

# Agency and impasses to success amongst higher education students in South Africa

## Studying while black

Race, education and emancipation  
in South African universities



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# Higher education

1. 55% failure rates among students
2. Low completion rates on time (only 1 in 4)
3. White completion rates 50% higher than Black students (CHE, 2013)
4. Inequity in enrolment rates (15% Black youth 18-24 enrolled versus 54% White in 2014)

# Education and Emancipation



1. National research project
2. Investigate obstacles and opportunities within Higher Education
3. Started in April 2012/completed in 2018
4. Framing question: *Who are our students?*
5. In-depth quantitative and qualitative research

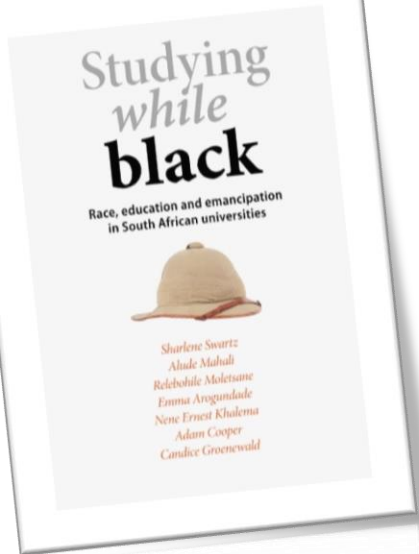
# EE Components



1. *Cohesion and discrimination*: after the Soudien Report: review Soudien Report and media analysis of protest action 2008-2015
  2. *Graduating into Professions*: literature review on obstacles to access and throughput with reference to women and black students.
- ***Who are our students and what happens to them?***: quantitative (CS) and qualitative (HSRC)

# The study

1. The study followed 80 students in 8 universities over 5 years (2013 to 2017)
2. Used a variety of engaging methods
3. Produced two accessible outputs:
  - **Book:** *Studying while black*
  - **Documentary:** *Ready or Not!*
4. Recorded struggles and obstacles, along with strategies and resources for success



I went to the bursary offices

'Where's the father's

Affidavit?'

'I don't have a father'.

'Go to your mom and tell her

to write about the

whereabouts of your father'.

I go home.

Write out another Affidavit.

Go back to the police station

Using a taxi.

Then back to university.

Being a female at  
university is an extreme  
sport

Every morning I wake up

Walk down to campus

with weapons

Tasers and pepper spray

There's always crime on

campus

Females being raped on

campus

With cameras.

You sit there in the  
lecture room and think:  
'What am I going to say?  
Are they going to laugh  
at me?

Think I'm stupid?

Some students slept.  
In the Student Building.  
For two days.  
Without food.

I wanted to study  
They said it's full.  
They just put me in another  
programme so that I don't  
stay at home.

If you are Black and poor,  
you are in trouble.  
This place is very brutal for  
Black poor kids.

I don't feel I belong to the  
campus

# Findings

1. Race and Racism on campus
2. Gender dynamics on campus
3. Language and power
4. Obstacles to overcome
5. Student strategies for succeeding
6. Research strategies for intervention
7. Recommendations for all stakeholders
8. Proposals for further research and intervention





# Sample Progression

<i>Category</i>	<i>Graduated</i>	<i>Still studying</i>	<i>Left university to work/seek employment</i>	<i>Untraceable</i>
<b>Total (n=80)</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>School background</b>				
<i>Township/Rural (n=38)</i>	<b>11</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>
<i>Suburban/Private (n=42)</i>	<b>16</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Parents' education</b>				
<i>Higher ed (n=41)</i>	<b>22</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>6</b>
<i>No higher ed (n=39)</i>	<b>5</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>

# Participatory research

1. “**Recognises** the value of **engaging** in the research process those who are intended to be the beneficiaries, users and **stakeholders** of research” (Biggs)
2. **Key feature - location of power**, commitment to the democratisation & demystification of scientific research
3. **Community** members as knowledgeable **collaborators**
4. **Underlying values** - action-oriented, dialogue, relevant and iterative, justice (Lewin – ‘The Northern Tradition’)
5. **Core elements:** Mutual respect and trust, accountability and reflexivity, participative and interactive, placing the participant at the centre (Freire – The ‘Southern’ tradition)

# Studying *while* black

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## METHODS

- Longitudinal cohort study
- Annual interviews
- **Social network interviews**
- **Social media blogs**
- Written Reflections
- **Ethnographic documentary**

# Construction/Structure of an **SNI Interview**

I. **Kinds of people** who might be interviewed (choose according to topic being researched)

II. **Declarative statement** (introduces the subject for discussion)

III. **Public attitudes** (external agency and building a discussion about community and norms on the topic)

IV. **Role of institutions, ideology, context, community** (evaluating context and what can or cannot be changed)

V. **Transformational message** (inviting constructive analysis of researcher's current behaviour; to develop internal agency)

