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Chapter 5

Factors affecting the success of first generation university students at a South African University

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> Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mineworker can become the head of the mine, that a child of farm workers can become the president of a great nation. (Mandela 1995)

Abstract

In South Africa, despite increased entry into tertiary education for students from poorer townships and rural areas, failure and drop out rates are still high which means that many are gaining admission without gaining real access to higher education. Although much research has already focused on the broader population of students disadvantaged by the legacy of apartheid, very little has focused on factors affecting the success of students who are the first generation to go to university. We used a Participatory Learning and Action approach to ask students to draw their experiences of the journey to, into and through the university. Using these drawings, students explained their journeys to the researchers and these were video recorded. In this chapter, we will present the journeys of two first generation students at a previously White institution in South Africa.

Keywords: first generation, South Africa, Participatory Learning and Action, transformative research methodologies, identity

Introduction

Nelson Mandela's words from his 1995 autobiography speak to the power of education for upward social mobility amongst first generation students everywhere, but particularly in South Africa. However, more than twenty years later, South African higher education institutions still face major challenges relating to participation, student retention, progression and success. These challenges are especially persistent amongst students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds, many of whom are first generation university students. Although South African participation rates[1] increased from 15 per cent in 2000 to 19 per cent in 2012 (Council on Higher Education 2013), these figures are very low when we consider that participation rates in countries like Ireland are 69 per cent (HEA 2012). Furthermore, there is a disparity of 10 per cent between the participation rate of African students (15 per cent of the population aged 20-24yrs in 2014) and the percentage of the population that are African (80 per cent of the total population in 2014) (Council on Higher Education 2013; Lehohla 2014)

Even for those participating in higher education, throughput of African and Coloured[2] students is lower than that of their White counterparts, with only 20 and 24 per cent of

[1] The participation rates refer to the total number of students attending higher education as a percentage of the population aged 20-24 yrs.

[2] During apartheid, people were classified as White, Black, Indian or Coloured (mixed race) and these categories are still used today in terms of redress.

African and Coloured students respectively graduating within the regulation time for their diplomas/degrees, compared to 44 per cent of White students. A similar differential based on race is seen after five years with fewer African (42 per cent) and Coloured (43 per cent) students than White (61 per cent) students graduating within five years (Council on Higher Education 2013) . It is clear from these statistics that increased participation in higher education by these groups has not resulted in a corresponding increase in graduation rates and throughput. Therefore it is important to look more carefully at the problems these students experience with access to universities.

Morrow (2008) differentiates between 'formal access', which merely entails acquiring a place at higher education institutions, and 'epistemological access' which entails gaining access to knowledge or ways of knowing in academia. While more students are gaining formal access to Universities in South Africa, they are not being granted epistemological access and without this, these students will be lost from the system. Many factors have been identified as preventing epistemological access for such students, including the discontinuity between the high school and university curricula: a so called 'articulation gap' (Council on Higher Education 2013; *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* 1997), a lack of decolonization of the higher education system, and the cost of higher education.

The legacy of apartheid means that South Africa still has two school systems, one well resourced and one poorly resourced; the schooling system that serves the poor Black working classes still suffers from the inequities of the past in terms of educational provision and outcomes. While students in the well-resourced schools have had the best teachers and resources, students in the 'poor' schools have suffered from overcrowded classrooms and under-resourced schools in often violent neighbourhoods. The differences in school systems

mean that those with qualifying marks for the more prestigious higher education institutions come largely from the wealthier population.

Another issue at both school and university levels is that of language. South Africa's constitution is unusual in that it identifies 11 official languages. Although English is the official medium of instruction in most high school classrooms in South Africa, with a minority having Afrikaans as an official medium of instruction, many South African students are taught mainly in their home languages. This is because English is the primary language of only a minority of teachers and students, and so schoolteachers use code-switching and code mixing in order to communicate their subject matter and ensure that students have understood them (Setati, Adler, Reed & Bapoo 2002). However, despite national language policies calling for multilingualism in higher education, there has been a lack of commitment to multilingualism as well as a lack of commitment to the development of indigenous languages as academic languages that can be used as mediums of instruction (Hurst 2015). Therefore English is still the medium of instruction at most South African universities, including the University of Cape Town where this study is set, and the monolingual nature of current language practices at these universities have consequences for both access to knowledge, especially for those who have completed most of their schooling in their home language, but also for affirmation of students and the decolonization of the university.

Mbembe (2016: 30) writes about the 'democratisation of access' and says that it is not merely about increasing the number of students from different backgrounds in universities but creating spaces where they feel they belong. 'When we say access, we are also saying the possibility to inhabit a space to the extent that one can say, "This is my home. I am not a foreigner. I belong here."' In this volume, Hamshire and colleagues (Chapter 6) highlight the

importance of belonging at university in student success. Creating such spaces requires both institutional and curriculum reform.

Some universities have initiated student support initiatives, such as foundation/ extended degree programmes[3] (EDP) and external student support courses, to try to bridge the articulation gap and mediate the language transition for some disadvantaged students. Recent research confirms that foundation programmes successfully decrease the articulation gap and increase the throughput rates of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Council on Higher Education 2013). However, the same research found that a lack of funding means that these programmes cannot be made available to all underprepared students. Furthermore, many of these programmes occupy 'low status' because they serve a minority of students, and are thus 'marginalised both academically and administratively', with students on these programmes often feeling stigmatised. This 'marginal status' often undermines the success of these programmes (Council on Higher Education 2013: 72).

Despite the formation of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) in 1999, the cost of higher education remains a limiting factor for many students. NSFAS aims to provide 'financial aid to students from poor and working class families in a sustainable manner that promotes access to, and success in, higher and further education and training, in pursuit of South Africa's national and human resource development goals' (NSFAS). It does this through loans, which may be partially converted to a bursary upon successful completion of all courses each year, however, high failure rates mean that many students are carrying the

[3] Extended degree programmes, also known as foundation programmes are designed to try to address the educational inequities in South Africa which are the legacy of apartheid, by providing extra support and time (four years instead of the standard three years) to assist students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds to succeed at University.

burden of ever increasing debt. Furthermore, while NSFAS has successfully doubled the number of students it funds each year since 2009 so that it funded 20 per cent of all university students in 2014 (NSFAS), it has been criticised for spreading its funding too thin and leaving its funded students with too little money to 'sustain the minimum conditions for university study' (Scott 2016). It has also been criticised for neglecting the 'missing middle'[4] (Scott 2016). The cost of higher education is not just an issue for those considering participating in higher education but also for those already engaged in higher education, as highlighted by the student protests at Universities across South Africa in 2015 and 2016. These students protested against upfront payments required by some universities, fee increases, the exclusion of academically eligible students on financial grounds, and argued ultimately for a free and decolonized higher education system in South Africa.

