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Conceptualising higher education (i)mobility in contexts of socio-spatial exclusion in South Africa

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to expand the conceptualisation of [higher] educational mobility. We use data gathered through ten photo essays of youth living in an informal settlement in the Free State province of South Africa. The youths, aged between 18 and 24 years of age, are part of a scoping study whose objective is to explore the higher education challenges and opportunities for youth from informal settlements. Our broadening of the mobility concept draws on the youth's lived experiences which include attempts to, and constraints in accessing post-secondary education, including university - within the confines of socio-spatial marginalisation. Focusing on these youths' experiences not only addresses a broad social justice concern, but also a specific element of inclusivity which might have been long overlooked.

Full paper

Student mobility in higher education has been conceptualised in different [formal] ways, mainly consisting of the migratory aspect and with much of the literature on exchange programmes such as the Erasmus. While it is important to understand the movement of students, particularly in the growing discourses of internationalization of higher education, we argue that there are young people living in informal settlements whose local experiences

of mobility are often overlooked, yet important for the expansion of an inclusive higher education system. Our projects' aspirations have been to understand access to higher education in contexts of socio-spatial marginalization, including opportunities for non-formal learning. In our South African context, there has been little progress in developing informal settlements with evidence showing that young people living in these contexts face social, cultural, political and economic isolation. The youths' ability to do well in different dimensions of their lives (Suarez, Mitchell, & Lepore, 2014) including in higher education (Walker and Mkwanaenzi, 2015; Mkwanaenzi, 2019) and training (de Jager and Maserumule, 2021). As a result of these limitations, understanding their opportunities for, and experiences of mobility and immobility within the higher education space is an area that is useful in exploring the value and meanings attached to post-secondary education.

Our data collection methods involved an introductory workshop, individual interviews, a series of photovoice workshops, and a stakeholder exhibition workshop. During the photovoice phase, we asked the youth to document their past experiences, present opportunities, and prospects brought through photographs. The process of photovoice allowed youth to reflect on their own challenges and promoted critical dialogue on their experiences. We use this data to conceptualise the horizontal (elements within the youths' control i.e., motivation) and vertical influences (elements beyond the youths' control i.e., higher education policies that are exclusionary) of their mobility in this paper. From the photo essays, we deduce that youths' aspirations for higher education are not only shaped by their context of social and spatial exclusion but also that the past and present experiences within and outside this environment create a complex web in relation to their agility to pursue higher education. Diverse yet interconnected factors such as social (i.e., networks, exposure, knowledge), economic (i.e., financial), political (i.e., opportunities for engagement and interaction with higher education institutions), and cultural (i.e., family values, norms) are instrumental in determining the mobility of the youth within and outside higher education spaces.

As most of the youth in our study are outside the formal higher education space, we view their mobility to be at the periphery of

higher education rather than within. To untangle the complexity brought by this conceptualisation of (i)mobility, we draw on the capability approach (Sen, 1999) in our analysis. The comprehensive and multidimensional nature of the approach highlights the vertical and horizontal interconnected nature of emerging concepts of agency, conversion factors and capabilities and their complexity in understanding higher education mobility in contexts of socio-spatial exclusion. Although mobility is widely defined as movement from one place to another (horizontal), and as upward and downward mobility (vertical) in class systems, our conceptualisation does not present these two types as mutually exclusive, but as a relationship of interconnected elements of agency, conversion factors and capabilities. We also view mobility as a capability on its own, and this is illustrated by an assessment of available opportunities for the youth to expand their choices and capacity to access higher education. However, drawing on their past and present experiences as well as future aspirations, action taken by youth as agents of change in their lives draws on vertical and horizontal spheres, impacting on their higher educational mobility. For many of the youth, their agentic endeavours are hindered by the interaction of these multiple horizontal and vertical factors.

We acknowledge that with the increasing internationalization of higher education, institutions are inclined to be tactical in positioning their policies and programmes to align with global competitiveness (Naidoo, 2011). Yet, the values and meanings shared by the youth might be useful for higher education institutions in considering and developing locally valued and internationally relevant non-mainstream programmes that are context-specific in an education system that is increasingly calling for community engagement and impact.

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