

# **‘New students’ in South African higher education: institutional culture, student performance and the challenge of democratisation**

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*South African universities confront a situation that most advanced countries face: the increasing enrollment of the so-called ‘new students’ (“non-traditional” in SA) from disadvantaged milieus, less prepared for the requirements of the traditional university culture. They are urged to respond to this challenge within a moral system that upholds justice, equality and solidarity, while confronted with a neo-liberal discourse that emphasises efficiency, performance, competition, and individualism. The university practice thus reflects a tension between two hardly reconcilable logics, the logic of performance and the logic of competence, which renders difficult the adjustment of ‘new students’, the work of the lecturers, often guided by the logic of performance. Lecturers and students are subject to these contradictory logics, characterised by ambivalences and lack of clarity about expectations and what constitutes good academic practice — source of misunderstandings and frustrations. Most institutions strive to articulate both perspectives, constrained however by their peculiar histories. With reference to the University of the Witwatersrand, I seek to unpack how higher education addresses the problems arising out of the increasing intake of students from the historically disadvantaged social groups and the insufficiency of results they achieve, particularly the processes of learners’ affiliation to the university culture, and the difficulties associated with their academic success or failure.*

## **Introduction**

The increasing access to South African higher education since 1994 has resulted in the admission of a new category of students, well known as “non-traditional” students or students from disadvantaged milieus. This is not unique to South Africa. Many institutions in advanced countries have had a similar experience. It happens in South Africa under increased commitment to address inequalities inherited from the past and to fight against all forms of discrimination within a framework of moral values which upholds justice, equality and solidarity. It also happens at a time the country has to respond to the logic of globalisation and values rooted in the ideology of neo-liberalism: efficiency, performance, competition, and individualism. As will be illustrated later, under these two contradictory pressures, the university system is thus governed by two hardly reconcilable logics that I refer to as *the logic of performance* and *the logic of competence* (Cross *et al.*, 2007). The affiliation of “non-traditional” to their new condition is thereby rendered difficult by the tension between these two logics of academic practice. In parallel, the lecturers, often guided in their practice by the logic of performance, are also subject to these contradictory logics, characterised by ambivalences and lack of clarity — source of misunderstandings and frustrations. With regard to the institution, in spite of manifested intentions, it strives to articulate both perspectives, constrained however by its peculiar history.

The University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) has undertaken programmes of research to establish and elucidate factors behind poor performances of the weak system challenged by the new student body inadequately prepared to face the traditional academic requirements owing to its sociological and cultural characteristics. In this article I seek to unpack the situation that Wits faces with regard to both the increasing number of students from historically disadvantaged social groups and the insufficiency of results they achieve (high repetition, low graduation, declining retention, increasing drop out rates, etc.). I examine the processes of learners’ affiliation to the university

culture, and the difficulties associated with their academic success or failure. I also seek to understand the position of the lecturers *vis-à-vis* transformations in student composition and the students' environment, and the resulting consequences at the level of their academic performance. Lastly, we also explore the meaning of the institutional responses to these challenges. Theoretically, in this article I draw mainly on the Weberian paradigm of social action logic which Francois Dubet's sociology of social experience refers to (Dubet, 1994), Coulon's (1993) concept of "affiliation" and the notion of institutional "at home-ness" as referred to in the work of Broekman and Pendlebury (2002).

## **Democratisation of access and performance within South African universities: theoretical and socio-historical context**

When we consider the history of educational systems of developed countries, we observe a movement described as 'democratisation', that is, primarily the access of a large number of learners to levels of education from which they had been excluded due to their membership to a disadvantaged social class, a marginalised race or ethnic group. When the scope of this historical movement reaches significant proportions, it is generally referred to as *massification*. Largely interpreted as quantitative in its expression, this phenomenon can also be qualitative when viewed from a sociological perspective. In fact, whereas the most privileged social strata include generally and traditionally the most schooled individuals at higher levels, the beneficiaries of democratisation, that is, "new students"<sup>1</sup> or "non-traditional students" belong to the families that, within the context of the process of democratisation, are more and more distant from the cultural and intellectual norms required by the educational institution, usually dominated by the values of the elite.

Since Bourdieu, sociologists of education have been able to study the phenomenon of acculturation, which those who are not part of the (dominant) tradition (hence "non-traditional") are subjected to. The democratisation of access to education does not operate in a homogenous manner within all areas of study. The so called non-traditional students generally tend to secure access into the less prestigious fields of study; those specially adapted to their profiles. The result of this is that the democratisation has been accompanied by both diversification and hierarchisation of the fields of study.