VI. **Talking about peer and/or gendered norms** (class, race, culture) to differentiate between internal agency and systemic change needed

VII. **Developing strategies** for success, behaviour change, new realities

VIII. **Recap and referral** (enlarge social network and create useful linkages for researcher)

# Social network interviewing

## I. Kinds of people to be interviewed (Choose 3-5):

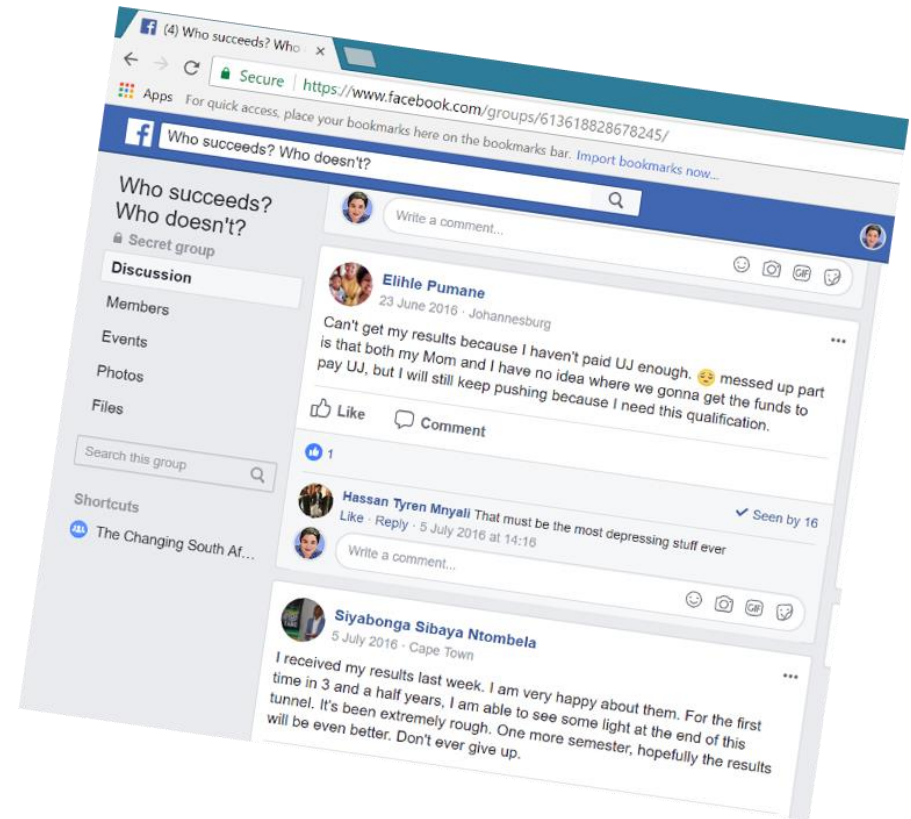
1. A person from your home town who never went to university
2. A student you consider more privileged than you
3. A student you consider less privileged than you
4. A staff contact from your previous school
5. A person in a university leadership position
6. A recent graduate that you know
7. A student like you
8. A person who works at student support services
9. A student who dropped out of university this past year
10. A person you consider to have helped you get to varsity
11. A person you consider to have helped you over this last year of university
12. A family member who has been to university

<p>II. Declarative statement</p>	<p><i>Many students struggle to both enrol at and successfully complete university. This research study aims to find out why this is so and what could be done about it.</i></p>
<p>III. Public attitudes</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Why is it important</b> for young South Africans to succeed at university?</li> <li>2. In your opinion, what are <b>some of the struggles</b> facing university students in South Africa, and what are some of the reasons for these struggles?</li> </ol>
<p>IV. Role of institutions, ideology, context, community</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. In your opinion, <b>what affects someone's success</b> at university?</li> <li>2. <b>Who is responsible</b> for students succeeding at University?</li> </ol>
<p>V. Transformational message</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. From what you know of me (or students in general), <b>what do I do that stops (sabotages) me</b> from succeeding at varsity? What should I be doing?</li> </ol>

<p>VI. Talking about peer and/or gendered norms to differentiate between internal agency and systemic change needed</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. How does <b><i>racism and gender discrimination</i></b> affect student's lives?</li><li>2. How is <b><i>success</i></b> at university affected by <b><i>people's backgrounds</i></b>? (Prompt: gender, education, race, social class)</li></ol>
<p>VII. Developing strategies for success, behaviour change, new realities</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. In your opinion, <b><i>who should be helping students succeed at university</i></b>, and what should they be doing to help?</li><li>2. What steps have you taken (or are you taking) in order to be successful in your life?</li></ol>
<p>VIII. Recap and referral (enlarge social network and create useful linkages for researcher)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. <b><i>Who else should I talk to</i></b> that might be able to help me to be successful at university?</li></ol>

