social inequality, youth geographies, Geographies of Education

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

I am the first one to go to university in my family so I will use this opportunity to better myself, family and community because I want to change my background. For me, I have always wanted to go to varsity because varsity will help me to take care of my granny who paid for my registration fee. (Sabelo).

I had to go to university because I have never known my father and my mother died many years ago. I am now living with my granny who I have to take care of and a university degree will help me to do just that. (Nana).

Sabelo and Nana's narratives above are not uncommon ones, where youth from impoverished communities aspire to go to university because they believe it will give them a chance at a better life and it will provide them with the means to transform the impoverished communities from which they come. Higher education policy and associated interventions have raised the aspiration of youth from disadvantaged background to pursue post-school education. Sabelo and Nana, as with all participants in this research, come from deep rural communities in the province of KwaZulu Natal where poverty, unemployment and crime is rife. Many of their communities still do not have access to clean running water, electricity and decent shelter. One participant described her neighbourhood as a 'survival of the fittest' camp where only those who have money survive because their children are able to access education and preserve their family name. Access to money was either in the form of social grants or the lowly paid wages of their unskilled parents or siblings. Another participant explained that in the absence of an income, one way of getting money is to marry into a wealthier family so her family can improve their circumstances with the labola (dowry) they receive. Still others explained that resorting to crime was not uncommon in order to survive, particularly in light of the high unemployment rate in these communities. According to Statistic South Africa (2015) the expanded youth (ages 15 to 34) unemployment rate in KwaZulu Natal in 2015 was 48.7 per cent. Youth unemployment in South Africa is severe and reflects apartheid spatial inequalities with youth unemployment in rural areas nationally at 82 per cent compared with 58 per cent in urban areas (Southern African Labour and Development Research Unit – SALDRU 2013). Youth unemployment in South Africa also reflects racial disparities with the highest unemployment rate among African youth. Among the causes of youth unemployment in the province, the lack of access to post-school education has been cited as a key factor. The cost of tertiary education is one major reason why poor youth remain excluded from higher education (Statistics South Africa 2015; SALDRU 2013). Participants bemoaned the fact that 22 years of democracy has done little for their communities and the youth they believe face a dismal future in the absence of access to post-school education.

Student protests across the country in 2015 and 2016 which gave rise to 'the fees must fall' movement, has raised questions about the transformation of South African higher education. Following violent student protests nationally in the second semester of 2016, Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Nzimande announced that government would support NSFAS qualifying students as well as the 'so-called missing middle', namely students from middle class families whose household income is above the NSFAS threshold but who cannot afford to access higher education, by exempting them from fee increases in 2017 (DHET

2016b). Minister Nzimande also affirmed, that government was ‘committed to progressively realise free post-school education for the poor and working class – and to assist middle class families who are unable to pay’ (DHET 2016b, 1). Student protests over the rising cost of higher education is not peculiar to South Africa and academics globally have also raised concern over the lack of government support and the consequential tuition fee increases (Calitz and Fourie 2016). But what do the ‘Fees must fall’ student protests and government’s response tell us about the transformation in higher education in terms of equity and redress? This article reports some findings from a narrative study that adopted the concept of the geographies of youth to explore the educational spaces and places of first generation, first year university students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

THE POLICY CONTEXT: EQUITY AND ACCESS

In 1996, the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) was established to develop a framework for transforming the higher education sector. Transformation of the higher education sector aimed to make it accessible to all sectors of society by widening participation and by being responsive to the socio-political and economic needs of post-apartheid South Africa. The NCHE recognized the need for ‘radical changes in the ways institutions and the system are structured, funded, planned and governed’ (NCHE 1996, 3) to expand student enrolments to widen participation and recommended a new funding model to address the financial constraints of widening participation.

