

and management; and between students, academic staff, and the university leadership, were fundamentally changed in the wake of these violent and prolonged protests.

#### CONSEQUENCES OF THE PROTESTS FOR ACADEMIC CULTURE(S)

There is no doubt that the protests raised crucial issues of financial access and racial inclusion in post-apartheid universities. In this context, the protests should be seen as a gift to society and a much-needed push toward transforming hard-to-change institutions. But what else was lost in the fire? The Academy of Science of South Africa launched a seminar forum to deliberate on the way in which campus cultures changed after the 2015–2016 protests. From these deliberations, it became clear that all of the public universities were much changed. At historically black campuses, violence and disruptions continued from one week to the next. At some historically white campuses, there were reported incidents of whites being excluded from public events or being asked to leave certain lectures. Works of art have been vandalized and covered up in some cases, including the

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**The #FMF revolt against high tuition fees started in October 2015 at another major research institution, the University of the Witwatersrand.**

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works of progressive and black artists; such acts have raised the alarm of creeping censorship on university campuses. The Danish journalist Flemming Rose was disinvited from, ironically, the Academic Freedom Lecture at the University of Cape Town; Rose drew controversy by having published cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in Denmark some 10 years ago. And at one Johannesburg university, academic teaching staff have to report on how much they have done to “decolonize” their curricula.

The physical damage to university buildings will be repaired and rebuilt over time. Much harder will be dealing with the psychological and emotional trauma that the protests left in their wake. But the more serious consequences of the 2015–2016 student protest movement include the long-term threat to the very idea of a university as a place for the free expression of ideas; a space in which academic functions like teaching, learning, research, and public commitments can proceed without frequent and violent interruptions; and a forum in which knowledge transaction remains open ended and inclusive rather than subject to the

ideological dictates of any political movement or passing fad.

#### BROADER IMPLICATIONS OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY CRISIS

South Africa is not exceptional. Recent research identifies the key reasons for the demise of once great African universities as being political interference, financial crises, and chronic disruption to the academic project of the university. While most South African institutions seem to have entered a period of uneasy stability since the 2015–2016 protests, it is not at all clear whether the country’s 26 public universities will be able to rebuild the social, intellectual, and cultural capabilities that distinguished them from other kinds of public entities.

These wide-scale student protests also have direct implications for the Southern African region and the continent as a whole. Middle-class African students from outside South Africa see post-apartheid tertiary institutions as relatively stable and offering, through the local elite research universities, a nearby and more affordable option for quality higher education than Western Europe or the United States. In the same way, African scholars consider South Africa’s top universities as places where they may pursue their own academic careers. It is quite likely that this inflow of academic talent from the continent has also been threatened as a consequence of the 2015–2016 protest movement. Time will tell. ■

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2019.96.10780>

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## Student Pathways in South Africa

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*The content of this article represents the work of the Pathways project, a collaborative effort that will soon be published as Higher Education Pathways: South African Undergraduate Education and the Public Good (an African Minds publication).*

**M**uch is expected of higher education systems around the world; individual families pin their hopes on the

promise of social mobility, enabled by a university degree, while governments expect that economic and social returns will flow from an increase in the population of university graduates. The South African higher education system, however, shoulders an additional burden. After decades of being directly implicated in the apartheid system, higher education institutions across South Africa are now expected to play an active role in that society's "transformation." In the nearly 25 years since the end of apartheid, South African universities have played a central role in the transformation agenda. Institutions are now required to accept students from all backgrounds, and new hiring and funding policies have been introduced in an effort to transform the system's historical injustices.

#### **A DISCONNECT BETWEEN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

The dramatic student protests of the last few years, however, have highlighted the limitations of this transformation agenda. The South African higher education system remains highly unequal, with white students disproportionately represented in terms of both access to and success within higher education. The protests reflect the deep-seated frustration of students who feel that, despite years of inclusive rhetoric, it remains much more difficult for young black people to gain a university place, to complete a university degree, and to gain fulfilling employment following graduation—due both to financial barriers and to more symbolic issues, such as a curriculum that alienates students by continuing to privilege European ideas at the expense of local knowledge.

