**REPORT**

# TSP STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN
## A SOUTH AFRICAN EDUCATION AND ENVIRONMENT PROJECT STUDY

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# Abstract

As a historically white university (HWU), the University of Cape Town (UCT) presents a unique environment for first-generation, historically excluded students, the consequences of which are that student experiences are often laced with exclusion, dissonance and epistemic injustice. Nevertheless, the findings of this research study suggest that black students' experiences at UCT vary, and for many of these students', despite significant challenges, they believe in their potential to succeed at UCT. Success is, however, defined in terms of upliftment and economic empowerment.

UCT KNOWLEDGE CO-OP

The UCT Knowledge Co-op facilitated this collaborative project between SAEP and the University of Cape Town.

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# I.  OBJECTIVE

This study set out to provide extensive insight as to the experiences of SAEP's Tertiary Support Programme's (TSP) students at the University of Cape Town (UCT). It is hoped that this study will contribute to informing SAEP's support practices directed at their students at UCT.

# II.  Guiding Questions

How do SAEP's TSP students perceive their universities?

a)  What challenges and opportunities exists?

b)  Which are the greatest stressors students' experience?

c)  What support exist, and what structures access to these supports?

# III.  BACKGROUND ON STUDY

This qualitative research study was conducted with the voluntary participation of SAEP's Tertiary Support Programme's (TSP) students. SAEP's Tertiary Support Programme caters to students from under-served communities by providing them with financial, academic and psycho-social support to help combat socio-economic challenges that might hinder their success at university.

The data for this study was collected through face-to-face in-depth interviews lasting over 45 minutes on average at the University of Cape Town. Ten students were interviewed, seven from the SAEP TSP programme and three from the UCT Humanities Faculty's Extended Degree Programme.

Over the course of the interviews, strict ethical considerations in addition to voluntary participation were adhered to. The rights of the participants to anonymity and confidentiality, rights to withdraw from the study at any given time and a general consideration of participants needs, values and wellbeing were upheld. Most importantly, an informed consent agreement binding me as the researcher to these important ethical research principles were signed by both parties. Furthermore, following the interview process, the data collected for this research study was organized and analysed with the aid of NVivo 10, a qualitative research software package.

# Key Findings

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## 1. Introduction

Contained under the following sub-headings are answers to the guiding questions necessary to satisfy the objective of this study. Numerous themes such as the nature of students' experiences, access to support structures and the specific challenges they face at the university were addressed and are provided below.

## 2. What is the nature of black students' experiences at a HWU?

Different aspects of university life present various types of experiences for black students. Socially, academically and otherwise, findings show that black students encounter challenges at UCT which significantly shape the nature of their experiences at the university. Nevertheless, in spite of these challenges, participants also shared positive remarks about UCT and some of the rewarding aspects of studying at UCT.

### 2.1. Experiential Dissonance

The nature of students' experiences at a HWU encompassed complex issues pertaining to academic demands, cultural and academic capital, experiential dissonance and other issues regarding social identity and its impact on student experiences at UCT. The findings show that factors relating to "experiential dissonance" and *"capital"* feature quite prominently in providing insight about the nature of participants' experiences. Experiential dissonance generally refers to the evidence of a noticeable disconnect between students' needs and expectations of the university and what is catered for and available at the university. It appears that many black students view UCT as a peculiarly unwelcoming environment where they are shouldered with a burden to adjust and/or assimilate in order to perform adequately as a UCT student. Participants offered a plethora of responses which affirm this point, one participant went as far as referring to UCT as a new society; *"Yeah I think for me it is that because we [are] in this new society now which is like UCT society umm [and] we tend to be lost"*. Evidently, experiential dissonance also entails an experience of feeling lost, out of place and at

most alienated. *"I don't think it is a place for me man, I don't feel a sense of belonging to this place, I don't think ahh because what this place tries to do to me each and every day, it tries to pull me towards this place instead of looking at my own suffering and stuff that I need to get to. So in a way I feel like it is making me different from what I think I am, from who I think I am so with the whole mind-set the way I think now in this environment you get to feel excluded in a way"*. This is another quote which further affirms this point that these black students experience the UCT environment as often exclusionary, and in many ways disconnected from their lived experiences. UCT as a university is ultimately viewed by these black students as a place where not enough is done to prioritize their backgrounds, their expectations and the needs of their communities.