A key purpose of the transformed higher education system is: ‘To meet the learning needs and aspirations of individuals’ given that education is ‘a key allocator of life chances’ and a critical means ‘for achieving equity in the distribution of opportunity and achievement’ for all South Africans (DoE 1997, 11). Following the recommendations of the NCHE, White Paper 3, premised on the principles of equity and redress, identified as a key goal: ‘Increased and broadened participation’, with greater ‘access for black, women, disabled and mature students’ and ‘equity of access and fair chances of success to all ... while eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination’ along the lines of race, class, gender and geography (DoE 1997, 10–11). In applying the principle of equity, there is a need to determine inequalities based on ‘racial, gender, disability and other forms of discrimination or disadvantage’ and to ‘develop a programme of transformation with a view to redress’. In facilitating the access of historically excluded students, new curricula needs to be developed, flexible models of learning and teaching must be adopted which include varied modes of delivery to accommodate a larger and more diverse student body (DoE 1997). To facilitate access and success, the Ministry of

Education identified ‘targeted redistribution of the public subsidy to higher education ... to support academically able but disadvantaged students’ (Ministry of Education 2004). In addition, higher education institutions would need to generate ‘greater private resources as well as to reallocate their operating grants internally’ and to ‘develop their own race and gender equity goals and plans for achieving them’ while remaining cognisant that equity of access must be ‘complemented by a concern for equity of outcomes’ to ensure that increased access includes participation in the curriculum to facilitate increased success (DoE 1997, 21–22).

The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) was established in 1999 to facilitate access to public higher education institutions by providing loans and bursaries to eligible students in terms of:

- Those with household income lower than the lowest threshold, according to current South African Revenue System tax tables;
- Those who went to a Quintile 19 school which includes those exempted from paying school fee in particular public schools; and
- Those from the most deprived municipalities.

(DoE 1997; DHET 2010).

Student enrolment increased significantly in public higher education institutions (HEIs) with previously disadvantaged students such as female, poor, disabled and black students gaining access. In 2010, 148 387 students received NSFAS funding compared to 40 002 in 1995, and in 2011 government budgeted R5.4 billion for NSFAS (De Villiers 2012). By 2013, 54 per cent of all full time contact students in public HEIs were women and 68 per cent were African (DHET 2015). The NSFAS aim to expand participation in HEIs was successful with a total of over R50 billion in financial aid being distributed to 1.5 million students since its inception (NSFAS 2015).

However, the increase in student numbers does not necessarily translate into equity of participation and success for all students. While student numbers increased significantly, government funding, which is the largest source of funding to universities decreased. Government funding to higher education is premised on the principle of cost sharing, which makes students and/or their parents liable for sharing the cost of higher education. The initial South African Post-Secondary Education (SAPSE) funding formula was replaced by the new national funding framework (NFF) which consisted of block grants and earmarked grants. Earmarked funds are directed to NSFAS while block grants are made up of teaching input and

output grants, research output grants and institutional factor grants (Higher Education South Africa 2011). According to PwC (nd) government funding of university education ‘declined from 49 per cent at the beginning of the century to 40 per cent by 2012, while the burden on students increased from 24 per cent to 31 per cent during the same period’ (PwC nd 1). Student fees escalated from R12.2 billion in 2010 to R15.5 billion in 2012 and student debt increased by 31 per cent over this two-year period (PwC nd). The increase in student fees is related to the decline in state funding. The decision not to increase fees in 2017 in response to the national student protests will place universities in a deficit given their dependence on fees to make up the shortfall created by the decline in state funding.

Of the 969 155 students enrolled in public HEIs in 2013 approximately 18 per cent of the starting number graduated and 48 per cent had either dropped out or not completed their studies (DHET 2015). The high drop-out and low graduation rates demonstrate the ‘revolving door’ outcome that the White Paper 3 had cautioned, where poor students gain access to universities but do not succeed. Lewin and Mawoyo (2014) explain that there is a low retention rate with a large number of students not completing their studies entirely and others not completing timeously. Despite the increase in student enrollment disadvantaged students continue to experience challenges in terms of access and success. Accompanying poor graduation rates, South African higher education institutions continue to face challenges indicative of our apartheid past such as classism, racism, sexism, sexual violence and ableism (DHET 2015). Women, black, poor and rural students continue to be marginalized and excluded in universities designed for white, male and middle class students (DHET 2015). The ‘transformation agenda in higher education embodies paradoxes’ in meeting the goals of equity, redress and development (Badat 2010, 7). A key paradox is that of privileging equity of access on the one hand and economic development on the other. Privileging social equity and redress in the absence of adequate public funding and academic support for under-prepared students (often black, poor and rural students) can compromise the provision of quality education, and exclusively focusing on economic development will result in the compromise of the goals of achieving equity and redress in higher education (Badat 2010).