The central argument of the paper is that the students interviewed in this project faced tremendous challenges and yet some of them showed agency in the way they adjusted, learned to cope with the structural and cultural challenges, and eventually found more comfortable niches for themselves. The chapter describes and draws on longitudinal data relating to two of these students to illustrate our argument. We begin by describing the theoretical and methodological framing we have used to analyse and understand our data. We then present representations and descriptions of the journey of these two first generation students.

Theoretical Framework

[4] In South Africa, the missing middle are those whose parents earn too much to qualify for NSFAS loans, and too little to cover the cost of higher education

Previous longitudinal studies on the experiences of first generation students at South African Universities have shown that first generation students shift their identity over the period of their university careers (Bangeni & Kapp 2005; Kapp & Bangeni 2011). Therefore, in this chapter we will draw on Margaret Archer's notions of identity formation (Archer 2000) to try to understand the transitions in identity experienced by these first generation students. Archer's work is based on the complex relationship between structure, culture and agency. She argues that each has autonomy from each other and its own distinctive properties and powers called 'emergent properties' (Archer 1995). Culture is the 'social realm of ideas and beliefs' (Le Boutillier 2003), structure refers to the social realm of material resources (Archer 1995) and agency is 'one's ability to pursue goals that one values and that are important for the life an individual wishes to lead' (Walker 2006:165). Archer (2000) singles out some specific types of agency. Of interest to this study is Archer's concept of 'primary agency', which is the opportunities and constraints that we face as a result of the position we are assigned to on 'society's distribution of scarce resources' (Archer 2000: 261-262) .

The complex interplay between structure, culture and agency is mediated by reflexivity, 'the 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). This in turn is affected by our past experiences and our 'ultimate concern'. Ultimate concerns are 'internal goods that they [people] care about most'. The types of concerns vary from one realm of reality to another. In the natural realm, the main concerns are with physical wellbeing, in the practical world the main concerns are performative and in the social realm, the main concerns are with self worth. Archer (2000) emphasises the role of emotion in achieving our ultimate concerns as one cannot genuinely care about something without some sort of emotion. People act in the best interests of their ultimate concerns while subordinating others. This action takes the form of 'projects' or action paths that if fulfilled should promote

their concern. The possibility of projects is governed by two causal powers; those inside ourselves and those that form our contexts (contexts are represented by structure and culture). Archer's (2007) approach sees that although our context automatically influences the project to either facilitate or obstruct it, we act reflexively on the project, having a choice as to whether we will pursue it or not. We can also act reflexively around or against our context to try to circumnavigate any perceived obstructions. The idea that people can choose to implement practices that fit within the social structure, circumnavigate it or rebel against it might explain why some students when exposed to the same environment at a university experience different issues of identity.

Archer (2000) separates personal identity from social identity. For her, personal identity is based on our ultimate concerns and is formed through an internal dialogue. This internal dialogue is composed of three stages:

1. Discernment, when one identifies what is important to one and identifies projects worth pursuing,

2. Deliberation, when one weighs up the value vs. the opportunity cost of each of the different projects,

3. Dedication, the stage in the internal dialogue where one prioritizes one order of reality over another and thus, one ultimate concern over others.

Once one's personal identity has emerged, shaped by one's ultimate concerns, it shapes one's emotional reactions to everything or as Archer (2000) puts it, 'they have a prism on the world which refracts their first order emotions'. Although one's social identity forms part of one's personal identity and so the two relate dialectically with each other, Archer differentiates between the two. Our social identity derives from our relations with the social

order through our allocated positions as agents and our chosen roles as actors. The roles we choose to personify exist whether we occupy them or not and according to Archer (2000: 283) they have 'emergent properties' which are 'demonstrated by the pre-existence of roles, their greater durability over time, a capacity to endure, despite considerable changes in the personal features of their successive holders and the relatively autonomous powers of constraint and enablement which are lodged in the role, not the occupant, and can be lost (or shed) without loss of occupancy'. Archer and other critical realists have been reproached for not being critical enough. However we believe like Lemert (2003) who wrote a review of *Being Human*, that we can still learn from Archer, and that her notions of structure, culture and agency provide a useful framework for analysing our student interview data.

Methodology

We decided to use focus group methodologies so that students from diverse backgrounds could share their experiences in group discussions. However, focus group interviews have been critiqued because they can silence dissension and result in only one perspective being heard (Kitzinger cited in McMillan 2014). Furthermore, English is not the home language of the majority of our students, and speakers of English as an additional language might be silenced in a diverse focus group. Therefore the focus group methodology was complemented with a Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) approach. PLA is a collection of research approaches that commonly uses visual methods such as drawing to learn from and evaluate peoples concerns. A PLA approach regards participants as experts in their own lives and the methods are accessible to people with different levels of language and literacy and gives voice to often-marginalised people (Bozalek & Biersteker 2010). For our project, we felt that PLA could be a means to facilitate students who struggled to express their ideas in an additional language like English. If students could get their ideas down in the form of a

drawing this would enable them to refer to their drawings when they joined the focus groups. Language barriers would be removed and they would be free to express themselves through another medium.

