THE HIGHER EDUCATION ACCESS EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS: A CALL FOR ANTI-COLONIAL DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT
The institutions of higher learning in South Africa (HEIs) still suffer from the remains of colonialism. Many different activities in HEI have exposed such legacy. For instance, the 2015/2016 #fees must fall, and Rhodes must fall mass student's protest exposed struggle for transformation in academic institutions. The current article wants to understand participants (which are graduates) experiences with regards to accessing the university. Twenty-two graduates were interviewed through individual semi-structured interviews. In a setting that still suffer from legacies of oppression, participants emphasised absence of easy access at the university as symbolising the still existing European domination in African institutions. Thus, poor students access experiences at the university are marked by misperceptions and disappointments due to several obstacles. There is a need for fundamental change in HEIs, by making certain that an inclusive admission of poor students in post-colonial South African universities is evident.
Keywords: accessibility, university, inclusivity, students, (de)coloniality

INTRODUCTION

The domination and oppression of African people are the characteristics of colonialism. The building blocks of colonialism includes but not limited to racism, "ruling of blacks by Europeans to advance whites agendas" (Tsotsi 2000, 6). The imposition of power and control was proclaimed as intended to develop countries in Africa (Birmingham 1995). The year 1902 marked the South African independence from colonialism (Okoth 2006). Nevertheless, apartheid regime reinstalled coloniality. This was a 1948 to 1994 system of racism in South Africa imposed by the National Party (Makhanya 2021a). The legislation favoring apartheid system was enacted. For instance, The Bantu Education Act of 1952 was the discriminatory policy that ensured minimal or no liberating education for Africans in order to sustain their oppression (South African History Online [SAHO] 2018). The University Education Act 45 of 1959 similarly prohibited African students from being enrolled in universities designated for

"whites" (SAHO 2018). The historical context of exclusions and racism are the significant founding systems of current educational practices in South Africa (Smith 2008). Henceforth, concerns of Western domination remain a global concern in African education.

The end of South African apartheid saw HEIs framing policies that enhance inclusivity, but the legislation focuses more on the inclusion and assimilation of African students in Western education systems than reconstruction of institutions that reflected African interests. There is a lack of contextualised higher education (Turton and Schemid 2020). Thus, the demise of colonial structures did not suggest removal of colonialities in HEIs. "The ending of colonial geopolitical measures did not suggest the end of coloniality" (Smith and Nathane 2018, 18). Consequent to this argument, this article advances the discourse for consideration of colonial legacies in a university context, and this understanding is fostered by the lived experiences of African students.

University students' success depends on wider contextual conditions (Higgins 2017) and these conditions impact on academic performance (Van Breda 2017). The focus of this article is on participants narrating the encounters they struggled with to be part of the university. The main arguments this article advances have been instigated by the colonial practices inherited by universities in South Africa, resulting in the elimination of poor students (Mbembe 2016). The article is also in contrast to the treatise that makes practices of exclusion and oppression permitted and undistinguishable in South African higher education institutions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The anti-colonial theory guides the article discussions. The theory argues that "the domination and imposition were the basis of colonial practices for mechanics and operations of imperial projects" (Rukundwa and Van Aarde 2007, 1172). "Coloniality is maintained in South African HEIs through the imposition and the dominance of colonial structures that thrive at the exclusion of African norms", thus limiting African students' access, symbolises societal injustice (Fraser 2008, 15). Societal injustices are reflected by the neglects of the needs (resources and services) of marginalised groups (Fraser 2008, 273). Hence the accessibility requirements of poor students are ignored in HEIs. The South Africa's Department of Education (2002) also argued against misdistribution as a hindrance for the development of African norms. Lack of advancement of African cultures in university access obstructs the African renaissance.

METHODOLOGY

The data was obtained from one of the universities located in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Individual semi-structured interviews were means of enquiry. Twenty-two (22) humanities

graduates participated, ten (10) participants were postgraduates in different human science disciplines and twelve (12) were practitioners. All the participants studied a Bachelor of Social Work degree from Hibiscus University (HU) (pseudonym). The study recruited two different groups for the aim of getting a broader and diverse interpretations and opinions on African student's access experiences in post-apartheid university (Makhanya and Zibane 2020).

