

# HOW ADP STUDENTS NAVIGATE ENABLEMENTS AND CONSTRAINTS OF THE PROGRAMME: AN EXPLORATION OF STRUCTURE AND AGENCY

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## ABSTRACT

Academic Development Programmes (ADPs), or Extended Curriculum Programmes (ECPs), continue to play a central role in increasing access to previously marginalised students in higher education in South Africa. Using Archer's morphogenetic approach, this study examines how a group of ADP students "made their way" through their engineering undergraduate studies. Twelve students in their fourth year of study were interviewed three times and selected university documents were analysed. The authors found that the fragmented curriculum, shortened consolidation and examination periods, and unfavourable examination timetables potentially constrained the students' aspirations. In addition, the mainstream students and lecturers' ideas about ADP students worsened their experience of marginalisation and exception. We also found that students experienced the mainly black student enrolment of the ADP as racial discrimination. The findings indicate that students found themselves in enormously constrained circumstances, but they also exhibited what Archer calls "corporate agency" and different "modes of reflexivity" to overcome some of these constraints. We argue that the establishment of Academic Development Programmes as separate from mainstream curricula, while enabling access to some extent, may have unintended consequences of also constraining the students for whom they are designed.

**Keywords:** Academic Development, student success, student experiences, structure and agency

## INTRODUCTION

Academic Development Programmes, Extended-Curriculum Programmes, or Foundation Programmes, date back to the 1980s in the South African higher education system (Luckett 2019; Boughey 2007). Boughey (2007) documents the history of their evolution through various phases from what she terms “Academic Support”, to “Academic Development” and then to “Institutional Development”. In the new dispensation in South African higher education, ADPs were an important intervention of the state to remedy unequal participation, acknowledging that students come from a range of educational contexts (Department of Education 1997). To facilitate the establishment of ADPs across universities, the state committed earmarked funding in 2006. However, owing to the nature of often being a separate provision from mainstream programmes, ADP’s role in promoting social justice has been challenged by authors such as Hlalele and Alexander (2012), who claim that they inadvertently give students labels that delegitimise them.

ADPs are now found across both historically advantaged and historically disadvantaged universities in South Africa. Hlatshwayo and Fomunyan (2019) document briefly the evolution of ADPs within what they term three distinct institutional “tiers”, the “dominant tier”, the “intermediary tier” and the “subordinate tier”, representing “historically white English” universities, “historically white Afrikaans” universities and the historically black universities. In each of these tiers, they argue, the ADP has had differential success, with the ADPs at historically black universities still primarily marked by inadequate funding and lack of infrastructure. Of particular interest to this study are ADPs at historically white institutions. While there is evidence that ADPs have improved access for previously marginalised students, their current role in fostering success remains complex. The current challenge of ADPs is that, while the dropout rate in the first year has reduced, students are often lost in the second, third and fourth years due to academic exclusion (Luckett 2019).

Much of the research that exists concerning ADPs in South Africa focuses on structural and systemic issues, curriculum development, or foundational provision interventions that aim to bridge the gaps from high school and address the perceived student deficits. In general, there is limited research that provides senior students’ accounts concerning their experiences as ADP students, and how having been in such programmes facilitated or constrained their journeys (Hlatshwayo and Fomunyan 2019). This study aims to address this gap; it uses a social realist account, the morphogenetic approach, to explain the complex interplay between the students’ agency and the structures that shape the possibilities for agency as they progress through their studies through an ADP in engineering. Specifically, this study adds to the existing literature that focuses on the experiences of ADP students at historically white universities.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This study locates itself within the existing, yet limited, literature on the experiences of ADP students at historically white universities, and the broader student learning literature that aims to account for the complex interplay between student success and persistence and the educational context. This section focuses on several recent key studies that offer important new insights on this topic.

At the University of Pretoria, Potgieter et al. (2015) investigated students' experiences in a BSc ADP. They focused on a cohort of students who had either completed their studies or were still pursuing their studies after five years. Specifically, they explored students' reflections on their experiences in the first 18 months of the programme and the challenges they faced when transitioning to the mainstream. Key to this study was the categorisation of students who responded into three groups: "good performers", "moderate performers" and "poor performers". The study found that although there was general acceptance and positive feedback from students about having been in the programme, they had experienced noticeable challenges. For example, in each category students reported that the transition to the mainstream was challenging and this was more so for students in the "poor performers" than in the other two categories. Another noteworthy finding was that, while some students felt that they benefited from smaller classes and familiarity with classmates at the Mamelodi Campus, a satellite campus where the ADP is based, some were frustrated by the separation from the main campus, leading to them reporting unavailability of lecturers for consultations. It was found that the separation made students feel that they did not belong; some thus sought comfort in seeing familiar faces of their old classmates once they transitioned to mainstream at the main campus. Of particular concern was that students in the "poor performers" category appeared to have been marred with financial and personal problems, to the point that they were unable to identify specific academic challenges that they faced. As the authors indicate, the voice of the "poor performers" in the study may represent the voices of many other students who may have felt excluded and subsequently left the university.

