

# **How undergraduate students 'negotiate' academic performance within a diverse university environment<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the practices, norms and values that constrain or enable successful participation of undergraduate students at a South African university undergoing a radical change. We look at four constructs about the resources that Wits students draw on when they negotiate their integration into the Wits culture of academic performance. The four constructs are: (i) internal regulation, which refers to the ways in which students experience the difference in relation to authority when compared to their school experiences; (ii) individual responsibility, which is related to the distribution of responsibilities between 'the student' and 'the institution' in relation to the process of learning and teaching; (iii) explicit and implicit rules, connected to the ways in which students get to understand how the Wits learning environment works; and (iv) re-visiting the familiar, which points to students' experiences of failure and alienation and how these experiences elicit past experiences of racial oppression.

Recent international research has shown that the transition between school and university is associated with stress, anxiety, and tension, which, in the case of students who come from socio-economic and cultural backgrounds that are radically different from the learning culture of the university they seek access to, leads to students failing or withdrawing from the university (Thomas, Bol and Warkentin 1991; Darlington-Jones, Cohen, Haunold, Pike and Young 2003). Literature has also been written on the question of the kind of transition assistance and academic support that are required to enable an enculturation process for students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds (Tinto 1987, 1993, 1995a, b, 2000; Tinto and Goodsell-Love 1993; Tinto and Russo 1993; Tinto, Goodsell-Love and Russo 1993; McInnis, James, and Hartley 2000).

The aim of this article is to explore the practices, norms and values that constrain or enable successful participation of undergraduate students at a South African university that is undergoing a radical social change. It looks at how do students at the University of the Witwatersrand (henceforth Wits) negotiate their needs and aspirations; and reflect on their expectations from lecturers and from the university, as well as from themselves. We examine four constructs, which together cover the social and academic resources that Wits students draw on when they seek to integrate into the Wits culture of academic performance. Our discussion shows how students draw on these conditions to reflect on their epistemic access and success. The four constructs are: (i) *internal regulation*, which refers to the ways in which students experience the difference in relation to authority when compared to their school experiences; (ii) *individual responsibility*, which is related to the distribution of responsibilities between ‘the student’ and ‘the institution’ in relation to the process of learning and teaching; (iii) *explicit and implicit rules*, connected to the ways in which students get to understand how the Wits learning environment works; and (iv) *re-visiting the familiar*. Here we look at students’ experiences of failure and alienation and how these experiences elicit past experiences of racial oppression.<sup>2</sup>

It is based on a study focused on third-year undergraduate students in the faculties of Humanities, Science, and Engineering and the Built Environment (EBE), which have the lowest throughput rates at Wits. Documents such as mission statements, institutional policies and strategies, reports and statistics on student performance were analysed. Empirical data came from 107 interviews of third-year students, 8 interviews with academic staff, and 3 interviews with administrative staff from the three faculties. The student sample was differentiated by race, gender and whether students were resident on or off campus.

The article is divided into three parts. The first part reviews three sets of social conditions that have been shown to impact students’ academic performance. The second part examines four constructs, which together cover the social and academic resources that Wits students draw upon when they seek to integrate into the Wits culture of academic performance. The third part of the article analyses the main characteristics of the learning environment that emerged from the students’ accounts.

We conclude by examining some of the institutional dilemmas, we believe, the university is facing.

## **WHY NOW AND WHY STUDENTS AT WITS UNIVERSITY?**

A university campus represents a very important space in social life where individuals experience ideological upheavals regarding place, location, identity and desire. For academics, this experience is articulated through debates on academic freedom, individual autonomy, collegial governance and truth seeking. Students too negotiate their needs and aspirations, they interpret policies, rules and guidelines and they respond to institutional administrative and academic provision.

In the last decade Wits has gone through significant social change. The number of its students grew from 17,884 in 1994 to 23,232 in 2005, of whom 14,960 were black (10,884 African, 3,455 Indian and 621 coloured) and only 8,269 were white. More importantly, the number of students from working class backgrounds increased, which means that many of Wits students do not possess the necessary social and cultural capital to meet the challenges of the academic culture of Wits. Data on students' performance and throughput is worrying. Wits University is facing a high failure rate and a very low throughput. While rates vary across faculties, on average fewer than 50 per cent of students who begin an undergraduate degree graduate and fewer than 45 per cent graduate in the minimum time. Black students are less likely to graduate than white students and male students usually take longer to graduate. Many degrees exclude more than 20 per cent of students for academic or financial reasons (Wits S2003/2183).

In South Africa, a host of literature has grown to examine (inter alia) patterns of students' participation in formal institutions of learning (Cross and Johnson 2003), ways in which academics accommodate the needs of a diverse student population, particularly in times of new managerialism, ways in which socialization into academic practice can support under-prepared learners (Griesel 2004), and what academic knowledge is worth knowing (Muller 2000). This article turns to students' accounts of their experience. It addresses the following research question: What social and academic resources do students draw on when they seek to integrate into Wits culture of academic performance, and in what ways do these align/or not with Wits culture of learning?

## **FACTORS INFLUENCING STUDENTS' ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE**

This section of the article considers three sets of social conditions that have been shown to impact on students' academic performance: *student biography* (socio-economic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds), *institutional mediation* (the nature of the learning environment constructed by the institution), and *student agency* (negotiating powers in the teaching and learning processes).

