How Do Students Pull Themselves Up by Their Bootstraps When They Have No Shoes? A Perspective on the Function of Meritocracy at South African Tertiary Institutions During Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT

The post-apartheid era in South Africa has been characterised by increased access to higher education. A dominant expectation by those within these institutions, who claim to be upholding the university's academic standards, is that previously excluded students must use their own agency to ensure their academic success. This bootstrapping approach transfers responsibility for academic progression and success to students, absolving institutional stakeholders from addressing structural, curricular and transformational issues that affect student success. Moreover, bootstrapping as agent of student success pays insufficient attention to the social systemic factors impeding the progress of students. The aim of this discussion is to illustrate how the context of emergency remote teaching and learning within the Covid-19 pandemic has accented the expectation that student merit alone will guarantee participation and success in academia. This article further challenges this meritocracy myth as myopic and offers a contextual analysis on how student agency alone cannot ensure student success. Finally, this article will outline how more involved engagement with structural and systemic action is needed by higher education institutions in South Africa.

Introduction

The global outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 marked the beginning of unprecedented change in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Within this scholarship, the themes of online learning, digital literacies and remote access to learning resources quickly gained traction as higher education institutions (HEIs) had to rapidly move to emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL). In the scope of HEIs in particular, the pandemic and subsequent move to ERTL brought to light how the ongoing legacy of structural disparities predicated on race, gender and social class impact the student body, particularly students from historically disadvantaged groups of society. According to the Western Cape Broad-Based Socio-Economic Empowerment Charter for the South African Mining Industry, "the term Historically Disadvantaged South Africans (HDSA) refers to any person, category of persons or community, disadvantaged by unfair discrimination before the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1993 Act No. 200 of 1993 came into operation" (Lester, 2002).

One of the factors that gives rise to continued disparity in the tertiary education system is the disproportionate emphasis on students' individual responsibility rather than on the institution's responsibility towards them. Using individual responsibility as a central measure for student success places students at HEIs on a level playing field. This is an inaccurate assessment of student academic performance when one considers the reality of university students' respective historical and current circumstances. The South African education landscape advances the notion that those from previously disadvantaged backgrounds should raise themselves up out of adverse circumstance by their proverbial 'bootstraps'. These are the students that often do not have the requisite resources (financial and social capital) to perform optimally. Boughey and McKenna (in Dison, 2018: 6) refer to this phenomenon as the decontextualising of the learner, where "students are largely understood in ways that are decontextualised from their histories and socioeconomic realities" (Perin, 2011: 56).

The etymology of the term 'bootstrapping' is from the field of finance and economics where these disciplines refer to "a situation in which an entrepreneur starts a company with little capital, relying on money other than outside investments" (Investopedia, 2020). The term has been employed extensively in the education sector where, in its essence, it holds the same meaning: in that students with limited resources are encouraged to improve their current and future circumstances through sheer effort and will. It is meritocracy in action. In defining meritocracy in education, Erivwo, Varghese, Mathai and Afrin (2021: 1) posit that:

> A meritocratic education system, by nature, is one where students are enabled to accomplish achievements, and receive corresponding rewards, regardless of outside factors. The common norm in schools is that achievement based on merit explains school success, and that merit is the only means of the upward mobility of all students in regards to societal status, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, current social status, etc.

This article discusses how the bootstrapping mentality and its foundation in the meritocratic myth operates to foster inequity within South Africa's higher education institution. The effect is that previously disenfranchised students remain on the margins of academic success. The article will further highlight how a move to ERTL exacerbated the already existing challenges emanating from a decontextualised approach to learning and teaching in higher education. Covid-19 and the rapid move to ERTL simply magnified underlying issues that a disproportionate emphasis on meritocracy could not salvage. Moreover, the article argues that HEIs must address students' academic performance with a contextualised recognition of the inequities of broader society. Practical recommendations of how institutions can function without an overreliance on meritocracy are presented in the final segment of the article.