In a further study by Ogude et al. (2019) at the same university and involving mostly students in the same BSc ADP, the authors used the Appreciative Inquiry approach to investigate the experiences of successful students who have identified with the programme. The focus of the study was on exploring students' reflections on the best practices of the ADP and how these could be used in its improvement plan. Based on the interviews with eight students, some of which had graduated and were working, it was found that students felt that the programme at the Mamelodi campus offered them a sense of belonging and family, that peer

mentoring amongst themselves, building support networks, learning to cope with failure, the student-advising model provided to them, and the “underdog phenomenon”, all contributed to their success. Compared to the Potgieter et al. (2015) study, in their research, Ogude et al. (2019) focused on positive experiences, which may be providing a limited view of the challenges students experience.

In other work at Rhodes University, Hlatshwayo and Fomunyan (2019) use Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of capital and habitus to attempt to understand how the ADP programme at that institution contributed to the experiences of black students. Hlatshwayo and Fomunyan (2019) found that students drew on economic, cultural and social capital in interesting ways to allow themselves to navigate marginality within the institution. In particular, Hlatshwayo and Fomunyan (2019) found that in the absence of economic and cultural capital, students drew on social capital from mentoring programmes, and some social networks such as study groups, to motivate themselves to persist. The findings indicate that while some students found innovative ways to navigate their way, others found the fact that ADP students were all black to be problematic and experienced the separate special programme as a form of racial marginalisation. The experience of the separate programme by some ADP students as problematic in Hlatshwayo and Fomunyan (2019)’s study is not new; an earlier study by Pym and Kapp (2013) had found that some students within the commerce faculty’s Educational Development Unit (EDU) at University of Cape Town also experienced the separate programme as problematic. Other noteworthy studies that give an account of the experiences of ADP students at historically white universities include Govender (2014) and Mngomezulu and Ramrathan (2015) – both exploring these experiences at the University of KwaZulu Natal.

Hlatshwayo and Fomunyan (2019) argued that the complexities of how students in AD persist need to be further researched and theorised; this study aims to contribute to the above literature by providing an in-depth account of how ADP students proceed through their undergraduate studies in engineering. The distinguishing aspect of this study is that it theorises student experiences as emerging from a complex interplay between social structure and human agency. This theoretical perspective provides a comprehensive account and possibly a new understanding of the challenges and accomplishments experienced by students in ADP programmes in South Africa.

## **SOCIAL REALIST THEORY – THE MORPHOGENETIC APPROACH**

The morphogenetic approach is a sociological perspective that allows for structure and agency to be analytically separated to enable an investigation of how their distinct properties interact. Structure, according to Archer (1995), can be further disaggregated into (i) structure – which

refers to the roles and material resources within institutions, and (ii) culture – which constitutes all possible ideas that can be known about a part of society. Both structure and culture have properties<sup>1</sup> that may constrain or enable agency. According to the morphogenetic approach, the properties of structure and culture precede any action by humans, and such, they *condition* the situations in which they find themselves and must act. Thus, in a situation where students are in a university setting within a wider society, properties of the social structures position them favourably or unfavourably in accessing both material and intellectual resources. The agents' positioning thus bestows on them vested interests of either wanting to protect their privilege or wanting to transform their underprivileged positions. Further, the properties of structure provide agents with possible courses of action by presenting them with situational logics<sup>2</sup> – the ways that they will interpret the situation presented to them before they choose courses of action.

In Archer's morphogenetic approach, agency refers to action by a group of social agents, who, upon pursuing their goals, exercise their personal emergent properties with regard to the constraints and enablements posed by properties of structure and culture. Archer (1995) differentiates between two types of agents: "corporate agents" and "primary agents". Corporate agents can "articulate shared interests, organising for collective action, organising for social movements and exercising corporate influence for decision-making" (Archer 1995, 258–259). On the other hand, primary agency, which results from people's social contexts of birth, lacks the capacity for strategic action to shape and reshape structure and culture; but, through exercising their internal conversations, primary agents can still execute aggregate changes on culture and structure. Both these properties of agency mediate the properties of culture and structure.