The *needs of specific students* and the difficulties they might encounter as a result of their academic, social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, their individual personalities, and financial difficulties have received wide attention (McJamerson 1992; Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg and Jalomo 1994; Lewis 1994; Long 1994; Shields 1995; Scott, Burns and Cooney 1996; Western, McMillan and Durrington 1998; Dobson 1999; Strage 2000; McInnis et al. 2000). The literature reports of complex combinations of variables that affect student academic achievement. These include: (i) student age, maturity and life experience (Clark and Ramsey 1990; Long, Carpenter and Hayden 1995; Shah and Burke 1996; West, Hore, Bennie, Browne, and Kermond 1986; (ii) institutional cultural differences between the school and the university (Abbott-Chapman, Hughes, and Wyld 1992; Bourke, Burdon and Moore 1996; Dobson and Sharma 1995; McClelland and Kruger 1989); (iii) gender differences (Scott et al. 1996); (iv) socio-economic status (Western et al. 1998); and (v) previous school performance (McClelland and Kruger 1998; Coulon 1993; McInnis et al. 2000).

*Institutional mediation* refers to the idea of ‘curriculum responsiveness’ (Moll 2004). From the perspective of this article, the idea of curriculum responsiveness focuses on the instructional strategies and learning pathways which a university employs in order to cater for its diverse student body, whilst socialising students into a form of academic inquiry that is aligned with the dictates of their academic discipline. The nub of this analysis is on how to enable ‘epistemological access’ (Morrow 1992) to students of different social and cultural backgrounds. A recent case study of pedagogical responsiveness (Griesel 2004) provides useful examples of pedagogical forms of engagement with learners’ thinking and systematic socialization of under-prepared students into academic practice.

In terms of student-lecturer mode of interaction, international research has provided us with important notions such as ‘pedagogic distance’ and ‘social presence’ (Richardson and Swan 2003), which bring to light the complexity and multidimensionality that characterise lecturer-student interaction. This work includes Gunawardena’s analysis (1995: 151) of ‘the degree to which a person is perceived as a “real person” in mediated communication’; Moore’s (1997) claim that by narrowing the pedagogic distance between lecturers and students, learning mediation is enhanced in its different domains- emotional, political, pedagogical, linguistic and physical; and Witt et al.’s (2004) description of ‘teacher immediacy’ or ‘the act of reducing the physical and/or psychological distance between lecturers and students through touch, direct body orientation, eye contact, gestures and positive head nods and related body language’. In one way or another, these studies aim to find ways to enhance student perceptions and feelings of connectedness to the academic expectations transmitted by their lecturers (Hostetter and Busch 2006). These studies must be seen alongside those that examine the notion of epistemological access from the point of view of ‘curriculum design’, which emphasises the importance of sequence and progression (Muller 2006) and ‘academic practice’, which examines

pedagogical forms in which lectures can socialise under-prepared students into its specific form of text-based practices (Slonimsky and Shalem 2004).

Studies on *student agency* examine the difficulties of adaptation of 'non-traditional' or 'under-prepared' students due to their disadvantaged background. Coulon (1993, 165) looks at 'affiliation' or the passage by which a candidate becomes a student. He shows that to become a student requires 'a progressive mastery of common institutional language' of the learning space through which a student emerges as 'a person endowed with a pool of procedures, methods, activities, know-how, which make him/her able to invent mechanisms of adaptation to give a meaningful sense to the world which surrounds him/her' (Ibid, 183). Coulon (1993, 165) argues that students who do not become affiliated fail:

The first task that a student must fulfil when he arrives at the university is to learn his student's profession [...]. The main problem the students meet is precisely to go beyond the first year [...]. Today, the problem is not to enter the university but to remain there [...]. To learn his student's profession means that *it is necessary to learn to become so*, otherwise one is eliminated or eliminates him/herself because they remain foreign in this new world [...]. It is necessary to move from pupil's status to that of student. As for any [ritual of] passage, this involves an effort of initiation. I called this process an affiliation [Our emphasis].

### **Internal regulation: In the learning space of the university no one 'nags' you**

At Wits students encounter a very different learning environment from the one they have experienced at school. The university learning environment appears to be open, in contrast to their experiences of being a school student: 'In school ... you're constantly being watched, you're being monitored, kind of so you don't break the rules'.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to this, the academic environment is attractive because of its freedom: 'I did come around once when I was in school and I saw people having like freedom, you know the freedom, which you do have in university and it was kind of attractive, I thought, from a young age'.<sup>4</sup> In the learning space of the university no one 'nags' you to do things or to do them on time:

But when I got to Wits, I realised I wasn't prepared; high school didn't prepare me. It was a shock ... the workload, and independent! You have to do things on your own, at your own pace, because in high school, your teacher is always nagging at you, do this exercise ... do this ... you know exactly that if you don't stretch, the teachers carry the stress for you. You just have to be there, you know. And getting to Wits was quite an eye opener, and now I appreciate that as an individual I practise urgency.<sup>5</sup>

And no one tells you how to study:

I thought they do everything for you, like making the academic stuff easier but it was not. I did not for instance know anything about the computer, until I got here. I didn't

know how to search for books in the library .... Even in studying, they don't really tell you how to study.<sup>6</sup>

We characterise the context of the university as *appearing to be open* because, underpinning the apparent openness, a particular relation of authority marks the social space of learning and teaching – the lecturer authorises knowledge. Students describe what they do when they seek advice or help, and the procedures they follow. What comes out of these descriptions is their sense of educational hierarchy – lecturers at the top, then senior students (tutors), then peers at the bottom layer. Here are the choices:

Well I have lots of friends on campus, some doing things similar to mine so I can consult with them any time, if they can they will help ... otherwise tutors are always there with their consultation times, which sometimes are not at the best times so you have to try and fit in, and I also consult with lecturers.