Background and Context

South Africa's political history has shaped the trajectory of the country's educational system from the days of colonisation, then apartheid and leading up to the democratic state. In the post-apartheid state, the concept of educational success for people classified as black and/or non-white has been based on their ability to be "bright, hardworking and tenacious" in the face of adversity. These qualities are then attributed to their propensity to perform optimally and gain their qualification in "record time". This form of meritocracy is true of all educational levels and not just within the context of higher education.

In 2007, while I was preparing for my grade 12 (matric) final examinations, my mother, almost on a weekly basis, told me stories from newspapers, magazines and national news media of students who, in previous years, overcame incredibly difficult circumstances in order to progress to unparalleled levels of academic success. During that time, reporting on students overcoming all odds to reach their goals was rampant. Examples of stories that advanced this narrative included accounts of students studying by candlelight, walking many kilometres to get to school and, in the wake of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, balancing their academic responsibilities while raising their siblings who, along

with them, had been orphaned. The media and my mother's message was consistently one of "if they can overcome all of that and still do well, you have no excuse to perform badly or to struggle".

The manner in which the circumstances faced by these students were reported was one of reverence and praise for managing to use their will and determination to pull themselves out of their dire circumstances and achieve incredible feats of excellence. The unjust system which had created these conditions in the first place was hardly interrogated and, when it was, it was defined as an uncomfortable but necessary pressure, a condition akin to that necessary to form diamonds. The message that youth from previously disadvantaged backgrounds were expected to pull themselves up by their bootstraps to achieve academic, financial and social success has been consistent throughout post-apartheid South Africa.

South Africa's education system (both basic and tertiary) has been beset by food insecurities and lack of access to funding; and poor preparation of students leaving the basic education sector and coming to HEIs has been the subject of academic discourse in recent years. The pandemic and its impact further exacerbated already existing structural deficiencies. The mandatory national lockdown instituted by the government forced HEIs to implement a rapid move to emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL). This necessitated a speedy adaptation to online learning. Both lecturers and students had to familiarise themselves with what had been deemed a "new normal" within a fairly short space of time. The challenges that HEIs were grappling with in relation to practical constraints with device allocation, student access to data and the adverse effects of the pandemic on mental health were symptoms of a systemic issue. The move to ERTL just shone a spotlight on how far institutions have to go in terms of creating safe and inclusive spaces for all students and how meritocracy functions to slow that progress.

Theoretical and Analytical Framework

The concept of social realism provides a lens through which the complexity of the matters addressed in this article can be brought to light. The student learning experience and how it relates to the broader institutional, social and cultural landscape of teaching and learning falls within the ambit of social realism. The interplay of structure, culture and agency as they are conceptualised in social realism makes it a suitable and relevant framework for discussion of how bootstrapping functions as a form of meritocracy in South African higher education institutions (HEIs).

Social Realism

In her pivotal contribution to social realist theory, *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*, Margaret Archer's framing of three variables – structure, culture and agency – is based on her contention that the interaction of these variables can ignite worthwhile analysis of social organisation within a cultural domain (Archer, 1995). Agency, specifically, is central to the bootstraps approach of making individual effort central to academic achievement: framing agency as a way to empower students by encouraging them to be autonomous entities that are agents of their own learning shifts the order of thinking from the parts to the people as the starting point. This is not in line with social realist thinking, as Archer posits that "the parts precede the actions of the people because structures and cultures always pre-exist the situations into which people enter" (Archer, 1995: 10). Students at HEIs are subject to the societal and university culture within which they find themselves. Upon entry into the tertiary education spaces, they are confronted by pre-existing dynamics that have long been at play within the space and will inevitably shape their experience. Even with the narrative of them being agents of their learning and higher education experience, students' agency is shaped by the specific cultural and structural system at hand. The components of these respective systems can either empower subjects within a given system to exercise their agency to its full potential or they can act as limitations that hamper their potential for optimal fulfilment (Behari-Leak, 2017).

