Experiences of First-Year, Four Year Degree Programme Students; an Ethnography of the Perceived Costs and Benefits

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And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, and have been called according to his purpose. Romans 8vs28

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Abstract

The focal research question of this study is formulated as; how do First-Year students enrolled in the Humanities Extended Degree Programme understand or interpret the programme as adding value, or not, to their university experience. How do they perceive the EDP to cost or benefit them, where costs and benefits are understood to include more than finances?

Apart from some experiences that have been documented qualitatively, predominantly through the use of focus groups there has been limited discussion about how students experience such programmes. This research thus aims to contribute ethnographic data that might illuminate the everyday/mundane experiences the programme incites. This in turn could contribute to policy where perceived benefits are uncovered and could be further exploited to the advantage of those in such programmes and conversely the cost could be minimized or eradicated.

As an ethnographic study this project will employ the 4 main aspects concurrent with anthropological practice; participant observation, interviews, focus groups & oral narratives, in an attempt to discover the costs and benefits of the EDP as it is perceived by the students enrolled in the programme.

Acronyms

ASP – Academic Support Programme

TYDP – Three Year Degree Programme (Also referred to as the Mainstream or General Degree Programme

FYDP – Four Year Degree Programme (Also referred to as the Extended Degree)

EDP – Extended Degree Programme

ED – Extended Degree

EDU – Education and Development Unit

HUMEDU – Humanities Education and Development Programme

UCT – University of Cape Town

Chapter 1: Redress and Inequality: the creation of the Four Year Degree Programme

1.1 General Background

The South African post-apartheid state, has since its inception in 1994, battled to establish an appropriate means to effectively address the inherited institutional disparities in higher education. This deficiency is confirmed in the Academic White Paper 3 (*A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* – DoE (2007, p. 8)) which highlighted the fact that there remains "an inequitable distribution of access and opportunity for staff and students along lines of race, gender, class and geography" and that there "are gross discrepancies in the participation rates of students from different population groups". These imbalances appear to be in stark contrast to our Bill of Rights (1996) which categorically states that individuals and "the state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone, on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth'. Further to this, the Academic White Paper 3 (DoE, 2007, p. 8), with respect to academic redress, announced the intention to "provide a full spectrum of advanced educational opportunities for an expanding range of the population irrespective of race, gender, age, creed or class or other forms of discrimination".

However, according to Badat (2008), a so-called government of equal recognition that remains blind to the legacies of colonialism and apartheid and which rests on the assumption that the onset of democracy is in itself a sufficient catalyst to bring about academic liberation, will fail to eradicate and correct the structural and institutional conditions, policies and practices that are grounded in historic inequalities in all domains of social life. This is the very reality that gives substance to the idea of academic redress and makes it an imperative dimension of transformation in higher education and of society in general (ibid).

1.2 Introduction

According to the University of Cape Town (UCT), the idea of academic redress goes as far back as the 1980s, when the institution first introduced its academic support programme (ASP). In

disregard of the Apartheid restrictions, the university admitted a number of black students framed with academic support which focused on closing their observed academic gaps, concomitant of the Bantu education system. The prescribed Bantu education system offered inferior primary and secondary learning to black students which, in addition to with other laws, prohibited the participation of non-white students in higher education (Alexander, Badenhorst & Gibbs, 2005).

The National Party (NP) apartheid government, maintained control of what was being taught in schools by implementing the Bantu Education Act, and thereby endorsed and perpetuated the ethos of apartheid (Moore, 2015). It was prescribed for all young black students and it ensured that they received sub-standard primary and secondary education (Alexander *et. al*, 2005). Thus, black students were epistemically disadvantaged by the education system, and were more often than not, prevented from pursuing higher education. Although, where black students were allowed to articulate to higher education, they were unfortunately, unlike their white counterparts, found to be inadequately equipped to succeed at university.

The ASPs were created in response to the conditions of apartheid, and relied heavily on a model of deficit thinking; they provided support to those who were disadvantaged by the Apartheid system. However this 'support', as per the deficit model, was merely an 'add-on' to the existing academic programme which in itself remained unreconstructed and untransformed. Deficit thinking, according to Smit (2012), refers to the way students are positioned as lacking the adequate resources, academic or cultural to succeed in what is imagined in a fair and open society. It then attempts to fix the students in response to this lack. Thinking about tertiary student's challenges this way aids in the creation of stereotypes and fails to recognise the role of higher education in the creating the barriers to student success (ibid). Further to this Valencia & Solórzano (2004) also argue that deficit thinking tend to contribute to processes of social reproduction in that it creates self-fulfilling prophecies about the academic capabilities of students, as it purports to place the blame for underachievement on the oppressed rather than on the societal structures and institutions that do the oppressing.

In contrast, the 'academic development' model, more so in its fully developed form, had a much deeper and more inclusive understanding of 'support' and constructed it as occurring through the

development of curriculum and appropriately aligned teaching methodologies (Boughey, 2005 p. 33). Whereas the deficit model sought to provide add-on support for students in order to fit current programmes, the academic development model sought to grow the students in parallel to the reconstruction of the curriculum and learning and teaching strategies and techniques.

At present, the emphasis of the 'institutional development' model is more to encapsulate the augmentation of student learning 'across the curriculum' as well as towards the establishment of initiatives 'within a wider understanding of what it means to address student needs framed within the context of a concern for overall quality' (Boughey, 2005 p.36). One of the strategies employed by this model is the so-called 'extended programme' in which the academic programme is lengthened by up to a year to accommodate supplementary foundation modules and or augmented courses which are supported by additional tuition and which may be taken over a longer period of time (Badat, 2008).

It is out of this model that the ASP at UCT evolved into what is now known as the Extended Degree Programme (EDP), also commonly referred to as the Four Year Degree Programme (FYDP).

1.3 The Four Year Degree Programme

The Four Year Degree Programme (FYDP) is offered to students in the redress category; groups who were disadvantaged by the system of apartheid, namely Black, Chinese, Coloured and Indian South African students.

In the Humanities Faculty, students who do not meet the minimum stipulated criteria for the faculty general degrees may be eligible for consideration for a place in the FYDP. Applicants are considered on the basis of their performance in the NBT tests, APS[1] and on educational background. The FYDP is a placement programme, hence students offered a place on the FYDP may not opt-out, and are accepted to the university provided that they enrol in the programme. While students enrolled in the Three Year Degree Programme (TYDP) or mainstream programme, provided they belong to the redress category, may opt-in.

[1] The Academic Point System (APS) allocates point values to seven National Senior Certificate subjects

The Humanities faculty offers a Quantitative FYDP with majors in Economics or Psychology, and a Non-Quantitative FYDP for all other majors. These programmes allow students to spread their curriculum/courses over a period of four years. It purports to offer the advantage of a well-paced curriculum and the opportunity to develop the competencies necessary to support senior courses. In both programmes, students are given guidance and academic support through special lectures, tutorials and workshop offerings.

The programme mandates that students enrol in two introductory courses during their first year of study. These are designed to introduce them to academic writing and quantitative literacies in preparation for their Humanities majors. In addition, the Humanities Education Development Unit (HEDU) provide academic support through augmented tutorials[2], additional course counseling, writing assistance, dedicated teaching assistance and social gatherings in the form of a weekly tea. In addition, the FYDP offers a variety of resources, all with the sole purpose of facilitating the transition and integration of incoming students as well as providing support throughout the student's academic career. (*The above information was adapted from the Humanities ED Guide and Website* (2015 & 2017)).

One of the fundamental beliefs behind these programmes are that students experience difficulties not because they themselves are deficient but because of major structural problems and inequalities that persist in South Africa's educational system and society at large (CHED website, 2017). The status quo of the previously disadvantaged has, since 1994, unfortunately remained unchanged. One could argue that 'previously' should be dropped from the categorisation as the social position of the disadvantaged majority has shown no dramatic improvement and given our current economic and political climate it remains entirely possible that conditions could in fact become worse. In this regard Bourdieu (1984) argues that our social positions are much more than just mere mental abstractions and that they are more often than not felt and expressed through our physical being. Hence one may conclude that failure to adequately and effectively address and correct these imbalances, will eventually, overtime, build increasing frustration among those directly affected by the disillusion of a perceived incomplete liberation and it will ultimately result

[2] Augmented Tutorials or Plus Tutorials are taken in conjunction with mainstream tutorials and are intended to provide support and extra contact time mandated by the government

in violent demonstrations of dissatisfaction together with a more militant demand for effectual change. Furthermore, when social change, or in this case, the lack thereof, threatens ones entire ontology, then violence is an almost natural response (Kapferer, 1988).

The first tremors of these publically demonstrated frustrations has already been felt through the recently established Fallist Movements such as #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall. These movements, have prompted calls for the decolonisation of higher education in South Africa, and for economically accessible education. The outcries and concomitant violent protests served to highlight the lack of transformation, the continuation of institutionalised racism and the culture of exclusion in institutions of higher learning. The #FeesMustFall movement in particular, served to highlight the lack of economic transformation in the country and the resultant effects it has on the accessibility of higher education for the socially and economically oppressed majority. Furthermore, the movement highlights the neo-liberalisation of universities and it illuminates the economic inequality prevalent in South African society at large, decades after apartheid has fallen. They object to the lack of transformation within the sector and the economic conditions that underpin student access to tertiary education. In addition they also reject the commoditization of education as it only serves to further reproduce the prevailing socio-economic status quo amongst South Africans.

My research therefore determined to explore the experience of FYDP students against the above background of the programme being a mechanism of academic and institutional transformation as well as a conduit of inclusion for the previously excluded. In particular I sought to ethnographically explore in what ways the FYDP may or may not have shaped the experience of these students in higher education.

1.4 Research Questions

This study aimed to investigate how first-year students, enrolled in the Humanities FYDP at the UCT, perceived its value as it relates to their university experience. It sought to explore the value of the programme according to students' feelings, experience and perspective, both positive

(benefit) and negative (cost) as well as anything in between, in order to better understand the effects, if any, the FYDP had on their social engagement with the programme.

The study incorporated an approach of a cost benefit analysis for the sole purpose of categorising students' valuations of the programme. I recognized that these terms may be problematic in that it could serve to create binary categories to describe the students' experience without acknowledging the varying subtleties that may be embedded within their perceived experience. Furthermore, it could even be misconstrued as being completely anchored in economics with the concentrated focus being on a Rand and cent translation and interpretation of students' experience in the FYDP.

However, the idea of a cost benefit analysis, was not employed as a rigid, non-negotiable scientific demarcation of data, but instead as two distinct, but permeable groupings of data which I used merely as a means to define and locate the concept of 'value' within the scope of the research. Hence, 'cost' largely encapsulated the more negative consequences, of varying degrees, the programme may or may not have imposed on students. Likewise, 'benefit' in the same relation to value, referenced the more positive consequences, of varying intensities, the FYDP students may or may not have experienced in the programme. I also understood, from the socio-economic diversity of the FYDP student population and the proposed pervious data delamination, that the perceived value of experience of some students could in fact be interpreted as being both a cost and benefit, simultaneously.