If one is looking for an answer that is guaranteed, one goes to lecturers.<sup>7</sup> A sense of degree of difficulty gives the student a sequence of possible options: (i) 'If I have difficulties, I try to sort them out on my own, if I find I have no way of understanding I discuss with my friends, if that doesn't help then I go and consult my lecturers';<sup>8</sup> or (ii) 'It depends on the question; if I think it's a stupid question I just ask my colleagues, but if I think it's important, like relevant to my essay, I go straight to the lecturer'.<sup>9</sup>

At times, the view of authority is mediated through perspectives that emanate from outside the academic culture – from a perceived African culture. In this regard, some students claim that they find it difficult to consult their lecturers because, in their view, it is difficult in an African culture to interact closely with people who are older than oneself. The challenge for them is to develop the necessary confidence to be able to communicate with older people and lecturers:

You know I come from a culture where we tend to respect older people and have to listen to them. But, right, I can enter into any conversation with an adult and speak confidently. So it is that confidence that is one of the things that I have actually got from Wits. It is the assertiveness and learning to substantiate my own ideas.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Individual responsibility: 'I don't believe in hard luck stories, I believe in effort'***

So far we have dealt with how students relate to the educative authority of lecturers. How do students see *their* role in this relationship? Many of the students convey a clear sense that 'it is up to the individual student' to get the most out of what Wits offers. This includes a form of individualism which encourages 'a sense of expressing your own opinion and thinking for yourself so that you can draw your own conclusions'<sup>11</sup> a social space of being yourself:

Basically this is where you get to establish yourself as an individual. Wits gives you room to be an individual. You realise what you want, they propose all sorts of things, and you have to grab whatever you can. And it is not restrictive, you're allowed to venture into anything and experience with anything, and so definitely it does give you the edge.<sup>12</sup>

This is not to say that students do not have expectations of the institution; they do. But they talk more clearly (and more repeatedly) about the need for understanding their role vis-à-vis learning and performing than they do about the responsibilities of their lecturers. Lecturers are described as 'interesting', 'boring', 'resourceful', 'passionate' or 'racist'. Students on the other hand are tasked with the responsibility *to work hard* and get the results.<sup>13</sup> The following student makes sure that when he does not understand, he makes a point 'to get it':

I always make sure that what I don't understand I will try to find information and ... work hard on that'. I committed myself to understand things although ... they gave me problems but no I think that ... sometimes ... you don't always need to go to ... tutors and lecturers asking for a hand ... say I don't understand it, this term, what does it mean? You have to go through the thing until you get it.<sup>14</sup>

The Wits learning environment is considered conducive to learning when one works hard: 'It is positive if you work hard, I mean if you don't work hard you can't consult because what is it you will be going to consult on?'<sup>15</sup> What really matters is 'putting in effort and coming out with something which is worthwhile and positive'. Together with 'responsibility' and 'hard work' in such an environment, students need 'initiative'. They need to get out there to the specialist, the lecturer, and confirm that 'they have understood': 'Ja I do, very much so, actually I'm one of those people that you'll find following the lecturer after lectures, to go and confirm, yes.'<sup>16</sup> Emerging from this account is the *expansion of self as the centre of power, action, change and responsibility*. 'I practice urgency', 'If I have difficulties; I try to sort them out on my own', 'I commit myself', 'You have to go through the thing until you get it' – these are the kinds of claims made by students, which disclose their conception of themselves as the primary locus of responsibility.

Lecturers too reinforce the idea that students have to be resourceful, independent and work hard:

My very first lecture is one of establishing the contract between my student and myself. What is my duty and what is their duty? We look at what we are supposed to get out of the time that we spend together. So that's the one thing that I would establish. The second question is always, always the same. Are there any disadvantaged students in this class? And it is interesting to see who puts up their hands. And I always look right through and never find any disadvantaged students – simply because we are all at Wits University. Do you understand? So I already set the course straight about, I don't believe in hard luck stories, I believe in effort.<sup>17</sup>

What needs to change is the student attitude. There needs to be an attitudinal change. That attitudinal change can only come about when a student body recognise that nobody owes them anything. For every student who gets into Wits, there's another five million who did not make it. So those students who get in, need to recognise that they have a one shot, one golden opportunity and they need to make that.<sup>18</sup>

These comments add a different dimension to the idea of individual responsibility. They convey a sense of *reduction of the notion of institutional responsibility*. We will elaborate more on this below. We now turn to the ways students negotiate their power in view of the reverence they attribute to the educative authority. Students speak about being vulnerable and shy in the public space of learning. They deal with that by deciding where to sit, and when and if at all to participate actively in public discourse. A striking feature here is the minimal, or in some cases absence of, lecturers' mediation in this process. For some students, active participation is associated with embarrassment or even sheer fear:

... I know I don't participate as much as I should. In tutorials, I do, but I get a bit intimidated in lectures. I tend to sit at the back and there are always three or four people.<sup>19</sup>

I participate in tutorials, in lectures I don't, because there are so many people and I feel as if my little question is taking up all the lecturer's time.<sup>20</sup>

Others know that they must take risks and expose the self:

Well, participation is something you gain after, afterwards you keep quiet, you shut all the information down. Who else is going to advise you if you can't raise your concern about what you don't understand?<sup>21</sup>