Table 1. Participant demographics

Pseudonym	Degree	Pop Group	Gender	School Quintile	Urban/Rural	Home language
Andile	Science	Black	Male	3	Urban	Xhosa
Akani	Science	Black	Male	1	Rural	Sepedi
Thandi	Science	Black	Female	3	Urban	Xhosa
Akhona	MBChB	Black	Female	2	Rural	Xhosa
Beauty	Science	Black	Female	1	Urban	Xhosa
Lutho	Science	Black	Male	3	Urban	Xhosa
Lethabo	Science	Black	Male	3	Unknown	Siswati
Zanele	Science	Black	Female	5	Urban	Xhosa
Mandla	Science	Black	Male	4	Urban	Zulu
Siyabonga	Science	Black	Male	4	Urban	Zulu
Bongi	Science	Black	Female	3	Urban	Xhosa
Lungile	Arts	Black	Female	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
Paul	Arts	Black	Male	2	Urban	Xhosa

Data Collection and Analysis

This study was carried out in two phases. The first focused on the data from the PLA workshops. The second phase concentrated on the three focus group interviews. Ethics approval was received from the Centre for Higher Education and Development Ethics committee and each student signed a consent form allowing us to use their drawings and interview data. In the PLA workshop, students were asked to draw their ‘journey to’, ‘journey into’ and ‘journey through’ university. Explanation by facilitators of what was meant by each of these journeys was kept as brief as possible to allow students to interpret the prompts as they wished and thus express themselves freely. The ‘journey to’ was explained as their life

before university, the ‘journey into’ university was explained as their experience of the administration of getting into university, and the ‘journey through’ university was explained as their life since coming to university. Students were asked to be as creative as they wanted with their drawings. They were also asked not to confer until they were all finished their drawings so that they did not influence each other. Once all drawings were complete, each student was invited to present their drawing to one of the facilitators. These presentations were held individually so that students did not hear each other’s presentations. All presentations were video recorded for later analysis. Although we attempted to maintain a five-minute limit of student presentations, the wealth of information in some of the drawings made this difficult.

Three focus group discussions were held several weeks after the first PLA workshops. Randomly selected videos from the PLA workshop were shown. These along with the facilitator’s unstructured and open-ended questions were used to prompt the discussions. Focus group discussions were all audio-recorded and then transcribed.

Students from the original sample were invited to participate in another PLA workshop two years later to obtain a longitudinal perspective. In the second PLA workshop the students were asked to draw their experiences since the first round of interviews. Two researchers independently analysed the drawings and focus group transcriptions and common themes were identified. These were then grouped into overarching themes (see Table 2).

Although, as shown in Table 2, we obtained much thematic data from the student drawings and focus group interviews, the focus of this chapter will be on the journey of two students, Zanele and Mandla. They were chosen because their stories present several of the themes identified in the data from the larger group. Most of the data presented is drawn from

the students' explanations of their drawings, supplemented with data from the focus group interviews. These students faced tremendous challenges over the three years of their university studies, but their drawings also illustrate how they developed coping mechanisms that assisted them in overcoming these challenges.

Table 2. Themes identified in students' drawings

Themes identified	**% of drawings exhibiting a theme**
Challenges	87
Funding	80
Friends	80
Unhappiness / weeping / depression	67
Workload / test	60
Insecurity / stress	53
Career / future	33
Thoughts of dropping out / returning home	33
Time management	27
Negative residential experiences	20
Did not get first choice subject	20
Gangs, crime	20
Church	20
Death	20

Unemployment	20
Language	13
Bad living conditions	13

Characteristics of the students and their context of study

For the purposes of this research we have defined students for whom neither parent attended university as first generation. This means that some students' parents may have gone to an institute of technology or a teacher/ nurse training college. Both Zanele and Mandla are Black first generation students with an African language (e.g. Xhosa, Zulu) as their first language. At the beginning of this project, both students were enrolled in their first year of a Bachelor of Science degree EDP[5]. Both students grew up in urban townships however, Zanele attended a school, which during apartheid would have been categorised as White, and Mandla went to a school that under apartheid would have been categorised as Black. Their university journeys began at the University of Cape Town (UCT), which is a large research-led university. It is the top ranked African university on several prestigious ranking tables and boasts staff and students from over 100 countries. As part of its mission UCT promises to create an Afropolitan University and provide an environment that 'supports redress in regard to past injustices' (https://www.uct.ac.za/about/intro/). The university has made several policy changes aligned with this mission, for example, the 2013 Language Policy document attempts to encourage the use of languages other than English for learning, however

[5] See note 3

implementation of this has been slow. Despite these policy changes, the percentage of African and Coloured students attending UCT has only increased by 9 per cent over the last five years and figures remain below the demographics for both the country and the province.

Analysis and Interpretation of Drawings-

Zanele

[Fig 5.1 here]