*"It [UCT] doesn't speak to the history and what it means today, for everyone else who is not white"*.

Participants' social identities, as explicated through analysing experiential dissonance, form the basis on which they feel academically and culturally unaccounted for at the university. Consequently, the issues addressed under experiential dissonance largely speak to the social nature of students' experiences at UCT which in turn influence the experiences they have in other areas of university life. In the area of academics for instance, the findings showed that black students feel generally confident about their competence and ability to work hard and excel at their respective degree programmes. For example, one participant stated that *"I think my problem with UCT has never been with academics"*, while another relayed that *"when it comes to tests I do very great"*. However, despite all 9 students expressing confidence in their ability to excel academically, a prominent factor stated by them that constrains their ability to fully participate academically at UCT is the total exclusion of all other official SA languages and the dominance of the English language instead as the language of instruction.

## 2.2. Academic Challenges

The dominance of English language as the only language of instruction adds another layer to the experience of exclusion and alienation which black students are subjected to at UCT. The findings showed that language is a symbolic indicator of access or lack thereof to the dominant culture of the university. Majority of participants relayed that their familiarity with the English language is secondary i.e. that English is a second, third and even a fourth language, and as such they encounter considerable difficulty in using it in such a rigid academic manner. Second

and third English language speakers are unfairly put at a disadvantage, and students feel strongly that this is an unjust situation: "*even during the break, if you are a first language English speaker, not just in class but like outside the environment, or at home and everywhere else then it is practice for you, it is learning [..] Here also this writing in English has to be proper and that is also what has been killing me the most*". Another participant stated that "*it was a big change, it was very different from my school, the use of English in every lecture so it was like even if you knew something you would be afraid to say in class because you don't know how people are gonna take your accent, how they are going to take your answers*". The dissonance in this regard is glaring as it appears that UCT does not cater to the diverse linguistic needs and strengths of its diverse student body.

The implication of this language issue is such that students who do not have a strong command of the English language have to work twice as hard as other students who do. This evidently fractures the ideal environment where all students should be given an equal chance at excelling at university. Instead, the reality is one where participants recounted their experiences from first year, with one of them stating that "*I had to cover the space, I had to make up the fact that I didn't go to an English school*". While academic writing particularly essay writing, referencing and in general familiarising oneself with the academic content and demands of particular courses were cited as significantly challenging mostly during the first year of study, language evidently compounds students' abilities to fully participate at a HWU such as UCT. Nevertheless, despite the prevalence of the aforementioned challenges, findings showed that black students at UCT also feel positively about a range of other factors and experiences.

### 2.3. Positive Remarks

Participants offered positive remarks about the availability of technological resources on campus, all participants spoke of their appreciation for the infrastructure in place at UCT. Participants further commended UCT for the availability of certain support structures such as the writing centre which they find useful and of necessity, especially given the language issue. One participant mentioned that the writing centre offered her the assistance she needed when she had to work harder to compensate for UCT's failure to accommodate other languages besides English: "*there are writing centres, it is just that I had to work harder than anyone to cover that, to cover the lessons*". Other participants relayed appreciation for facilities such as the libraries and the computer laboratories, "*they have all the supporting structures that I need like they have libraries, they have like labs they open for 24 hours and for me that's like enough*

*for you to study [...] even in res like they have those spaces that you can go and study and yea"*. Two other key features of UCT which participants find indispensable are student residences and the availability of academic support structures. *"I think I appreciate the fact that at UCT, there is accommodation, like I mean I won't be able to go back and forth, well I will be able but it will be even harder for me because it was already hard. It is already hard to study here so it will be even harder if I had to go back and forth like attending classes"*. Concerning academic structures, participants find the existence of the HUMEDU as well as the assistance of the SAEP to be incredibly useful and of tremendous benefit. *"Academic structures uh EDU your SAEP, they try so hard to assist me and stuff and I thank them [...] I get to be supported also like in terms of academically in that midst of trying to find where I stand and stuff I get that support academically which is very convenient and helpful to me so things like EDU, SAEP yooh"*.