Like, my first presentation, ... I really suffered ... because it was my first time to speak in front of people, and in front of my lecturer, whom I really respect ... so it was really challenging ... I wasn't angry, but I was afraid ... lack of confidence.<sup>22</sup>

The general sense that is emerging here is of students who acknowledge that they need to try and take responsibility for knowing the work that is required, seek the initiative to make a mark, address the lecturer when needed and, when they feel vulnerable, keep a low profile. *Lecturers having a clear sense of authority over knowledge and the student is the primary locus of responsibility* are two important markers of the social space of learning at Wits. As we will show, the constitutive rules for effective student engagement in these processes tend to be assumed; they are not always made explicit. As a Drama student put it: 'There is this thing they say that "this is varsity, we are not here to spoon-feed you", that they are lecturers and not teachers'.<sup>23</sup>

Reduced institutional responsibility emerges clearly when students speak about 'personal problems'. Despite the existence of official support structures in the



university community,<sup>24</sup> students feel that depression, family problems and financial problems have to be faced alone. Students relay that personal problems are, too, one's own problem:

When my mother passed away and with those assignments that I had to submit, you know they always say, 'I understand, you guys have problems' and when you ask for an extension, they give you a week. For somebody who has got a very close relationship with the mother, that sounds unfair.<sup>25</sup>

We come from different backgrounds and this obviously comes with some strain like financial problems. Some people come here without food, they are hungry, they can't even concentrate ...<sup>26</sup>

These experiences need to be seen alongside students' emphasis on the need to work hard, get it by themselves, seek help, feeling shy or even intimidated and in view of (some) lecturers' belief that effort rather than hard luck is what really counts. Taken together these disclose a sense of institutional space that can be overwhelming: 'The Wits community is massive and I see myself as a very small, small portion of Wits; I consider myself a number at Wits'.<sup>27</sup>

### ***Explicit and Implicit Rules: 'I want to know why, and if I get a, c or fail, I want to know why so that I can improve'***

How do students get to understand how the Wits learning environment works?

The rules for a social space of learning and teaching signify what is possible and what is not. Rules of communication are important for expectations and central to creating a social order in which there is consistency and predictability. Rules provide structure and habituation (Bernstein 1975). As we saw in the discussion above, students remember that in school they were being 'monitored' or 'watched'. As for university rules, students speak about a slow process of adaptation: 'It's not like you know that you're changing; it's just that you adapt'.<sup>28</sup> The university rules are inscribed. These rules are not always explicit, and they clearly require an adaptation: 'It was a completely different environment and ... I had to start from scratch in terms of adjusting'.<sup>29</sup>

Rules are inscribed in the Wits academic culture – in academic practices and in the ways the educative authority transmits criteria. Some of the practices are foregrounded by many students, which suggest a degree of greater visibility. Very commonly mentioned is where one can approach the lecturer, and how and when to make the contact. Typical comments are 'They're ... more available to consultation in their offices, rather than after lectures when ... everybody's kind of in a rush, etc.; so ... they make themselves available more frequently'<sup>30</sup> or 'Ja, because they provide consultation time so it is very convenient, if the times they specify are not convenient for you, you can always make an appointment via a phone call'.<sup>31</sup> *How to make contact?* 'Lecturers usually ... give us ... their office telephone numbers and

their office number, where we can reach them, and they always say that, if we need to consult with them, [we] must either just look on their timetable or leave a note under their door, and then we can come make an appointment for consultation with them<sup>32</sup> or ‘Sometimes, [I] e-mail, sometimes I go to their offices, sometimes I call – it depends’.<sup>33</sup> The kind of query determines *where* you raise it: ‘Well it depends, when it is a comment I can raise it in class, when it is a problem to do with understanding then I can go to them after class’.<sup>34</sup>

Work gets submitted according to external rules of pacing – ‘When the lecturer decides to pile all our work all at one time towards the end of the second block; that really pisses me off’.<sup>35</sup> In line with individual responsibility, here too the student needs to learn to deal with the pressure of fixed submission dates or exam timetable:

I think reaching a deadline can be quite difficult. Lecturers can be quite stingy with extensions. I mean, I’ve never been granted an extension in my life. It’s my pain. It’s not funny. I literally finished each one on the day or the time in which it’s... [due].<sup>36</sup>

Now there was one time when I got my exam timetable and there was one exam in the afternoon and also another the following morning. I was so exhausted. That is really one of the worst things that I got really annoyed about. I know they have a lot of trouble trying to set up timetables and avoiding clashes but that was pretty annoying. I think that impacted on my marks a lot, I can’t remember what I got but I remember I was really exhausted.<sup>37</sup>

When the rules and expectations are not clearly communicated, students feel overwhelmed or frightened (‘thrown into the deep end’). When this happens, some withdraw, while others, such as the student quoted in the following, rely on their own ‘personal discipline’:

Well last semester we had a new lecturer, they introduced TV production this year and it is still a very new course. He gave us a new course outline and here we’re thinking, in the third week we will do this and so on. What happened eventually was that he started doing his own personal work [...]. He sort of started a cute little production company of his own [...] so we asked him what we are going to do for our marks and his response was: “Do whatever you want”. People went haywire, they got cameras, shot whatever, edited, like I ended up editing something for two months. I learned a lot but one thing he taught me was that if I didn’t have my *personal discipline* I wouldn’t have learned anything .... If a lecturer gives us a course outline, he is supposed to follow it.<sup>38</sup> [Our emphases.]

