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The consequences of increasing student alienation in higher education institutions.

In line with global trends, higher education enrolments on the African continent, and particularly, sub-Saharan Africa, have grown faster than in any other region in the world – despite remaining the lowest in the world. While the idea of high student enrolment in the context of post-apartheid South Africa is assumed to imply transformation through diversification, there is disagreement, however, on whether it has redressed past inequalities. More specifically, it is unclear whether high student enrolment has addressed the dual concerns of democratisation of higher education through participation. This is because for the majority of first year students, for example, university life represents an untraversed terrain, academically, socially, and emotionally. The students' anxieties of displacement and alienation have far-reaching effect on their potential for academic success. The paper has a twofold interest: firstly, to explore the phenomenon of student alienation from the cultures of higher education institutions (HEIs); and secondly, to consider what HEIs ought to be doing in cultivating spaces of belonging, so that they promote inclusivity and institutional cultures that are welcoming and not alienating.

Keywords: *Access, student alienation, institutional culture, inclusivity, transformation*

Introduction

In line with global trends, higher education enrolments on the African continent, and particularly, sub-Saharan Africa, have grown faster than in any other region in the world – despite remaining the lowest in the world. While the idea of high student enrolment in the context of post-apartheid South Africa is assumed to imply transformation through diversification, there is disagreement, however, on whether it has redressed past inequalities. More specifically, it is unclear whether high student enrolment has addressed the dual concerns of democratisation of higher education through participation. For the majority of first year students, university life represents an untraversed terrain, academically, socially, and emotionally. Academic challenges are often compounded by student anxieties of displacement and alienation.

The paper commences by looking at the influences of institutional culture on student experiences of exclusion and alienation. It then discusses the consequences of student alienation in relation to academic success, and continues to explore how student alienation might be addressed, if the institutional and academic cultures of higher education institutions are reimagined. This re-imagination has to depart from a basis of concern and interest in cultivating inclusion and belonging not only for the wellbeing of diverse communities of students, but for the advancement of democratisation through higher education, as part of the responsibility of higher education institutions

is to produce graduates that can contribute to entrenching democracy in the country.

Expanding student enrolment and the risk of alienation

The rapid growth in higher education enrolments in Sub-Saharan Africa can be ascribed to two main reasons: increased enrolment in primary and secondary education, which has created rising demand for higher education; and a growing awareness on the part of African governments of the role of higher education in national economic productivity (Akalu, 2016, p. 262; Mohamedbhai, 2008). In South Africa, for instance, the participation rate in higher education increased from 15% in 2000 to 18% in 2010, and it was expected that the 20% target would have been met by 2015/2016 (CHE, 2013). Although significantly higher than the average gross enrolment ratio for sub-Saharan Africa, which is under 10%, the South African higher education participation rate is well below the average for Latin America (34%) and Central Asia (31%). The CHE (2013, p. 41) report concludes: 'Despite the growth, it is clear that the low participation rate continues to act as a brake on social and economic development and is a key factor in explaining the shortage of high-level skills. This is compounded by poor completion rates.'

The trend of increased student enrolments – globally and locally – is commonly and somewhat uncomfortably, referred to as massification. Trow (1974) explains that in every advanced society, a broad pattern of development of higher education manifests in three phases: elite higher education; mass higher education, where participation reaches 15% of first year student registrations; and universal systems, where participation exceeds 50%. In the transition between the three phases, access to higher education shifts from being a privilege in the elite phase to a right in the mass phase and then to an obligation in the universal phase, when higher education qualifications became mandatory for full and effective social engagement (Trow, 1974). In turn, according to Trow (1974), student selection into higher education learning programmes proceeds from the primary use of the criterion of academic merit in the elite phase, to programmes designed to create social equality of opportunity in the mass phase, and then to open access in the universal phase.