Currently in South Africa, white children and pupils from privileged social strata attend private schools or former Model C schools — perceived as the best schools in the country while learners from underprivileged milieu attend less prestigious institutions, being victims of a certain form of educational apartheid. A similar phenomenon characterises their transition to tertiary education. For example, the increase in intake of black students is principally recorded within the less prestigious areas of study, such as social sciences or humanities, where students from the most modest social milieu enroll (Soudien, 2008; Mouton, 2006). These students are primordially in the situation where academic performance becomes very often problematic. They fall into the category of "poorly or under prepared" students according to the new Wits lexicon. Their academic trajectory, strongly characterised by low throughput, drop-outs and failures, leaves much room to cast doubts upon the prospects of democratisation of academic success, which has become now a priority objective in all universities in South Africa. The reduction of inequalities aimed at after 1994 is thus hardly or only partially achieved.

In developed countries, the democratisation of access and educational *massification* generated peculiar patterns of development within higher education systems. Social inequalities regimented schooling into thinly tight-schooling networks, which reproduced existing social relations and social hierarchies (Bowles, 2001; Bowles & Gintis, 1981; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). The educational inequalities were but a replication of the social division. With the massification, the important part of the selection no longer seems to happen up-stream, but in the course of studies, a process which, according to Dubet (1994, 170), produces "minor differences". In the end, these "minor differences" build academic hierarchies which, in turn, reproduce social hierarchies. These transformations

equally account for the university system and are not without consequences. As Dubet (1994, 171) puts it,

It seems that, in a large measure, it is the school itself, through its multiple interactions, which accelerates and reinforces the inequalities that it receives. The image of the school has changed, it is no longer that island of formal justice within unequal society; it generates its own inequalities and its own exclusions. Obviously, educational massification has broken the old adjustment of ... diverse educational publics. The college, the secondary school and undergraduate cycles are perceived as levels where problems of heterogeneity of students, of strangeness of learners to the academic norms, of disarray of teachers, of anxieties of learners multiply [My translation].

### **South African context: the legacy and globalisation pressures**

The discourses described above are readily transposable to analysis of South Africa. In fact, the racial division which, under apartheid largely involved social division, no longer allows distinction between educational institutions with reference to an explicit racial criterion. As the distribution and selection of students are no more done up-stream, it is in the context of studies that selection increasingly operates through competition. This forces educational institutions and universities into a paradox: to accelerate and reinforce social inequalities, whilst pretending to neutralise and fight them.

Indeed, universities are expected to become vehicles of social reformation through democratisation, to contribute to the achievement of racial and gender equality, and the improvement of performance rates and the institution of democratic values of tolerance, citizenship and common welfare. While these ideals are perceived as conditions for excellence, they have however to be pursued in a world constrained by the demands of the market and driven by the spirit of enterprise and competition. As such, both the sensibility and the receptivity to the interests of society are embedded in two conflicting systems of values: on one hand equality, justice, solidarity, on the other, differentiation, competition and individualism. The consequences of this ambiguity for the tertiary system of education are unpredictable.

Some universities have interpreted this "receptivity" as engagement in entrepreneurship by diversifying their trajectories and operating in line with the marketplace. Under the present constitutional dispensation, they have been able to operate without any fear whatsoever of government regulations. By enrolling large numbers of black students residing on satellite campuses and adopting a managerialist-style of management, they were able to move from the status beneficiaries of apartheid financial privileges to the status of more aggressive promoters of academic capitalism. Such is notably the case of the former Afrikaans-speaking universities, such as Pretoria, Free State and Rand Afrikaans (now University of Johannesburg). Although from a more moderate and critical perspective, Wits has also embraced a managerialist discourse at least in its organisational strategy and daily *modus operandi* (see Cross & Johnson, 2004). In a sharp contrast, the traditionally disadvantaged black universities were undermined by competition with the historically privileged white universities. In the process, the former lost a number of students and staff, and their academic culture became relatively weak. Paradoxically, the introduction of free market strategies by the newly elected government contributed, through de-regulation, to the amplification of inequalities which were meant to have been fought against and thereby significantly reduced.

### **Growth in intake and recomposition of the student population: the phenomenon of "non-traditionality"<sup>2</sup>**

Together with the University of Cape Town, the University of Natal and Rhodes University, the University of the Witwatersrand was prominent in displaying a liberal ideal of becoming an "open university" expressed in its manifesto of 1950. In so doing, this institution avoided external interference, particularly from apartheid-induced policies of the government. This position was not

without ill effects on its own operation because, in fact, until the end of 1980s there was no substantial change in the composition of its staff and students with regard to “race” or gender.