In a recent report published by the World Bank (2022), titled *Inequality in Southern Africa: An Assessment of the Southern African Customs Union*, Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Namibia, and South Africa are the countries highest on the inequality scale. South Africa's state of inequality persists largely because of the country's socio-political and socioeconomic history. The racial discrimination perpetuated by colonialism and apartheid created an economic and social system that entrenched white wealth and privilege while simultaneously enforcing the poverty of black South Africans. The nearly 468 cumulative years of legalised discrimination means that the roots of inequality run deep and affect every aspect of the lives of South Africans. Soudien, Reddy and Woolard (2019: 10) note that "inequality results in deeply entrenched social and economic exclusions that inhibit sustainable human development and self-actualisation". Archer's explanatory framework of culture, structure and agency elucidates this point by looking at how agency is structured and how existing structures "may be the heritage of unintended consequences of past actions" (Archer, 1995: 5). In the case of South African HEIs, acknowledgement and understanding of

this context provides an avenue for educational practitioners to address factors that impede on students' probability of academic success in their tertiary studies.

When students who are adversely affected by this state of inequality come into the tertiary space, it should come as little surprise that the inherent constraints that are still woven into pedagogic practice and curriculum development, barriers created by an inefficient basic education system and the plethora of socioeconomic constraints, limit their chances for success. Situating people as preceding the "parts" is not in the favour of student wellbeing. Through a discerning analysis of the characteristics that make up the specific conditions of a given culture and structure, this theory helps observers gain insight into the ways in which these intersections impact each other as well as the exercise of agency by the participants within this system.

Given the limitations of the bootstraps mentality on students' own perceptions of their capabilities, the focus of this paper will be on the interplay of structure, culture and agency in the academic lives of students, with a particular focus on students who are classified as previously disadvantaged[1].

Conceptual Framework

Meritocracy

The action of encouraging students to pull themselves up by their bootstraps is predicated upon the concept of meritocracy. Meritocracy is defined as "(a) an individual's abilities to succeed on the basis of their individual aptitudes and actions; (b) success is based on moral virtue; and (c) equal opportunity applies to all regardless of origin or social identity" (Lardier, Herr, Barrios, Garcia-Reid & Reid, 2019: 5).

In a study of how urban youth in an under-resourced school located in an American neighbourhood contend with the social challenges they experience within their community, Lardier et al observe how meritocracy functions within an educational context. The findings of their research show that the concept of the American Dream, which posits that everyone on American soil has equal access to opportunity, is the "bedrock of the neoliberal educational policy" (Lardier et al, 2019: 4). Neoliberal

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[1] Within the context of this paper, 'previously disadvantaged' refers to students who are from the demographic group/s of people that were disadvantaged by the discrimination meted out against them by the preceding political, social and economic structure of apartheid.

policy, characterised by a plethora of highly individualistic considerations, expounds values of individuality and exceptionalism; an inevitable adverse consequence of this is that it is inherently insensitive to the needs of the poor. Within this policy framework, the very real factor of structural inequality is overlooked and the lack of an equitable approach to teaching and learning is not considered. Instead, there is an overemphasis on the responsibility that youth have towards their learning whilst the conditions for them to engage in meaningful learning experience are not ideal and are not attended to (Lardier et al, 2019). According to the authors, "there is a persistent American belief that if an individual is poor or jobless, it is somehow due to their own shortcomings and inadequacies" (Lardier et al, 2019: 6). This observation builds on the work of Berliner, who previously observed that within the American education system:

> The wonderful but *occasional* story of a child's rise from poverty to success and riches [is centred on] the heroic, remarkable, but *occasional* impact of a teacher or a school on a child. These stories of triumph by individuals who were born poor, or success by educators who changed the lives of their students, are widely believed narratives about our land and people . . . But in fact, these are simply myths that help us feel good to be American (Berliner, 2013: 10 - emphasis added).