Globally, globalization and the emergence of a knowledge economy has influenced the shift in universities from being elite institutions to massification, resulting in an increase in student enrolment. The democratization of higher education has also contributed to massification which has resulted in the enrolment of previously excluded communities and non-traditional students. In South Africa the White Paper proposed a policy of planned expansion in place of the NCHE recommendation of massification. Planned expansion aimed at expanding

the participation of previously excluded communities and increasing career oriented short programmes and post graduate enrolments to produce high level skills to meet the needs of the economy (Sader 2014). The state committed to equity and redress in the student composition through targeted distribution of public subsidy to support disadvantaged students.

Planned expansion in South African universities led to the development of diversified qualifications, programmes and curricula in response to student diversity, and the implementation of a quality assurance system to address the effects of increasing enrolment on academic standards (Sader 2014). In line with the goals of equity and redress, HEIs were required to develop institutional equity plans to ensure that equity in access is complimented by plans to ensure equity of outcomes. To facilitate equity of outcomes, universities were called on to develop plans to address the poor quality of schooling which resulted in a gap between school leavers' educational attainment and the academic requirements of higher education study. This resulted in the development and provision of access and bridging programmes in higher education and the state called on HEIs to create inclusive environments to challenge and transform oppressive ideologies and practices to facilitate equity in participation and outcomes. (Sader 2014)

University education does influence an individual's life chances and earning potential, and as such has become increasingly sought after. The democratization of South African higher education and the increase in demand has not translated into more people accessing quality education. University education continues to be accessed by those who can afford it as state control and financial support for higher education diminishes in the context of neoliberalism and globalization. As corporate entities, universities in South Africa 'are now in the business of selling their commodities, entering into partnerships with corporate entities to generate income, adopting instrumentalism to bring about great effectiveness and efficiency, and transferring the cost of education to users' (Sader 2014, 85).

In a society where education, information, and knowledge are the critical sources of wealth and influence, class formation takes place in the classroom. Who gets what in the education system determines who gets what in capital, communication, and political influence (Carnoy and Castells 2001, 15).

Planned expansion has resulted in greater access to universities for the previously excluded but massification globally has not benefitted all sectors of society equally and higher education continues to be exclusive with the privileged classes retaining their advantage (Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley 2009).

THE STUDY

It is against this backdrop that this study aimed to investigate the higher education experiences of poor students at one university in the province of KwaZulu Natal. The concept of geographies of youth is an area of study in human geography that focuses on the places and spaces of youth hood (Barker and Weller 2003). Social geographers privilege the standpoint of children, youth and families thereby acknowledging their agency as active decision makers and participants in the struggle against social injustices (Helfenbein and Huddleston 2013; Jeffrey 2012). Places are viewed as neutral, physical surfaces where social action happens, while spaces are seen as complex socially created and power laden (Barker and Weller 2003). The study also draws on the social geography of education which focuses on spatial inequalities in education in terms of differences in social class, gender, and race. Geographers of education argue for a balance between an analysis of socio-cultural factors as well as the political economy to illustrate the structural constraints under which children, youth and families live their lives (Holloway, Brown and Pimlott-Wilson 2011).

As narrative inquiry, the study sought to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of poor university students as they navigate the spaces and places they occupy or are excluded from in the university. The research questions in this study were: What are the contextual dynamics that affect access and participation in this university?

Using purposive sampling five first year Bachelor of Education (BEd) students who had received financial aid, were interviewed. Given that the focus of the study was on the higher education experiences of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, namely their educational geographies of access and participation, participants selected were recipients of NSFAS loans or Funza Lushaka bursaries. The Funza Lushaka bursary scheme is for students registered for a teaching qualification and the following applicants are favored: those from rural areas, those who wish to teach in rural areas and those whose financial position would otherwise exclude them higher education (Department of Basic Education 2016). Five research participants (two females and three males) who are first year Bachelor of Education students in receipt of financial aid. Of the five participants two were female and three were male. They are all African, first language isiZulu speakers who come from deep rural areas in KwaZulu-Natal.

This study, through the use of participatory methods, namely individual and focus group interviews and a mapping exercise, created the space and place for participants to share their university experiences. (Helfenbein and Huddleston 2013; Jeffrey 2012; Barker and Weller 2003). Mapping, which involves participants visually representing something are, useful as they generate a variety of information, such as socio-economic circumstances, attitudes and points of view and the use of space by different social groups (Theis and Grady 1991). Data collection

was conducted soon after student protests over fee increments at the research site and participants indicated that they were keen to participate as they ‘needed someone to listen to their stories’ (Gabela 2016).