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling strategy. These are non-probability sampling techniques that are used in research that adopts qualitative methodologies (Guest, Namey and Mitchell, 2013). Data collection was executed from June to August 2018. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University, Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. After the participants had been recruited, an information session was held where the central issues of the study were discussed, and the prospective participants were given a chance to ask questions pertaining to the entire study, signed consent, and data collection began.

The conversations ensured comfortability to voice out, respect and participants anonymity was assured for confidentiality. Thus, for privacy, pseudonyms are used to conceal the names of participants and locations. Participants were thus perceived as active agents rather than as recipients of inquiry (Acocella 2012). Participants interests, perceptions and encounters became central to the study. Thematic content and discourse analysis were used to arrange and analyse data.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Experiences in locating the University.

Most of South African universities are in big cities and in urban areas, but their targets are on all students, including these who come from remote rural areas. In a democratic state, one would prefer some African academic institutions to be located where people reside. But in South Africa universities maintains its previous locations and students still leave their rural communities in search of university education. In this study participants expressed how students are exposed to different difficulties in search for university in a distanced, unfamiliar urban location:

> "Original I come from High Flats and its rural areas. I struggled to locate the university because it was my first time being in big urban town. It was frustrating ...." (Siyo).

> "Sisi Thembelihle (researcher) I have never been this scared in my life. Manguza is very small compared to the big city where the university is located. So, I am used to African people and

African communities. I struggled to be in white people's areas. I could not even ask directions because everything was new, scary, and shocking. It was scary since I had never been to a big city. Manguza, where I come from, is a smaller town compared to the city life. I feared everything and everyone." (Zama).

"When you are asking people about directions of the university, you get confused whether you should use isiZulu or English. Its big town with mix races. If I ask using my language some do not understand, if I use English some laugh at my poor vocabulary and some do not understand. You end up spending long hours not knowing where to get the transport to drop you at the University." (Notsha).

Oppressive cultures are maintained in post-colonial society by forcing dislocation of African students (Bharuthram 2018). Expressions of participants in the above extracts reveals how unfamiliar environment disadvantage African poor students emanating from rural settings. Subsequently, uncertainty, being lost, and discouragements of the unknown spaces became the participants characteristics of locating HU. Participants spoke about struggles of movement with luggage in trying to locate HU, and some articulated fears associated with strange atmosphere. According to Bharuthram (2018) such experiences reflects on the sensitive battles of first-year university students.

The question is on the number of poor prospective students who could not make it to the university gate due to location frustrations and transition difficulties (Collins and Van Breda 2010). This suggests that, notwithstanding the termination of colonialism and apartheid, the decentralisation of universities, for the sake of equal access, is not evident in South Africa. There is a lack of campuses or satellite academic institutions in African rural communities. Some of these communities have Further Education and Trainings (FETs), which do not offer some courses desired by students, such as the Bachelor of Social Work. Consequently, after obtaining matric, students leave their familiar places in search of academic institutions in urban areas. To make an example, Ruggunan (2010) argued that, approximately 69 per cent of Africans in universities come from geographical locations distanced and many kilometres from the city.

During apartheid, institutions of higher learning were situated in locations where they would serve different racial groups (Permegger and Godehart 2007). African people residing in remote areas were eliminated, harassed, monitored, and constrained in different major life aspects. Therefore, university location away from rural African people advance the deliberate policy of exclusion and marginalisation by White oligarchical regime.

Coloniality on admission into careers of choice

During colonialism and apartheid policies, universities deliberately forbidden African students

from studying toward certain qualifications and careers. These were racial influenced policies (Bunting 2006). Institutions of higher learning were separated along racial lines, and African students were not allowed to benefit from programs offered in White institutions (Badat 2007). Although South Africa is celebrating democracy and the demise of apartheid, previously disadvantaged students are battling to pursue professions of choice. Study participants indicated experiences regarding academic admission into the careers of their choice as branded by obstacles, late responses, variation of career paths, and extended waiting times:

> "At the University, they said they could not accept me for my first-choice degree which was community development and Bachelor of Law (LLB). So, they offered me the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) ...." (Thato).