In South Africa, the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) defines massification as the process through which participation in higher education has both increased and widened, moving away from an elite system that caters for a few individuals from privileged classes, to a mass system for larger numbers of students recruited from more diverse social backgrounds. The 'logic' of massification, 'is inevitable and includes greater social mobility for a growing segment of the population, new patterns of funding higher education, increasingly diversified higher education systems in most countries, generally an overall lowering of academic standards, and other tendencies' (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009, p. iii). Flowing from this understanding, some scholars, such as Mohamedbhai (2008) and Akalu (2016), have argued that increasing student enrolment, or massification is seen as critical to the democratisation of access by making higher education accessible to diverse sections of the population, and benefitting groups which, historically, have been excluded from the elite systems of higher education. Underscoring this argument is an idea that an increase in student enrolment constitute broadening and diversifying higher education spaces. In turn, an increase in diversity of students signals a greater chance of different voices and perspectives, thereby ensuring that higher education becomes more representative and reflective of its society.

While it is necessary to understand the promotion of massification within a context of political, economic and social redress, it is, however, not without criticism and concerns. On the one hand, critics maintain that massification in South Africa

has shown little evidence of tackling social inequalities of access and participation - inequalities in terms of access and success persist even in participation systems (Hornsby & Osman, 2014; Marginson, 2016). On the other hand, in addition to structural, organisational, curricular and pedagogical reforms, massification holds particular implications for students – specifically, in relation to financial sustainability, and finding a sense of belonging on campuses.

It is, of course, easier to look at data in terms of access, retention and graduation – that is, when transformation is measured in terms of numbers. More complex, however, and therefore, under-explored, are the actual experiences of students, as they attempt to navigate higher education terrains, which are often alien and alienating. The kinds of frustration and hopelessness, which are commonly witnessed in student protests, offer brief glimpses into the neglected implications of increased student enrolments. That massification has not yielded the envisaged patterns of accessibility and participation, necessarily leads to questions not only on the topics of redress and equity, but also on the actual experiences of historically excluded students, and the barriers, which they encounter as they enter higher education. When HEIs are focused on extending their reach through increasing numbers, they run the risk of affording less attention to who students are, what their needs are, and what they as HEIs ought to be doing in response.

In South Africa, a high percentage of students come from historical and generational exclusion. Since becoming a democracy in 1994, South Africa has doubled the number of students in higher education, and currently has about one million students in the system, which constitutes 20% of the 18- to 23-year-old-age cohort (Case, Marshall, McKenna & Mogashana, 2018, p. 11). Despite this significant increase in student numbers, for political and economic reasons, the majority of historically disadvantaged students enter the higher education arena with very limited understandings of what to expect – in terms of academic structures and processes, as well as socially. Tinto (2003, p. 2) explains that students, especially those who have been historically excluded from higher education, are affected 'by the campus expectational climate and by their perceptions of the expectations of faculty and staff hold for their individual performance.' For many, the prospect of pursuing studies at an HEI also implies new living arrangements, with circumstances, which are often profoundly different from their home settings. The transition from a schooling environment, therefore, is not limited to a mere adjustment to a new academic programme and format. Students are required to adapt to particular institutional cultures, which are as prevalent in lecture theatres, tutorial groups, libraries and laboratories, as they are in student residences and any social gatherings. This transition and the pressure to assimilate to a dominant institutional culture is amplified when historically disadvantaged students enter the spaces of historically advantaged institutions.

Evident from an increasing number of student protests, which continue to disrupt public higher education campuses, are not just serious concerns and questions about finances, but also deeply complex experiences of non-belonging and alienation, particularly at historically advantaged institutions. What this brings to the fore is the misplaced assumption that external access (student registration) necessarily translates into participation and internal inclusion. Historical exclusion cannot simply be remedied through external processes of inclusion – that is, in simply increasing student registrations from historically disadvantaged groups. Due attention has to be afforded to the identities and contexts of students, so that they are both externally (access) and internally (voice and belonging) included. The explanation provided by Graham and Slee (2008, p. 278) is one worth considering – namely, that 'there is an implicit centredness to the term *inclusion*, for it discursively privileges notions of the pre-existing by seeking to include the Other