Data analysis occurred at two levels. The initial level involved participants’ explanation and interpretation of their maps. A second level of analysis was conducted by the researcher using a thematic approach adapted from Denzin and Lincoln (2008).

Participants who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Participatory methods were used to attempt to address the imbalance of power between the researcher and research participants. For example, the mapping exercise allowed participants to shape the nature and direction of the visual representation of their experiences.

GEOGRAPHIES OF EDUCATION

Geographies of education aim to understand the significance of spatiality in the provision, consumption and consequences of formal education systems, like higher education. They foreground the wider socio-cultural, political and economic processes that shape and are shaped by educational spaces and the ways in which they are experienced by subjects of education (Holloway and Jons 2012). As such, they recognize the need to examine both educational policies and the experiences thereof, and consider their consequences in producing particular types of citizens and the workers. The notion of social geography in education places emphasis on the importance of physical and social spaces in understanding people’s experiences of educational change (Hernandez and Goodson 2004). Geographers of education posit that educational change is not ‘an object that can be defined, planned, implemented and evaluated’ and have moved to consider the importance of understanding how ‘subjects construct meaning and represent educational change’ (Hernandez and Goodson 2004, xiii). Social geographers view geographies as socially constructed and as such produce differential social relations.

Research on the educational geographies of student access to and participation in higher education which are student centered can contribute to an understanding of not just who goes to university but also ‘where and how they experience’ it (Holton and Riley 2013, 62).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

While equity of access to higher education has significantly increased, it has not been accompanied by equity of opportunity and outcomes for the historically disadvantaged. Equity of opportunity and outcomes relates to ‘epistemic access’, i.e. access to knowledge which can

only be enabled through ‘supportive institutional environments and cultures, curriculum innovation, appropriate learning and teaching strategies and techniques, appropriate induction and support, effective academic mentoring’ (Badat 2011, 6). This article presents some findings from a study on the geographies of access and participation. While the university does provide interventions to address the diverse needs of students such as an Academic Literacy course, an English Language course and a computer literacy course for undergraduate students, this study did not investigate participants’ experiences of these courses.

ASPIRATIONS AND CHOICE

All the participants in the study were first generation students, that is, they were the first in their families to access higher education. Three of the participants live with their grandparents, one with his father and one with her younger siblings who she takes care of in the absence of her mother, who works in Cape Town. The household income of four participants is social grants and which go to supporting families of more than six. With the exception of one parent who is a professional nurse, all the other caregivers do not have an education beyond primary school.

Participants described their desire to pursue universities studies to escape the poverty prevalent in their communities, as captured in these narratives.

There are many of us living with our grandparents in this community. There are no parents and some of the children have also become parents because there is nothing else to do. I want to make a difference and help those who need help so I want to leave this place, get educated and then come back. (Kwezi).

I had to go to university because I have never known my father and my mother died many years ago. I am now living with my granny who I have to take care of and a university degree will help me to do just that. (Njabulo).

Their choice of what to study and where to study was influenced by their financial status, their schooling achievement, as well as their access to information. The absence of career education also influenced their choices as reflected below:

There was no one in school to tell us about the different careers out there. I wanted to do B Com Accounting but my teacher told me that it takes time and it requires a lot of money which is something I do not have, rather I become a teacher because there is always funding, our country is short of good teachers and there are bursaries available. (Kwezi).

My mum is a nurse so I also wanted to be one. But I did not meet the requirements so now I want to be a teacher. But nobody cared enough at school to tell us what we could study. (Nana).

Policy on expanding participation of the previously disadvantaged, such as NSFAS, do raise the aspirations of people from low socio-economic backgrounds beyond schooling. Participants aspirations are linked to place... and ‘their desire to escape place’ and the poverty that place

represents for them (Brown 2011, 8). The affective and emotional geographies of their aspirations, that is, their feelings about their circumstances and their desire to want to become something so they can help their communities are linked to ‘the act of raising aspirations’ influenced through policy on equity of access and participation. University recruitment strategies such as university open days and school visits also contribute to raising student aspirations (Brown 2011, 9), as was the experience of participants in the study.