The frustration of many higher education researchers in South Africa is that none of the issues raised by the student protesters is new. In fact, all of them have been frequent topics of academic analysis throughout the past two decades. The fact that extensive research has not yet influenced policy in such a way as to satisfactorily address these issues raises alarm bells for all who believe that higher education research is important to illuminate challenges and help to formulate better ways forward.

#### **EXPLORING RESEARCH GAPS THROUGH COLLABORATION**

In 2015, a group of UK-based and South Africa-based researchers launched a collaborative project, which aimed to address this impasse by taking stock of what is currently known about higher education in South Africa. The project rested on three fundamental premises: 1) that higher education in South Africa should be contributing to the "public good" and that it should do so by enabling its students to have a positive impact on society; 2) that, despite the fact that students' individual experiences form a "pathway" through higher education, higher education research is lim-

ited by the tendency of individual studies to focus only on one stage within that pathway (i.e., on access to higher education, experiences within higher education, or outcomes of higher education); and 3) that there is value in bringing these largely independent strands of literature together, in order to better understand how pathways through higher education work for different students studying in different institutions. As a result of these orienting concepts, the project team chose not to undertake new empirical research but, instead, used project funding to bring participating researchers together at regular intervals over a three-year period to study what we currently know about higher education "for the public good" in South Africa.

When taken together, our analysis of the existing literature illuminated three main conclusions, two of which relate to the project's focus on student pathways and one that emerged from our final synthesis of existing research on South African higher education.

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**The project highlighted the significant lack of information about the more disadvantaged corners of South Africa's higher education system.**

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#### **THINKING IN TERMS OF STUDENT "PATHWAYS"**

First, thinking about existing research in terms of student "pathways" illuminated the multiple "moments" (aside from the oft-discussed moment of access) when students encounter damaging barriers that prevent them from achieving success and/or push them toward the kind of future that might be better understood as a public "bad" than a public good. Second, bringing access, experiences, and outcomes research together helped to highlight the ways in which institutional structures affect student pathways throughout higher education. Although each student's ability to access higher education (and to succeed within it) is affected by his or her material and family circumstances, the highly differentiated nature of South Africa's higher education system also plays a crucial role. South African universities remain deeply affected by their historical legacies and differ dramatically in terms of both mission and funding/resources, and these institutional differences profoundly affect student pathways, as they can either further exacerbate, or help students to overcome, the barriers presented by their personal circumstances.

**A BIAS TOWARD BETTER-RESOURCED INSTITUTIONS**

In addition, the project highlighted the significant lack of information about the more disadvantaged corners of South Africa's higher education system. The literature reviewed as part of the project was overwhelmingly focused on more advantaged institutions, most of which are historically white. This is, in some ways, not surprising, given that researchers in better-resourced institutions have more access to research funding and have stronger networks that enable them to publish their work, but it does have important implications for our ability to understand the system as a whole. If we know very little about the institutional culture of historically disadvantaged universities, for example, what can we really say about the ways in which institutional culture might disadvantage black students studying at different types of institutions?

**CONCLUSION**

These messages are not revolutionary in their own right, but they are strikingly absent from the current discourse, likely because they can only be drawn from a review of the field as a whole. Yet, such reviews are rare, given that faculty incentive structures prioritize individual empirical research over collaborative attempts to synthesize existing work. This tendency limits our ability to advise institutions as to how best to support students throughout their higher education careers.

Taken as a whole, these conclusions carry important implications for those interested in using research to strengthen future higher education policy and practice in South Africa, but they also invite reflection from higher education researchers outside the country. South Africa is certainly not alone in suffering from an exclusionary history of higher education, nor in struggling with highly unequal access to, experiences within, and outcomes of higher education. What is unusual is the particular emphasis on higher education within the national reconciliation and transformation agenda—and, as a result, the particular focus within the literature on higher education as a potentially transformative space. This focus offers an unusual perspective on issues that plague all unequal higher education systems. The rest of the world could learn much from the South African experience.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2019.96.10781> ■

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