into a prefabricated, naturalised space'. What this means is that when historically excluded and marginalised students are enrolled into spaces from which they were previously prohibited, they are effectively enrolled or brought into spaces which are shaped by pre-existing norms of supremacy and privileges – norms, which do not necessarily shift just because of expanded student numbers. Instead, what one commonly finds is that unless students keep their heads down, and assimilate to the institutional norms, the space in which they find themselves will not provide accommodation.

The external inclusion of people does not mean that they are included in the internal interplay of power relations. Stated differently, a legitimate right to inclusion does not preclude other vectors of exclusion and marginalisation. Those, who are already within the functioning of power, might allow others in, but that does not mean that the power relation ceases (Davids, 2019: 168). Under the pretence of inclusion, state Pendlebury and Enslin (2004: 37), 'previously excluded groups may be brought into a public deliberative domain but remain on the margins of deliberation, silenced or ignored by dominant terms of discourse and privileged styles of action and expression'. One finds therefore, that, while exclusion is generally as consequences of attitudes and responses to race, social, class, ethnicity, religion, gender and ability, the shifting trajectories imply the risk of ubiquitous exclusion (Peters & Besley, 2014, p. 109). Notions of participation, inclusion and recognition are, of course, not limited to social belonging and navigation.

The 'forms of knowledge and associated literacy practices that are valued in the academy are those of privileged groups in society, and that the university mainly serves to prop up this privilege' (Case *et. al.* 2018: 3). In the South African context, a report of the CHE (CHE, 2013) revealed poor student throughput and low retention. Only 30% of students, registered for a three-year bachelor's degree, managed to complete their degrees within the stipulated three years, with 56% graduating within a five-year period. While it is indeed possible to differentiate between types and trends of privilege, the overall experience for students from historically disadvantaged background is often an intersectional maze of displacement and hopelessness. A student, for example, who feels alienated from his or her residence, will probably experience similar feelings within a lecture theatre. The end-result is often the same – poor academic performance, which leads to low self-esteem, which, in turn, signals the risk of attrition.

The alienating institutional culture

The South African higher education landscape provides a rich kaleidoscope of deeply embedded disparities. Although there has been significant shifts in the student demographics at historically advantaged institutions, historically disadvantaged institutions have retained their historic racially and culturally defined identities. However, despite student migratory patterns at historically advantaged institutions, it is hard to pinpoint any definitive shifts in the institutional and academic cultures, with the overwhelming criticism being that these institutions continue to perpetuate a culture of white privilege. As recently as 2015, explains Shay (2016), with the '#feesmustfall' and '#rhodesmustfall' campaigns students have called for the end of domination by 'white, male, Western, capitalist, heterosexual, European world views' in higher education; and for the incorporation of other South African, African and global 'perspectives, experiences [and] epistemologies' as the central tenets of the curriculum, teaching, learning and research in the country. Although there have been significant progress in transformation in some aspects of higher education (DoE, 2008, p. 89), the curriculum has remained largely intact. By government's own admission, transformation efforts have not 'translated into any significant shifts in the structure and content of the curriculum' (DoE, 2008, p. 90). In turn, the curriculum 'is inextricably intertwined with the institutional culture

and, given that the latter remains white and Eurocentric at the historically white institutions, the institutional environment is not conducive to curriculum reform' (DoE, 2008, p. 91).