From the preceding arguments my research questions was thus formulated as:

> **How do FYDP students interpret the programme as adding value, or not, to their university experience? How do they perceive the FYDP to cost or benefit them, where costs and benefits are understood to include more than finances?**

I found the following sub-questions to be helpful in addressing the primary research questions declared above:

- How do FYDP students imagine the Programme to impact their day-to-day lives?
- What are the perceived costs, how are they mitigated/managed/minimized by the students?
- What are the perceived benefits, do students imagine these to outweigh the costs?
- How do they imagine the programme to affect their future university experience, or their life experience further on?

1.5 Rationale

Since the fall of apartheid the South African higher education system has been littered with various versions of academic redress programmes meant to expedite the freedom and emancipation of previously disadvantaged South Africans. At present, UCT's Humanities' FYDP caters for students who do not meet the epistemic requirements to be accepted into the mainstream, but they have demonstrated the potential to succeed if given additional academic support. Many of those enrolled in the programme attended schools which were inadequately equipped to prepare students for success at university. These inadequacies, amongst others, could be, but are not limited to human resource competencies, financial restraints, social and academic infrastructure, pervasive access to technology and structured academic support. In light of South Africa's past, most of those students attending schools as aforementioned are those of colour. The FYDP put in place a number of measures aimed at supporting students' social and academic wellbeing and success.

Apart from some experiences that have been qualitatively documented, predominantly through the use of focus groups, not much has been reported in terms of an ethnographic perspective of how students perceive and experience such programmes. This research thus aims to contribute ethnographic data that might illuminate the everyday/mundane experience the programme incites. This in turn could contribute to policy where perceived benefits are uncovered and could be further utilised to the benefit of those in such programmes and conversely the cost could be minimized or eradicated.

1.6 Theoretical Background

The following is a brief review of literature, conceptually framed towards providing insight into the spectrum of influences which may or may not, either directly or indirectly, contribute towards shaping or defining the experience of first-year University students enrolled in academic support programmes such as the FYDP at UCT. Perceived complexities and challenges imposed on students by higher education are explored in terms of the transition from school to university

including the factors imagined or otherwise, that impact students' experience at university, namely, the environment, academic, finance and the so-called perception of self.

1.6.1 The Transition from School to University

Evidence educed from literature (Van Schalkwyk, Bitzer & van der Walt, 2010; Wilson-Strydom, 2010, 2012; Marnewick, 2010) suggests that the background, both educational and socio-cultural, and identity of students, are significant factors affecting the transition and integration of students into the university. The data also highlights that students, regardless of the school they attended, i.e. be it government, private, former model C or independent, experienced the transition from school to university with varying degrees of difficult (Wilson-Strydom, 2010, 2012; Marnewick, 2010). One may however argue, given the generally fragmented and deteriorating state of basic education in South Africa (Van der Berg, Spaull, Wills, Gustafsson & Kotzé , 2016), that this is almost an obvious finding. Furthermore, tertiary education is pedagogically and otherwise, vastly different from that of secondary education. Therefore, university preparedness cannot just simply be equated with the completion of secondary school (Conley, 2008). However, given that students, regardless of the school background, struggle with this progression, one may assume that the challenge of the secondary to higher education transition, is not just limited to their academic under preparedness (Wilson-Strydom, 2010). This makes it apparent that there are other factors at work, regardless of what they may be, which influence the degree of difficulty and or frustration students experience when progressing from secondary to university education. One may than also assume that not all students will necessarily experience this transition with the same measured intensity or duration i.e. some will adapt and overcome their perceived challenges better and or quicker than others. Furthermore, should this prove true, then by implication, the range or spectrum of identifiable transition challenges, will also be different, but not necessarily unique, for each student. This line of argument i.e. degrees of under preparedness, is supported by van Schalkwyk *et al.* (2010) who in reflecting on the readiness of secondary school students to enter higher education, confirmed their overall deficiency, but also found that some were in fact more underprepared and conversely that others were less underprepared for the progression to university. How then do universities determine what applicants are more ready and which of these applicants have the better change of academic success?

In general, South African Universities use the combination of National Benchmark Tests (NBTs) and the National Senior Certificate (NSC) or Matric Certificate, as a means to measure students' general preparedness or readiness for university (Wilson-Strydom, 2012; Marnewick, 2012). Students scoring towards the top percentile are normally favoured to be admitted into mainstream programmes, whereas those who score below par are deemed underprepared. Although it has been argued that all students are inadequately prepared for university, some, as mentioned, are deemed less underprepared and it is these students who are normally placed in Extended Degree Programmes (EDP) or any other equivalent academic support programme. More often than not, students who score under but 'close' to par, where both 'par' and 'close' is different for different institutions, are the preferred candidates for theses academic redress programmes, provided they also meet the socio-economic requirement of being part of the previously disadvantaged population grouping.

Unfortunately, this 'readiness' assessment process is far from full proof as it only measures (to an extent) the academic readiness of students, and as has already been shown, academic competency is only one of a number of factors influencing the successful transition from school to university. Van Schalkwyk *et al.* (2010) report that the EDP students who participated in their research project, listed the many differences between tertiary and secondary education, such as the increased workload, self-regulation and the so-called 'university set-up' as among the biggest contributors towards the difficulty of their transition experience. Furthermore, there appeared to be a direct correlation between the degree of under preparedness and the intensity of the challenges experienced in the transition to higher education i.e. the intensity increased as the degree of preparedness decreased (ibid). According to the 2017 PPS Student Confidence Index (SCI) (http://www.pps.co.za) less than half (49%) of the 2500 students, surveyed across South Africa, felt that they were adequately prepared for the transition from secondary school to tertiary education. This result appears to give credibility to DHET's 2015 performance statistic (*released in March 2017*) that 47.9% of university students do not complete their degrees.

The progression from school to university, as evidenced by the preceding literature, is indeed challenging; even more so for those who have been disadvantaged by their unresolved, pre-apartheid socio-economic circumstances. However, simply identifying the school-to-university transition as being difficult, is not enough. In order to possibly reduce the intensity of this

transition, one would have to consider what other influences contribute to burden students' progression and hinder their potential to succeed at university.

1.6.2 Factors Influencing the University Experience

The Environment

Dewey (1933), in defence of the importance to create purposeful educational environments, argues that student success rates could be severely impacted by universities' choice of whether to 'permit chance environments to do the [educating], or whether' they 'design environments' fit for purpose (pp. 22). This view is endorsed by Bronfenbrenner (1993) whose Ecological Systems Theory, claims that the composition of our surrounding environments significantly influence our development. Bronfenbrenner (ibid) divided a person's environment into four different levels: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem and the macrosystem.

The *microsystem* typifies the physical, social or constructed features of the immediate environment a person find themselves in. A common university microsystem could be made of interactions with roommates, friendship groups, sports, social engagements, general 'university life' and family as well as interactions with academics, academic support as well as administrative staff. Universities could create structures to facilitate and ensure students' maximum engagement with these microsystems through teaching, facilitator led tutorials, one-on-one sessions with students, career guidance and focused academic support, amongst others. First year university students, regardless of the programme, will most definitely have to manage the challenge of having to deconstruct their engagement with their secondary school microsystem as they migrate towards engaging with the university microsystem. The manner in which a university constructs their microsystem i.e. ad-hoc or with purpose, will according to Bronfenbrenner (ibid), either influence students to adapt, learn and grow or it could contribute to their gradual disconnect.

Bronfenbrenner (ibid) clarifies the *mesosystem* as representing the processes taking place between two or more settings containing the developing person. A mesosystem develops where a person's individual microsystems cease to function independently as it becomes interconnected, impacting one another and indirectly influencing the individual. When students continue from secondary

school to university, their school microsystems interact with their university microsystems, creating a mesosystem environment which indirectly impacts on how they manage the transition to university. Depending on the density and or complexity of the microsystem interconnections i.e. the degree of synergy or connectedness (one complementing and or supporting the other), the resulting mesosystem environment can either be calm, empowering, and supportive of the individual or it could be chaotic, stressful and fragmented or disconnected. Students' who find themselves in a more supportive mesosystem environment, should be able to better handle the transition from school to university, than those whose mesosystem environments are less constructive.

Exosystems, as defined by Bronfenbrenner (ibid) are environments that exist beyond the immediate environment of the individual. Even though it does not directly involve the individual as an active participant, it still exerts an influence on how the person develops. Exosystems within a university student's ecosystems include, amongst others, university policy environments (admissions, progression, placement etc.), National Higher Education policy environments as well as national frameworks or policies dealing with the industries into which the student aim to graduate. UCT's FYDP, together with the mechanisms of influence, political or otherwise, that pressured the development and implementation of the programme, would be a further example of how an exosystem environment can influence a student's development.

Macrosystems embody the sum total of the micro-, meso- and exosystems within a particular social structure (ibid). It encapsulate not just the cultural system in which the student lives, but also all the other systems that affect them. A macrosystem will exert either a negative or a positive influence (ibid). For example, the South African economic macrosystem, together with the political macrosystem have exerted a negative influence on the development of especially previously disadvantaged students. Their dire socio-economic circumstances restricted access to environments that are pro-educational and which would concomitantly contribute to their social development. Some of these include ,but are not exhaustive, properly resourced and supported schools, fit for purpose teaching spaces, access to technology, ongoing career guidance, structured academic support, continuous development and training support for both teachers and school principals, appropriately resourced community centres which can competently support the

continuation of the education process. These negative macrosystem environments are directly responsible for placing the large majority of this socio-economic grouping of students at such a huge disadvantage when they transition from school to university.

Finances

The socio-economic background of a student has significant impact on their transition from school to university (Marnewick, 2012). Breier (2010) argues that in the context of a developing country like South Africa, finances play a crucial role for students who form part of the lower socio-economic groups. Finances most often affect the type of secondary school a student is able to attend, which in turn impacts their relative preparedness for university in terms of their social capital and habitus (Marnewick, 2012).

Not only does a lack and or restricted access to finance, impact a student's preparedness prior to starting university, it also affects their performance while attending. Students entering the university without secured financial support are at an immediate disadvantage as the challenge to cover academic fees, living costs, transport and accommodation costs, will escalate proportionately, causing uncertainty and anxiety which not only negatively impacts the students' experience but could also eventuate their premature exit from the university (Senett, 2000).