It was not before the end of the 1980s, and in a more significant manner in the wake of 1990s that, due to an important student financial support, the composition of students at Wits changed considerably and began to bring new challenges to the university management though the number of registered students decreased from 18,477 in 1992 to 17,884 in 1994, the year of the first democratic elections. This number remained relatively stable during the 1990s. In other words, the change was more notorious in the composition of the student body than in the numbers of students enrolled. The university kept a majority of white students albeit the decline which brought down their number from 13,276 in 1992 to 9,155 in 1997. To stress that the number of students from underprivileged origin remained nevertheless marginal. Black students originated mostly from middle class families and thus possessed enough social and cultural capital to face the challenges inflicted by a typically elitist institutional culture that characterised Wits. This inheritance was, however, subject to a radical change since the end of 1990s with the growing enrolment of students with “non-traditional” or “poorly prepared” profile, i.e. black students from diverse social milieus who were admitted according to a more lax selection procedure.

The number of students grew from 17,884 in 1994 to 23,232 in 2005, which was a sharp increase, given that student numbers had remained relatively static during most of the 1990s. In 2005, Wits had a total of 23,232 students, of whom 14,960 were black (10,884 African, 3,455 Indian, and 621 coloured) and only 8,269 were white. In addition, the end of apartheid led to an influx of international students, particularly from the Southern African Development Community (SADC). From 1997 to 2005, the number of international students increased from 701 to 2,072. Today, the majority of the student population at Wits is black. From the total of 24,116 students, 15,588 are ‘non-white’ (11,363 Africans, 6,625 Indians and 600 coloured); only 8,520 are white. This led to greater heterogeneity in the student population with students displaying a greater diversity of skills, knowledge and resources. These changes meant that the number of students from working class backgrounds increased, i.e. more students who did not possess the necessary social and cultural capital to meet the challenges of a typically elitist academic and institutional culture enrolled. They led to a substantial transformation of Wits’ institutional life, particularly with regard to academic performance, an issue that now dominates academic debates.

In response, Wits undertook a structural change in accordance with its own institutional identity and processes, which brought about new developments in campus services. Residence life, libraries, food facilities, sports and recreation services, etc., have been the object of improvements to increase life satisfaction. Several strategies have been implemented to address students’ needs. These include: (i) the introduction of relevant policies on student access and campus life; (ii) student representation at all levels of university governance; (iii) a privileged role of students in the University Forum; (iv) the restructuring of student services (e.g. admissions and careers and counselling services, and the International Office) and residence life to make them more responsive to student needs; and (v) an improved provision of campus services (e.g. the Matrix complex for food, banking and shopping) and so forth ( see Cross, 2008).

Against this background, I now turn to the patterns of development in student performance. Three faculties (Humanities, Engineering, and Science), which are particularly affected by the questions raised in this section, received increased attention in the study.

## Analysis of student profiles at Wits’ Faculty of Humanities

Although percentages inherently vary from faculty to faculty, fewer than 50% of undergraduate students receive their degrees, and less than 45% finish within the prescribed minimum period of study. Male black students achieve their objective less often than female white counterparts, and even those who do tend to take longer. Many disciplines within the faculty exclude more than 20% of the students for academic or financial reasons. Among the 16,206 undergraduates registered with

Wits in 2005, 18% completed their studies, 52% passed to the following class, 21% repeated the class, and 7% were excluded for failing. The Faculty of Health Sciences remains the only faculty with a higher progress rate, because of strict selection process.

Focusing on the Bachelor of Arts, intended to involve three years of study, the average number of years required to complete is 3.42; males taking more time than females and blacks more than whites. In 2003, 56.4% completed the degree but this declined (50% of blacks and 62.5% of whites). Only 36.2% of those able to finish did so without repeating. About 52.4% did the degree in four years while 14.7% dropped out and 16.7% were excluded; desertions and exclusions seeing a relentless increase.

The students' fluxes into the Faculties of Science and Engineering and Built Environment seem to follow the same pattern. Furthermore, the latter, a programme which spreads over four years and allows students who require particular attention to take more time to finish, hardly fills its function. The rates of success are still inferior and one can interrogate the rationale for maintaining this costly programme demanding a lot of resources in its current form, structure and pedagogic mode unless the profile of students changes.

The increase in the last decade in the proportion of black students (64%) is not therefore without consequence, many coming from schools described as 'disadvantaged', and finding themselves confronted with students from private or former Model C schools. The gap between the school and the university learning environments is considerable and adaptation becomes a challenge, for both black and white students (see Cross *et al.*, 2008).