Agency, according to Archer (2003), is exercised through the internal conversation, our interior dialogues with ourselves. Specifically, Archer proposes reflexivity<sup>3</sup> as a key aspect of our internal deliberations through which we mediate properties of the social structure. She identifies four modes of reflexivity: "communicative reflexivity", "autonomous reflexivity", "meta-reflexivity", and "fractured reflexivity". A communicative reflexive involves other people to complete their internal conversation, which is often constrained to the knowledge and experiences of their interlocutors. As such, communicative reflexivity tends to constrain one's options in life and fosters social reproduction. Autonomous reflexivity entails completing one's internal conversations independently, and as a result, an autonomous reflexive may pursue goals that promote upward social mobility. A meta-reflexive tends to be critical of their internal deliberations and to focus on their vocational ideals, and as a result, they tend to subvert the constraints that society thrusts on them; the result of meta-reflexivity tends to be lateral mobility for the individual but is crucial for fostering social change. Finally, fractured reflexivity, which

Archer indicates is not a distinct mode, includes those who cannot hold purposeful internal deliberations. Fractured reflexives are generally passive agents who may, at some point, have held one of the other three modes but are currently deprived of a personal stance in society. Archer (2007) indicates that these modes of reflexivity have outcomes for those who hold them and the society they are reshaping.

Bringing together the main concepts outlined above: the morphogenetic approach and the temporary analytical separation of the emergent properties of culture, structure, and agency, the question framing this study is thus: *“How did the ADP students’ personal emergent properties mediate the potentially constraining or enabling properties of structure and culture they experienced, as they ‘made their way’ to reach their fourth year in their studies?”*

## THE STUDY

The study involved 12 students who reached the fourth year of the five-year ADP programme in engineering in the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment (EBE), at the University of Cape Town (UCT). Table 1 provides a basic description of the participants.

**Table 1:** A basic description of the participants

| Pseudonym | Gender | Race                        | Past school authority    | Discipline |
|-----------|--------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|------------|
| Dyllon    | Male   | Coloured                    | HoReps – coloured school | Chemical   |
| Ogone     | Male   | Black African               | DET – township school    | Chemical   |
| Tebogo    | Male   | Black African               | Model C school           | Chemical   |
| Eric      | Male   | Black African <sup>+</sup>  | HoReps – coloured school | Civil      |
| Nombulelo | Female | Black African               | Model C school           | Civil      |
| Thando    | Male   | Black African               | DET – township school    | Civil      |
| Katlego   | Female | Black African               | DET – township school    | Electrical |
| Pitso     | Male   | Black African               | DET – township school    | Electrical |
| Zingiwe   | Female | Black African               | DET – township school    | Electrical |
| Bonang    | Male   | Black African <sup>++</sup> | Model C school           | Mechanical |
| Nkanyi    | Female | Black African               | HoDels – Indian school   | Mechanical |
| Thebe     | Male   | Black African               | DET – township school    | Mechanical |

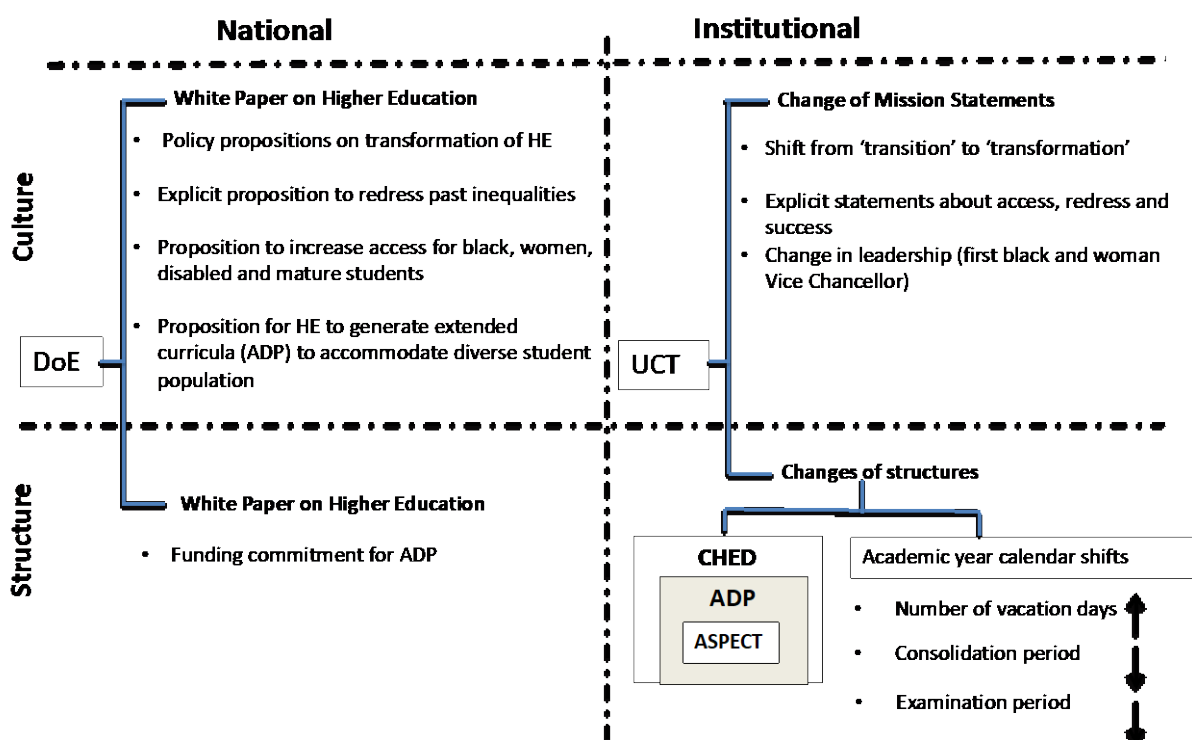
<sup>+</sup>Citizen of another African country <sup>++</sup> Permanent resident of South Africa