The cost of education is not just the biggest agent of exclusion, it is also credited with being one of the single biggest factors negatively impacting students' transition from secondary school to tertiary education (Marnewick, 2012; Breier, 2010). Student led protest movements like, #FeesMustFall, has since 2015 been exerting steady pressure on government to provide free tertiary education for all qualifying students. A 'no-fees' tertiary environment, even if limited to undergraduate programmes, would certainly lay the foundation for a more inclusive academic space, in addition to obliterating finance related dropout rates.

Academic Background

Marnewick (2012) asserts that students completing secondary school are predominantly academically underprepared for tertiary studies. Wilson-Strydom (2010) also found that students

were explicitly aware of the fact that they were underprepared for the intellectual demands of university. Students from predominantly under-resourced schools are perceived as being more academically underprepared; they battle to close the academic gaps and to acquire the necessary academic skills needed to succeed at tertiary level (van Schalkwayk *et al*, 2010). The FYDP redress effort at UCT is aimed at addressing this under preparedness through academic interventions like the mandatory introduction courses as well as the augmented tutorials.

Identity

Van Schalkwyk *et al* (2009) report that students in the EDP at the University of Stellenbosch, have implicitly been labelled as academically 'at risk[3]'. The negative perception of this label, or any other label with a derogatory connotation for that matter, has the potential to erode students' sense of self and self-worth, which in turn could weaken their confidence and even further reduce their chances of succeeding at university (ibid). In confirmation of this phenomena, the authors (ibid) also report, that at the beginning of their study, students were measured to be generally positive about their situations, but were subsequently less buoyant, less confident and less certain about their own ability to succeed, after having been immersed in the daily challenges of university life. Some (Lazarus, 1977; Leventhal, Nerenz & Straus, 1982) would accredit this apparent emotional deterioration, to these students having a weak or fragmented self-identity, which compromised their ability to monitor and regulate their own behaviour, emotions and or thoughts in response to the exigencies of their circumstance. This position is supported by Fraser & Killen (2003) who found that self-regulatory behaviours such as motivation and personal effort, were rated amongst the most popular ideas imagined to contribute to students' success at university.

Perception of self or self-identity, thus positions itself as yet another factor that directly affects the lived realities and experiences of students in tertiary education. Furthermore, it is possible, that most of our previously disadvantaged students, given their oppressive background, enter tertiary education with an already compromised self-identity, thus further negating their chances of success at university.

[3] Students were regarded as underprepared for the challenges of University

1.6.3 Conclusion

University education is often seen as being perpetually demanding, austere and uncompromising – it shows no mercy to those who enter the environment ill-equipped and under prepared, as evidenced by the previously mentioned statistic that 47.9% of university students fail to complete their degrees. Academic redress programmes, such as UCT's FYDP, have been positioned, to not just increase the inclusion of the previously disadvantaged, but also to build students' capacity to succeed in higher education. Unfortunately, success is not guaranteed, as the preceding literature shows that there are still a number of challenges exerting a restrictive influence on students' ability to meet and overcome the demands of higher education. Nonetheless, regardless of what these restrictions may be, theoretical evidence suggests that it is interrelated, context dependent and as diverse as it is complex; challenging students in ways and dimensions for which most of them appear to be poorly prepared for.

The derived conclusions, in the context of the preceding theoretical landscape, can be rather depressing if not outright demotivating. However, not all is doom and gloom i.e. not all students fail to complete their degrees; not all students fail to transition from school to university and not all students registered in redress programmes fail to succeed at tertiary education. In fact, how does one explain the fact that some academic redress participants thrive and do better than others when they are classed in the same categories and often come from similar backgrounds?

To properly explore this phenomena one would have to introduce an ethnographic research perspective, in order to gain insight into how students conceptualise these programmes; where and how do they locate themselves within the programme; what perceived values do they derive from the programme and how do these values contribute towards their overall experience at university. However, rich ethnographic data appear to be missing from the large pool of qualitative research work, reporting on the success rates of students in academic redress programmes.

The proposed research inquiry will thus attempted to provide some ethnographic insight as it endeavoured to address the formulated research questions.

1.7 Summary

This chapter gave the background to the research topic and introduced the history behind the academic redress programmes. It located the research focus within the FYDP at UCT and sought to provide evidence from literature that the proposed research will contribute to current pool of available research.

The next chapter will introduce and elaborate on the research design and the data collection methods that was utilised in the research process.

Chapter 2: Methodology – Shaping the 'How' of the Inquiry

2.1 Introduction

Recent developments in higher education in South Africa have heightened the need for student perspectives to be included in educational discourse. With calls for free, decolonized education abounding, it has become exceedingly important, if not appropriate, to recognise the views of students in all capacities, and incorporate it into the ongoing discussions and evaluations of educational programmes, especially the redress offerings such as the FYDP at UCT. The focus of this research project, was in part, a response to the call for the inclusion of students' perspectives as it sought to understand the perceived value of the FYDP as consumed and experienced by the participating students. In addition, it also aimed to understand the worth of their experience in terms of a perceived cost and or benefit, where these were understood to include more than finances.

This chapter focuses on the methods employed in achieving the objectives of this study. The subsequent discussions are focused on the field site, the research collaborators, the research method and the data collection methods utilised well as the ethical considerations that informed the research. In conclusion of the chapter, I briefly share my thoughts on the anthropological concepts of othering, the voice of authority and fictionalising, and how these influenced my own perspective of the research.

2.2. Field Site

All research activities were conducted at the University of Cape Town's Upper Campus. Upper Campus is UCT's Main campus and is home to all the major Faculties, including the Humanities Education and Development Unit (HEDU), which is also the headquarters of the FYDP. The venues for all the lectures and tutorials I needed to attend as part of the research requirements,

were located on this campus. Being the main campus, it is frequented by students from all disciplines and diverse backgrounds. It offers many spaces for both academic activities and social interactions. Data for this study was gathered in lecture theatres, tutorial rooms and in the Education Development Unit (EDU), all of which are familiar spaces frequented by students enrolled in the FYDP even though these spaces (lecture & tutorial rooms) were not exclusive to the FYDP.

2.3. Collaborators

The study focused on first-year students enrolled on the FYDP. However, the perspectives of some senior students, those in their second, third and fourth year, were also included. The FYDP is aimed at the academic redress category i.e. groups who were disadvantaged by the system of apartheid and hence, by definition it may only register students of colour. As a result all the participants of this study were either black or coloured.

Enlistment of collaborators for this project was restricted to convenience sampling due to a compressed academic programme schedule and time table logistics, which influenced the availability of students in the cross hairs of the research. This unfortunately limited the size of the data pool, whereas it would have been ideal to engage with students from a wider range of socio-economic and educational backgrounds.

The research informing this project was conducted during the beginning of second semester of the 2017 academic year at UCT. Thus, the first year students had already completed their first semester and were able to draw on their experiences as students enrolled on the FYDP based on their first semester experiences.

2.4 Method

The study used ethnography as a method to address the research questions as the ethnographic focus emphasise the perspectives of those being studied; in this case, the FYDP students (Gullion, 2016, Rapport & Overing, 2000). Ethnography also requires that the researcher be deeply entrenched, over a reasonable period of time, within a given community (field of study), so as to develop an in depth understanding of how and why people think, act and interact as they do, in

addition to the value and meaning these community practices have for the community being studied (Gullion, 2016). Thus, an ethnographic approach, provided the direct access to study the everyday life of the students and their engagements within the FYDP, in order to understand their perspective within the context and confines of the formulated research questions.

Moreover, the ethnographic written report, which is expected to give a deep and granularly descriptive account of the social life and culture of the group studied, provided a means with which to overcome the embedded complexity of the research focus in terms of codifying students' observed perceptions and experiences (Gullion, 2016; Rapport & Overing, 2000). This kind of deep, descriptive writing, which Geertz describes as a 'thick description' (Cited in Rapport & Overing, 2000, p. 349), is supported by Flyvbjerg (2001, pp.18) who argues that where "… science does not reach, art, literature and narrative often help us to comprehend the reality in which we live."

However, describing and interpreting cultural meaning as symbolised by the interactions of the community, is a complex process as the structures of meaning underlying any one social situation are multiple, incomplete and muddled together (Rapport & Overing, 2000). At best, the ethnographer's inscriptions are interpretations of interpretations and 'constructions of community member constructions of what they and their fellow members are engaged in doing' (Rapport & Overing, 2000, p. 351). Hence, an ethnography is thus never complete and is therefore not incontestable. It may be refuted by any past or future event, or it could be superseded by more deeply grounded and more complexly conceptualised interpretations (Rapport & Overing, 2000).

The ethnographic method employed four main qualitative data collection methods, namely, Focus Groups, Interviews, Participant Observation and Oral Narratives.

2.4.1. Focus Groups

Focus groups, as a qualitative data collection method, are especially useful for capturing 'information about social norms and the variety of opinions or views within a population.' (Mack *et al*, 2015, p. 51). Moreover, the group dynamic as well as the diversity within the group, ensures 'the richness' of the emergent data (ibid, p. 52). Hence focus groups were used, in the context of the research inquiry, to observe and understand the community's (group of 1st year EDYP students)

collective perspective of the perceived benefits of the EDYP as well as the degree to which these perceptions varied amongst individual community members.

Three focus group sessions were conducted over the research period, all which were hosted in the FYDP's tea room.

2.4.2. Participant Observation

Participant observation offers a method of collecting data over a range of perspectives within a studied community, by both observing and participating - to varying degrees - in the community's daily activities (Mack *et al*, 2015). It assists researchers in developing a familiarity with the cultural environment (the relationships among and between community members, contexts, ideas, norms, and events; and behaviours) that exists within a community, leading to a more a nuanced understanding of the context of engagement within the community, the outcome of which may produce a deeper insight into the research context being studied (ibid).

In addition, participant observation, may also reveal elements of the research that are important for a thorough understanding of the research problem and context, but which were not known when the research was designed (Mack *et al*, 2015, Gordon, Holland & Lahelma, 2001). This is a particularly important advantage of participation observation in that even though we may '… get truthful answers to the research questions we ask, we may not always ask the right questions.' (Mack *et al*, 2015, p. 14). Participant observation is also complementary in that the knowledge gained from the process can be used to better understand the data collected through any of the other methods, such as focus groups and interviews (Mack *et al*, 2015).

Participant observation, in relation to research inquiry, was conducted in three FYDP student activities. These were the weekly Anthropology Plus tutorial, weekly Lectures in Working with Texts in the Humanities and the students' weekly tea session with FYDP faculty. The spaces, or community settings, in which these activities were conducted, could unfortunately not be identified as strictly for the FYDP students as the UCT hosts lectures and tutorials all over campus. It does not strictly delimit course activities to their faculty buildings, i.e. Anthropology lectures might be held in the Engineering building.