Staff, however, tend to feel that the criteria *are* communicated:

At the beginning of each course a student has a very clear idea of the course aims, the outcomes, the assessment criteria, and the course content, the reading list, everything is in a little pack; and that then gives the student a very clear idea of what they’re committed to in the course and it gives them a sort of route map through the course,

which then allows them to monitor their own performance, which I think is a far more positive way of doing it than a big stick teacher running after them kind of technique, which will maybe help them through your course but doesn't necessarily help them in terms of their personal growth.<sup>39</sup>

When norms of behaviour that a lecturer expects are not adhered to, they are made more visible in ways that confuses 'university' with 'school' space: 'I have to ask people two three times to keep quiet and to single people out and I've had to send some out of class and I hate doing that'.<sup>40</sup>

The social sphere of learning and teaching consists of layers of criteria and assumptions. What students describe above are the outside layers – structures of authority, formal contact arrangements, time frames, course outlines, etcetera. They are important but they do not disclose the evaluation criteria of the knowledge base, or the kind of academic text that is expected. Students have to come to grips with less explicit principles that underlie the specialisation of the discipline: 'It is the principles that are taught through the subject and how you incorporate that into the career that you want to have'.<sup>41</sup>

Making the underlying criteria explicit is important in a culture which emphasises individual regulation and self responsibility, and where the idea of standards to be achieved is paramount. Below is a very dedicated student expressing her frustration. She knows that there are criteria, but they are not made clear and can be misinterpreted. She wants a set of criteria that will make success or failure equally visible, and thus will help her regulate epistemological access:

Okay, lecturers ... expect [you] to do hard work and they give you low marks. That is the only thing that irritates me. You know if I get an A I want to know why, and if I get a C or fail, I want to know why so that I can improve. I don't want to repeat the same mistake and if I get an A I want to know why so that I can do the same in other courses. So if you can't explain to me why I got a D, I get very frustrated.<sup>42</sup>

Where and when to consult with lecturers, the pacing of the work, timetabling of exams, and when to expect marks to be published are some of the ways the Wits environment of learning and teaching is marked explicitly, with institutional rules on how to behave. Notwithstanding, learning can be difficult when expectations are not communicated, when the rules and principles of the specific area of specialisation are not clearly spelt out, particularly for those who come from a learning background that works with very different kinds of criteria.

### ***Feelings and perceptions of racism and alienation: 'I used to work hard; the white students were not working hard but they were getting 80s'***

A Zoology student suggested that black students are undermined from an academic perspective and deliberately prevented from succeeding:

It has this culture that a person could not understand. [...] What it does, it underestimates people from other backgrounds. Some of us are failing not because we [are] not doing well, maybe it's because we're black. Whenever white people will write whatever they want, they look at scripts, they look at names, and if your name isn't – already it is a deduction.

Well mostly lecturers are racist .... They wouldn't give more attention to black students than white people. [...] If there was a white person in our group, they would be our group leader. There is no one concerned whether we like it or not.<sup>43</sup>

And students from Engineering and Humanities suggest that white students are offered academic support that is not offered to black students:

Well, what I know, in truth, if you can keep on like interviewing the students from electrical engineering, they will tell you very well, as I have said, they don't want to see themselves any more at Wits. They are tired of the school. At the same time they won't even influence any other one to come to Wits. And at the same time, they just want to get out, *in all proportion*, to get out, to get out of this school. Yes ... For the black people, this school is not that great. We can see that the advantages are for the white students.

And you can even see from the result path that black people are really struggling in this school. So [animated] why keep on coming here in thousands, then, next thing, only two of us are getting out? No! [Emphatic] Uh, uh. This is not worth it.<sup>44</sup>

It depends which faculty you are in, even the school you are in . . . there are students who say there's still that racial segregation or whatever you call it and to me it's like maybe it's like that a little bit because I was getting 40s and 50s and I used to work hard. The white students were not working hard but they were getting 80s and you compare your work and you see that I'm even better than them. You see that this white student fails to do referencing so how come the content ...?<sup>45</sup>

The experiences of students reported here may be isolated but they assume significance for two reasons. First, they are in direct conflict with the policy of the University that emphasises commitment to fostering a culture of dialogue and respect for difference. Second, they point to the limitations of the pedagogic practices that dominate the Wits learning culture. Students who do not share the academic code and who have knowledge gaps (owing to historical disadvantage) struggle. When they do the official culture of individual responsibility get mediated by racism, being the most familiar cause in South Africa for deprivation and powerlessness. Hence without clear criteria transmitted formally and pedagogically, other discourses (such as racism) get to mediate students' perceptions of their performance.

We were struck for example by a long narrative by a student who felt that she did not belong to the same tradition of knowledge as the lecturer (and some of her peers in the course) and was being prevented from entering it. Instead of being *brought*

into the tradition by intersubjective means of dialogue, this student 'chose to fail'. She felt prevented from asking questions or saying she did not understand or testing her own ideas in public.

Even though I could be having an idea, I could not say it because I would think that it is wrong. So I would just let the other people talk, including the black people who grew up around Gauteng because they had the privilege of going to multiracial schools. I remember I did design and drawing and when we were in class they were talking about all those terms like "abstract" and "realist" and everyone seemed to know and I don't. Then they would give us this assignment and it is the white people getting grade A and this affected me and I would not even try hard to prove myself because I knew I would fail. So I only stuck to what I knew and if I got 50 per cent then I was happy and would not struggle to get 80 or something like that.<sup>46</sup>

In her attempt to make sense of her alienating experience, she made use of an explanation from everyday experience as a victim of the apartheid legacy, an experience largely mediated by racism.