The above remarks indicate that students are agents who in certain capacities make use of the resources available to them, oftentimes to counteract the ways in which they are underserved by the institution. These remarks also show that there are structures and mechanisms in place at the institution which help facilitate a positive environment for students. The following discussion uncovers the structures and mechanisms in place to assist black students in tackling the challenges they face at UCT.

## 3. What support structures are in place to facilitate an enabling experience for black students' at a HWU?

A plethora of different forms of support structures were uncovered as existing and available to students at UCT. However, most prominent support structures uncovered focused on academic support. The findings showed that these students generally make more use of existing academic support structures despite being quite knowledgeable about the various forms of support structures available at UCT. These available support structures, their unintended consequences as well as the effectiveness thereof are subsequently discussed.

### 3.1. Diverse Forms of Available Support Structures

The nature of support structures available at UCT range from financial assistance, psychosocial support and a general catering to the improvement of soft skills e.g. linguistic skills, analytical skills and overall writing skills. Provided below are quotes from participants highlighting the different forms of support structures available:

1. *In some of my departments the people are more umm like we want you to do well to get through and we have all these things in place for you to get through to make sure you can get good marks and you can land these **scholarships[1]** so maybe like umm in our [anthro/politics] department there's this **writing tutors** that help you to write better essays and things like that.*

2. *You can always go to the **EDP tut** uhh sometimes you will be dealing with concepts in one stream, one course and then you go to your **EDP courses** and it is the same concepts as well and they link it together and everything makes more sense and really helps you.*

3. *Then I heard that we gonna get R3700... Or R3000 what for a book allowance, I was so excited for **Financial Aid.***

4. *I get support financially from **SAEP** and they also support me like, well last year I was part of their **mentorship program** and it was like sort of helpful.*

5. *I think like UCT has the tools that I need to succeed because there's writing centres, there's tutors, there's um um what's this thing called down there in near Forest hill? Interviewer: the wellness center? Yes, **the wellness center**, there are also, you can also consult lectures, I think it is just lies within a person whether to use like the facilities.*

The findings provided above is a key summary of the range of support structures mentioned by participants, whether participants found them useful or not, they appear to have knowledge of their availability. Subsequently, I shall now proceed to offer a more detailed discussion of participants' perspectives about the aforementioned support structures as well as their perceived effectiveness or lack thereof.

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[1] Support structures and mechanisms are highlighted in bold.

## 3.2. Stigma and Othering

During the initial stage of the coding process, responses about support structures showed that participants held diverse views about the structures in place, however, a significant amount of participants remarked about feeling "targeted", which suggested an experience of othering and stigmatization. While preliminary literature review did not focus on highlighting issues pertaining to othering and stigma in relation to support structures, a further review of literature was conducted in response to the emergence of these issues from the data. Available literature on stigma and othering showed that an unforeseen consequence of a focus on "disadvantaged" students by the EDP access programs for instance, is the unwitting perpetuation of stereotypes (Mann 2008; Swail 2002 in Pym and Kapp 2011:1-2). According to Pym and Kapp (2011:2) the history of academic development is seen to exacerbate students' experiences of being 'othered' and marginalized. The findings for this research study found that this argument carried much weight for a significant number of participants. Here is a quote validating this claim: "*I think umm, what I think yeah the program comes from very great intentions and but it really does inform like the stigmas because yeah you wouldn't find a white person from whatever in there, in the program*". Two other different participants stated the following: "*Well EDU has been associated with okay you didn't, you weren't good enough at school, you come from a poor background and whatever so for me it was like oh God I am that girl from the townships who didn't do well at school*". The second participant comments on how limiting the identities imposed upon them as EDP students are, evidently being critical about the negative association made between socioeconomic background and being an EDP student: "*umm it makes me feel bad because umm one, there's like umm people that are in the EDP, they are people who come from "these" backgrounds [..] but this is true but can we maybe just don't look at it that way because we, I don't know, but yeah I think there is a way that people can look at in like differently because we are not just that, yeah there is more to us than that*".