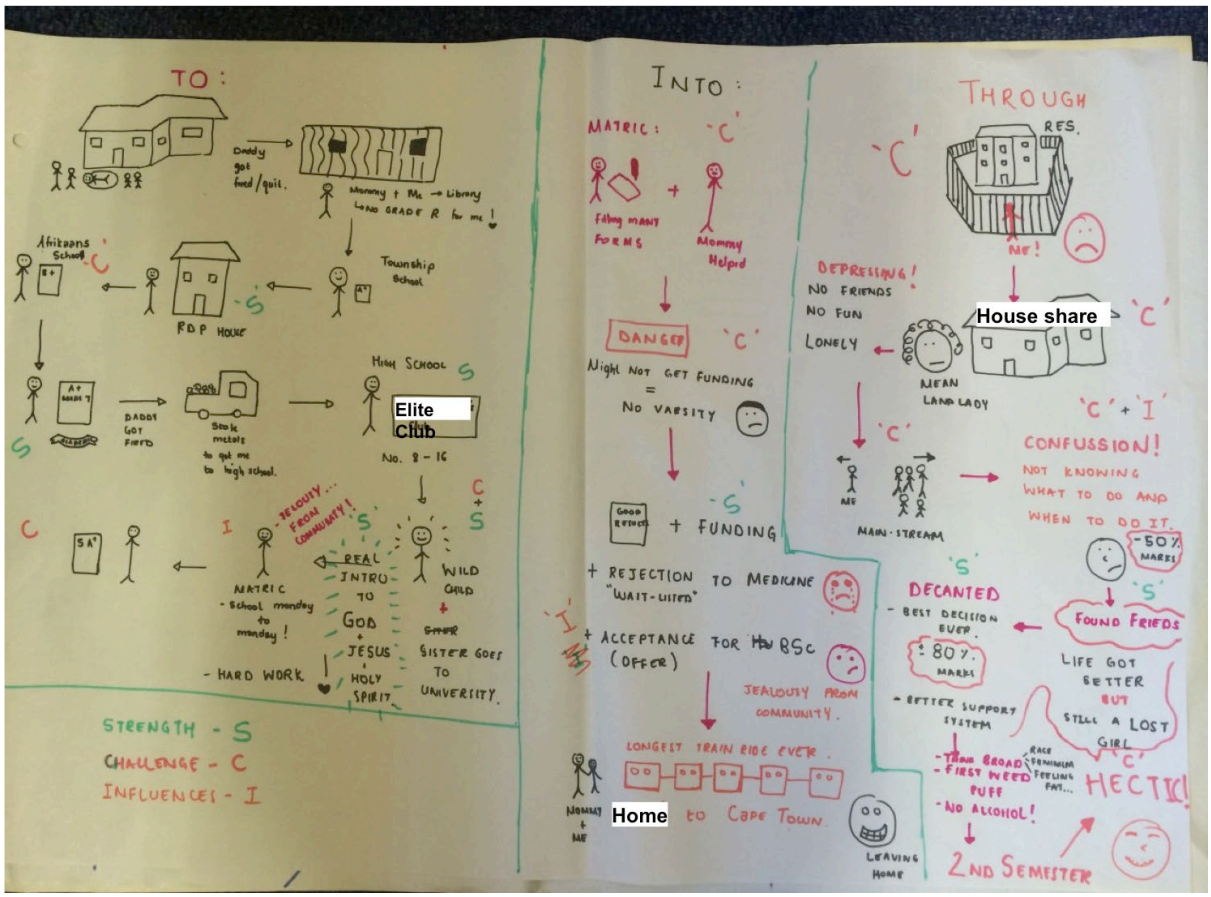


Figure 5.1: Zanele's journey to, into and through university. This drawing has been adapted to remove any identifying information

Despite the fact that Zanele went to a well-resourced high school she is not necessarily without disadvantage, as her story will highlight. Her story begins early in her life, thus she starts her story by highlighting her primary agency (opportunities and constraints) (Archer 2000). In Zanele's case, her opportunities seem to be both constrained and enabled by her father's unstable employment. For example, her choice of school was largely determined by where they lived which in turn was determined by her father's employment status:

> So yea I was born right, um in a nice big home and then my dad got fired and then we went to move to a shack in an informal settlement…I went to a township school, I was top student and then um my parents moved to an…ok another informal settlement where they got an RDP house.

Reconstruction and development programme (RDP) houses are government-subsidised homes. To qualify for such a home a person needs to earn less than a certain amount per year (R3500 in 2016). However, qualifying tenants do not always get a choice of where their new home will be. Thus Zanele's family financial situation meant that they had to move to an Afrikaans speaking area, which meant Zanele attended a school where Afrikaans was the main language of instruction. This had a negative effect on her marks, however she tells us that by the end of primary school, she is back to being an 'A student' again. However, problems arose again when her father lost his job:

> Then my dad got fired and he had to steal metals to hustle for us to get food and everything so that's how he took me to high school, to an English high school.

Through stealing, her father was able to get his daughter into an English high school. This is an example of somebody circumnavigating the system to achieve his or her goals.

While at high school, Zanele was again a top achiever, though she describes several phases that she went through:

> Then um, I became a wild child between grade 9 and grade 11. Like yea I was very naughty…Then early grade 12, I got a real introduction to God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, which was a very good thing for me.

Archer (2000) tells us that although children and young people cannot yet develop their personal identity they do have an internal conversation and this early internal dialogue is exploratory in nature, where they try to decide which projects are worth pursuing. In this instance, Zanele may have identified the church as a project worth pursuing but also tried several other things. Herrington and Curtis (2000: 372) suggest that many students seek and find a discourse community that offers social identities that enhance their development and that these communities serve as sponsors for their actions. It seems that Zanele found a sponsoring community in the church at a time when she had lost focus.

In terms of social support, Zanele had both constraints and enablements. Her mother seemed to encourage educational activities, which led to her excelling at school:

> Um my mom and I used to go to the library a lot…so because of that I was able to skip grade R and start grade 1 at 6 years old.

Her mother also seemed to be the big supporter of Zanele going to university:

> In my matric my mom and I filled in forms like for bursaries and everything and um yea she helped me a lot.'

And:

> I had the longest train ride ever from [Home] to Cape Town, my mommy and I actually and I was excited um yea'

She also tells us that she was in school seven days per week. It became clear in the focus group interview that this arose due to her involvement in an organisation that sought to assist students with potential by offering support on weekends. However, in the focus group interviews she tells us that becoming a member of this organisation saw the start of the disconnect between her and her friends. This disconnect grew when she went away to university. It seems that even the parents in her community are not very supportive:

> Like people really get jealous because their children aren't doing what I am doing. Their children are lazing around, stealing and everything and I am not like those children so yea…

Due to her family's fluctuating finances Zanele shifted from qualifying for NSFAS funding to being one of the 'missing middle' and back again. Luckily at the time of registration at university, her financial situation allowed her to get partial funding from NSFAS. Although Zanele got into university and got financial aid, she was upset that she had not been accepted into medicine. At university, Zanele found it difficult to make friends and she says that this was exacerbated by not getting into the residence system. Academically, her identity came under challenge:

> And then um, when lectures started, that's me going that way, so um it was really difficult for me. I couldn't catch on, I didn't know what was happening, I was confused um, I was getting like 50 per cent.

She was no longer the top achiever she had been in high school. This is what prompted her to move into the EDP:

> Um, I decanted [moved into the EDP], best decision of my life, and um I started to get like 80s plus, ok plus minus.

Zanele seems to foreground her 'performative concerns' (Archer 2000), wanting to achieve in the practical world. However, she still seems to be exploring who she is:

> I started to think broadly and I had my first puff of weed and of course no alcohol. And um thinking broadly in terms of race, feminism, feeling fat, of course I am a girl.