The United States of America (much like South Africa) has a significant income gap between people at different socio-economic levels. Both countries have a terrible history of legalised segregation whose eventual abolition influenced the national collective conviction that as a nation and as a people, they have a good story to tell. After the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, there was a concerted effort from the state to move past the country's painful history. The re-establishment of an existing and widely accepted narrative would be seminal in this endeavour, a narrative that people can easily buy into: the American Dream. The American Dream is the USA's collective conviction that anyone, regardless of background or circumstance, can obtain prosperity and success, this success usually being economic or financial in nature.

Coined in 1931 by James Truslow Adams, in his book titled *Epic of America*, the American Dream is described as "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" (Murphy, 2010: 1). In the wake of Jim Crow and the gains made by the civil rights movement, increased emphasis was placed on the concept of the American Dream in order to advance the narrative of a nation that has gone through adversity and has overcome it to become a land of endless opportunity where anyone can be successful as long as they are willing to do the hard work. In the context of the education system, this concept of the American Dream drives an overemphasis on meritocracy. Factors such as structural inequality and systemic discrimination are overlooked as potential barriers to individual

success and instead personal culpability is centred as the distinguishing factor in an individual's ability to improve their circumstances and to achieve their goals.

The South African education system, since the abolition of apartheid, operates in a similar fashion. The prevalence of meritocracy within basic and tertiary education is based on similar inclinations as those in the American context. Where Americans have the American Dream, South Africans have the Rainbow Nation ideal where, in the post-apartheid context, we are all equal and have access to the same opportunities, regardless of race, gender or economic background. With the dawn of democracy came the emphasis on education as the key that would unlock doors (opportunities) previously locked, and that all the previously disenfranchised had to do was to be tenacious and work hard.

On paper, it was framed as though the government would do its part in ensuring that the education system would be transformed to the betterment of those who had previously been left out:

> The realization of democracy, liberty, equality, justice and peace are necessarily conditions for the full pursuit and enjoyment of lifelong learning. It should be a goal of education and training policy to enable a democratic, free, equal, just and peaceful society to take root and prosper in our land, on the basis that all South Africans without exception share the same inalienable rights, equal citizenship and common destiny, and that all forms of bias (especially racial, ethnic and gender) are dehumanising (Department of Education, 1995: 22).

Bootstrapping as a Function of Meritocracy

In the book *Sanitized Apartheid: The Post-Racial Hoax in South Africa and the United States*, Arnold Dodge (2020) draws significant parallels between SA and the USA with respect to the socio-economic divisions that are interwoven into the fabric of both nations across the scope of economics, education and opportunity. Whilst his focus is on the basic education sector, the issues addressed when looking at South Africa extend to the tertiary education sector. The book, in its opening chapter, has a quote by Richard Rothstein which illustrates the gravity of how the bootstraps mentality has far reaching consequences for those it is imposed on. He notes that:

> there's a lack of moral, political, and intellectual integrity in [the] suppression of awareness of how social and economic disadvantage lowers achievement. Our first obligation should be to analyse social problems accurately; only then can we design effective solutions. Presenting a deliberately flawed version of reality, fearing that the truth will lead to excuses, is not only corrupt but also self-defeating (Dodge, 2020: 77).

The term bootstrapping is derived from the phrase "pull yourself up by your bootstraps". It is defined as the ability one has to get themselves out of unfavourable circumstances, using existing resources and personal drive to reach their desired outcome. It is the action of relying solely on one's capabilities and achieving success without help. It is the exaltation of personal agency (Dodge, 2020).

Bootstrapping in higher education places individual effort above all other factors that influence students' performance. For South African students who fall within the demographic profile of the racial groups previously disadvantaged by apartheid, the prevalence of bootstrapping culture at HEIs poses a potential threat to their ability to perform optimally as they do not receive the requisite institutional support. An exaltation of personal agency above institutional responsibility negates the impact that the continuing legacy of apartheid has on the current education system. Misplaced meritocracy does more harm to the multitude of students who, upon entry into the tertiary education space, are already on the back foot. By negating or glossing over the students' social circumstances and their familial and academic background, HEIs are separating the student from the circumstances which have shaped them and their learning experiences. It removes the context from which they stem, creating what Boughey and McKenna refer to as the "decontextualized learner" (in Dison, 2018: 6).