Data were generated through an analysis of selected university documents and student interviews. Three interviews were conducted with each participant over a period of a semester. The initial interview entailed getting to know each interviewee, gathering background information, and building a foundation for future interviews. During the interview, the participant was asked to describe their family, high school and family background. They were encouraged to share their personal experiences beginning with when they decided to study at

the university until they arrived. The next interview focused on how they have mediated constraints and enablements in relation to their concerns and projects. The participants were asked to discuss what they considered to be most important to themselves and how they planned to achieve those goals. Then, they were asked to discuss each of their academic years, beginning with the one they considered most difficult. The third and last interview involved in-depth discussions concerning issues that required more detail than in previous interviews; it also served to verify some unclear information. The study was granted ethics approval through the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment Ethics Committee at UCT.

## FINDINGS

The arrival of students at the university in 2008, and in the ADP, happened while higher education in South Africa had been undergoing transformation for approximately 15 years since the dawn of democracy. The first section of the findings, which is based on the analysis of selected documents, contextualises the national agenda for higher education and how this influenced the institutional landscape. It is shown how some of the key changes had shaped the context in which students found themselves upon arrival to undertake their studies.



**Figure 1:** Summary of the cultural and structural shifts leading to 2008.

## The structural and cultural context preceding the arrival of students at university

One of the instrumental policy documents on post-apartheid higher education, the White Paper

3 (Department of Education 1997), guided the shifts that took place following the establishment of the democratic dispensation. This White Paper was centred on the need for higher education to transform to address inequalities of the past. Universities needed to widen access for students from previously marginalised groups and, to facilitate this, extended curricula were proposed. The implementation of the extended curricula programmes across institutions was made possible when the Department of Education committed earmarked funding (Department of Education 2006).

UCT embraced the transformation that was proposed at the national level, making a shift from “transition” to “transformation” (Ifill 2000). The university’s new mission statement adopted in 1996 became explicit about redress (see UCT 2005). At the same time, the university appointed its first black female vice-chancellor (Nuttall 1999). It is noteworthy that the shifts in diversifying the student population at the university in the engineering programmes had already begun in the 1980s through soft-funded foundation provision; however, the new shifts at the national level meant that the pace of transformation quickened. Figure 1 summarises the structural and cultural shifts that happened at both the national and institutional levels before these students arrived at UCT.

The establishment of the Academic Development Programme (ADP) at UCT was a significant structural shift that incorporated the Support Programme for Engineering in Cape Town (ASPECT) that had been established in the 1980s to offer an extended curriculum route in engineering. Based on the faculty handbook (UCT 2008), Table 2 summarises the criteria for completion of a BSc in Engineering for both the four core mainstream programmes and ASPECT. While the mainstream programmes have clearly specified courses and associated credit load for each year, a student who enters through ASPECT follows a fragmented curriculum; they take fewer credit-bearing courses in the first year then straddle courses of different levels of study until the final year.

