



## Transport justice for students: Transport crisis and some suggestions

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### Abstract

Unsafe, costly, and unreliable travel is a significant issue for students from working-class and poor communities. Among the consequences are missed classes, late arrivals, and dropouts from university. This article examines the challenges faced by female students in Johannesburg and Bellville (near Cape Town), where local universities predominantly serve students from working-class communities. Public transport articles rarely address the experiences of young women who are students of the university education system in South Africa. The article suggests ways to improve the transportation conditions for these students based on in-depth interviews conducted in 2021 and 2022 and secondary sources. The findings reveal that women not only feel unsafe in their communities and homes but also when using different modes of transport to travel to and from the universities. The article concludes with suggestions and proposals to enhance the transportation conditions for women from working class communities in higher education.

**Keywords:** transport justice, public transport, universities, students

### Introduction

In 2018, the former Western Cape Provincial Secretary of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) – the biggest trade union federation in

South Africa, Tony Ehrenreich, published an article in the *New Agenda*, a magazine focusing on economics and politics in South Africa, providing an overview of the state of transport in South Africa,

particularly public transport. He noted that apartheid geography moved black people to segregated areas that were far away from economic activities and livelihoods, forcing them to spend extra money to commute to their places of work, universities, schools, factories, and so on (Ehrenreich 2018). In taking forward the conversation on the crisis of public transport in South Africa, my paper zooms in on university student transport – an issue that requires debate and discussion – because it has a direct negative impact on university students, especially those who come from working-class and poor households. Like workers represented by COSATU, many students need transport to move from the townships to cities and towns. Students must move from townships far away from the universities and university campuses. Apartheid geography, which relegated Black people to far-flung areas, created a huge transport challenge for students who resided in Black, working-class regions (Czeglédy 2004). Like transport for workers, student transport is time-bound because students have to be in class, examination rooms, and laboratory on time (Msuya 2024).

A student who arrives late due to delayed transport may miss the examination and even fail that subject because of persistent transport challenges. Workers who arrive late may have a portion of their wage deducted as a punitive measure, which is less disastrous than students' situation. Still, a student may have to repeat a course in the following year, which has time and cost implications for a student—traveling long distances and the unsafe and costly transport force students to leave their places of residence and stay on campuses even though they may not have to attend class for eight hours. For instance, if transport systems were reliable and accessible, they would attend a class for one hour and go back home and come back to participate in another class after lunch (Munir and Saleem 2025). In other countries, like Germany, students move easily and enjoy freedom of movement and learning due to subsidised and reliable transport networks (Ortega and Link 2025). In cases where the universities cannot accommodate universities, ensuring they can move easily to and from campuses is supposed to be the norm. Student transport and accommodation crises are even present in the best universities, such as the University of Cape (UCT), where some students

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sleep in the SRC offices because of accommodation and transport problems at the beginning of the year. The fact that accommodation near campuses is expensive for many students compounds the transport issue, particularly for those from middle and working-class communities. A lack of reliable and accessible transport for precarious students makes the students' academic lives even more difficult (Dimmer 2025).

Based on the higher education sector figures, the number of financially needy students is just above 50% (542 653 students) of the total student population at public universities in South Africa (Mashilo 2025). No figures reveal the number of students who owned cars in 2025; this sector of students come from affluent families and, therefore, do not have to deal with the problems of public transport like taxis, which I discuss later in this article. Students from working-class communities are most likely to use taxis and buses to travel to and from campuses. However, a transport policy governing student transport is needed to ensure students can enjoy higher education. In a journal article that focuses on transport for university students, Ofentse Mokwena and Mark Zuidgeest (2020) argue that the National and Regional Transport Policy of the South Africa state, which is supposed to regulate transport in South Africa, tends to exclude students who need to move from their places of residence to universities for lectures, examinations, tests, and other academic activities.

Ofentse Mokwena and Mark Zuidgeest (2020, p.13) state, "There is a lack of specific legislation that enables effective administration and management of post-school education mobility and access exacerbates the problem." For instance, the White Paper on post-school education published in 2013, which is the main policy framework for the state's approaches to higher education (HE) and further education in general, states that technical and vocational education and training (TVET) students will be able to access transport allowances to help them participate in the TVET education system; however, the white paper did not mention the public transport crisis and how to solve this problem to ensure that HE students, particularly university students, are not sabotaged by poor public transport when pursuing their studies (Republic of South Africa 2014).