The concept of the decontextualized learner is pervasive within the pedagogical structure of HEIs in the country and is, in essence, meritocracy by another name. By divorcing the student's progression from their social, economic, political and other contexts, we are in effect institutionally stacking the deck against them, asking them to participate in the game of learning without considering that they may not possess the tools necessary to do so. To make an analogy with an actual game of football (soccer), it is tantamount to asking the child without soccer boots to play barefoot alongside teammates that have the full kit and then expecting said child to score goals and have the same experience of the game.

From the vantage point of academic literacies, Boughey and McKenna (2016: 3) note that:

> decontextualized approaches include generic 'academic literacy' courses which
> construct the ability to read and write in socially legitimated ways in the academy as
> simply a matter of acquiring a set of neutral, asocial, a-cultural, and a-political 'skills'.
> These courses often completely fail to acknowledge that reading and writing in the
> ways sanctioned by the academy have implications for students at the level of identity.

The tenets of Boughey and McKenna's framing of the decontextualized learner are relevant to other aspects within the South African educational structure and are represented within the broader discourse on this phenomenon. Whilst there are students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds who have overcome their personal circumstances and managed to achieve academic success within the merit-based tertiary education system, they are outnumbered by those who are unable to persist.

The research on student persistence, especially that of students who are classified as first generation, shows that the students who have the greater likelihood of success are those that have a combination of internal and external resilience factors. In their research paper titled 'The Academic Persistence of First-Year First-Generation African Students', Motsabi, Diale and van Zyl (2020: 79) observe that "students who were able to successfully adapt and adjust seem to have psychological resilience attributes and dispositions that serve as a buffer against risk. These buffering factors are divided into two: firstly, internal resilience factors and secondly, external encouraging factors". The external encouraging factors are identified as family and community support and institutional attributes such as psycho-social, financial and academic support. Intrinsic motivation works best within the context of a broader support network.

Therefore, the peril of decontextualising the student from their lived and very real social circumstances is that it lowers the self-worth of students whose contexts may well be and very often are the reason for their poor academic performance. The system of meritocracy is all-encompassing and students who are adversely affected, even with an acute understanding of their personal set of circumstances, are unlikely to view their difficulties in progression as the result of the inherent disparities within the system.

Equity

The term equity is often misconstrued as a synonym for equality, and both are used interchangeably. Whilst it is closely related to the concept of equality, equity is a standalone concept. Whereas equality refers to the provision of the same experiences and resources, equity refers to the deliberate action taken by individuals or organisations to address and overcome discrimination against specific groups of people, especially discrimination that is based on race and gender, in pursuit of fairness and justice. In the higher education space, "equity requires institutions to identify structural barriers facing underserved students. Universities need to eliminate such barriers by

investing in equity-minded policies, practices, and behaviours that lead to student success through the intentional design of the university experience" (Achieving the Dream, 2018: 7).

Equity as a concept, a principle and a structural framework is an integral aspect of the South African tertiary education discourse, especially in the wake of the massification of education that transformed the demographics of HEIs and diversified the student body. Subsequently, massification laid bare the inherent disparities between the students' respective social backgrounds at tertiary institutions. This massification of HEIs allows space for a greater convergence of these students that would have otherwise not crossed paths. The term equity is therefore evoked when speaking to mechanisms that need to be put in place to ensure that the proverbial academic playing field is levelled.