A third of the participants experience the EDP as stigmatizing, this stigmatization was uncovered to stem from the inferiorization of the high schools they attended and in general the backgrounds participants come from. Majority of the participants also conveyed feeling that being an EDP student often wrongly defines who they are and how their peers perceive of them. However, many of the participants disagreed that being on the EDP stream means that they are inferior, academically or otherwise. Participants in fact find the EDU[2] to be helpful, there was

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[2] This is the colloquial abbreviation with which students refer to the extended degree programme, the EDU in place of the EDP stands for the Extended Degree Unit (EDU)

a general consensus among the participants that they find available support structures, including the EDP, to be effective and instrumental to good academic performance at UCT.

### 3.3. Examining Available Support Structures

According to the findings available support structures at the university include; Financial Aid, the Writing Centre, academic and psycho-social support from SAEP and EDU, the Wellness Centre, the Libraries and lastly the Computer Laboratories. A discussion of the effectiveness of these structures is provided below.

- **Financial Support**

Firstly, many of the participants mentioned that the financial support which they receive through scholarships, stipends and UCT's financial aid counts as their biggest source of support. *"I guess I am getting my biggest support through financial aid because I am able to come back each year because they have covered my fees, imagine life without having financial aid I would never be able to pay such amount of money, like there is no other way I will be able to cover this amount except I did get some bursary, but like I think I consider it as my biggest thingy".* This is the general sentiment conveyed by majority of the participants in regard to financial support, as eight out of nine of the participants of this study are first generation university students. Majority of the participants come from working class backgrounds where their parents either dropped out of high school or stopped schooling at grade 12 or even at primary school level. In providing a response to one of the interview questions, one participant mentioned that her grandmother supports her and that she works as a domestic worker: *"ohh, this other day my grandma was working in Rondebosch, she's a domestic worker".* Another participant's response to her parents schooling history was that *"they [parents] only did primary yeah both of them".* Therefore, coming from low-income earning households, it evident why financial support is imperative and important to these students. Also, considering that a Bachelor of Arts or Social Science degree at a historically white university such as UCT will cost no less than R49, 440 excluding all other expenses (UCT Fees Handbook 2017: 8). University education has evidently been placed beyond the reach of students from working class backgrounds and as such financial assistance is imperative.

Black students receive financial assistance from a range of support structures which have financial support mechanisms in place. According to one participant, *"financially if you want*

*textbooks, and you really don't have help for textbooks and some other material"* SAEP provides. Another avenue for financial support comes from UCT's financial aid where one participant mentioned that in addition to other living expenses *"we [gonna] get R3700... or R3000 what for a book allowance, I was so excited for financial aid"*. Financial aid contributes tremendously towards settling university fees for these participants and to a lesser degree book allowances and living expenses. For this reason, five out of the nine students interviewed for this study supported by UCT's financial aid work part time during the semester in order to supplement the needs not met or covered by financial aid; *"I got uhmm a part job [...] I am tutoring learners from primary and high school from Gugulethu"*. Furthermore, only two of the nine participants interviewed are fully supported by their parents i.e. university fees and expenses; of these two participants, however, one works part time over the weekends to earn money towards his living expenses. Evidently, findings suggest that many black students are faced with a responsibility to balance their time between working to earn money to support themselves and the academic demands that come with being a university student. In some cases, students earn money so as to support their families at home as well: *"I have always had jobs in and outside of this place, uhm for extra cash, for groceries, or to help out at home when there's something needed"*. This is undeniably an incredible responsibility for a student with demanding academic obligations, as such examining the relevance and effectiveness of the academic support structures available to black students considering this demanding reality becomes necessary.