> "I lost my self in crying several times. I could not be admitted for Bachelor of Social Work, but it was my first choice, and I could not be told why. I used to cry every day. But I was later advised by a mentor that I should do change of mind application and choose community development (CMDV) as it related to social work. I did not know that course but because I was so determined to be enrolled at the university I applied and was accepted for CMDV. I then had to do internal transfer to do a social work in the following year." (Sihle).

The expressions above represent few challenges of admission most students faced at HU. Utterances feature how "students have become victims of the struggle to access careers of their choice in post-colonial higher education institutions" (Makhanya 2020, 81). Apparently, other students applied for certain programmes they prefer, but were denied; instead, they were automatically enrolled for Bachelor of Social Work. This suggest that the requests and wishes of students became less valuable in university admissions. Six participants also mentioned that, even if some students had applied for BSW, as the primary choice, the battle for entree certainly made students to register degree they either did not apply for nor have little to no interest to pursue. This would eventually delay students' careers. To make an example, about six study participants spoke about how they had to waste a year pursuing qualifications of no choice, as they waited for BSW admission. Study participants also mentioned that they were not provided with clear answers of the reasons why they were not admitted into the careers of their choice. Nevertheless, some participants complained about massification, discrimination, and students' ignorance regarding university structures as contributing factors.

There is thus a connection in the country's "historical and socio-political contexts and the issues of academic access" experienced by African students (Makhanya 2020, 82). Scholars such as Bunting (2006) and Badat (2007) had similarly indicated that concerns of university admissions are not alien from the lingering history of colonial-apartheid. These historical

contexts intentionally maintained racism, discrimination, and biases in the university system. Therefore, students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds still feel rejected in the post-apartheid university. Similarly, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2016) maintained that "the failure by African universities to eradicate coloniality inherited from the colonialism period is a hindrance in recognising the true needs of Africans in African universities". "A lack of access for the poor is characteristic of such colonial policies" (Ruggunan 2010). This suggest that academic institutions still operate on the fundamentals of coloniality which limit poor African students' access to the University.

Students' accommodation experiences at HU

Disadvantaged students still struggle to be admitted in students' residences (Makhanya 2021b). For instance, although participants in the study came from location distanced from the university, thus applied for students' residence, and were academically admitted, they still struggled to get access to university students' accommodation. Even these who were eventually accommodated they lamented about unfavourable living conditions. Furthermore, while race divisions were not obviously visible, participants recognised that residences dominated by African students were neglected and poorly maintained. For instance, Toto expressed his residence-related struggles as follows:

> "For accommodation, administrators had no time for us, sometimes we would sit outside the whole day without any assistance and be turned back. Come back the next day it becomes the same struggle, and we are told there are no spaces. But in these waiting lines, it only African students. White and Indians are not there, but some of them live in students' residences. You sometimes ask yourself how they got it. I even stayed next to informal settlement and walked to university. I stayed like that until my relative who works at the university assisted me by speaking with one of the residence administrators." (Toto).

Toto's expression above exposes challenges that students face before being accommodated at the university. Toto describe his residence application process as a struggle that was characterised by waiting long hours, denied access, and living in unconducive environments. Toto also expose nepotism for admission. Even though they were told about limited and unavailable spaces in residences, Toto confess that his relative managed to get a space by negotiating with the residence administrator. "It thus makes sense why students from disadvantaged backgrounds, those who are not connected to any staff member and with no funding, struggle relentlessly to obtain accommodation at the university residence" (Makhanya 2020, 84). Some participants had to reside in unsafe places due to be denied residence admission at the university.