As Beckman notes, "equity implies more than equality and is a term we invoke when the removal of formal barriers to equality is not enough to ensure fairness and justice in the light of historical and other contextual factors" (Beckmann, 2009: 775). Although equity can be adapted to a myriad of social circumstances and can therefore mean different things to different people, the underlying tenets are characteristically uniform. Whether it be racial, structural or gender equity, the essence of equity is that it goes back to the very basis upon which social justice and injustice is predicated. It seeks to be pre-emptive in creating the conditions that are necessary for beginning on an equal footing and having a socially just starting point for all marginalised groups.

In the Rawlsian framing of justice as fairness, the application of equity is a corrective measure designed to ensure a fair system of equality, of opportunity and a just system of end results (Rawls, 2005). When this is translated to the tertiary education sector, equity is the process of ensuring that all students receive the requisite support and resources in order to have a greater chance at attaining holistic success during their tertiary education experience. Equity is a concept that has been a fundamental focus of student support and success work globally in the education sector. The Achieving the Dream network is an international student success and support structure that has a network of affiliated colleges and universities. In their research on factors that support and detract from student success, they find that students regarded as historically marginalised present the greatest need for institutions to have a strong focus on equity. In the American context, these students include "first-generation, low-income, students of colour; adult students; marginalized orientations, gender identities, and intersex students; students with second-language backgrounds;

undocumented students; veterans; students with disabilities; students with dependents; foster care youth; and formerly and currently incarcerated students" (Achieving the Dream, 2018: 93).

The South African context requires the application of such an equitable approach. Most of the above demographic classifications as well as the continuous conflation of equality and equity by institutions encapsulate the challenges faced by people who are in these groups. One aspect that is prevalent in relation to equity within South Africa is investment in policy and over-reliance of state apparatus on said policy. In 'Equity, access and quality in basic education', Motala (2015) notes that government policy, sanctioned legislature and the drafting of resolutions to move a number of sectors towards an equitable future are in high supply and have been carefully crafted. The implementation of said policies, however, is lacking (Motala, 2015: 162). When equity is considered in the conversation about bootstrapping, it is located at the opposite end of the pendulum from meritocracy. This is because meritocracy, in its framing, in its approach and its ranking of agency above the parts inherent in the system gives rise to the prevalence of the bootstraps ideology.

Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning

The mode of academic activities that took place at HEIs since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 has been characterised as Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning (ERTL). As the name suggests:

> ERTL is a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances. It involves the use of fully remote teaching solutions for instruction or education that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face or as blended or hybrid courses and that will return to that format once the crisis or emergency has abated (EduCause, 2020).

In a study conducted by Sifunda, Mokhele, Manyaapelo, Dukhi, Sewpaul, Parker and others (2021), titled 'Social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth in the Post School Education and Training (PSET) Sector in South Africa', it was found that over 40% of the 13 000 students who participated in the survey could not afford to purchase their own food during the pandemic. Additionally, 30% of them did not have an adequate study space while another 40% felt socially isolated (Sifunda et al, 2021). While none of these are new or unique to the circumstances brought on by the pandemic, the difference is that they have had to deal with them in isolation from their tertiary communities.

ERTL and the Decontextualised Approach to Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

The notion that every student has the opportunity to perform optimally provided they apply themselves to their academic endeavours irrespective of the set of circumstances they come into HEIs with, is not only unrealistic but also a myopic frame of reference. These are the basic maxims of a meritocratic system that places all the responsibility squarely on the students' shoulders. It requires that students be excellent at all times, where excellence is defined within the narrowest of margins where even average students who manage to narrowly progress to the next year of study are regarded as insufficiently committed to their studies. One of the consequences of an education system predicated on meritocracy and an overemphasis on individual effort is that, for students who do not progress and end up being academically excluded, such exclusion is regarded as a failure on their part, irrespective of the circumstances that have led to that unfavourable result. This meritocratic ethos is particularly problematic when the research indicates that "the total number of poor black students at previously white institutions (PWIs) in South Africa are very limited" (Tjønneland, 2017: 2). Furthermore:

> Barely 50 percent of undergraduate students have managed to graduate five years after entry. And among those being supported by the national financial aid scheme two-thirds of undergraduate students have become drop-outs five years after entering. Most drop out after the first year, many because the financial support is insufficient and with accommodation and transport being too expensive, but most because they fail to pass exams (Tjønneland, 2017:2).