**Table 2:** The credits criteria for completing an engineering degree in the EBE faculty

|                      | <b>Chemical</b> | <b>Civil</b> | <b>Electrical</b> | <b>Mechanical</b> | <b>ASPECT</b> |
|----------------------|-----------------|--------------|-------------------|-------------------|---------------|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> year | 148             | 144          | 144               | 144               | 104/108       |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> year | 144             | 144          | 144               | 144               | -             |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> year | 124             | 132          | 132               | 132               | -             |
| 4 <sup>th</sup> year | 124             | 144          | 132               | 132               | -             |
| Electives            | 48              | 16           | 24                | 24                | -             |
| Total                | 588             | 580          | 576               | 576               |               |

During the few years preceding the participants’ arrival in 2008, UCT had introduced some significant changes to the academic calendar. The most pertinent structural shift was the



shortening of the examination period. Firstly, the consolidation period was reduced from seven days per semester to six days. Moreover, the examination period was reduced from three weeks in each semester to two weeks, forcing the structure of the examination timetables to change from two examinations per day to scheduling three examinations per day. According to the university registrar, quoted in a memorandum, there were advantages to shortening the examination period, but he acknowledged that the change necessitated changes in course designs and assessment methods:

“We see very significant academic advantages in this, but emphasise that course design, and method of assessment, will have to take account of the reductions in time for consolidation and formal examination. For example, courses should not introduce important new conceptual material late in the course, and with a reduction in the period for consolidation, students will need to be encouraged to work consistently.” (UCT 2003, 1).

Although the shortening of the assessment period was approved, it is noteworthy that it was objected to by the examination officer and by a sub-committee that was established to investigate students’ concerns regarding the proposed change. The examination officer expressed this view:

“I am sure that the proposed change to a two-week examination period is well-intended and will have its supporters, but as the examination officer and the person who does all the actual work when it comes to setting the examination timetable, I cannot honestly say that I see the merits of this change.” (UCT 2004, 6).

In its findings, the sub-committee indicated that reducing the consolidation period might adversely affect throughput rates. Despite these concerns, the university executive approved the new academic calendar, creating a potentially constraining situation for the participants of this study and subsequent cohorts. Next, we examine the ways in which students’ agency navigated the conditioning influences of cultural and structural shifts.

### **Agency: how students “made their way” through their studies**

Since the participants did not meet the minimum entry points for the mainstream programme, they entered their studies in engineering through an ADP. They describe their experiences with the conditioning effects of the cultural and structural context, as a result of being positioned in the ADP below.

### ***Students’ experiences of the institutional cultural context***

The institutional cultural context refers to the ideas that structured the way things worked in the

programme. Because of the demographic profile of the ASPECT intake, several students indicated realising only when they arrived that the programme was for black people; this made them feel uncomfortable and marginalised, and resulted in some questioning whether they belonged in the institution. In some cases, the fact that they were black, and in ASPECT, often exacerbated their feelings of exception during group work in courses they took alongside mainstream students. This left some feeling undermined, their contribution devalued, side-lined and that they were “not good enough”. For example, Nombulelo shared her experience of interacting with mainstream students in a group:

“There was a lot of undermining where you’ll say something and they’ll be like “OK, let’s continue; it doesn’t really matter what you say”. I guess that will make you feel stupid because I remember I felt stupid.” (Nombulelo’s interview).

The second example of this experience of marginalisation is that given by Thando:

“Most of the mainstream students are white; they undermine your ability to do things or they question how you do things. I think if they didn’t know that I was from ASPECT, they wouldn’t. We changed groups in every project; some groups were just black and with other mainstream Black students and things were normal. But the problem is that the white students will question you .... That is the only thing that really bothered me, that because I am from ASPECT, I am questioned.” (Thando’s interview).

The experiences of Nombulelo and Thando were not unique; several other students also alluded to this experience. Thus, placing the students in the ADP unintentionally resulted in them receiving negative and degrading ideas about them from other students; this was sometimes experienced as racially motivated, leading them to feel inferior and marginalised.

Secondly, several participants reported that the mainstream programme lecturers’ attitude and treatment towards them differed from how they treated the mainstream students; they felt that these lecturers sometimes looked past them. Dyllon shared his experience of this:

“If they hear you are ASPECT, they just have a different kind of attitude to you than they would to any normal mainstream student. That’s how I feel. I just think they look past you and they just go on with it.” (Dyllon’s interview).

The attitude of a lecturer toward her was interpreted by one student as racially motivated. While it is possible that lecturers did not intend to subject ASPECT students to racial prejudice, the ideas that shaped such placement led to these interpretations by the students.

Thirdly, the notions that shape the ADP curriculum were based on the extension of the four-year curriculum into five years; this led to students taking courses at different levels

simultaneously. Thus, some found it difficult to identify with a mainstream cohort when they moved from ASPECT to the mainstream programme since they were neither first years nor second years. Pitso shared his experience in this regard:

“I think the challenge is that you don’t really know which group you belong to because you are doing some courses with first years, and some with second years. So you are being pulled in different directions ....” (Pitso’s interview).