This article analyses data collected from news sources on the internet and in-depth interviews mainly conducted with young female students studying with some students at the University of the Western Cape in Bellville and the University of Johannesburg in Johannesburg. Both universities have a significant number of students from marginalized communities from poor urban and rural areas of South Africa. These universities are in metropolitan areas dominated by taxis and have some presence of buses and trains (Clowes et al. 2017; Thandi 2021; UWC 2019). Research has shown that improving student transport improves their mental health and performance (Schoeman et al. 2015). Millions of people use minibus taxis to get around South Africa every day. According to Martin (2024), taxis account for almost 70% of transport usage in South Africa by working-class people, lower-middle-class groups, and students coming from poor communities. Taxis are generally not safe for women and female students. Young women who are students often face sexual harassment and violence as they commute to and from campuses daily. Yet, there are not many studies that focus on transport problems and violence faced by a student who is supposed to be pursuing their studies with less anxiety and stress.

### Research design

The qualitative study sought to collect data on the experiences and views of students in Bellville and Johannesburg. I chose the two universities

because one is located near a coastal town, Bellville, and the other is inland, in Johannesburg. I asked the interviewees to narrate their stories as they navigated a complex terrain of transport to and from the universities. Six in-depth interviews ranging from 30 to 60 minutes were conducted in 2021 with female students at these universities. Using an interview guide, the students were asked to reflect on modes of transport used when traveling to campuses, problems and challenges faced when commuting to and from the universities, and some reflections on the violence they face as women in different modes of transport. The sample was purposive because the women were selected because they are regular commuters and, therefore, have experiences to share as students and young women. To supplement the interviews, internet sources from reliable news agencies reporting on transport and students were another data source. The advantage of these internet sources was that they could capture facts and were also triangulated with the narratives of the students interviewed (Cloutier 2024).

Transcribed interviews and internet sources were analyzed using a thematic analysis, which entails reading both sources to determine patterns regarding students' experiences when commuting to campuses. The concerns about the lack of reliability of different modes of transport and the lack of safety for young women as they commute became some of the central themes of the research. Given the uniqueness of each province, the findings are reported in the form of a provincial report (Liu 2024).

I obtained ethical clearance to conduct a bigger study on transportation from the University of Johannesburg in 2020. Participants knew about the purpose of the study and were assured that their research would ensure that their identities and names were not revealed to avoid harm in the research process. The researcher observed all protocols pertaining to the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA). For example, I clarified to the interviewees that the information collected from the interviewees will only be used for this research, and only the researcher will have access to the data (Menziwa et al. 2024).

## Findings:

### UWC students find alternatives

Mase, a UWC student who lives in Nyanga, a working-class residential area in Cape Town, uses the Golden Arrow Bus Service because it is cheaper than taxis. The difference between a return trip is R6. Mase is fortunate because many buses go past her area. She does not use the taxis because they are infested with violence, and there are no trains in her area. Mase then reflected on how taxi violence affects the bus service she uses daily:

One day, I was supposed to write a Life Science test in the morning, and I saw people coming back from the bus terminus saying that they [unknown people] had burnt a Golden Arrow Bus. So I had to call my uncle to come and help me travel" (Mase, interview, 28 April 2022, Bellville).

Mase then said:

I spend about R700 [on transport], and it's fine because I am using NSFAS money. So, it's fine. Because I do not stay on campus, I get an allowance of R2200. ... It could be better if they could give us school buses to come and assist students, and I am sure the taxi driver won't affect them" (Mase, interview, 28 April 2022, Bellville).

The financial support from the government assisted Mase in further studies at UWC/ Despite some issues about violence associated with the taxis in her area, she seems to be happy with the bus system as a mode of transport to UWC.

### The Use of shuttles as an alternative

Shuttle services are some of the responses adopted by students. Ntombi, a young female student who lives in Grassy Park in Cape Town, did not view trains as an option for transport because they had become dysfunctional and were generally not safe, especially for women. She wakes up at 5:30am and comes back at 7:30am. Ntombi argued that trains were not an option, and she elaborated on this:

I have not been on the train before. ...It is very dangerous and no longer as safe as it used to be. ... It is because there will usually be those people looking very suspicious, and it is unsafe for a young lady like me to travel

like that (Ntombi, interview, 28 April 2022, Bellville).

Alternatively, she is part of a transport shuttle that ferries students from her area to and from UWC. Passengers must complete a schedule so that shuttle drivers can pick them up. A 20-day package would cost R1 600. The reliable shuttle takes two hours to travel to and from UWC. However, the downside of the trip is that it takes two hours to travel to and from UWC, and she would have to wake up very early in the morning, and on her way back home, she sleeps on the bus (Ntombi, interview, 28 April 2022, Bellville).