## **Institutional culture in mutation and logics of action: theoretical framework**

Three aspects of the democratisation of higher education are central to the argument. First, the democratization of admission into higher education has been accompanied by widespread anxieties with regard to the democratization of success. Second, in the process the whole institutional culture has been affected by the changes in the student body. Third, in their attempts to address student needs, considerable strains are beginning to crack the resilience of lecturers in their efforts to address the complex needs of a diverse student population. Students as well as lecturers expressed each in their way these issues during discussions. Consequently, while recognizing the centrality of students as agents of change, in this article I also interrogate the capacity of the institution and its agents to offer adequate remedies. It is not, therefore, only students that I am concerned with, but a triangular system linking students, lecturers and the institution as a whole. To the bipolar relationship, students-lecturers, we draw attention to a third symbolic player, with the role of structuring the relations between students and lecturers.

As for the university trajectory, the interest for academic success preponderates. Nevertheless, fundamental as it may be, this question is by itself not enough to interrogate the multifaceted problem of institutional culture and its transformations. The notion of institutional culture encompasses all the attitudes and behaviours which, though inherited from history, appear nevertheless resilient to change or almost immutable. These attitudes and behaviours characterize the institution and different actors from within; they constitute its identity. The institutional culture defines itself, therefore, not as an essence but as a process like any other identity process.

From the point of view of classical sociology, and concurring with Dubet (1994), the tri-polar structures described above are merely brought to a bipolar structure putting in opposition the institution (the system) and the actors (particularly students and lecturers). The classical paradigm is that of the incorporation of the actor into the system and the system unto the actor "according to a process of *interiorization* of norms and values by the individuals" (Dubet 1994, 31). Applied to the situation characterizing the research, this theoretical model suggests that the university institution is structured by a system of norms that fulfil an integrative function (e.g. admission, report on studies and evaluation). This system imposes a code of conduct to both students and lecturers —

which they internalize more or less — a code that defines the *modus operandi* beyond which one falls into “deviance”. The paradigm proposed by Dubet (1994, 91-92, 105) differs drastically from the classical theoretical model inasmuch as it develops the idea of a plurality of logics of action which are open to the actors:

Social experience forms itself where the classical representation of society is not adequate any more, where the actors are required to manage at the same time several logics of the action rooted into various logics of the social system, which is not then any more a system, but the co-presence of systems structured by principles. The combinations of logics of action, which organize experience, do not have a centre; they rest on no fundamental logic [...]. The sociology of social experience aims at defining experience as a combination of logics of action, logics which link the actor to each of the dimensions of a system. The actor is required to articulate different logics of action, and it is the dynamic procreated by this activity which constitutes the subjectivity of the actor and his reflexivity.

Dubet thus endorses Weber’s theoretical framework, according to which there is no unique system or logic of action but a non-hierarchic plurality that the actor must manage.<sup>3</sup> In line with this analysis, once we acknowledge the capacity of initiative and choice of the actors, the lack of their integration into a unique system, it is necessary to look into what the social action involves, and to undertake a radical criticism of system-actor duality, including in the plural form of the notion of system expressed across the multiplicity of the logics of action. In this regard, interactionism and ethno-methodology contribute to the debate in interesting ways. According to Blumer (2004) and Goffman’s (1991; 1974) interactionism, for instance, it is not the roles, norms and values which determine social action but the reciprocal relations through which actors negotiate and construct a moving “social reality” in which the individual cannot be defined by the *interiorization* of the social and system of norms. In the same perspective, Garfinkel (1972a; 1972b; 1972c) brings up a criticism against an interpretation that turns the action into a product of *interiorization* of the role. In order to characterize this epistemological position, Dubet (1994, 85-86) speaks of a “radical actionalism”, that is,

... a non-determinist theory of action, in which activity becomes social in that it implies being accountable to others. This activity does not at all imply existence of a reality in itself, and notably a social order in itself [...]. Within the field of contemporary sociology, this conception of action is certainly the one which situates itself far beyond the classical sociology, because it neither implies any “interiority” of the actor, nor the exteriority of the system.

I have so far entered into the epistemological debate only to elucidate the framework of my analysis of the transformations that took place within the institutional culture of South African higher education. In this respect, two axes allow one to organise the reasoning:

- the building of new norms within social interaction between actors (students, lecturers) and the institutional system in place, itself subjected to tensions;
- management by the actors of the “logics of action” and their combination.