Participants indicated they were unprepared for university study and the lack of information, in addition to their family background (i.e. being first generation university entrants) was a significant factor which influenced their access to and participation in higher education. This is demonstrated in the following excerpts:

I don’t understand why they tell us now that they will pay for the rest of our tuition fee and all we have to do is cover our registration fee because when they came to my high school last year, I was told that their bursary covers everything. And when I came to register this year, I was told that I had to pay the registration fee which nobody had warned me about or that nobody had budgeted for. (Sabelo).

Even if you wanted to go to university, you still have to think of the rest of the family. What will they have because nobody is educated or employed back at home? Sometimes I even thought of what my mother said that I should rather look for work than study but my teacher was happy to help. (Kwezi).

From the above narratives, it was evident that participants were not aware of the terms and conditions of their bursaries or loans, and that the bursaries did not cover registration fees which their caregivers had to come up with. They believed that the university was not upfront with them and one participant believed the university had deliberately misrepresented itself to attract more students when he stated, ‘they just want our money, they don’t care about us’.

With increased participation rates in higher education, come increased opportunities for social mobility and this is what participants aspire to. However, the social and cultural capital that ‘provides know-how of where and what to study that is crucial to eventual life chances ... is denied to those from disadvantaged groups and communities’ (Brennan and Naidoo 2008, 295) as is evident from these participants’ experiences. Their family circumstances influenced their choices and at times, as the narrative above indicates, the wellbeing of the family takes precedence over their aspirations.

Whether or not poor youth pursue their aspirations of attaining a university education, the careers they choose and the type of university they gain access to, is significantly influenced by their knowledge or lack of thereof, and the social, cultural and economic capital of the family (Brooks 2008). The provision of career guidance, assistance with subject choices, the provision of information of university requirements and sources of funding are critical to facilitate redress

and equity (Badat 2011).

In the United Kingdom, the discourse on young people's aspiration has tended to position the aspirations of youth from working class backgrounds as being inferior to their middle class counterparts and there is a need for further research on the aspirations of youth from low socio-economic backgrounds and access to and participation in higher education in South Africa (Brown 2011).

EQUITY OF OPPORTUNITY AND PARTICIPATION

How are universities experienced by students from low socio-economic backgrounds? Are universities facilitating equity and social justice within institutions? Do institutional cultures and internal processes significantly shape student's educational experiences, i.e. their participation, progression and success? It is necessary to examine that factors which facilitate or impede poor students' success so as not to blame students for their failure.

LANGUAGE

For all participants, English is their second language and is experienced as a significant barrier to their participation and ultimate success. They described the challenge they experience in classes because they think in isiZulu and there is no time in class to translate that and respond, resulting in them not participating in class discussions or responding to questions.

First of all, I am black and English is not my first language so of course I will find it difficult to speak it. Sometimes I first have to think in isiZulu before I answer the question in English. (Njabulo).

It is not easy to translate a difficult English word in your mind and it's even more difficult for us, Black students because all the other students think in English so there is no need to translate but we think in isiZulu so imagine the time wasted. That is why most of the times, we do not speak in class. (Nana).

Participants explained that in schools the medium of instruction was isiZulu and their experience of English as the medium of instruction places them at a significant disadvantage in comparison to peers for whom English is their first language. Language and the mastery of English as a medium of instruction is a significant barrier for many black students for whom English is a second or third language and (Mouton, Louw and Strydom 2013).

In my school, all the subjects were taught in isiZulu except for English. The teachers only translated the difficult words so English is still difficult for me to understand, especially this university writing. (Lebo).

Compounding this barrier is their lack of preparation for university studies and their lack of

academic literacy. Academic literacy, i.e. reading and writing academic texts, is not part of participant's everyday language and presents a significant challenge for participants:

Even essay writing is so different. I really don't understand academic writing because in high school you were taught that an essay has an intro, a body and a conclusion. But here they teach you how to write their way which does not make sense to me. (Njabulo).

ALE was difficult for me because in ALE, the terms and the structure was different from what we were taught in high school. All they told us in school is that an essay has 3 parts, an introduction, a body and a conclusion. Nothing else! (Sabelo).

English language learners commonly associate language proficiency with effective communication and the means to gaining educational success, better employment, as well as recognition by native English speakers (Rodriguez 2009). The absence of social and cultural capital places participants at a significant disadvantage. Four of the five participants explained that they chose not to participate in class discussions because of their lack of proficiency in English. They perceived language to be a significant barrier and felt that the imposition of English as a medium of instruction was a deliberate act intended to prohibit their participation in lectures. This left them feeling excluded and alienated:

I don't understand, if the lecturers know that we don't understand English well, then why do they still use it throughout the lecture, why not switch to some isiZulu to include us? (Lebo).