### Taxis as a dominant mode of transport

In one case, a UJ student indicated spending about 30% (R5 000 per month) of their monthly income on taxis. In many instances, a student would be transported by a taxi from Orange Farm in the south of Johannesburg to the city centre and then to Kingsway Campus of UJ (Ntu, interview, June 2022). In this regard, Ntu mentioned: "I wake [up] at 4:30 am when I have a class at 8 am" (Ntu, interview, 28 June 2022). The distance between the student's residence and the university's main campus is approximately 50km. Sadly, sometimes this student spends 4 hours traveling to and from the main campus. "As you can imagine, this is a lot of time wasted for a student who has to use her time focusing on reading and writing," Ntu said (Ntu, interview, June 2022).

Similarly, one of the UJ students who lives in Ivory Park – a working-class area in the northeast of Johannesburg – commented:

I would take a taxi from Campus Square near UJ and get to Johannesburg only to find a long queue at the taxi rank. Even though he left UJ at 4 pm, I would only get home at 8 pm. What causes these delays is that all taxis return to the townships in the late afternoon and early evening, causing very long queues at the taxi ranks (Zinhle, interview, 31 May 2021).

One of the problems cited by students who use taxis is that the taxis do not leave a taxi rank until they are full. According to Thuli who is another UJ student:

This delay causes many students to miss their classes, examinations, and tests. In

many cases, we [students] wake up early. Still, traffic congestion and the specific delays caused by the taxis fail them, causing us to arrive late for their academic activities (Thuli, interview, 31 May 2021).

Another UJ student complained that taxis called “Siyaya” (we are going there) taxis are highly uncomfortable. She elaborated on this: “So it gives you that real uncomfortable feeling, you know, and you can’t wait to get off because it is very uncomfortable...” (Xolo, interview, 31 May 2021).

Moreover, sometimes taxi drivers can be a law unto themselves. Xolo explains:

This is evident in the following scenario when one taxi driver was driving too fast, and when passengers expressed their unhappiness, he slowed the vehicle to the point that the speed was close to 0km per hour. This is a clear sign that a taxi driver is spiteful and shows the passengers he is in charge of driving the vehicle (Xolo, interview, 31 May 2021).

Alarming, criminals also prey on students, as can be seen in the theft of their cell phones, laptops, and clothing on their way to and from the university. Matters are reported to the police, but there is generally no arrest or prosecution (Xolo, interview, 31 May 2021). Another serious concern is that female students are often sexually harassed at the taxi ranks, such as the Bree and Noord Taxi Rank in Johannesburg. In this regard, a UJ student commented: “It’s tough to be a girl in South Africa. So, they would touch me like on my hands, or they will touch my shoulders and all that” (Thuli, interview, 31 May 2021).

All the problem narrated by the students are not new and the university system in South Africa is yet to resolve such problems. However, there have been some attempts by the student leadership that sought to address the transport challenges for students.

### **Transport as a structural problem for students**

In the early 2000s, the Student Representative Council (SRC) at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), supported by the Division for Lifelong and the office of the Vice-rector of Students Development and Support, conducted this survey to get a picture of the transport needs

of full-time and part-time students. With close to 500 student participants, the survey showed a hunger for safe, reliable, and affordable student public transport. Moreover, the study called for all stakeholders to play a role in ensuring that UWC students enjoy public transport to facilitate learning and the intellectual development of students, especially those from working-class communities (Koetsier 2004).

Even after the research report was published in 2004, students at UWC continued to face problems. For example, those who stayed at the Hector Petersen Residence, which is near UWC’s Unibell Train Station and in the working-class part of the area called Belhar, were victims of violence. In this instance, they were robbed of their possessions, such as laptops, cell phones, earrings, and other possessions, while on their way to and from the UWC campus (Sass 2005).

On the eastern side of the Hector Petersen Residence, students also had their goods stolen by thugs when they used Belhar taxis to ferry them to and from Bellville, which is the nearest city. Incidents of rape and attempted rape were common among young women as they utilised trains and other modes of transport. Students also experienced violence when they travelled by taxi. One student was on her way to Delft from the Hector Petersen Residence when a criminal who was carrying a gun demanded money from the taxi conductor. What makes matters worse for students is that violence is associated with the taxi industry, and sometimes, it takes extreme forms, such as gun shootouts. When the trains were still running, they, too, were a site of violence and murder. Criminals frequently robbed UWC students of their possessions on the

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trains; some were stabbed, or they witnessed other passengers being stabbed, having their goods stolen, or thrown out of a moving train (Sass 2005).

All of the aforementioned incidents affect students negatively; unsafe and unreliable transport undermines their access to education and their intellectual environment. According to Venicia McGhie, access to safe, quality transport plays a significant role in students' academic success at the universities. Good transport enables students to attend classes, write examinations and tests, and use university facilities like laboratories and libraries. In McGhie's study, a UWC student living in Paarl had to travel to and from the university for at least three hours to and from the university (McGhie 2012).