As a result, some students felt they didn’t belong, which resulted in them struggling to build fruitful relationships with their mainstream counterparts.

### ***Students’ experiences of the institutional structural context***

The institutional structural context was predominantly represented in the structure of the curriculum. Firstly, when the four-year curriculum was spread over five years, which meant students overlapped courses at different levels; it resulted in the misalignment of content in some courses. Eric demonstrated this misalignment using the concept of “significant figures”:

“For example, we’d be expected to know significant figures, which is a topic that a lot of people struggled with. To them [mainstream students], it is a small thing but to us [ASPECT students], we didn’t know how to do them. We didn’t understand it because we weren’t taught them until we did chemistry in the second year, and the mainstream students did it in first year. So it was small things like that, but it affected me because my marks went down clearly because of things like significant figures.” (Eric’s interview).

While the concept of significant figures had already been covered in a chemistry course with the mainstream students, ASPECT students in Eric’s civil engineering class could only register for the course in their second year. The misalignment of content in various courses may unintentionally act as a constraint and a disadvantage for ASPECT students.

Secondly, because students registered for courses at different levels of study simultaneously, all of them reported that this led to unfavourable examination timetables. Compared to their mainstream counterparts, the number of ASPECT students in a class is much smaller. Thus, when the university sets up an examination timetable, it is understandable that they prioritise a suitable timetable for the majority of the students. ASPECT students being in the minority did not favour them, thus leading to many of them feeling hopeless about how the university system works. Nombulelo, for instance, stated that “the system is never really willing to change” to accommodate them.

Thirdly, when some students failed courses, the effects of straddling courses across various levels of study became more disastrous, leading to clashes in lecture timetables, tutorial

timetables and further exacerbated challenges with examination timetables. For a mainstream student, failing a course might introduce some timetable clashes. For students studying through the ASPECT programme, if they failed courses, the risk of extending an already extended curriculum was higher. For seven out of 12 students in the study, their curricula had already been expanded from five to six years by the time of the interview.

Fourthly, the faculty of EBE introduced the so called “decant courses” to try and assist students who did not cope with Mathematics 1 and Physics 1. The thinking behind establishing these courses was to help prevent struggling students from failing the full-year course by offering them an alternative way of passing half the material through downgrading to a “decant course”. Although this structural change seemed to be a reasonable alternative, the results indicate that the consequences of the “decant courses” on the ASPECT curricula as a whole had not been carefully deliberated. The results show that it later became problematic for a student who registered for both “decant courses” to face academic exclusion when they failed another course. Zingiwe, for example, reported that she was academically excluded at the end of the first year because she had not met the number of credits passed for the readmission criteria. Although Zingiwe had managed to all her courses except one, having registered for both Mathematics 1 and Physics 1 “decant courses” implied that she should not fail a single course to achieve sufficient credits for readmission.

Some students indicated that the often late administering of tests and assignments at the end of the semester resulted in the late release of Duly Performed (DP) lists. Apart from administering some assessments very late in the semester, some students reported that lecturers sometimes rushed through the content of the course towards the end of the semester. For example, Bonang shared his thoughts on this issue:

“Bear in mind that they ask things they taught towards the end and they don’t lecture those things properly, to be honest. I don’t know why they do that here at UCT. Most of the things that appear in the exam like in Mech Dynamics 1, Mech Design 1; those two critical courses entailed things taught towards the end, and the lecturers did not lecture those properly. Even the tutorials you had to do them on your own for those sections that they were going to ask.” (Bonang’s interview).

This was deemed unfair by Bonang because a substantial part of the examination was based on the course content that was taught at the end of the semester.

Lastly, over and above the pressure resulting from late assessments and rushed course content at the end of the semester, the consolidation and the examination periods were reduced. The reduction of the consolidation and examination periods resulted in all students feeling that they had insufficient time to prepare themselves for examinations, some going as far as

indicating that they failed because of the extreme time pressure they experienced at the end. The reduced examination period had arguably the most negative effects; nine of the 12 students reported a minimum of one examination period in which they had to write multiple examinations within several days. Ogone, for instance, recalled an examination period that he wrote four examinations in three days; he related the difficulty of navigating this:

“After writing an exam today, tomorrow you are writing two. You need that energy to study for the fourth exam. So you fail even the easier stuff because you have not studied them properly.” (Ogone’s interview).

He said that he failed “some easier courses” because of insufficient time to study

Despite experiencing the cultural and structural context in the institution as detailed above, students persisted in their studies. How they persisted is now examined.