If the access to the university by “new students” is accompanied by difficulties of adaptation which principally, but not exclusively, manifest themselves through a higher rate of failure and drop-out, it becomes important to make an inquiry into the processes of their “affiliation” to studentship, that is to ask the question *how do they become students?*

Similarly, in a situation that can be considered to be a crisis, the lecturers express their certainties and their uncertainties concerning their profession, their status and their role. In this respect, I ask: *how can they remain teachers?*

The question of the production of new norms during the interaction of these two categories of actors, interaction mediated by the institutional framework subjected to these tensions, therefore arises. In the process of interaction through which institutional culture is negotiated, the actors are at the crossroads because they have to answer to different pressures, which put their action into the context of the sociology of experience, defined by Dubet as a combination of different logics of action.

## The logic of action led by the institution

The Wits Draft Report to the Council on Higher Education (Cross *et al.*, 2007), refers to the difference established by Bernstein (2000) between *pedagogic model of performance* and *pedagogic model of competence*, two models demanding different expectations from the lecturers towards students and vice-versa. The main characteristic of the model of performance, as stated above, consists of strict distribution of roles. Students' performance in this regard consists of raising themselves to a high level of performance, by skilfully mastering the rules and procedures of the process of knowledge acquisition. The lecturer is endowed with the power to determine the contents of academic knowledge, that is, the norm and the procedures of evaluation. In his/her position as an expert, the lecturer is a repository of legitimacy. The model of performance therefore has high requirements, endeavouring to promote competition and effectiveness in a world where individualism and competition dominate the market, diminishing attention to the student as a person and to his/her development.

Conversely, the second model — of competence — puts the emphasis on students and on their development, not simply on their capacities of acquisition. The relationships between students and lecturers are hereby regulated and governed by a conception of social justice, incorporation and participation. Centred on the student, this model implies an over-demanding implementation in terms of means, resources and cost. The barriers between academic knowledge and daily experience differentiate this from the classical elitism centred on a system of external norms that gives everyone a space to build their individuality.

The differentiation of these two models leads to the formulation of the hypothesis according to which the experience of the actors — students and lecturers — gravitates around the logics of action rather than oriented either towards performance or competence. How do the actors express and interact in their experience under so different logics of action? What then does “becoming a student” mean for students placed within the tensions between both models, tensions which express themselves even within the institution where they have just completed their studies?

The double pedagogic model as described above in its formal aspects needs to be contextualised. The history of the different universities considered in the larger study leads to a hypothesis that either model is more or less predominant according to the context. This is why for example the historical reputation of Wits is broadly spread among the students who consider it has international reputation for excellence. Based on the assumption that this perception is the image of good results, themselves linked to the effects of a “good practice”, students tend to agree with the idea according to which there is something positive which makes it more attractive, evoking the slogan ‘*Wits gives you the edge*’. It is the model of performance that is predominant at Wits, inherited and principally adapted to a carefully selected white student body that puts emphasis on merit and equality of chances, competition and survival of the most capable. In this system, therefore, students have to adapt or disappear, with very little room for social justice or questions of formal access and academic performance, beyond a *meritocratic* framework. Institutionally, this model is less costly and requires little from the lecturers, but is highly demanding for students.

On the other hand, from the model of performance, spaces have emerged for academics guided by the sense of social responsibility of the institution and those concerned with improving both the participation and the success of students. It is an answer to the challenge posed by the increasing number of students coming from historically disadvantaged milieus. Nonetheless, the model in force at Wits is that of performance, of which the consequences on students from poor circles are particularly heavy. The institution is faced with one alternative: either to continue in the way of the *meritocratic* model in its actual variant of the model of performance articulated in the discourse of “globalization”, with all that it implies from the point of view of the policy of selection and admission, or to invest systematically in the strategies of support for students who need it by upholding the best practices of both models — a hybrid choice.

The inability to cater for the specific needs of these students can also be captured through the

notion of *pedagogical distance*, which in our view is also embedded in the model of performance (see Jansen *et al.*, 2007). The theory of *pedagogic distance* brings together several dimensions of lecturer-student interaction useful for understanding the nature of pedagogic and social mediation. The first is the notion of ‘transactional distance’ i.e. the cognitive space between peers, teachers and content. It shows that physical and pedagogical distance has an effect on the teaching–learning connection in the classroom (Moore, 1997). It is made up of understandings and interpretations between the teacher and students, and it is the inability to reduce this distance that has had negative effects on the historically disadvantaged students. This problem can be minimised through strategies that embrace the notion of ‘social presence’ (Richardson & Swan, 2003), defined as ‘the degree to which a person is perceived as a “real person” in mediated communication’ (Gunawardena, 1995, 151), which enhances student perceptions and feelings of connectedness to the lecturer, (Hostetter & Busch, 2006). The second is ‘teacher immediacy’ defined as ‘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 (Witt *et al.*, 2004). I would assume that this dimension is more appropriate to the school context. The promise is thus that by narrowing the pedagogic distance between lecturers and students, pedagogical mediation would be enhanced in several domains of interaction, emotional, political, pedagogical, linguistic and physical.