English as the medium of instruction is widely accepted as an institutional fact ('It is better to use English'),<sup>47</sup> that is, an aspect of institutional life against which they conduct their daily lives on campus, and whose use, function, status and meaning they collectively agree on – even if they do not think about them (Broekman and Pendlebury 2002, 289). Most students who attended private or 'Model C' schools<sup>48</sup> have no difficulties with English.<sup>49</sup> However the English language is a major constraining factor for students who come from black and rural schools, where the mother tongue is predominant: 'So I think language, it's really giving ... students ... I mean, who are coming from rural schools a problem'.<sup>50</sup> For some it represents a barrier to conceptual access: 'Here you are struggling to conceptualise what is being delivered in the lecture and catch each and every English word, that itself is a challenge to you'.<sup>51</sup> Some feel demotivated, given the difficulties they experience in expressing themselves: 'I'm a hard worker, but I was demotivated because I would work hard and because of the language problem, my results would come out as average, although I never had that thought of dropping out of school'.<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, students do not always get much sympathy from staff members regarding their language difficulties. A humanities lecturer says: 'Look, I got to France without speaking a word of French and I wrote a PhD in French, I don't see why you can't make an effort to write English properly'.<sup>53</sup>

## **HIGH PERFORMANCE VIS-À-VIS HIGH PARTICIPATION**

Overall, the evidence from the interviews points to the dominance at Wits of what Bernstein (2000) refers to as *performance-driven learning environment*. The defining aspects of this kind of environment include specialisation of knowledge, highly competitive academic environment, and modes of transmission and evaluation that give primacy to individual academic achievement or success ('high performance')

with limited peer collaboration or faculty support. It focuses more on meeting the requirements defined by the lecturer and less on being recognised as different and particular individuals with specific experiences, needs, problems or aspirations. In this kind of academic environment,<sup>54</sup> the major resource for success is students' accumulated social and cultural capital, their ability to work independently and their individual autonomy. The educative authority of the lecturer is clear: she has the power to define what constitutes academic knowledge, what constitutes a good academic text, what knowledge is relevant and how it should be assessed, and when a student has attained the required performance level.<sup>55</sup>

Performance-driven approaches to learning at Wits have their roots in the liberal-meritocratic discourses that dominated academic practice throughout the 1970s and 80s, and are now supported by the globalisation discourse of competition and use value for the economy.<sup>56</sup> They are essentially economic: they do not allow students extra time, much individual attention or flexible evaluation criteria. Students have to be self-reliant, resourceful, motivated and 'get on with it'. Minimal support is made available and students are expected to take the initiative in finding any extra support needed. Interactions between students and lecturers are sporadic and formal. In Schneider's words, students are expected to have 'aligned ambitions' (Schneider and Stevenson 1999) to set goals and devise strategies to achieve them on their own. The 'fittest' students will survive in a kind of educational or intellectual *laissez faire, laissez passer*. For such an approach to work the institution needs to be selective and exclusionary. The performance-driven learning environment does not cater for the complex learning needs of 'non-traditional' students.

While performance-driven approaches dominate at Wits, the evidence from the interviews suggests that there are meaningful pockets of innovative pedagogy grounded in principles of social justice and perceived by students as attempts by individual lecturers to address the needs of 'non-traditional' students. When students speak about these lecturers they foreground a picture of a teacher whose knowledge base enables them to work with ideas and develop them *for* the student.

He is another very ambitious and really dedicated lecturer. He is very firm, he does not try to be our friend, he knows what he is here for and is very clear on his mind. He knows what he wants from students and communicates with us all the time. I think he is so dedicated to the students; he answers all e-mails and is so intelligent.<sup>57</sup>

In these experiences, students describe a learning environment which foregrounds care and support. One important aspect which emerges from these accounts is a deep sense of trust – *the lecturer follows a process that is trustworthy*. The following captures some of the main aspects of what they describe as a supportive environment:

- *Recognition of individual potential*

'He tells me that even if my mother is a domestic worker, it doesn't mean that I will be a failure in life'.<sup>58</sup>

- *Teaching with passion*

'[She] is fantastic because you really feel her passion about what she's teaching and she really cares about her students .... She teaches first years and she had like 50 first years and she would know each and what is going on in each one's life and Eve as well well, her personality and how much she shares with us, but also the passion for what she teaches.'<sup>59</sup>

- *Relating to the person and motivating*

'That lecturer was ... not just a lecturer; he was someone in my life. He played a good role in my life. Well, he motivated me, you know, he gave me direction. I told him my problems, he gave me direction. He gave me direction as to how ... how to become a good person, a good achiever and potential student at the same time.'<sup>60</sup>

- *Validating different points of view*

'She teaches us what is important, she's very open-minded but if you have a different view, she encourages you to hold your point of view even if it's different to hers ..., which is nice.'<sup>61</sup>

- *Encouraging interaction*

'And it's pretty much hands-on, it's interactive, it's small groups, you know, so you're able to share your point of view, you're actually able to listen more carefully. Ja, it's the smaller group does it better for me though. I think in the bigger classes such as geography and sociology and the maths etc... . bigger classes, it's almost tougher to cope.'<sup>62</sup>

- *Building a 'nice relationship'*

'I mean like in Italian there are only five of us and we build up a nice relationship with our lecturer, but that again can be a problem because if there is a personality clash then it is a big issue.'<sup>63</sup>

