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Book Review

Going to University: The Influence of Higher Education on the Lives of Young South Africans by Jennifer M. Case, Delia Marshall, Sioux McKenna and Disaapele Mogashana

(Bloemfontein: African Minds, 2018)

Sherran Clarence

Centre for Postgraduate Studies, Rhodes University, Makhanda/Grahamstown, South Africa
s.clarence@ru.ac.za

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For the last few years in South Africa, and around the world, debates have intensified over the purposes of higher education. Versions of a neo-liberal, market-driven, corporate university are pervasive, and their effects are alarming. Globally, we witness increasing casualisation of academic labour (Andrews, 2016), increased mental illness and burnout in academics from PhD-student level to the professoriate (Gorczynski, 2018), and increased pressure from industry and government to produce so-called work-ready graduates (McCowan, 2015). This drive towards what is presented as employability, as well as the overarching concern with rankings and metrics, has led many universities to reduce students and staff to statistics on throughput, retention, staff-to-student ratios, and publications, to name just a few categories.

In South Africa, universities spend a significant amount of effort on improving student retention and throughput, and there are ongoing concerns about the skewed success rates when the graduation statistics are disaggregated along the lines of race and associated socioeconomic status. Research by the Council on Higher Education, published in 2013, shows that only 30% of students starting a degree in contact mode graduate within the required three years, and only 56% of the cohort within five. Many students are therefore not graduating from the university at which they start—a problem referred to as wastage. There are, then, big questions being asked about the purposes of higher education, given the relatively low participation rates (around 20% of South Africa's population), the uneven success rates, and the pressures from all sides to produce a range of potentially competing outcomes.

It is to this fraught area of concern that this book makes a significant and valuable contribution. The authors have used narrative methodology to interview 73 young people six years after they started a bachelor's degree at one of three well-resourced urban universities

in South Africa. These narratives, that reveal the complex and nuanced internal conversations that these young people have with themselves and the conversations they hold with significant others, are used to guide the reader through an emerging argument about the purposes of higher education in the lives of these students. The authors use a light touch approach to theory, framing their analysis of the participants' narratives with Margaret Archer's concept of "internal conversations" through which humans develop different forms of reflexivity and exercise agency. They add to this Amartya Sen's account of the conditions, personal, social, and environmental, needed for people to exercise their agency fully so as to realise their capabilities, understood here as their "ability to choose to live their lives in accordance with what they value" (p. 10).

Each chapter in the book introduces the reader to different narratives, drawn upon to illustrate and elaborate on an emerging argument about how young people navigate and negotiate their way through a range of personal, social, and environmental conditions to carve out the life they want to live. The first three of the eight chapters in the book look at the ways in which the structure of the current undergraduate curriculum in the higher education context, and in the BSc degrees especially, can prove an obstacle to choice and changes of heart and mind on the path of these students through their studies. They look, further, at the kinds of deliberations in which young people engage when they are deciding where and what to study. The next four chapters consider the broader student experience at university, the effects of not completing one's degree of first choice and the deliberations in which they engage about continuing with postgraduate study and entering the workplace. Finally, the book returns to considering the purposes and role of higher education in the lives of young people.

Several key insights emerge from the book as a whole. The first is the significance of structural factors in achieving one's aims through exercising agency. An important instance of this is socioeconomic status and access to stable funding and the freedom that this can offer. Many of the young people interviewed who had done well academically, and made it to university in spite of financial constraints, found that financial aid came with hidden strings, and they felt huge pressure to get the degree done because they needed to start working to support their families and themselves. Students who had access to funding felt a greater sense of freedom to enjoy university without financial worries. Another structural factor, linked to the first, is access to networks and expertise. The kinds of advice and insights that family members with knowledge of higher education could offer young people made an impact on their deliberations and choices; the absence of this advice for students without this kind of capital was notable. Networks, either the students' own or family networks, were important in accessing additional funding, part-time work while studying (and full-time work later), and other opportunities such as internships. Students from rural areas and from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds struggle to access the same kinds of networks and associated resources that students in urban areas and from more capital-rich backgrounds can access.

What the book drives home very clearly is how success or struggle at university and from there into the workplace, has very little to do with individual motivation and drive. Far more influential are deeper structural constraints, such as access to enough funding to study what

one wants and for as long as desired, access to family support, advice, and counsel, and access to networks that can help one obtain work, internships, and so on. These social and environmental conditions can limit the achievements of the most motivated and driven students.

Going to university is about so much more than gaining the right skills to get the right job. University provides students, especially those from poorer home backgrounds, with access to new networks and resources that are hugely valuable in helping them to expand their capabilities. University offers new and different opportunities for socialising and making friends, for engaging in extra-curricular activities, for learning more about who one is and what one wants to do and be in one's life. Far, then, from being wastage, young people who have not yet managed to complete a university degree are gaining a great deal from being part of a disciplinary and social campus community.

This book eloquently and accessibly challenges dominant discourses in the broader neoliberal framing of higher education that tends to cast success or failure in individual terms and castigates students who do fail for not making the right choices, or for not working hard enough. Rather, the authors show, chapter by chapter, how factors beyond the remit of any individual—many within the control of the university or higher education sector such as the structure of the undergraduate curriculum and student fees—can work to either enable or limit the exercise of agency. In an environment in which students are reduced to metrics and measures, we tend to forget that most of our students are young people making their way in the world. This book offers a powerful reminder of this, and of the responsibility higher education has to ensure, as far as possible, that it creates an environment that enables these young people to build lives in which they can flourish, and, by extension, contribute to the flourishing of the society in which they live.

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