2.4.3. Oral Narratives

Narratives provide a means of examining participant roles in 'constructing accounts and in negotiating perspectives and meanings' (Edwards cited in Gordon *et. al.*, 2001, p. 384). Oral narratives were collected during the focus groups and interview sessions. These allowed the students to express their own views on a given topic where their words might reveal their individual ways of interpreting events as well as how they derive meaning and understanding from their interactions with their environment (Gordon *et. al.*, 2001). The students, even during the initial focus groups, were quite vocal and willing to share their stories openly. These stories were useful in understanding how students interpreted the FYDP and their experiences as being part of the programme.

2.4.4. Interviews

Interviews are designed to elicit in-depth, nuanced responses and contradictions from the participants in terms of their perspective on the research topic (Mack *et al*, 2015). It presents an opportunity for participants to talk about their personal feelings, opinions and experiences while at the same time it offers the researcher an opportunity to gain deeper insight into how people view and interpret the world around them i.e. the connections and relationships a person sees between particular events, phenomena and beliefs (ibid).

Interviews were conducted with two senior students enrolled in the FYDP and with two members of staff within the EDU. These interview sessions were informal and facilitated through open ended questions which freed the participants to express their own opinions and to discuss the motivations behind their articulated perspectives. The sessions with the senior students were to provide a retrospective/reflective point of view while those with the academic staff focused on gaining deeper insights into the FYDP programme's constructions and entailments.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

The purpose of this research study was not intended as a critique of the FYDP, but rather to illuminate the experiences of students, whether positive or negative.

In accordance with the ASA guidelines (2004) measures were put in place to avoid inflicting harm on the collaborators of this study. I initially drew up consent forms (Appendix A) and planned to have all collaborators sign them off before starting the data collection activities i.e. the focus groups and interviews. However, the manner in which the research process unfolded, caused me to forgo the consent forms and I instead opted to constantly negotiate consent by regularly informing my collaborators of their rights to withhold or withdraw from the study, the purpose of the study and how their identities would be protected.

All the collaborators in the study were given pseudonyms and the data and recordings for the study were kept under password protection. Lastly, the final research project will not be published without the consent and final review of all collaborators.

2.6. The voice of authority

The act of transcription is not '… some kind of innocent recording of the ways things really are' – implying it distributes authority differently, which enacts power differently (Clifford cited Schwandt, 2007, p. 297). For this reason it was important to recognise and remain mindful of my own position as the one who authors the text and the position of those who are collaborators on the project. In an attempt to avoid the 'voice of authority', I have adopted the terminology narrator(s) and interpreter to refer to my collaborators and myself respectively (Varga-Dobai, 2012, p. 4). In employing this duality, I hoped to reflect the co-production of this work and its concomitant shared ownership. In addition, I aspired to avoid replicating inequalities between the collaborators and the *author,* as the one who writes – i.e. as the one who has the authority.

Further still, I acknowledge that my role as the interpreter, is an active one. Thus my own subjectivities as an interpreter have shaped and or influenced the production of this work. The fact that I am a postgraduate student in the Humanities Faculty, having been enrolled on the TYDP and as a student of colour, have shaped this project in a very specific way.

2.7. Othering

I found it exceedingly difficult, in the context of the research topic, to avert constructing FYDP students as '*other'*. The historical conditions that necessitate the programme, the structural inequalities that persist in society at large and which demand forms of redress such as the FYDP at UCT, already position them as being '*other*'.

Although the purpose of the FYDP is to equip students with the necessary skills deemed to facilitate success at tertiary level, the conditions of acceptance into the programme, namely on the grounds of apartheid racial categories, unfortunately situates and creates the students to be seen as '*others*'. So in this way the differences become visible and tangible and often result in stigma. Ironically, both the FYDP and the university as a whole, can subsequently be seen as enforcing this 'separation' and are thus guilty of reproducing difference. This will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

2.8. Fictionalising

Here I elected to draw on techniques used by Zoe Wicomb in her book David's Story[4], to essentially make the data into stories and thus more '*tellable*' - to use her word. These additions however are not as fantastic or even as the word fictionalising might suggest. I believe the additions are necessary to provide the readers with a rich and thick description of the events that I describe. I agree with what Wicomb says pertaining to her own work that "somehow in the business of telling, the events shift and slide just that bit, blurring the distinction between fact and fiction". I agree that the stuff of storytelling requires weaving together elements to tell a full story. However I have not added so much that the stories are false or pure fiction, but I have fleshed them out in order to make them more '*tellable*'.

In some ways the stories or dialogues between my collaborators and I, are not full stories, but are rather fragmented. In these cases I added to their telling, I filled in the gaps and fleshed out the narrative and thus, in this small way – I essentially fictionalised.

[4] Olver, S. & Meyer, S. 2004. Zoe Wicomb on David's Story. Current Writing: Text and reception in Southern Africa. 16(2):131-142

2.9 Conclusion

This chapter located the field site and illuminated the research collaborators as well as the ethical considerations that informed the study. Ethnography was constituted as the research method together with focus groups, interviews, oral narratives and participant observation as the qualitative data collection methods. I also situated the anthropological aspects of 'the voice of authority', 'othering' and 'fictionalisation' and how it influenced my position and perspective within the context of research inquiry.

The chapters that follow will present and discuss the data in relation to the research questions. In particular, Chapter 2 will offer a brief description of all the site venues utilised, Chapter 3 will reference the discussion from a 'benefit' perspective and Chapter 4 will do likewise from the perceived 'cost' perspective.

Chapter 3: Meeting Places for Familiar Faces

3.1 Introduction

As mentioned in the previous chapter, this study utilised participant observation, focus groups, oral narratives and one on one informal interviews as the qualitative data collection methods driving the inquiry into the perceived costs and benefits of the FYDP as experienced from the perspective of the students registered in the programme.

In order to establish a 'look and feel' understanding of where these activities were conducted, this will provide brief descriptions of the venues, all situated on UCT's Upper Campus, which were utilised in the study.

3.2 The Tea Room

The tea room, also called the EDU meeting room, is situated at the end of the EDU office corridor. It is a small room, with large windows looking out onto an even smaller concrete balcony shadowed by the side of the Neville Alexander Building. The room is made to look even smaller by the large faux wood round table and the matching corner filling cabinet, which was left empty. Just over a dozen identical black chairs were swished around the table. In front of the room, a decent sized white market board took up most of the wall space. Immediately to the right of the board and safely tucked away in the corner stood a boardroom meeting pad just waiting to be put to use. Apart from the marker board, the white painted walls were almost conspicuously bare as if to present the room as having nothing to hide and nothing to conceal. I got the impression that the 'bland look' was somehow deliberate; perhaps to present it as a 'neutral' space. Clinical, stark and cold is how I would best describe my first impression of this space – and one that would quickly change after hosting my first participatory session in the tea room.

As mentioned, the room primarily functions as the staff/meeting room for the EDU staff but is also utilised by the EDRC for their required group meetings. Over and above, it is also the venue for the FYDP weekly tea sessions, and later my focus group sessions. The tea room by its very location

is clearly an academic staff space – further enforced as you walk down the long corridor with all the staff offices to the right. I often pondered whether the decision to use it as the venue to host the FYDP students was intentional or whether it was just a matter of convenience or lack of suitable infrastructure. Was it deliberate in enabling the staff involved in the FYDP to come across as available, accessible and approachable?

3.3 The Lecture Theatre – Texts in the Humanities

The lectures I attended for Texts in the Humanities were held in the Snape Building. It is located near the top of UCT's upper campus, and tucked away between the three Engineering Buildings. The lecture theatre is rather large, with four separate entrances; two at the bottom and two at the top end. It is equipped with two smartboards and a mini grey metal lecturer's podium that also functions as the room's control centre. The benches in the room are wooden as are the desks, each row is situated on a step above the first as the stairs run parallel to the desks and in-line with the entrances at the top and bottom of the room. Overall, the theatre is not much different from any other lecture theatre, on campus, but even so, from my experience as a first year, a venue like this, can be very intimidating, especially fresh off the school benches.

3.4 Computer Science 2.17 – the anthropology augmented tutorial

Room 2.17 is on the second floor of the Computer Science building. Everything about the room's design insist that it is meant for small group gatherings. The room is longer than it is wide is filled with rows of standalone desks and chairs facing the green chalk boards and the pull-down projector screen in the front. In more ways than one, it reflected an almost typical school classroom setup were it not for the bare, white painted walls - the biggest contributor to the overall bland decor theme. Apart from the monotonous hum of the noisy air conditioner competing with the muffled noise from the Jammie Plaza below, the room was pretty much configured to be as unexciting as it can be, which in many ways would be no different from any other small room tutorial venue on Upper Campus.

3.5 Interview Locations

As mentioned, the study collected data from four interviews, two of which were held in the EDU meeting room and the office of an EDU lecturer, respectively. The other two interviews were conducted in the AC Jordan Building in an empty tutorial room. Small, but not necessarily confined is how I can best describe the lecturer's office space. It is situated directly next to the EDU meeting room with similar physical structures; a large window looking onto a small concrete balcony. The office held a desk, computer, bookshelf and chair as well as some personal items; sticky note to-do-lists, books, files and personal photographs in photo-frames.

The interviews with the two senior students were held in a tutorial room in the AC Jordan Building. It was a little bigger than most other tutorial rooms on campus; definitely bigger than the Room 2.17, the Augmented Tutorial venue. Two large green boards, a pulldown projector screen and a small grey control podium, made up the front of the room. Large wooden windows allowed ample opportunity for the breezy sunshine to pour into the room against the backdrop of big, waving green leaves, courtesy of a fully grown oak tree that partly obscured the windows - a welcome break from cold concrete and even colder balconies.

3.6 Conclusion

Overall, these spaces presented itself as being part of what one could call, a typical university environment. The FYDP predominantly utilised these venues, excluding the interview locations, in the execution of the curricula requirements of the course. However, apart from the mentioned significance of the location of the tea-meeting session, I failed to observe how any of these spaces, as representing the physical layer of their education environment, could have directly influenced students' experience in an either negative or positive manner.

Chapter 4: "It is, what it is" – Perceiving the Perception of a Benefit

4.1 Introduction

As I introduce this chapter, and in part the one to follow, I am somehow reminded of Schrödinger's Cat, a thought experiment from quantum physics, used to explain the indeterminacy of quantum phenomena. It states that one may believe that the state of a cat inside a closed box is either dead or alive. However, the cat is in neither state until the box is opened and the state of the cat is observed. In this case, the cat represents the FYDP and the value it holds for the students that transact with what it offers, in whatever form. For one, it purposes to facilitate access to university for students belonging to groups disadvantaged by apartheid. The FYDP aims to assist students in the redress categories, by providing them with 'extra' resources, services and time meant to facilitate their transition and success into university.