Like the transition from the school phase to the higher education phase within the education and training system, the measurement of student retention and completion of degree studies depends on academic performance and achievement. Academic performance is at the core of access, retention and success. It is in the classroom at an HEI where students experience the highest sense of displacement and alienation – because they are not 'seen' nor 'heard', and because they are unable to navigate the expectations of the classroom. Even before students have attended their first lecture or attempted their first essay, state Read, Archer and Leathwood (2003, p. 261) they will have begun the process of confronting and negotiating the (largely unwritten) 'rules of the game' of university life. Although the dominant discourses of knowledge, communication and practice in higher education can be seen to vary significantly geographically, politically, socially and economically, as well as between institutions, between faculties, and between disciplines, it is nevertheless, defined by particular discourses, which constitute academic and institutional cultures (Read et. al. 2003). The academic and institutional cultures are influenced and shaped by how the HEI defines itself in relation to knowledge, research, teaching, community engagement, as well as policies pertaining to access, teacher and student bodies.

Moreover, Tierney and Lanford (2018, p. 2) contend that one's understanding of institutional culture is subject to reinterpretation as new individuals instigate change through the unique perspectives and ideas they introduce and propagate. For these reasons, most contemporary discussions of institutional culture proceed from the epistemological stipulation that the organisational environment of higher education is 'socially constructed' (Tierney & Lanford, 2018, p. 2). Hence, both institutional and academic cultures, as observed by Read et al. (2003: 61) are neither uniformly accessed nor experienced. Despite the significant increase in students from working-class and ethnically diverse backgrounds attending university in the last decade, the academic culture predominantly reflects the dominant discourse of the student as white, middle-class and male (Read et al, 2003). One cannot discount the profound debilitating impact of this dominant discourse on the lived experiences of historically and contemporary marginalised students. There is indeed 'something anachronistic, something entirely is wrong with a number of institutions of higher learning in South Africa. There is something profoundly wrong when, for instance, syllabuses designed to meet the needs of colonialism and Apartheid should continue well into the liberation era' (Mbembe, 2016, p. 32). Similarly, there is something concerning about propagating student expansion without, firstly, being cognisant of who students are and what they do or do not bring; and, secondly, without taking account of the need to cultivate the contexts in which high student enrolments might evolve into student belonging.

It is disconcerting for students to come up against norms, traditions and ways of being, which they do not identify themselves with. Accordingly, they feel disconnected from the academic and institutional cultures to which they gained external access. The majority of historically disadvantaged students struggle in finding their way and themselves, in the institutions which have offered them external access. Students, states Ahmed (2012, p. 175) come up against a 'wall', which contains 'the sedimentation of history into a barrier that is solid and tangible in the present, a barrier to change as well as to the mobility of some, a barrier that remains invisible to those who can flow into the spaces created by institutions'. The 'wall' serves the purpose of including some, while excluding others; and of recognising some, while misrecognising others. The result is that students are 'decontextualised' and end up operating

separately from their socio-cultural world (Boughey & McKenna, 2016). Hlengwa, McKenna and Njovane (2018, p. 55) explain that the student, who finds herself or himself in such alienating campus environments, is effectively stripped of her or his heritage, norms, values and social practices. It is, therefore, unsurprising to find that students, who feel estranged from their institutions, and struggle to find points of resonance, subsequently detach themselves from their own learning.

Mann (2001, p. 8) defines the experience of alienation within the learning environment as 'the estrangement of the learner [student] from what they should be engaged in, namely the subject and process of study itself'. When students experience alienation, writes Mann (2005, p. 43), they feel unable to engage or contribute in ways which are meaningful and productive for the realisation of their own potential and learning requirements. This may include, she continues, the experience of feeling held back, blocked, inhibited, estranged or isolated from what it is they are learning, and the study practices and learning processes, both individual and social, which are part of their particular learning context. Consequently, argues Mann (2001, p. 7), it is not unusual to find students adopting a 'surface approach to their study'. The approach is characterised by a focus on rote learning, memorisation and reproduction, a lack of reflection, and a preoccupation with completing the task. The students passively undertake the required learning activities in ways that do not engage their being and desires in the subject of study, but rather locate the responsibility for their actions and purposes in 'external others'.