Spread throughout different schools are pockets of practice within the framework of competence characterized by greater responsiveness to historically disadvantaged students at social, curriculum and pedagogic levels and sometimes by the adoption of more flexible entry requirements and comprehensive academic support. The competence model seems however constrained by the Wits particular history characterized by the predominance of meritocratic approaches and performance-driven practices.

## **The social experience of the actors: processes of affiliation and the logics of action in interaction**

In research conducted in France between 1984 and 1989, Coulon studies the process of affiliation based on the theoretical framework of ethno-methodology. Taking into account both the failures and drop-out of students, Coulon (1993, 165) argues that students who do not manage to become affiliated fail:

I showed that 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 student’s profession means that it is necessary to learn to become so, otherwise they are eliminated or eliminate themselves 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 [My translation].

According to Coulon (1993, 167),

To affiliate, therefore, is to naturalize while incorporating academic practices, which are never already formed within pupil circles. It is to know the local ethno-methods which allow first to understand the role of the rules.

By affiliation, true ritual of passage by which the candidate becomes a student, the latter achieves a member’s position:

Becoming a member, is to affiliate to a group, to an institution, what requires a progressive mastery of common institutional language [...]. A member, according to ethno-methodological conception is, therefore, 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 (Coulon, 1993, 183).

Affiliation appears as the third stage of a process characterized, on the one hand, by the strangeness



linked to the discovery of a new world with new institutional functioning and, on the other hand, by the apprenticeship of codes, implicit or explicit, which leads to the final stage of affiliation characterized by the mastery of these codes and the capacity to interpret them, or even to infringe them. Drawing on Searle (1995), and on an article by Broekman and Pendlebury (2002), Cross (2008) uses two important concepts to unpack the nature of these codes. The first is the notion of *institutional facts*, which refers to those aspects of institutional life against which we conduct our daily lives on campus, and whose use we collectively agree on — even if we do not think about them. The second the notion of *constitutive rules*, i.e. the normative framework, not always explicit, that creates the very possibility of a particular form of practice — e.g. what students at university should do, how they should behave or spend their leisure time (Cross, 2008, 267).

Whether and how students interpret or attach meaning to these facts and rules depends on their background of capacities, know-how and dispositions — in other words, a sort of pre-intentional knowledge about how the institution works, and a set of abilities for coping in and with the institution. In brief, institutions mediate student affiliation by promoting or constraining awareness of what constitutes institutional facts, and what constitutive rules may be used as guiding or warning signs. Thus institutional facts and prescribed or perceived constitutive rules represent an important measure of the degree to which students may or may not develop the feeling of “at home-ness” towards the institutional environment.

In the context of the South African universities, the process of affiliation is not unequivocal. According to the predominant character of either of both logics of action described above (logic of performance/logic of competence), the processes of affiliation differ, given that this does not take the same form in either situation.

### Processes of affiliation: between performance and competence

The discussions with students translate, for many of them, a big difficulty in their process of affiliation, frustration with what they consider to be an injustice in not being able to benefit from true equality of chance. The feeling of abandonment and rejection reflects an aspiration for the logic of performance, currently a dominant feature, to be replaced by the logic of competence which would allow them to be closer to the centre of the university system. This would narrow felt ‘pedagogic distance’, and provide a sense of empowering ‘social presence’ and of the necessary ‘immediacy’ in having their needs addressed. The Wits Report (Cross *et al.*, 2007) divides students into three groups according to the type of affiliation: the “Witsies”, the students whose social and intellectual resources are well enough in harmony with what is required by the institution; the “survivors”, those who do not have the required social and intellectual resources, are bearers of scholastic deficiencies but have, for one reason or other, a fighter’s temperament; and the “culturally disoriented”, those who do not possess the required level of social and intellectual resources, who are bearers of scholastic deficiency and who, for one reason or another, have no means to negotiate their needs (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999).