- **Academic Support**

Findings showed that students receive what is perceived to be their most relevant academic support from both the SAEP and the HUMEDU. Participants overwhelmingly offered positive remarks about their experiences with these two parties. The stigma associated with being an EDP student aside, participants perceive the HUMEDU as an invaluable resource which they are often grateful for. Sentiments regarding the EDU read similarly to this one offered by one participant: *"You are on the EDU program which is fine because it will stand you a better position when you take those prerequisites to do those courses, you will do better"*. Participants believe that the EDU exist to offer them extra help which they believe there is real need for. One participant commented as follows: *"my understanding is that I am receiving a lot of extra help, extra time within my degree [from EDU] so there's no excuse for failure so I should do well and umm, I just feel grateful"*. Another participant went as far as offering to rate the EDU

out of 10: *"I would rank it as a 10 out of 10 because if ever you have a question or anything that is not covered in your normal tut that you have to go to, you can always go to the EDP tut"*. Ultimately, findings suggest that black students believe that the mechanisms in place offered by the HUMEDU are of tremendous use to them, particularly the tutorials and some of the Extended Degree courses. More so, findings further showed that students believe that the EDU exists to prioritize their academic interests by way of paying careful attention to their academic performances and promptly intervening when the need arises. This response by one participant sums up this point: *"EDP is like that mother figure which pulls you to the side not because you have done anything wrong but because she knows you might need it and that you can come to her anytime when you need it"*.

Similarly, SAEP offers academic support which participants consider useful, the most commonly cited and seemingly most rewarding academic support according to participants is SAEP's mentorship programme. SAEP's mentorship programme provides students with the opportunity to be paired with a mentor who has considerable amount of social and academic experience in the university. One participant stated that this mentorship opportunity sparked his initial interest in SAEP, he said: *"there are also mentors which are really good, I was attracted to those"*. Mentors primarily helped them with academic demands, however there was also room to speak to their mentors about non-academic issues. Generally, SAEP coordinators dealt with the varied non-academic nature of issues their students encountered at UCT. Mentors assist with reading and editing assignments, they help with referencing and many other academic related issues: *"He [mentor] would even teach me how to reference in APA format"*.

Evidently, participants receive all sorts of academic support from the mentorship programme which contributes towards excelling at their academics. In addition to the mentorship programme, a factor which is less of an academic support mechanism but rather a characteristic of the SAEP which participants experience as beneficial to their academics is approachability. Participants generally commended the ease with which they are able to approach SAEP for any sort of assistance: *"SAEP is like doing fairly well you know because I like the relationship that me and SAEP have you know just like I keep going there and actually umm I appreciate for me you know"*. There appears to be a certain feeling of ease and familiarity with which all the participants supported by SAEP express how effective they perceive SAEP to be. Findings suggest that this might stem from the long standing relationship SAEP has built with their students from high school. In speaking about her relationship with SAEP, one participant

commented that despite being supported by both SAEP and HUMEDU, she frequently sort assistance from SAEP over the HUMEDU as a result of this factor. A detailed correspondence between this participant (P) and the interviewer (I) on this issue is provided below:

*P: They [EDU] actually did [help] but I was just like, just out of this thing that was going on. I just didn't like things, I didn't like the system. Like you don't understand [pauses and sighs]. It was just like too much.*

*I: So much that the EDU also felt like part of the system?*

*P: Yeah and it felt like part of the hardship, so yeah I guess like my hope that time was relying on SAEP for me to get help.*

*P: Why did you feel SAEP was the better uhmm..?*

*P: Because I already  know them from high school, I've been with them, they understand me better than whoever I'd go to here and they will help me as much as I want them to. I mean like I couldn't, who could I give my whole assignment to, to check for me in UCT? While there is thingy, there is writing center but I had to book for that and maybe you will only get next week.*

This correspondence is provided in such detail because it sheds light on a crucial issue as to what structures black students' decisions to seek assistance from one support structure over the other. The findings evidently showed that the issue of preference is linked to familiarity with particular support structures as well as certain time constraints. The perceived shortcomings of the support structures available to students will be discussed next.