I endeavoured not to know the state of the 'cat' until I opened the box through the mentioned data collection methods. Hence, I deliberately refused to look for 'costs' or 'benefits' which I thought should be in the data. In this way, what follows is the truest version of my ethnographic engagement with the FYDP students, formulated through participant observation in tearoom discussions, student lectures and tutorials as well as focus groups and one-on-one informal interviews.

This chapter in particular reflects on the perceived benefits of the course as experienced by the FYDP students.

4.2 Tuesday Tea & Talk: First Impressions

The first time I visited the Tuesday afternoon tea in the EDP building, there were already a few students present with cups in hand; engaged in muffled conversation. After introducing myself, I slipped off to the kitchen, which was less than five steps away, to grab a much needed cup for myself, before rejoining the conversation. In my brief absence though, the group grew

significantly, but the students I met on arrival readily introduced me to the newcomers. This simple act immediately made me feel included even though I was there as an 'outsider'.

As the students strolled in, I felt more and more comfortable, mingling and having polite conversation as if I was always part of this groups' interaction. It was only when one of them commented, '*Oh, are you the one coming to present to us?*', that I felt re-positioned as an outsider. For a very brief moment, I felt strangely nervous and in fact somewhat anxious as if I was caught out as being an intruder. Before I could respond, one of the other students added, "*Who did you think she was? Didn't you read the notice?*" referring to the introductory email, I send to the EDU Tea Coordinator in which I explained the background and purpose of my research inquiry. This unexpected 'support' made me feel somewhat better as I realized that at least some if not most of them already knew who, as one student commented, the '*new girl*' was, and it did not affect the manner of our interaction. I was happy to conversationally 'fill in the blanks' for a few students who subsequently wandered over to my corner. In fact, this whole episode worked out rather well, as when the Tea Coordinator finally officially introduced me, the proverbial ice was already broken.

Despite being so small with its dreary windows looking out onto even drearier concrete, the students' intimate chatter turned the atmosphere within the tearoom into a warm and cheerful space. Most of the students seemed very comfortable in the environment and with each other. I would later discover that they were the regular attendees of the event. Seeing as they hung out together outside of the tea – I saw them sit together in a lecture and walking around campus together - I assumed that they were a group of close and or semi-close friends, which perhaps explained the warm and intimate atmosphere present in the room.

The weekly teas focused on providing a social space for students to interact with one another, as well as with members of staff within the EDU department. Moreover, the teas were hosted by senior FYDP students and or the FYDP representative council, who in all the sessions I attended came across as being authentic i.e. I observed a measured sincerity in their engagement with the students as they enquired after their wellbeing being both in and apart from the course. Over time, I found myself looking forward to these engagements as I experienced it as both stimulating and refreshing, not just because of the content but also the manner in which it was facilitated.

I managed to observe four tea meetings, but the last one turned out be the richest in terms of the exchanges taking place between the facilitators and the participating students. The hosts on this occasion being one of the senior members of the Extended Degree Representative Council (EDRC) and a staff member of the EDU, introduced #FeesMustFall and its predecessor #RhodesMustFall as the topics for the week. Most of the students in attendance were in their first year and had not experienced the protests first hand. Hence, the hosts first laid out the actualities of the protests with as much detail as time allowed, after which the students were given an opportunity to ask questions and share their thoughts on the topic. Opinions and questions, as can be expected, varied quite significantly – some were borderline ridiculous and typically high school like wanting to know the '*... estimated scrap value of the statue ...'* - while others were a lot more informed and thoughtful. One of the students, for that matter, questioned the legitimacy and effectiveness of throwing down statues as an effective means or act of accelerating transformation. The student felt very strong that

> "*... removing statues, or whatever, that represents apartheid doesn't remove the scars of the wrong stuff that was done. People remember, with or without statues, their circumstances remind them every day ... they should've kept the statue, not as a brag but as a reminder of the shame of the past, like a ugly tattoo that you can't hide ... it's like throwing down the signs in my neighbourhood that says Cape Flats, Silvertown and renaming it to Lower Constantia ... it changes nothing ... "*

Another student probed the two facilitators along the lines of UCT's complicity in the matter of the Rhodes statue. She wanted to know why *"it took a bunch of students to show a university like UCT, that the statue doesn't fit their image anymore. Why didn't the university take the initiative? Unless of course they are not entirely honest about wanting to change ... "*

As the discussion continued, I observed that the varying degrees in the intensity and thoughtfulness of the arguments put forward by different students, could in some measure be a reflection of the scope of dissimilarity in their literacy levels.

However, many of the current challenges facing the concept of literacy revolve around issues of its definition(s). How is literacy defined and by whom? In what contexts and in whose interests? Street (1993) groups literacy in one of two approaches or models *viz.* the 'autonomous' and the

'ideological' models of literacy and depending on what model is in power, students may either be advantaged or disadvantaged. The autonomous model considers literacy only in terms of technical terms and as being independent of social context (Street 1993). In contrast, the ideological model views literacy practices as being inseparably linked to cultural and power structures within society. Literacy is practiced and mastered within a specific social context applicable to the participants within the defined social construct as opposed to being pre-scribed a version of literacy to be acquired and subsequently unfairly measured against. Hence, in the context of the unfolding discussions, it would appear that some of them were better at being able to apply an embedded measure of literacy within the scope of the discussion to overcome the challenges as forthcoming from the topic being debated.

I can see how this kind of engagement overtime can significantly sharpen the ability of those who already show signs of such maturity while at the same time it can assist in developing those who are not yet functioning at that level.

The students, in all the teas I attended, were comfortable to share freely and question liberally, in what can best be described as an atmosphere of tampered honesty. I am compelled to confess, that that outside of Social Science lecture theatres and tutorials, I had not yet encountered a space like this. Not only did the tea provide a comfortable space for social interaction, it also provided a space to educate students on wider social issues. The setting and the nature of the 'tea-engagement' provided a safe space for questions, discussion and self-expression, that general lectures/tutorials perhaps do not always provide. From my observation, it managed to expose students from different disciplinary backgrounds, to one another's ideas and opinions on context dependent issues, which they in any other circumstance or environment would not have shared with such liberty.

In light of my own undergraduate experience, as a TYDP student, knowing what I have been through and knowing what I know now, I believe I would have greatly benefitted from this kind of interaction.

4.3 Introductory Courses and Augmented Tutorials – As it was in the beginning

I almost missed my first FYDP tutorial observation. It had just turned nine-o-clock and I rushed across campus, to the Computer Science building to observe the anthropology augmented tutorial (also called plus tutorial). When I entered the room, most of the students were already seated waiting for the tutorial to begin. After a few greetings and announcements, the tutor prompted the students to prepare a free writing piece on the topic of the 2015 #RhodesMustFall movement. This was in preparation for their upcoming anthropology group project on the topic and also tied in with the tea-room debate on the same issue. They were allowed some time to write down any thoughts and questions they had on the movement. The room went quiet almost immediately, except for the sound of clicking pens and the muffled voices of students down on Jammie Plaza below.

However, this was soon interrupted as the tutor started to introduce the tutorial topic on "*How to go about creating a research project*." She went on to describe, in great detail and with constant reference to their lecture notes, the process of putting together such a project. I was most impressed with the clarity and the simplicity of her presentation and my thoughts almost involuntarily turned to how helpful this content would have been to the group of TYDP students I had just come from tutoring.

Although both tutorials were for the same anthropology course, students enrolled in the FYDP were, as a result of the extra contact time, exposed to additional content and are also given an extra opportunity to explore and delve deeper into the topics and themes of the course; more so than those students enrolled on the TYDP. Following, every plus tutorial I observed, I subsequently sent an email of suggestions and/or advice to my TYPD tutor group extracted from what I had been exposed to during the plus tutorial. In retrospect, I believe that my own tutorial group would have benefited greatly from similar sessions, were they also allowed more time to develop their ideas.

I had a similar thought when attending the Monday 2pm introductory course lecture. The lecture was just like any other I had been to in my undergraduate years. It was in a large lecture theatre, as described in the previous chapter, and full of students; some taking notes, others chatting with friends or staring at their cellphones. Had I not known that it was an introductory course, I would have assumed it to be any other social science lecture. I sat near the front end of the lecture theatre and in the middle of a long wooden bench. The content of the lecture seemed standard to the

general social science disciplines, but it was delivered in the same deliberate manner as in the tutorial session, with the lecture taking her time to make sure her audience grasped the gist of what she was trying to bring across. A standout aspect of this specific lecture was when the lecturer explained the meaning of the word *embodied*, she did it in such a way that I knew what she meant without having to explicitly define it – this kind of focused, wilful teaching was completely absent from my first year experience at UCT. Often during that time, so many concepts, and I suppose important ideas, simply went over my head. In light of what I observed, it may have been a consequence of lectures which were unnecessarily rushed and not as well thought through. Time, however, appears to be the chief enabler of this rich development space, and I will be the first to admit that it is not on the side of the TYDP.

4.4 Time is on our side

Students enrolled in the FYDP are expected to take a maximum of four years to graduate enabling the students to spread their courses over a longer period instead of the normal three years. The course load per semester is consequently lighter which allows students the additional time required to complete their two mandatory introductory courses. These intro courses are not mandated on the three-year degree programme. Hence, FYDP students are required to complete 22 courses over a period of four years, as opposed to the TYDP students who are required to complete 20 course over three years. The concomitant difference in pace of delivery and perhaps even the cognitive load (more time to process) becomes immediately obvious.

Be that as it may, FYDP students, over the course of the three focus group discussions, expressed mixed feelings in terms of how they interpreted the additional time as being a possible benefit. In reference to the length of time spent at university, senior students appeared to be the greatest proponents of the *extra* time spent at university in reference to what it afforded them to achieve. During the first focus group session, which was also the largest, a second year student, who was part of the ED council went on in defense of the extra time component in the FYDP

> "*… with ED you have more time, less courses, to work on those aggregates to qualify to get into postgrad …*"

The two senior students I interviewed also expressed a similar appreciation for having had more time to get to grips with university,

> "*The ED allowed me to have more fun at university, I had more time to socialize … I really appreciated the social aspects of ED… it also allowed me more time to focus on my majors and other subjects*"

> "*The extra contact time in first year was really useful… after taking a gap year it was nice, because it helped me to get back into the work mind-set.*"

Some first year students also commented along similar lines, but not with the same conviction as expressed by the senior group. I got the impression that somehow they were just being polite as in they thought it the right thing to say,

> "… *When you get to university they expect a whole lot more from you and the pressure is a lot more so I think the four-year degree is there to relieve some of the pressure ...*"

> "… *It think it helps you transition into the varsity lifestyle, in a more relaxed way, because now you have more time allocated to your courses and studies …*"

I perceived their comments more as observations as opposed to actual experiences given the manner in which they distanced themselves in their statements –it lacked 'identity' or 'ownership' as they did not claim the affordances of the extra time as something they experienced as being an advantage. For example, in the first comment above the student did not say '*when I got to university I was under a lot of pressure and the extra time in the four-year degree relieved some of the pressure.'*

During the third and last focus group session, one student commented that she had been accepted for the TYDP but opted to enrol in the FYDP, as she thought it would benefit her academically as a result of the extra time. She was definitely in favour of the programme from this aspect and did not regret her decision. Her comment, more than anything, became the catalyst that challenged the integrity of some of the other first years' comments in reference to this perceived benefit of extra time. It immediately changed the vibrancy and excitement levels within the group, which up to this point was rather restrained.