### ***How students exercised their agency***

There were several students who demonstrated corporate agency; they collaborated strategically to achieve positive outcomes. Katlego and Pitso, for example, by acting together strategically, overcame potential constraints associated with the ADP curriculum for electrical engineering. When they recognised the ambiguities in the curriculum, Katlego and Pitso requested concessions to enrol for courses that they were not yet eligible to do. During the previous years, they enrolled for “difficult” courses first; if they failed, they could repeat the courses without having to extend their studies. The collective strategy and action of Katlego and Pitso demonstrate that they made things happen.

Students also exercised corporate agency when a group of five, including Katlego and Pitso, collectively contested an unfavourable examination timetable. The students sent an email to the examination office asking that the examination timetable be changed. Despite not being granted their request, they did not give up; instead, they persevered by approaching the ASPECT coordinator until the unfavourable timetable was altered to suit them. The collective effort of these students successfully challenged and overcame a potential constraint.

The last example in which students demonstrated corporate agency was when Ogone and Dyllon, the chemical engineering students, acted strategically to improve their academic performance. Their first three years had been challenging for them. Their particular challenge was finding and maintaining fruitful study relationships with other students. Along with another student, the two of them formed a study group of three chemical engineering students at the beginning of the fourth year. The three worked together and began helping one another. When the group was not able to solve a problem, they would ask other students or approach the

lecturer – this was an approach neither Ogone nor Dyllon had attempted before. Collectively, the study group seemed effective for its members; according to Ogone, they passed courses that others in the class failed. They overcame constraints that they had trouble overcoming on their own; they became resilient as a group. Because of their teamwork, Ogone and Dyllon said they enjoyed the fourth year more than the previous ones. Overall, the students were able to overcome some of the institutional constraints they faced when they achieved corporate agency.

The rest of the students in this study did not exercise corporate agency, but as primary agents, adopted different modes of reflexivity to mediate the structural and cultural context they were experiencing. Table 3 summarises the dominant modes of reflexivity that the students in this study adopted:

**Table 3:** Summary of students' dominant modes of reflexivity

| <b>Modes of reflexivity</b> | <b>Stance towards institutional constraints</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | <b>Students in this category</b>                                    |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Communicative               | Evasion – the students tended to avoid some institutional constraints; they believed that they could not influence the system on their own.                                                                                                                                    | Dyllon                                                              |
| Meta-reflexive              | Subversive – the students pursued their ideals in spite of the institutional constraints.                                                                                                                                                                                      | Bonang                                                              |
| Fractured                   | Lack of personal stance – the students were so constrained that they were, at that time, uncertain about how to act in relation to their futures. They were “going with the flow”.                                                                                             | Tebogo<br>Nkanyi<br>Thebe                                           |
| Autonomous                  | Strategic – the students did whatever was required to overcome the conditioning effects of structure and culture. Some of their strategies included working in groups, applying for concessions, finding accommodation closer to campus, and turning to top students for help. | Eric<br>Katlego<br>Nombulelo<br>Pitso<br>Ogone<br>Thando<br>Zingiwe |

As shown in Table 3, autonomous reflexivity dominated amongst this group of students; this was a probable response amongst the students who had persisted, considering that the cultural and structural context described earlier depicted extremely constrained circumstances. There were some students who felt constrained to a point that their modes of reflexivity were temporarily shifted to “fractured” ones. Yet, despite their “fractured” state, they persisted in their studies. Their future persistence was unclear, but they had persisted to the fourth year of their studies when the interviews took place.

## DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that, when considering the cultural context of the university, students' positioning, in both the first year and in the following years, and their being endowed with the ASPECT tag, resulted in the unintended consequence of themselves being subjects of the

lecturers' and other students' negative preconceived ideas about them. The preconceived ideas left some ASPECT students feeling that they occupy a marginalised place within the university. It is worth noting that the experience of marginalisation was not expressed by all students, and indeed some indicated that ASPECT helped them feel included. However, it is argued that positioning students in the separate ASPECT programme exposed them to a contradictory situational logic<sup>4</sup> in which the structure that enabled them entry into university and the ideas that shape the university itself have irreconcilable differences, and ironically served to exacerbate the students' feelings of exception.

Concerning structure, the analysis shows that the fragmented curricula spread across different levels of study, the "decant" courses and the condensed assessment period, all positioned ASPECT students under constraining circumstances. It is argued that fragmented curricula, which resulted in students straddling courses of different levels of study, positioned students unfavourably. When a student failed a course, the situation was worsened, leading to complicated curricula and timetabling. The already complicated situation was exacerbated by the shortening of the assessment period. These complexities indicate that compared to the mainstream students, ASPECT students were presented with a contradictory<sup>5</sup> structural context in which, although on the one hand the extended curricula aimed to enable them, other changes such as shortening assessment period and straddling various years of study seemed to constrain them.