Participants expressions above reflect on the allocation of university accommodation at the university which is characterised by the neglect of poor students. This negligence originated from insufficient funding, which remained a determining factor to access residences at HU. Students coming from disadvantage background often resort to living in unsafe conditions outside of the university. Participants also highlighted affordability as another factor in determining students' choice of these locations. But even these students who were eventually allocated to university residences complained about unfavourable living environment particularly for residences that are dominated by African students.

> "In our residence we were only Africans. Indians and white are staying on campus. For us we were bathing in cold showers and toilets were not working. We even protested and we were kicked out of the building. We spent the night on the road ...." (Khomi).
>
> "You know where we stayed there was no wi-fi and we were sharing everything such as room, stoves, fridges. Our building was close to the tax rank and the market. It was noisy all the time. But no one cared about us. Maybe if we were the other race, we were going to be taken good care of like on campus residences." (Thato).

Participants accepted that most students residing in residences are Africans and believed that this is a contributing factor to poor maintenance. Thato argued that residences located inside the university are well maintained. Similarly, Chetty and Knaus (2016) argued that maintenance and quality on university services are still offered along racial lines. The researcher attests to this point as she relates to the experience of being a residence assistant, how she was pressured by residence administrator to prepare for White student coming from Germany. Such pressure was not a common practice for the rest of students. In contradiction, Gopal and van Niekerk (2018) on their study on safe and security in university residences, found race as invisible but all students are exposed to similar environments. But Bazana and Mogotsi (2017) agreed to the expressions of participants' by stating that university residences for African and / disadvantaged students are largely deserted.

Indeed, poor conditions in university residences is not alien to HU students. On the 19th of March 2018 Sunday *Times* newspaper reported students protest at a KwaZulu-Natal university due to poor living conditions. Similarly, daily news reported how students complained about lack of proper infrastructure despite the large amount of residence money they pay. The paper also reported the insult that is directed to students if they complain such as their poor backgrounds. This suggest that institutions of higher learning in South Africa still suffer from class struggle and oppressions undermining the cries of the poor and previously disadvantage (Makhanya 2021b).

Participants experiences with funding and financial aid.

The post-colonial administration saw institutions of higher learning receiving funding support from different institutions to reverse the injustices of the past and inclusion of these who were previously oppressed. Despite such transformation, funding is insufficient to respond to the high number of poor students (Mabizela 2015). Thus, despite funding availability, poor students' exclusions continue due to funding issues. Below Silo expressed his dependence on financial support due to poor backgrounds:

> "I did not have funding for my first year, although I applied for it through CAO, and I appealed for NSFAS but nothing. In my second year I even went to the department of social development to request a scholarship. They wanted to give me, but I was registered for community development. I had to deregister and apply for Social Work to be able to get funding." (Silo).

Demand for funding support for poor students remains a concern. Although there is a National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) which was established to provide financial support to poor students, and other funding support structures, there is high demand for financial assistance than the available supply of funding. This leads to financial exclusions, as indicated by participant Silo above. Silo is an orphan, had no support thus qualifying for financial assistance, otherwise he could not progress with his studies. For instance, Silo had to change his initial qualification to secure funding. As argued by Mabizela (2015), "this reveals the impact of insufficient financial support and the exclusion of poor students". On a similar notes debts and unpaid fees remains a hindrance to success for poor students. Graduates who fail to settle university fees experience challenges in obtaining their university qualification. For example, Sihle had graduated with Bachelor and Honours degrees, and pursuing his Master's degree, but he has no documentations to use for job seeking as a proof that he graduated.

> "I am still struggling to offset the debt that accumulated in 2012 when I was in my first year. I do not have my certificate. I did not obtain anything as proof that I graduated. It holds me back." (Sihle).

The utterance above reveals financial hindrances as impede career progress for poor graduates. Sihle's financial struggles replicate those of other disadvantaged students. Nkosi (2019) similarly lamented on the challenges which includes but not limited to exclusion and graduates' prevention from getting a qualification after graduation as the reality of young people in post-colonial academic progress. Arguably, coloniality is conserved and perpetuated in universities through hidden exclusion criterions (Nkosi 2019). Some participants also complained about

exclusions due to finances and issues of university funding:

> "I relied on funding support throughout my university years. It just that I had no funding in the first year, so I have outstanding fees which holds my things." (Melo).