Most admitted that having the extra time was '*helpful*' but the difference was that this student chose the course whereas the course '*... was chosen for them*.' In recognising her own

'weaknesses' she understood from the outside looking in, how having the additional time in the FYDP, could help her to graduate successfully. Some of the subsequent comments were

> *'... yeah it is nice and everything but I feel I was just thrown into it ...'*
>
> '*... like there was no discussion like at school when your parents and the teachers discuss your subject combinations ... like why you must rather do math lit and stuff like that ... you feel part of the choice ... like in class the other day the lady said we must reach consensus ...I don't feel like we've reached consensus ...'*
>
> *'... I do like that the course is not so rushed, and that we get to talk about a lot of stuff like in tea-time ... but I don't know if I would have done any worse in the three-year degree ...'*

As no one really denied the positive aspects of having the extra time, I understood, that their objections, more than anything else, were mainly anchored in the fact that it was somehow 'imposed' on them.

4.5 "Grandma's Hands" - Soft, Tender and Certain

Following on from the above discussion, I observed that the students, in reflecting on their comments on 'time', also touched on elements of the culture of the course as having had an impact on them. In the last comment above for example, the student referred to the nature of the course as,

> *'... I do like that the course is not so rushed, and that we get to talk about a lot of stuff like in tea-time ...'*

Having first hand observed the confident and unrestrained manner in which the students interacted and shared in the tea-room, would suggest that this environment was not just ad-hoc; there were specific elements at work which caused students to feel safe and comfortable enough to share in

such an un-coerced fashion. A similar environment, though not as intimate, existed in the tutorial room as confirmed by one of the students who commented in one of the focus groups,

> *'It's rather different from your lecture. It's more comfortable and feels more like a teacher and student space …'*

I found from my participation sessions as well as the focus group discussions that this same thread of nurtured caring was woven throughout the tapestry of the programme. Not a single student made a remark to the contrary. In discussions focusing on their interactions with staff most comments were along the lines of '*… very approachable …*', '*… they take their time with you …'* and '*… you feel they actually want to help you …*' Two students in particular pointed out how this environment helped build their confidence and eased the pressure of needing to perform at a particular level,

> *'You know you think that you're at varsity and they're your lecturers and you shouldn't bother them with stupid stuff, but it's like they don't even care … you can ask whatever … it really helped with my confidence levels'*
>
> *'… she's so approachable … sometimes I email questions that even I think maybe a little silly, but she responds hey, and in a friendly manner … there's no judgement … so you can just relax and focus on your work…'*

Both of the senior students, in our one-on-one interviews, and without being probed to do so, also freely commented on the impact this nurturing environment had on them. Over croissants and coffee, one of them, who is now in her final year of undergraduate study, recounted with deep fondness, her experiences of her first year enrolled in the FYDP. The other also commented in a very definitive manner that

> *'… the programme is there to bridge the gap between school and university, it's a caring programme and we have lecturers and course convenors who care …'*

One student in particular happened to comment on how this environment made her *'… appreciate even more, just being at UCT …',* and in the process rekindled the debate around the perceived prestige of being at UCT which was touched on during the first two focus groups. According to

some students, them just being at UCT by virtue of the FYDP, was a benefit in itself, as according to them, UCT was "*the best university in Africa*".

4.6 Levels of Separation and Benefits of Association

The venue for the first focus group, as previously mentioned, was packed to the rafters with the most number of students in attendance. During this initial discussion the prestige of UCT and the perception that it was the best university in Africa, was widespread among the group and in fact remained undisputed throughout the ongoing discussion and subsequent focus groups. After sharing what the students imagined to be the 'costs' of the programme, a female student, attempting to look on the bright side commented

> *"… I just think we should think of the positive things, if you put all these things aside, forget all the points you're making about finances, and the amount of time we are spending here, at the end of the day if you think about the institute that we are at, and we're getting another… like another option… I mean we're not on the 3 year so that's another option on the side, and we're at the best institution, look at the positive…at the end of the day when we have our degree, even though it took us longer, its gonna benefit us and obviously we'll have better jobs…"*

While students largely agreed with the supposed gravitas of UCT, many did not agree with the statement above. They were not convinced that just having graduated from UCT is a guarantee that you will get employed in the first place, or for that matter have better opportunities. Some of them contested her statement with comments like

> *'… so every single UCT graduate is happily employed?'*
>
> *'…are you saying companies are going to line up to offer us jobs? Meaning that the graduates from the other universities are all useless?'*
>
> *'… I suppose some companies, for whatever reason, do want UCT graduates from specific degrees, but I don't think it's the same for all qualifications …'*

However, for most present, the perception of UCT and its rank as the best University of Africa remained an important mediating factor in their decision to attended UCT. I hesitantly concluded,

given the value they attached to the perceived social and cultural capital gained by being associated with UCT, that for most it was almost enough just to say *'I'm at UCT.'* One student tried to articulate his interpretation of this 'perceived prestige' of being associated with UCT, but the best he could come up with was *'You just cannot deny the levels of UCT'.* Nevertheless, most of the students present seemed to have understood what he meant as they all nodded in agreement.

The following week I conducted another focus group – this time with only eleven students in attendance. We all managed to find seating around the table which in some small measure contributed towards a more relaxed and open discussion. Still intrigued by the phrase *levels* that was used in the previous focus group, I asked if any of my collaborators could explain what they meant and or understood by the term.

They explained that *levels,* referred to both the rank and the academic standards between UCT and the other Universities, as well as the *rank* of degree programmes within UCT and the standards it upheld. They understood UCT to be better that any other university on any *level* and that all the other institutions are measured against UCT's standards. According to them, these levels of separation affords them the benefits of being associated with UCT. Even when I pointed out that their perceptions were perhaps arrogant and untested as they were not exposed to any of the other institutions at any *level*¸ they persisted '*It is what it is'*.

Their perceptions appear to align itself with the socio-cultural theories of Pierre Bourdieu (1986). According to Badat (2008) the previous apartheid higher education system, discriminated along the lines of race and ethnicity to the advantage of historically white institutions. They benefited educationally and financially as well as infrastructural and geographical while historically black institutions remained under-resourced and financially restricted – a disparity that is still clearly visible, especially amongst the Academic Universities in the Western Cape.

This advantage allowed these institutions, of which UCT is one, to build substantial portfolios of what Bourdieu (1986) refers to as economic, social and cultural capital – all of which are interrelated and interdependent. In brief terms, cultural capital is something one acquires for equipping oneself and which is reproduced by economic capital (material in nature). Bourdieu (1986, p. 51) defines social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition." He further states that this network "provides each of its members

with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word." These entities, being interrelated and interdependent, will consequently vary according to social i.e. the more social and economic capital you have the higher your social class and the higher your cultural capital will be (ibid).

It thus stands to show, that given UCT's considerable economic, social and cultural capital it would concomitantly increase its perceived social class, while previously disadvantaged institutions remain at the lower rungs of the proverbial social ladder.

4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I attempted to show as educed from the data what students may have alluded to as being a 'benefit' of the FYDP. Most of them agreed that they appreciated the caring and supportive nature of the FYDP and how it helped them to relax and build their confidence. They also indicated that they liked the deliberate manner in which both the introductory lectures as well as the augmented tutorials were delivered. Some of them also recognized the tea-room sessions as a place where they '*learned about other stuff and could express themselves freely'*. However, talks and discussions around the extra time in the FYDP as a perceived benefit were, as I perceived it, somewhere between inconclusive and contradictory. Though none of the students outright denied the benefits of the extra time, some felt that they were denied the freedom to choose to take four years as opposed to three. On the other hand, all the senior students were adamant that the extra time was in fact a definite benefit to them. Also without the extra time, none of the 'nice experiences' of the FYDP would be possible as these are understood to be direct affordances of having the buffer or luxury of time.

The one surprising perception they all seemed to agree on, is that '… *just being at UCT is a good thing …'* and a direct benefit of the FYDP as the conduit of this opportunity. Whether or not their perception has any legitimacy, appears to be irrelevant, as according to them it simply '… *is what it is …*'

Chapter 5: Same, Same but Different – "The challenge of being a 4YDP student"

5.1 Introduction

Predictive Processing, as proposed by Gladziejewski (2017), argues that our perceptions are more than just passive creations of reality – they are in fact actively influenced by our prior knowledge about the world as well as our own cognitive and emotional state at the cross section of the actual reality with the observed or perceived reality. Our experience, actions, cognition and concomitant opinions are therefore not just shaped by 'what' we perceive but also 'how', 'why', 'when' and 'where' we perceive it – the sum total of which determines our reality.

First year students, enrolled in the FYDP at UCT, engaged with the course, from receiving their letters of acceptance to orientation, to registration and subsequent interaction with the course curricula and the related university ecosystem. These interactions took place against their socio-economic, cultural and educational backgrounds as well as whatever pre-conceived perceptions or expectations they may have had or formed of UCT prior to coming to the university – all of which ultimately contributed to shape their perception, whether real or imagined, of the programme as well as the institution.

Whereas the previous chapter reflected on the perceived benefits, this chapter will focus on the costs or 'negative' aspects of the course as experienced by the FYDP students. In order to best articulate these students' perceptions I elected to employ, in part, short second person narrative ethnographic stories, as educed from the focus groups, interviews and oral narratives, in the hope that it might make the reader feel as if it were happening to them.

5.2. The O-week surprise

It's early March, the sun is shining and Upper Campus is abuzz with new and returning students. You find yourself in and amongst the crowd, half intoxicated with excitement and disbelief that you too, are now a student at UCT – one of the best universities in Africa! Orientation Week (O-

Week) is about to kick off and you have every intent to support as many of the scheduled student festivities as you can. But first things first - orientation lectures.

With a look of obvious relief, you finally stumble into the Beattie Lecture Theatre, which took you a while to find, as it is only your second day on campus and you're still finding your bearings. The room is already full of students whose excited chatter sounded like the steady hum of a swarm of bees. After finding a seat, you take out a notebook and pen, careful not to look too overeager. You start scanning the crowd, trying to recognise a familiar face, someone from your school maybe or some past social engagement but then the lecture theatre falls into abrupt silence as the lecturer walks in.