It was in the EDP that Zanele finally made some friends. [Fig 5.2 here]

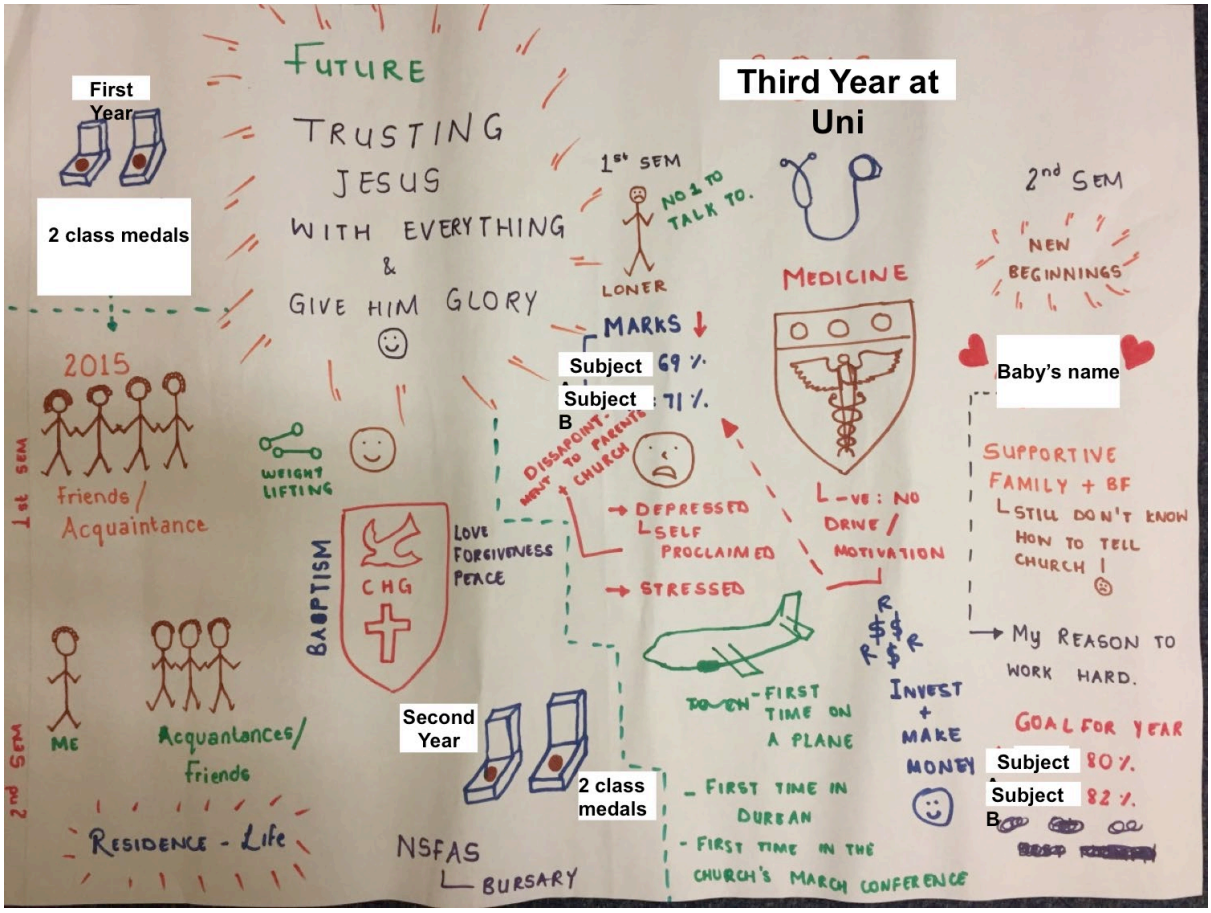


Figure 5.2: Zanele's journey from first year to third year. This drawing has been adapted to remove any identifying information.

At the end of first year this student received two class medals for her performance in exams and coursework, which shows her determination and motivation. She still had the same friends that she described in her earlier drawing, however this changed in second semester when they all started doing different subjects and Zanele started to see herself as a loner. Outside her coursework things were changing for her; she got baptised, started weightlifting and finally got into a university residence. She also received a government bursary due to her high marks and received two more class medals at the end of second year. This signifies the recognition by the government and university structures of her achievements. All this success

was motivated by her 'ultimate concern' (Archer 2000), which was to get into medicine. This paid off at the end of her second year when she was accepted for medicine:

> that was quite nice and here is my stethoscope (points at Figure 5.2) and then first semester it was quite rough this year um, also I was a loner even more so then [second year], I had no one to talk to and I was quite sad and my marks dropped because I think, well I say here (points at Figure 5.2), I was depressed…

Prior to this move from science to medicine, her ultimate concern (Archer 2000) had been to get into medicine and her main project (Archer 2000), achieving good marks in science, seemed dedicated to this. Since all projects are guided by one's ultimate concern (Archer 2000), it is not surprising that having achieved her ultimate concern she began to feel that she lacked direction and motivation:

> I didn't have motivation like I did before I wanted to do medicine and now that I have it, it's like what is going to happen now?

This lack of direction alone may have been enough to encourage Zanele to reopen her internal dialogue to reconsider her ultimate concern. However, it becomes evident at the beginning of second semester that there was more to the story than a change in performative concerns (Archer 2000):

> So second semester, new, new beginnings um so, I had a baby (giggles). Um yea her name is XXX and she is my reason to work hard and yea it's a girl and then um my family and my boyfriend have been quite supportive about it…

The unintended birth of a child represents an unintended change in circumstances and Archer (2000: 247) tells us that such drastic changes can destabilize commitments and call for a re-opening of the internal dialogue so that one can reconsider one's ultimate concern. Within this internal dialogue she would need to consider her concerns in all three realms of reality. In the natural world the fact that she was pregnant and the physical toll that this takes would have been a concern. In the practical world, she would have been concerned with her performance. According to Archer (2000: 198) 'the precise object of performative concerns are historically, cross-culturally and socially varied'; however it is clear from the above dialogue that for Zanele the object of her performative concern was her academic performance and she is not happy that her marks have begun to drop. Furthermore, the high standards that she holds for herself are highlighted in her drawing since it is clear that what she is considering bad marks are 69 per cent and 71 per cent. In the social world, her main concern is with letting people down by not performing her social roles appropriately. Zanele depicts two social roles (Archer 2000), that of daughter, clear from her constant reference to her parents, and that of Christian which is clear from her baptism, her wish to please the church and her excitement about attending the church conference. Archer (2000: 198-199) tells us that in becoming a member of a social group we cannot avoid the norms that shape social standing within those groups. There are two instances in her story where Zanele does not feel like she lives up to the norms of the social groups to which she belongs. Firstly, regarding her decrease in marks in the first semester, she says:

> most of my stress came from the fact that I had disappointed my parents and my church

and regarding the birth of her child at the beginning of the second semester she says:

and so the church I still haven't told them, its quite stressful

We assume here that her stress about telling her parents and the church about her marks is due to a perceived clash between her current social standing in those groups and that of a person with falling marks. Furthermore, we assume that the stress of telling the church about the baby is due to what she perceives to be a lack of alignment between the birth of her child out of wedlock and the norms of the church. It is possible that some of the feelings of depression that Zanele felt in the first semester may have stemmed from this destabilization and the need to reconsider her personal identity. It seems that having gone through this internal dialogue, her ultimate concern does change to that of caring for her child's future. However, through reflexively considering all her concerns as well as her support structures it seems that the project she undertakes towards achieving her ultimate concern, this good future for her child, remains the achievement of good marks so that she can get a good career.

Mandla

[Figure 5.3 here]

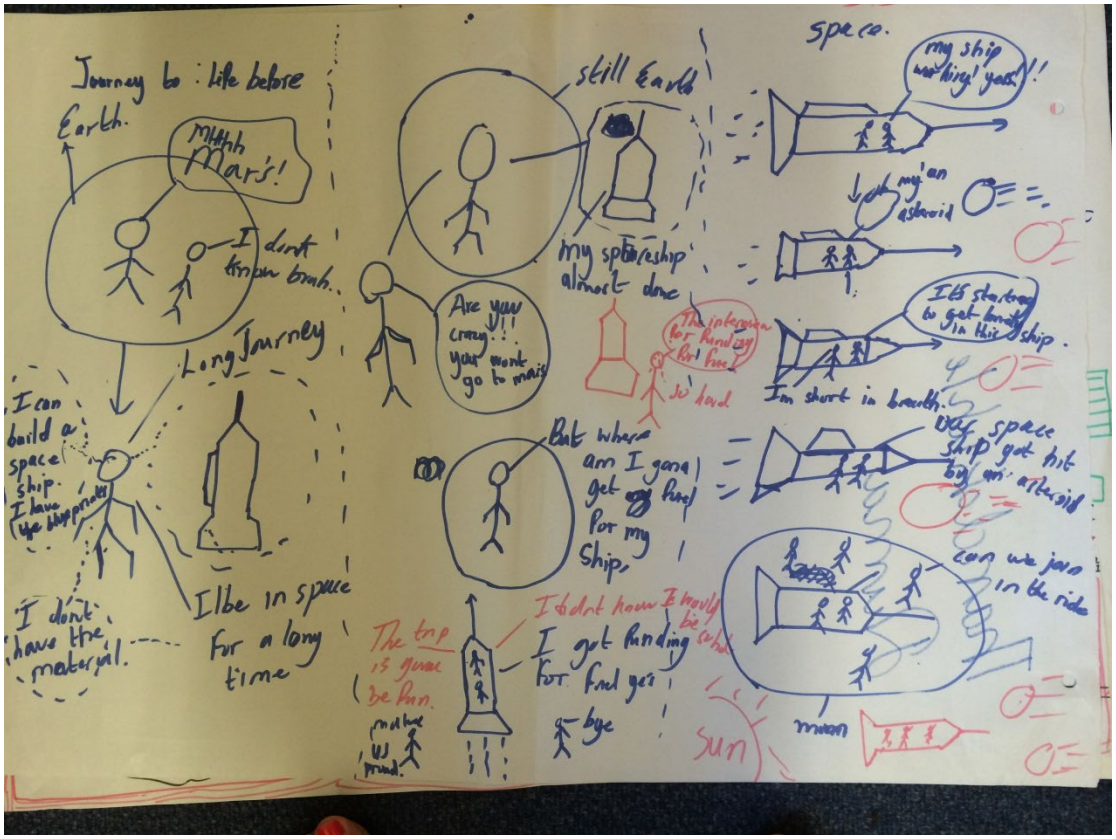


Figure 5.3: Mandla's journey into university.

In his first drawing (Figure 5.3) Mandla uses an extended metaphor depicting his journey as that of a space flight. In his interview he explained that his 'ultimate concern' was to land on Mars, which represented his degree:

> Circle represents earth, earth represents me in high school. Mars represents me getting my degree. On the side you see my friend, he's outside - he is not sure about whether he is going to go or not. Below, that is me visualising the space ship. The spaceship is what is going to take me to university.

To act in the best interest of his ultimate concern he undertakes the project of travelling through space - university. The first two panels are concerned with the launch and the various factors that constrain lift-off and the ways in which he circumnavigates these constraints. The

journey begins with finding the materials and building of the spaceship. Pointing to his drawing he says:

> In the speech bubbles I say, I can build a spaceship, I have the blueprints. In high school I was able to pass well because my grades were good so I thought that I was fit to go to UCT.

In other words in Archer's terms (2000) one set of the causal powers that determines the possibility of projects is present. In both the first and second panels, 'journey to' and 'into university', the student is represented as strongly framed by planet earth while preparations for the journey are made. This earth frame may represent structural boundaries that constrain the possibility of his project. Indeed, pointing to the second panel of the poster, he says:

> You see a person on the side – "are you crazy" – ways of demotivation, people telling me that since I was the first one to go to university, "you'll never make it".

It seems that even people who believed in his project of going to university did not believe that he could do it in the minimum time. He says:

> I'll be in space for a long time – from the beginning I decided to take four years instead of three because I was told by one of my teachers it was better to take an extra year because some people usually end up doing five years anyway.

The influence of people's comments and his own history reinforces the negative thoughts he was having about himself and represents a shift in his identity from being a member of his community to being both an outsider (indicated by his word 'crazy') from his community and a person who is unfit for a regular three year degree at the university. His comment 'probably yeah it's too big for me' implies that he doesn't think he is good enough for university. The longitudinal study of Humanities students by Bangeni and Kapp (2007) illustrates students experiencing similar rejections from their peers in their home communities. Despite these feelings of constraint, Mandla continued to pursue this project.