# Facebook: Who succeeds?

- Smartphone & airtime
- Status updates
- Images and Photo's
- Inspirational Quotes
- Memes
- Video clips
- Newspaper articles
- Blog posts
- Bursary/Funding Info





# READY OR NOT

Black Students' Experiences of South African Universities

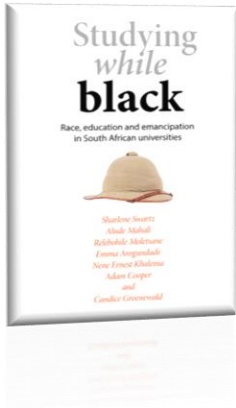
# What inequality does

1. **Stunting** - physical and cognitive
2. **Psychic/social stress** - 5 to 15 more years of illness
3. **Social sundering** - distrust, fear, violence
4. **Economic squandering** - charity after accumulation
5. **Ineffective democracy** - no substantive participation
6. **Lessens educational outcomes**
7. **'Worse' (hierarchically low) jobs and unemployment**
8. **Shortens lives**
  - In US: no degree associated with 5 yrs shortened life expectancy for women, 3 yrs less for men
  - Lack of education (less than 12 yrs) + **being black** = 12 yrs shortened life span
  - In South Africa by 20 years difference in life expectancy (HDI 15 White SAs and 116 Black SAs)



# 4 Mechanisms of inequality

- **Distanciation** - a systemic process designed to discern 'winners and losers'
  - *Approximation – close the physical distance*
- **Exclusion** - the division of 'in-groups' and 'out-groups'
  - *Inclusion*
- **Hierarchisation** - formal organisations of inequality
  - *Flattening power structures*
- **Exploitation** - unfairly capitalising on the physical labour of others
  - *Protection, redistribution and rehabilitation*



# RECOMMENDATIONS

Three spaces for action

- Individual/personal
- Institutional
- National/structural

**Actions for management and administrators, for lecturers and support staff, for students/student leaders, for government**





# University leadership (2)

17. Commissioners of oaths available in funding offices
18. Administrative offices accessible hours
19. Free or subsidised transport
20. Technology proficiency capacity development
21. Improved mental health facilities
22. Institutional justice processes
23. Formal mentoring programmes for all undergraduate students.
24. Resources for student self-management
25. Family events part of student orientation
26. Multiple orientations - compulsory
27. Course on other directed and self-directed learning



# Lecturers and support staff

1. Formal course on the social history of SA
2. Relevant Southern material
3. Formal reporting mechanism for GBV and harassment
4. Accents
5. Lecturers trained to communicate
6. Translanguaging
7. Lecturers as enablers of learning
8. Lecturers accessible
9. Course content to include academic know-how
10. Lectures compulsory for 1<sup>st</sup> yrs
11. Lecturers trained for referral e.g. mental health & crime
12. Faculty to act as mediators between students and management
13. Academic credit for reflections on transformation
14. Faculty to offer/administer mentorship programmes



# Student leaders and students

1. Student activities must encourage diversity
2. Mechanisms to report staff who gender discriminate
3. Awareness of support services – academic and mental health
4. Compulsory courses to disrupt patriarchy.
5. Mobilise peer academic support (incl. social media)
6. Students helped to include family in study progress
7. Compulsory lectures
8. Frequent incentivised check-ups (study skills, career guidance, mental health, time use and writing).
9. Opportunities for funding
10. Watchdog over residence allocations, incl. racial mix
11. Technology courses required
12. Public service messages
13. Student protests as opportunities for reflection
14. Student orientation repeated





# Government and policy makers

1. External structures for victimized students
2. Dedicate funding for Southern knowledge production
3. Multilingualism encouraged from school level
4. **Change monitored**
5. Student funding reforms and accountability
6. No withholding of marks for non-payment of fees
7. Incentives for faith communities to assist students (eg. Accommodation, study spaces, comm of oaths)
8. Private security firms to be held to strict codes of conduct
9. A standing forum for students to engage policy makers
10. Govt funded research on learning from students
11. Money for peer support and mentoring programmes

# Urgent next steps

1. Discussion of recommendations with **ALL** stakeholders
2. Full use to be made of the ***Ready or Not! Documentary*** in schools and for new students
3. Three follow up studies dealing with
  - **Sexual violence** and safety for women on campus
  - **Translanguaging**: Policies, practices, practicalities
  - **Mentoring**: For whom, by whom, how long, what medium?

Thank you