"Well done on making it to UCT and thank you for choosing us as your preferred institution! You're certainly amongst the best students in the country!" is the lecturer's introduction. After identifying herself she continues with further congratulations before moving on to speak about the Humanities Faculty and all it has to offer. Everything sounds just great. You literally cannot stop yourself from smiling. Psychology – you will definitely sign up for psychology. This determined thought is however short-lived, interrupted by the lecturer's high pitched instruction, "Mainstream Students, move to Jameson Hall. Extended Degree Students stay behind."

Wait. What? What does this mean? You ask the student sitting next to you, who with measured impatience replies, "If you're doing the *three-year degree* go to Jameson Hall. If you're registered for the *four-year degree*, then stay here". All you can offer in response is a muted thanks as you struggle to process this new information. You thought all programmes took four years to complete. Reluctantly you stay behind, still trying to figure out what just happened.

As the lecturer leaves, the chatting starts up again, but this time with a lot more animation. You start to pick up from the conversations around you that you are not the only one who was caught off guard. From a heated conversation to your left you hear someone say, "You see, if you didn't meet all the requirements for the three-year degree they put you on this four year programme to give you more time to finish instead of just outright rejecting you, which is alright for me because I'm still where I want to be". To this someone else responds, "Ja, but still, it's a junk way to tell a person! They could've at least explained it in the admissions letter. How am I going to tell my

parents I've been enrolled in a *remedial* programme?" This comment draws a chorus of "It's true!" followed by an immediate chaotic crisscross exchange of opinions, all of which comes to an abrupt end when the course convenor walks in.

So much for being amongst the best students in the country - how indeed are you going to relate this turn of events to your parents?

5.3. You're NOT Stupid

From the bottom level of the Beattie Building, past the undergraduate computer labs, you can see the long line of students snake past the bathroom and end outside the second entrance of the main lecture theatre. You have your course registration form in one hand, all filled out in blue ink, and the undergraduate handbook in the other. Realising that it is going to take a while before you reach the registration venue, you take out your cell phone to lose yourself in your Facebook™ account and a number of other related social media distractions.

After almost an hour of waiting in line, you can eventually see the student advisors' desks and it immediately feels as if everything is starting to move quicker from this point onwards. In almost no time at all, you find yourself in the front of the que waiting to be served. "Next!" calls the advisor. You hand over your form as you clumsily slip into the vacant chair in front of the desk. "What do we have here?" is his only acknowledgement of your presence as he drops his head to quietly go over your documentation. Bored with the lack of engagement from your designated advisor you eavesdrop on what appears to be some kind of disagreement between a student and her counsellor at the desk to your right.

The discussion appears to pivot around subject combinations or time table clashes and or the student's preferred major subject selections. "Can't I just transfer to the four-year programme?" you hear her ask. The student advisor looks up from the transcript and says, "You don't need to do that, you're not stupid."

In more ways than one, the advisor's comment, though not directly directed at you, sowed the first seeds of doubt and perhaps even stirred a sense of inferiority as you find yourself questioning your own adequacy while at the same time trying to shrug off the slight feeling of embarrassment having to register for the Four-Year programme.

5.4 Unintended Consequences

This notion of so-called academic inferiority being attached as a descriptor of the FYDP, surfaced multiple times in the focus group discussions. In one of the first sessions a student noted that:

> *"I know I'm not the only one here but I feel like the programme makes us look stupid, not worthy… I've always felt like that, but then the other day it hit me even worse. Because what happened was my friend's boyfriend asked me what I'm studying, and I told him … mmm Politics and Sociology and then Language in the Humanities. And then my friend's boyfriend was like* **DOH**[5] (emphasis added by student – very expressive and very negative) …"

One student in particular made the comment that:

> "*When I first heard that I was in ED, I was like what does that mean, am I like dumber than everyone else?… But once you're in it – it's literally to give you more time and I even told my sister, and she's quite smart. But I told her, if you can take ED, do it. Because everything gets spread out and so you're not struggling to do everything in these three years, because sometimes it's hard and especially when you're coming in from high school, it's so different. But I think people do stigmatise you especially people those who are in the three year programmes, they look at ED like the lower level …*"

Although the student appreciated the programme and thought it immensely helpful during her own undergraduate degree, she nonetheless felt that she was still made to feel 'less adequate', especially by those outside of the FYDP. This perception, whether real or imagined, was largely confirmed

[5] DOH stands for Department Of Humanities it refers to the beginning letter of the introductory courses. The acronym DOH is used by students to refer to the course/ subject

by most of the participants in further focus group discussions – it is not the programme itself that made them feel inadequate or inferior, but more so those who statically viewed the programme from the outside in.

Staszak (2008, p. 2) describes this 'othering' of the FYDP students as a complex process by which the dominant in-group, in this case the mainstream students, constructs them as an out-group ("Them", "Other") by "stigmatising a difference" – such as for example that they are given a year longer to complete the same degree i.e. they are 'slow') – "presented as a negation of identity" and which may ultimately spur discrimination. 'Othering', however, does not necessarily develop without a catalyst or in isolation as institutionally, the very nature, structure and purpose of the programme as a redress implementation, restricted to the previously disadvantaged, already 'otherised' the FYDP students (Gorski, 2010).

The FYDP seeks to support those students who are deemed underprepared for higher education, which, according to one of the elements of Bourdieu's (1986) socio-cultural theories, implies that they do not meet the cultural capital requirement of the mainstream programme. Bourdieu (1986) constructs the concept of cultural capital as having an intimate awareness or familiarity of the dominant culture, including the ability to communicate effectively using the language of the dominant culture. Those whose ontogenetic development is supported by social and or family structures that communicate the competencies of the dominant culture, are heavily favoured to acquire the mentioned linguistic and cultural competencies (ibid). Moreover, having cultural capital is directly related to social class, implying that it is better inculcated in higher social class homes, enabling those individuals to maintain their socially dominant positions (ibid). Conversely, individuals coming from lower social class homes and or socio-economic environments (as do most previously disadvantaged students), would by implication have a cultural capital deficit which immediately places them at a disadvantage when engaging so-called dominant cultures. In this regard, the principle focus of the FYDP is to familiarise students with the culture of the mainstream programme and related higher education practices (the dominant culture) in addition to building their cultural vocabulary (academic vocabulary) required to appropriately and effectively communicate within the higher education academic space.

However, from the students' comments above, it appears that, in as much as the FYDP is meant for good, it may have the unintended consequence of perpetuating marginalisation. In separating these students (even in part) from the dominant culture based on their perceived cultural capital deficiencies, one is in fact 'otherising' them from the dominant culture and in the process predisposing them to being stigmatised (Fox, 2016).

5.5 Positive Discrimination or Deficit Selection?

As previously mentioned, FYDP students are those who did not meet the minimum stipulated criteria for the Humanity Faculty's general degrees, but, but were eligible for the extended programme as a result of their socio-economic and educational background as well as their performance in the NBT tests and the APS[6]. While some of the FYDP students, with varying degrees of conviction, accepted that the programme is probably the best option for them, others seemed to question the legitimacy of their placement in the course.

In one of the smaller focus group sessions, while discussing the perceived 'value' of being at UCT, one of the students with a tone that matched his irate expression, shared that

> "*Even at orientation they say you're of the best students in the country. 'Well done for making it here', but then if I'm like top in the country why am I on this programme?*"

His comment drew immediate support from a student towards his left who added

> "*True! They say you're among the top students in the country but when it comes to playing with the best of the best you are the weak of the flock*"

One of the senior students started to offer a 'background' response: "*This programme is intended to correct the wrongs of the past, it's mainly for people of colour who …"* but it was summarily cut off by a student towards the back of the room who claimed that he "… *got higher marks than*

[6] The Academic Point System (APS) allocates point values to seven National Senior Certificate subjects

a white person, and he's in the three year degree programme … so I'm here just because I'm coloured?".

It is this particular phenomena that Sikhosana (cited in Badat, 2008) warns of in speaking about the undesired outcomes of applying affirmative action redress that does not look beyond race or ethnicity in moving target groups into the predominantly white mainstream without questioning the mainstream system itself – it only serves to widen class inequalities while strengthening apartheid legacy practices. Furthermore, the university, as a space of whiteness (Moreira, 2015) is in stark contrast to the FYDP which is restricted to students of colour only. Hence the positioning of the FYDP students as the 'dark other' somehow lends credibility to the student's insinuation of having been racially disadvantaged.

A girl, sitting next to the senior student who was cut short, commented with a tone which I can only describe as a measured combination of disappointed and concern, that she knows "… *a girl, she's really smart, she like mainly gets code 7's*[7] *for all her subjects. But she's black and from a township school so I know she'll be in this programme …*"

As mentioned, students in the FYDP are selected based on a perceived deficit, generally referred to as being underprepared and measured in part on how far off they are from meeting the minimum entry requirements of the mainstream programmes. From the students' comments, one gets a sense that for them the issue is not the actual entry requirements, but more that they may have been "unfairly" measured with some even suggesting that their racial classification may have disadvantaged them. These racial insinuations are, ironically, the complete opposite of the intent of the so-called Positive Discrimination application in the FYDP's selection process which seeks to favour students of colour to 'benefit' from the redress programme.

However, their perception is in part supported by Fox (2016, p.640) who argues that the deficit model does not "necessarily reflect a lack of cultural assets possessed by marginalised groups", as per Bourdieu's (1986) construct of cultural capital, but rather "a lack of recognition and legitimisation of those assets by the dominant culture". A consequential outcome of this approach,

[7] Code 7s are the highest possible code to get – the grade range of a code 7 in secondary schools in SA are between 80-100% - they are an A grade

is that the perceived cultural deficiency becomes the student's problem – one which will need to be changed and modified if the student is to conform to the dominant culture and or social norms (Fox, 2016). Students who are marginalised in this manner are thus required to adapt to the educational system as opposed to being integrated into it, which according to Freire (2005) are two distinct processes.

Freire (2005, p.4) defines the process of integration as being a distinctly human activity resulting from one's capacity "to adapt oneself to reality" in addition to having "that critical capacity to make choice and transform that reality." In contrast, the process of adaptation, positions one as an object void of choice and being incapable of transforming one's reality, one simply adjusts to it (ibid). The deficit model employs an enforced adaptive process in which the marginalised student is detached from their background culture and experience and are placed in an environment in which their indigenous cultural capital is seen more as an impediment than a resource to be embraced (Pitzer, 2013). Interpreting the concerns of the students, one gets the impression that they measured and viewed their abilities differently than the FYDP course selectors, with one of the students even stressing that he "*... could've easily managed four courses*".

However, the FYDP remains void of choice (subject selection) as well as room to manoeuvre a cognitive path 'upwards' into the mainstream programme, which inevitably culminates in the fatalistic acceptance of either "adapt or die".