A structural barrier that stood in his way was the lack of 'fuel' (funding) for his spaceship, not only for the journey through university but also the journey to university from his hometown. He circumnavigated this barrier by applying for NSFAS funding. His acceptance into a university and his financial status make him eligible for this funding. The fact that this financial aid is means tested positions him as financially poor and different from those who do not need such funding. Although the structural processes here, in terms of government funding, facilitated his access to university, they also had the potential to constrain access in a very important way. The funding did not provide funds in time for transport to the university from his home, which was approximately 1650km away. It is unclear whether it was this student acting reflexively on his situation, that is, by approaching people for funding, that led to his teacher funding his travel. However it is likely that it was his position as a star student that led to his teacher funding him. Finally 'fuel' is found and the spaceship is shown at the bottom of the second panel in launching position ready to take off with Mandla and one of his friends represented as little stick figures in the departing spaceship.

In the third section of the poster, the journey through university, the spaceship is shown facing forward with vectors to indicate direction and forward motion. However in the

journey through university, asteroids hit the spaceship from time to time which Mandla says represent university tests. His portrayal of the tests as asteroids is interesting as it positions them as dangerous, with potential to damage the ship and thus his journey. However the fact that he has not shown an asteroid hitting the ship shows that he has the potential to navigate around them. Although, throughout this third section, Mandla's travels are supported by his friend and he is the only student in the group who did not refer to insecurity or stress in his poster, he does use the first person a lot when he describes the first section of his journey through university. This may be indicative of the loneliness he and his friend were feeling in the ship and the feeling of homesickness. It seems that they do not feel like members of the university community. This isolation is highlighted when he says:

> Before decanting [transferring to the EDP] we just went to the lectures, we didn't socialise, we didn't have time for that.

Here he attributes the lack of community to a lack of time, which would seem to be a structural obstacle, however in depicting what happened on a daily basis, he says:

> I would probably chill in my room and go to the lec[ture], look at the slides and think I would look at it later then go back to my room and forget about it.

A few weeks into his degree he failed a big test (the asteroid which badly damaged the spaceship), which meant he was advised to move into the EDP, depicted in the poster as the moon (bottom right hand corner). In the EDP he and his friend had more time to socialise and to make new friends who ask, 'can we join the ride?' These friends help to repair the spaceship and it is able to resume its journey. In this section of the student's description he starts to use the personal pronoun 'we' instead of 'I' which highlights his transition from a solitary individual at university to a member of the EDP community.

In the focus group interviews during their first year, Mandla tells us that his choice to come to UCT was determined by several factors, including the subjects he liked, financial prospects of each career, and the prestige of the various universities. When he had to make a final decision, he could not choose the programme that he wanted because the university which offered it required an upfront registration fee of R4000 which would not be covered by financial aid. Despite the fact that the rest of the fees for this degree would be covered by the financial aid, this initial fee was enough of a stumbling block to prevent him pursuing his chosen career. This is an example of where the NSFAS funding fell short of the policies of one of the universities in the country (or vice versa) and thus limited the students' choices. This ties in with the current wave of protests in South Africa where one of the major demands of the 2015 protests was the scrapping of such upfront registration fees. In terms of institutional culture, Mandla says that he knew what to expect of the university because he knew people in the year ahead of him. He spoke of how these students had gone through failure, exclusion and even suicide attempts. It is interesting that this information encouraged him to 'adjust that I will be alone and stuff so I really didn't have a problem with failure when I got here and missing back home'. He also talks about the different identities he needs to enact when people from home telephone; 'sometimes you've got loads of work and stuff and then you have to lie and say "oh it's okay, it's fine". You can't tell them that no it's hard coz they will start stressing.'