● **Shortcomings and Other Forms of Support**

Despite lauding certain support structures as effective, findings showed that participants held certain reservations about some of these same support structures. One such crucial reservation entailed participants expressing that they perceived the EDP as being no different from the university in its culture and its practices. For these participants, the EDU reproduces the challenges which they feel are present and constraining at UCT. For example, the detailed correspondence provided above offers significant insight into how black students feel about approaching the EDU for assistance: "it felt like part of the hardship". According to findings, some of the participants perceive the EDU as being part of the "system" rather than being different from it; a system which encompasses institutional forms of discrimination and exclusion: *"it is the life that we (black students) live here that makes the whole thing or situation harder than uh anything else"*. It is primarily for reasons of this nature that

participants feel generally less inclined to seek assistance from this support structure. Consequently, this sentiment about the EDU held by a few participants suggest that when available academic support is devoid of actively recognizing and addressing the institutionalized cultural hegemony prevalent at UCT, it falls short of being perceived as offering genuine academic assistance.

Other criticisms levelled against the EDP were criticisms about time, where participants expressed that: *"honestly for me the two hours [of EDP tutorials] is too long, yea it is too long for us to concentrate like for like 2 hours"* and another participant expressed that being on the EDP feels like being *"given less time and more work so to say, [...] given that time to work under pressure to be able to still produce quality work without time being on our side basically"*. Most strikingly, a participant made this comment regarding the four year time period required for the EDP degree: *"the intentions [of the EDP] are to help us right but at the same time it makes us extend our years which doesn't really - I don't know how to put this but - we trying to improve our situations as quickly as possible but it makes us to spend more time"*. These perceived shortcoming of the EDP as discussed evidently carry unfavorable implications, most significantly for students who feel discouraged to approach the EDP for assistance, it also compromises the work the EDU sets out to accomplish.

Criticisms of a lesser magnitude were also levelled against SAEP and these criticisms were generally issues pertaining to preference and time management on part of participants rather than shortcomings of SAEP. A couple participants merely relayed that some of their SAEP obligations e.g. regular meetings, monthly reports, meetings with mentors were time consuming. *"I was like do I want a mentor, I ticked no because that's like time consuming. Yeah that's time consuming"*. More significantly, a noteworthy issue was raised by one participant regarding approaching SAEP and the process of proving financial need: *"SAEP, there's monthly reports that you submit and they support you with like a little stipend, [...] there's like stuff you have to do and sometimes you are just like I don't want to do that all the time, keep your money - but not to be rude. It just gets frustrating, you have to go through all these processes with NSFAS, SAEP, with everyone, like for a little more money so sometimes you are just like it is fine sharp I'll just live"*. Evidently, this student feels rather strongly about the constant need to, in some way, prove and perform poverty every time financial support is needed. This is evidently the result of how current commodification practices on higher education exacerbate larger structural arrangements in the country which perpetually place full

access to university education beyond the reach of students from poor and working class backgrounds.

Lastly, the least spoken about but mentioned support structure was the Wellness Center. Similar to support structures such as the writing center, majority of the students were aware of the availability of this structure to students, however there was no input regarding participants making use of this support structure in aiding students' abilities to excel at UCT. The Wellness Center offers a host of services to students either free of charge if on UCT's financial aid or at fee depending on the nature of support required. Given that physical and mental health is the priority of this support structure, it holds strong potential for mental, emotional and psychosocial wellbeing which could be of tremendous benefits to students. However, whether as a result of the limitations of this research or other factors, it appears that psycho-social forms of support are not as prominent among these students in comparison to academic and financial forms of support.

## 4. How do black students at a HWU define success and to what extent do current support structures enable their definitions of success?