OVERCROWDED CLASSES

Participants described the pedagogic places and spaces they occupy in overcrowded classes as creating pedagogic distance in terms of the physical and emotional distance they experience:

Nothing really takes place in these large lecture venues because there is no personal attention and sometimes there are no registers to sign therefore my friends and I don't attend because we sit for over an hour but yet end up not understanding. (Nana).

Some of us choose classes to attend or we leave 10 minutes early so that we get the good seats in the next class. First come, first serve! We always pray that the important stuff are said before we leave. (Kwezi).

I do attend but I sit right at the back because I do not want the lecturer to say that he does not know me. I just go there to show my face. (Sabelo).

According to participants not much teaching and learning takes place in their overcrowded lectures. They are unable to concentrate or take notes due to the discomfort they experience when there is no seating available. They also explain that they do not participate in the lectures and neither are they encouraged to, which leads to pedagogic disconnectedness (Jansen, Tabane and Sehlapelo 2010). Participants indicated that it is not worth attending lectures, and they either do not attend or leave their lectures early. Another reason cited for leaving lectures early

is to enable them to get a place in the next lecture. Overcrowded classrooms affect students' access to epistemic knowledge as the quality of their education is influenced by the availability of material and human resources. This demonstrates that 'students are perhaps the main victims of massification. They have to contend with overcrowded classrooms, unavailability or insufficiency of academic facilities including accommodation, reading materials, research equipment, computers etc.' (Mohamedbhai 2014, 12).

TECHNOLOGICAL LITERACY

When I got to a computer at varsity, I just looked at it and smiled because somebody said computers are like people. I did not even know how to switch it on so I spoke to it and said, Open Sesame but it just looked at me. (Sabelo).

I have never had a computer in my life. In school we did not use computers because we did not have them. I was told by a friend that a computer is like a cellphone, but I was only given a cellphone last year after I passed Grade 12 so I still am not good at it. (Kwezi).

According to all participants there were no computers available in their high schools and they were not computer literate, which is a prerequisite in this university. This has impacted on their participation, in terms of both access to the curriculum and participation in wider university life. Due to a lack of technological skills, participants in this study could not access important information regarding lectures, bursaries and upcoming events. They experienced difficulty in accessing internet resources which they cited as a key reason for their poor performance in assignments. The university offers a computer literacy course for first year students to provide them with relevant computer skills. There is also an online learning website with teaching and learning resources submitted by lecturers, which also provides a platform for student and lecturer communication and interaction. However, their access to it is influenced by their lack of technological literacy and when they do get to the LAN (local area network) there is always a long queue.

CONCLUSION

While the places and spaces they occupied impeded their participation, they also demonstrated their agency in addressing the barriers to participation and success they experienced. In response to large classes and the language challenges they experienced, participants formed small study groups in which the better performing students willingly assisted those in need during their free time. While this demonstrates their agency, it is a reminder of the effects of budget constraints and cost efficiency measures taken by universities such as the lack of provision of small group tutorials. This demonstrates that participants are active agents who

develop strategies to cope with the alienating dominant culture of the university. This also provided them an opportunity to form friendships (networks) with other students from similar backgrounds thereby negotiating the geographies of higher education.

The findings above confirm findings from other studies that students from disadvantaged families enter universities with several limitations such as a lack of financial resources and lack of assistance from uneducated parents and a lack of proficiency in the English (Lewin and Mawoyo 2014; Kanno and Cromley 2013). Access to higher education and access of opportunity is significantly impeded for these students from rural, under-resourced disadvantaged schools. The poor quality of schooling and their ‘vulnerable economic and cultural situations’ perpetuate their exclusion from and within universities (Chetty 2014, 89). Participants’ access to opportunity and participation in higher education was impeded by both academic and non-academic factors. Academic factors which impede participation included: language as a barrier, overcrowded classes, lack of academic literacy and a lack of technological literacy. Financial constraints was a significant factor which impeded access to higher education for participants. ‘There is an important social class factor at play here ... if equity of opportunity was previously influenced by ‘race’ they are now also impacted by social class’ (Badat 2011, 8). Despite enabling education legislation and policies, inequalities in higher education opportunity and outcomes for the previously disadvantaged in relation to social class persists (Chetty 2014).

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