The above extracts were offered when students were asked to think of happy experiences or about lecturers who had made an exceptional impression on them. In other words, the ideas about care, motivation and personal interaction come when students think about the ideal. Ideal lecturers break the formal boundaries between the lecturer and the student – they take the trouble to know their problems (their private and vulnerable self) and to support them when they need it. These lecturers are mentioned for the time they devote to guiding and motivating students.<sup>64</sup>

Students emphasise the benefits of community (having small classes), equality ('treating us equally'), counselling ('take his advice' and 'how to become a good person, a good achiever'), interaction ('by talking to that person, giving him information, helping him, you are also benefiting'), attunement ('You are actually

able to listen more carefully’) and intimacy (‘She would know each, and what is going on in each one’s life’).

We refer to these emerging practices as *competence-driven learning environment* (Bernstein, 2000). Generally, they foreground the person over the ‘student’ and emphasise the potential of the self as a whole rather than just her/his performing aspects. The benchmark here is ‘inclusion’ and ‘integration’. Success is not only predicated on personal effort and hard work but also on help from the other who cares, as the following remarks suggest: ‘If he sees you’re falling apart he’s trying to build you at the same time’;<sup>65</sup> ‘...the fact that I have kept on going, a lot of lecturers have been very helpful and encouraging’;<sup>66</sup> and ‘They actually make you want to be part of the whole planning thing’.<sup>67</sup>

Formal roles and boundaries are backgrounded in this learning environment and the student is given the opportunity for self-affirmation and self-definition. Lecturers who hold this approach foreground their willingness to support and understand students and to recruit varied support mechanisms (‘careful choice of language’, ‘visual aids’, ‘a lot of feedback’, ‘help to each and every one student’, etc.).<sup>68</sup> Economically, it is a more expensive model, requiring small classes, academic support, mentoring and academic enrichment initiatives. Psychologically, it stands for an approach to learning that foregrounds empowerment and emancipation above acquisition of skill (Bernstein, 2000: 50–56).

Each of these two sets of practices – performance-driven and competence-driven – assumes more specific modes in specific historical circumstances and ‘give rise to what could be called a pedagogic palette where mixes can take place’ (Bernstein 2000, 56). The data we have is not quantitative – it does not tell us how many lecturers are perceived to offer advice and guidance and to empower students, and how many are perceived to position themselves primarily as knowledge specialists. This could be an interesting study but it is not the point of this analysis. We are also not suggesting that more of these practices will improve throughput and retention – debate about this is beyond the scope of this study.<sup>69</sup> The tentative conjecture that can be made is that, in the absence of guidance, academic support, advice and personal care, and in view of language difficulties, students who are able to ‘crack the code’, understand the modality of knowledge and work hard, will thrive. Others will manage unevenly, or drop out, depending on the availability of personal empowerment. To highlight the experiences of the students we interviewed, we divided them heuristically into 3 groups: ‘The Witsie’, ‘the survivor’, and ‘the culturally displaced’ student.

- The *Witsies* are students whose learning orientation matches (more or less) what is expected and carry individual resources (material and symbolic) to engage meaningfully with their studies and, with or without the help of individual lecturers in rare occasions that may be needed, they are able to decode the learning and adjustment criteria and expectations and to develop consistently into Wits graduates. Such students do not experience severe crippling adjustment problems



to Wits environment. Briefly, *Witsies* are students with *aligned ambitions* – they are able to set goals and develop strategies to achieve them.

- *The survivors* are students who do not share the learning orientation required, who carry knowledge gaps from school, but have drawn on a life experience of 'go getters'. They take upon themselves to work hard, improve their language competence, develop their self-confidence and assertiveness, find academic sources, and, when needed, go to the lecturers and ask for help. These students believe that it is up to the individual student to try and solve problems, and when they feel vulnerable or not confident choose to hide away and keep a low profile. They will benefit from personal care and support of lecturers.
- *The culturally displaced* are students who do not share the required learning orientation, who carry knowledge gaps from school, and do not have the resources to negotiate their needs in their own terms. In view of the little collective resources offered by the university, they develop feelings of alienation, deep anger about the experience of inequalities, and thus, ultimately, may decide to withdraw. These kinds of students need much more than personal care and academic attention from individual lecturers.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS: INSTITUTIONAL DILEMMAS**

Performance-driven strategies, which emphasise high student performance and low participation, dominate at Wits. These practices recall a time when Wits catered for a carefully selected, white student population, and emphasised merit, competition, and the survival of the fittest. Presently, individual staff members have established pockets of support strategies. There are also institutional interventions, which respond to issues of equity. They display commitment to institutional responsibility towards providing epistemic access. These include: training and support to staff through the Centre for Learning and Teaching Development (CLTD); a more inclusive language policy introduced in 2003; extended curriculum; access to a Writing Centre; monitoring of courses in which the pass rate differs significantly from the norm; Pre-Bursary Scheme in Engineering and the Built Environment; Foundation courses in Humanities; and services for support on physical, social and emotional issues within the Division of Student Affairs.