South Africa's socioeconomic context renders an emphasis on personal agency as unsuitable for the context within which students operate in order to obtain academic success. Despite 27 years of democracy, the progress made towards uplifting marginalised communities out of poverty and providing equal opportunities and access to all South Africans has not been substantial enough for meritocracy to be a legitimate benchmark for student success.

Although personal agency and individual effort are important attributes for students to develop throughout their tertiary education experience, the possession of these attributes alone, without institutional or community support, decreases a student's chances of success. Vincent Tinto, one of the leading scholars on student success, notes that both factors of academic performance and social cohesion are crucial markers that impact whether or not a student will drop out. In his analysis, a feeling of inclusion is paramount, especially for first-generation students and students who come from communities that have been historically marginalised or excluded from higher education (Tinto, 2012). From a social realist perspective, Tinto's analysis is rooted in what is called the

ontological turn in the ambit of student learning; this denotes a focus on students 'being' and 'becoming' rather than just on knowledge and skills (Archer, 2019).

The importance of 'being' was embodied by the spate of protests that took place in 2015 and 2016 where students across HEIs in South Africa protested against the unjust and unequal education system. The #FeesMustFall (FMF) protests were a stark consequence of what happens when meritocracy and individual agency are continuously decontextualised and socioeconomic issues ignored. The foregoing challenging atmosphere ignited FMF and successfully highlighted government underfunding of tertiary education while surfacing dissatisfaction with persistent income and service disparities more generally. This dissatisfaction elicited rage from students, who subsequently brought higher education in South Africa to a complete standstill in October of 2015 (Zwane, 2015), and the cancellation of exams (Ejoke, Enwereji & Chukwuere, 2019).

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the FMF protests was that students highlighted how social issues converge to create an unjust social structure where those from previously disadvantaged groups are victimised by the system. In his book *Breaking a Rainbow, Building a Nation*, Rekgotsofetse Chikane outlines the aspects inherent to South Africa's economic and social structure that act as barriers to access to higher education. Among these is an unrelentingly unequal society where 10 percent of the country's population owns 80 percent of the country's wealth (World Bank, 2022). The states inability to prioritize poor youth is another factor. In South Africa, where the vast majority of poor young people do not have access to universities, financial aid and development structures that enable access to HEIs have not been prioritized (Chikane, 2018). By championing the struggle for free, accessible education, the students informed South Africa that the system is holistically broken. According to Dlamini "the demands made by students reflect democratic South Africa's struggle to alleviate poverty and create an environment conducive to sustainable development" (Dlamini, 2019: 50).

The move to emergency remote learning at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic presented the education sector with a range of challenges, from access to devices and stable internet connection to support for students who have home circumstances that are not conductive to studying. Institutions had to grapple with how to continue the academic programme during these uncertain times. As difficult as this time was, there are lessons to be learned that could produce a better future for students. Equity is one of the concepts that requires thoughtful, deliberate application. When we consider its implementation in the future, we need to expand it beyond the academic scope. The

Achieving the Dream network notes that "in higher education, equity refers to ensuring that each student receives what they need to be successful through the intentional design of the college experience" (Achieving the Dream, 2018: 7). The needs of students extend far beyond the scope of academic competency and success and the practice of advising for student success must be cognisant of the nuances that exist within students' educational journeys. The structure of student success initiatives at HEIs is not representative of this nuance. The conceptualisation and subsequent application of equitable redress is predominantly predicated along academic content lines. A majority of the readings look at equity from an academic perspective, looking at curricula, assessment practices and teaching methodologies (Czerniewicz, Agherdien, Badenhorst, Belluigi, Chambers, Chili, …, 2021: 950). In the interests of advancing holistic student success in a post-pandemic world, HEIs need to find ways to explore how students' other skills can be developed during their time at university. Below are some recommendations for how this can be practically implemented.