Alternatively, the students might adopt the 'strategic approach', which is characterised by a focus on assessment requirements and the expectations of the lecturers, as well as a careful management of time and effort, with the aim of achieving high grades. Under this approach, the students 'actively' undertake the required learning activities just in order to fulfil their own desires for success; but they do so in ways that do not allow them to engage their own being and desires in relation to the subject of study itself, and which locate control for their engagement in the perceived demands and criteria for success of 'external others' (Mann, 2001, p. 7).

Both 'surface ' and 'strategic' approaches to learning, as discussed above, could be described 'as expressing an alienation from the subject and process of study itself' (Mann, 2002, p. 7). While HEIs might be aware of the students' experiences of alienation from the classroom, and hence their own learning, the common response is curative, rather than attempting to take into account who the student are, what they expect, and what their actual experiences are. Hence, because HEIs persist with their understanding of students as 'decontextualised', they continue to want to remedy the problem of poor academic performance and achievement through remedial add-on interventions. These interventions, explain Hlengwa et al. (2018), include calls for academic support in the form of additional tutorials, supplementary instruction, online courses or enhanced orientation programmes.

While such initiatives, contend Hlengwa et. al. (2018, p. 157), may well be beneficial to the students, 'they are arguably based on the premise that both the problem and the solution rest outside of the core university structures and cultures, the curriculum content or the teaching and assessment approaches'. On the one hand, therefore, a university 'remains largely untouched while students are slotted into various initiatives to fix the lacks they have' (Hlengwa et. al., 2018, p. 157). On the other hand, complex questions arise as to how an HEI is conceived in relation to how it is experienced. If a number of students are alienated and disengaged from their own learning, then the HEI has brought into disrepute notions of inclusivity, belonging, recognition, and accountability – values commonly associated with the idea of a democratic university.

The system-wide implications of student alienation

The immediate effect of student alienation is manifested through poor performance of students which, in turn, leads to high failure rate. Thus, with continuing student alienation, increases in student enrolments do not imply corresponding increases in student participation and graduation rates. The reality is remarkably different. On the one hand, as Cloete (2016) clarifies, a detailed analysis of the 2000 and 2006 cohorts shows that the proportion of the intake of students who are sufficiently prepared to complete undergraduate curricula within the intended time, in contact universities, is only 27%, which is small by all accounts. Performance is very poor across the three qualification types (diplomas, three-year and four-year degrees): only 48% in contact universities graduate within five years and it is estimated that 45% will never graduate. For distance education, the figures for the University of South Africa are simply dire: only 6% graduate within five years and it is estimated, that 78% will never graduate.

By the end of the regulation time for all three qualification types, more students have been lost to failure and dropout than have graduated – more than twice as many in the case of African and diploma students (Cloete, 2016). These figures lead to one conclusion, and that is that the higher education system in South Africa is awfully inefficient and unsustainable in its current form and shape. It is an inept and compromised higher education system that is not doing the country any good. The few that graduate, compared to the mass that enrols for higher education in a particular cohort, are not fully absorbed in the economy, ironically when it is accepted that a key challenge to the economy is the lack of skills. This suggests that the higher education system is not producing the skills that the economy requires. The employment statistic renders credence to this thesis: in the first quarter of 2019, the unemployment rate of graduates was 31%, compared to 19, 5% in the 4th quarter of 2018 – an increase of 11, 4 percentage points quarter-on-quarter (Stats SA, 2019). In this current situation, the idea that higher education is an investment may not hold water, and has led Ware (2015, p. 475) to label this thinking as a 'fraud', since 'a large minority of graduates earn no more than non-graduates or are in jobs for which they are 'overeducated'.