The performance model requires maintaining a policy of admissions based on a strict selection suitable for the students of the first group as well as for those of the second group, committed to surviving in spite of difficulties and when lecturers do not put priority on both teaching and evaluation. The Wits Report underlines that if one puts emphasis on a hybrid model which links the best aspects of the model of high performance and the model of democratization of the admission within the context of social justice, it is possible to meet the needs of the three groups.

The difficulties of affiliation often rest on the feeling of being subjected to injustice; they express themselves through different patterns:

- *Logic of competence and break with the past*

At Wits, for instance, the denunciation by students of material difficulties (financial pressure linked to the payment of registration fees, accommodation, transport) underpins the polarity between

formal decision-making concerning the attention given to individual situations and the reality of practices, which leads to exclusion of poor students. Moreover, a number of students often perceive their relations with the administration, or even with the teaching staff, as marked by a racism incommensurate with the current policy of openness and flexibility in admissions. Some feel that they do not benefit from the same solicitude from their lecturers as do white students. Black students from rural areas very often feel completely foreign to campus culture dominated by cultural practices of middle-class tradition. This feeling of strangeness felt by these students is reinforced by the impossibility for them to express their own system of values and express themselves in the mother tongue.

- *The considerable trench between the [high] school and the university*

The students of all faculties underline the vast chasm which separates studies at high school from those at university level. Requirements at university are too high, a feeling as strongly expressed by the students from elite schools scoring higher levels of academic performance as by those from poor rural schools with lower ones. This evidence contrasts with that of other universities for which the trench seems increasingly wide for the latter. The break between high school and university becomes visible within three main domains: the intensity and volume of work, the rhythm of progress and the degree of independence *vis-à-vis* work, the academics breaking with the pastoral approach and the practices of “maternage” in force within secondary education.

- *Difficult affiliation due to contradictory injunctions*

The students often deplore the fact that they are subjected to contradictory injunctions from their lecturers. The principles of critical approach, intellectual autonomy under performance-driven academic practices sometimes collide with detailed and almost regimented control and monitoring that underpin competence-oriented pedagogy.

- *Denunciation of the implicit*

Another obstacle to affiliation is identified by certain students as being the blurred or implicit character of the norms. The studies conducted by Coulon revealed that this implicit character of working norms of the academic institution makes the university’s community particularly opaque for non-initiated students coming from ordinary circles. Ignoring implicit codes and “good manners” which enhance success, these “culturally displaced” students maintain social and intellectual resources maladjusted to the situations.

- *The good lecturers*

The felt frustration, as well as difficulties in becoming students, or “members”, leads students to consider to be good lecturers those who adopt towards them an attitude inspired by the logic of competence. They appreciate particularly the solicitude of understanding their problems and their availability. In contrast, the same students complain about the stigmatization inflicted by other lecturers. They often express the negative judgements by their lecturers, perceived as a source of humiliation, hardly stimulating factors, as studies on the Pygmalion effect<sup>4</sup> have demonstrated (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1992). Rather, such practices prolong those in force in “bush colleges” under apartheid.

Attending prestigious universities, as that of the Witwatersrand, is for certain students a source of intra-psychic conflicts. Although positive, the representation they forge has a double character. On the one hand, they are proud to have been accepted in an institution of such outstanding status but, on the other hand, it raises their aspirations. This situation is illustrated by an extreme case of a student who, unable to find support, attempted suicide. When pressures and frustrations accompanying their efforts to succeed do not receive the necessary institutional support, students feel alienated and marginalized. They tend to portray Wits as a hard, cold and pityless world, in which

many of them, especially those from underprivileged milieus, try to adapt to the mould of excellence and independence by struggling for their survival.

## Lecturers between logic of performance and logic of competence

In general, the lecturers interviewed argued in favour of the logic of action inspired by the model of performance. This trend translates into a representation which makes deficit and handicap the major characteristics of the students in difficult situations, very often referred to as underpreparedness.

- *The trench between secondary education and the university*

A general agreement exists among lecturers to consider that students have difficulty in adapting to the university environment. Finding themselves devoid of indispensable bases for the pursuit of their studies, the weakness of the level of the education given in poor schools is deemed responsible. Due to their cultural deficiencies, the students lack capacities of expression required by university standards. For most, English is only a second or third language. They refuse therefore to be confronted with academic texts in this language, therefore they refuse academic texts in a language that, if they could understand, would increase their chances of success.

The quality of the teachers at secondary education level is equally challenged, with learners falling under the category of “underprepared”. The evidence gathered through interviews establishes a link between the level of performance in “matric” and subsequent success. Speaking from a historical point of view, certain lecturers at the university raised concerns about the eventual decline of level of performance. Nevertheless, for lack of objective criteria to perform comparisons over time, some people report two key factors which, in their view, might contribute to failure.