Notwithstanding these interventions, the overall picture that emerges from the study is worrisome. It shows that, although there are many positive experiences emanating from the decision of the university to diversify its student body, it is clear that its institutional commitment to transformation has not integrated the two edges 'individual responsibility' and 'institutional responsibility'. We see three possible responses to this tension: (i) to stick to its performance-oriented approaches and align its selection and admission policies accordingly; (ii) to emphasise high participation over and above performance and to support staff in its attempt to adapt their teaching practices; or (iii) to adopt a hybrid model that retains the performance focus but offers

greater support to students in need. The advantage of the last option is clear. It retains the best aspects of high performance and contextualises them within a framework of social justice. Such a model would foreground social over individual presence, the person over the student; it provides pastoral care and legitimizes personal and collective forms of recognition. It institutionalises sustainable and continuous support that recognises that an integral aspect of the labour of lecturing is socialising students into sound academic practice. Here we refer to collective resources that target development and thus are labour intensive (small classes, collaborative teaching, and variation of pacing, individual and collective feedback on continuous forms of assessment with the aim of making evaluative criteria explicit). These are essential for student development, particularly for *the culturally displaced* student.

This does not mean compromising standards but rather making them explicit to students by providing enabling socialisation and learning opportunities especially for those who are unable to crack the code. This model would require systematic expansion of the efforts of individual academic staff. In this view, the choice is not between high participation and high performance; it is about confident participation for high performance.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 This is the second in a series of articles on student performance in South African universities linked to a study sponsored by the NRF and the CHE. The first is M. Cross and B. Johnson 2008. Establishing a space of dialogue and possibilities: Student experience and meaning at the University of the Witwatersrand. *South African Journal of Higher Education* 22(2). The next will focus on lecturers' constructs of student performance.
- 2 In the quotations the following symbols are used: H for Humanities; S for Science; E for Engineering and the Built Environment; interview number; course; race (A, C, I or W respectively for African, coloured, Indian or white); gender (F or M); and residence status (R or nR for students who are resident or non-resident on the campus).
- 3 E06, Urban planning, IM, nR.
- 4 E06, Urban planning, IM, nR
- 5 H07, Psychology and African literature, AF, R.
- 6 H08, Sociology & psychology, AF, R.
- 7 E03, Electrical engineering, AF, R.
- 8 H07, Psychology and African literature, AF, R.
- 9 H27, History of art and media studies, AM, R.
- 10 E01, Urban and regional planning, AM, nR.
- 11 H13, Psychology and international relations, IM, nR.
- 12 H07, Psychology and African literature, AF, R.
- 13 H11, Media studies and international relations, AF, nR.
- 14 E04, Quantity surveying, AM, R.
- 15 H08, Sociology and psychology, AF, R.
- 16 E03, Electrical engineering, AF, R.
- 17 Staff H08.
- 18 Staff E02.

- 19 H10, Modern languages, WF, nR.
- 20 H28, International relations and sociology, WF, nR.
- 21 E4, Quantity surveying, AM, R.
- 22 E01, Regional planning, AM, nR.
- 23 H14, Drama, AF, nR.
- 24 For example Physical, social and emotional services (Division of Student Affairs).
- 25 H11, Media studies and international relations, AF, nR.
- 26 H33, Sociology and psychology, AF, R.
- 27 E30, Urban planning, AF, R.
- 28 E28, Architecture, WF, nR.
- 29 E03, Electrical engineering, AF, R.
- 30 E06, Urban planning, IM, nR.
- 31 H07, Psychology and African literature, AF, R.
- 32 H46, Education, AF, R.
- 33 H08, Sociology and psychology, AF, R.
- 34 H13, International relations, IF, nR.
- 35 E30, Urban planning, AF, R.
- 36 H28, International relations and sociology, WF, nR.
- 37 H09, Psychology and English literature, WF, nR.
- 38 H12, Drama, AF, nR.
- 39 Staff E01.
- 40 Staff S02.
- 41 H11, Media studies and international relations, AF, nR.
- 42 H08, Sociology and psychology, AF, R.
- 43 S05, Zoology, AF, R.
- 44 E17, Electronic engineering, AF, nR.
- 45 H27, History of art and media studies, AM, R.
- 46 H14, Drama, AF, nR.
- 47 Students H07, E03, H46, E30.
- 48 Model C schools are suburban schools that were in the past reserved for 'white' children.
- 49 H15, Political science, AM, nR.
- 50 H26, Sociology, AM, R.
- 51 S03, Life sciences, AM, nR.
- 52 H19, Media studies, AF, nR.
- 53 Staff H08.
- 54 Bernstein also looks at curriculum design features, which is beyond the scope of this study.
- 55 This is similar to what Sfard (1998) refers to as the 'acquisition metaphor'.
- 56 See Moja, T. and N. Cloete. 2001. 'Vanishing borders and new boundaries' in J. Muller, N. Cloete, and S. Badat. (Eds.). *Challenges of Gloablisation: South African debates with Manuel Castells*. Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman.
- 57 H11, Media studies and international relations, AF, nR.
- 58 H08, Sociology and psychology, AF, R.
- 59 H10, Modern languages, WF, nR.
- 60 E04, Quantity surveying, AM, R.

- 61 E28, Urban planning, WF, nR.
- 62 E06, Urban planning, IM, nR.
- 63 H10, Modern languages, WF, nR.
- 64 E05, Urban planning, AM, R.
- 65 E04, Quantity surveying, AM, R.
- 66 H09, Psychology and English literature, WF, nR.
- 67 E30, Urban planning, AF, R.
- 68 Staff E01 and Staff E04.
- 69 See Muller, J. 2001. *Progressivism Redux: Ethos, policy, pathos*. In A. Kraak and M. Young (eds.) *Education in retrospect: Policy and implementation since 1990*. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council.

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