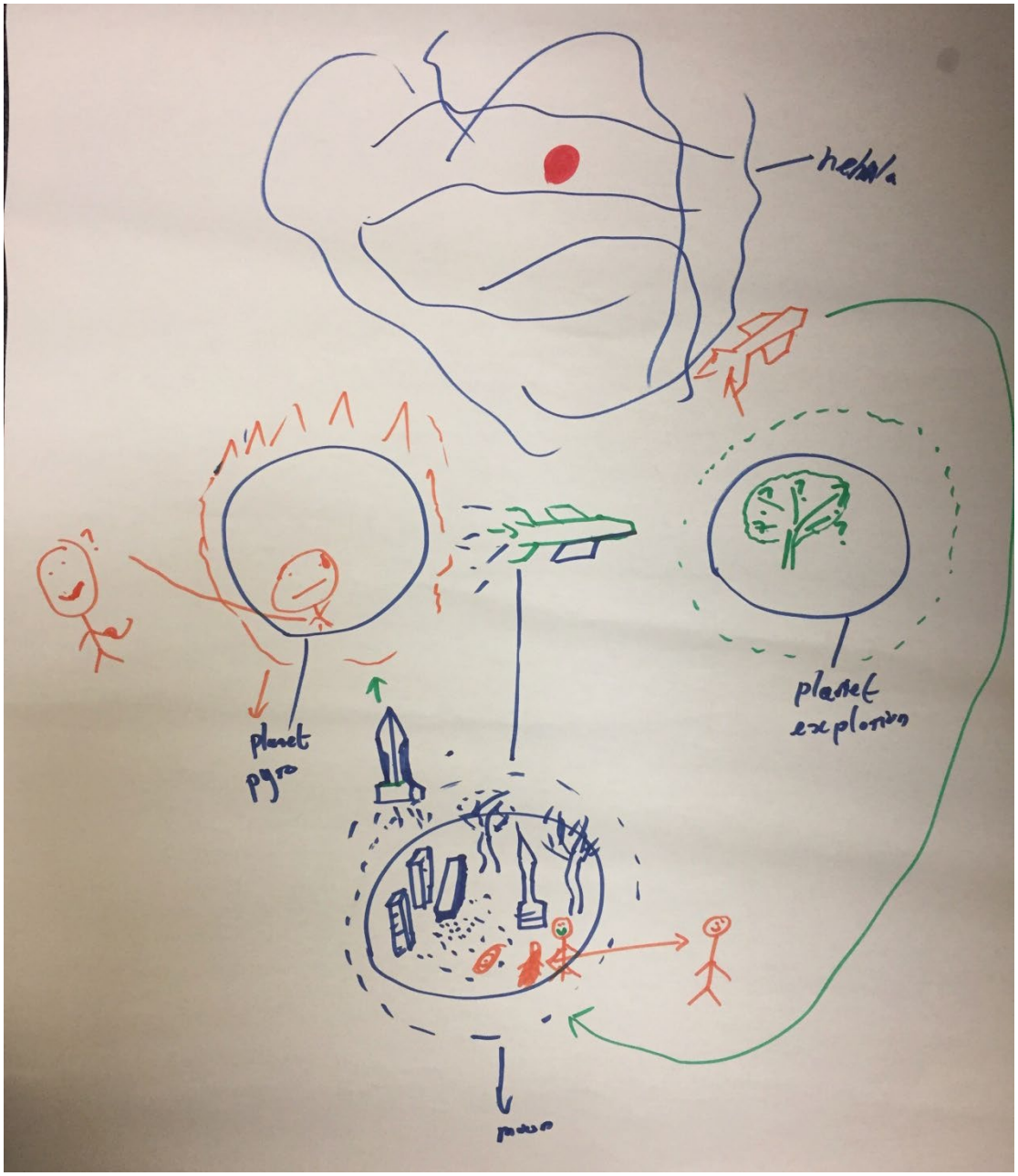


Figure 5.4: Mandla's journey from first year to third year.

[Figure 5.4 here]

When he is interviewed in his third year of university, Mandla continues the metaphor of the space ship. Instead of going directly to Mars (his career) he indicates that he has stopped on several other planets (Figure 5.4). Interestingly he starts his new description on the moon, which represented the EDP. On the moon he has built laboratories and he has

planted some trees, however when it comes to the creation of an atmosphere which he says represents his growth, he speaks in the passive voice as if he was not responsible for it. He says, 'This is the atmosphere which has been created around the moon.'

From the moon he moves to 'planet pyro'. He says that 'pyro' is fire. Here he is possibly drawing on what he learnt in one of his courses, which focused on the Greek origin of words. This planet represents the problems he has had. Although the student says that these problems are social, it is clear from his marks that his academic performance is also affected as his time on 'pyro' coincides with the year he failed some subjects. Given the consequences of this failure for his funding situation, we can assume that this failure has also landed him in more debt than he had wished to incur. It is clear from the expression on his face that he is not happy with the situation on this planet, however he says:

> I figured out that instead of being actually inside the planet, I can go out and look at the planet from the outside instead of enduring the problems, but stepping back and look at them from the outside.

Here Mandla is not merely accepting the problems but by distancing himself from them a little, he tries to understand them. In order to look at his problems 'from the outside' he decided to travel away from this planet to planet 'explorion' where he studied electives in other university faculties. This planet also has an 'atmosphere' which we can assume again represents growth. It also has a tree, bearing question marks, which he says represent his getting 'involved'. It is not clear what he means by 'involved'. He also says that it made him look at things differently and made him question the degree he was doing. From here, the spaceship goes to a 'nebula' which creates planets. The student has shifted from landing on planets which were already made to creating a planet which he says represents his thoughts

after doing the elective courses. This might suggest that they have opened up his mind to a reality that is alternative to the one he was faced with in science. He contemplated changing degree but in the end he returns to the moon to continue his journey in science. He says that he finally realised that '[I] can do anything that's possible as long as I put my mind to it because I have this ability of finding interest in what I am doing', which shows he has gained confidence in his own abilities despite failure and multiple challenges. He feels he should stick to the degree that he originally chose. Although he is focused on science again, he sees it from a different perspective. He no longer sees it as the only way of viewing things:

> I finally understand that I can step back from that and look at other things instead of being preoccupied in that particular place.

In Mandla's drawing, this is represented by the double-headed arrow, which shows him resonating between the moon (science) and space (other ideas). Interestingly he calls the other ideas his 'main thoughts', suggesting that they are currently more important to him. This again highlights the way in which his world has been broadened.

Conclusion

The stories in the two case studies, as well as those in the broader first generation group, highlight the role that NSFAS funding, foundation programmes and academic organizations provide in assisting first generation students to participate in higher education. NSFAS provided funding for students who otherwise could not afford to attend university. The EDP allowed these students to do better both academically and socially. As with Zanele, several of the first generation students in the broader group highlighted the role of outside organizations, such as iKamva Youth, Fundi, CHIETA, Hundred Up, and Kutlwanong, in

assisting top students in maximizing their academic potential. However, Zanele and Mandla's journeys highlight some of the challenges we identified in the larger first generation group, including challenges with adapting to the demands of studying at university, the financial burden of going to university, and feelings of unhappiness, depression and loneliness. The loneliness felt by these students is a response to both isolation and a lack of belonging at university and alienation from their family and friends at home. Their financial stories highlight the shortcomings of the current NSFAS system and the unstable financial situations of many families in South Africa. Although South African first generation students have noted language as an issue in adjusting to University (Pym and Paxton 2013), it is interesting that neither of these students and very few of the broader group explicitly mentioned language as an issue. It is possible, however, that some of the problems these students had with the academic demands of university were language-based. For the two students in the case studies it was more personal challenges that destabilised their commitments and called for them to reconsider their personal identities. Fortunately, the reopening of their internal conversations ultimately led to them continuing their academic careers with new motivation; though for some students such challenges might lead to a decision to leave university. We, as academics, could avoid this by understanding the types of concerns that students have and that the decisions made in the internal conversation are fallible, because they are based on the information and perceptions that students have at the time. Often academics tend to focus on students' practical concerns, however this chapter highlights that it may be concerns in either the social or natural worlds that cause a reopening of the internal conversation. By understanding this we can assist students by providing them with the correct information and discussing incorrect perceptions, hopefully allowing them to make informed decisions.

We are not suggesting that academics need to be counsellors, but that they need to realise that poor student performance could be an indication of problems in other aspects of their life, and to be able to direct them to relevant support services. Furthermore, it seems that universities need to do more to make the social environment more welcoming and inclusive to first generation students in order to ease their transition to university. Our institution has attempted to put support mechanisms in place and to create a more welcoming environment for all students, but there is often poor understanding of the challenges faced by first generation students. Our findings provide some important insights into the experiences of these students.

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