First of all, the criteria of admission were, more or less, depending on universities, subjected to developments which allow pupils who do not fulfil entrance to secure an admission. This requires setting up support structures, particularly for those prone to failure. For lack of sufficient financing, these structures remain deficient and hardly achieve their function. Secondly, a number of testimonies collected from lecturers report the pressures of the administration intended to ensure that results comply with the expectations of the institution. The paradigm of the socio-cultural handicap which defines the student as a failure through deficits or deficiencies to be filled up, expresses the distance between this paradigm and the experience of the students.

Similarly, the question of language reveals here the trench which separates both perspectives. The mastery of English as a medium language in education is in general considered to be a fundamental obstacle to university success for black students. As underlined by Jansen *et al.* (2007) in a study of the University of Pretoria, these have to carry a double workload as much as they have to follow their education in a language that is not theirs: “I must work double now”. Students reported an injustice, an attack on the principle of equality of chances, practices which make them to appear as handicapped. Conversely, lecturers have increased tendency to consider, as part of the logic of performance, that it is about a disabling objective deficiency. The practice of African languages, regarded as a factor of development and personal expression within the context of the logic of competence, becomes rather a handicap with regard to the logic of performance.

- *The lack of involvement of the students*

The majority of lecturers interviewed declared that the way students approach their studies is the main source of failure. Students continue with the same attitudes they had at secondary school: absence of investment in their schoolwork and absenteeism. Some students sit exams without having attended classes, a lack of involvement in studies translating into an attitude of distancing, in the form of light-heartedness and indifference. This is sometimes attributed to their inability to achieve a successful affiliation, that is, to know how to access the system of implicit values, the codes of behaviour and work which, often implicitly, define the academic world.

In response, students declare that the lecturers are not exempt from the blame because nume-

rous factors have an influence on their assiduity: such as their number and the size of groups, personal problems of health or resources, and transport. Some also recall lack of interest in lessons, which make them waste their time.

- *The criticism of the institution*

The logic of competence is, nevertheless, not completely at odds with concerns expressed by lecturers, some of whom highlighted the dysfunction of the institution itself, concerning the modular pedagogic system and lack of feedback on tasks required from students.

## The institution

Adopting a historical perspective on the development of the French educational system, Dubet (1994, 166) considers in a less polemical manner that “the institution no longer appears as a block of integrated functions, but as a relatively unstable construction, as an arrangement”. If we admit that the scholastic or university institution performs the functions of education, selection and socialisation, it is important to understand that this functional unit faded away to give rise to distinct logics of action, without a clear centrality defining the system. One can therefore better understand the situation of perceived crisis in student performance and rates of success, which has been the object of several studies and continues mobilizing increased attention.

Different strategies were set up to improve the rates of success, notably across faculty-based commissions co-ordinating various clusters of initiatives at faculty level. All official documents emanating from the university management unambiguously exhibit the commitment to change the culture of the institution towards better integration: social incorporation, anti-racism, anti-sexism, tolerance, and diversity. This process entails an underlying commitment to allocating necessary collective resources and to offsetting the lack of individual resources.

Nevertheless, in spite of the various actions invested at institutional level, the overall impression that surfaces from discussions merits attention. Despite the numerous positive experiments resulting from the decision of the university to diversify, one notes that this institutional commitment is neither acknowledged nor understood by students. In these conditions, one can ask whether the efforts of South African universities to remain institutions in the sense of Dubet are successful or not. In their attempt to control the two logics of action concurrently, they are faced with the possibility of their synthesis, and their reconciliation in a world marked by contradictions.

## Conclusion

In spite of its historical originality, the Wits situation, shares with other South African elite universities and university systems across the globe these contradictions and tensions between conflicting logics. A comparative approach should allow for clearing the invariants but also variations in the way an ethic of justice and equity, confronted with one of effectiveness and performance, that generates on behalf of the actors, an experience involving different logics of action, or even contradictory. In this manner, such an approach would give theoretical tools susceptible to new political and pedagogic perspectives of action in South Africa and elsewhere.

## Notes

1. According to the terminology in usage in Europe during 1980s and 1990s.
2. All statistical data used in this section were provided by the Wits information systems unit.
3. Weber’s distinction between rational action towards aims and rational action towards values provides a clear illustration of the disjunction of the social action.
4. They hold that individual performance is influenced, both negatively and positively, by the expectations of others.

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