Participants expressions suggests financial issues as increase unease and elimination, resulting to inadequate educational performance. Funding struggles affect all South African universities. For instance, Rhodes University informed a high number of "academically performing students that they were financially excluded and were thus barred from returning to the university the following year" (Mabizela 2015). This also speaks to #FeesMustFall movement of 2015 and 2016 where South African university students took issues of fees and exclusions to the street. The call was for increased academic inclusion than elimination. The concern is the high fees that are unaffordable to poor students and lack of financial support. Chetty and Knaus (2016) also agreed that the aim of high fees is to provide quality education only to the middle class. Hence, Sewpaul (2006) viewed economic crisis in higher education as a global problem.

Financial hindrances remain a problem to access at the university, which is inconsistent with the South Africa's transformation agenda aim of redressing past injustices by increasing university access for the poor (Pandor 2018). Although there are several calls of transformation and dismantling of racism, historical white universities still maintain their high fees and white dominance (Chetty and Knaus 2016), this hinders access of the disadvantaged students. There is thus a need for academic institutions in South Africa to be considerate of the needs of previously disadvantaged students. As argued by Mbembe's (2016), institution of higher education needs to be sensitive to the history and context of the country that produced discriminations and unfairness. Such inequalities are the basis of the colonial experiences and the exclusion being faced by African students at HU today. The participant below further provides context of the struggle of poor students that need university consideration:

> "Do you know that I used my financial aid that I received at the university to support my family as well. There is no one who is working and I could not manage to have groceries knowing very well that they are hungry. I did not even buy prescribed books, I would borrow or make copies just to be able to send money at home for my child, my mother and my siblings ...." (Nox).

The participant stresses the economic battles of unfortunate students. This demonstration suggests that underprivileged students are the outcomes of family poverty. Thus, the study appeal to South African HEIs not to act ignorantly and blindly to the struggles and poverty-stricken circumstances of poor students. Indeed, the financial strains of the poor are disregarded, specifically in higher academic institutions. This is the remains of coloniser dominance, which also exposes the preservation of a racial apartheid system, that encouraged African exclusion.

Students encounter difficulties due to lack of support (Yunong Huang and Yu Shi, 2021). Thus, there is a connection relating colonialism and apartheid with the present elimination suffered by needy students. Similarly, during colonialism, there was a hindrance of admission for the oppressed within White people spaces to maintain class racial divisions (Borocz and Saker 2012). Accordingly, the economic battles experienced by disadvantaged students at HU demonstrate the continuation of settler supremacy.

CONCLUSION

The participants' expressions captured in this article are a call for a context-specific transformation that fosters decoloniality in HEIs. This article highlights the importance of "dealing with higher education issues in South Africa from grassroot up" (Maglajlic and Selimovic 2014, 26). This is a call for African-centred university structures as the basic way of upholding the human rights of African students (Maglajlic 2010).

The article admits the point that some authors do not support the call of decoloniality and Afrocentricity. The argument is that decolonisation and Afrocentricity for context-specific transformation is the enemy of interconnectedness and globalisation. Scholars such as Jørgensen (2010) are against "context-specific and culturally embedded knowledge" as claims that such calls are a hindrance in the formation of several views, which foster alienation of previously oppressed population in the mainstream of global matters. Nonetheless, Sewpaul (2006); Maringe and Ojo (2017) contend that fostering appropriate context-based transformation are the source of balanced global engagement in South Africa's education system.

The scholars argue that higher education in Africa can no longer afford to preserve the status quo of globalisation. The educational ethos of the continent is in the fringes of the global context due to domination of western blueprints (Maringe and Ojo 2017). Therefore, there is a need for the governance, and African academia to concentrate "inwardly and outwardly" (Grosfogual 2020) in handling of African troubles and the ever-increasing poverty (Maglajlic and Selimovic 2014). The different profiles of students should also influence not only the university administration, but to conscientise social work academics of the profiles of some of their students (Dykes and Green 2015).

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