Student alienation could also be a contributory factor to the culture of violence that has engulfed university campuses over the last couple of years. Giroux's (2017) caution that unless [higher] education inculcates that which fosters students' humanity, their sense of well-being and purpose, it 'can all too easily become a form of symbolic and intellectual violence that assaults rather than educates'. As one reflects on the ongoing disruptions that continue to plague a number of HEIs, questions have to be asked about the students who embark on increasingly violent forms of protest. While the dire financial challenges and constraints, which the majority of students face, could be an important trigger, the role that the frustration, disillusionment and alienation of students play in agitating students should not be underestimated. The myriad, complex experiences of exclusion, marginalisation, alienation, and non-belonging which continue to dictate the narratives of far too many students, and often remain unreported, play a significant role in triggering violent responses from students. When students feel repressed in terms of who they are, what language they speak, or how they choose to enact their cultural and ethnic identities, they are prevented from deriving meaning in the contexts in which they find themselves.

HEIs' responsibility to create spaces of belonging for belonging for all students

Against the backdrops of student alienation, exclusion, and the ensuing patterns of high student

attrition rates, HEIs have an ethical responsibility to take stock of their students. Within the context of a democracy, which is beset by unprecedented degrees of intolerance, anger and violence, HEIs have to ensure that their spaces are hospitable to all students, that students take critical account of multiple identities, and that they are equipped with the social agency to navigate and respect different people and their perspectives. An increase in student numbers has to be reflected in the institutional and academic culture of HEIs. This means taking the trouble to understand not only who the students are, but the values and ways of being that they inevitably bring with them. If students are not included and reflected in the institutional cultures and ethos of HEIs, they will struggle to find resonance in curricular and pedagogical practices. When students fail to find points of connection with an HEI, especially in and through their own learning, it becomes highly improbable for them to claim responsibility and accountability for their own education. When students are not invited to participate to speak back, to question and to disagree, they become docile and unresponsive participants in their own learning. In turn, in a classroom where there are no opportunities for deliberation and debate, existing views and arguments remain uncontested, thereby stifling opportunities for new ways of thinking and considerations to come to the fore.

By virtue of being the custodians of academic, cultural and economic spaces, HEIs have to allow for the identities of students of different backgrounds to be manifested in the very discourse of higher education. Notions of inclusion and belonging can neither be assumed, nor undermined. Students have to know and trust in their equal right to be seen, to act, and to be recognised. This is what a democracy implies – that equal regard is afforded to all – unconditionally. Such an approach, says Giroux (2017), 'suggests providing students with the skills, ideas, values and authority necessary for them not only to be well-informed and knowledgeable across a number of traditions and disciplines, but also to invest in the reality of a substantive democracy'. When students are attuned to democracy and its incumbent principles of respect, dignity, justice, equality, recognition, and tolerance, then they are positioned to identify and challenge any form of discrimination, exclusion and humiliation.

Conclusion

The main conclusion from the foregoing discussion in this paper is that, it might be opportune time for a reimagined understanding of higher education transformation, from the preoccupation with expanding student numbers, to extending the focus to also include ensuring inclusivity and social cohesion on campuses of HEIs. For this to happen, HEIs, firstly, have to provide space and time for students to express views that create not only a culture of pluralism, but that tie these views to larger political articulations. Students need to be provided with spaces and opportunities, so that they can cross-over and engage with other life-worlds and perspectives. This means ensuring that student access also opens doors for meaningful participation, deliberation, debate, and hence, responsibility and accountability. In this way, HEIs do not simply prepare students to become active responsible citizens, but they can 'introduce them to the political aspects of existing in plural states, which means facing disagreement on political instead of moral terms' (Todd & Säfström, 2008, p. 8).

To do the above HEIs have to take stock of students' contexts, and in turn, ensure that HEI's reflect those contexts. On the one hand, this involves developing a culture of 'seeing' students as they are, and not as the HEIs would like them to be, and of engaging with their differences, rather than en-framing them within pre-defined notions of assimilation. On the other hand, this also means a preparedness by HEIs to take

account of their own climates, architecture and discourses. Students cannot be expected to engage in practices of respectful deliberation, if the contexts in which they find themselves are physically and symbolically at odds not only with who they are, but also with the values of democracy.

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