Nonetheless, as Archer (1995) points out, structure and culture only condition the situations for the agents; therefore, it was up to the students to exercise agency in mediating the conditioning influences of the cultural and structural context they confronted as they pursued studies in engineering. As shown in the analysis, students mediated the conditioning influences through the achievement of corporate agency and exercising their primary agency by adopting different modes of reflexivity.

The analysis suggests that a tension exists between ADP and its positioning within the university. ADPs in higher education in South Africa were established as a way of widening access and catering for the "new students" – the previously marginalised; this brought with it the deficit view of such students. We argue that historically white universities, despite having made structural changes in recent decades to admit students from historically underprivileged backgrounds, might continue to hold a dominant view that these students are lacking and require improvement. As described by Engelbrecht, Harding, and Potgieter (2017, 59), these students "have become a problem in higher education in South Africa". Such views about the students in the ADP suggest that the cultural context, the dominant ideas that shape these universities, remain mostly unchanged.

The fact that some students interpreted their experience of being othered as racially motivated is not new. It aligns with the findings of Hlatshwayo and Fomunyam (2019) where students alluded to the problematic nature of their positioning in a separate programme that seemed racially segregated, leaving them to find different ways of navigating their marginality within universities. The effect of a separate programme, as indicated in Potgieter et al. (2015) is potentially worse at institutions where ADPs are set up at satellite campuses. Not only do students experience being separate, they sometimes have limited access to their lecturers who commute from the main campus to the satellite campuses; this experience exacerbates the feeling of marginalisation and the sense of “I am not good enough”. It is noteworthy that the experience of being the other is not always experienced negatively. Indeed, some students use their separate position to form social networks that prove to be fruitful; they find that the separate ADP helps them develop a sense of family and closeness that assist them to adjust to university before transition to mainstream (Ogude et al. 2019).

The findings of this study show that ADPs, although well-intended, may have unintended consequences of positioning students as deficient and of exposing them to often constraining cultural and structural context. It may be that, as argued by Hlalele and Alexander (2012), keeping the ADP separate will continue to perpetuate inequalities and move further away from achieving social justice.

## CONCLUSION

Contributing to the literature, the study offers a complex explanation that departs from identifying “factors” and “deficits” by considering both students’ (agency) and university’s (social structure) role in student success. The study shows that although students arrived at the university as survivors from their historically underprivileged educational backgrounds, their structural and cultural positioning within the university unintentionally perpetuated the deficit view of them and, as a result, intensified the sense of marginalisation and disappointment among many of them. Despite their accomplishments thus far, their positioning in an ADP at a historically white university mainly made them feel that they did not belong. The separate programme, which accommodates a mostly black intake, intensified their experiences of marginalisation and worsened their sense of “I am not good enough”. The extended and fragmented curricula, the straddling of courses at different levels of study, were compounded further by the structural changes of shortening the assessment period. This resulted in students experiencing highly constrained examination timetables. Despite the above potential constraints, the study shows that students exercised corporate agency by collectively articulating their concerns and acting strategically to overcome some of them. Individually,



students mediated their constraints through different modes of reflexivity.

The implication of the outcomes of this study is that the Academic Development Programme, while facilitating their entry into the university, simultaneously placed students within a contradictory situational logic that exacerbated their experiences of exception. Although the university has made significant structural adjustments to accommodate students from underprivileged educational backgrounds, the ideas that continue to shape the ADP space perpetuate the outlook that these students have some deficits. The study suggests that, in South Africa, higher education should reconsider the approach of separate programmes; the inherent logic of these programmes seems to contradict their primary purposes: to enable redress and widen participation.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Sasol Inzalo Foundation and the National Research Foundation (NRF) for this project.

## NOTES

1. Archer (1995) refers these properties as “Structural Emergent Properties” (SEPs) and “Cultural Emergent Properties” (CEPs).
2. Archer (1995) stipulates that the second order SEPs and CEPs are either complementary or contradictory. The SEPs provide directional guidance of protection, compromise, opportunism and elimination while the situational logics that result from CEPs are protection, correction, opportunism and elimination.
3. Reflexivity is defined as “a regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa” (Archer 2007, 4).
4. Archer (1995) refers to this as the second-order Cultural Emergent Property (CEP) of “constraining contradiction” leading to a situational logic of compromise.
5. Archer (1995) refers to this as the second-order SEP of necessary contradiction, leading to situational logic of compromise.

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