The driving distance between Bellville and Paarl is 38.6km and it should take one 29 minutes to complete the journey if the average speed is 80 km/h (Distance Calculator 2022). The fact that transport was unreliable caused the student to miss some of her morning classes, and the traveling consumed her time for studying and preparing for her examinations and tests, for instance. Students who pass matriculation well and live off campus fail some of their modules because they spend so much time traveling and sometimes miss their tests and examinations (McGhie 2012).

The Metrorail train service is cheaper than taxis but extremely unreliable. When the train system works, waiting for a train can take up to three hours, and trains can be stuck on the tracks for two hours without explanation to passengers (Ledwaba 2019). In February 2021, after approximately 471 days of closure of the central line to Cape Town, trains could only travel from Cape Town station up to Langa station. The poor and unsafe railway system ground to a halt in Gauteng and the Western Cape when criminals took advantage of the "hard" lockdown of 2020 by stealing cables and steel and vandalizing the already poor railway infrastructure (Geldenhuys 2021). A stone's throw away from the Langa station in the direction of Khayelitsha, the railway tracks were occupied by people who built shacks. Then, a few kilometres away, the same thing occurred near the Philippi station. One of the reasons for the erection of shacks on the railway tracks is that the trains were not running for almost two years, paving the way for backyard dwellers to

find space for accommodation that had no monthly rental obligations (Mlamla 2020). This means that the railway infrastructure that was supposed to be used to transport workers, students, and people with low incomes generally was the proverbial adding insult to injury by exacerbating the existing transport catastrophe.

Like many students of UWC, students in Gauteng, especially those studying at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), have structural transport problems. The transport crisis in Gauteng was highlighted to the South African public when President Cyril Ramaphosa was directly affected. During his campaign for the national elections 2019, the president was stuck on the train with other workers and students in Tshwane for four hours on a trip that should have taken 45 minutes (BBC Reporter, 2019). The Metrorail service in Tshwane, Johannesburg, Vereeniging, Randfontein, and Springs operated under conditions of significantly reduced capacity due to cable theft and vandalism that took place on the railway infrastructure during the hard lockdown of 2020 (Masuabi 2022). Like in the case of the Western Cape, given the crisis of students who relied on Metrorail from working-class and poor areas in Gauteng, they no longer use the train because they are, quite frankly, unavailable (Laby et al., 2021).

The collapse of the Metrorail system in Gauteng and the fact that the Bus Rapid Transit System (BRT) does not reach all the areas and is also unreliable, means that some students end up using local taxis to get to the Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital Taxi Rank and then walk a kilometre to the university's Soweto Campus to take a bus to the university's main campus in Auckland Park (Kingsway Campus). Before COVID-19 and the lockdown, the trains were the cheapest mode of transport, but the problem was that they were crime-ridden and overcrowded, and thus very unsafe for young women who faced sexual harassment during train rides (Hlatshwayo 2022).

### **Suggestions and Conclusion**

The availability of transportation is crucial for students, especially young women, to succeed academically and access education, research, and teaching at universities. As data used in this paper shows, students who live off-campus often struggle

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to find affordable, safe, and reliable transportation (Van Zyl and De Villiers 2021). Commuting from distant locations, such as rural areas and urban residences, to campuses can be tiring and stressful, negatively impacting students’ academic performance (Ndagurwa 2017).

Students in urban areas from working-class communities spend a significant portion of their income on transportation to and from universities. As a result, they have less money to spend on necessities such as food, textbooks, and laptops. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that the modes of transport are not safe, particularly for young women, who are often victims of muggings and sexual harassment by men (Mentz and Webb 2019). The transportation crisis for South African students reflects the social and economic inequality faced by South African society, where students from working-class and poor communities continue to be affected by transportation injustices (Van der Berg et al. 2020). Students from poor and working-class communities struggle to access transportation due to its high cost, causing some to leave universities and miss classes (Govender 2017).

South Africa is experiencing a deep transport crisis, as shown in this article. Students, particularly young women from working-class families, have not realized transport justice or the rights to ensure that working-class and marginalized communities have access to safe, affordable, reliable, and clean public transport (Jennings 2015; Martens and Golub 2021). The apartheid geography that located working-class and marginalised communities far away from economic hubs and centres, including universities, and the fact that the post-apartheid South African state has not been able to transcend the apartheid geography, has placed a transport burden on workers and students, especially young female students (Cronin 2006). What is disturbing from the findings of this article is that the latter are the primary victims of the public transport system. This is evident in the various forms of sexual harassment and violence they experience as they leave their households to go and acquire knowledge at universities. Any society’s development is judged by how it treats women and girls.

