

Students' experiences of South African undergraduate higher education (0255)

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Extended Abstract

In order to understand the transformative potential of higher education both within and beyond the South African context, there is a pressing need to understand the forms of curriculum, pedagogy and social experiences that support “epistemological access” for all students ([Morrow, 2009](#)). There is also a need to understand the ways in which transformative university experiences can lead to social change through the development of graduate professionals who are orientated to and contribute to the public good ([Walker & McLean, 2013](#)).

Research from a range of contexts suggests that, although undergraduate students' experiences at university can be individually and socially transformative, such potential is not always fulfilled ([Arum & Roksa, 2011](#); [Bok, 2009](#); [Schendel, 2015](#)). A number of critical dimensions have been identified: the need for students to have a sense of belonging in their institutions; the need for curricula to be designed to support students' personal engagement with disciplinary and professional knowledge; the need for students to experience teaching and teachers that are both supportive and set high standards ([McLean, Abbas, & Ashwin, 2015](#); [Shay 2008](#)). However, the means to create teaching and learning environments that support these dimensions is less clear. We also need to develop better understandings of how to provide non-traditional students with more equal access to disciplinary and professional knowledge ([Shay 2015](#)) and the role of students' wider university experiences in these transformative processes ([Ashwin & McVitty, 2015](#)) including co-curricular training offered by student affairs, student participation in student union activities and political activism ([Luescher-Mamashela, 2015](#)).

These issues have led us to focus on the following questions about students' experiences of undergraduate higher education in South Africa:

- 1) What pedagogic, curricular, and social elements are needed to construct undergraduate experiences that are personally transformative for all students?
- 2) How might such experiences prepare students to engage in social transformation?

In order to respond to these questions, we have developed three propositions about students' experiences of South African undergraduate higher education that we are interrogating through our work. These are:

1. Students' experiences are systematically unjustly and unequally differentiated, due to the material, structural and cultural conditions within and beyond institutions.
2. Institutional cultures, curricula and pedagogies are central to possibilities of the kind of personal transformation that contributes to the public good.
 - a. Transformative curricula and pedagogies depend on availability of professionally qualified and committed academics, supported by high quality academic development.
 - b. Transformative curricula and pedagogies depend on flexible programme provision that takes account of student diversity.
 - c. Transformative curricula and pedagogies depend on resource allocation that takes account of the differentiated material conditions of students and institutions.
3. Students' experiences beyond the curriculum can play a key role in personal transformation that contributes to the public good.

In this paper, we will explore the team's progress in reviewing these propositions in relation to South African undergraduate higher education and consider the possible implications for other higher education systems of our findings to date.

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