Success refers to the desires, goals and/or outcomes associated with students' understanding of what a university experience can offer. To varying degrees, students further their education beyond schooling in order to achieve several objectives, moreover students hold certain preconceived perceptions as to the nature of the university environment which would allow for the fulfillment of their intended goals. Hence, this sub-research question deals with highlighting the various definitions of success black students hold onto in deciding to pursue a university qualification. Findings from the preceding sub-research question further provide bulk of the answers to the second half of this sub-research question which deals with current support structures, and whether or not they enable students' definitions of success.

The findings strongly showed that for many of the participants, success is framed around a socio economic objective which seeks the economic empowerment: *"You've seen the standard of living you've had to go through, so you'll understand what it means to be a poor black without education in this country that like on its own forces you to get this education"*. The dominant narrative around defining success for these black students revolve around ensuring a higher

socioeconomic status for themselves and their families. Essentially, the findings showed that participants are interested in obtaining the necessary economic capital which they believe will secure a future different from the poor to working class conditions that they are currently familiar with. There are several complex and intimate factors which propel black students to perceive the benefits of a university education in this way. Firstly, eight out of the nine students interviewed for this study are first generation university students, as mentioned earlier. *"We are the first umm people to go to varsity so they've [family members] been working hard at restaurants and being cashiers and whatever but for me that was like okay they are working hard but there's not much improvement at home so I think maybe getting a degree would help to maybe for me earn better money and we can make more improvements"*. This quote among others highlight that definitions of success for black students are significantly influenced by structural factors which dictate the sort of choices they are able to make. *"Because now instead of thinking about yourself, you think for many people, even if I say UCT is not a kind of place for me I want to go to somewhere else, they will be like Ah! The way they will be disappointed and stuff so that fear of disappointing parents and stuff"*.

Secondly, it appears that for students to believe that a university degree can guarantee such an economic goal, it means that the university is understood to exist to serve the economy rather than its original purpose of being a public good with the objective to bolster critical citizenry (Vally 2007). Although one participant relayed that he *believes "UCT degree offers you that opportunity to have a diverse mind and also to have a mind that's free, that's open to learning, to experience and also that's open to discussion and opinions you know, [...] especially this degree that I'm doing right now [social sciences] you know"*, the overwhelming sentiment around the essence of a university education is one which places more emphasis on an economic return. Despite evidence which showed students disappointment and discontentment with the university for several reasons, for example: *"I thought maybe the informing thing about why university was it and nothing else, was because at that time I thought university takes into aspects all of the things, you know, like your intellectual, your social, your political stuff and you get to learn all those things and then you go out there and you apply them in the specific uhmm that you venture into. So I got it all wrong in high school when I thought university was this thing where we change things"*, the findings showed that black students firmly hold on to the belief that a university degree guarantees their upliftment out of poverty, as the following comment shows. *"We are the first umm people to go to varsity so they've [family members] been working hard at restaurants and being cashiers and whatever but for*

*me that was like okay they are working hard but there's not much improvement at home so I think maybe getting a degree would help to maybe for me earn better money and we can make more improvements".*

In sum, findings showed that black students set out to accomplish long term goals, their goals represent a commitment to permanently transform their circumstances: *"I need to make sure that after my mother is tired of working she will still get something to eat on the table so that's why".* Typically, however, support structures arguably offer support which tackle more short-term hurdles, e.g. assistance with coursework, essays and financial support within the period of study among others, which could in turn culminate in enabling students long term goals. At this juncture, what is most apparent is that black students have placed enormous value on the economic potential of a university degree whereas the degree in itself is seemingly not what is intrinsically valued.

## 5. Summary

For a number of reasons, the nature of students' experiences at the HWU, UCT are varied and complex. For one, it was highlighted that language features quite prominently in structuring the constrained nature of academic participation of black students' at UCT. Furthermore, available support structures are overwhelmingly perceived to be generally useful and instrumental, however unintended consequences associated with particular support structures create a different set of challenges for their intended beneficiaries. In addition, success is defined within a logic of upliftment and economic empowerment - predominantly linked to the reality of social inequality in South Africa.

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