Recommendations

One of the most overlooked but potentially affirming mechanisms is the university co-curricular transcript. As we shift to a more student-centred mode of education, the design of what is recognised and awarded in students' overall performance also requires redress, and the development and implementation of a co-curricular transcript is a critical element. By definition, "a co-curricular transcript is a document of non-academic activities that encourages students to reflect on the skills and values they learn through involvement outside the classroom" (Stirling and Kerr, 2015: 4). From the non-academic challenges that we have observed as hampering students' academic performance, it is strongly recommended that some form of requirement not related to academic content be instituted in order to get students to really think about their reason behind coming to university and how to achieve their goals. A co-curricular transcript has potential to assist with more than time management and study skills. The scholarship indicates that it can improve students' problem-solving capabilities, assist them to socially integrate, and hone their decision-making abilities. These are all skills which will be crucial for the world beyond university, which university is supposedly preparing them for.

The co-curricular transcript is but one form of redress that embodies collective effort and change in institutional culture and moves beyond an academic system based solely on meritocracy. There are other methods which have been outlined in the canon on student success that speak to the kind of

equitable approach that is required in South Africa. One such seminal text is the guidebook titled 'Knowing our Students'. It is a guidebook that has been designed for academics and stakeholders in the student success sector to explore practical ways of creating multiple avenues for the achievement of holistic and equitable student success. As we slowly begin to transition to a post-pandemic world where existing pedagogies will need to be reviewed, guidelines that are covered in student support literature such as this can be applied across multiple institutions across the landscape of HEIs in South Africa.

Additionally, the below considerations contribute to the implementation of an equitable institutional approach that moves away from meritocracy:

- Who are our students? An equitable approach begins by first knowing who our students are, what they struggle with, where they come from, etc. Equity starts with knowing and understanding our students.

- Look at the design of the university experience – social and academic – and tailor it to speak to who our students are. Students should be able to relate to the various offerings regardless of background.

- Related to the above point is institutional culture. For the approach to be truly equitable, the culture has to change from one of individualism, isolation and shaming to one of inclusion.

- Institute a culture of care. This point is reiterated because it is at the centre of an equitable institution. Strategy, interventions and pedagogy should be predicated on the question: "is this the best course of action for all our students?"

- Develop students holistically and not only academically. The current discussion around co-curricular transcripts is one crucial component in implementing this method.

- Predicate excellence on the students' ability to demonstrate growth and reflection rather than on getting it right the first time. While some students may excel from when they enter the university space, this is not true for the majority. The reward system being set up to recognise and reward the former group is not characteristic of an equitable institution.

Conclusion

The post-apartheid dispensation has been a space where previously disadvantaged students have been given access to institutions that previous generations (their parents and grandparents) were barred from. With this access came an incredible responsibility to ensure that they use the resources available to them to obtain academic success – and preferably in the minimum allocated time for

completion of a degree. However, the greater the challenges faced by students, the more emphasis is placed on them being tenacious and pulling themselves up by their proverbial bootstraps to achieve success. This paper has illustrated how bootstraps ideology as predicated on meritocracy is decontextual and therefore disadvantageous to the development and implementation of a holistic approach to student success. The shifting goalposts and lack of appreciation of the social factors surrounding student success are some of the reasons why HEIs should move away from bootstraps thinking and toward an equitable approach that brings all students into the fold of higher education.

This paper has discussed how this equitable approach becomes more urgent in a country like South Africa that continues to battle the legacy of its difficult history, as evidenced by the rate of inequality amongst its inhabitants. Additionally, as the academic world moves into a future that has been altered by the global pandemic and subsequent move to ERTL, the response to the inherent difficulties that have plagued the tertiary education landscape will have to be inclusive and progressive; they will have to have more of a human face.

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