5.6 Who Needs Time?

It was four o' clock on a Tuesday and the small ED tea room was unexpectedly crowded. There were so many more students present than when I just visited the previous week. Perhaps they actually enjoyed the first meeting or perhaps word got out that there would be snacks. Nonetheless, the room was full and bustling with excitement. I stood at the front of the small grey room with my back pressed up against the white-board. The students, on noticing that I was ready to start, slowly quieted down while continuing to chew on the biscuits I brought.

As soon as I worked through the welcome and abbreviated background as to why we were there, the chatting flared up again as I opened the discussion with the first of many questions. We were discussing the perceived costs, more specifically as it pertained (or not) to the extra year mandated by the programme. Students' opinions in this regard, as can be expected, differed significantly

A male student sitting on a swivel chair in the corner of the room, commented

> *"... I can go maybe two weekends when I don't get work done, but I can still survive - with an additional course it wouldn't really affect me that much, I would be able to handle it surely – so it's like you're wasting my time bra ..."*

To which another student hurriedly added,

> "*Yes, I get the extra time, but that extra time I spend sleeping anyway, so for me it's just a waste."*

From the back of the room, a girl standing squished in the corner with a green and yellow Lipton™ Ice tea in her hand, spoke up, directing her response mainly at the student who made the first comment,

> "*It's different when you're not in the three year stream and then you're looking in and you're like oh I can do that, but there's a reason why we are here ... it's because of our marks. It's not as if you just magically ended up in this programme, you were put here for a reason, and if you had worked harder in matric maybe you would've been in the mainstream programme."*

This caused quite a stir as not many in the room agreed with her, especially in terms of it just being a question of marks. A number of students in the group actually commented that their results were fairly on par with those in the TYDP. One of them went so far as to state that his marks were in fact better than that of a student he befriended in the TYDP, which further added to their already blurred understanding of the selection criteria applied in the FYDP.

As the exchange continued through the balance of the focus group sessions, I noted that every time this issue surfaced, no one would raise any direct complaints or concerns with regards to the actual content, quality and or relevance of the additional compulsory courses (DOH courses) and how these elements may or may not justify the additional year as a reasonable (or not) cost in exchange for its derived benefit (if any). Hence, even though opinions differed in terms of the perceived cost of the extra time, their comments remained consistently dichotomous in terms of viewing the additional time as being detached from the perceived benefits gained from the compulsory courses. However, a senior student, during one of the interviews indirectly touched on the relevance of the DOH courses, asserted that he found the second introductory course unnecessary and that it should have been optional as it just "added unnecessary time". This same student, ironically, did not consider the extra year as a "waste" as he felt it afforded him the opportunity to "pay proper attention" to his credit subjects.

In as much as most of the students shared their thoughts of the extra year as either being helpful or as some commented, "a waste", there were those who explicitly raised the financial implication of the extra year as being their "biggest negative". A female student living on campus, felt that even though she was being funded through NSFAS, the funding module does not include "a cost of living allowance", which for her presented a serious challenge – "*... it's not only res, but I have to manage the small stuff, stationery, travel, books ...".* Her concern was supported by a male student who added that *"... There are a lot of small things that add up, for example, I live off campus, and I must pay for my food and for my accommodation, transport, so that's all from my own pocket ..."*

Their concerns triggered a somewhat subdued discussion around what some of them perceived to be disparities in the NSFAS funding module. Those in the group who were funded by the NSFAS either received finance for their residence and tuition fees, or tuition together with a travel allowance or just the tuition fees. However, students were also keenly aware that not everyone was financed by NSFAS or outside bursaries, as confirmed by a student who stressed that "… *We shouldn't generalise and assume that most students in the programme got NSFAS loans, because they didn't.* " Students seemingly agreed that the financial cost of spending the extra year at university was minimized (not removed) where the full cost of tuition and or residence were

covered by NSFAS funding. They also acknowledged, in the same vein, that the financial burden of an extra year without this funding or any other funding, would in fact be very significant.

5.7 Stifled Progression

FYDP students are limited in their choice of course subjects as a direct result of the structure and requirements of the programme. Firstly, students enrolled in the FYDP may not major in undergraduate law. Secondly, students wanting to major in Psychology or Economics must first pass two introductory numeracy courses before they can take these subjects. Hence they are not allowed to enrol in these courses during their first year of study. Many students were frustrated by the fact that these limitations and or restrictions had not been made clear to them prior to registration and especially after they already rejected their other offers in favour of UCT's placement offer. One student was especially annoyed with what he called "*UCT's blatant lack of transparency*" in their admissions offer. He further commented that

> *"Having known this I would have made a different choice, I was accepted at Stellenbosch and UWC and they accepted me for the 3 year degree …"*

Another student suggested that

> "*The thing that said four year degree was not specific enough … I want to know my options, I feel that the slides that they showed us during orientation should've been attached to the acceptance letter, stating that if you join this programme, you can't do law, you can't do economics – then you know that, okay you're ready when you come here*"

Someone else added that "*It's true. I actually thought that all degrees were four years, until I got here …*"

These layers of cognitive restrictions and or enforced limitations to progression presents itself as nothing other than a perpetuation of the underlying deficit ideology that remains in the employ of our colonised universities as a means to deflect, gate-keep, segregate and to maintain and

perpetuate the injustices that fortify their underlying practices (Gorksi, 2010; Shields et al, 2005). Through this process of stifled progression, students remain marginalised and are further restricted to choices that have already been made for them, resulting ultimately in stifled potential (Stefani, 2009). Furthermore, it also brings into question the integrity of the FYDP as a mechanism of transformation and gives credence to those who have been calling for the radical decolonisation of our educational institutions. For them, transformation, in this context, is nothing other than an exercise in cosmetology, absent of any qualitative and meaningful change, and applied by colonialist institutions merely as a strategy to maintain the status quo (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2016).

5.8 Conclusion

As in the previous chapter, perceptions of a 'cost' experience amongst the students varied substantially in some aspects while in others they almost reached accord. Most of them agreed that the perceived stigma attached to the FYDP was for the most part, more of social difficulty to manage, but still not what they "signed up for". Some of them were rather crudely introduced to this unintended consequence of the course during orientation as well as at registration. The lack of clarity in the acceptance letter about the detail of the course, including the progression path restrictions as well as the obfuscated selection criteria, were also raised as cost attachments of the programme.

The perceived cost aspects in terms of the extra year appears to be relative to their confidence levels in their own cognitive ability – some felt that they will not be able to cope without the extra time whereas others thought of it as a "waste of their time". However, they agreed that it does present a significant financial challenge without the required support.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Background

This study sought to ethnographically explore the value of the Humanities' FYDP programme according to students' feelings, experiences and perspectives, both positive (benefit) and negative (cost) as well as anything in between, in order to better understand the effects, if any, the FYDP had on their social engagement with the programme. The rationale behind the study was that apart from some experiences that have been qualitatively documented, not much has been reported in terms of a rich, ethnographic perspective of how students perceive and experience such programmes.

6.2 Reflection

As previously mentioned, I employed four main qualitative data collection methods, namely, focus groups, interviews, participant observation and oral narratives to engage with my collaborators who were mainly first year FYDP students. I have, however, also included the perspectives of some second, third and fourth year students, which I found were consistently more reserved and much more reflective. One could perhaps credit it to their level of maturity as well as perspective in terms of having already completed the first year FYDP. The first years, on the other, were a lot more animated, erratic at most, and to some degree unrestricted but without being thoughtless i.e. our engagements were hardly ever superficial or burdened with mindless exchanges of nonsense.

I had no illusions that the concept of a 'cost' and or 'benefit' experience was ever going to produce a straightforward binary result, and this was summarily confirmed in the very first focus group. A number of issues serviced over the period of our engagements; some of which were considered a 'cost' by some students while others perceived it as a 'benefit' and vice versa. However there were some 'cost' and some 'benefit' perceptions that did not present themselves as a dichotomy.

The most consistent 'cost' perception was the attached stigma that came 'parceled' with the course. I observed, based on multiple exchanges that touched on this aspect, that some dealt with it better than others. In particular, those who were of the opinion that they were "unfairly" judged to be in the FYDP were a lot less willing to "just live with it" as opposed to those who felt that the FYDP

is the “best course for them”. The impression I got from amongst the senior students, is that it does not go away; they just learned to manage it better and by that they meant, ignore it.

UCT’s lack of professional courtesy in terms of clarifying the details and embedded limitations with regards to subject choices and progression paths, in their acceptance letters, produced some of the more emotional interactions and also surfaced as a consistent ‘cost’. A few of the collaborators insisted, that had they known, they would have chosen differently. Others felt that they would have been a lot more emotionally prepared, as opposed to being told on the day that “this thing is not what you thought it was”. Ironically though, in spite of being treated with such apparent disregard, most of them felt that just being at UCT is a good thing. They may not agree with some of the elements or how they ended up in the course, but if being in the course places them at UCT, then it’s a good thing; a ‘benefit’ perception that remained consistent amongst the collaborators.

The discussions around the extra year turned out to be the most contentious. The extra year is mainly the result of having to make “space” for the compulsory courses which most of them seem to appreciate, with quite a few of them perceiving it as a definite ‘benefit’. However, a small grouping of students perceived as neither, even though they did not deny the compulsory modules as a positive experience. Many of those who thought the extra year to be a “waste of time” and who perceived as an outright ‘cost’, came from this grouping. The contradiction surfaced when those who perceived the support modules as a ‘benefit’ also argued that the extra year was a waste and thought of it as a ‘cost’. Hence, even though opinions differed in terms of the perceived ‘cost’ or ‘benefit’ of the extra time, their comments remained consistently dichotomous in terms of viewing the additional time as being detached from the perceived benefits gained from the compulsory courses.

The perceived blurred selection criteria of the FYDP, surfaced as a ‘cost’, predominantly amongst those who felt that they were “good enough” to be in the mainstream programme. These were also the same grouping of students who insisted that the extra year was a waste and expressed as it as a ‘cost’ experience. In as much as some in the focus groups thought that these students were just being arrogant, evidence in literature does agrees that the ‘readiness’ assessment process is far from full proof as it only measures (to an extent) the academic readiness of students, and as has

already been shown, academic competency is only one of a number of factors influencing the successful transition from school to university.

6.3 Final Remarks

Even though students' perceived 'cost' and or 'benefit' experiences varied greatly, there were still pockets of consistency in terms of a particular "view". A number of students consistently felt that, apart from the stigma and in spite of the manner in which they were introduced to the course, they still felt that they were in the right course, with the right support at the right university. However, a small number of students also consistently felt that in spite of them being at the right university, they were in the wrong course, with the right support which they could have done without.

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