The South African Constitution states that everyone has the right to freedom of movement (Section 21); the constitution also grants people socio-economic rights (Sections 26 and 27) and public services which could include access to transport (Section 9) (Republic of South Africa 1996). In other words, transport justice for students, including young female students, is a matter that requires the urgent attention of all stakeholders involved in university education. Local municipalities that host the universities, such as Johannesburg, Cape Town, and eThekweni, provincial governments, national and provincial arms of the National Department of Transport, various transport agencies, public and private bus companies, taxi associations, university managements, SRCs, community-based structures, community police forums, local councillors, and other local stakeholders, have to jointly find local-specific solutions to the transport problems faced by students, especially female students. Such a forum will have to be permanent so that it can ensure that all stakeholders are held accountable regarding the provision of safe and reliable public transport to students.

Students are compelled to leave their universities in the early afternoon to go to their working-class residential areas because transport at night is highly unsafe, especially for female students. This

means they cannot use the university's facilities in the evening, such as libraries and photocopiers. What makes it worse is that their homes do not always have the space for studying, as was shown by research conducted on online learning during the Covid-19-induced lockdown of 2020 (Naidoo and Israel 2021).

A researcher, based on his findings and experience, can express his or her opinions to advance a research agenda and come up with solutions to problems, such as transport challenges. (see Taherdoost 2022). One of the issues that need to be looked at by the proposed forum is providing a subsidized bus service for students living in working-class areas. A safe, affordable, and reliable bus service that specialises in ferrying students to and from the universities from morning to evening, using the existing special bus lanes, will contribute immensely to solving students' transport problems. Once they have arrived in the townships, taxis can help drop off students in their residential areas. Authorities will have to vet all drivers transporting students to minimize sexual harassment and other sexual offenses. Members of the police forums, as well as the police operating in working-class areas, will have a big role to play in protecting the students. To drive the process forward, students must consider area-based transport committees that are democratically elected to report to students using public transport. Already, students at residences have house committees that are supposed to be looking after the affairs of students at residences. Transport committees of areas like Soweto will have to be led by young women whose dignity is undermined by the current transport crisis.

Students can learn lessons for struggles for transport justice from campaigns waged by The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in the Western Cape. Unlike COSATU in other provinces, COSATU in the Western Cape has, over many years, led transport justice campaigns to aid the working class, students, and all the marginalized people in the Western Cape. Protests, the laying of charges against the Metrorail, and media statements have been used to highlight the transport crisis in the Western Cape and the need to create a safe, reliable, and affordable public transport system for workers, students, women, and working-class communities (Washinyira 2017).

Another organization that has played a role in transport justice is #Unitebehind, which has been calling for an end to corruption in state agencies responsible for public transport, the rehabilitation of the railway system, and an end to the apartheid geography that placed black people in remote areas distant from economic and work opportunities. #Unitebehind and COSATU, as organizations leading transport justice struggles, can act as collaborators with the SRCs and other student organizations in the struggle for transport justice (Human 2020).

On the other hand, Durban students tend to live near their campuses to reduce their traveling time. Based on a student population of 20 764, and a sample of 377 students from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), the findings from research conducted by Ponnann, which was published in 2015, indicated that student transport in the Durban area is not bad because most of the students reside near various campuses of the university. The study discovered that about 65% of the students spent between 15 to 30 minutes traveling to campus. Unlike in Gauteng and the Western Cape, trains in the eThekweni area were cheaper for some students and tended to be reliable. However, the problem was that the rail routes were not always near all campuses.

Furthermore, the study revealed that taxis reached many destinations, but the challenge was that students had to wait for a taxi to fill up before embarking on a journey to the campus (Ponnann 2015). The positive results of Ponnann's research mirror the state of public transport in Durban, which is better than in other cities. The city has municipal buses, Metrorail trains, private buses, and decorated taxis. One of the innovations of the eThekweni municipality was the introduction of the Imuvo (One) card, which allows students and passengers to use the same card on different public bus services in the city (Alyssa 2020; Dlamini 2022).

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#### Interviews

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- Ntombi [pseudonym], interview, 28 April 2022, Bellville.
- Ntu, [pseudonym], interview, 28 June 2021, Bellville.
- Thuli, [pseudonym], interview, 31 May 2021, Johannesburg.
- Xolo, [pseudonym], interview, 31 May 2021, Johannesburg.
- Zinhle, [pseudonym], interview, 31 May 2021, Johannesburg.